In The Library

by Quesarasara

Summary

"Tucked here between towering shelves stuffed full of hundreds of years of knowledge on tens of thousands of pages filled with hundreds of thousands of words made up of millions of individual letters –Sherlock Holmes fits."

There are so few places Sherlock feels at ease, but this library feels like home. He likes the solitude, takes comfort in the quiet. He may not have friends, but he's got books--and that's just as good, isn't it? Better, even.

And then one day John Watson walks in, and everything changes...

Notes
Hello Friends!

A while back I saw an absolutely adorable prompt by tumblr user teatective that read: “Teenlock spends nearly all his time in the library. The teachers believe he’s studying, because he’s got such high marks, but he’s actually just pining after the librarian’s college assistant, one tanned and cardigan wearing John Watson”.

I threatened to write the damn thing, and it turns out people in this fandom actually hold you to crazy talk like that. So that little nugget got stuck in my brain, then it rolled around in there for a while, then it bounced off the inside of my skull, then in broke into pieces and got taped back together again, and it grew and changed and got itself stuck between two other ideas….and at the end of all that, this fic was the result.

Special shout out to the damn finest beta and partner in fic a girl could ever have (a.k.a. owensm who manages to stay 100% mysterious even though she actually has an AO3 account now). Special thanks to my pal Dewey (who created a popular decimal based library classification system) for his help in naming the chapters in this little story. Warning: Not Britpicked (because I am a silly American who considers light googling “research”), but if you’re up for the job drop me a line.

Thanks for clicking on this new adventure and giving it a read, I’ll be updating on my regular Thursday schedule starting next week, hope to see you back here as the story unfolds!
“Are you sure they were headed this way?” the voice half-whispers, high and breathy with barely contained excitement.

“I think so,” another girlish voice replies gleefully from three (no, two) aisles to the left of his regular study carrel sandwiched between the medieval history collection and the rows of pathetically out of date atlases gathering dust in the stacks. “I saw him come in just as I was leaving the nurse’s office. He told the school secretary he was here to see Mrs. Hudson, and I passed her in the hall on her way to fetch him!”

“How do you know she was bringing him here?” titters a third girl, her voice growing breathless as she tries to keep up with her friends as the group comes even closer before stopping just one aisle away.

Lifting his chin and gazing over the uneven tops of the neat row of books on the shelf just above his desk and through to the other side, he can see the backs of three heads (brunette, brunette pretending to be a blond, redhead pretending to be brunette) attached to three necks (one long and tan—recent beach holiday judging by the small patch of lighter skin revealed by a sunburn that peeled away, one short and pale—sporting the freckles she can’t cover up with concealer like those on her cheeks, and one of average length—unremarkable but for the edge of the purpling love bite peeking just above the collar of her school uniform jumper) attached to three girls (fifth years, popular, vapid and useless) clustered around the end of one of the long rows of bookshelves that fan out around the circulation desk in the center of the library like spokes on a wheel.

“Mrs. Hudson is the librarian, Marjorie,” the first girl snaps, exasperation coloring her reply. “Where else would she be taking him?”

“I don’t know, Dora,” Marjorie shoots back defensively. “Melody didn’t hear anything about them coming to the library. Could be taking him lots of places.”

“Fit thing like that,” Melody purrs, “he could take me anywhere he wanted.”

“That’s because you’re a slag, Mel,” Dora says, rolling her eyes and tossing her curtain of dark hair carelessly over a slim shoulder, smacking Marjorie full in the face with it in the process.

“Oi, watch it Dor—“ Marjorie huffs, spitting out strands of hair that have adhered to her sticky, overglossed lips.

“Shhhhh!” Melody hisses, putting a finger to her mouth to quiet her friends and pushing them back out of the line of sight as the heavy glass door to the library swishes open.

“Here we are!” The librarian says brightly, the three hiding girls growing still and silent as they peer between the shelves to sneak a look at the two people who’ve just entered the large, airy space.

“So this is where you spend all your time,” a voice answers (male, fairly young, pleasant and masculine with just a hint of a Welsh accent coloring the vowels, not a Londoner by birth but not a brand new resident of the city either). “It’s a fair bit bigger than I’d imagined it would be.”

“Yes, I suppose it is a bit grand for a secondary school of this size,” Mrs. Hudson agrees. “But we
were lucky enough to be the beneficiary of quite a generous donation a few years back, including a very large collection of both new and rare volumes as well as a healthy endowment that came with the express intent that the funds be used to upgrade and maintain the library.”

“Impressive gift,” the man replies. “My old school library seems like a broom closet full of paperbacks and a mouldy old set of encyclopaedias compared to this place. Alumnus with a soft spot for the old alma matter, eh?”

“Not a former student, no,” the librarian answers, vaguely. “A fine young man, though—in charge of a sizeable family trust, with a great respect for knowledge and a certain amount of gratitude to the school for…well, for being so welcoming to gifted students.”

“A huge amount of gratitude, I’d say.” His voice recedes and rises again (turning slowly in place, no doubt taking in the tall polished walnut shelves stuffed with thousands of volumes, the state of the art computer terminals tucked into well-appointed study nooks, and the cozy seating areas arranged with comfortable leather armchairs and settees). “I can see why you love coming to work every day.”

“And you’ll love it too, John.”

“I think I will,” the man (John) agrees, a smile evident in his voice. “Thanks again for this, Mrs. H. You’re doing me a big favor with this job, and I won’t forget it.”

“Oh nonsense, dear. It’s you who is doing me the favor. Nearly two years on from the renovations and we’ve still got over half the inventory in the Holmes collection left to catalog and shelve. I’ve been thinking of hiring on a part time assistant for months, and it’s lucky you’ve got the time now.”

“Yeah,” John replies, his tone bright but tinged with something hesitant (Disappointment? Regret? Not enough data…). “Lucky indeed.”

“All right then, the first afternoon bell should be ringing here in just a few minutes. Why don’t you go on and leave your coat here behind the desk, and I’ll show you around the building and introduce you to the rest of the staff.”

There’s the swish of fabric being peeled off and dropped over a chair, then idle chatter and footsteps that exit back out the library door that swishes softly shut behind them.

Followed immediately by a shrill, high pitched, ear-splitting squeal.

Followed immediately by two more.

From his vantage point behind the three girls, he presses a finger to his ear and shakes his head in an attempt to clear the ringing now echoing through his skull.

“Oh my god!” Dora Lancaster says. “You were right, Mel.”

“Of course I was,” Melody scolds, pulling out her mobile phone and sliding her fingertip quickly over the screen. “I always am. I told you he was hot.”

“I’ll never doubt you again.” Dora turns to lean against the shelf and fans herself dramatically with a hand.

“How old do you think he is?” Marjorie asks, her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright.

“Who cares?” Melody shrugs, her thumbs tapping furiously on her phone. “He’s older than any of
the little boys at this school—and that’s all that matters to me.” She punctuates the last word with a final tap of her finger against her mobile phone, finishing the movement with a small flourish.

He rolls his eyes and stares back down at his notes where they’re spread before him.

A fraction of a second later, three text alerts chime in near unison.

*ping*

*ping*

*ping*

At the same moment, another (silent) alert brightens the screen of the mobile phone on the table in front of him. He looks down to see that a text has arrived, the words “NEW CONFESSION!” appearing on the screen.

Glancing up between the shelves, he watches the three girls read the same message, then lowers his gaze again to his own phone. He swipes through his apps until he finds the acid green skull, a small number “1” floating on the top right corner of the icon. He taps it and the screen goes black, and a message begins to appear one letter at a time, as though it’s being typed out:

iConfess: The new library assistant is HOT! He can check me out and take me home ANY TIME.

There’s a second round of high pitched squealing from the girls in the next aisle, and Sherlock looks down at his phone in time to see the message that just appeared begin to pull out of focus before the letters explode in a shower of white sparks and his home screen pops abruptly back into view.

“Melody!” Dora laughs, slapping her friend playfully on the shoulder. “I can’t believe you just did that!”

“Everyone in school is going to read that!” Marjorie says, her voice shrill and her eyes wide.

“I bloody well hope so.” Melody shoots them both a grin before shrugging and slipping her mobile back into the side pocket of her pleated uniform skirt. “There’s a new gorgeous, blond, blue-eyed bloke in the building—that’s the kind of thing students at this school have a right to know.”

“But what if people find out you’re the one who said it?” Marjorie asks, worrying nervously at her bottom lip with her front teeth.

Melody narrows her eyes suspiciously at the shorter girl. “How would they find that out? Are you going to tell people it was me?”

“They can’t find out who sent it, Marjie,” Dora says, stepping between her friends, rolling her eyes and raising a hand to fend off Melody’s impatient scoff. “That’s sort of the whole point of ‘iConfess’ isn’t it? You type in your confession, everyone sees it, and then it self destructs. Totally anonymous. Everyone knows that.”

“Right, yeah, Okay,” Marjorie says, then smiles at her friends. “Sorry, I just forgot.”
“That’s all right,” Dora says, reaching out and squeezing her friend’s shoulder. “Besides, the three of us are best friends—forever. We’d never betray each other. Right?”

“Right,” Melody and Marjorie answer in tandem.

He tries to hold in the laughter. He really does. And to be fair, he doesn’t laugh.

He snorts.

Three heads whip around in his direction and he ducks quickly—but not fast enough. The soft thunder of angry feet on carpet echoes in his ears, and in moments the three girls have rounded the end of the shelf and are bearing down on him where he sits.

“You!” Melody snarls, stomping toward him and stopping just a few feet away. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I was studying.” He looks at her coolly, calmly gesturing one pale, long fingered hand at the chemistry notes spread out before him on the desk. “Until I was interrupted.”

“You were spying on us!” Dora accuses, pointing a finger at him angrily.

“Oh, is that was it’s called when one huddles behind bookcases peeking through shelves at people who don’t know they’re being observed?” He tilts his head, peering at at them innocently. “I was wondering how one might define that particular act. Thanks ever so much for the clarification.”

“I don’t know what you think you heard, but—“

“Oh come now, Melody,” he says, dismissing her indignation with a careless wave of his fingers and a pointed roll of his eyes as he turns his attention back to the desk. “I know exactly what I heard, I am not deaf, you know—though you gave it a good go at making me so, what with all the screeching.”

“You better keep your mouth shut, freak!” Dora hisses, stepping up beside Melody and staring down at him.

“Oh don’t worry,” he says, affecting his most uninterested tone. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“It better be.” Dora puffs out her chest and tries to sound tough. “Though it don’t matter if you say anything or not, nobody with half a brain bothers listening to you.”

“Doesn’t matter, Dora. Do at least attempt not to butcher the very language born in the same country you were.” He sighs heavily as she begins opens her mouth to reply. “Oh never mind, I don’t expect you to listen to my advice, given your very astute observation that half-brained people rarely ever do. Good Lord, the admissions standards for this esteemed educational institution really are abominably lax.”

“Yeah,” Melody says with an icy smile. “I hear they’ll let anyone in this place. All it costs is one brand new library.”

“That’s right,” Dora chimes in. “At least none of us had to have our families buy our way into this school.”

“Is that so?” Sherlock inquires, his tone light and curious. “Are you under the mistaken impression that the very large cheque your father writes each term is some sort of selfless charitable contribution?”
“That’s different,” Dora says, looking slightly confused. “That’s for tuition.”

“You do know what that word means, don’t you?” Sherlock asks, head tilting and brow knitted thoughtfully.

“Of course she does,” Marjorie says, stepping up next to the other two girls and adding a third hostile glare to those already directed his way.

“I think not,” Sherlock replies, crisply punctuating each terminal consonant. “But as luck would have it, there’s a very fine selection of dictionaries shelved not fifteen feet from here. If you’d like to pop over and confirm that the word tuition is literally defined as “the charge or fee for admission and instruction as at a private school or college or university” have at it. I’ll be right here, ready accept your apology on the matter.”

“Why should I apologize to you, freak?”

“Let’s see,” he begins, listing her offenses and ticking each off with a flick of an elegant finger. “For your abysmal understanding of the English language, for attempting to impugn the honor of my family name, for subjecting me to your inane ramblings over a random stranger you proceeded to stalk the moment you laid eyes on, and for you and your pathetic little friends being so generally uninteresting that I’m too bored to continue with this list. Take your pick.”

“At least we’ve got friends,” Marjorie says, and the other two girls smirk their approval.

“Too right, Marjie,” Melody agrees, lifting her chin to stare down her nose at him. “Look at you, all alone, surrounded by your stupid books and papers, skulking around the library spying on private conversations. You’re the pathetic one here. You should be apologizing to us.”

“There’s one slight problem with that scenario, Melody,” he says with a tight smile. “I’m not sorry.”

“Oh yeah?” Melody’s pretty face twists into a viciously unattractive sneer. “You WILL be.”

She turns on her heel and begins storming away, one hand reaching into her pocket and retrieving her mobile as she goes. The other two girls hesitate for just a moment before each throws a disdainful glance his way then follows her out of the stacks and through the door. He stands there for a moment, the library quiet and still and deserted around him, wondering exactly how “sorry” such a dull excuse for a human being could possibly be capable of making him—when a flash of light from the surface of the desk catches his eye.

NEW CONFESSION!

Oh. Of course.

Looking down at his mobile, he swipes until he sees the green skull with the new message indicator. Tapping it, he eyes the screen suspiciously as the following text appears:

¡Confess: Sherlock Holmes is a faggot and a FREAK!

He stares at the words as they begin to fade before bursting into the customary shower of sparks and disappearing from view. He shakes his head ruefully, dark curls spilling carelessly over his smooth, pale forehead. This is Melody Harrison’s grand revenge? An anonymous jab on the app of the moment that every Morningside Academy student will likely tap on and see flashed across their devices—and then just as likely forget before the last sparks of the message disappear from the screen?
How boring.

And hardly a crushing blow, really. Interpersonal relationships may not be his area, but even he understands that if you’re going to start a hateful rumor with the intent of causing your victim the maximum amount of pain and embarrassment—at least make sure it isn’t something that everyone already knows.

With a sigh, he stands up and slips his mobile into his front trouser pocket then begins gathering up his assorted papers and books. Normally he wouldn’t clear out this early in the day, preferring to pass his afternoons in the relative safety and seclusion the library provides him. It’s the one place (outside of the makeshift laboratory he’s assembled over the years and secreted away in the fourth floor attic space above his bedroom, the location of which not even his chubby git of a brother has sussed out and taken away from him in the name of “fire safety” or some such nonsense. Yet, anyway.) that he actually likes to be. It feels like home to him.

As well it should, really.

His insufferable brother paid quite a hefty sum for it, after all, from the trust their parents left in his care (along with one younger, and rather incorrigible as it turns out, brother seven years his junior) when they passed away five years ago. Five years, three months, fourteen days, three boarding schools, two expulsions and one rather unfortunate incident involving a pair of skunks roaming into a dining hall filled to capacity on parents visiting weekend (that no one had ever been able to definitively tie to him thank you very much) to be exact.

Along with the monetary gift Mycroft Holmes had bestowed upon the school at Sherlock’s unorthodox mid-term admittance to Morningside two years ago, there was also quite a large donation of books and furniture and fixtures from the impressive library that sprawled over the east wing of the manor home in Cornwall where both Holmes boys were born and spent their childhoods. When it became clear that a boarding school education wasn’t quite the right fit for his younger brother, the elder Holmes sibling closed up the house and moved everything—including Sherlock—to the family’s second home in London. Much of his father’s extensive library found a new home on the third floor of the massive town house on Highgate Road, a large amount of the volumes were donated to several deserving charitable organizations and archival museums, and a very respectable number of the best and most useful items made their way here—to the renovated school library on the northeast corner of the second floor of Morningside Academy.

Sherlock is starting to forget his mother’s hands, her easy smile, the ever present scent of roses and rich, dark soil that hung around her all summer long, and the feel of her soft lips against his crown as she tucked him in at night. He can’t quite remember the color of his father’s eyes, the exact sound of his booming laugh, or the faint scratch of tweed against his weary cheek as strong arms carried him up to bed.

But the smell of binding cloth, the feel of ancient parchment maps unrolling, the sigh of worn stuffed leather chairs, the warmth of a broad lap as a large hand encouraged him to turn the pages with his tiny fingers, and the timbre of a deep voice giving life to letters inked over countless page? Those things he remembers with astonishing clarity. And when he stands in this place, it seems possible that he will never forget.

Tucked here between towering shelves stuffed full of hundreds of years of knowledge on tens of thousands of pages filled with hundreds of thousands of words made up of millions of individual letters—Sherlock Holmes fits.

He’s nearly finished gathering up and packing away his schoolwork when he hears a door swish open followed by two sets of feet (one clad in slightly worn trainers, the other in sensible kitten
heels) entering the library. He pauses where he stands, slowly pulling the flap of his messenger bag closed before he silently loops the strap over his head and threads one arm through the gap, listening intently.

“You’ll spend most of your time here, of course,” Mrs. Hudson says cheerily as she and her companion walk toward the large circular desk at the center of the room. “But you’re free to use the staff areas if you’d like, and you’ll be doing a fair amount of moving boxes out of storage and dragging them up here so we can finally take a proper inventory. That won’t be a problem, will it?”

“I don’t think so,” the other voice (John) replies.

“Because there’s a handcart available, of course,” the librarian continues, her voice softening a bit. “And there’s no shame in taking several trips if it’s easier for you to—“

“I’ll be fine, Mrs. H.,” the man says, a bit more loudly than he’d likely intended to if the slightly uncomfortable pause and small cough that follows is any indication. “Really, it won’t be a problem. I promise I’ll take it as easy as I need to, all right?”

“All right, dear,” Mrs. Hudson replies, no doubt reaching out and laying her hand softly on the man’s shoulder in a sincere display of motherly affection. “You know best.”

Sherlock smiles to himself, imagining the look on the stranger’s face after being on the receiving end of one of Martha Hudson’s maternal moments. He knows from experience that while you may want to be taken aback by the contact (you are practically a grown man, after all) and might even actually have case for being so (this woman isn’t your mother, for heaven’s sake)—there’s something rather lovely about the sincerity of the gesture that makes you forget very quickly that you ought to be offended. It’s diabolical, really.

“Is the library always this empty?” John asks, his voice even and pleasant once again.

“On most days, it’s fairly quiet,” Mrs. Hudson tells him, a note of regret in her voice. “We get quite a lot more traffic when teachers assign research projects, and things pick up a bit during exams week each semester.”

“It’s such a lovely space, though.” John’s voice fades a bit as he starts to walk around the common area and examine the seating areas and computer terminals. “It’s a shame that it doesn’t get used more.”

“It really is,” Mrs. Hudson agrees. “But it seems that libraries hold less appeal for young people when they’ve got instant access to all the information they could ever need tucked away in their pocket.”

“I suppose that’s true. My mum always told my sister and I that she didn’t know why we kept calling them ‘phones’ when she’d never once heard us actually speak to another person on them.”

“My mother used to go on endlessly about how I spent all my time crouched in the hallway with the one half of the phone pressed up against my ear and an endless stream of nonsense rattling out of my mouth and into the other.” Mrs. Hudson sighs heavily. “Time makes relics of us all, John.”

“True enough.” John huffs out a quiet sigh of his own, and after a short pause there’s the sound of a hand thumping against something solid—a slight creak as fingertips pull against a slick surface and the unmistakable whoosh of a stationary object suddenly in motion—and in his mind Sherlock can see the large, ornate globe rotating on its axis just as clearly as it had when he’d set it spinning himself in the library of his childhood home next to his father’s favorite chair. “But this here is a
work of art as much as a map of the world. Can’t get this on a smartphone.”

“Actually you can, dear. There’s an app for that.”

Sherlock hears a soft exhalation of breath followed by a huff of laughter that starts low and slow and rich, and then morphs into something that can only be described as a…giggle. As he listens to the sound float through the air toward him, Sherlock feels a strange fluttering in his stomach—the corner of his lips twitching reflexively as if to join in.

Which is preposterous, of course. He’s definitely not going to start laughing at something Mrs. Hudson said to someone he doesn’t know just because that someone is laughing. It wasn’t even that funny. But when the laugh ends, and the fluttering in Sherlock’s stomach fades, there’s a strange emptiness left in its place—and he’s struck by the sudden thought that he wishes he could hear it again.

“So you’ve had the tour, we’ve talked a bit about what your duties will be—Oh!” Sherlock hears her run her palms softly over the lines of her blouse and skirt to smooth them before beginning to walk in his direction. “Sherlock, love—come out and meet John, the new library assistant.”

Sherlock freezes in place, holding his breath and staying very, very still.

“Who’s Sherlock?” John asks, and his footsteps begin to cross the floor in the same direction that Mrs. Hudson’s are moving—directly towards him.

It’s not that Sherlock is in the habit of avoiding Mrs. Hudson. Quite the opposite, really. He’s quite fond of the woman, to be honest—and not just because she makes the best raspberry jam biscuits in the world and never forgets to bring him a packet of them each week now that she knows they’re his favorite. Or because she actually listens to him when he speaks, and doesn’t just pretend to. Or because she gave him his own key to the library after she’d found him attempting to pick the lock one morning when she was running late. Or because she’s always been kind to him, not because she had to be—but because she actually likes him.

Or maybe for all those reasons, really.

He doesn’t know why he suddenly doesn’t want her to know he’s been here and listening this whole time…he just doesn’t.

“Oh, Sherlock comes with the library, John.”

“A student?” John asks, the volume of his voice increasing as they grow nearer to where he’s standing.

“Sixth former,” the librarian confirms, her voice warm. “Spends a lot of time here. If he’s not in class, you can find him tucked away back in the stacks with his nose in some book or another. And frankly he’s here even when he should be in class—bit of a sticking point with some of the teachers but he gets top marks in every subject, so they can’t complain really. He always sits right…”

There’s a pause as Mrs. Hudson and her new assistant round the end of the shelf and find the aisle empty, the desktop surface of his regular study carrel bare and the desk lamp switched off.

“That’s odd,” Martha Hudson says as she regards the empty chair. “I could have sworn he was still here, he’s hardly ever gone home this early in the afternoon.”

Sherlock clutches his bag tightly to his stomach, his back pressed up against the end of the shelf one aisle away, and listens as Mrs. Hudson continues.
“He’s a lovely young man,” she says fondly. “Smart as a whip, with a wit to match. He’s a bit of a loner, doesn’t mix much with the other children—he transferred in from another school a few terms back, and you know how kids are, always so reluctant to let someone new join in the fun. Well, you’ll meet him soon enough, I’m sure.”

“I look forward to it,” John tells her, and it strikes Sherlock that he actually sounds as though he means it.

With one slow, graceful turn, Sherlock pivots around the far edge of the bookcase and stretches his neck slightly to peer between the shelves just in time to see a shock of golden blond hair disappear down the end of the aisle and back out into the library common area.

“All right then,” Sherlock hears Mrs. Hudson say to her companion. “Let’s take a walk down to the storage room and I’ll show you which crates we can get started with when you come in tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan,” John agrees, his voice fading and growing dim as the library door softly swings shut behind him.

Sherlock lets out the breath he’s been holding in one steady, loud huff and pulls in another, enjoying the rush of air into his oxygen starved lungs. After a length of time just long enough that, by his calculations, Mrs. Hudson and her new assistant should be far enough away that he can slip out unnoticed, he walks to the end of the aisle and pauses for a moment. He cocks an ear, listening for approaching voices or footsteps, and hearing none he steps out in the center of the library.

He looks around him—at the familiar furnishings and rows of volumes on the shelves—breathes in the dust and comforting smell of old books...but the silence and solitude doesn’t seem to sit as easily with him as it normally does. Tightening the shoulder strap of his bag around him, he walks towards the exit as the ghost of a sneering voice echoes softly in his head:

*Look at you, all alone, surrounded by your stupid books and papers, skulking around the library spying on private conversations. You’re the pathetic one here.*

His shoulders slumping slightly, he presses on the handle and slips out the door.

Chapter End Notes

As ever, comments 100% encouraged, clapped about, cooed over and answered with a consistency bordering on the pathological. Feel free to drop me a line!

And because this little adventure in writing Teen!Lock has taught me that I’m *way* too old to be anything other than completely predictable, welcome to the part of my fics where I suggest someone ELSE’s work that you might (read: totally will, because, duh) enjoy reading as much as I did while you wait for the next chapter of this little adventure to post.

This week’s rec is a gorgeous little imagining by a talented first time author who penned 1,972 words of delicious pre-slash Johnlock that finds everyone’s favorite silver fox detective inspector helping our favorite former Army doctor discover exactly what it is he feels for our favorite consulting detective because he’s too blind to see it for himself.

Author Itsallfine’s *Through Another Lens* delighted me with its spot on characterization,
tight construction, and clever use of descriptive images to convey oodles of emotion in a very small space. I adored it, and I hope you will too.
Hello friends, and a happy “Nope, not Thursday, not even close” to you all! A mid-week bonus update because as this tale unfolds it’s becoming quite clear that my original word count estimate was a little (read: a LOT) on the low side—and I want to keep this story moving along. Next update is right on schedule for Thursday (whatever that word means).

First let me extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has clicked on this new fledgling tale of mine and given it a read. It’s a new kind of story for me, and imagining our boys at this stage in their lives has been as challenging as it has been fun to write. The kudos and comments are so very appreciated—and the subscriptions to hits ratio might technically be an imaginary number.

Great big sloppy kisses to my beta and partner in fic owensm for being willing to take on this new little slice of Johnlock insanity, and a special shout out to cheytea7 for her ninja level cheerleading skills and moral support. As ever, comments are welcomed, appreciated, answered, and honored with a choreographed dance of glee. Thanks for reading, and I hope you’ll keep coming back!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Staring through the tinted glass, Sherlock watches the scenery change as tree lined walkways flanking stately city homes gradually give way to wide, unadorned sidewalks in front of the incongruous jumble of modern sky scrapers and historical buildings that line the streets of downtown London.

It’s early enough yet that the car glides easily through the city, the morning traffic beginning to increase in volume but still moving at a steady clip for the moment. A glance down at his mobile confirms that this particular trip from Highgate Road to Morningside Academy is progressing at precisely the pace it normally does—just as he knew it would. He’d carefully timed his appearance at the top of the main staircase to coincide with the exact moment that his insufferable older brother’s infinite patience began to wear thin, yet just before said brother would feel compelled to lecture him (again) on the predictably exponential relationship between each minute Sherlock delays them from leaving the house and the amount of additional transit time it will tack on to their journey. His precision had been rewarded by the grim set of Mycroft’s jaw as he glared at him before looking pointedly at his terribly tasteful (and obscenely expensive) watch.

“How generous of you to grace us with your presence this morning, brother,” Mycroft had said wearily, fingertips sliding idly over the polished walnut handle of the umbrella in his hand before clutching it under one arm and turning to take the briefcase and stainless steel travel mug from the uniformed woman standing next to him, then striding purposefully to the door.

Sherlock descended the last few stairs and paused for a moment in the marble foyer. Soft footsteps crossed to meet him, and he looked up to see a second silver mug being extended in his direction.

“How generous of you to grace us with your presence this morning, brother,” Mycroft had said wearily, fingertips sliding idly over the polished walnut handle of the umbrella in his hand before clutching it under one arm and turning to take the briefcase and stainless steel travel mug from the uniformed woman standing next to him, then striding purposefully to the door.

Sherlock descended the last few stairs and paused for a moment in the marble foyer. Soft footsteps crossed to meet him, and he looked up to see a second silver mug being extended in his direction.

“How generous of you to grace us with your presence this morning, brother,” Mycroft had said wearily, fingertips sliding idly over the polished walnut handle of the umbrella in his hand before clutching it under one arm and turning to take the briefcase and stainless steel travel mug from the uniformed woman standing next to him, then striding purposefully to the door.
“Three,” their housekeeper whispered, shooting him a quick wink.

“Excellent.” He smiled, then leaned forward and mirrored her conspiratorial expression before whispering, “Thank you, Marie.”

“Lord knows you need the calories,” she replied, looking him up and down and tutting ruefully. “Nothing but skin and bones, since the day you were born.”

A pointed cough from the door had interrupted them then, and seconds later he’d followed his brother down the steep front steps and into the back of the sleek black car waiting for them at the kerb.

Half way through their journey, the silence in the spacious back seat has yet to be broken but for the soft rustle of paper as the elder Holmes peruses his copy of the morning Times. Lifting his coffee cup to his lips, Sherlock tips the mug up and takes a pull of the sweet caffeinated liquid in a long (and purposefully loud) wet slurp—smiling against the lip of the cup at the world-weary exhalation that sounds beside him.

“Your company, as ever, is delightful,” his older brother says from behind his newspaper.

“You could avoid exposing yourself to it if you’d simply agree to hire a second car and driver.”

“And willingly forgo these daily moments of family togetherness?” Mycroft asks, face still hidden as he turns one long, printed page. “Perish the thought.”

“Don’t you think I’m getting a bit old to be shuttled to school by my older brother and dropped off at the door like a child?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Then why, exactly, can’t I have a car of my own?”

“You already have your own car, Sherlock. Ready and waiting and sitting idle for well over a year now," Mycroft reminds him. “You need only learn to drive it.”

“You don’t drive,” Sherlock challenges. “Ever. I can’t even recall the last time I saw you behind the wheel of a car.”

“My occupation affords me certain accommodation in that respect, as you are well aware,” Mycroft tells him, with the air of someone who has grown tired of repeating the same information multiple times. “And just because you haven’t seen me drive doesn’t mean I don’t do so regularly. I’d been driving for nearly two years already by the time I was your age.”

“We live in a city that boasts one of the finest and well maintained public transportion systems in the world,” Sherlock argues, changing tacks. “Driving is hardly a necessary skill in London.”

“But it is a useful skill, Sherlock.”

“And not a particularly difficult one to master, apparently, if even you can do it.”

“Says the person who has not yet done so,” his brother replies lightly from behind his newspaper.

“Do try to be less smug about the achievement, Mycroft. It’s hardly quantum physics, after all.”

“Would that it were, brother,” Mycroft sighs. “You’d have taught yourself the finer points of ignition wiring and been touring the countryside in Old Bessie by the time you were eleven years old.”
“Don’t be absurd.” Sherlock flicks his wrist, fingers waving dismissively. “My feet couldn’t have reached the pedals in that monster. It was less a sedan than a yacht.”

“A fair point,” his brother concedes. “Father’s Aston Martin coupe would have been a much better fit for you.”

Sherlock is silent beside him for a beat—just a fraction of a second, really, a mere moment within a moment—and in all fairness even an astute observer might miss the slight hitch in his posture and the single soft, sharply drawn breath hissed through clenched teeth. It’s a momentary shift in demeanor, passing as quickly as it came, and it’s doubtful that most people would notice it had happened at all.

Mycroft Holmes is not most people.

His long fingers tighten ever so slightly where they grasp the edges of the newsprint barrier before him, and he moves to fold one corner of the paper down so that he can look at his brother, whose gaze snaps back into focus as he turns to face him.

“I do understand your…reluctance, when it comes to this matter,” Mycroft begins, his voice softer now. “But if Mummy and Father were here, I believe they would—”

“But they’re not here,” Sherlock says, interrupting his brother with the look in his eyes as much as the words he speaks. Mycroft holds the gaze, letting the moment stretch out between them, then tilts his head slightly and tips his chin in a small nod.

“No,” he concedes gently. “They’re not.”

Sherlock stares at him for a long moment, his expression blank and passive, but Mycroft doesn’t miss the slight creases at the outside corners of the eyes that are so very like their mother’s (almond shaped, long lashed, pale grey-green irises speckled impossibly with so many other hues) yet somehow so very different at the same time. As his younger brother turns his stare away and back out the window, Mycroft realises what it is he sees in Sherlock’s gaze that he doesn’t ever recall seeing in Rosamund Holmes’ eyes.

Sadness.

Mycroft silently watches his brother, eyes tracing the rather striking profile he cuts, stark and pale and angular against the dark tinted window. After a long moment he swallows against an unfamiliar tightness in his chest, clears his throat softly, then raises his newspaper back up before him and continues to read.

Sherlock Holmes doesn’t hate Morningside Academy.

True, the first time he’d scaled the front stairs and walked through the main doors trailing sulkily behind his officious brother’s long, purposeful stride, he had silently predicted it would be approximately three months (four, tops) before they’d be performing this same trip in reverse, forcing Mycroft to locate another well regarded educational institution that would gladly accept Sherlock based on his stellar test results yet also be willing (for a price) to overlook his somewhat colourful academic history.

But strolling through the empty halls, deserted as they nearly always are at this early hour, Sherlock is willing to concede that he doesn’t loathe the place entirely. A fact which, as it turns out, comes as much of a surprise to him as it does to anyone, really.
He finds that the facilities in general are pleasant enough, the pre-war building that houses the institution having been continuously upgraded and modernized over the years. The board of governors has prioritized a focus on an infrastructure that embraces advances in technology at the same time that it strives to maintain the historical reputation of the institution. As a result, a state of the art intranet accessible to nearly any electronic device that connects the staff with the students (and the students to each other) exists in the same building that now boasts one of the largest traditional libraries of any secondary school in the country.

The staff, in Sherlock’s opinion, is fairly acceptable on the whole, with a few glaring exceptions (because really, the very idea that one can claim a degree in “physical education” as a legitimately academic pursuit is beyond his understanding when it seems to him that the only prerequisites for an actual job in the field are the ability to blow a whistle and the burning desire to relive one’s own testosterone fueled glory days vicariously through subsequent generations). His other instructors have displayed skills of at least basic competency in their chosen fields, and even those that continue to lecture him about such tedious matters as “attendance” and “participation” cannot deny that his coursework demonstrates an excellent understanding of the curriculum, whether or not he can be bothered to actually come to class.

The students, however—well, they’re the same as students everywhere really. Dull, boorish, privileged, and excessively concerned with all manner of ridiculous topics that he’s never found to be worthy of the level of fascination his peers assign to them. True, there are a few personalities amongst the masses that he doesn’t find completely objectionable, and when he’d first arrived at the school it came as a bit of a shock to find that he wasn’t immediately and universally despised. For a while there, he’d even thought that he might possibly have found someone his own age that he actually might enjoy associating with, someone that seemed to enjoy his company as well, but…

Well. He’d been mistaken, that’s all.

Besides, he reminds himself as he rounds the top of the staircase and turns down the second floor corridor and begins rooting around in his shoulder bag for the spare set of keys Mrs. Hudson gave him, when this school year comes to an end he’ll be on his way to university, and at that point it won’t matter who he befriended (or didn’t) in his tenure here.

The sudden, sharp clang of metal against tile startles him as it echoes through the empty corridor.

Which, as it turns out, isn’t empty at all.

“Buggering hell!” an oddly familiar voice exclaims, and Sherlock looks up just in time to avoid a head on collision with…

John.

Sherlock stops short, his gaze sweeping quickly over their surroundings (staffroom door directly to the right, a job hung with several keys lying on the floor to the left) and then coming to rest on the person standing just a few feet away as he attempts to reconcile the young man before him with the voice he’d heard talking with Mrs. Hudson in the library yesterday.

He looks (down, as the man is quite a bit shorter than he is) at him, taking in the large backpack slung over one (broad, well defined) shoulder, the dark green cardigan jumper hanging from the crook of one (tanned) elbow, the arms laden with a stack of heavy books (academic texts of various scientific subjects) and the large lidded paper coffee cup balanced precariously on top of the whole mess held in place by the (dimpled) chin attached to a face in possession of a (slightly chapped) set of lips and a pair of (blue) eyes all framed by a halo of (short and slightly mussed) golden hair.
“Sorry about the language, you know, before,” the man says sheepishly, his (quite deeply blue, really) eyes crinkling at the corners as he attempts to explain. “It’s just that my goddamn hands are full and I’ve dropped my sodding keys—oh hell, sorry. Again.”

Sherlock stares at him for a moment longer, and he tries to stop the corner of his mouth from quirking upwards in a grin, but apparently fails to do so as the stammering young man huffs out a short laugh.

“Look, I swear I’m not trying to break into the place or anything, but would you mind…” John cocks his head towards the set of keys on the floor, looking relieved as Sherlock steps to his left and bends down to retrieve them. “Thanks, I appreciate the help. I’m John Watson, by the way, I’m the new—”

“Library assistant,” Sherlock says, straightening back up and thumbing through the keys to find the correct one.

“Yeah,” John Watson says, surprise in his tone as Sherlock watches him shift the stack of books into the crook of his right arm then grab the coffee cup with his left hand and slowly roll his shoulder back and forth with a slight grimace before continuing. “How did you—”

“Car accident or sports injury?”

“Sorry, what?”

“Your shoulder,” Sherlock clarifies, throwing a sidelong glance in John’s direction. “Was it a car accident or a sports injury?”

“Sports injury,” John answers, eyebrows knitting together in confusion. “Torn rotator cuff, but how—”

“Is that why you lost your scholarship?” Sherlock slides the proper key into the lock and turns it, the telltale click echoing through the hall as the tumblers align.

“Yeah, I’m not exactly sure what’s going on here,” John says, his voice a bit suspicious as he looks up into Sherlock’s face. “Or who you’ve been talking to, but—”

“I haven’t been talking to anyone,” Sherlock tells him, his cheeks pinking slightly as he looks away and turns the knob, pushing the door open a few inches and gesturing to it. “There you are. Welcome to Morningside Academy.”

“Thanks,” the shorter man says, watching him extract the keys from where they’re still hanging from the knob, his eyes widening in surprise when Sherlock steps forward and reaches towards the waistband of John’s jeans and pushes the keys into his front pocket with two long, pale fingers before stepping gracefully around him and continuing down the hall. As he makes his way down the corridor, Sherlock can feel the new library assistant’s gaze boring into his back.

“Wait!” John calls out a moment later.

Sherlock stops walking, then slowly turns to look back at John where he still stands in front of the now open staffroom door staring at him curiously. Sherlock returns the look, and a few long seconds later when John still hasn’t spoken he raises his eyebrows and tilts his head expectantly.

“Yes?”

“Well,” the shorter man begins, pausing for another moment as if in thought—the very tip of his tongue darting out to glide over his bottom lip, a mere flash of pink that disappears so quickly
Sherlock can’t be sure if he really saw it to begin with—before he shrugs his good shoulder and heaves a slightly exasperated sigh. “It’s just that you seem to know exactly who I am, but I don’t know a thing about you. I don’t know if you’re a student here, or what you’re doing in the building at this hour—I don’t even know your name.”

Sherlock raises his cup to his lips and looks at John Watson over the edge, takes a long sip, then narrows his eyes and considers his response. After a moment he swallows his mouthful of sweet, hot coffee and smiles. “I am a student here, I’m always here this early, the name is Sherlock Holmes, and I’ll be in the library.” He raises his cup and tips it in mock salute, then turns on his heel and continues walking to the end of the hall before rounding the corner and disappearing from view.

Staring at the papers spread out before him, Sherlock reaches up to tilt the desk lamp a bit to better illuminate his notes. Squinting, he concentrates on the section of the page where he’d been forced to write out his formulas in smaller and smaller text to compensate for the lack of space he’d given himself when he’d set out to chart the reactions in the first place. He touches the tip of his pencil to the scant open space below the last set of notations and is so lost in thought that he fails to notice that he’s not alone until a hand alights softly on his shoulder, making him jump in surprise.

“Sorry,” John Watson says quickly, deftly raising his arms just in time to narrowly avoid having the coffee cup clutched in his left hand slapped out of it by one of Sherlock’s flailing arms. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I wasn’t scared,” Sherlock answers crossly, settling back into his chair and rearranging his notes as his heart rate begins to settle back down to something approaching normal. “A bit startled perhaps, which is hardly surprising given that you chose to alert me to your presence by clutching my shoulder instead of simply announcing yourself.”

“Well, I thought about shouting ‘boo’!, but it seemed a bit childish.” John says, and when Sherlock shoots him a withering look, he simply shrugs—and smiles. “To be fair, I did say your name. Twice. But it looked like you were a bit lost in thought.”

“Yet you still felt compelled to interrupt me,” Sherlock replies, his earlier surprise giving way to a touch of annoyance. “Very considerate of you.”

“Hey, I said I was sorry.” John Watson offers an apologetic grin as he raises his cup and takes a drink. “So you’re Sherlock Holmes.”

“Apparently.”

“Right. As in the ‘Holmes Collection’, and the library endowment?”

“The very same,” Sherlock confirms, affecting a disinterested tone as he bends back over his notes and begins to transcribe the next equation in the sequence.

“So your parents are responsible for all of this?” John looks impressed as he gestures broadly to the space around them, and if he notices that Sherlock stiffens slightly and goes momentarily still, he doesn’t mention it.

“My brother, actually,” Sherlock answers, his voice less abrasive than it had been just moments ago.

“Your brother?” John asks with a touch of surprise, and without even looking at him Sherlock can pinpoint the exact moment that he understands the implications of the pronouncement, can practically see the puzzle pieces sliding into sequence and clicking into place, the image of the poor little orphan
child coming into focus. “Oh. So your parents—”

“Are dead,” Sherlock confirms, turning to look up at him where he stands, and all traces of the earlier flash of vulnerability have disappeared. “Is there a point to this line of questioning?”

“No, not particularly,” John says, a bit defensively, before drawing in a breath and letting it out heavily. “Look I think we may have gotten off on the wrong foot earlier. When she showed me around yesterday, Mrs. Hudson mentioned that you spend quite a lot of time here in the library, and since I’ll be spending a fair amount of it here myself I thought it might be nice for us to, I don’t know, get to know a bit about each other, I guess.”

Sherlock sweeps his gaze down the length of the young man before him, and then reverses course to scan back up to his face before narrowing his eyes and regarding him shrewdly for a long moment—then he takes a deep breath and begins to speak:

“I know you’re in your first year at Bart’s and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, and that you’re studying to be a doctor. I know that you were able to begin your academic career there thanks in large part to a fairly generous rugby scholarship, the same scholarship that you subsequently lost as a result of the shoulder injury you incurred early in the season. I know that you were able to make ends meet at first without additional employment, likely because the rent on your basement flat at 221 Baker Street is exceedingly reasonable and therefore you were able to finish out the first term by severely cutting back your expenses, but it wasn’t long before you realised that you’d need to find a job—one with flexible hours to accommodate your fluctuating class schedule as well as offering a fairly quiet environment that will allow you time to study during the less busy moments of your shift. I also know that such a job, in general, could hardly pay you enough to make it worth the petrol to make the trip each day, let alone fund your tuition, but if you were lucky enough to find such work under the management of someone with broad discretionary access to a private trust who was willing to pay you generously for your services both out of a sense of affection as well as a belief that you’ll do the job very well, then it would be the perfect arrangement for you—and thus, here you are.”

“So you see, John. I know a great deal about you already,” Sherlock says, the corners of his mouth tipping up into a smug grin before nodding dismissively and turning his attention back to the notes spread out on the desk in front of him. “That’s enough to be going on with, don’t you think?”

John stares down at the younger man for a long moment, but Sherlock keeps his eyes on the factors and formulas covering the pages before him, fully expecting the inevitable angry outburst at any moment and attempting to brace himself for it while still appearing casual and uninterested…but it doesn’t come. A full minute passes, and though Sherlock tries to maintain his careful air of nonchalance, in the end his curiosity gets the best of him and he turns his head slowly to meet John’s gaze, the blue eyes open wide and slightly out of focus above a mouth hanging slightly agape.

Sherlock cocks his head and peers at him curiously. “Are you quite all right, John?”

“Yeah.” John nods slowly, then his mouth snaps abruptly closed and he shakes his head slightly before lowering his gaze to meet Sherlock’s. “Actually, no. I’m not. How on earth could you know all of that?”

“I didn’t know.” Sherlock lifts one shoulder in a careless shrug. “I saw.”

“You saw?” John asks. “You saw what?”

Sherlock turns in his chair to face John fully, regards him curiously for a beat, then begins to explain.
“Your carriage and demeanor says athlete, your age and general physical condition suggests a level of play that exceeds the occasional friendly game in the park or membership in a casual amateur club. Your arms are tan but the colour stops just shy of the sleeve hem of your t-shirt, suggesting a sport played outdoors in a uniform featuring a moderately short sleeve length. Now the sport itself could be something other than rugby, but given that the skin on your elbows is scarred by years of repeated minor injuries to the flesh there and the fact that your short stature and stocky build give you the ideal physique to play the back line, I think we can safely say that Rugby has long been your sport of choice.”

“OK,” John says, a touch of wonder in his voice but still eyeing him suspiciously. “I’ll buy all of that, but who said anything about playing for Barts?”

“You did. Not in so many words, of course, but it was you who pointed me directly to the evidence. Literally dropped it right in front of me.”

“Ah!” John’s face lights up with sudden understanding. He reaches into his pocket to pull out the ring of keys Sherlock had retrieved for him from the floor that morning and runs his thumb over the fob—tracing the shape of the distinctive black and white checked shield rimmed in bright yellow that serves as the team logo for the Royal Hospitals RFC before looking back up at Sherlock. “Doesn’t mean I go to school there, though. Might just be a big fan.”

“Possible,” Sherlock concedes with a thoughtful tip of his head, “but unlikely given the stack of textbooks with subjects highly specific to the course work of a first year medicine student—and even more unlikely since all three bore stickers on their spines clearly indicating that they were purchased at an officially sanctioned Barts/LMC textbook exchange. Books which you chose not to find room for in your backpack, which is completely understandable given that the extra weight is more easily borne by the well-developed muscles of your upper arms instead of putting extra strain on your still healing shoulder, which—though much improved—still bothers you enough that you need to stop and stretch the joint quite frequently. Losing your scholarship put quite a strain on your budget, I’d wager.”

John’s expression doesn’t alter much at the pronouncement, but his mouth tightens a bit, and he nods in confirmation while unconsciously rolling his left shoulder the way he had earlier.

“Luckily, your rent is set at a comically low amount for such a desirable central London location, and that does improve your financial situation considerably.” Sherlock says.

“How can you possibly know where I live?” John asks, curiosity warring with disbelief.

“Take a look at the cup in your hand, John.” Sherlock rolls his eyes slightly as John does exactly that. “Speedy’s Sandwich Bar and Café, despite making a passably decent cup of coffee, is hardly the type of establishment one might go out of their way to patronize, therefore we can assume proximity played a significant factor in your stopping there this morning. The fact that Speedy’s is located in a Westminster building owned by one Martha Hudson, who just happens to be the venerable librarian here at Morningside Academy, leads me to believe that I may also safely assume that proximity played a significant factor in her hiring you on as her assistant as well.”

“Doesn’t prove that I live in the building,” John challenges, looking thoughtful. “Mrs. Hudson could be my Aunt for all you know.”

“Given that her late husband was an only child and that she has only one sister, who as of this date has never been married and claims parentage of no one outside of the rather extensive collection of neighborhood cats she feeds daily, I find that scenario to be highly unlikely. Besides, if the faint smell of mildew on your clothing wasn’t evidence enough that you’ve taken up residence in the
basement flat of 221 Baker Street, the slight, and obviously new, squidginess around your waistline is a dead giveaway, as it is certainly the result of fewer intense regular workouts combined with a steady diet of home baked goods that no doubt find their way into your flat with astonishing regularity.”

John plucks at the neckline of the green cardigan sweater he slipped on at some point after Sherlock first saw him in the hall and lifts it to his face and takes a deep sniff, his forehead wrinkling in confusion.

“My clothes don’t smell musty to me.”

“Of course they don’t.” Sherlock waves his fingers dismissively. “You’re used to the smell, so you don’t notice it. But don’t worry, scents have a harder time lingering on cheaper, artificial fibers, it’s already less noticeable than it was earlier.”

“Well good.” John huffs out a breathy chuckle. “I’ve been looking for the silver lining to being dead broke, I guess ‘quick dissipation of mouldy odours’ is a start. And I’m not squidgy, by the way. My trousers fit just as well as they ever have, thank you very much.”

Sherlock smirks. “For now.”

“So let me get this straight,” John says, holding up his left hand and ticking off the details one by one on short, sturdy fingers. “You looked at me for a total of thirty seconds and were able to tell that I played rugby at school, that I’ve lost my scholarship due to an injury, that I’m a first year medicine student at Bart’s, that I live at 221C Baker Street, that I’m damn near broke, that I walk around smelling like mould, and that I’m apparently also getting fat?”

“Well,” Sherlock says carefully, “I suppose that is one way of putting it, yes.”

“I see,” John says, a slightly incredulous look on his face.

Sherlock looks at John impassively, quietly taking in a breath and inwardly bracing himself for the type of reaction he’s come to expect in situations like these. He watches John digest the events of the last several minutes, then nod his head and open his mouth to speak.

“That,” he begins, looking Sherlock directly in the eye, “was amazing.”

Sherlock freezes where he sits, eyes blinking rapidly as he replays John’s words in his mind repeatedly, making sure he heard them correctly.

“You think so?” He asks, the timidity in his voice sounding strange even to his own ears.


“Oh,” Sherlock says, narrowing his eyes slightly and staring at John who looks back at him with a gaze as open and sincere as the words he just spoke “That’s not what people normally say.”

“No?” John asks, eyebrows raised in curiosity. “What do they normally say?”

“Piss off.”

Sherlock watches as John’s shoulders begin to shake and a low chuckle rumbles in his chest and slowly works its way up his throat before it dissolves into that same infectious giggle he’d overheard the day before—the one that makes Sherlock’s own lips twitch as a soft laugh escapes from his
mouth, the two sounds combining, weaving together to fill the space between and around them, echoing in his ears even as it dies away, and Sherlock watches John’s face—watches blue eyes crinkle with laughter, watches tanned cheeks pinked with amusement, watches the last clear notes of John’s laugh tumbling from his lips…then all at once realises that he’s watching—staring, even—and turns quickly away, looking back down at the desk and fidgeting with the notes spread across the surface.

“I don’t doubt it,” John says with a broad grin and a sigh, then steps a bit closer to get a look at the papers Sherlock is absently pushing around the desk. “So what are you working on so diligently back here?”

“Chemistry,” Sherlock tells him, suddenly glad for the change in subject.

“Oh wow.” John bends a bit lower over Sherlock’s shoulder to examine the equations more closely. “These are reaction summaries, aliphatic organic compounds, right?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, a note of surprise in his voice as he turns slightly to surreptitiously examine John’s profile as he leans casually on the edge of the desk and looks over Sherlock’s notes. “At least they’re supposed to be. I’m still working on the progressions.”

“They cover organic chemistry in A-Levels now?”

“No,” Sherlock says with a sigh. “The standard texts available at this school are disappointingly basic. This is more of a personal project, I suppose.”

“That’s pretty impressive.” John stands back up and looks down at Sherlock with a smile.

“It passes the time,” Sherlock says lightly as something warm and unfamiliar blooms behind his sternum. “I am almost certain there are some much more advanced Chemistry texts in storage downstairs that have yet to be catalogued, but Mrs. Hudson won’t let me go searching for them.”

“I’ll keep an eye out then. Let you know what I find as we work through unpacking the crates.”

“That would be…good.” He nods his thanks, watching as John smiles before looking back down at Sherlock’s carefully transcribed equations.

“I can’t believe you’ve worked all this out on your own,” John says again, a note of impressed wonder in his voice, and Sherlock sits up a bit straighter in his chair at the praise. “We just started learning about these reactions last term. I’d never have been able to tackle these in my A-Levels.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot,” Sherlock says reflexively, turning to regard John when he doesn’t immediately respond, taking in the shocked amusement on his face, and rolling his eyes dismissively. “Oh don’t be like that. Practically everyone is.”

John shakes his head as a broad smile stretches over his face and another laugh-turned-giggle floats through the air between them. Sherlock sucks in a shallow breath at the sound, surprised again by how it seems to resonate somewhere deep within him, how he can’t seem to hear it often enough, how he begins to miss it even before it’s fully gone.

“Yeah, I’m starting to understand that whole ‘piss off’ reaction.” John smiles as he shakes his head then lifts his coffee cup to his mouth.

Sherlock sees John’s lips part against the white plastic edge, hears him inhale slightly as he closes his mouth around the small opening in the lid, and watches the muscles of his neck contract as he swallows repeatedly. He’s staring so intently that he doesn’t notice at first that John is looking at him
quizzically. Thinking quickly, he clears his throat slightly and gestures to the cup clutched in John’s hand.

“You’re not supposed to have that in here, you know.”

“Really?” John asks, looking down at the paper-covered surface of Sherlock’s desk and gesturing to the gleaming stainless steel mug. “You’ve got one.”

“True,” Sherlock concedes, picking it up and looking thoughtful as he takes a sip. “And Mrs. Hudson will arrive at any moment to scold me for it—after which she will allow me to keep it ‘just this once’.”

As if summoned by the mere mention of her name, the heavy library door swishes open followed by the soft tap of kitten heels traveling across the floor in their general direction.

“Yoo-hoo!” Mrs. Hudson calls out as she crosses through the large common space in the center of the room. “Sherlock, love—are you already settled in?”

“Yes, Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock calls back, and he and John both turn to look toward the end of the aisle.

“Oh good.” They hear her start across the floor, stopping to flick on a table lamp on her way. “I’ve hired a new assistant, and I want you on your best behavior when you meet him, understood?”

“No promises,” Sherlock says, smiling back as John shoots him a conspiratorial grin.

“Sherlock Holmes, you listen very carefully,” the librarian says sternly, the soft hum of computer terminals coming to life as she makes her way closer to his location. “John Watson is a lovely young man, and I think if you give him half a chance you just might find that the two of you have more in common than you—”

Martha Hudson rounds the corner and stops abruptly and stares at the two young men where they stand, smiling broadly when John lifts a hand and waves it at her.

“Oh wonderful, you’ve already met!” She beams at each of them in turn, then narrows her gaze, fixing it on the cups in their hands before pursing her lips crossly. “For heaven’s sake Sherlock. How many times must I tell you that you’re not to bring beverages into the library?”

“At least once more, it would seem.” Sherlock smiles brightly, lifting his cup and taking a drink.

“The sign out front is very clear, young man. No Food, No Drink, No open flames. I don’t blame you, John—this is your first day after all, but this one here is beginning to try my patience on the matter.”

“Won’t happen again, Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock says with a solemn nod, shooting John a sly wink and taking yet another drink from his cup, smiling against the edge of it as he watches John suppressing a grin of his own.

“See to it that it doesn’t,” the librarian says, then lifts one handle of her bag off of her wrist and begins rooting around in the depths. “Though perhaps it’s just as well you’ve got something warm to drink, it’ll go nicely with these,” she says, producing two small paper wrapped parcels and handing one to each of them.

John's eyebrows lift hopefully. “Raspberry jam biscuits?”
“Of course they are,” Sherlock says.

“They’re my favorite,” both boys say, nearly in unison.

“See there? Already something in common,” Mrs. Hudson says, beaming smugly at them both before pointing a finger at each of them in turn. “But just this once, mind.”

Joh nods solemnly. “Understood, Mrs. H.”

“But for the moment we’ve got food, we’ve got drinks, perhaps I should light something on fire while all the rules are suspended,” Sherlock teases, ripping open the packet of biscuits and popping one into his mouth. “Just this once.”

“Don’t press your luck, Sherlock Holmes,” Mrs. Hudson fires back before turning to smile at her new assistant. “All right then, John. Ready to get to work?”

“Ready when you are,” John answers, following her as she disappears around the end of the aisle.

Sherlock watches them go, then stares for a long moment at the empty space—and is momentarily startled when John reappears suddenly, leaning to poke his head around the end of the aisle.

“Talk to you later, yeah?”

“All right,” Sherlock says, returning the smile directed his way before it disappears once again.

After a moment he looks back down at his notes, pops another biscuit into his mouth, then gets back to work—crumbs, and a smile, lingering on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, feel free to drop me a line in the comments section—I love to hear from you!

Now, in this chapter’s installment of “Damn it Sara, if you’re going to write a slow burn Teenlock fic, then you better give us some smut to enjoy in the meantime!” I present to you a delicious little tale full of sleepy morning sex that I guarantee will help tide you over until TeenLOCK becomes TeenLICK.

So if you’re in the mood for a 4,000 word infusion of hot-affectionate-loving-smut into your life, click on over and read ’Till I Break by the gloriously talented pandoras_chaos (whose work happens to be my happy sexy-times place), and then meet me back here on Thursday for the next installment of this story. Happy reading!
(304): Factors Affecting Social Behavior

Chapter Notes

Hello friends, and happy “A Thursday by any other name might technically be a Saturday, but I’m pretty sure it would still smell as sweet” to you all.

Yes, I am aware that posting on a Saturday is taking even my liberal view of what constitutes a Thursday in the first place a bit too far. But as this week saw the sudden and heartbreaking loss of a most beloved family pet, I must beg your understanding for this minor delay. It was a rough week at our house. :( 

Ongoing effusive love for my incomparable beta owensm and her uncanny ability to steer a story in the right direction without seeming like a great big meanie who just wants to make me cry, and dozens of cupcakes to cheytea7 for whipping my dialogue punctuation into shape and for earning her accelerated degree in “Talking Sara Off Ledges” this last week.

Oodles of affection for every click, comment, subscription and bookmark on this new adventure, I’m enjoying the challenge of writing about our boys at this age and your support is so very much appreciated. If you enjoy the mental image of me dancing in glee while staring at my phone, please feel free to drop me a line in the comments as that never fails to bring that particular fantasy to life. Have a great week, and I’ll see you next Thursday…ish.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock Holmes was eight years old when his Aunt Violet got married.

Again.

While she had been blessed with the grace, charm and effortless beauty that were the hallmarks of the women in their family line, Violet Poppington-Rinaldi-Buchanon (née Molyneaux) unfortunately did not possess the same good fortune in love that her younger sister Rosamund had found with Sieger Holmes.

But where Aunt Violet was decidedly unlucky in marriage, her luck in divorce was another matter entirely. The circumstances of her birth afforded her quite a comfortable life, but it was the dissolution of three marital unions that made her a very wealthy woman. Wealthy enough that, upon leaving her third husband after finding him in a rather compromising position with his yoga instructor, Violet had sworn to her sister that as she had the means to take care of herself—and was perfectly capable of doing so—she was officially swearing off the entire notion of romance and vowed that he she would never marry again.

So it came as somewhat of a surprise when less than a year after that pronouncement, over breakfast the morning after she arrived in Cornwall for a week-long visit, she casually announced her engagement to one Alexander Cartwright of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and asked if they might possibly hold the ceremony there in just under three weeks’ time. And because Rosamund Holmes loved to throw parties almost as much as she loved her sister, a fortnight later the plans had been made, the house had been readied, and the guests began to arrive.
Sherlock had been transfixed by the spectacle of it all; the bustle of the household staff as they raced to prepare for the big day, the constant stream of deliveries and workmen going to and fro, and finally the seemingly endless parade of people filing into the house dragging suitcases behind them, invading the rooms and filling the halls with noise and voices and the constant hum of occupancy. Perched behind the long railing at the top of the main staircase, he watched with interest as the adults greeted one another. The sea of familiar faces of family and friends peppered with those he’d never seen before, many of whom introduced themselves in voices with American accents and exchanged hugs and handshakes with people they’d just met as though they’d known them all their lives.

He found that if he stayed silent he could wander amongst them mostly unseen, listening to the rattle of ice cubes against glass, catching snippets of conversation, feeling the heat generated by so many bodies, smelling the combined scents of perfume and aftershave and sweat. He stood there in the middle of it all amazed by the sheer amount of information that bombarded him from every direction, the endless stream of data—it was strange and new and overwhelming…and fascinating.

He’d been so lost in thought that when a large hand settled softly on his head, it startled him for a moment—until his father’s familiar chuckle soon followed and the hand slid to rest affectionately on his shoulder.

“There’s my boy,” Sieger Holmes said jovially, raising his glass of caramel colored scotch to his smiling lips and taking a drink while looking down at his youngest son. “Your mother said you were upstairs at the children’s party.”

“I was,” Sherlock answered with a grave look. “Dull.”

As Sieger Holmes’ booming laugh rang in the large room, several people around him smiled at the sound and joined in with chuckles of their own.

“Thought you might make a break for it,” his father said. “Better not let your mum see you down here.”

“I don’t know why I can’t stay with you,” Sherlock whined, brow scrunched moodily as he stared across the room where his older brother stood (looking terribly smug) conversing intently with their cousin Peter and a third older boy, tall and blond, that he didn’t recognize. “Why doesn’t Mycroft have to come upstairs as well?”

“Because he’s nearly sixteen, Sherlock,” his father replied patiently.

“What difference does that make?” Sherlock stretched his shoulders and neck, standing as tall as possible. “I’ll be nine next month.”

“And ten a minute later, and all grown up before I’ve even had the chance to blink.” A fond smile tipped at Sieger’s lips as he dropped to one knee and looked his young son in the eye. “Your mum is counting on you to help entertain your cousins and the other children, you know. It’s a big responsibility, and it’d be a great help to her.”

“Fine,” Sherlock sighed, looking quite put out before turning and walking purposefully (but definitely not stomping) towards the stairs. He paused for a moment at the bottom step and looked back over his shoulder to find his father’s gaze, smiling as the elder Holmes shot him a wink before turning away and blending back into the crowd.

Relegated to the company of the other children for most of the week that followed, Sherlock had expected that while the information to be gathered from the gaggle of his young cousins and various other offspring of the wedding guests may not be as interesting, it would certainly still plentiful. But
it very quickly became apparent that the regular tedious jumble of data—revealing who was angry with whom or who grew three inches over the summer or who wanted to talk ad nauseum about the ridiculous television programme everyone was currently obsessed with—had suddenly been replaced by the only thing that anyone seemed to be talking about at all:

Tristan Cartwright.

When Aunt Violet’s soon to be (fourth) husband had arrived in Cornwall that first night with his sixteen year old son in tow, the adults had been warm and friendly and happy to meet Violet’s new beau, ready to welcome him and his charming son into the fold. The children in attendance, however, skipped right over friendly curiosity about the new arrival and moved on directly to losing their minds.

At dinner that first night, the air around the children’s table was abuzz with speculation. The boys were impressed by his worldly air, speculating about his life (I heard he drives a race car…Eddie saw him smoking with the cooks outside the kitchen…My mum says he works at his Dad’s company…I bet he has loads of girlfriends). The girls, however, seemed fixated on slightly different aspects of the young man. (Look at those blue eyes…His smile is so perfect…My brother Peter says he’s in a band…Do you think he has a girlfriend?…I wonder what kind of music he likes… He smiled right at me! I swear he did!)

And then there was the giggling.

The next morning, after the older girls had spent most of the previous night skulking down hallways and peering around corners just to get a glimpse of his cousin-to-be—and then bursting into squeals of laughter and frantic bouts of whispering after they did—Sherlock overheard Alexander Cartwright laugh and remark that his son tended to have that effect wherever he went, saying:

“That’s Tristan for you. The boys all want to be him and the girls all want to be with him!”

Which, Sherlock had to admit, did seem to be an accurate assessment of the situation. With the other children so preoccupied with tracking young Tristan’s every move, Sherlock had more time to break away from the pack and wander around the big house alone than he’d expected he would. And so it happened that the night before the wedding he rounded the corner of the second floor hallway just in time to see Tristan Cartwright disappear, alone, into the library. Sherlock waited for a moment, anticipating the arrival of the ever present gaggle of girls that seemed to follow Aunt Violet’s new stepson at every turn, and when they didn’t come he crept down the hall and stood outside the library door, listening.

When he didn’t hear any voices, his curiosity got the best of him and he quietly turned the knob, opened the door just a crack…and saw that Tristan wasn’t alone at all.

He was standing next to the fireplace, backed up against the wall, being kissed (rather thoroughly, it seemed) by one of Sherlock’s cousins. He watched for a moment longer, eye pressed tightly to the narrow crack, until a soft cough sounded from further back down the hall, making him jump slightly. Whipping his head towards the sound, Sherlock saw his mother standing next to the large spray of flowers sitting on a table nestled into a nook, two baskets of fresh cut blooms in her arms as she stared in his direction with a raised eyebrow.

Closing the door as silently as possible, Sherlock turned and padded down the hall, stopping right in front of her and looking sheepish.

“What did your father and I tell you about spying, love?” she asked him softly.
“I wasn’t spying,” Sherlock assured her, squaring his shoulders with a bit more bravado than he actually felt. “I was observing.”

“There’s a very fine line of distinction between the two,” she reminded him gently, setting her baskets on the floor and turning to pull the least fresh blooms from the arrangement of flowers beside her. “What was it that you were observing?”

Sherlock shrugged. “I saw Tristan going into the Library. I wondered what he was doing in there.”

“And what was he doing?” Mummy asked lightly, tucking fresh stems into the vase and arranging them artfully.

“Kissing someone.”

“Oh, I see.” A smile quirked at the corner of her lips as she plucked a drooping white rose from the vase and replaced it with a fresh soft peach bud. “Someone you recognized?”

“Yes,” Sherlock admitted. “Cousin Peter.”

Rosamund Holmes froze for a moment, just a split second really—no more—before pulling another dying bloom from the bouquet and setting about replacing it deftly with a new one.

“Well,” she said airly, a bit of a smile in her voice. “Agnes Carlisle’s daughter Bitsy will be terribly disappointed. She’s been making moony eyes at him for three full days now.”

“Cousin Peter is a boy,” Sherlock continued.

“That’s true,” she agreed, turning to look down at her young son, smiling softly as he stared back at her, his forehead wrinkled in thought.

“Do boys always kiss other boys?” he asked, tilting his head and looking up at her for an answer.

“Some boys do, yes,” she told him with a smile, continuing to pull and replace flowers. “And some boys kiss girls. And some girls kiss other girls.”

“How do they know who they want to kiss?”

“That’s something we each get to discover for ourselves, love. One day you’ll know too.”

“All the girls in this house want to kiss Tristan,” Sherlock said, rolling his eyes. “Should I tell them he’d rather kiss boys?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she replied, her voice kind but firm.

“But why not?”

“Because we all have our stories, Sherlock,” his mother explained gently, reaching out a hand to fondly tame the wild curls at the side of his head. “And they are ours to tell…or not.”

“But if I see it, doesn’t that make it my story as well?”

“A very clever question,” Mummy conceded with a proud grin, extracting one stem from the arrangement before her and deftly snapping off the perfectly formed soft pink rosebud and inch or two from the top, then crouching down before him and slipping it into the button hole in his lapel. “You’re quite an observant young man, you know. But observing is not the same as participating. Everyone has secrets, love. And if those secrets aren’t hurting anyone, best let them be kept. One
day you’ll share a kiss with someone special—and that will be your secret to keep.”

Sherlock scowled. “I don’t want to kiss anyone!”

“You may change your mind about that, someday,” Mummy said with a knowing gleam in her eye, turning her head slightly and winking at her youngest child, who rolled his eyes and grinned before pursing his lips and pressing them to her cheek. With a smile, Rosamund Holmes smoothed her warm hand over the shoulders of his jacket, gently straightened his collar, then slapped her palms on her bent knees and stood back up to her full height. “Right, then. If you’re finished observing for the moment, why don’t you help your old mum carry these baskets downstairs and we’ll freshen up the centerpieces before dinner?”

Wicker handle balanced in the crook of his arm, Sherlock followed his mother down the long hall toward the front staircase. And when Tristan Cartwright and Peter Bingley exited the library standing side by side and turned in their direction, Sherlock observed them—the careful distance they maintained between themselves, the pleasantly neutral expressions on their faces as they conversed, the polite greetings they exchanged with his mother as they passed by.

A few moments later, a group of girls appeared on the landing and began making their way en masse down the hall. And as Sherlock observed their high pitched giggles and breathless whispers and ridiculously deliberate hair tosses as they very obviously trailed after the object of their affection while trying (in vain) not to be obvious about it—he realised that he had a secret of his own:

If, one day, he ever did want to kiss someone…he felt very sure that someone would be a boy.

Sherlock Holmes was eight years old when his Aunt Violet got married, when he decided that the group of girls in attendance of that blessed event were the silliest, loudest, most irrational beings he had ever—or likely would ever—encounter.

Nearly ten years later, he is now forced to admit that he’d been wrong.

In the two years he’s been a student at Morningside Academy, Sherlock can’t recall a single day when the library has seen this much traffic. By his count there are currently no fewer than fourteen girls wandering around it at this very moment, huddled in groups of two or three, conversing in soft voices and pretending to browse the shelves while taking turns peering around (and through) them at the young man seated behind the circulation desk unpacking a large crate of books and chatting amiably with Mrs. Hudson.

He’s not particularly surprised, mind you.

Annoyed, yes.

But not surprised.

The first bell had barely sounded that morning when his mobile phone alerted him to the presence of a “NEW CONFESSION” waiting to be viewed. Tapping the green skull icon out of habit, Sherlock knew how the day would progress as soon as the first words began to appear:

iConfess: I think I’m going to be spending more time in the library…

Before the last spark of the self-destructing message had even faded from view, the library door swished open and the usually quiet atmosphere that prevailed in this space was shattered by the first grating, high-pitched, girlish giggles of the day.

But not the last, by far.
“Voices, dears,” Mrs. Hudson had admonished pleasantly, and the students attached to the aforementioned giggles scattered into the stacks, far enough away from his regular spot that their conspiratorial whispers and occasional bursts of laughter were quiet enough not to be obtrusive, but just loud enough to disturb the normally hushed atmosphere of the one place where Sherlock Holmes finds respite from the constant noise and clatter and crush of the rest of the student body. He’d just managed to tune out the new layer of noise when his mobile phone screen glowed to life beside him once again.

NEW CONFESSION!

Reaching out to tap the screen, the dull sense of dread in the pit of his stomach sharpened as he read:

iConfess: What has blond hair and blue eyes and a killer smile? Come to the Library and find out!

Watching the message slowly blur and then dissolve into a shower of bright sparks, Sherlock imagined that he could hear the ping and whir and beep of countless mobile phones alerting his fellow students to the presence of the message he’d just read—and with a sigh sank down into his chair, bent over his notes, and prepared himself for the inevitable invasion.

Hours later, the sudden flow of visitors anxious to avail themselves of the many services that Morningside library has to offer has yet to cease. While the traffic had understandably increased markedly during each passing period between classes (and saw a predictably impressive spike over the lunch hour), Sherlock is surprised by how many students are still here during scheduled class times. He can hear the swish of their footsteps as they prowl the stacks, the thump of fingertips dragging idly over the spines of books as they make their way and down the aisles, their hushed voices as they lean their heads together and discuss the single reason that has caused most of them to step foot into a library for the first time in their lives:

John Watson.

Who, Sherlock can only assume as he listens to John and Mrs. Hudson’s steady stream of pleasant conversation as they sift through the contents of one of the crates dragged up from storage that morning, remains blissfully unaware of just how much interest his mere presence in the building has inspired in the students of Morningside Academy.

Well, the female students, anyway.

After the first few mentions of the new library assistant on the iConfess app, there’s been a steady stream of new messages appearing regularly, the theme as consistent as the content is ridiculous.

iConfess: I am going to start reading more. A LOT MORE.

iConfess: I just heard him say he plays rugby, he can tackle me any time.

iConfess: OMG HE TOTALLY SMILED AT ME!

iConfess: I don’t see a ring on his finger

iConfess: I AM THE FUTURE MRS. WATSON!

He’d tried simply slipping his phone into his pocket to avoid seeing the NEW CONFESSION notification constantly blinking on the screen. But he soon discovered that even though his own mobile is set to silent it seems that every other phone belonging to every other person within earshot
is not, and it’s difficult to ignore the impromptu symphony that sounds each time one of the new members of the John Watson fan club decides to express themselves via anonymous electronic confession.

With each new iConfess alert that arrives, Sherlock finds himself more and more agitated by the entire spectacle. Intellectually he knows that approximately 49% of the students at Morningside Academy are female, he just hadn’t expected every single one of them to suddenly develop an intense desire to prowl around the school library peeking around corners in hopes of catching a glimpse of a perfectly ordinary, unremarkable twenty one year old librarian’s assistant.

Well, not completely unremarkable.

Sherlock had learned quite a bit about the man just that morning, had even told him (out loud) exactly what he’d observed—and the way that John Watson had reacted wasn’t ordinary at all. He hadn’t been angry or defensive, he’d seemed…impressed. Said it was brilliant and amazing. John even recognized the equations he was working on, and even when Sherlock called him an idiot he hadn’t taken offense, he’d laughed.

A laugh that started out as one thing and then lifted and changed into something else entirely. A laugh that surprised him and intrigued him and seemed to drag a chuckle from his own lips without his permission. A laugh that he can still hear the ghost of ringing in his ears...

The sudden, low rumble of a chuckle drifts softly through the air, the pitch rising steadily until it bubbles over into an unmistakable giggle, and it isn’t until Mrs. Hudson’s tittering laugh joins in that Sherlock realises he’s not imagining the sound. He cocks his head and listens, the slow swell of warmth rising steadily in the pit of his stomach, until the moment is broken by the chorus of electronic alerts sounding all around him.

*ping*

*whir*

*bloop*

*trill*

*Ah, Ah, Ah, Ah, Stayin’ Alive, Stayin’ Alive…”*

With a sigh he extracts his phone from the pocket of his trousers and looks at it wearily before hastily tapping the icon so the latest anonymous declaration appears:

iConfess: The new library assistant has the CUTEST laugh!

Oh for god’s sake, he thinks to himself, shaking his head quickly from side to side to clear it. I’m turning into a teenage girl.

With a heavy sigh and a roll of his eyes, Sherlock reaches down and pulls his earphones from the front flap of his bag, settles the buds into his ears, plugs the cord into the bottom of his mobile, taps his favorite playlist and gets back to work.

As it turns out, thumping bass and searing guitar and angry lyrics delivered by soaring vocals proves to be the perfect distraction. An hour later he’s completed (and submitted electronically to his lit teacher’s inbox) a very thorough essay on Chaucer that is insightful enough that it should merit not being harassed about his spotty attendance record in class. He’s reviewed his French text with
enough scrutiny that he feels quite confident he will ace the exam later this week. And now he finds he’s anxious to get back to charting his reaction summaries—ready to start puzzling out the final set of equations that have given him such trouble over the last few days.

He’s spreading out his notes with one hand and leaning down to retrieve his pencil as the last few rough notes of the song currently playing in his ears ring out and gradually fade into silence—and in the brief pause that follows, he catches a snippet of conversation coming from the next aisle.

“So you’re saying that’s him?” a deep voice asks, and Sherlock’s ears perk up at the sound, the obviously male voice somewhat out of place given the events of the day. Sitting back up, he reaches out and quickly taps his mobile screen as the next song beings, pausing it as the voice continues. “You’re full of shit.”

“I’m not,” a second voice (also male but with a distinctly nasal tone) insists. “That’s the guy.”

“You’ve got to be joking,” the first voice continues. “That short little tosser is what all the girls won’t shut up about out?”

“I don’t think he’s that short, Seb,” the second voice answers.

“Are you blind? He’s gotta be at least eight inches shorter than me,” the first boy insists, and Sherlock stretches his neck up enough so that he can peer through the gap above the neat row of books on the shelf and confirm that the two voices belong to Sebastian Wilkes and Philip Anderson.

“According to Sally, that’s part of his charm,” Anderson says with a moody scowl. “She called him ‘goddamn adorable’. Says she wants to carry him around in her pocket.”

“Yeah, well that makes sense,” Wilkes says, huffing out a laugh. “She’s your girlfriend, so we already know she’s used to tiny things.”

“Fuck you, Seb!”

“How many times do I have to tell you, Anderson,” Sebastian says, affecting a world weary tone. “I am not gay, you’ll have to find someone else to fuck you.”

“Christ, you two,” a third voice interrupts, and Sherlock spine stiffens suddenly, freezing him in place as he listens to the cadence of familiar footsteps rounding the far corner of the shelf and approaching the two other boys where they stand. “Keep your voices down, this is a library you know.”

“Sorry, Vic,” Sebastian answers, his affected stage whisper dripping with fake contrition and seeming somehow even louder than his regular voice, as he crouches down and tries to find a gap in the shelves with a clear view of the central common space.

“Seen enough yet?” Victor Trevor asks, stepping up beside Sebastian and bending over to peer into the open spaces above the rows of books.

“How should I know?” Victor shrugs. “Why don’t you ask one of the girls?”

Sebastian Wilkes opens his mouth to protest, but then stands up suddenly, slaps his friend on the shoulder and grins broadly at him.
“Vic, my boy,” he says, starting to walk purposefully towards the far end of the aisle. “You are a genius.”

Sherlock watches as Phillip Anderson trails after Sebastian immediately, and it suddenly registers with him exactly where they’re headed. He sees the exact moment that Victor Trevor realises it as well—when he turns his head quickly to the right, stares through the gap in the shelf, and directly into Sherlock’s eyes—holding his gaze for the briefest of moments before turning away and following his friends.

Sherlock looks quickly down at his desk, takes a deep breath, and stares at the page of meticulously constructed formulas before him just as Sebastian Wilkes rounds the end the aisle and strolls towards him where he sits, Philip Anderson and Victor Trevor in tow.

“Hello, Sherly,” Sebastian says, a malevolent little smile playing on his lips. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Sherlock turns his head slightly as if to study the next page of notes laid out on the desk, then affects a look of moderate surprise as he raises his gaze to meet Wilkes’. He stares at him for a moment, at the rather pleasant features that are sullied by the decidedly unpleasant personality that lurks beneath them. He turns turns and regards Anderson’s beady eyes and hawkish nose, then lets his gaze slide to Victor’s face, eyes scanning quickly over caramel skin and high cheekbones and long curled lashes shielding impossibly dark eyes that refuse to meet his own. Looking back up at the ringleader of the group, Sherlock pulls the headphones out of his ears and stares at him expectantly.

“Is there something I can help you with, Sebastian?”

“Yeah, actually, there is.” Wilkes steps forward and casually pushes the papers on his desk aside to sit down on the edge of it, crossing his long legs before folding his arms over his chest. “Seems the new library assistant is causing quite a stir with the ladies in this school. Phil and Vic and I can’t seem to work out what’s got them so hot and bothered about the bloke.”

“Perhaps you should find one of these ladies you mention and ask them for an explanation.”

“That’s what I’m doing right now, Holmes.” Sebastian grins snidely, looking very pleased with himself.

“Oh, I see,” Sherlock answers with a slight roll of his eyes. “I should have made myself more clear. Perhaps you should go and ask your girlfriend to tell you exactly what it was that she found so appealing about him while she was busy stalking him all around the building yesterday afternoon.”

“What are you on about?” Sebastian asks, his disinterested tone at war with the slightly worried creases forming at the corners of his eyes. “Dora hasn’t even laid eyes on the man. Told me so herself.”

“Did she?” Sherlock inquires, his tone curious. “That version of events is a bit at odds with the fact that she and her two best friends forever were squealing over how ‘gorgeous’ he was just one aisle away from here not twenty four hours ago. In exactly the same place where you three were doing practically the same thing just now. What a coincidence.”

Sebastian eyes him angrily. “You’re lying.”

“I could be, that’s true. Then again, Dora might be the one lying to you,” Sherlock says lightly. “You might simply ask her.”

“Maybe I will,” Wilkes fires back.
“An excellent plan,” Sherlock agrees. “Though before you confront young Ms. Lancaster regarding her whereabouts yesterday afternoon, you may want to concoct a suitable alibi for your own.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sebastian raises a hand to worry the collar of his button down shirt between his thumb and forefinger.

“I am merely suggesting that before you question your girlfriend about the veracity of her statements regarding her impressions of a certain recently hired library assistant, you should take care to conceal the purpling love bite that rests just above your collar bone so that Dora doesn’t think to question where you were at approximately the same time she was standing not ten feet from here and ogling someone who was not you.”

“I’m not cheating on my girlfriend,” Sebastian insists defensively, looking around at each of his friends and then back down at Sherlock. “Dora did that. She’s possessive, you know. And a bit of a biter.”

“I’ve no doubt that she is,” Sherlock assures him. “But the depth of the color of the bruise in question would suggest that the precipitating injury was suffered approximately twenty four hours ago. And while it is entirely possible that your girlfriend could have both been here in the library shrieking at improbably high decibel levels over the library assistant she has insisted never to have laid eyes on and then very quickly met up with you for a heated snog within the same small window of time, it does seem unlikely. Unlikelier still, when one considers the miniscule abrasions occurring at very specific intervals apart on the surface of the skin over the hemorrhage in question, suggesting that the mouth that delivered the requisite suction belongs to someone wearing braces…and as I recall, Dora does not have braces on her teeth. But it seems to me that her younger sister does, isn’t that right?”

“Now you listen here,” Sebastian Wilkes says through clenched teeth, standing up suddenly and staring down at Sherlock with fury in his eyes. “I don’t care how smart you think you are. You better not say a word to anyone about—”

“Oh don’t worry,” Sherlock says dismissively, picking up his headphones and sliding one speaker into his ear. “I have no interest in outing your minor indiscretions. We all have our secrets.”

“Yeah, and yours is that you’re a little faggot!” Sebastian growls, sweeping one hand over the surface of the desk and scattering his notes onto the floor.


“You’re right about that.” Sebastian's lip curls up in a menacing grin as he looks over at his friends and then back down at Sherlock. “Everyone knows you’re a cocksucker, practically gagging for it, really. Even tried putting the moves on Victor last year, but he showed you what happens when your kind barks up the wrong tree, didn’t he? And you can be sure there’s more where that came from if you say one word to anyone about—”

“Sebastian Wilkes,” Martha Hudson says sternly, commanding the attention of the four boys she stares at from the head of the aisle not with volume, but with the quiet steel in her tone. “Is there a reason you’re in my library at this moment and not in your customary seat at in the fourth row of Madame Renaud’s French class?”

“I was just…” Sebastian begins, looking to his friends for help and finding them staring pointedly away. “I was just talking to Holmes here. That’s all.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Hudson says icily. “I heard. I trust that your conversation is now over?”
“Yeah,” Wilkes agrees quickly. “All done here.”

“Excellent,” the librarian replies, the stony tone evaporating as she clasps her hands and rubs her palms together. “And as it appears that you and Mr. Anderson and Mr. Trevor are not otherwise engaged, you may come with me and put that free time to use by carrying several very heavy crates up three flights of stairs from the storage room in the basement.”

Sherlock stares at her for a moment, lips tipping into the ghost of a thankful smile. He sees the twinkle in her eye, a quick flash of affection before she lifts her gaze to the three young men behind him.

“We haven’t got all day. Get a move on!”

She turns on her heel and walks back out into the library, and one by one Sebastian, Philip and Victor begin to follow. Sherlock watches each of them as they go, Sebastian Wilkes throwing one last baleful glance over his shoulder as he turns the corner, Philip Anderson not looking back at him at all before he disappears as well, and Victor Trevor looking straight ahead as he walks away, then stopping just before the end of the aisle. Sherlock watches him stand there, sees him start to turn back, catches his striking profile as he turns his head and looks over his shoulder, dark eyes tracing the distance between them on the floor before flitting up to meet his gaze—and for the briefest moment Sherlock remembers soft cinnamon skin and the silky slip of hair through his fingers and the wet slide of lips and the warmth of breath on heated flesh—before Victor drops his chin, turns away, and is gone.

Swallowing against the sudden tightness in his throat, Sherlock takes a deep breath and begins gathering up his notes and then depositing them back on the desk before beginning to put them back in order. He’s nearly finished when a flash of movement at the end of the aisle catches his eye, and he looks up to see John Watson, backpack slung over one shoulder and an arm full of books, walking towards him.

“I haven’t seen you at all since this morning,” John says by way of greeting. “You been back here this whole time?”

“Yes,” Sherlock confirms, wondering if John—like Mrs. Hudson—had heard the exchange between him and Sebastian Wilkes.

“Sorry I didn’t have time to come and say hello.” John rolls his left shoulder and winces slightly. “Things were a bit busier than I expected. Didn’t even have the chance to go to the loo until just five minutes ago. Do you know where Mrs. H. went?”

“She said something about the storage room,” Sherlock says vaguely, breathing a silent sigh of relief that John had been out of the library for the last several minutes.

“Well, damn.” John looks down at his watch. “I was hoping I’d get to check in with her before I left—but if I don’t go now I’ll be late, well more late, so I’d better get a move on.”

“I’ll tell her that you needed to leave,” Sherlock offers.

“Thanks.” John smiles, then begins to walk away before stopping short and turning back to face him. He takes the top textbook off of the stack in his arms, then holds it out to Sherlock. “Oh, I almost forgot. Here.”

Sherlock takes it from him, reading the title: Principles of Organic & Biological Chemistry, 12th Edition. He runs his fingers over the smooth cover, then looks up at John quizzically.
“I don’t have that class until later this week, and I thought you might enjoy a little light reading,” John tells him, with a shrug and a grin. “I’ve marked the section on aliphatic organic compounds, it might be shit compared to what you already know, but I figured you could find something useful in there.”

Sherlock stares down at the book for a long moment, then back up at John who is looking at him expectantly.

“Thank you, I…this…is good. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” John replies, a broad grin stealing over his friendly features, and he begins to back away down the aisle. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Don’t read it all in one night!” And with a wave, he’s gone.

Turning back to his desk, Sherlock carefully clears a space on the surface and sets the heavy book down. He opens the front cover, reads the hastily printed text scrawled onto the first page: Property of John H. Watson.

He runs the pad of his finger over the name, feels the slight indentation where the tip of the biro pressed itself into the paper leaving a trail of ink that formed letters and words declaring that this book now belonged to someone. Settling his earbuds into place, he taps play and the song he’d paused earlier starts back up. He sets the phone aside and is about to open the book to the section John marked for him, when a flash of light from his mobile screen catches his eye.

NEW CONFESSION!

Sherlock picks up the phone, taps on the green skull, and the message begins to reveal itself:

iConfess: The hot blue eyed blond has left the building and the library is BORING again.

Shaking his head, he watches the message disappear in a shower of sparks, then moves to set his phone back down on the desk…but at the last moment he picks it back up, opens a new session, taps out a short message, and then pauses for just the briefest of moments before pressing send. He slips his phone into his pocket, flips the textbook open, and starts to read.

At that very moment, mobile phones all over the building are alerting their owners that a NEW CONFESSION is now available to view. And if they tap on the icon of the acid green skull with a small number “1” floating in the corner, they’ll see the following message appear, briefly, on the screen:

iConfess: John Watson is not boring.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for giving this a read, as ever comments 100% encouraged and appreciated!

And in this chapter’s installment of “Maybe you should stop whatever you’re doing and read this because you’ll never forgive yourself for missing out if you don’t” my gift to you is a fic that reads a bit darker than my usual recommended fare, but don’t let that scare you off—you know I love a happy ending.
Sometimes I think I’m getting a handle on this whole writing thing…and then I read something so beautifully conceived and penned that I realize I’m more or less just a monkey writing porn with a purple crayon. Case in point:

ACD’s Sherlock Holmes is a bare-knuckle boxer in the original stories, and while our beloved BBC incarnation hasn’t yet included that facet of canon, fandom author deadspy has, and managed it in a way that is brutal and breathtaking and improbably gorgeous. Messes of Men is post S3 fic that doesn’t shy away from the brokenness of our boys, and the writing is so delicious that I find myself still dwelling on passages of it months after my first reading. I loved this story. I hope you will too.

Happy reading, see you next week!
Hello Friends, and a very happy “Thursday is merely a social construct created by the drawing of arbitrary boundaries in time which means I can redraw them whenever I want, so there” to you!

So our boys are getting to know each other in this universe, and that means they actually have to talk to one another…and that means dialogue. Lots and lots and LOTS of dialogue. Let the slow burn commence!

Unending devotion to my tireless beta owensm who puts up with a lot from me even when I’m NOT up to my neck in a new fic, and is therefore some kind of saint for dealing with me when I AM. Grateful kisses to Cheytea7 for the second set of eyes and the helpful lecture re: imaginary building codes and how they might apply to the imaginary doors on imaginary libraries. (So many imaginary lives saved!)

Massive, continuing heartfelt thanks for every hit, kudo, subscription, bookmark and comment this new project has received thus far. One of the coolest things about fanfic is that it facilitates conversation between writers and readers—and I love that. And to that end, comments are encouraged and appreciated and might even be the only thing on earth I look forward to more than my Aunt Polly’s rice pudding on Christmas. Thanks so much for stopping by to read, and I’ll see you next week!

“For the last time, Sherlock, the answer is no.”

“I don’t know why you’re being so difficult about this, Molly.” Sherlock sighs crossly, grabbing the sleek metal handle of the heavy glass door and pulling it open with more force than is strictly necessary. “I’m perfectly capable of completing the assignment myself.”

“I know you are,” the petite, chestnut haired girl answers, shaking her head and stepping through the door as Sherlock holds it wide open for her to pass through.

“Then why won’t you agree to let me do it?”

“Because it’s a joint project, Sherlock,” she tells him, with the air of someone who is quite used to explaining things that ought to be obvious as she weaves through the chairs and tables in the central common area.

“We’d get an A,” Sherlock insists, trailing after her moodily.

“No, you’d get an A.” She slides her heavy bag off of her shoulder onto one of the polished oak tables near the edge of the space. “And I would get a grade I didn’t earn on a project I didn’t do on a subject I didn’t learn about for myself.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds like a terrible idea.”

“That’s because it is a terrible idea.”
“Fine,” he huffs, eyeing her sulkily then knitting his eyebrows in confusion as she reaches into her bag and begins to pull out various books and papers. “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting out my things.”

“Yes, I can see that,” he snaps, “But why?”

“Because the lunch bell just rang—and since I’m not hungry and you can’t ever be bothered to eat, we might as well take advantage of the time and get started.”

Sherlock heaves an exasperated sigh. “I meant, why are you doing that out here? There’s plenty of room back in my normal study carrel.”

“There isn’t, really.” She pulls out one of the sturdy wooden chairs and lowers herself onto the cushioned leather seat. “I have to drag a second chair back there, it’s dusty, it’s dark, and you always hog the desk lamp.”

“But there are too many people out here,” Sherlock argues, leaning forward and pitching his voice low.

“What are you talking about?” she asks, turning in her seat to look around the room. “There’s never anyone in here—oh...”

Sherlock sees her take in the small group of younger girls gathered in a clump near the reference section, then watches her gaze follow two other female students as they exit one of the adjacent aisles and then immediately disappear down the next one.

“What are they all doing in here?” she whispers, and Sherlock raises one hand from his side and subtly points toward the circulation desk, where three additional girls are clutching books and queuing up to take their turn having the handsome, golden haired young man behind the desk assist them.

“So that’s the famous John Watson then?” Molly asks, still whispering.

“Obviously,” Sherlock hisses back, sitting heavily in the chair opposite her and heaving his own bag up onto the table.

“He’s cute.” She smiles, looking over her shoulder again at John before turning back to face Sherlock. “I mean, I saw all the confessions about him, but I didn’t know what to expect really. He’s quite fit.”

“Is he?” Sherlock looks down at the table, suddenly fascinated by a small nick in the smooth surface as he bends his head low and rubs his thumb over the blemish in the wood.

“Very.” Molly throws one last appreciative glance towards the new library assistant before continuing to unpack her bag. “Have you talked to him yet?”

“A bit.”

“Is he nice?”

Sherlock looks up from the table and across the common central space to where John is standing, leaning forward and cocking his head to better hear the question posted by the young student he’s assisting—and when John’s face breaks into a grin he feels his own lips mirror the expression as the faint echo of a bubbling laugh fills his head and he recalls the surprised look of blue eyes open wide
and pink lips forming the word *amazing*...

A soft cough interrupts his train of thought, and he looks back down to where Molly Hooper is staring at him expectantly, waiting for an answer.

“Well?” she prompts again, leaning forward and propping her chin on the heels of her hands.

“What’s he like?”

Sherlock shrugs evasively. “He seems…fine, I suppose.”

“Sherlock Holmes,” Mrs. Hudson interrupts, a note of surprise in her voice, and he and Molly turn to see her standing next to their table buttoning up her coat and smiling down at them. “I hardly recognized you, sitting out here in the light of day.”

“Molly made me do it,” he says, throwing a baleful look in the young woman’s direction.

“Well done, Miss Hooper.” The librarian aims a quick wink at the young woman. “It’s about time someone convinced him to stop lurking back there in the shadows.”

“She’s being unreasonable,” Sherlock complains.

“It’s not unreasonable that I would rather sit out here than in that dusty old cave of yours,” Molly replies, spreading out her notes on the table.

“She’s not wrong about that, you know,” Mrs. Hudson agrees, throwing Sherlock a scolding look before reaching into her handbag and fishing around a bit.

“Perhaps you should dust that area more often then,” Sherlock suggests, exasperation creeping into his tone.

“I’m your librarian, dear,” she reminds him pleasantly. “Not your housekeeper.”

Molly smiles triumphantly at Sherlock who rolls his eyes and grudgingly begins to unpack his own bag.

“Molly dear, how is your Dad feeling?” Mrs. Hudson asks, looking up from her purse and clutching a pair of gloves in her hand.

“He’s doing quite well, actually.” Molly nods as she tucks a stray hair that’s escaped her ponytail back behind her ear. “The doctors say he’s responding positively to the treatments and he’s in wonderful spirits.”

Mrs. Hudson reaches out to lay a hand on her shoulder and squeezes softly. “I’m very glad to hear it.”

“Thanks.” Molly Hooper pauses for a moment, swallowing deliberately before the bright grin returns and she looks up at the librarian. “How about you? How’s the hip?”

“Absolutely dreadful, but thank you for asking. Been aching something awful this last week. I’m on my way out just now to see my herbalist, as a matter of fact.” She reaches up and pats her hair absently then looks back toward the circulation desk. “Oh for heaven’s sake, where on earth did I leave my hat?”

“Right here, Mrs. H.” John moves to circle around the three students now clutching their newly checked out books where they’re still huddled near the desk, and walks towards her—bright purple...
hat in hand.

“Oh thank you dear,” Mrs. Hudson says, smiling brightly as she takes it from him his hands, settling it onto her head and looking down at Molly. “Have I got it on straight?”

“Looks very smart,” the girl answers with a nod, then turns her attention back to the young man standing next to the table. Mrs. Hudson follows the gaze, her lips twitching up at the corners.

“John, have you met Ms. Molly Hooper yet?” she asks.

“I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure,” he replies, looking down at the brown eyed girl where she sits and smiling politely. He extends his right hand, and as Molly reaches out her own Sherlock finds himself fixated on the impending contact, time seeming to slow with each fraction of an inch that the space between the two hands decreases. And when they do connect, palms sliding together and fingers curling around one another in the common ritual of greeting, he is startled to feel the pang of something low in his gut, dull and bass and unfamiliar. He looks at Molly’s face, sees the rising blush on her cheeks, the slight dilation of her pupils, the press of white teeth where they bite into the rosy flesh of her retracted lower lip. Then he turns to look at John’s face, takes in the mild expression, the close-mouthed smile, and the polite nod of his head—and the feeling that rose within him so suddenly moments ago recedes as quickly as it came.

“Well now you have,” Mrs. Hudson says pleasantly, as John retracts his hand from Molly’s grasp and looks back at his boss expectantly. “I’ll be back in a few hours, so you’ve just got to hold down the fort until then.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” her assistant assures her with a smile. “It’s not nearly as busy as it was yesterday.”

“True enough,” she agrees, looking around the room at the small groups of girls still scattered throughout the space, then nodding back towards the desk where two more girls have emerged from the stacks and are waiting for assistance, books in hand. “Looks like you’ve got a few more eager customers waiting.”

Mrs. Hudson, Molly and Sherlock all watch John as he makes his way back to the desk, the faces of the two waiting girls lighting up with smiles as he greets them. Mrs. Hudson takes in the scene then shakes her head slightly and smiles.

“Would you look at that,” she says, leaning over their study surface and lowering her voice conspiratorially. “If I’d known that a handsome young face is all it would take to get students interested in reading, I’d have hired an assistant years ago.”

Molly giggles in reply, and Sherlock considers responding to the remark with a roll of his eyes and a scowl, but that would mean he’d have to look over at Mrs. Hudson, and that would mean he would have to stop looking at John, which he finds he’d really rather not do at the moment.

“Well, I’m off,” Martha Hudson announces, slipping a glove over one hand. “Behave yourselves while I’m away, won’t you?”

“We will,” Molly assures her. “Don’t worry about us.”

“Oh I’m not worried about you in the least, dear,” Mrs. Hudson says with a smile, before throwing a glance in Sherlock’s direction. “That was aimed at him.”

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock says, reluctantly looking away from the activity at the circulation desk to meet her eye. “No food, no drink, no open flames—got it.”
“I should add ‘attend class every once in a while’ to that sign,” the librarian tells him sternly, pulling her second glove into place.

“I just came from class,” Sherlock says, pointing an accusing finger at the smiling girl sitting opposite him. “She made me go.”

“You’re my lab partner, Sherlock,” Molly says patiently, hauling out her Biology notes and flipping through them. “If I have to be there, so do you.”

“She’s a good influence on you,” Mrs. Hudson remarks as she walks away. “Lord knows someone needs to be.”

Sherlock glowers after her as she makes her way to the door, and when she stops just before the exit and turns back and shoots him a fond smile followed by a wink, he meets her gaze—and smiles back. When she opens the door, the three girls who’d been loitering up by the desk follow her out, the one in the centre looking down at her mobile as the other two crane their necks to watch from their positions on either side of her. As soon as the door snicks softly closed behind them, the air fills suddenly with sound:

*ping*

*whirrrr*

*bloop*

*ching*

Sherlock sees the peripheral flurry of movement as hands reach into pockets and bags to retrieve devices that no doubt all display the same announcement:

**NEW CONFESSION!**

From the corner of his eye, a flash of golden blond gets his attention—and he looks up to see John Watson, brows drawn together curiously, watching every Morningside student currently in the library (including Molly Hooper) stare intently at their phones, his curiosity giving way to confusion as the first high pitched giggle sounds from somewhere back in the stacks, followed quickly by another, and then another. John turns and looks over at Sherlock, catching his eye and lifting his eyebrows and palms in the unmistakable universal gesture for “what the hell is that all about?” In reply, Sherlock performs his most understated shrug and eye roll in combination, a response that he hopes will read as “it’s difficult to explain”—a message which he is fairly sure was both conveyed and received when a moment later John grins at him, nods once, and then turns back to help the next student waiting in line at the desk.

A sharp buzzing sound distracts him then, and Sherlock glances down at the message blinking on the screen of his silenced mobile where it lies next to his bag, vibrating on the table. Dismissing the alert with a touch, he swipes through his icons, taps the acid green skull, and watches the latest anonymous confession appear:

**iConfess: The library hottie thinks we were checking out books, but we were really checking out HIM!**

Twenty minutes later, Molly has managed to scatter both of their notes over nearly the entire surface of the table and is busily bent over her notebook drawing boxes and circles and scribbling inside of them before adding lines and dashes to connect the entire mess in what seems to be a strange flow
chart/outline hybrid for their Biology project. She’s explaining (in painstaking detail) which duties she believes each of them should take during the research phase, or least Sherlock assumes that’s what she’s saying. Technically he stopped listening to her ages ago, and as long as he continues to nod and hum interestedly at plausibly attentive intervals he is fairly certain he can avoid doing so for quite some time before she notices.

It’s not that he makes it a habit of ignoring Molly completely, but as she does have a tendency to ramble on he finds that if he tunes back in for short intervals every few minutes he can glean the general gist of the conversation—one sided though it often is. And while detailed discussion of the finer points of human digestion is admittedly the sort of subject he would normally engage in on a more active level, for the moment he finds himself much more interested in the conversations that Mrs. Hudson’s new assistant is having with the various students who approach the circulation desk and hand over the materials they wish to borrow.

“Actually,” he hears John Watson say politely to the young woman standing before him absently twisting the ends of her blond ponytail around one finger, “This is from one of the encyclopaedia sets, and reference books can’t be taken out of the library.”

“But I need it for an assignment,” the girl tells him with a pout. “I have to write a paper, and it’s due tomorrow.”

“Maybe we can find something a little more specific in the general collection,” John suggests helpfully. “What is the paper about?”

“It’s about…” the girl begins, looking a bit flustered as she (clearly, Sherlock thinks) struggles to make something up, then smiles brightly and says “Parliament. My report is about Parliament.”

“Oh,” John replies, turning the heavy volume in his hand to look at the spine. “All for the best then, really. The ‘F’ volume wouldn’t have done you much good even if you could take it home.” He leans down over the keyboard on the desk in front of him and taps a few keys, eyebrows drawn together and top teeth worrying at his bottom lip as he concentrates on the screen. “You’re in luck—looks like there’s a good selection of books about British governance available. They’re filed in the 300’s, 328 to be exact. You can take a look for yourself, that section is just over...”

John looks up and out at the long rows of high shelves that surround the centre of the library radiating out from where he stands. As he’s squinting out over the tops of the tables trying to read the small engraved plaques that mark the contents of each aisle, he happens to look at Sherlock—who lifts one long fingered hand to point to his left, lifting his chin and subtly jerking his head in the same direction.

“...there,” John finishes, pointing the young lady toward the rows of shelf off to his right, then looking back at Sherlock and mouthing the word ‘thanks’ with a grateful smile, before he turns to help the next student waiting in line.

“Sherlock, have you listened to a single word I’ve been saying?” Molly asks suddenly, the change in her tone grabbing his attention.

“Oh course I have,” Sherlock replies haughtily, looking at her with mock indignation.

“You’re such a liar.” She rolls her eyes and sighs. “I need a copy of the Krebs Cycle diagram, do you have one?”

“Page 143,” Sherlock says, lifting his gaze back up to the circulation desk while reaching out to grasp the heavy textbook beside him, sliding it towards her through the sea of papers on the desk.
“Oi, watch it! Those were in order, you know.” Molly lifts the heavy book and sets it down in front of her, pausing as she looks down at the cover. “What’s this?”

“That’s a Biology textbook, Molly,” Sherlock explains patiently, watching two girls listen intently to something John is saying—and while Sherlock can’t hear what it was, he can only assume it was hilarious if the girlish giggles it provokes are any indication.

“No it isn’t. It’s a Chemistry text,” Molly says, and Sherlock looks across at her just in time to see her open the front cover and read the words hand-written there in blue ink before she looks up at him, a touch of alarm in her voice as she whispers, “Property of John Watson? Sherlock, you didn’t steal this from him, did you?”

“Of course I didn’t steal it,” he hisses back at her, reaching across to pluck the book from her hands before bringing it back over to his side of the table. “He gave it to me.”

“He did?” She asks, a bit of scepticism still lingering in her voice. “When?”

“Yesterday afternoon,” Sherlock answers, glancing up at John who is still engaged in conversation with the students at the checkout desk and oblivious to their exchange.

“You’d only just met him, and he gave you one of his school books?”

“He loaned it to me,” Sherlock clarifies, looking down at the desk and feeling a sudden need to put the scattered papers on it into some semblance of order, shuffling through them as he glances back up to meet her questioning gaze and shrugging nonchalantly. “He noticed the reaction summary I was working on. Thought I might be interested.”

“That was nice of him,” Molly says, throwing a glance over her shoulder at John and then looking back at Sherlock.

“I suppose,” he agrees quietly, glancing down at the textbook beside him and running his finger absently along the spine before looking up at her and shrugging. “He was just being polite, that’s all.”

She stares at him for a moment longer, and he watches in alarm as the corner of her mouth tips up in a knowing grin, her eyes crinkling at the corners as the smile spreads across her face.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she replies lightly with a slight shrug as she flashes him a smirk.

“Shut up!” Sherlock says crossly, and if Molly notices that his pale cheeks are suddenly tinged with a bit more pink than is strictly normal, she doesn’t mention it. “Aren’t you supposed to be harassing me about this project right now?”

“Oh, now you’re going to listen to me?” she asks, picking up her pencil and tapping it against her lips.

“Probably not,” he admits, smiling as she leans over the table and smacks the top of his head with the end of her pencil before he reaches down into his bag and retrieves his Biology text, opens it to page 143 and turns it towards her—gesturing grandly to the diagram on the page. “The Krebs Cycle, as requested.”

She looks up at him for a moment longer—then shakes her head, sighs, pulls the book closer, and gets back to work.
When the bell rings twenty minutes later announcing the end of the lunch period, Molly stands up and begins to gather her things, stacking her notes back into a neat pile and tapping the bottom edge on the table to straighten them.

“I think we may have actually accomplished something,” she teases, packing her materials away in her bag. “Are you coming to French class today?”

Sherlock casts a scornful look in her direction.

“Of course you’re not,” she sighs, hoisting her bag up onto her shoulder and looking down at him. "I’ll see you in class tomorrow, then."

“Perhaps,” Sherlock says, leaning back in his chair and lazily beginning to gather up his own notes.

“Definitely,” Molly warns as she crosses the room, before throwing a wave over her shoulder and disappearing into the hallway.

One by one, the other students scattered about the library begin to emerge from their various hiding places, many of them slowing a bit as they cross through the wide common space at the centre of the library for a last surreptitious (or unabashedly blatant in a few cases) look at the compact blond library assistant as he’s just finishing up assisting two fourth year girls who clutch their newly lent books to their chests and flash appreciative smiles in his direction.

As John returns the smiles and politely wishes them a good day, the taller of the two pulls out her mobile and begins tapping on the screen as she and her friend join the end of the queue of students creating a bottleneck at the exit. Moments later the familiar symphony of mobile alert tones fills the air.

*DING*

*whirrrr*

*Tweet*

*buzzzzzzz*

Sherlock sees John’s head lift at the cacophony of sound, watches him follow the movement of the few students left standing near the door as they immediately retrieve and begin tapping at their phones—then sees his expression dissolve into puzzled confusion when the giggling begins.

A few fleeting backward glances are thrown over shoulders and knowing looks are exchanged between friends before the library door finally swishes shut—and Sherlock takes a deep breath, closes his eyes and enjoys the silence.

For approximately three seconds.

At which time the aforementioned silence is broken as an exasperated John Watson storms out from behind the desk and crosses the floor to where Sherlock is sitting.

“Okay, I give up,” John says, throwing up his hands and then plopping down heavily into the chair across from him that Molly had just recently vacated. “What’s with all the text alerts? And the strange looks I keep getting. And, Christ—what the hell is all the giggling about?”

Sherlock looks at him for a long moment, considering just how honest to be—and in the end decides that John can handle the truth. He reaches next to him to grasp his mobile phone, spins it 180
degrees, then slides it across the table and gestures to it.

“See for yourself.”

John looks surprised for a moment, then lowers his gaze and reads the notification message dominating the screen.

“New Confession? What does that mean?”

Sherlock stretches out his arm and taps the notice closed, then swipes twice through his apps before pulling his hand back across the table.

“Tap the skull,” he instructs, and watches as John scans the screen and locates the acid green icon with a ‘1’ hovering in the corner, then reaches out a finger and taps it without hesitation. The display goes black, and Sherlock watches the message appear one letter at a time as John reads the words out loud.

“OMG...HIS...JUMPER...TOTALLY...MATCHES....HIS...EYES...I’M...HOT-SON...FOR...WATSON.”

Sherlock cringes inwardly at the pun, but can’t help smiling as he watches the realization dawning on John’s face.

“Holy shit, is this about me?” he asks, his eyes wide as he puts the pieces together in his mind. “Oh my God, did one of those little girls write this?”

“Obviously.”

“Which one?” he demands, staring back down at the message, eyebrows knitting together as it blurs and expands and then bursts into a shower of white sparks that shimmer across the screen before disappearing completely as the mobile display is restored to its original state. He blinks a few times, then raises his appalled gaze to meet Sherlock’s rather bemused one. “Where did it go?”

“It’s gone.” Sherlock tells him.

“How do you get it back?” John asks.

“You can’t.”

“Who sent it?”

“No idea.”

“What the hell is this, Sherlock?” John asks, and the alarm in his voice awakens something strange in the younger man’s mind, an unfamiliar instinct to calm and protect that surprises him a bit but he decides to go with the feeling.

“It’s called iConfess,” Sherlock begins. “It showed up one day near the start of term on the school’s student portal as a new app available for download. No description, no announcement, just a green skull. No one seemed to know what it was or where it came from, so naturally news of it spread like wildfire. Two hours into the day nearly every student in the academy had installed it on their phones, by noon they’d figured out exactly what it did, and by the time the last bell rang the app had disappeared from the portal.”

“And what exactly does it do?” John asks, still looking a bit confused.
“Think of it as an ‘antisocial media’ app. You can publicly air your darkest secrets or petty grievances or deepest feelings yet still remain essentially anonymous—and within seconds all the evidence disappears into a shower of sparks, never to be seen again.”

“So let me get this straight. You can type in anything you want, no one knows it was you who sent it, anyone with the app can view it once—and then it’s gone forever?”

“Essentially, yes,” Sherlock agrees, considering. “Assuming your darkest secrets can be expressed in 144 characters or less, of course. But it’s only anonymous if no one actually witnesses you typing the confession into your phone. And it’s only gone forever if no one decides to snap a screenshot of the message before it self-destructs.”

“Sounds like a recipe for disaster to me,” John replies with a shrug. “I imagine all sorts of horrible things get said if no one has to be accountable for having said them.”

“Fewer than you’d think,” Sherlock sighs, his voice tinged with regret. “I only downloaded it because I assumed the content would be interesting. Surprisingly little of it is.”

“Yeah?” John asks, amusement coloring his own voice as he looks across the table at Sherlock. “What do people normally talk about on it?”

“Lately? You.”

“What, you mean other than the one I just saw?”

“Oh yes,” Sherlock says with a grin. “It seems that the female population of Morningside Academy has had quite a lot to confess since your arrival.”

“Really?” John's tone changes noticeably from worried to interested. “Like what?”

“Oh the usual,” Sherlock says vaguely, thinking back through the slew of ridiculous John Watson related confessions he’s read in the last 48 hours. “Your blue eyes, your winning smile, a lot of childish references to rugby tackles and terrible puns involving ‘checking things out’ in the library.”

“Well that doesn’t sound so bad.” John says with a bit of relief in his voice, when suddenly the library door swishes open and a red-haired girl shuffles through it looking shyly over to where they’re sitting as she makes her way up to the circulation desk and waits. John stands and crosses the floor to meet her. “Hi, is there something I can help you with?”

“I think I may have left my bag in here earlier?” she asks, her voice squeaking a bit with nerves.

“What did you happen to find one?”

“Oh yeah—I did actually. Blue, with a little gold duck on it, right?” John asks, and when she nods he turns and leans over the circulation desk, stretching to reach the handle of the bottom drawer next to the chair behind it. Sherlock watches the girl’s eyes follow the line of John’s spine and settle someplace just south of his waist, and after a beat he finds his own gaze drawn to the same sight. “A-ha! Got it!”

John straightens back up, and the girl quickly raises her eyes to meet John’s as he returns her blue leather handbag. She squeaks out her thanks, and when she leaves John comes back over to the seat he’d just vacated earlier and sits back down.

“I was a little surprised to see you sitting out here today,” he tells Sherlock, who is busying himself with gathering up the papers Molly had spread all over the table earlier.
“Molly insisted,” he replies with a shrug. “Says the light is better out here—and she’s not wrong, I suppose. But don’t tell her I said that.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” John assures him, huffing out a small laugh. “She seems nice though, Molly. Is she your girlfriend?”

“Girlfriend?” Sherlock says, the touch of surprise in his voice giving way to a wry smile. “No. Not really my area.”

“Oh.” John nods, and Sherlock watches him closely, sees the very moment that John Watson catches on—and braces himself for whatever comes next. “Oh, okay. Do you have a boyfriend then?”

That…wasn’t what he’d been expecting.

Looking over at John, at the guileless expression on his face and the polite and open interest in his gaze, Sherlock can’t think of a clever response, so instead he opts for the truth.

“No.”

“Me neither,” John answers with a shrug, then tilts his head as he considers what he’s just said. “I mean, I don’t have a girlfriend. Well, I guess I don’t have a boyfriend either for that matter. Not that there’s anything wrong with having a boyfriend, mind you. Which—by the way—is totally fine with me. It’s all fine.”

“I know it’s fine,” Sherlock assures him, brows knitting together as he watches John fidget for a moment under the scrutiny.

“I just mean that I think it’s good that you know who you are,” he explains, looking Sherlock in the eye as he continues clumsily. “It’s cool that you’ve got it figured out already, that you’re not ashamed to be yourself. I think that’s brave, braver than I was at your age, anyway. Or than I would have been, I mean—well, braver than most, I bet. So, good on you, is what I’m saying. I guess.”

Sherlock is struck by the sudden realisation that watching John Watson stumble through that little speech should have felt more awkward than anything else, but when John finally shuts his mouth and looks at him expectantly, he mostly feels…grateful.

“Thanks,” Sherlock says, and when John’s face lights up with a grin he feels his own mouth mirror the expression automatically.

*buzzzzzz*

The rattle of his mobile vibrating against the table startles them both, and while Sherlock feels slightly affronted by the intrusion on the moment, the rising pitch of John’s signature giggle mitigates the disappointment nicely. He reaches down and plucks his phone from where it still sits in front of John, the screen announcing the presence of a NEW CONFESSION!

He sees the man across from him eyeing the device suspiciously, and when Sherlock raises an eyebrow and grins John rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“I don’t want to see,” he insists. “You read it.”

Sherlock taps the notice closed, then swipes to find the skull icon and touch it with his fingertip, focusing on the screen as the message begins to appear:

iConfess: Hotson Watson has a SPECKTACULER bum.
“Oh no,” John sighs, watching Sherlock’s face intently as he reads the anonymous message. “Please tell me it’s not another confession about the color of my eyes.”

“Nope.” Sherlock grins. “This one’s about your arse.”

“Oh for God’s sake!” John rolls his eyes and stands up from the table. “This is ridiculous. I can’t believe my arse is the subject of schoolgirl conversation. I don’t remember ever getting this much attention from girls when I was actually in school.”

“Would it help to know that she said it was spectacular?”

“Seriously?” John asks, the earlier outrage suddenly waning.

“Oh don’t be too flattered,” Sherlock scolds, shaking his head. “She spelled ‘spectacular’ wrong.”

John looks at him for a moment, then his shoulders begin to shake and when he laughs Sherlock finds himself unconsciously leaning into the sound, as though if he presses closer he might be able to hear it more clearly, feel it brush against his skin as it moves through the space between them.

The sound of the door swishing open interrupts the moment, and John sighs as he looks over at the three girls who have just entered the library. He takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly, looks down at Sherlock with a shrug, then walks back over to the circulation desk and sits behind it.

Sherlock listens to the girls whispering to each other, hears them laughing as they disappear down one of the long rows of shelves, and for a moment he considers picking up his notes and books and moving back to his solitary study carrel in the stacks—but when he lifts his head and looks across the open space and sees John Watson sitting at the desk, he decides that maybe Molly really was right.

The light is much better out here.

“*How* can you not know this?” John asks, looking up at him from the pages of an oversized book, the large crate next to his chair behind the circulation desk (still two-thirds full of items to be catalogued) sitting ignored in favor of the volume spread open before him.

Sherlock shrugs. “Hardly seems important.”

“But it’s the *solar system*, Sherlock.” John continues. “It’s the tiny corner of infinite space where we live. There are whole worlds right out there in our own back garden just waiting to be discovered—so many new things to learn.”

“There is more to learn than is even possible in a single lifetime right here on *this* planet,” Sherlock replies, not looking up from the chemistry text he liberated from John’s backpack earlier that day. “So what if someone shot a telescope into orbit so it could take pretty pictures of places no person will ever visit or see. Irrelevant.”

“It’s hardly *just* a telescope.” John flips one thick glossy page and examines the high resolution photograph on the next. “In twenty five years the Hubble has taught us more about space—about the very nature of the universe—than we’d have ever known without it.”

“Dull,” Sherlock says without looking up.

“It’s the *opposite* of dull.”
“Bright?”

“What?” John asks, raising his eyes from the stunning image of a pink and gold nebula to throw a confused glance his way.

“That’s the opposite of dull,” Sherlock explains calmly. “Are you saying that this telescope and its various astronomical achievements are bright?”

“No, you annoyingly literal git.” John says, smiling down at the page. “I’m saying it’s fascinating,”

“And I’m saying that it’s the opposite.”


They’re alone in the library at the moment. In the two weeks since Mrs. Hudson’s new assistant arrived at the school, the initial furor over his presence had peaked in the first few days, slowed gradually over the next week, and eventually unevened out to a steady (but manageable) trickle. It seems that the sudden desire to expand one’s knowledge through reading that spread through the female student populace of Morningside Academy with epidemiological speed just a fortnight ago has waned, the number of anonymous confessions about ‘denim blue eyes’ and ‘bulging biceps’ decreasing proportionately along with it.

Which is a relief, frankly. The increased traffic in the library was bothersome enough, though it might not have been so grating to him from his regular study space tucked away in the stacks. But Molly had been intractable in her determination not to sit there—and since she’s been joining him much more regularly as they work on their term project, it seemed easier to simply continue sitting out in the open rather than to fight with her about it.

Which is definitely the reason he’d stopped going directly back to the isolated study carrel at the far edge of the library each morning, opting instead to occupy the wide oak table at the edge of the circular common space.

The fact that this new seating arrangement gives him an unobstructed view of the circulation desk—and the golden haired young man that so often occupies the chair behind it—is incidental to the choice, really. And if that proximity happens to more easily facilitate regular and easy conversation between himself and John Watson, it’s merely an unexpected side effect of the transition and definitely not something Sherlock had been hoping would happen.

And the whole matter of how he is beginning to notice that, while his regular early morning arrival time still suits him, underneath the comforting solitude brought on by the smell of old parchment and the feel of worn wood and the sight of so many familiar objects, there’s a new feeling in this space as well. A contentment that settles over him and then evolves gradually into an anticipation of that same silence being broken—in the form of a friendly greeting or good natured teasing or interesting conversation peppered with the occasional light hearted sound of a sincere laugh as it transforms into a melodic giggle…

Well. Surely that hasn’t had any significant impact on his decisions regarding seating arrangements in the least.

Coincidence. Nothing more.

“Though to be honest,” John says, continuing his leisurely perusal of the book that has so vividly caught his attention this afternoon, “I’d have thought Astronomy would be right up your alley, what with all the physics involved.”
“Theoretical Physics,” Sherlock clarifies in a less than charitable tone before rolling his eyes and continuing to read. “I prefer the applied variety.”

There’s a sudden whistling sound followed by a small whoosh of air that disturbs the dark curls spilling over his forehead just a fraction of a second before a tightly rolled ball of crumpled paper hits him directly in the face. He flinches, blinking rapidly, then lifts his head and throws an accusatory glance at John—who smiles broadly back at him.

“Applied physics,” he says with a shrug, and Sherlock tries to scowl (he really does) but when smiling lips part and begin to laugh, he catches his breath—holding it in anticipation of the moment when the timbre of the increasingly familiar chuckle tips, bubbles over and rises and fills the air between them and seeps into and fills the space inside of him he hadn’t even realized was empty before—and when it does, he can’t help but huff out a soft laugh of his own.

“You’re an imbecile,” Sherlock scolds, pressing his lips together in an effort to look as stern as someone trying not to laugh can, before picking up the wad of paper and whipping it back in the direction it came from.

“Says the man who doesn’t know how many planets there are in the solar system,” John mumbles, easily deflecting the lobbed object before turning another large page and examining it intently.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sherlock scoffs. “There are nine planets. Everyone knows that.”

“Nope.”

“There most certainly are, John. There’s a song about it and everything.”

“Is there?” John asks, sitting up a bit and raising his eyebrows interestedly. “What song is that, exactly?”

“It’s the one that goes—” Sherlock begins, but stops when he catches the gleam of anticipation in John’s eyes, sees the corners of his lips twitch as he attempts to suppress a smile. Sherlock snaps his mouth shut, and narrows his eyes suspiciously before continuing. “The song itself isn’t important; the fact that it lists nine planets is the salient point.”

“I’m not saying it doesn’t,” John says matter-of-factly, turning to the next page of his book. “But you’re still wrong.”

“I am not,” Sherlock insists, and then pauses for a moment, concentrating on a fixed point somewhere over John’s left shoulder as he silently ticks off the names of the planets in his mind.

“You’re singing it in your head right now, aren’t you?” John says, the slight smile on his lips growing wider as Sherlock turns to look at him.

“It’s a helpful mnemonic device,” he says defensively.

“Not that helpful, considering how wrong it is and all.” John teases.

“Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, Uranus and Pluto. That’s NINE planets.”

“That is a list of nine,” John concedes. “But only eight of them are technically considered planets. Pluto was officially declared a dwarf planet so it no longer counts.”

“When did that happen?”
“Several years ago. It was all over the news, my old secondary school science teacher wouldn’t shut up about it for months. How did you miss all that?”

“I might have heard about it,” Sherlock says, waving his hand dismissively. “It’s possible I’ve deleted it.”

“Deleted it?” John asks, eyebrows knitting together in confusion. “What, like, from your brain?”

“Exactly.” Sherlock sets the textbook down and pushes it away slightly then looks at John and taps a slender finger against his temple. “This is my hard drive, John. It’s a storage device with an impressive—though regretfully finite—amount of space available. It makes sense to use that space to its greatest advantage, to clear out unimportant information to make way for what is useful. Do you understand?”

“Sort of,” John replies, tilting his head and examining Sherlock where he sits—gaze curious and considering, but not judgmental. “So you take in all sorts of information, but at some point you sift through it, and what? You just decide which knowledge is no longer necessary and—poof—it disappears?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“And one day you just said to yourself ‘I think I’ll delete my knowledge of the solar system to make way for aliphatic reaction summaries’ and then it was gone, just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Huh.” John purses his lips, considering what he’s just heard. “It’s certainly an interesting theory.”

“It’s not a theory, John,” Sherlock insists. “It’s a fact. I’ve just told you how it works.”

“Right, but it’s hardly a foolproof system. I mean, you didn’t delete that song.”

“No, apparently not.” Sherlock sighs. “Some things simply won’t be erased.”

…a cool evening breeze, the smell of hay and horses drifting up through the air, rough planks beneath his feet as he watches his father carefully set the powerful telescope into place and motion for him to step closer. The kiss of the round eyepiece against his skin, the rough grooves of the focus knob against the pads of his fingers, the weight of a large hand as it settles on his shoulder and steadies him. A warm voice encouraging him to turn the knob slowly, to be patient, to trust that the end result will be worth the effort. Blackness, then a spot of light, just a blurry circle one moment, but in the next—there it is. Round and perfect and streaked with reds and oranges and just hanging there in the sky, so small to his eye but also so much larger than he ever imagined…

“Maybe some things shouldn’t be erased,” John offers, lifting his left shoulder in a shrug and then rolling it back and forth a few times. “I mean, the stars may not be useful—but they are beautiful. Humanity has been looking at them for thousands of years, imagining gods and creatures and even our destinies written in them—and we’re still doing that even today. What if one day someone asks you to drive out in the countryside with a blanket and a bottle of wine to stare up at the night sky—and you can’t enjoy it because you’ve deleted the constellations?”

It takes Sherlock a minute to wrap his mind around the question, momentarily distracted by the idea of a cool evening breeze and a soft grassy hill and looking up into a dark sky littered with countless points of light, John stretched out beside him on the soft patchwork quilt that his mother made for him when he was just a little boy...before he suddenly comes back to himself, shrugging off the thought and glancing up towards the desk where a pair of dark blue eyes meet his expectantly.
“Do people actually do that sort of thing?” Sherlock asks him, one eyebrow rising in disbelief.

“Some people do.”

“Real people?” Sherlock clarifies, looking sceptical. “Outside of ridiculously improbable movie montages, I mean?”

“Sure they do,” John tells him, nodding confidently. “They fit it in right after browsing through charming antiques markets and trying on silly hats, and right before a totally preventable misunderstanding that leads to a big fight and ends with confessions of love and a passionate snog.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen that film,” Sherlock says, tilting his head and considering.

“Who said anything about a film?” John asks, feigning confusion. “That’s just how romance works, you know. Happens to me all the time.”

Sherlock huffs out a breathy chuckle, and revels in the sound of John’s answering laugh as it bubbles out of his mouth and floats on the air. Shaking his head, he starts to open his mouth to reply—but when his gaze meets John’s he forgets what it was he meant to say, breath catching in his throat as the slightest frisson of...something...seems to pass between them, setting off a low crackling in the pit of his stomach. The silence hangs there for a beat, and in that moment—just a split second, really—Sherlock is almost certain that he sees...

*buzzzzzzzz!*

The rattle of Sherlock’s phone vibrating loudly beside him against the hard wooden surface of the table fills the air, and the tenuous connection is severed instantly, both of them breaking the gaze and looking over at the mobile.

“Please tell me that’s not about me,” John says, lifting his right hand and rubbing at his injured shoulder before slipping his fingers through the hair on his crown then down to rub roughly at the back of his head.

Sherlock picks up the phone and scans the message, scowling before standing up and beginning to pack away his things. “Text from my brother. And while your recent level of vanity is impressive, it bears repeating that not every electronic communication I receive is about you.”

“I don’t think every text alert you get is about me,” John clarifies. “Just most of them.”

“I should never have shown you those confessions,” Sherlock sighs, rolling his eyes and shoving the last of his papers into his satchel before closing the flap and hauling the strap up over his shoulder.

“Look, I can’t help it if the birds love me. It’s just my cross to bear.” John tells him with a shrug as Sherlock leans over and picks up the single textbook and sheaf of notes still lying on the desk and begins to walk in his direction. “Wait, are you leaving?”

“Yes.”

“But you were going to help me review my biochem notes,” John complains. “The test is tomorrow morning.”

“You’re the one who wasted the last hour prattling on about planets and stars and the mysterious nature of the universe, John.”

“That’s because I wasn’t expecting you to leave this early in the afternoon.” John tells him with
what, Sherlock is almost certain, is a slight pout. “Where are you off to?”

“Violin lesson. According to my menace of a brother the car will be waiting downstairs for me in five minutes,” Sherlock explains, stopping in front of the desk and holding out John’s copy of *Principles of Organic & Biological Chemistry* towards him along with a neat stack of papers pressed under the front cover. “While you were busy looking at picture books I took the liberty of reviewing your notes and making a few corrections.”

“Of course you did.” John shakes his head as he takes the book and flips through the stack of notes—eyes widening as he scans the meticulously penned additions in black ink that have been added to the notes written in blue in his own scrawling hand. “And this looks like more than a few corrections, Sherlock.”

“It isn’t really,” Sherlock tells him, reaching down onto the desk and picking up the mobile phone lying face down next to John’s elbow and tapping at the screen. “I just changed a few signs you’d transposed in your formulas and added some suggestions about what is likely to be covered on the exam given the content of your lecture notes and the corresponding chapters in the text. If you have any questions, feel free to text me.”

“Oh, well that’s good then.” John glances over the new phone number that appears under the contact ‘SH’. “You can feel free to text me as well, you know, if you have any questions about the solar system.”

“Duly noted.” Sherlock rolls his eyes at John’s self-satisfied smirk. “Don’t you have some actual *work* you should be doing right now?”

“You do now,” Sherlock replies, making one last tap on the mobile phone in his hand before holding it out to John, who looks at it for a moment before he recognizes it as his own and takes it from him.

“Okay, thanks,” John says absently, still scanning over the pages of notes before registering what Sherlock just said and stopping to look up at him. “No, wait—I don’t have your number.”

“Best get on with it then,” Sherlock says, tipping his chin in a nod and walking towards the door, then turning around and leaning against the horizontal push bar handle, smiling at John as he backs out into the hall. “See you tomorrow?”

John returns the smile and throws up one tanned hand in a casual wave. “Yeah. Of course.”

When Sherlock opens the back door of the sleek black car idling at the kerb outside the front entrance of Morningside Academy, he’s already half way into the vehicle before he notices that he’s not alone.

“What are you doing here?” he demands, looking over at his brother who is sitting comfortably at the other end of the plush leather bench seat.

“And good afternoon to you as well, brother,” Mycroft Holmes sighs, a sound far too world-weary than any man of his age should emit on such a regular basis.

“Checking up on me, are you?” Sherlock guesses, narrowing his eyes and examining the elder Holmes shrewdly. “I’m perfectly capable of behaving myself in the back of your car for the duration of a ride to and from a simple music lesson, you know.”
“A statement for which there does exist some compelling evidence to the contrary,” his older brother offers politely, then smiles slightly when his younger brother responds the way that Sherlock Holmes always responds when he has no response to speak of.

“Piss off, Mycroft.”

“Eloquent as always, brother dear.” Mycroft smooths his hands down the impeccably pressed lapel of his suit jacket, taming what Sherlock can only assume are imaginary wrinkles in the fabric. “I find that I have business in the same area of London that dovetails nicely with the time frame of your appointment, and it seemed imprudent not to take advantage of the excellent opportunity to engage in a ride share.”

“How very civic minded of you. Thank heavens the world won’t be forced to wait until my violin lesson is over for you to start the next war.”

“A war can be started from anywhere, Sherlock,” Mycroft says blandly.

“Like in the back of moving Town Car, for instance?”

“Precisely,” Mycroft replies, casting an appraising glance at his younger brother. “I think you’ll find that wars are fairly easy to start, in general. Ending them, however—that can be a bit trickier.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes then turns to look sullenly out the window when he hears the muffled buzz of his phone as it vibrates against his hip. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieves his mobile and reads the text message on the screen:

*Helpful tip: If you see a giant ball of fiery yellow light in the sky DON’T PANIC. That’s called the “sun” and it’s supposed to be there.*

He’s reading the message a second time—lips curling up in a smile as he imagines John typing out the sentence clumsily with his short fingers—when the second text comes in.

*The planet we live on is called “Earth” and it revolves around the sun. Stop me if all of this has already been covered in that song of yours.*

His grin widens as he shakes his head, thumbs flying over the virtual keyboard as he composes his response:

*That tune is going to be stuck in my head for days now, thanks to you. –SH*

He hits send and then watches the screen, something warm blooming within him as three small dots begin to blink in the corner indicating that John is composing his response. He stares at the undulating ellipsis intently for what seems like a very long time, until John’s next message (finally) pops into view.

*When I have a song stuck in my head, do you know what helps make it go away? SINGING IT. Out loud. To someone else.*

Sherlock shakes his head, narrowing his eyes at the screen as he types.

*You can’t make me sing that song. –SH*

Seconds later, John replies:

*I’ll get it out of you eventually. I have my methods.*
Rolling his eyes, he huffs out an exasperated sigh and taps out his reply:

*Stop being an arse and get back to work—SH*

He watches the screen for the telltale blinking dots, and moments after they appear so does the following message:

*I think you meant ‘Stop being a SPECKTACULER arse’. ;)*

The breathy chuckle that bubbles up from his chest is out of his mouth before Sherlock has time to check himself, and in his peripheral vision he sees the man next to him turn and look pointedly in his direction. He sees the raised eyebrow, senses the unasked question lingering just behind his lips, feels the curiosity blazing in his gaze. He keeps his eyes fixed resolutely on his mobile, taps the command at the top of the screen, and moments later the name *John Watson* appears in his contacts.

He slips the phone into his pocket and settles back against the cool leather seat. He can feel his brother watching him, the weight of his stare a nearly tangible thing, and he does his best to keep his expression neutral. After a minute or two Mycroft slowly shifts his gaze from Sherlock’s face to the scenery passing by outside of his own window.

Only then does Sherlock allow himself to relax, to let his mind wander as he thinks of blue eyes and mischievous smiles and tan fingers raking through golden hair and spinning planets and shining stars—and an infinite, mysterious universe filled with possibility.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated!

And because this particular project is one that simmers at the slowest of burns (but the TEENLICK is coming, I SWEAR IT!) I feel it’s only fair that I direct you toward some sweaty, delicious porn that you can enjoy in the meantime while things are still heating up around here.

So in this week’s installment of “Maybe turn on the A/C and take off a few layers because…damn, it’s getting hot in here” may I direct your attention to a glorious little nugget of Johnlock porn that is smoking freaking hot all on its own, but happens to have been inspired by some adorably filthy Johnlock fanart as well, so follow those links if that’s your jam. And it should be, because jam is delicious.

If you need a 2,000 word infusion of gloriously wrought, established relationship, hot steamy sweaty sexy loving smut in your life (and come on, let’s be honest, who *doesn’t*?), pour yourself a nice cool drink and hop on over to jinglebell’s *Husband*. But maybe first make sure your fire extinguishers are in working order. And if you’ve already read this one, READ IT AGAIN. Because: YUM.

NOTE: I forgot to mention that this particular fic is only viewable to AO3 members, which is a bummer for my beloved anonymous readers. But maybe this is the day you take the plunge and join AO3 and get in on all the fun!
Hello Friends, and Happy Thursday!

Oh yes. You read that right. Though the chapter publication date may actually say *Friday*, but that’s only because of something weird involving time zones and AO3 and frankly I don’t really get it—BUT: my clock still says it’s before midnight CST on 5/21/2015 and that is a REAL LIVE THURSDAY. Take that, universe!

But maybe don’t get too used to it or anything. I’m just saying.

The slow burn continues, as our boys forge the friendship that will be the foundation their future is built on.

A quick housekeeping note: You may have noticed that the chapter count on this story has gone up a bit. The reason for this is two-fold: ONE: I am notoriously bad at estimating how long things are going to be. I outline the bejesus out of my fics and then forget that these ideas actually take up WAY more space on the page than I thought they would. And TWO: Way back in the day when I wrote *Colors*, I was a naïve first time author who thought that it was perfectly reasonable for someone with a job and a family and a life to pump out 12K word chapters every week and not go insane. Turns out I was wrong. After much discussion in beta-land, we’ve agreed that the story arc is best served by letting chapters begin and end where it makes the most sense, not when I feel like they’re acceptably (far too) long. Any questions? Bring ‘em on.

Effusive praise and near-religious reverence to my incomparable beta and BFF owensm, and an equal amount of blown kisses and virtual cupcakes to cheytea7 for sanity-preserving services rendered. Bordering on creepy levels of affection to you, dear readers, for each click, kudo, subscription, bookmark and comment. It still amazes me that people take the time to read something I wrote—and I am eternally appreciative of that. Drop me a line in the comments if you’re so inclined, I love to hear from you almost as much as I DON’T like the idea of having a colonoscopy! (And trust me, that’s a *lot.*) Have a great week, and I'll see you next Thursday (or some approximation thereof).

After brushing the fringe of wet curls free from where they insist upon clinging to his forehead, Sherlock drags his fingers down to tug at the collar of his button down shirt in an effort to pull it away from where it’s sticking to the still-damp patch of skin between his shoulder blades. While he resents the inane school policy that requires him to participate in physical education courses as a graduation requirement on principle, it is the indignity of being forced to shower after each and every class period that he finds nearly intolerable.

It’s not the requirement itself that he finds objectionable, per se. He shudders to imagine the level of stench that would result if sweaty teenaged boys were unleashed into the halls without at least a cursory scrub after spending an hour chasing down balls or climbing ropes or running endless laps around the oval track that rings the gymnasium under watchful eye of the Morningside PE instructor,
one Mr. Reginald Bank.

Nor is it the communal showering facilities themselves that he finds the most distasteful part of the process. True, the lack of privacy can be occasionally disconcerting, and in light of last year’s unfortunately public revelation regarding his sexuality Sherlock admits that tensions in the locker room were a bit high for a period of time that followed. It had, like most things do, passed more quickly than he’d expected it to—likely in no small part due to the fact that everything happening inside the locker room was subject to the same level of oversight as those that occurred outside of it.

Though Sherlock might not have the highest opinion of his area of academic expertise, or of his level of intelligence on the whole, he can admit that ‘Bank The Tank’ is a competent and fair educator who—in defiance of nearly every cinematic representation of those in his chosen profession—manages to run a physical education programme fairly devoid of the stereotypical dangers that it could be fraught with for a certain subset of participants like himself. A fact for which he finds himself both pleasantly surprised and uncharacteristically grateful.

No, it isn’t the showering itself or the setting in which it occurs that he objects to. What he finds truly upsetting is that he’s forced to perform these compulsory bathing rituals using the liquid shampoo/soap combination dispensed from judiciously placed wall mounted receptacles in the shower room—a vile substance that purports to smell “mountain fresh” but to Sherlock’s nose seems far better described as “essence of pinesap and urinal cakes”. It leaves an itchy film on his skin and dries out his scalp and awakens a level of unruliness in his curls that refuses to be tamed no matter how much hastily applied product he runs through it afterwards. Add in that the pitifully rough rectangles of barely absorbent fabric available for drying off can only be referred to as towels in the most liberal definition of the word, and it’s fair to say that his favourite part of PE class is when it’s over.

Huffing a sharp breath over his pouting bottom lip in the vain attempt to dislodge a disobedient curl from where it’s currently tangled in his eyelashes, Sherlock heaves open the heavy glass door and steps into the library—and the scowl on his face fades almost immediately at the sight of John Watson standing in front of the circulation desk, an involuntary smile moving to replace it as he walks toward the man with a greeting on his lips…

And freezes.

In a split second he examines John’s posture (rigid), his stance (wide and commanding), his mannerisms (fists balled tightly at his sides, the left one clenching and unclenching rhythmically), his expression (thunderous) his gaze (fixed and focused intently on a spot near the centre of the room).

Sherlock automatically follows John’s line of sight to the artfully arranged seating area where an impeccably dressed visitor sits calmly in one of the brown leather wingback chairs, legs crossed primly and smiling benignly in his direction while absentely stroking the polished walnut handle of the umbrella propped up beside him against the chair.

Oh, of course.

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock demands, his deep voice breaking the tense silence hanging in the air. From the corner of his eye he sees John start a bit at the sound and turn his head towards him as if he’s just now noticed that Sherlock is in the room.

“And good day to you as well,” Mycroft Holmes says blithely, a thin smile on his lips as he looks at his younger brother, gaze scanning quickly over his wet head and slightly disheveled clothing. “Has there been unfortunate mishap with a sprinkler system that you have somehow found yourself in the midst of—through no fault of your own, of course—again?”
“That was one time, and it was ages ago,” Sherlock fires back, glowering at him. “And I’ve very clearly just come from PE. That’s a class where people participate in physical activity with the goal of achieving fitness, so I suppose it shouldn’t come as a complete shock to me that you’re unfamiliar with the concept.”

“Charming, as ever,” Mycroft simpers. “Your manners continually impress.”

“I learned from the best,” Sherlock points out, cocking a hip and looking at him expectantly. “Well? I’m waiting for an explanation.”

“Perhaps I was simply in the area and thought I’d stop in to say hello.”

“Oh, please,” the younger Holmes sneers, “You just saw me not six hours ago when your driver dropped me off out front this morning. Now answer my question; why are you here?”

“I’m checking on the current status of the Holmes Memorial Library,” Mycroft answers with a smile, lifting one perfectly manicured hand and indicating their surroundings with a sweeping gesture.

“You mean you’re checking up on me,” Sherlock challenges.


Sherlock opens his mouth in preparation to deliver a biting reply when he notices his brother’s gaze flick away to land on the third person in the room before returning quickly to his own.

“Oh, I see,” Sherlock begins, narrowing his eyes and huffing out a heavy sigh. “You’re here to check on John.”

“That is certainly not my only motivation for this visit, but I will admit to being in possession of a certain curiosity about young Mr. Watson.”

“Don’t bother playing coy, you’re terrible at it and it doesn’t suit you,” Sherlock spits back. “John isn’t some exotic animal tucked in a cage for you to observe at will, Mycroft. He’s an actual human being.”

“Who is in the room, by the way,” the non-Holmes party to the conversation interjects, looking at Sherlock who continues to glare at his older brother.

“This facility was built with, and continues to be funded by, a sizeable grant from the Holmes Foundation,” Mycroft continues, calmly reaching down to pinch a seemingly invisible piece of debris from the arm of his impeccably tailored suit jacket before flicking it carelessly away from him into the air. “It’s only prudent that I take an interest in that investment.”

“John isn’t one of your employees, Mycroft,” Sherlock growls.

“He could be,” Mycroft answers, tipping his head and turning his gaze to meet John’s.

“No,” John Watson answers firmly, his voice low and dangerous as he returns the stare and steps forward to stand beside Sherlock. “He really couldn’t.”

“You are very loyal, very quickly Mr. Watson,” the elder Holmes observes, rising to his feet, crossing one foot over the other and leaning gracefully on his umbrella. “I wonder what it is, exactly, that my brother has done to inspire such…dedication. In any event, you would be wise to consider my offer.”
“I think I made myself quite clear already,” John tells him, his pleasant tone at odds with the stiff set of his shoulders and hard glare in his eyes. “I don’t betray my friends.”

Beside him, Sherlock sucks in a soft breath and throws a quick glance in John’s direction as something warm and unfamiliar begins to spread behind his sternum at the pronouncement. He watches the stocky blond continue to stare down his older brother without even a flicker of fear in those slate blue eyes, and feels a grin tip at the corner of his mouth, the smile beginning to bloom over his face before he catches himself and suppresses it—afflicting a more neutral expression quickly enough that he’s confident John didn’t notice the change—before looking back up at his brother.

Who, judging by the insufferably smug look on his face, most definitely had noticed what John had not.

_Damn._

The whisper of the library door swishing open doesn’t tempt any of them to break the tense three-way staring contest currently in progress, but the gleefully melodic greeting that follows it has the trio turning automatically to trace the sound to its source.

“Mycroft Holmes!” Martha Hudson says, smiling brightly as she walks towards them with her arms wrapped around an ungainly stack of brightly coloured cushions that stretch three feet above her head and look as though they’ll be toppling over at any moment now. “What a pleasant surprise!”

“Is it?” Sherlock asks, glaring ominously at his brother as John immediately crosses in front of him to relieve the librarian of the majority of her fluffy burden.

“Oh, I know they’re a bit garish, but they’re not _too_ terribly constructed, and I could hardly say no to the offer. They’ll certainly brighten up the place.” She reaches out and takes the top one from the pile in John’s arms, tutting softly at the bold pattern of Chihuahua dogs wearing sunglasses and colourful straw hats before turning back to face their visitor. “I see you’ve met my new assistant?”
“I have just this moment had the pleasure,” Mycroft confirms, throwing a beleaguered look in his brother’s direction when the younger Holmes scoffs at his words.

“John’s been such a help to me,” she says, looking over at him fondly, “and the number of students utilising the library has seen quite a rise since he arrived. He’s been an absolute pleasure to work with, and a real breath of fresh air around here.”

“Yes,” replies Sieger and Rosamund Holmes’ oldest child, turning to John Watson and giving him an appraising look. “So I am given to understand.”

Sherlock watches the shorter man return Mycroft’s stare for a beat, impressed by how John doesn’t fidget in the slightest under the penetrating gaze, then sees him turn to Mrs. Hudson and nod his thanks for the praise.

“The pleasure’s been all mine, Mrs. H.” John smiles sincerely and tips his chin down at the cushions he’s holding. “Where would you like us to put these?”

“Oh just scatter them around the furniture, dear,” she replies, gesturing vaguely to the comfortable chairs and settees arranged in cozy clusters around the space before turning back to her visitor. “Now, how about a nice cuppa?”

“Unfortunately, I am on a rather tight schedule today,” Mycroft Holmes begins, before she interrupts him with a smile and a careless wave of her hand.

“Nonsense. You’ve come all this way the least I can offer you is a spot of tea,” the venerable librarian insists, and before he can open his mouth to respond she adds, “There may also be a batch of almond biscuits, baked fresh this morning, if you’re interested.”

Mycroft Holmes closes his mouth, then lifts his umbrella and examines it as he considers the offer, one elegant thumb rubbing at the oval brass plate inset into the polished wood handle, before tipping his head in assent. “I suppose I can make a few adjustments to my appointment diary. A cup of tea would be lovely, thank you.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes dramatically at his brother’s abrupt, almond biscuit induced change of tune, and from the corner of his eye he sees John attempting to repress a smile at the sudden reversal as well.

“Wonderful!” Mrs. Hudson says happily, clapping her hands softly together and then taking the tall man’s proffered elbow. “We’ll be down in the staff room if you need anything, boys.”

“My sincerest thanks for the conversation, Mr. Watson,” Mycroft Holmes says politely, “Best of luck to you in your studies.”

Sherlock watches John’s jaw tighten slightly before he nods curtly at Mycroft Holmes who turns his attention in his younger brother’s direction.

“Do attempt to behave yourself, brother,” Mycroft admonishes, raising an eyebrow in warning. “I will see you at home this evening.”

“I am breathless with anticipation,” Sherlock deadpans, a response that his brother rewards with a barely perceptible shake of his head and a weary sigh as he leads Mrs. Hudson through the heavy glass door and out into the hall. As the door swings softly shut, they stand and listen as the librarian begins to tell her benefactor how lovely it’s been to have so many students show an interest in reading of late. When the door closes behind them, the latch engaging with a metallic click that rings through the quiet air, they both stare at it for a moment longer without speaking.
It’s John who eventually breaks the silence.

“What the hell was all that?”

Sherlock shakes his head grimly. “That was my brother.”

“Yeah, I’d worked that much out on my own, thanks,” John says, turning to face Sherlock and stretching his neck to look at him over the pile of cushions he’s still holding. “I meant, what was he doing here?”

“Hovering,” Sherlock says, sighing wearily before reaching out and snatching the top two pillows off of the pile in John’s arms and tossing them carelessly towards the brown leather chair his brother had recently vacated, then taking a few steps to his right and dumping the remaining cushions in his arms onto a dark green upholstered loveseat before turning and sitting down heavily onto it. “He’s very talented at sticking his overly large nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“I don’t doubt that,” John says, tossing cushions from where he stands and watching them land one by one on the various pieces of furniture still devoid of them. “I came in after my test this morning and he was already here, waiting. I didn’t even see him sitting there until he said my name. Creepy as hell, really.”

“He does have a certain flair for the dramatic,” Sherlock concedes, reaching out to clutch one of the donated cushions to his chest, and then pausing to stare down at the busy pattern of overlapping rainbow trout on the fabric with an expression of deep distaste. “Good Lord, were these produced in a sewing class for the blind?”

“They are rather hideous,” John agrees with a smile, sending a shocking pink and neon orange striped monstrosity flying over Sherlock’s head to land on a squashy grey leather chair near the edge of the common space before looking down at the last cushion in his hand with an expression of mild surprise. “This one’s not so bad. I kind of like it, actually—very patriotic.”

Looking at the plumped square of deep blue striped in the set of familiar crisscrossed bars of red and white, Sherlock has to admit that of all the various patterns now strewn about the furniture that once resided in the family home of his youth—the Union Jack cushion clutched in John Watson’s hands is the only one that seems like it belongs there. And in an act of unspoken agreement, John walks over to where Sherlock is sitting, props the cushion neatly in to the corner of the loveseat, and sits down beside him.

“So,” John begins, huffing out a deep breath turning a bit to face him. “You want to tell me why your brother was lying in wait to interrogate me like some kind of Bond villain?”

“I’m afraid that was my fault.” Sherlock breathes out a sigh, long fingers picking absentely at a stray thread on one corner of the atrocious fish pillow in his lap. “He saw me laughing at your texts in the car yesterday afternoon.”

“Well, that makes sense then,” John says seriously. “They were very funny texts, after all. If I’d read them I’d have wanted to meet me too.”

“Yes, yes. You’re hilarious.” Sherlock rolls his eyes, unable to resist quirking a small grin at John’s cheek. “He didn’t say anything to me about it, but I could tell he was curious about who sent them.”

“And instead of simply asking who it was you were talking to, he decided the best way to find out was creep around an empty library on the off chance he might run into the other party?”

“I suppose that is one way of putting it.”
“OK, but he knew it was me—how, exactly?” John asks with interest, shaking his head when Sherlock opens his mouth to answer and putting up a hand to halt his response. “No, wait—don’t tell me, let me guess. Is it by the way my hair is parted? Or bit of mud he noticed on my right shoe? Oh—I bet he guessed by the way my left jumper sleeve was pulled up further than the one on the right? Am I close?”

Sherlock looks at the man sitting beside him and wonders for a moment why John doesn’t seem more put out. Most people in his position would be at least marginally angry at his meddlesome brother’s unsolicited, and frankly a bit frightening by most standards, intrusion into their affairs—but John seems mostly interested. Amused, even. Taking in the sly grin lifting at the corner of his (pink) lips and the expectant, playful look in his (blue) eyes he marvels to himself once again at how John Watson manages to keep surprising him.

“It is entirely possible he deduced your identity through observational means,” he tells John, nodding thoughtfully. “But it does seem more likely that he saw your name on my mobile screen when I entered it into my contacts and made a discreet inquiry as a result.”

“Oh,” John replies, raising his eyebrows and nodding. “That makes more sense. Not nearly as impressive, mind you—but definitely less disturbing. Well, a little less so, anyway.”

“What did he say to you?” Sherlock asks.

“Oh you know, the usual,” John replies with a shrug. “Spouted off a bunch of facts about my life that he had no business knowing then demanded I tell him about my ‘association with Sherlock Holmes’. Basic stuff like that.”

“I’m sorry, John,” Sherlock says quietly, acknowledging John’s ribbing tone with a half-smile before looking down at his hands and fidgeting with one poorly sewn edge of the cushion he’s still holding. “He can be a bit... overprotective.”

“Yeah, I gathered as much,” he says with a grin, rolling his bad shoulder back and forth while tipping his head to the side and grimacing a bit at the stretch. “I was actually relieved to find out he was your brother, truth be told.”

Sherlock regards him with a knitted brow. “Who did you think he was?”

“I don’t know,” John shrugs. “Some kind of criminal mastermind, maybe?”

“Close enough,” Sherlock mutters, his glowering expression softening a bit at the sound of a breathy chuckle being huffed out beside him. “Spoken like a true younger brother,” John says with a smile. “Underneath all the cloak and dagger stuff, I get the feeling he’s just worried about you.”

“Did he offer you money to spy on me?”

“Yeah, he did. Said he’d pay me a ‘meaningful sum of money’ if I’d check in every once in a while and tell him what you’d been up to.”

“Did you take it?” Sherlock asks, eyeing him cautiously and bolstering his voice with what he hopes reads as disinterested bravado.

“Of course not,” John answers, his expression a nearly even combination of surprised and indignant, yet tinged with a touch of something else, as well—a quick flash of tension around his eyes and mouth and brow that Sherlock is almost certain is... hurt. John tilts his head and looks at Sherlock
for a long moment, forehead creased with concentration. “I would never do that to you, you know. I meant what I said earlier, Sherlock. I don’t betray my friends.”

Under John Watson’s earnest gaze, this second mention of that word in reference to Sherlock—to what John considers them to be in relation to one another—provokes an increasingly familiar sensation somewhere deep within him, a tingling warmth that spreads and seeps and settles and grounds him in the moment, and he is suddenly aware of just how little space there is between them. In the ever increasing number of hours they’ve spent in each other’s presence over the last few weeks, they’ve carried on conversations across rooms and tables and desks and large wooden crates and occasionally over unimpeded respectable distances best measured in feet—but this proximity, this separation of inches, is new.

Sherlock lets out a slow breath, the air seeming thicker somehow, and time slows to a crawl as he examines the improbable young man beside him—this fascinating person who called him friend. He hears the soft rush of air hissing out from between slightly parted lips, and some part of him imagines he can feel the exhalation pass through the air between them to ghost over his skin. He catches a flash of pink as the tip of a tongue darts out to slide smoothly over the length of a chapped bottom lip, an unconscious act that John performs regularly and that Sherlock never fails to notice.

There’s a muted tapping sound, the soft, rhythmic thump of flesh against denim, and Sherlock drops his gaze to see strong fingers drumming absently against one compact, muscled thigh…and all at once he is seized by the urge to touch—struck by just how simple it would be to reach out and lay his hand over John’s, to see how pale, slender fingers might fit between short, tanned ones.

And now he’s staring, and he knows he’s staring, and he realises he really shouldn’t be staring…

And with that thought he sucks in a deep breath, and time starts back up. The sudden rush of oxygen to his brain helps to clear his mind as he shakes his head slightly and looks back up at John, relieved to see that his expression hasn’t changed from the one he was wearing moments ago when he assured Sherlock that he had refused Mycroft’s offered bribe: honest and focused and expectant as he awaits a reply.

“It must have been tempting, though,” Sherlock says in a considered tone, regarding him shrewdly and with open curiosity. “Given your present financial situation, I mean.”

“No, it wasn’t,” John answers immediately, shaking his head shrugging his good shoulder slightly. “Some things are more important than money.”

“A very noble sentiment,” Sherlock concedes, nodding seriously. “A bit shortsighted, however. If you’d said yes we could have split the fee. Think it through next time.”

The look of amused surprise on John’s face is almost as lovely to Sherlock’s eyes as the sound of his melodic chuckle-turned-laugh-turned-giggle is to his ears when it fills the air. Almost.

“So, are there any other protective relatives lurking about in the shadows that I should be on the lookout for?” John asks as the last breathy remnants of laughter spill from his lips.

“None,” Sherlock assures him with a shake of his head.

“Do you think he’ll come back?”

“Hard to say,” he tells John, pausing to consider. “You handled him admirably, so it stands to reason that he won’t feel the need to return. I suspect the ‘offer’ he made you was as much a test as it was a
Sherlock looks at John for a moment, remembers the set in his jaw and the steel in his eyes as he stared down Mycroft Holmes and told him in no uncertain terms: *I don’t betray my friends.*

“Definitely.”

And when John Watson smiles at him, Sherlock can’t resist returning the grin.

“Speaking of which,” Sherlock says, suddenly remembering why John wasn’t in the Library that morning before he’d had to go to PE class. “How did the test go?”

“Very well, actually. Thanks in no small part to you, I should add. Your very thorough ‘review’ of my notes was really helpful—and you were spot on about what would be covered on the test.”

“Well, it wasn’t a terribly difficult leap to make,” Sherlock says, feigning indifference while secretly preening internally at the praise. “Your notes were fairly complete, I just corrected a few inconsistencies and made some obvious deductions about the material likeliest to be covered on the exam. It was nothing really.”

John looks at him for a long moment, then narrows his eyes and tilts his head to peer at him with increased scrutiny—and just as Sherlock is beginning to get a bit uncomfortable under the gaze he breaks the stare and nods his head in understanding.

“Oh, that’s what it was,” he says with a sigh, as though he’s just come up with an answer that had eluded him.

“What?” Sherlock asks, confused.

“I was thinking to myself earlier that there was something about your brother that reminded me of you, but I couldn’t put my finger on it until just now. Tell me, which side of the family does being ‘insufferably smug’ run on?”

“Oh shut up,” Sherlock says, successfully looking affronted until John’s laugh fills the air and he smiles sheepishly at him before rolling his eyes. “Any other ridiculous questions you’d like to ask?”

“One,” John confirms.

“By all means,” Sherlock replies, lifting a hand in invitation.

“It’s a bit personal though, so I’ll understand if you’d rather not answer.”

Sherlock looks at him for a moment, considering, then nods his assent.

“Well, I was just wondering,” he begins, then huffs out a deep breath and looks Sherlock in the eyes for a moment, then slowly raises his gaze a bit higher and points a finger in the same direction. “What exactly is going on with your hair today?”

Sherlock blinks rapidly for a moment, then rolls his eyes at the playful grin that overtakes John’s serious expression, attempting to remain indignant even while he revels in the sound of John’s giggle as it rings, once more, through the air.

“Oh, sod off,” he snaps crossly, raising his hands to his head and pressing his palms against the flyaway curls where he can feel them jutting out wildly at improbable angles.
“It’s not that I don’t like it,” John clarifies between short bursts of laughter. “It’s just a bit of a different look for you. Very ‘newly hatched chick’, I’d call it.”

“It’s the atrocious substance that’s meant to pass as “shampoo” at this ridiculous school,” Sherlock says defensively, threading his long fingers repeatedly through the hair at his crown in an attempt to tame it.

“Now that sounds like an excellent project for the Holmes Foundation to take on,” John chides, shaking his head before reaching out and circling his fingers lightly around one of Sherlock’s wrists, halting his frantic pawing. “You’re really not helping things, with that. Here, bend down a bit you bloody ostrich.”

Sherlock freezes in place, staring at John and knowing that he really should say something—but at this moment it would seem that he is unable to focus on anything but the feel of sturdy fingers against his wrist, as though every active nerve in his body has suddenly rerouted itself to the small patch of flesh where John’s skin meets his own. He can feel his own pulse thrumming up and through his veins, and he panics at the thought that maybe John can feel it too.

“I promise I’m not going to lick my fingers first the way my mum used to,” John teases, gently pulling Sherlock’s hands down from his head and looking at him expectantly. “Just lean over a little and let me give it a try.”

John lets go of his wrist, and Sherlock finds himself acutely aware of the loss, but before he has time to dwell on the feeling, the sudden slide of short fingers against his scalp commands his full attention. He leans forward, bowing his head down involuntarily and sucking in a slow breath as the abhorrent fish patterned fabric below him begins to blur. As sections of hair curl around and slip over the sturdy hands brushing gently over his head, he feels a strand or two catch briefly on the edge of a neatly trimmed nail, and he closes his eyes and lets himself enjoy the sensation while it lasts…which, as it turns out, is only about five seconds longer.

“OK, I think that should do it. Look at me.” Sherlock composes himself quickly, then does as he’s told—raising his head and looking up at John, who examines Sherlock’s hair from a few angles then purses his lips and nods. “Yeah, sorry. I’ve definitely made it worse.”

Sherlock widens his eyes and huffs out an exasperated sigh as he gets to his feet, tossing the fish cushion behind him and smiling in grim satisfaction as he hears it make contact with some part of John. He walks over to the spot on the floor near the circulation desk where he’d hastily dropped his bag earlier and drags it to his regular table at the edge of the common area before heaving it up onto the polished wood surface and beginning to root through it.

“Oh come on, Sherlock,” John says, his voice growing nearer as he walks from his seat on the couch to stand beside him. “I’m only joking. It looks great. Just needed a little taming, that’s all.”

Sherlock eyes him suspiciously, but the sincerity in John’s eyes seems genuine enough that when the shorter man reaches out and presses a palm to his shoulder he allows himself to be guided by the motion, and when John takes a step closer and turns to point across the room, Sherlock follows the line of his arm to the heavy glass door and examines what he sees in its reflection.

His hair, in fact, looks fine. He stands there staring for a long moment, but after the briefest glance at his own reflection, it’s the other image in the glass that captures his attention. Standing there beside him, broad shouldered and clean cut and golden haired and blue eyed and smiling back at him—John Watson is quite a sight to behold.

“See?” John asks. “Looks nice, doesn’t it?”
Before he has a chance to answer, the library door swishes open and Martha Hudson steps through it—then looks over at them where they stand and smiles.

“Oh good, you’re here,” she says, reaching out a hand and beckoning them both forward. “Mycroft’s just left, but we had a look in the storage room and decided on the next few crates to be unpacked. Time to put those strong young backs to use!”

And with that, she turns on her heel and walks right back out the door.

John heaves in a deep breath, then lifts his hand from where it’s still resting on Sherlock’s shoulder and slaps it back down once before letting it fall to his side.

“Duty calls,” he says, then turns and begins to walk towards the door.

And after a moment, Sherlock follows.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated.

And in this week’s installment of “Oh for God’s sake, Sara, are you telling us it will be even LONGER before you get to the Teenlick?”, in lieu of taking me out back and beating me up please accept this sweet little filthy tale as a peace offering instead.

If you’re looking for 4K words of first-time possessive Watson initiated hot Johnlock sex that turns into them ripping each other's clothes off in moderately inappropriate places with a strong emphasis on bodily fluids that still manages to be heartfelt and deftly written, look no further than A Sense of Propriety by the inimitable sweetcupncakes.

Click, read, sweat, shower, towel off, repeat.

Enjoy!
Hello Friends, and a happy “Friday shall henceforth be known as Thursday—with-benefits for I have decreed it to be so. Nyaaah.”

So the boys have had five chapters full of fluffy getting-to-know-you goodness, but you know the old saying: Into every fic, a bit of angst must fall. And by “old” I mean “from 12 seconds ago” because that’s when I made it up and typed it here. Which is maybe why it doesn’t make much sense. Also, this chapter contains a couple of fairly vague references to childhood trauma and sexual abuse (involving ancillary characters), so consider yourself warned.

A million kajillion high-fives and fist bumps to the world’s best beta/BFF owensm for the unwavering support (and for making me justify my last minute minor plot changes before agreeing to them), and a running, jumping chest bump to cheytea7 for taming my run-on sentences with a whip and a chair and a healthy dose of good grace as well.

Effusive thanks and praise and awkward deep bows of respect for every click, kudo, comment, subscription, bookmark and rec this little adventure has received thus far. This tale is proving to be a genuine pleasure and challenge to write, and I am so grateful for the support. Drop me a line in the comments if you’re so inclined, because if I had a choice between reading your comments and eating a brownie sundae with mint chip ice cream and hot fudge and real whipped cream—you can rest assured I would totally take the sundae because I can read while I eat. :)

Have a wonderful week, and I’ll see you next Thorsday! Thoorzdai? Thewersdee…or, you know, something like that.

The early evening breeze was picking up speed—licking at his heels and rushing close behind as he ran down the cobblestone path and between the tall hedgerows—before it caught up to him all at once and blew the dark, too-long curls away from the tender patch of skin at the back of his neck, flushed warm and pink over the stiff edge of his starched collar. The hand embroidered tag sewn into the bespoke dress shirt had been irritating him all afternoon, held aggravatingly in place by the silken noose of the aubergine necktie knotted at his throat.

It was an early birthday present from his parents: a proper suit from a proper tailor from the proper shop in London where he’d stood weeks earlier, shivering in his pants and a t-shirt and stocking feet on a tall box in the middle of the room with his arms outstretched. He’d listened to his mother chatting about fabric and cut as the small, bespectacled man took the measure of his arms and legs and chest and hips and waist—stretching out the long strip of tape he pulled from around his neck and then looping it carelessly back over it when he was done—without stopping even once to write anything down. Next he was being draped in heavy dark cloth that was snipped and chalked and pinned and lifted off in a whoosh. Before he knew it he was sent through the heavy curtains to get dressed and he was following his mother out of the shop as she thanked the man, who assured her that Sherlock’s brand new suit would be delivered in three weeks’ time.
True to his word, it had arrived just the day before—received and looked over by Marie, who had pronounced it adorable and seen that it was perfectly clean and pressed and hung right alongside those that his father and brother would be wearing for the occasion. As he threaded his thin arms through the sleeves of the jacket and slid his fingers down the narrow, smooth lapels for the first time, he silently reviewed the rules his father had taught him: he slipped the first button neatly into its hole (always), ran his fingers over the edge of the second one before buttoning it as well (sometimes), then slid the palm of his hand over the last button (never) before leaving it unfastened and looking at his reflection.

It was, he had to admit, a very nice suit.

And he hated it.

No, that wasn’t exactly true. He actually quite liked the suit itself, really—the fit at his shoulders and the taper to his waist and the slim trouser legs and the precise, nearly invisible, stitching at the hems and seams and around the edges of the button holes. The shirt, he noted, was quite fine as well, the crisp white fabric contrasting nicely against the dark navy of the jacket. But the way it was fastened up at his throat, how it pressed against the skin at his neck and made him feel claustrophobic and panicked and choked—that was the part he could barely stand.

Since nearly the moment he’d finished getting dressed that afternoon his fingers had been twitching in his pockets, longing to slide beneath the starched collar and yank hard—hard enough to pop the threads anchoring the buttons and loosen the necktie mummy had so carefully knotted before she’d smiled broadly and pronounced him to be ‘the handsomest nine year old Holmes the family had seen in well over seven years’ before depositing a kiss on his cheek, then aiming a wink at her eldest son where he stood straightening his own tie in the mirror beside them. Swallowing repeatedly against the relentless pressure at his throat, he told himself that it wasn’t so bad, he would surely get used to the feeling.

As he tore around the last of the manicured bushes that flanked the large garden, Sherlock suddenly found he couldn’t stand the constriction for even a single moment longer. He raised his hand and clawed at the strip of silk around his neck, pulling it loose enough to pop the first two buttons out of their holes then yanking roughly at the tie until the knot slipped free so he could take it completely off. Sucking in a deep breath of cool, moist air, he stumbled forward a few steps more before sitting down heavily, the evening quiet and still but for the sound of his labored breathing and the soft rush of silk against his skin as the tie slipped through his fingers and fell at his feet on the ground. Shoulders slumped and head hung low, he caught his breath and stared sullenly at the sea of red and pink and yellow petals swaying in the wind.

When the first fat drops started falling from the sky, pelting the colorful blooms and dark green leaves and landing with a muffled splat on the fine fabric covering his thighs and shoulders and knees, Sherlock realised that if he continued to sit there his new suit would be ruined, that he really should get up and take cover from the rain in the nearby garden shed.

But sitting there on a cold stone bench tucked amongst a sea of roses and watching the rich soil beneath the bushes slowly darken as the rain began to soak into the earth, he found that he simply couldn’t move—couldn’t bear to disturb this rare moment when, for the first time in what felt like ages, what was happening on the outside of him so perfectly matched what was happening on the inside.

As the drops began to patter against his skull, soaking the roots of his unruly curls and running in cool rivulets down his pale forehead, anyone who happened upon him could have easily mistaken the moisture that pooled in his lashes and spilled over to slide down his cheeks for the rain that was
falling all around—nothing more.

The rain picked up a bit just then, the gentle sprinkle well on its way to becoming a steady shower as he hugged his arms to his chest. Sherlock stared over at the two large bushes opposite his bench—their branches heavy with thorns and bursting with buds—then at the young sprig of a plant nestled in the space between them. Small and round and green, mulch piled around its base where fledgling roots were even then winding their way down into the ground, anchoring it into the dark, rich soil. The same soil that had found its way deep beneath his fingernails and stuck in his cuticles and stained his cuffs and darkened the knees of his trousers when he’d knelt next to his mother last week as they’d planted it.

Sherlock dug the hole himself, just the right width and depth, the perfect size for the bush he’d chosen from the greenhouse—an heirloom varietal called “Deep Secret” according to the tag written in his mother’s flowing script. Rosamund Holmes had carefully removed the plant from the pot and held it in place while he’d lifted the lid off the small wooden box and tipped it slowly, pouring the contents around the ball of roots before tapping the last of the delicate ash free from the vessel and then scooping the dark, fragrant earth back over it, patting it down gently to keep the plant in place.

He’d stood up then, felt large hands settle onto his shoulders from behind as his mum fussed a bit with the mulch before sitting back on her heels and slipping her gloved hand into his, giving it a squeeze. His father had said a few words then, lovely things about loyalty and friendship and missing the sound of tags jingling through the halls—and Sherlock had tried to be brave, to be strong like he knew Mycroft would have been if he hadn’t been away at school—but in the end he’d been unable to stop the tears from spilling down his cheeks and dripping from his chin where they splattered against the small round disc pressed into the ground below and pooled at the bottom of the paw print inset in the centre of it. The one now filled with rain.

The same rain that had suddenly stopped pelting him then, the steady splatter of it on his skin replaced by the thrum of drops against the wide dome of fabric stretched taut above him, held aloft by a large hand clasped around a polished walnut handle. Sherlock looked up as his father crossed to the front of the bench and sat down beside his youngest child, his umbrella sheltering them both from the impending downpour. Sherlock sat very still for a long moment, but when a wide palm slid across his back and curled around his shoulder, he melted into the touch and let himself be pulled in close.

“Thought I might find you here,” his father said, breaking the silence. “Your mum was worried when your friends told her how you’d run off.”

“They’re not my friends. They’re cousins, or the children of your friends.”

“You’ve known most of them for your entire life,” his father reminded him gently.

“Knowing someone isn’t the same thing as being friends with them,” Sherlock insisted.

“Can’t argue with you there, lad,” the elder Holmes conceded with a nod. “I’m not sure half of the people in there are actually my friends, now that you mention it. Even the ones I’m related to.”

“You invited them,” Sherlock pointed out, raising an eyebrow at his father questioningly.

“Technically, your mum invited them,” he said, raising his own eyebrow knowingly at his son. “This party was her idea, you know. I wanted to take her away on holiday somewhere, but she wouldn’t hear of it. Said she wanted to celebrate our anniversary right here at home with me and
you and your brother—and everyone else we’ve ever met, apparently.”

“I’m sorry I ruined everything,” Sherlock told him quietly, voice thick and eyes downcast.

“Nothing’s been ruined, Sherlock,” Sieger Holmes assured him with a weary shake of his head. “Though it was quite a scene there for a bit, I must admit. Would you like to tell me what happened?”

“You were there,” Sherlock mumbled against his shoulder. “You heard everything.”

“I heard you announce to an entire ballroom full of guests that eleven year old Avery Tisdale is a chronic bed wetter who wears a diaper under her party dress. Which, as your mother and I assured Charlotte and David Tisdale at great length just now, is something that I know you would never have done without being provoked in some fashion. Am I wrong?”

Sherlock thought for a moment, and then shook his head silently. He huffed out a long breath, reached into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out a worn strip of leather—dark with age, the stitching coming loose along the edge, two round metal tags clinking together and against the shiny brass buckle at the end—and showed it to his father.

“She saw it sticking out of my pocket,” he began softly, worrying the end of the collar between his thumb and forefinger. “She asked me what it was, and when I didn’t want to tell her she snatched it from my hands and held it high above her head where I couldn’t reach it. I told her to give it back, but she wouldn’t. She read the tag, said she always thought ‘Redbeard’ was a dumb name for a dog, and that he was so old she couldn’t believe he hadn’t died ages ago. I tried so hard not to cry, but I couldn’t help it and she called me a baby and said it was stupid to cry over a dead…dog…but…I…”

A sob swallowed the rest of the thought, and he covered his face with his hands and tried to turn away but Sieger Holmes pulled him closer until Sherlock threaded his arms around his dad’s waist and clung to him as he cried.

“Shhh,” his father said softly, tightening his arm around him as he pressed his lips into the damp curls at the top of his son’s head where it rested against his shoulder. “It’s all right to be sad.”

“He was my best friend,” Sherlock whispered.

“You loved him.” He adjusted his hold a bit on the umbrella in his hand and rested his chin atop Sherlock’s dark curls. “And he loved you too, you know. He adored Mycroft, was his co-captain and first mate and tagged along behind him wherever he went—right up until the moment when your mother and I found out we were going to have you. And suddenly that dog couldn’t be budged from her side. Followed her around night and day, sat at her feet when she rested and kept guard at the end of the bed while she slept. It’s like he was just biding his time, waiting for you to arrive—and the moment he laid eyes on you, he had eyes for no one else.”

Sherlock sniffled a bit, swiped at his cheeks with the back of his hand, the lifted his head to look up at his dad with a small smile. “I miss him.”

“I know you do,” his father said, pulling back a bit to look him in the eye. “And it was very wrong of Avery to make you feel bad about that. It was unkind and cruel, and I understand why it made you angry. But what you said to her, embarrassing her in front of everyone? That was cruel as well, Sherlock.”

“I just wanted her to stop,” he insisted, extracting his hands and turning to face out into the garden. “I wanted her to know how it felt.”
Sieger Holmes took in a deep breath then, releasing it slowly as he looked out over the flowers, then nodded once to himself and turned back to his son. “This is the part of this conversation where your mother would have me tell you that the very best response in situations like these is to turn the other cheek—that the high road is always the right route to take.”

“I know, I know,” Sherlock said with a sigh, affecting the tone of someone repeating a phrase they’ve heard countless times before. “It is never a good idea to follow up rudeness with more rudeness.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what your mum would say,” his dad said, stifling a chuckle at the look on Sherlock’s face. “But she’s not here right now, so I’m going to tell you what I think. Man to man, all right?”

Sherlock looked up at his father, eyes still a bit wet with tears but now widened with curiosity as well, then nodded.

“A true gentleman never starts a fight, but he always finishes one,” Sieger Holmes told his son, his voice calm and even as he looked him in the eyes. “There is no shame in defending yourself or someone you care about from the careless—or willful—cruelty of others in this world, and I won’t demand that you stand idly by and take such treatment. But the way in which you choose to respond? That matters.”

“That’s what I was doing,” Sherlock insisted, gaze narrowed and forehead creased in confusion. “I just wanted her to give me back Redbeard’s collar and leave me alone, that’s all.”

“No, Sherlock. You wanted to hurt her, to embarrass her, to treat her as badly as she’d treated you. You told me so yourself.”

Sherlock opened his mouth to argue, but it was the memory of his own words moments earlier that stopped him: I wanted her to know how it felt.

“There is a difference between defending yourself and retaliation,” his father continued, nodding at the look of realisation on his youngest child’s face.

“I’m going to have to apologize, aren’t I?” Sherlock asked him, a slight pout on his lips.

“Yes,” the elder Holmes confirmed.

“But you said she was wrong to tease me, that missing my dog doesn’t make me a baby,” he pointed out, brow wrinkled in frustration. “What I said about her was true.”

“That doesn’t mean it wasn’t wrong to say, Sherlock,” his father reminded him. “Knowing someone’s secret is one thing, but telling the world that secret—particularly out of anger—is something else entirely. How can you be sure that what you said about Avery is true?”

“Because I saw it.” Sherlock shrugged at the mildly sceptical look on his father’s face. “She’s always smoothing her hand over her hip when she thinks no one is looking, like she’s trying to make sure you can’t see what she’s got on under there or hear the slight crinkle when she moves. She pretends to drink from her glass, pressing it to her lips and tipping it up—but it never even gets half empty. And I heard her telling Katy Martin that she wouldn’t be coming to her sleepover next weekend because it sounded ‘boring and stupid’ but I could tell that’s not what she meant at all because even though she was laughing when she said it her eyes looked sad.”

His Dad had stared at him then, a look of careful consideration—eyebrows knitted with a combination of confusion and exasperation that was at war with the impressed twinkle in his gaze.
The silence stretched out between them, broken only by the tap of the rain on the leaves and against the umbrella overhead.

“Do you know why Avery Tisdale came to live here in Cornwall with her Aunt and Uncle six years ago?” Sieger asked him, raising an eyebrow at his son and tilting his head slightly as Sherlock shook his in reply. “Her mother was quite young when Avery was born, and had always been a troubled soul. She did her best, but struggled to care for her daughter properly. When she died suddenly, Charlotte drove to London that very night and brought Avery home with her. She and David adopted her soon after, and they love that little girl every bit as much as your mum and I love you and your brother, but six years without that kind of unconditional affection—it leaves a mark, Sherlock. Sometimes the cruelest people are the ones who have been hurt the most.”

He considered this new information for a moment, stared out over the rainy landscape and tried to reconcile the girl who’d teased him so mercilessly earlier tonight with the tiny, scared child she must have been all those years ago.

“She flinches when her Mum hugs her sometimes,” Sherlock told his dad, head tipped as he worried his top teeth against this bottom lip for a moment, thinking. “But only for a second, and then the smile on her face is a real one—the kind that goes all the way up to her eyes.”

He looked up at his dad then, and was surprised to see that the eyes staring back at him had gone a bit misty and crinkly around the edges. When a strong arm snaked around his slim waist and gathered him close once more, Sherlock pressed himself up against the man’s side and rested his head on a broad shoulder. While Sieger looked out over the dewy blooms, Sherlock lifted a hand and ran the tip of one small, pale finger down the polished walnut umbrella handle, tracing the edges of the oval brass plate engraved with the letters S.J.H. After a long moment, his father cleared his throat quietly and heaved out a soft sigh.

“You see so much more than most people do,” the elder Holmes said at last. “You have a keen eye and a quick mind and a sharp wit that never ceases to amaze me. It makes you interesting and brave and bold—and occasionally a tad infuriating—and I love that about you.”

“But I still have to apologize to Avery.”

“Yes,” his Dad confirmed with a firm nod. “Because—and this is important, so listen carefully. Your brilliant mind is not all that you are, Sherlock. You also have a wonderful heart, with a huge capacity for tenderness and compassion—and that makes you brave and bold and interesting as well. It is a rare combination in this world, son. You have an extraordinary mind and an equally remarkable heart. And the true measure of a man is found in the balance between the two. Do you understand?”

Sherlock returned his father’s earnest gaze, using the moment of silence to consider what he’d just been told in the light of the events that unfolded earlier that evening. He remembered the sudden loss of having Redbeard’s collar taken from him, the sting of Avery’s words when she mocked his sadness, then the white hot clench of anger that had seized him just before he’d announced her secret to everyone within earshot…and the look of shock on her face, the panic that flared in her eyes as he snatched back the beloved band of leather from her now slack fingers, the slump of her shoulders as she dropped her head and folded in on herself in shame.

It wasn’t nearly as satisfying as he’d thought it would be.

Sherlock squared his shoulders and huffed out a long breath—then nodded solemnly.

“Good man,” Sieger Holmes said quietly, returning the nod as a soft smile spread over his kind face.
Because even at the tender age of nine, Sherlock had understood what his father was trying to teach him that day: That sometimes the most difficult people amongst us are also the most broken, and though we might not feel that they deserve our compassion, they may be the most in need of it.

At the age of seventeen, however, as he slouches down in his chair pretending to read the biology textbook propped up before him while in actuality merely peering over the edge to watch the scene unfolding in the centre of the library, Sherlock Holmes is finding it somewhat difficult to be quite so philosophical.

About anything, really.

Not while Melody Harrison is bent over at the waist, leaning on her elbows where they rest on the wide surface of the circulation desk—preening and giggling and tossing her long dark ponytail over her shoulder—flirting shamelessly with the golden haired young man who sits behind it.

“He’s not interested in her, you know,” Molly says quietly, and when Sherlock turns his head in surprise and looks in her direction she shrugs slightly, eyes still scanning over the text on the page of the heavy book spread open in front of her. “I mean, if you were worried he might be, or anything.”

“Why would I be worried about that?” he asks testily, pointedly turning to the next page in his book and looking at it for approximately two full seconds before his eyes drift back up to the scene still playing out at the centre of the library.

“No reason,” his lab partner says lightly, a slight smile twitching at the corners of her mouth as she looks up at him with a shrug. “But he isn’t. You know, just in case you were worried.”

“I’m not.”

“Okay,” she says amiably, picking up her pencil to underscore a few lines of text and jotting down a short note in the margin before setting it back down and continuing to read silently.

“Of course he’s not interested in her,” Sherlock huffs impatiently, his voice pitched low as he aggressively flicks to the next page in the book he’s definitely not reading while continuing to stare broodily over the edge of it. “Isn’t he? Why isn’t he?”

“Well, for starters,” Molly begins, running her hand over the page before her and marking her place with a fingertip, “she’s way too young for him.”

“She’s our age, more or less,” Sherlock argues.

“She is not,” Molly insists, shaking her head and tucking a loose strand of hair back behind one ear. “She’s a fifth year—and a young one at that. She just turned sixteen last month—her father threw her that ridiculous party and everything.”

“Did you actually go?” he asks her, his voice dripping with disdain.

“Of course not,” she says, rolling her eyes and waving a hand dismissively. “I wouldn’t go to anything celebrating that hateful cow, no matter how bloody tall the chocolate fountain was or what kind of swag was in the gift bags. I saw all the confessions about it, though: ‘iConfess: Melody knows how to party!’ and ‘iConfess: I wish MY dad would buy me a Land Rover for my birthday’ or, my personal favorite, ‘iConfess: A SWEET 16 for such a SWEET girl!’ Oh, please. I bet she sent them all herself.”

Sherlock huffs out a genuine chuckle at that, and Molly grins in surprise as a slight blush rises to her cheeks. “Besides, even if she wasn’t too young, she’s also an idiot. And stupid isn’t John’s type at
“How do you know his type?” he asks, attempting to keep his tone casually curious.

“He is studying to be a doctor,” Molly points out, picking up her pencil and twirling it absently between her fingers. “So we know he’s clever, and clever people tend to surround themselves with other clever people, don’t they?”

Sherlock thinks on this for a moment, deconstructing the idea and reassembling it through the lens of his own experience. It’s hardly in contention that he’s a very clever person, and he surrounds himself with—well, with Molly, lately. Who, he supposes, actually is fairly clever, despite her unfortunate tendency to ramble on (and on, and on…). And while he certainly wouldn’t choose his company, he can admit that his insufferable brother is quite clever in his own right. And then there’s John, of course. Who surprises him on almost a daily basis and makes him laugh and talks about chemistry and asks for his opinion and looks happy to see him and calls him friend.

“All right,” Sherlock agrees, punctuating his assent with a small shrug. “I suppose that is true. Good deduction.”

“Is it?” Molly asks him, looking pleasantly surprised for the second time in as many minutes.

“Yes,” Sherlock tells her, knitting his eyebrows together as he considers her assertion again. “Very sound reasoning. Perfectly logical, actually.”

“You don’t have to look so surprised. I’m not a complete moron, you know,” she teases, rolling her eyes in his direction. An annoyingly shrill cackle pierces the air and both Molly and Sherlock look up to see Melody throwing her head back in laughter, one hand reaching out to swat playfully at John’s shoulder. Molly rolls her eyes, mumbling under her breath. “Speaking of morons…”

Sherlock sits very still, staring at the top edge of his book, anticipating John’s answering laugh—waiting to catch the first rumble of his low chuckle on the air before the pitch rises and tips to the infectious giggle that rings in his ears and fills all the spaces inside his head each time he hears it… but it doesn’t come. Chancing a glance up, he watches John tilt his head to the right, stretching his neck and raising a hand to rub at his injured shoulder as he casually pushes on the edge of the desk to roll his chair back a few inches, putting him conveniently out of Ms. Harrison’s reach.

“So what’s this you’re studying?” Melody asks, grabbing a corner of the medical textbook open on the desk before turning it 180 degrees and squinting at the page. “Eppy-diddy-mitts-ice-iss? What’s that?”

“Epididymitis,” John says, effortlessly correcting her mispronunciation as he reaches out to turn the book back to its original position and pulls it towards him. “It’s an infection of the epididymis.”

“Sounds awful,” Melody says dramatically.

“It certainly can be,” John confirms with a nod, closing the book and sliding it off to the side.

“Do you think I should get checked for it?” the young girl asks, raking her fingers through her long ponytail where it drapes over her shoulder and twirling the end absently around her fingers.

Sherlock snorts out a laugh and three sets of eyes fix on him immediately—Molly’s (wide with surprise), Melody’s (narrowed with annoyance), and John’s (twinkling and blue and crinkled at the corners as he works to suppress a grin). Thinking quickly, he raises a hand to his mouth and begins
to cough. It’s a cheap gambit, and though Molly reaches over to slap him on the back helpfully he can tell she doesn’t buy it—but Melody seems to, evidenced by the way she rolls her eyes in his direction before turning her attention back to John.

“I don’t think it’s anything you need to worry about,” John assures her, his voice even and serious.

“Are you sure?” Melody inquires, batting her eyes in his direction.

“Pretty sure, yeah,” John says with a nod, his gaze flicking away quickly to meet Sherlock’s. The younger man rolls his eyes and can’t help but grin as he watches John press his lips together tightly in an effort not to do the same.

Pretty sure, indeed, Sherlock thinks to himself. Especially considering that the epididymis is located in the scrotal sac and Melody Harrison isn’t in possession of that particular anatomical structure. As far as he knows, anyway.

“See?” Molly whispers, grinning smugly as Melody continues to ask John nonsensical questions. “She’s an idiot.”

“Undoubtedly,” Sherlock mumbles in reply, eyes drifting back down to his book and scanning the first few paragraphs on the page before his attention wanders predictably from the wonders of the human digestive system and he finds himself sneaking another look at the man across the room… who, at that very moment, happens to be looking at him as well.

When their eyes meet Sherlock feels a warm shock at the base of his spine, a tingle that travels up and over the tender skin at the back of his neck and he flushes slightly under the gaze, huffing out a soft breath of amusement as John shoots a very understated roll of his eyes at Melody, who is busy chatting away about something ridiculous as she pages through the textbook John had closed earlier. When the library door swishes open just then and a few third year girls amble through it, John looks up to greet them with a nod, and the moment is over.

Sherlock drops his eyes back to his book, a soft sigh escaping from between his lips.

“Know how else I can tell he’s not interested in her?” Molly asks quietly, looking over her shoulder at John and Melody, then turning back to smile at Sherlock.

“How?” he asks, not looking up from the page.

“Because the whole time she’s been talking to him, he’s been looking at you.”

Sherlock goes still at the pronouncement, breath catching in his throat, eyes flicking unconsciously up and across the room where John is looking down at something on the page that Melody is pointing to with an expression of mild disinterest, and just as Sherlock opens his mouth to inform Molly that John Watson is certainly not looking in his direction—suddenly he is. Just a glance, a quick flash of blue from beneath golden lashes that lingers for the briefest of moments before flitting away once more.

“Believe me now?” Molly asks softly.

“You’re sitting here as well,” Sherlock offers, clearing his throat softly and biting at the inside of his cheek. “He could be looking at either of us.”

“He’s not looking at me, Sherlock.”
“You can’t know that for sure.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Well it hardly matters either way, does it?” Sherlock sighs, shaking his head and pulling in deep breath through is nose. “As you said, we’re ‘way too young’ for him.”

“No, I said Melody is too young for him,” Molly clarifies. “I turned eighteen at the beginning of term, and your birthday is in a few weeks. There’s quite a lot of difference between sixteen and eighteen, you know. Big difference.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agrees seriously. “Nearly two years, according to my calculations.”

“You know what I mean, you prat,” she says, rolling her eyes in exasperation then smiling fondly when Sherlock tips his head in grudging assent.

“Well, if it isn’t Morningside’s least popular couple,” an unpleasant voice announces with mock sincerity. Melody Harrison stands next to their table, one hand resting on a cocked hip as she sneers down at them. “What are you two lovebirds so busy whispering about over here?”

“At the moment? You,” Sherlock tells her evenly, gaze flicking briefly past her to see John engaged in conversation with the three girls who had entered the library earlier and were now queued up and waiting to check out their selections.

“Me?” Melody replies, looking confused.

“Of course,” Sherlock says, turning the page of his book and scanning it without raising his gaze. “We rarely talk of anything else but you, Melody. Just now we were discussing whether you were going to crawl over the desk to get closer to the new library assistant, or walk around it and just climb directly into his lap instead.”

“Very funny,” Melody drawls, looking back over her shoulder at John Watson appreciatively, then turning her attention back to Sherlock. “Nothing wrong with a little harmless flirting. That’s what boys and girls do, you know. Oh wait—I suppose you don’t know that, do you, poof?”

“Don’t call him that,” Molly says, lifting her chin and staring resolutely back as the younger girl turns to her with an amused glint in her eye.

“I call it like I see it, Hooper,” Melody replies with an exaggerated shrug. “And I got an eyeful last year, believe me.”

“I don’t care what you saw,” Molly tells her with a slight tremor in her voice that could easily be blamed on nerves, or anger—or both. “It doesn’t give you the right to be a bigot.”

“Oh, Hooper,” Melody says, shaking her head and looking at her with a frown. “Don’t tell me you’re still carrying a torch for Holmes-o-sexual here? I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you’re really not his type.”

“Do you truly have nowhere else to be, Melody?” Sherlock asks with a sigh, snapping his book closed and sitting up a bit straighter in his chair. “I imagine there’s a cauldron out there somewhere in desperate need of stirring.”

“Ha, ha,” Melody replies, rolling her eyes. “Molls and I are just having a bit of girl talk, Sherly. But I suppose you’re close enough, join in if you like.’
“I have nothing to say to you,” Molly says tersely, beginning to gather up her notes.

“That’s too bad,” Melody says with an affected frown. “Because I was just thinking I might give you a few pointers about how to attract the attention of a real man.”

“Well you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?” Molly says icily, glancing pointedly at Melody’s exposed cleavage before continuing. “How many times did you have to roll up your skirt to get it that short?”

“Four,” Melody says smugly, crossing her arms over her chest and smiling. “Are you calling me a whore, Hooper?”

“I call it like I see it, Harrison.” Molly says with a shrug, heaving her book bag up from the floor and pulling at the zipper.

“‘Whore’ is just a word that plain girls use to describe the pretty ones,” Melody smirks. “And you’re really not bad looking, Molly. You could stand to wear a little lipstick and lose the childish jelly jewellery, though.”

Molly freezes in place for a moment, then runs the fingers on her left hand over the worn, light blue rubberised band around her right wrist. “This is an activism bracelet. I wear it for my Dad.”

“Oh that’s right,” Melody says, pressing the heel of one hand to her forehead dramatically. “Prostate cancer, I remember now. How is your dear old Dad doing these days?”

Molly presses her lips together tightly, returning to the task of packing away her things. "He's fine."

“It’s nice of you to wear that for him,” Melody concedes, lifting her own wrist and examining the thick gold bracelet shining around it before thrusting it out in front of Molly’s face. “My Dad gave me a bracelet too, see? It’s not quite as nice, but 18 karat gold isn’t a look everyone can pull off, I suppose. I expect mine will last a lot longer than yours, though. Probably even longer than your Dad will, come to think of it.”

Sherlock sees the anger in Molly’s eyes, hears the sharp intake of breath sucked between her clenched teeth, feels a slight shift in the air as she stares down at the glittering bracelet—and in that instant, time seems to slow.

As the light glints off of the heavy cuff around Melody Harrison’s wrist, his eyes are drawn to the matching band that rings the third finger on her left hand, the thick rope of gold gleaming at her neck, the sizeable diamond studs sparkling on her slender earlobes—and they seem wrong, somehow.

The craftsmanship is quite fine, obviously expensive, but the jewellery still looks strangely out of place on the girl before him. These are bespoke, high quality pieces that, to his eye, don’t seem like something a doting father would give his young daughter—they’re much more suited to a spouse, or a lover…

Oh...

Sherlock lets his eyes travel over his classmate then, looks closely at the hand protruding from the bracelet—sees the ragged nails bitten down to the quick, the skin sore and red and swollen around them. He takes in the purposely shortened skirt, the blouse unbuttoned far lower than the dress code allows, then remembers the way Melody had crossed her arms defensively over her chest when Molly mentioned it—unconsciously covering herself even as she’d purported to be confident in her appearance. Her confrontational nature, her reputation for promiscuity, her constant need for validation from the opposite sex…it’s textbook, really. He can’t believe he hadn’t seen it before now.
Time restarts with a whoosh, and Sherlock is on his feet and moving around the table to place himself between the two girls as quickly as possible. He hears the swish of the library door as the three students who’d entered earlier leave through it, the latch clicking shut just as Molly heaves in a deep breath.

“You’re a vicious, horrible excuse for a human being!” Molly cries, her lip quivering as she slaps Melody’s hand away from her face. “At least my Dad doesn’t have to *buy* my love.”

“Oh yeah?” Melody snarls, the pleasant pretence dropping in an instant. “Well, at least my father isn’t *literally* dying to get away from me!”

“That’s enough!” Sherlock announces, raising his voice and stepping in front of Molly and staring down at the furious fifth year girl before him. “Believe me when I say that you really don’t want to pick a fight about fathers right now, Melody.”

“You don’t even *have* parents, you freak,” Melody spits out. “What do *you* know about fathers?”

“I know that fancy parties and new cars and expensive trinkets are very often the currency that rich men use to buy the love of their daughters,” Sherlock tells her, pitching his voice low and deep and quiet enough that only Melody will hear what he has to say next. “And I also know that they can be used to buy *other* things from them as well—like obedience, and silence.”

Melody Harrison lets out soft gasp, blinking furiously as she stares at Sherlock with wide, frightened eyes. She opens her mouth, then closes it again, then sets her top teeth worrying roughly over her bottom lip. She takes in a deep breath and Sherlock can see the instant that she gains control: the change in her expression, the hardness in her eyes, the set in her shoulders as the wall around her goes back up, thick and strong and impenetrable—built and rebuilt over years by necessity.

“You keep your mouth *shut,*” She hisses, looking him hard in the eye.

“You *first,*” he replies, returning her glare.

There’s a muffled sob behind him, and Sherlock hears footsteps approaching on his right.

“Oi, Molly—are you all right?” John asks, stepping up to lay a hand on her shoulder and stumbling back a bit as the girl turns and crumples against him, crying. “Sherlock, what the hell is going on?”

“It’s fine, John.” Sherlock says calmly, his eyes still locked on Melody’s. “Ms. Harrison was just leaving. Weren’t you Melody?”

“Yes, I was.” she agrees, staring pointedly at him for a moment longer before shrugging and casually backing away a few paces, then looking around Sherlock and at John. “But it was nice talking to you, John. Maybe we can do it again sometime.”

John ignores her completely as he reaches out his free hand and settles it on Sherlock’s upper arm, looking at him questioningly when he turns to face him. “You okay?”

Sherlock nods and John looks at him for a moment, searching his features until he seems satisfied by what he sees.

“Oh, dear,” Melody says with a sigh, and both John and Sherlock turn to look at her where she stands, shaking her head at John Watson. “I’d be careful if I were you, John. The last person in this school that tried to be nice to Sherly here got a whole lot more than he bargained for in return.”
“Melody,” Sherlock warns, his voice low and dangerous.

“Got down on his knees, this one,” she says, pointing a finger carelessly at Sherlock as she continues to back towards the door. “Right here in the library.”

“That’s enough,” John says, his voice stern and authoritative. “You need to leave, now.”

“I’m going,” Melody sighs, crossing the last few steps to the door and pressing the handle to open it a few inches before turning back to look pointedly at John. “But mark my words: you’ll want to watch your arse around Sherlock Holmes. Literally.”

When the door clicks shut behind her, Sherlock closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He turns slowly towards John, who looks at him for a long moment before puffing out his cheeks in a sigh and shaking his head incredulously. Sherlock heaves a sigh of his own and Molly raises her head just then and sniffs loudly. John jerks his head towards the circulation desk so Sherlock crosses the room to retrieve a box of tissues, and Molly takes one gratefully and swipes it over her nose and cheeks.

“I don’t know what that was all about,” John begins, looking up at Sherlock, “but—“

“It’s about Melody Harrison being a right cunt,” Molly sniffs.

“You’ll get no argument from me there,” John agrees, pulling back and taking Molly by the shoulders. “How about you and I go and find Mrs. Hudson. See if she can’t help sort things out, yeah?”

Molly takes another tissue from the box in Sherlock’s hand and nods. John smiles at her and slings her book bag over his good shoulder, a tan hand splayed at the small of her back as he steers her towards the door. John looks back over his shoulder at Sherlock as he presses the door open and gestures for Molly to walk through it. “You’re going to explain to me what the hell just happened here, right?”

Sherlock nods, and John returns the gesture—the slightest of grins tipping at the corner of his mouth…but it doesn’t go all the way to his eyes. He turns and walks out the door, the soft snick of the latch seeming impossibly loud in the suddenly empty space.

Sherlock stands there for a long moment, the silence around him filled with the echo of all the things that happened just moments ago—the terrible things Melody said—the equally terrible things he didn’t say—the look on John’s face when he’d left just now.

This space is the one place on earth that Sherlock Holmes feels at home—but standing here now, out in the open, he feels raw and tired and exposed. With a sigh, he gathers up his things from the table, lifts the strap of his bag over his shoulder, and walks back into the stacks.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading. As ever, comments 100% encouraged and appreciated.

So you know when you brush your teeth in the morning and then you take a big gulp of orange juice and it tastes TERRIBLE?

This fic is NOTHING like that. I promise.
I figured that you might need a palate cleanser, so in this chapter’s installment of “Sorry about the angst, here take this to balance it out and for heaven’s sake brush your teeth afterwards because you will TOTALLY get cavities if you don’t!” I present to you 5,801 delicious words of Johnlock friends-to-lovers first kiss goodness that I loved so much I read it twice.

So if you’re not averse to sweet things (and why on earth would you be?) click on over to author darcylinbergh’s the lingering taste of orange juice and lap it up!

ENJOY!
Hello Friends, and a very happy “In Today’s update the part of ‘Thursday’ will be played by the understudy ‘Technically still Friday’. Management apologizes for the short notice and there will be no refunds” to you all.

So while it is no secret that my fic lives solidly and unapologetically in the Land of Happy Endings, this is probably a good time to remind people that this IS a Sherlock fic, and as such will contain it’s fair share of story-serving angst, mystery, and even a smidge of death here and there (heed the tags!). At the end of the day there will be quite enough fluff to soften the landing, I promise. Our boys have come together in this universe—and now begins chain of events that will allow them to move ever closer to the day when they *ahem* come together in this universe. :)

Unending admiration and affection for my tireless beta owensm, who squeals with me about plot points as we eat overpriced lunches and pretend that the people around us aren’t appalled by our unabashed mealtime discussion of all things Johnlock porn related. One big hug—and then another- for my second set of eyes cheytea7 (because she’s hugging for two these days) as well.

And wet, sloppy kisses to each of you for every hit, subscription, kudo, bookmark, rec and comment you’ve showered on this little tale. It’s been a pleasure to write about our boys in this universe and I am so grateful that you’ve taken time out of your day to read my story. Feel ever so free to drop me a line in the comments, I promise not to read them when I’m driving, bathing, mowing the lawn, or when I should be paying attention to a children’s soccer game. Well, maybe don’t hold me to that last one. Have a wonderful week, and I’ll see you next Thursday!* Any promises involving the concept of Thursday are subject to the very loose interpretation of the author and do not constitute an agreement, legally binding or otherwise, as to the actual timing of the next update. So there.

Yanking open the heavy glass door, Sherlock was relieved to find that Mrs. Hudson was nowhere to be seen. If the Morningside librarian had been sitting in her usual chair behind the circulation desk he thought it was possible that, if he kept his head ducked low, he might have been able to wave off her customary cheery greeting and make it all the way back to his regular study carrel in the stacks without her noticing that anything was amiss—but he was suddenly grateful that he wouldn’t have to find out whether or not he was right about that.

As he listened to the door close behind him with a metallic clunk, he released the breath he’d been holding—the one he’d gulped in as he threw open the first floor classroom door the moment the bell rang before he darted down the long hall and flew up the stairs—expelling it from his burning lungs with a shaky sigh.

He had thought things might be different this time: new school, new start, new people...same old story. He shouldn't be surprised, really. But still, he'd hoped...
Standing alone in the centre of the library, he tried to calm his breathing. He inhaled deeply through his nose before exhaling slowly, the breath hissing through his pursed lips, making him wince a bit as his teeth caught against the torn skin inside his bottom lip. He lifted his right wrist to his mouth, pressed his cuff against it, then pulled it back to see the stain spreading slowly across the fabric—slick and wet and red. He flattened his tongue against the injury, tasting the metallic tang of blood and swallowing against the sudden lump in his throat as he weaved his way through the tables and other assorted furniture to disappear between two tall rows of shelves near the back of the large room.

He slid his heavy bag from his shoulder onto the surface of the desk, pulled out the single chair pushed up to it, sat down heavily, then leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and cradle his aching head in his hands. After a long moment he sat up, heaved a deep sigh, then reached into his pocket to retrieve the tightly balled piece of notebook paper he’d shoved in there earlier. The one that Sebastian Wilkes had crumpled with a sneer and tossed at him as he lay sprawled out on the floor between the rows of desks, having tripped over Wilkes’ size 11 brogue where it blocked his path in his haste to return to his regular seat in Mr. Thomason’s fourth period Literature class.

He flicked on the desk lamp, blinking briefly against the sudden brightness, then picked at the edges of the balled up paper in his hand, gently pulling it apart and unrolling the sheet. He laid it out on the desk, pressing out the wrinkles with slow swipes of his palm, repeating the motion until it no longer curled at the corners when he took his hands away. He stared down the words, the fourteen lines penned in black ink, carefully transcribed from the small notebook next to his bed where he’d written them the night before.

It was a ridiculous assignment.

Though he was a voracious reader from an impossibly young age—captivated by books from the moment he’d realized that letters made up words and words made up sentences and sentences could be stitched together to create infinite worlds outside of his own—Sherlock had no use for poetry in general, much less the inclination to write his own. He’d been listening to the teacher blather on about the delicate balance between the beauty of language and the precision of construction to be found in Shakespeare’s sonnets for what seemed like hours, so that by the time the man had charged them each with the task of composing one of their own, he’d barely been paying attention. One original sonnet, Shakespearian format, any subject matter, due next class period, blah, blah, blah… Tedious.

Much to his surprise, he’d found the exercise quite a bit less tiresome than he’d expected it would be. There was, he could admit, a certain beauty and rhythm to the verse, the ten syllable heartbeat of iambic pentameter that thrummed in each of the quatrains before resolving in the terminal couplet. It reminded him of music, of dragging his bow over taut strings in graduated arpeggios, the individual notes sounding vaguely discordant on their own, but coming together in the progression to form something larger than their individual tones—the simplest of strokes rendered beautifully complex in combination.

Sherlock had spent countless hours over the years in various classes grudgingly reading the poetic musings of others, dissecting the silly declarations of love and the enumeration of all the ways in which one might feel or express it—and it had all seemed so boring.

Later that night, as he read over the fourteen lines of verse that had flowed out of his pen and onto the page with such unexpected ease, he would think to himself that it was possible he’d been mistaken about poetry—that it wasn’t silly at all. Perhaps he simply hadn’t had anything worth writing about before.
At the sound of the library door swishing open, Sherlock stiffened where he sat, head cocked and breath held as he listened for the distinctive sound of Mrs. Hudson’s kitten heeled footsteps to make their way across the floor—but instead he heard another set of footsteps, heavy and familiar, and uncharacteristically cautious in their approach. Huffing out a soft sigh, he turned back to the hopelessly wrinkled sheet of paper on the desk before him and continued the futile attempt to smooth it with his palm, resolutely ignoring the tall, dark haired figure as it turned down the aisle and walked slowly towards him where he sat.

“Are you all right?” Victor Trevor asked, his voice quiet and a bit strained.

“Fine,” he replied, shrugging casually as he slid the crumpled page away from him, refusing to look up as he lifted the flap on his bag and began unpacking the contents. Sherlock watched out of the corner of his eye as Victor took a hesitant step forward, paused, then closed the distance between them with a few measured strides before turning to sit down on the edge of the desktop, stretching out his long legs into the aisle and crossing them at the ankles.

“You sure?” Victor asked him cautiously. “You fell pretty hard back there, I was worried you might be hurt.”

“Yes, I know exactly how concerned you were,” Sherlock replied, not meeting his eye. “I could tell by the way you just sat there while everyone else laughed at me and said nothing.”

“You understand why I couldn’t,” his classmate said softly, sounding both resigned and ashamed.

“No,” Sherlock answered, lifting his chin and looking up to meet the other boy’s gaze, taking in the combination of wariness and worry radiating from the liquid pools of deep brown—so dark they looked nearly black in the dim overhead light of the stacks. “I know why you think you couldn’t, you’ve taken great care to explain that on numerous occasions. But no, I do not understand it.”

“We’ve been over this before, Sherl,” Victor sighed wearily. “They can’t know about…this. They wouldn’t like it.”

“Why do you care so much about what other people think?” Sherlock scoffed, pressing his hands against the edge of the desk and pushing his chair away.

“Why don’t you care about what they think at all?” Victor asked, exasperation colouring his tone.

“Because they don’t matter,” Sherlock said angrily as he got to his feet and stared down at the boy where he sat perched on the edge of the desk.

“They’re my friends, Sherlock,” he argued, shaking his head and throwing up his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “They matter to me.”

“Well, they’re not my friends.” Sherlock shook his head and lifted a foot to step over Victor’s feet where they blocked his way out of the aisle.

“Maybe they could be?” Victor offered hopefully, reaching out and taking hold of one pale, clenched fist to halt him from walking away. The contact stopped Sherlock in mid-stride, one foot planted on either side of Victor’s outstretched legs.

“Oh, please,” Sherlock said, rolling his eyes then casting his glance down to where a strong hand curled itself over his own, coaxing open his palm before threading elegant caramel coloured fingers between his own long, pale ones. “They despise me.”

“That’s not true,” Victor assured him.
Sherlock’s brow knitted, his lips pressed together tightly as he stared down at a fixed spot on the floor. “Yes, it is.”

“No, it isn’t,” Victor insisted, tightening his grip on the other boy’s hand. He tilted his head and slowly reached out a finger, stroking it lightly down the line Sherlock’s jaw before applying the slightest hint of pressure beneath his chin. Sherlock looked up then, troubled grey-green gaze meeting dark eyes smiling up at him through a fan of jet black lashes. “They just don’t know you. Not like I do.”

“I should hope not,” Sherlock said, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a half smile as Victor huffed out a laugh.

“A few of the girls wish they did, you know.” Victor grinned as he dropped his hand away from Sherlock’s face and slid it casually down his chest before threading one thumb through a belt loop as he cupped his palm around the curve of a slim hip. “Melody Harrison’s had her eye on you from the moment you walked into class that first day. You should have seen her while you were reading your sonnet earlier—looked like she was ready to leap across the room and swallow you whole.”

Sherlock affected a shudder at the pronouncement. ”Terrifying thought, though it does explain why Sebastian acted like such a raging arsehole, I suppose.”

“Nah, they broke up ages ago,” Victor said with a shrug, shaking his head. “Ancient history. He and Dora are an item these days.”

Sherlock looked thoughtful for a moment, staring down at their joined hands as he ran the pad of his thumb gently over the smooth, deeply colored skin at Victor’s wrist. “Why does he hate me so much?”

“I don’t know,” Victor began with a sigh, then paused for a moment to consider the question. “Seb doesn’t like it when people are better at things than he is, turns him into a real dick.”

“It’s hardly my fault that he’s an idiot.”

“I know it isn’t,” Victor told him, shaking his head and smiling as he squeezed Sherlock’s fingers in his own. “And it’s not his fault that you’re so bloody brilliant, either. But do you have to be good at everything?”

“I rather think you’d be grateful for my range of talents,” Sherlock scolded half-heartedly, taking another step closer as Victor’s hand slid further around his hip to splay over the small of his back. “My aptitude at maths is the reason you’re not failing geometry this term.”

“Well, yeah, that’s true. You’re the best tutor I’ve ever had,” Victor said with a smirk, smiling as Sherlock rolled his eyes at him. “It’s just—on top of everything else, did you have to be better than him at poetry too?”

“Are you saying that Sebastian’s ode to the Liverpool F.C. wasn’t impressive?”

“Oh no, it was a literary masterpiece,” Victor replied, lips curling into a wry smile. “That bit about a ‘red card’ being ‘so hard’? Genius.”

“Personally, I thought rhyming ‘pool’ with ‘drool’ was the real high point,” Sherlock argued, huffing out a low chuckle as Victor’s shoulders shook with laughter.

“Yours was brilliant, you know,” Victor said then, his arm tightening a bit as he tugged the standing boy closer and looked up at him with a shy smile. “Was that all about me?”
Sherlock glanced over at the wrinkled paper on the desk, the first few lines of the sonnet just visible from his vantage point:

*Where words abide, their knowledge to be lent*

*In solitude I did myself there find*

*The space between soon filled with silken scent*

*As skin and bone and breath fused heart and mind...*

He gazed down at the young man before him and simply tipped his head in reply, a half-nod that—if it hadn’t been a clear enough answer on its own—was soon accompanied by a slight pink blush rising over his cheeks in silent confirmation. Victor rewarded him with a smile then, dusky rose lips parting to reveal a bright flash of teeth, gleaming white and perfect against a canvas of cinnamon skin burnished gold in the ambient light from the desk lamp—but the smile faded quickly, dark brows knitting tightly together as he bit at his bottom lip for a moment before speaking.

“You don’t think anyone else knew it was about me, do you?” Victor asked him then, forehead creased with the same worry that crept into his voice, joined by the slight edge of something more urgent. “I mean, you don’t think that’s why Seb was such a prick about it?”

Sherlock’s smile faded from his face as he moved to take a step back. “I was careful not to be specific.”

“It’s just that Seb’s mum and mine are friends,” Victor continued, tightening his grip on Sherlock’s fingers and hip, holding him in place as he looked up at him with panic in his eyes. “If he said anything about it to her, she’d go straight to my mum, and—”

“Sebastian Wilkes is an idiot who wouldn’t know he was the subject of a rude limerick even if his full name was spelled out in the rhyme,” Sherlock snapped, closing his free hand around the wrist settled near his waist and tugging as he attempted to free his other hand from Victor’s grip as well. “Your dirty little secret is still perfectly safe, I’m sure.”

“No don’t—I’m sorry, okay?” Victor loosened his grip and stood up to face Sherlock as he backed away a few steps. He took in a deep breath and ran a hand through his short, ink-black hair before exhaling slowly and looking at him with a pained expression. “It’s just—they can’t find out about us, Sherlock. You don’t understand—it’s different for you. Your parents are dead. It doesn’t matter if you disappoint them.”

The words hung there for beat, heavy and solid in the space between them, before rushing at Sherlock all at once and slamming against his chest with a force that nearly made him gasp. He struggled to keep his face impassive and blank as he stared back at Victor where he stood.

“You’re right, Victor. It is different for me,” Sherlock told him, his voice steady and even. “If my parents were alive—they wouldn’t be disappointed.”

“Well you’re lucky, then,” Victor said. At the look of shock and hurt on the Sherlock’s face he heaved out a sigh and shook his head, stepping closer and reaching out to gather the other boy’s hands into his own and hold them tightly as he tried to explain. “I’m not saying that you’re lucky your mum and dad are gone, Sherlock. That’s not what I meant at all. It’s just, my parents—they’d never understand, never accept it. They’d never accept me, not, you know, this way.”

“Gay,” Sherlock said flatly, looking intently at Victor and shaking his head slowly as the other boy flinched slightly. “It’s not a particularly complicated word to pronounce.”
“Yeah, but that still doesn’t mean it’s easy to say,” Victor sighed, pulling Sherlock’s hands up between their bodies and tipping his head down slightly to press his lips tenderly against them, his next words a warm whisper against the row of pale knuckles in his grasp. “I wish I was as brave as you are. I’m sorry that I’m not.”

Sherlock looked at him for a long moment, eyes scanning over the dark shock of fringe where it fell against the expanse of smooth brown forehead, at the sleek black brows and fan of feathery lashes that brushed slightly over the tender skin on the back of his fingers. He watched pink lips press themselves over that same flesh, didn’t resist as Victor turned their joined hands over and pressed a chaste kiss into one of his palms, and then repeated the gesture on the other before pulling his head back a bit and squinting slightly at Sherlock’s wrist.

“Is that blood?” Victor asked him, pulling Sherlock’s right hand closer and running the pad of his finger over the small stain on his cuff before looking up at him again, eyes filled with concern.

“It’s nothing,” Sherlock shrugged, running his tongue over the minor cut in his mouth that had long since stopped bleeding. “Bit my lip when I fell, that’s all.”

“Let me see,” Victor insisted, releasing one of Sherlock’s hands and then lifting his own to settle a broad palm against a pale, lightly stubbled jaw and softly grazing the tip of his thumb over the plump, pink bottom lip beneath it. “Open up.”

Sherlock felt his breath catch then, his pulse quickening slightly at Victor’s soft touch, at the tender concern in his voice and gaze. He let his jaw fall slack, allowed the other boy to tug gently on his chin and watched as he examined the swollen break in the slick skin just inside his lip, then sighed softly as Victor leaned forward and pressed his mouth against the injury. Just a soft brush of lips: once, and then again, and then once more before he pulled back slightly and tipped his chin down and rested their foreheads together.

“I know I don’t deserve you. And I can’t give you everything you want,” Victor said, squeezing his hand and lifting his chin to nuzzle the tip of his nose alongside Sherlock’s. “But we can have this, can’t we? Isn’t that enough?”

Sherlock huffed out a soft breath against Victor’s cheek, felt the sweep of a warm palm as it snaked around his waist and settled lightly on his hip, and he wanted to tell him no—an occasional snog and grope and breathless fumbling in the stacks would never be enough...

But with each moment that passed—the wet drag of lips against his cheek, the soft catch of teeth at his jaw, the warm press of a tongue against the tender skin over his pulse—in that place, at that very moment, it felt like perhaps it could be.

Sherlock lifted his arms and wrapped them around Victor’s broad shoulders, pressed one large palm against his back to draw him closer and threaded the other into the short, dark hair at the back of the other boy’s head, pulling slightly to guide Victor’s clever lips away from his neck and up to meet his own. He tilted his head and slotted their mouths together, groaning as the caramel skinned young man licked at the skin inside his lips. The tip of a searching tongue grazed over where he’d bitten himself earlier, and he heard Victor utter a soft moan of surprise as Sherlock whimened at the contact.

Victor raised one hand to grip the side of Sherlock’s face, fingers slipping into the mahogany curls behind his ear and tugging slightly before pulling that plump bottom lip between his own and sucking hard. Sherlock gasped at the pressure, the heady combination of pleasure and pain making his head swim. When Victor pulled back, biting softly at his lip before he released it, the slight scrape of teeth over the cut made Sherlock catch his breath, and he felt Victor’s lips tip up into a smile against his mouth.
With a low growl Sherlock spun them around, pressed forward to push the other boy against the shelf, their teeth knocking together as Victor’s head collided with the row of books behind him and his breath rushed out over Sherlock’s mouth in a whoosh. Victor dragged the hand wrapped around Sherlock’s slim waist up to grasp the other side of his head as Sherlock lunged forward and crashed their mouths together, his fingers trailing down to wander over Victor’s chest before he slipped his palms down and settled his hands around the dark haired boy’s waist. Pulling back he looked into deep chocolate eyes, pupils blown so wide they were nearly indistinguishable from the dark irises, smiled mischievously, and dropped to his knees.

He slipped his fingers under the tongue of Victor’s belt and began to push it through the loop of fabric that held it, his hands shaking a bit with the rush of adrenaline that coursed through his veins. His pulse was racing, the pounding of it a thunderous racket inside his skull and his ears were filled with the rhythm of his own heavy breaths as he worked to free the strip of leather from the sleek silver buckle—when a sudden burst of sound cut through the white noise and startled him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” a voice demanded, rough and angry and loud—and familiar.

It was Victor’s voice, he realised, just before a fist slammed into his jaw, knocking him off of his knees and throwing him back against the opposite row of shelves. The base of his skull cracked painfully against the edge of a sturdy wooden ledge, and he blinked against pain as he struggled to see through the haze of stars that played across his vision. He looked up to see Victor’s face contorted with rage, his arms raised in front of him defensively, and just as Sherlock gathered his wits about him to ask what it was he’d done to make him angry, he saw the other boy’s eyes flicker towards the centre of the library. With a sinking feeling, he slowly turned his head and followed the gaze, squeezing his eyes shut and then opening them as the person standing at the end of the aisle came into focus.

Melody Harrison.

“Vic, what happened?” she demanded, eyes glancing over Sherlock where he sat propped against the shelves and then looking back up at Victor.

“I came up here to ask Holmes a question about my Geometry homework, and then he just…” he let the sentence trail off, eyes darting around wildly as he looked at everything in the area except for Sherlock.

“Well, that certainly explains a lot,” Melody sneered, stomping over to stand next to Victor and looking disdainfully down at Sherlock, her gaze furious. “What have you got to say for yourself?”

Sherlock took in a swift breath, the denial and rebuttal hovering on his tongue—but just as he opened his mouth his eyes flicked from Melody’s indignant scowl to the face of the young man beside her. To the grimace of fear barely held in check on his lips (soft and pink and sweet), the deep worry lines carved into his forehead (smooth and warm and brown) and the abject terror flashing in his eyes (deep and dark and beautiful). Looking at Victor Trevor, he could feel the plea radiating from every inch of him, could almost hear it in the air. With a sigh, he looked back at Melody Harrison.

“It was a simple misunderstanding,” Sherlock said, getting to his feet with a visible grace and ease that he would later wonder how he managed to pull off, given the stabbing pain that sliced mercilessly through his skull.

“A misunderstanding?” Melody asked incredulously. “More like an assault, I’d say. And to think, I only came up here to see if you were all right after that nasty fall you took in Lit today. If this is how you treat people who try to be nice to you, it’s no wonder you don’t have any friends.”
“Don’t worry,” Sherlock said quietly, looking past her to Victor, who kept his gaze on the floor and refused to meet his eye. “It won’t happen again.”

“Too right, it won’t,” Melody snarled, grabbing Victor by the arm and pulling him towards the end of the aisle before stopping just a few feet away and turning back. “We’re going to report this, you know. I’m a witness, I can confirm what happened.”

“No,” Victor said forcefully, shades of panic in his voice as he shook his head at the look of confusion Melody gave him in return. “I’m fine, Mel. It’s over and done. And besides, I don’t want to have to explain any of this to my parents.”

“I understand completely,” Melody purred, laying a hand on Victor’s shoulder and nodding sympathetically before turning back to Sherlock and narrowing her eyes menacingly. “But mark my words, Sherly. Just because Vic isn’t going to report you, it doesn’t mean that you’re getting away with anything. By tomorrow morning, every single person in his school is going to know exactly what kind of freak you are.”

Melody Harrison, as it turns out, had been true to her word.

Standing in the same place nearly a year later, Sherlock remembers the sound of her purposeful stride as she’d taken Victor’s hand and stormed away, the steady beat of her footsteps in stark contrast to the slow drag of the other set of feet that trailed behind her, pulled along in her wake. He vaguely recalls the vindictive look Melody shot him as she glanced back over her shoulder before disappearing around the end of the aisle. But the look on Victor’s face—the hurt and fear and confusion and shame that radiated from his eyes in the split second he raised his gaze to Sherlock’s as he walked away—that he remembers with perfect clarity.

Lifting a hand to the back of his head, he threads his fingers into the unruly curls to run them softly over the hard ridge of bone at the base of his skull, and part of him imagines that he can still feel the bump—a slight soreness where his head collided with the unyielding edge of the third shelf up from the floor. He closes his eyes against the phantom sensation, tries to isolate the feeling, then concentrates on collapsing it down over itself, folding it in half again and again until the memory of that terrible day is just a small square of nothing in the darkness. He swallows around the lump in his throat and blinks against the moisture gathering in the corners of his eyes and wills it to disappear…

It refuses to be moved.

Some things simply can’t be deleted, no matter how hard he tries.

With a shaky sigh he lets the strap of his bag slide off of his shoulder. As it tumbles to the floor he carelessly tosses his mobile onto the desk, where it cuts a visible trail through the thin layer of dust as it skitters over the polished surface. Knitting his brow, Sherlock reaches out a hand and flicks on the lamp, looking at the desktop in the soft glow of the single bulb. He drags the tip of one long finger over the smooth wood, trying to remember how long it’s been since he’s been back here…

The soft swish of the library door breaks the silence, and he stiffens at the sound, standing very still while cocking an ear and waiting. After a long moment there’s a low thump as the door closes against some part of the person stepping through it, followed immediately by a breathy exclamation of “Damnit!”, then a soft clink of ceramic and the unmistakable sound of liquid sloshing onto the floor. A tired sigh precedes the sound of footsteps—steady and rhythmic and sure—as they make their way across the common space to set something down heavily onto the circulation desk.

John.
He listens to the library assistant moving about, muttering under his breath as he pulls several tissues from the box on the desk and crosses to wipe up the minor spill he’d caused moments ago. He imagines the furrowed brow and pursed lips and annoyed expression that is surely all over John Watson’s face at the moment, smiling to himself at the thought. Then he remembers the look he saw on that same face earlier today, the one that flashed over those same features as Melody Harrison warned him against being kind to Sherlock, implying that he might have something to fear if he was—and the smile fades from his lips, his own brow creasing with worry and embarrassment as replays the exchange in his mind.

*bzzzzzz*

The sudden vibration of his mobile against the hard surface of the desk startles him, and he reaches out to snatch it up, silencing it quickly before he looks at the screen to see a new text from John.

*I’m back, where are you?*

Sherlock draws in a quiet breath, worrying his top teeth against the swell of his bottom lip, considering how—or if—he should respond. The appearance of the flashing ellipsis at the bottom corner of the display gives him pause, and he watches a new message arrive seconds later.

*I heard your phone vibrating, Sherlock. I know you’re back there.*

Damn.

Sherlock looks hard at the screen for a long moment, breath held as he listens for the sound of approaching footsteps that he’s sure will be headed in his direction at any moment…but they don’t come. A new text, however, does.

*It’s OK if you just want to be alone right now. You don’t have to come out.*

The breath he’d been holding rushes out then, the stiff set to his shoulders relaxing a bit as he looks up from his phone and towards the end of the long aisle, considering. The buzz of his mobile in his hand pulls his attention back to the screen.

*But if it matters at all, I wish you would.*

Sherlock reads the message again. Then once more. He sets his thumb gently against the glass to bring up the virtual keyboard, when yet another text from John appears on the display.

*Maybe you could just cough or something? Just so I know you’re not trapped under a pile of old atlases.*

He feels a grin begin to stretch across his face as he shakes his head at John’s lame attempt at a joke. This is all a bit silly, texting while in the same room, isn’t it? It would be much easier to gather up his things and walk back out into the library and sit down at his (new) regular table than to continue this ridiculous exchange, surely.

Sherlock *coughs.*

Three undulating dots immediately appear on the screen, and he watches them curiously, waiting for the next message to appear.

*Oh good, you’re alive. That’s a relief. But that cough did sound a bit dry…*

Sherlock reads the message, and as he’s pondering the last sentence, he hears a bit of activity out in
the library—the same soft clink of stoneware he’d heard as John entered the room a few minutes ago, and a few seconds of silence pass before his phone is buzzing again, three words popping up on the screen:

This might help:

A photograph of a white ceramic mug with a grey striped kitten on it blooms into view, dark liquid filling it (nearly) to the brim, a slender white string and tag hanging over the side. Sherlock hadn’t been aware that he was particularly thirsty before, but at the moment he has to admit that the steaming mug of tea in the picture does hold some appeal. He’s considering his reply as the next text arrives:

Not tempting enough? How about now:

A new photo pops into view, the same mug of tea—only now it’s accompanied by two crumbly looking chocolate biscuits sitting on a paper serviette beside it. It’s not a bad offer, he thinks. He’s nearly decided to take it when his mobile buzzes yet again.

OK, I really didn’t want to have to do this, but you’ve forced my hand. Might as well break all the rules:

Before he can stop himself, Sherlock huffs out a surprised laugh at the image that pops into view: The same mug of tea, the two chocolate biscuits…and a box of matches.

Shaking his head at the photo, he catches the faint sound of a second laugh on the air--just a quiet thing, soft and familiar, a self-satisfied chuckle that morphs into a few higher notes of an infectious giggle before it fades away. The sound echoes in his ears—bright and clear and warm—and Sherlock’s decision is made. Slipping his mobile into his pocket he bends down to pick up his bag, squares his shoulders, and walks out of the stacks.

John is sitting at Sherlock’s table, in the seat across from his own that Molly so often occupies these days, blond head bent over his phone, tanned fingers wrapped around the dark green mug pressed to his mouth as he takes a careful sip. At the sound of hesitant footsteps he lifts his head, a slight smile tipping at the edges of his lips—the kind that goes all the way to his dark blue eyes that crinkle at the corners as he watches Sherlock approach the wide desk.

“Hey,” John says casually.

“Hey,” he replies quietly, chin tipping in a slight nod as he pulls out his chair and sits heavily into it.

John tilts his head toward the mug in front of Sherlock as he lifts his own and takes another drink. “Your tea’s getting cold.”

Sherlock reaches out and grabs the handle of the cup with one hand, then wraps the long fingers of his other hand around it as he raises it to his mouth. He pauses for a moment, blowing over the surface of the liquid before touching his lips against the heated edge of the mug and taking a cautious sip. The burst of sweetness that spreads over his tongue surprises him, and he looks questioningly at John as he savors the taste of the warm liquid before swallowing it down.

“Molly told me you take yours sweet.” John shrugs, a half grin quirking at the corner of his lips. “I believe her exact words were ‘think about how much sugar a normal person would use, then double it’, so that’s what I did. Too much?”

“Just right,” Sherlock tells him over the edge of the mug, inhaling deeply and taking another drink.
“She told me a few other things as well. About what Melody said earlier,” John continues, the slight smile fading from his mouth as his expression turns more serious. At the look of alarm that begins to bloom over Sherlock’s face, he raises a hand in a gentle halting gesture. “Don’t be angry with her, all right? I’m the one who asked about it. She was just answering my questions.”

Sherlock looks at John for a moment, searching his face for the combination of judgement and disgust he became so used to seeing in those days after Melody Harrison waged her campaign of (mostly) misinformation about him. What he sees instead is open, if cautious, curiosity. With a soft sigh, he carefully sets his mug down on the table and folds his hands together in front of him. “What do you want to know?”

“What Melody says she saw, is that true?” John asks, his tone light but direct.

“Yes,” he answers simply, and when John’s eyes widen as he sucks in a surprised breath Sherlock shakes his head slightly and holds up his own hand in a mirror image of the same placating gesture that John aimed at him earlier. “And no.”

John regards him for a short moment, looking confused, then nods his head in a silent invitation for Sherlock to continue.

“Melody did see me in a somewhat compromising position that day, and was informed in no uncertain terms by the other party involved that my actions were unsolicited and unwelcome,” Sherlock tells him, eyes focused on the desk where two long fingers worry at the corner of the paper serviette beside his tea. “But the truth is that encounter was completely consensual…until someone else was looking.”

“I see,” John says, huffing out a long breath. He wraps his hands around his own mug and runs the tip of his thumb over the edge as he stares into it, brows drawn together in thought. “So this, Victor, was it? He was your boyfriend?”

“We’d been involved for several weeks by then,” Sherlock confirms, voice low and resigned. “But no one else knew?” John asks, nodding his understanding as Sherlock shakes his head in reply. “And he just stood by and let people believe Melody’s version of events?”

“I suppose that’s one way of putting it,” Sherlock replies, brow creasing as he watches John’s hands move away from his mug and clench tightly into fists against the table. He hears him take in a sharp breath then let it out slowly through flared nostrils, feels the faint vibration of a rapidly bouncing leg travel from the patch of floor beneath John’s feet up through the soles of his own shoes, sees a pair of pink lips pressed so tightly together they’ve gone a bit white. “You’re angry.”

“Yeah,” John says, dark blue eyes gone stormy as they flick up to meet his own. “I am.”

“I’m sorry, John,” Sherlock whispers, breaking the gaze and looking down at the table before pressing his palms against it and starting to stand up.

“No,” John says quickly, shaking his head. “I’m angry, Sherlock—but not at you.”

John reaches over the table then, settling a tan palm against Sherlock’s forearm and curling his fingers around a delicate wrist with a grip that is firm—but not so tight that he couldn’t break the hold if he wanted to. Which, he’s surprised to find, he doesn’t. Sherlock stares down at the hand on his arm, marveling at the warmth that radiates from the tanned skin along every point where it connects with his own. He lowers himself back down into his chair and looks up at John, taking in the expression of relief that plays over his kind, handsome features. When John draws his hand back
across the table, Sherlock feels the sudden impulse to snatch it back, to replace it against his wrist in exactly the position it was moments ago.

“So Victor let Melody out you, let the whole school think you’d forced yourself on him—but you didn’t out him?” John asks, and Sherlock reminds himself that the hard edge in his voice isn’t directed at him.

“It wasn’t my story to tell,” Sherlock tells him quietly, lifting one shoulder in a slight shrug as John fixes him with an intense gaze.

“Look, I don’t know this Victor bloke,” John begins, shaking his head and heaving out a slightly frustrated sigh. “And I get that coming out at your age—hell, at any age, really—can be scary as hell. But standing by and watching someone you say you care about get hurt like that? I don’t know how anyone can do that. I couldn’t do it. And I’m angry that he did that to you, Sherlock. You didn’t deserve that. You deserve someone who is proud to be with you, who knows how lucky they are that you chose them, and wants the whole world to know it. You know that, right?”

Sherlock stares at John then, at his earnest gaze and soft expression and blue eyes and tanned cheeks and golden hair sticking up a bit at the back and managing to somehow look all the better for it. He considers the words he’s just heard, replays them in his mind, turns them over and examines them from every angle as he considers John’s question—and the truth of the matter is that he doesn’t really know if he deserves any of that. But just now, when he hears John Watson say that he does, Sherlock Holmes finds himself believing that he actually might.

He nods his head slightly, and John’s answering smile prompts one to bloom across his own face. The moment stretches out between them, comfortable and calm, and after a few long seconds John breaks the silence as he heaves in a deep breath and blows it out from between pursed lips.

“Well, I think that’s as much talking about our feelings as we’re legally allowed to do by British law,” John jokes, grinning as Sherlock huffs out a chuckle then pointing down to the chocolate biscuits still sitting next to Sherlock’s tea. “You going to eat both of those? They were the last two in the cupboard, and one looked too lonely in the picture.”

“By all means,” Sherlock says, plucking one up and pushing the other across the table towards him, then looking back down at the mug of tea and the empty space around it before quirking an eyebrow at John. “Where are my matches?”

“Bait and switch, mate,” John says, picking up his biscuit and shrugging. “That was just to get you out here. Besides, I like this job, and Mrs. H. might forgive us the food and drink—but I’m pretty sure she’s serious about that whole ‘no open flames’ thing.”

At that very moment, as though the mere mention of her name summoned her into existence, Martha Hudson heaves open the heavy glass door and walks into the library.

“Well, I finally got poor Molly sorted and sent off to class,” she says with a sigh as John and Sherlock look up to watch her crossing towards them, shaking her head ruefully. “I don’t like to speak ill of our students as a rule, but that Melody Harrison can be quite a wretched little specimen. I’ve half a mind to march down to the headmaster’s office and give her father a call myself and tell him exactly what his daughter has been up to today.”

John nods his agreement with the sentiment, and though Sherlock understands Mrs. Hudson’s position, he can’t help but wonder if such a conversation with Mr. Harrison would cause his daughter more harm than good in the long run.
“Well, Molly seems in much better spirits, and that’s what matters now,” she tells them with a smile. “It was good of you to stand up for her, Sherlock. And quick thinking, bringing her to the staff room to find me as well, John.”

“No problem, Mrs. H.” John says with a smile, lifting the chocolate biscuit to his mouth and taking a bite. His eyes widen as the librarian narrows her eyes at the offending confection.

“You two,” she says sternly, then reaches out both of her hands to snatch the biscuits directly from their fingers. She marches around the circulation desk, picks up the bin tucked under it, and pointedly tosses the confiscated baked goods into it before leaning down to pick up her large handbag and marching back over to them. “If you insist upon defiling my library with crumbs, I’ll thank you not to do so with such inferior biscuits.”

She reaches into her handbag to retrieve a mid-sized tin and drops it onto the table in front of them. John looks down at it, then up at Sherlock, who looks at Mrs. Hudson, who gestures to the tin. John pries up the lid, and the scent of coconut wafts through the air. Sherlock’s eyes light up and he reaches into the tin and picks up a dark chocolate dipped macaroon and pops it into his mouth, chewing it with relish.

“Drink your tea,” Mrs. Hudson orders over her shoulder, stepping back around the desk and sitting down behind it. “And when you’re finished, we’ll all get back to work.”

John looks over at Sherlock, eyebrows raised in surprise, then huffs out a laugh at the smirk the younger boy shoots his way as he pops another macaroon into his mouth. John reaches into the tin and takes a few for himself, then picks up his phone and thumbs open his email and begins to read. Sherlock looks at him for a moment, at this impossible person who lured him out of the stacks (again) and then nearly made him forget why he’d ever gone back there in the first place. He picks up the tea John brought him and takes a sip. As he moves to set the mug back down, he glances up to see Mrs. Hudson looking in his direction with a small smile on her lips. When their eyes meet, she drops her gaze briefly to John, then back up to Sherlock—and winks.

Sherlock feels a slight blush creep up his cheeks, then lifts his mug up to his mouth again and smiles back at her over it.

“Trapezoid, trapezium, scaphoid, capitate…” John says, leaning back in his chair feet propped up on the edge of the circulation desk, forehead creased in thought as he continues his recitation. “Hamate, pisiform, lunate, and—damn it, I’m forgetting one! Which one am I forgetting?”

“The same one you’ve forgotten each of the last three times we’ve been over this,” Sherlock prompts, paging through the anatomy text spread open on the table in front of him.

“It’s the…don’t tell me!” John warns, pointing a stern finger in his direction as Sherlock shakes his head and smiles to himself. “Pisiform, lunate…triquetrum! Ha! Got it!”

“Well done, Dr. Watson.” Sherlock smirks. “You’ve mastered a list of eight bones in the human body, only 198 to go. Well, in an adult body, that is. Infants have 270 bones at birth, but that number decreases to 206 later as several of them fuse together in the growth process.”

“How about you go and take this test for me,” John suggests, smiling amiably as Sherlock rolls his eyes and continues looking through John’s textbook. “Or maybe you could find a better way to help me remember the names of all the bones in the wrist.”
“I’ve been helping you study all week, John.”

“Well yeah, but I was thinking of something a bit more clever.” John smiles at the questioning look on the younger man’s face. “Wait, I know—maybe you could sing me a little song about it. You could use the same tune as the one about the solar system! How does that go again?”

“Pathetic attempt,” Sherlock drawls, shaking his head wearily, yet unable to resist smiling as the lilt of John’s signature giggle fills the air.

“You are going to sing that song for me one day,” the future doctor promises.

“Shut up, John.”

“Oh come on, Sherlock. What if I get mugged on my way home tonight and the guy sticks a gun in my face and says he’ll take all my money if I don’t sing him the names of the planets, in order, right then?”

Sherlock shrugs. “Then he’ll leave with the eleven pounds in your pocket and two maxed out credit cards.”

“Speaking of which, I’ve got to spend that tenner on petrol,” John says with a sigh as he gathers up his belongings and shoves them into his backpack before standing and hoisting it over his shoulder. “I barely coasted into the staff lot this morning on fumes, and if I don’t stop to fill up on my way to campus I’ll never make it there.”

“Ready for the exam?” Sherlock asks, eyes tracking John as he makes his way to the door.

“As I’ll ever be.” John sighs, flashing him a smile. “Thanks for quizzing me, by the way.”

Sherlock returns the smile. “Any time. Good luck.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you in the morning.” John waves as he pushes his way out into the hall. Sherlock watches the door swing shut behind him, hears the metallic catch as the latch clicks into place, then counts silently to himself:

3…2…1…

The door swings back open and John walks through it, strides purposely over to Sherlock’s table, takes the heavy anatomy book from his outstretched hand, then pivots and walks back to the door.

“Goodbye, again,” John says, as he backs out into the hall. “And this time I mean it!”

Sherlock chuckles to himself, then picks up his French text and opens it to this week’s assigned chapter. He’s paging through his notebook several minutes later when he hears the door open once again, and without looking up he asks, “What did you forget this time?”

John doesn’t answer.

He lifts his head and looks towards the door, and finds that the person who just walked through it isn’t John Watson.

It’s Melody Harrison.

Sherlock looks at her warily, watches her cock a hip and fidget with the mobile in her hands. They spend a few long moments this way, in an awkwardly silent standoff that neither seems willing to break. After a half a minute ticks by, Sherlock heaves in a deep breath and puts on an affected smile.
“May I help you?” he says, surprised to see the girl flinch slightly at the sound.

“Is there anyone else here?” Melody asks, looking around the large space, her voice a strange combination of timid and demanding.

“Obviously not,” Sherlock says slowly, looking around pointedly and then rolling his eyes at her. “Oh, I see. You’re looking for John. Well, he’s gone for the day.”

“I was looking for you, actually,” Melody says, raising her chin and picking at the corners of her mobile phone with her fingertips.

“And now you’ve found me,” Sherlock replies, eyeing her suspiciously as she takes a few steps forward and stops again. He watches her carefully, and his first thought is that she seems—embarrassed.

“I wanted to say,” she begins, then swallows audibly, eyes dancing around the open space seeming to focus anywhere but on him before she starts again. “I want to tell you…that I’m sorry.”

Well. That wasn’t what he’d been expecting.

“For…?” Sherlock prompts, and as Melody lets out a deep breath he narrows his focus and concentrates on the young woman before him as time slows to a crawl. He lets his gaze trace over her face and sees that she’s been crying recently (eyes bloodshot, the normally heavy layer of mascara nearly wiped away), takes in the set of her mouth (jaw clenched, bottom lip red and slightly swollen from being worried at by her top teeth), takes in the vee of skin visible between the parted lapels of her uniform shirt (ubiquitous gold necklace missing, a quick glance confirms the bracelet and matching ring are gone as well).

He checks the line of her posture (rigid, joints locked and tense) watches her hands (fingers tightened painfully around the phone in her hands, knuckles white with the strain) and glances down to her feet (shuffling slightly in place). He listens to her breathing (shallow, respiration quickened) and tilts his head to look at the pale expanse of her neck just beneath her jaw (pulse visible, elevated).

Melody Harrison isn’t embarrassed, he realises. She’s afraid.

Time starts back up with a nearly audible whoosh that rings through his ears as Melody looks up at him and shakes her head, brow knitted in concentration as she opens her mouth to speak again.

“I am sorry for what happened last year,” she begins, then pauses, tilting her head to the side and biting at her lip before continuing. “I’m sorry that I intruded upon a private moment, and that I told everyone what I thought I saw when I…without knowing all the facts.”

Sherlock sits up a bit straighter in his chair, replaying the words in his mind and turning to face Melody more fully where she stands and regarding her openly. “Melody, are you all right?”

“I’m fine” she says brusquely, dismissing his concern with a shake of her head. “I just—I have to—I was wrong to treat you the way that I did, and I needed tell you that. That’s all.”

“Is it?” Sherlock asks her, his annoyance at her sudden appearance giving way to genuine concern. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” she insists, a hint of her regular petulance coming through.
“Has something happened with your father?” Sherlock asks softly.

“Don’t you say a word about my father!” Melody shouts, her voice echoing through the large, open space. “That’s none of your business!”

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly, putting up his hands in a gesture of supplication. “I know it isn’t. But perhaps there is someone else who might—”

“I said I was sorry!” Melody implores, taking in a deep breath as she fights to keep her composure. “Now, do you forgive me, or not?”

Sherlock looks at her for a long moment, then nods his head slowly.

“You have to say it out loud,” Melody says, then looks sheepishly at him before clearing her throat slightly. “I mean, I need to hear you say it.”

“I forgive you,” Sherlock tells her, and he sees some of the tension drain immediately from her shoulders.

“Okay,” she says, huffing out what sounds to his ears like a sigh of relief. She stares at the ground for a moment, nods once, then slowly turns and begins to walk towards the exit.

“Melody,” Sherlock says, getting up from his chair and looking at the young woman standing with her hand against the library door as she pauses without turning around. “I know it’s none of my business, but maybe there’s something I can do to help.”

He watches her shoulders slump, sees her tip her chin and rest her forehead briefly against the door before she lifts her head back up and shakes it slowly.

“You can’t help me,” Melody Harrison says, pushing the heavy glass door open and turning to look back at him. “No one can.”

She slips out into the hallway, and the door swishes shut behind her.

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Sherlock is rinsing out his toothbrush when he hears his phone vibrating against the bedside table. He unscrews the cap on the bottle of mouthwash and tips it against his lips, swishing the bracing liquid around for a count of thirty before spitting it out and rinsing it down the drain. Climbing into bed, he reaches for his phone and is pleased to find a text from John:

*Trapezoid, trapezium, scaphoid, capitate, hamate, pisiform, lunate, TRIQUETRUM!!!*

Sherlock smiles slightly, and taps out a response.

*Test went well, I take it? –SH*

John’s reply is quick in coming:

*ACED IT!*

Sherlock begins to type out his congratulations when he notices that John is still typing—so he waits for a few seconds, and then:

*Well, all except the bonus. I didn’t know the answer to that one, unfortunately.*
Intrigued, Sherlock replies:

What was the question? –SH

He watches the three telltale dots blinking in the corner of the screen for what seems like a very long time, and when the response finally comes through Sherlock looks at it for a long moment before bursting into reluctant laughter:

Name all of the planets in the solar system in musical format. :) There’s ten points I’ll never have. I hope you can live with yourself.

Shaking his head, Sherlock types the best response he can think of under the circumstances.

You’re an idiot –SH

As the delivery confirmation appears beneath the text, he pictures the look John’s face as he’s reading it, imagines that even from here he can hear the gentle roll of a chuckle as it changes into the endearing giggle he’s become so accustomed to. The buzz of his mobile draws his eyes back to the screen.

Maybe. But I’m a persistent idiot.

He pulls back the duvet and slides his pyjama clad legs beneath the sheets, settling down against the pillows as he composes his reply:

NEVER going to happen.—SH

He pulls the covers up to his chest, smiling at John’s rebuttal when it arrives.

We’ll see.

He quirks a grin at that, then looks at the screen for a long moment as he considers telling John about his strange encounter with Melody in the library that afternoon—but a look at the clock reveals that it’s already late, and he decides it can wait until the morning. He taps open the keyboard and sends the following:

Goodnight, John. –SH

A reply soon follows, and Sherlock smiles as he sets his mobile down on the bedside table and switches off the lamp, the soft glow of John’s text casting the only light in the room:

Goodnight, Sherlock.

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When he steps out of the sleek black car and onto the kerb in front of Morningside Academy, it isn’t until he’s already up the stairs and through the front doors that Sherlock notices anything strange.

The main office door is already open, the large windows that face out into the hall are illuminated and the two school secretaries are at their desks, one of them taking a phone call while the other listens intently to something that the headmaster is telling her.

As he makes his way down the hallway to the staircase, he notices that several regular classroom doors are open as well, and as he walks by he can see teachers congregating in some of them—huddled in groups of two or three, heads bent together as they speak in hushed tones. As he climbs the stairs, he passes two more staff members on their way down, the school counselor and his
calculus instructor both nodding politely to him as they descend.

While he’s never the very first person to arrive each morning, there are rarely so many people in the building at this hour. He’s contemplating the possible explanations as he’s fishing out his keys from his bag when he notices that the lights inside the library are already on. He tugs on the handle and, finding it unlocked, pulls it open and steps through.

Mrs. Hudson and John are in front of the circulation desk, and they both turn in his direction as he enters. He looks at their faces, sees the shock painted onto John’s and the sadness etched into Mrs. Hudson’s, before crossing immediately to them.

“What’s happened?” he demands, looking to the librarian for an answer.

“The staff was called in early, dear;” Mrs. Hudson explains, one hand fluttering lightly over her chest as she clutches the handkerchief twisted between her fingers. “One of our students committed suicide last night.”

“Who was it?” Sherlock asks, a slick pool of dread spreading low in his gut.

Mrs. Hudson lifts the handkerchief to dab at the moisture gathered in the corners of her eyes and looks at him sadly.

“Melody Harrison.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated.

And in this week’s installment of “Listen, the TEENLICK is on its way, eventually, I PROMISE”, I offer you a Teenlock classic that is a tad different than my usual rec fare in that the boys in this fic are actually modeled after the versions in the RDJ/Jude Law movie franchise—but please don’t let that frighten you off, because this is a darling little Victorian Johnlock tale that manages to somehow pull off being both hot and chaste at the same time. It’s sweet and sexy and interesting and exciting and at times a little melancholy…and I loved it. I think you will too.

Roll Away Your Stone by foxxcub is a beautifully written multi-chapter length fic (published in single chapter format) and is full of teenage angst and discovery and sex and mystery and it’s absolutely worth the read.

Go forth and let thine eyes devour it. Enjoy!
Hello Friends! And a happy “Did you know that the Dutch word for Thursday is ‘Donderdag’, which in Sara-ese translates loosely as ‘whenever the hell I feel like it’? You didn’t? Well now you know. Good talk.” to you all!

This chapter contains a fair amount of discussion about death—but enough sweetness sprinkled throughout that I can promise the first half of that sentence shouldn’t scare you. Think: the grim reaper wearing a clown wig and wielding a rubber chicken instead of a scythe. Or Hello Kitty dressed as the grim reaper. Six of one…

This week saw the convergence of several unpleasant factors in my life, the worst being sickness (why can’t I remove my nose and rinse out my head, huh? BIG design flaw there, universe) and hormones (I suffer from a rare disorder known in our house as *menstrual amnesia*, characterized by the cyclical symptom of having NO clue why I’m so sad and angry and agitated for three days each month until it all becomes clear), and thus this chapter is posting on the very edge of what even I consider a ‘Thursday’. And I feel this would also be a good time to mention that I will be attending an out of town wedding next week, and the scheduled chapter 9 update will be impacted accordingly, but be back on track the next week. Fair warning.

Uncomfortably long hugs to my saintly beta/BFF owensm who speaks softly and handles me the way one might approach the angry stray cat that they are only trying to take in and feed tuna and give belly rubs to. Equally creepy sustained eye contact stares to the other half of team beta, the lovely cheytea7 who tells me I won’t hate EVERY SINGLE THING I’ve written if I just go to bed and get some sleep and look at it with fresh eyes in the morning. Seriously, she thinks she's soooo smart. (hint: she *is*)

And not in the least bit creepy or uncomfortable cartoon eyes full of hearts to each of you who have stopped by to read, comment, kudo, bookmark, rec or subscribe to this little fic of mine. It still blows my tiny mind that people purposely seek out and read things that came from my brain. It’s humbling and delicious and a real honor that I will endeavor to deserve. Please drop me a line in the comments if you’re so inclined, I look forward to talking to you with the same anticipation that my dog displays when you say the word “bacon” then hover near the cupboard where the magic yellow bag of treats is kept. Except with less drool. Most of the time, anyway.

Thanks so much for reading, and I’ll see you all next Donderdag! (see Sara-specific translation above)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sun was high overhead, the warmth of it beating down on him where he stood—soaking into the mop of dark curls on his head and kissing his cheeks—coaxing the light spray of summer freckles that always seemed to be lurking just below the surface of his pale skin into showing themselves.

Peering around the edge of the small building set on one end of the rose garden, Sherlock watched the sea of summer blooms swaying in the early afternoon breeze. Bright spots of pink and yellow
and red tucked amongst shiny green leaves, their heady perfume saturated the air, the cloying sweetness cut through with the rich scent of soil still damp from the storm that passed through during the night.

The sudden slap of rain against his window had been so loud that it woke him with a start. But it was the brilliant flash of light, the one that sliced through the curtains seconds before a vicious rumble rattled the panes in their frames, that had him throwing back the covers and padding quickly down the hall (two small bare feet accompanied by four broad paws). Mycroft didn’t even sit up in bed when the door opened—just lifted the edge of the blankets and set them back down over his brother after he’d climbed in, then shifted his legs to make room as the third occupant of the bed leapt up onto the mattress and settled heavily between them atop the duvet.

The clouds had been gone by the morning, the rolling mounds of grey replaced by a canvas of blue stretching out to the horizon as the sun rose ever higher in the sky. From his vantage point behind the potting shed, Sherlock watched the tip of a yellow straw hat disappear below the tops of the leaves, only to pop back up seconds later. He heard the slice of the trowel as it cut through earth, the sweet notes of a hummed tune lilting through the air, the rhythmic panting breaths of the Irish Setter seated faithfully beside him. And below it all, another sound: a constant buzz, low and steady, the faintest of vibrations caused by the frantic beat of tiny wings, a barely audible chorus sung by the countless fat honey bees hanging in the air above the flowers.

Sherlock eyed the insects from a distance, watching them float lazily from bloom to bloom, his pale eyed gaze a constantly shifting mix of curiosity and suspicion. A wet nose nuzzled at his right hand, the sudden pressure startling him a bit, and he lifted his arm to examine the plasters stretched over the red, swollen wounds on his small palm and two of his slight fingers. Smooth forehead suddenly creased in thought, he recalled the bright, hot flash of pain followed by the slow fire that crept beneath this skin as he ran back up the house clutching his wrist and crying out for help.

He knew that bees could sting, of course. He had been learning all about them, Father reading to him each night when Sherlock climbed into his lap in the chair near the fire with the large book Aunt Violet had sent Mycroft for his eleventh birthday last month. He knew that they would sting when threatened, and even then only as a last resort—because they had only one sting in them, and to use it meant that they would die soon thereafter.

Mummy swept the tears from his cheeks with her thumbs, kissing his brow as Father scraped the barbed stingers from where they were caught in his skin, pausing to blow gently over each red welt to soothe it as he went. Father talked softly to him as he worked, kind words about bravery in the face of pain, and tempering curiosity with caution, while Sherlock sniffled and bit his lip and tried not to be sad.

He hadn’t meant them any harm, he’d only wanted to touch them—to see if their tiny, fuzzy bodies were as soft as they looked. He had tried so hard to be gentle, closing his hand carefully around the first of the three bees that had settled on a blood red bloom. The sharp pain that followed shocked him—and when he flinched and pulled back his hand, it had startled the other two insects and they’d stung him as well.

Later on, wounds cleaned and bandaged and tears all wiped away, Marie had presented him with a scoop of fresh peach ice cream in a small glass bowl that fit perfectly into the palm of his hand, the cold seeping through the plasters to cool away the burn a bit. When he’d awoken this morning the worst of the pain had passed, but the dull throb of it still lingered, a sharp itch that he had to remind himself not to scratch.

“Sherlock,” a soft voice called, distracting him from the memory and pulling him back to the
present. Redbeard stood up beside him and bounded away from the shed, long tail swishing happily as he darted between the leafy bushes towards the sound. Sherlock lifted his eyes to meet his mother’s where she smiled at him over the tops of the flowers. Her face was shaded by the wide brim of her hat, a grin on her lips as she raised the back of one delicate wrist to wipe at her glistening brow. “Are you going to linger there all day peering around corners or would you like to come and help me with the pruning?”

He took an automatic step forward then paused, sucking in a sharp breath as his eyes followed the movement of a honey bee as it lifted off of a deep pink blossom and hung there for a long moment before buzzing up into the air and flying away.

“It’s all right, love,” Mummy assured him, rising up from her knees and stepping out into the garden path and extending an arm in his direction. “Don’t be afraid.”

Sherlock looked at his mother, at her honest eyes and soft smile and outstretched hand, then took a deep breath and began to walk towards her.

She flashed him a soft smile. “That’s my brave boy.” He crossed the space between them to slip his small hand into her palm, felt her give it a squeeze as she turned and nodded at the sprinkling of buzzing insects that hovered in the air all around them. “The bees are very busy right now, gathering up nectar from the roses. Come round here and sit with me, and we’ll watch them work together, you and I.”

A soft chuff of a bark sounded then, and his mother’s tinkling laugh rang through the air as she bent to ruffle the silky fur behind the dog’s long ears.

“You too, Redbeard,” she told the pup, then led her son and his best friend back through the rows of bushes where she and Sherlock knelt on the cushioned mat rolled out over the ground. Rosamund Holmes slipped her delicate fingers back into her gloves and set about trimming back branches, picking off the woody stems and laying them in the flat basket balanced across on her young son’s lap.

When a good sized bee swooped down to hover over an open blossom directly in front of him, Sherlock stiffened and sucked in a surprised breath, eyes widening as it dropped slowly down to stand atop the delicate petals. As the bee made its way to the centre of the flower, dipping its tiny head down repeatedly to gather the sweet nectar from the bloom, Sherlock found himself leaning forward to watch—the momentary fear he’d felt when it landed suddenly replaced with an intense curiosity.

“What do they do with the nectar?” he asked his mother, head tilted and eyes narrowed as the bee continued to gather up tiny sips of the sweet liquid on offer.

“They take it back to their hives, and use it to make honey,” Mummy told him, leaning over to slot her face next to his as they watched the bee collecting its prize from one of her prize winning roses. “So that your brother can spread it on his toast in the mornings, and you can drizzle it over your oatmeal.”

“It’s very nice on ice cream as well, you know,” Sherlock added, continuing to observe the bee as his mother suppressed a grin beside him. “And on Marie’s apricot scones.”

“Careful, love,” she warned, watching as her youngest child leaned forward, his face pressed even closer to the insect at work within the flower, so near that the tip of his nose nearly touched the petals. She reached one hand around his neck and rested her fingers over the curve of his slim shoulder then pulled back gently. “Not too close, remember.”
As they sat back onto their heels, the bee rose slowly from the flower and flew lazily away. Sherlock huffed out a long sigh as he dragged the fingers of his left hand lightly over the plasters on his right.

“I didn’t mean to make them angry,” Sherlock told her, peering up at her through a fan of dark lashes. “They look furry when you see them up close, I thought they might feel soft, like the tips of Redbeard’s ears.”

“They do look a bit fuzzy, don’t they?” she conceded with a nod, then paused to consider her next words carefully before continuing to speak. “Bees are fascinating creatures—and quite beautiful in their own way, I think. But sometimes even lovely things can hurt us, Sherlock.”

“Like bees.”

“Yes,” she agreed, nodding down at him. “And other things too—like fire, for instance.”

Sherlock’s eyes blazed with sudden understanding. “Or...lightning?”

“Exactly,” his mother affirmed, reaching out to run her palm over the dark curls on the side of his head as she looked down at him with softness in her eyes. “You’ve always been so curious, you know. Even when you were just a tiny baby, you watched everything. Your father says that you see more than the rest of us do—and I think that’s wonderful. But it can be a little scary sometimes too. Because what is safe to look at isn’t always safe to touch. Will you try and remember that, for me?”

Sherlock thought it over for a moment, dark brows drawn tightly together to form a deep crinkle of skin above the bridge of his freckled nose, then looked up at his mother and nodded solemnly. Rosamund Holmes smiled softly down at her child before nodding her own head in reply. She reached out and cradled the back of his injured hand in her palm, lifted it to her face, dusted a soft whisper of a kiss over each sting, then pressed her lips to the unblemished center of his palm and blew out a breath—hard—so that her lips vibrated loudly against his hand and tickled his skin, eliciting a giggle in response. She grinned brightly at the sound, pulling him close and nuzzling her nose against the nest of curls at the top of his head as she inhaled deeply.

“I made something for you,” she told him, sitting back after a moment and regarding him fondly. She slid one hand into the large pocket of her gardening apron, used the other to turn one of her son’s small hands palm up before her, then deposited the promised object into it. Sherlock looked down at the gift, eyes widening as he took in the narrow, stuffed black and yellow striped body, the shiny black button eyes, the curved pipe-cleaner antennae, and the gossamer fabric wings that fluttered slightly in the soft afternoon breeze.

A smile tipped at the corners of Sherlock’s lips as he lifted it up to examine it more closely. “It’s a bee.”

She mirrored his delighted smile with one of her own. “So it is.”

“What’s his name?”

“He’s called Bertram,” she said with a wink, smiling softly as she watched him gently pet the layers of shimmery wings then lift a small finger to trace the curve of one wired antennae. “And you can touch him whenever you’d like. You can talk to him as well.”

“That’s silly, Mummy,” Sherlock teased, nose scrunched as he regarded his new friend. “Bees can’t talk.”
“True enough. But you can. And Bertram here may not be able to speak, but he is very good at listening. You can whisper all your secrets to him, and he’ll never say a word to anyone.”

Sherlock eyed her suspiciously, then tipped his gaze down into Bertram’s button eyes and gave him an appraising look. After a long moment he slowly raised the toy to his face, pressed his small lips against the side of the stuffed bee’s head, and whispered softly against the smooth fabric, “I’m sorry I scared the other bees.”

Rosamund Holmes pressed her lips together tightly and looked down at her boy, her gaze soft and warm as she stared into eyes that were so very much like her own. Pulling in a soft breath, she reached out and gently wrapped her delicate hand around the smaller one clutching the toy, raised them both to her son’s rosy cheek, then pressed the head of the stuffed bee against his skin and made an exaggerated smooching sound with her lips. She threw her head back and laughed along with him as the little boy’s surprised giggle filled the air around them. Slipping a hand around his slim shoulders, she drew him close and pressed her lips against his brow.

Sherlock snuggled up to his mother, his small face tucked against her shoulder, a smile on his lips as he breathed in the comforting scent of roses and freshly turned earth while watching the honey bees float lazily over a sea of flowers.

Years later, on another summer’s day, Sherlock Holmes would press his eyes closed—breathe in the scent of roses and freshly turned earth—and then slowly open them to watch the honey bees floating over the ornate sprays of flowers atop twin caskets set side by side beneath a sky that was an endless blanket of grey.

He listened to the low murmur of hushed voices from the crowd of people behind him, heard the swish of their feet in the soft grass as they made their way back down the gentle slope towards the long row of cars that lined the cemetery drive in both directions as far as the eye could see. He heard the first cool drop of rain when it spattered against his shoulder, felt the next one as it landed on the top of his head and sank into his curls, then closed his eyes and raised his chin slightly towards the sky so that the next one hit his forehead before sliding slowly down the bridge of his nose.

He didn’t hear the footsteps approach, didn’t notice his brother’s presence at all until the soft swish of metal against polished wood ending in a metallic snick reached his ears, followed immediately by the patter of scattered raindrops where they drummed down onto the wide canopy of fabric now held aloft above them both. Mycroft didn’t offer words of shared sympathy, didn’t tell him what a brave young man he was, didn’t attempt to convince him that it was time to get back into the car and go home and receive their guests. He simply stood beside him and sheltered him from the rain.

As the skies began to open, the soft thrum of drops on the dome above them slowly intensified to a steady, monotonous beat as Sherlock reached into his pocket and closed his hand around the soft lump of fabric and wire hidden inside of it. Stepping out in to the rain, he reached forward and tucked the item into the spray of white roses on the casket. He stared at it for a long moment, the yellow and black stripes barely visible amongst the glossy green leaves, then stepped back under the shelter of the wide umbrella. Mycroft nodded once beside him, then transferred the polished walnut handle into his other palm—the pad of his thumb swiping over the initials SJH engraved on the oval brass plate set into it. He gently slipped his arm around his younger brother’s shoulders as they turned and walked away.

Much later that night, after the endless parade of mourners (friends and family and neighbours and strangers) had eaten their fill and expressed their condolences and come and (finally) gone, after the staff had cleared away the dishes and replaced the furniture and swept the carpets, long after the crusts on the plate beside him (from the sandwich Marie surreptitiously slid beneath the edge of the
long tablecloth earlier) had gone stale—Sherlock emerged from hiding.

He made his way through the empty rooms, down the dim hallways, tiptoed past the open kitchen door and scaled the wide stairs before slipping quietly into his room. The lamp beside the bed glowed in soft welcome, casting its warm light over the tall glass of water on the bedside table, the pair of soft flannel pyjamas laid out for him, and the carefully turned down duvet, but Sherlock barely took notice of those things at all.

Because waiting for him there—clean and dry and nestled into the safety of his pillow—was Bertram.

His breath left him in a soft rush, the edges of his vision blurring slightly as he hurried across the room and climbed up onto the mattress, closed his hands around the small object, and clutched it to his chest. He curled up against the pillows in his suit and his shoes and the dreadful tie he hated but couldn’t bring himself take off. The tears he'd refused to let fall for the last three days leaked from the corners of his eyes as he pressed the stuffed bee against his mouth and whispered all the things he hadn’t been able to say out loud:

*I miss you. I love you. I’m sorry….*

The words tumbled out from between his lips, breathy and quiet and sad and sincere, until at long last there were no more left to say. There in his bed, with Bertram tucked up tight against his face, Sherlock Holmes breathed in the comforting smell of roses and freshly turned earth…and slept.

The two large floral arrangements at the front of the stage are bursting with roses—tight buds of white and pink and red—the stems tucked in with dozens of lilies and hyacinth and snapdragons and carnations and leafy green ferns. They sit on either side of the easel propped between them, sentinels of sympathy for the pretty girl smiling in the poster-sized photograph set upon it.

Sherlock sits quietly in his seat, watching as the staff and students of Morningside Academy rise to their feet and began to file silently out of the auditorium. From his vantage point in the back corner of the room he can see their tear streaked cheeks and solemn expressions, hear their sniffles and hiccups and sighs as he watches them queue up and make their way to the exits.

It was the third convocation in as many days, the latest in the administration’s attempt to create an atmosphere of safety and solidarity in the wake of the tragic passing of one of Morningside’s own. On the morning after Melody Harrison took her own life, the headmaster gathered them all together to gently break the news that had already been spreading rapidly through student body, the rumours flying at alarming rate long before the first bell had even rung.

*iConfess: It can’t be true! Please don’t let it be true…*

*iConfess: I don’t understand! Why, Melody?*

*iConfess: I can’t believe she’s gone.*

A group of professional grief counsellors were quickly brought in, many of them taking up residence in the common area of the library to serve the steady stream of students that came to them seeking solace and comfort.

When he’d made his way back from Biology class that afternoon to find his regular table had been commandeered (a fourth year boy whose name he hadn’t bothered to learn was seated in his chair
across from a pleasant looking middle aged woman who sat forward listening intently to her young charge), Sherlock hadn’t been sure exactly how to proceed. He stood for a moment just inside the space as the heavy glass door swished shut behind him, eyes flicking towards the circulation desk where he saw John and Mrs. Hudson unpacking a box of pamphlets and books about loss and mourning and suicide prevention. He briefly considered weaving his way through the uncharacteristically occupied tables and chairs and couches to take refuge back in the stacks, but the murmur of quiet voices and the low hum of activity that filled the usually tranquil space felt wrong to him somehow, skittered uncomfortably over his skin and set his teeth on edge. After a moment he’d turned around and pushed his way back out into the hall. Considering his options, he settled his bag more firmly onto his shoulder and did something he hadn’t done in voluntarily in quite some time:

He went to his next class.

In fact, he’s been to more of his regularly scheduled classes over the last two days than he’d deigned to attend in the last several weeks, though this phenomenon hasn’t attracted much notice given the present atmosphere in the school. Everyone seems to be moving about in a daze, teachers and students alike, the chaos of the last few days finally culminating in the all-school memorial programme that just now ended, a precursor to the formal funeral services that the vast majority of the students and staff of Morningside Academy will now be leaving to attend.

Sherlock watches the grim, respectful faces of his fellow students as they continue to file out of the auditorium, then glances down towards the stage at the rows of teachers and staff members who have arisen to their feet to follow in their wake. He catches sight of Mrs. Hudson, sees her press a lace edged handkerchief daintily to her nose as she looks with red rimmed eyes at the golden haired young man who offers her his elbow and begins to escort her up the aisle.

Sherlock allows his gaze to trail over John Watson’s strong shoulders, broad and compact beneath the dark blue suit jacket he’s wearing for the occasion. He follows the curve of his neck up to a tanned jaw and traces the line of his profile, watches as John tips up his chin and looks over the crowd, blue eyes scanning the room in slow, deliberate sweeps. Sherlock finds himself wondering what it is he’s searching for, curiosity getting the best of him as he examines the familiar face intently. He sees him lift up onto his toes to look over the sea of heads then follows John’s gaze as it scans the perimeter of the room, blond brows knitted in concentration as he slowly turns his head… and looks directly at Sherlock.

Deep blue eyes widen with discovery, and the corners of John’s mouth lift in a subdued smile as he raises one hand to wave subtly in his direction. Sherlock draws in a shallow breath, his own mouth tipping into a slight grin as he nods his head in recognition of the gesture. A slow warmth spreads through his abdomen as John’s face brightens slightly before he looks away to cock an ear towards Mrs. Hudson as she leans in to speak to him. He watches John nod before replying to her, then follows their progress as they continue up the aisle to exit through the auditorium doors that spill out into hall near the main entrance of the building.

Sherlock stays seated as the room slowly clears, waits until the last few people queued up for the exits have nearly reached the open doors, then slips out of his seat and walks to the end of the line and follows it back out into the hallway. Through the open front doors he can see the orderly throng milling about in front of the school, waiting for the cars and vans and hired busses that will ferry them to the church service, then on to the interment, and then to the luncheon that will follow. He watches the doors close behind the last few people to pass through them, then turns on his heel and makes his way down the deserted hallway. He scales the stairs two at a time before heading towards the familiar glass door at the end of the corridor.

With classes being cancelled for the remainder of the day, he is fairly certain that the library will be
unoccupied, rendered back to its default state after the recent influx of activity. Reaching for the
door, he pulls it open and steps across the threshold, fully expecting it to be deserted.

It isn’t.

Sherlock has missed the Morningside Library these last few days. He’s missed the safety of being
surrounded by books, missed the smells and sights and sounds of so many things that remind him of
the home he once had. He’s missed the comfort and familiarity it brings, the certainty that in this
world there is at least one place where he belongs. As the door swishes softly shut behind him and a
pair of deep blue eyes look up expectantly to meet his own, Sherlock Holmes finds himself struck by
the sudden realisation that there is something else he’s missed as well.

Or someone else, to be more precise.

“There you are,” John Watson says with nod, a broad smile spreading across his features as he looks
at Sherlock from his seat in the red upholstered armchair near the centre of the room. He looks down
at the mobile in his left hand and gestures to it with the right. “I was just texting you.”

*Buzzzzzz*

She sudden vibration against Sherlock’s hip has him reaching instinctively into his front trouser
pocket to retrieve his phone, the screen lit up with a message from John:

*The invading forces are in full retreat, the kingdom is deserted once more. Well, except for me I
guess.*

Sherlock quirks a half grin at his phone, then slips it back into his pocket as he crosses the room and
sinks down into the grey leather chair directly opposite John’s, sighing heavily as he pulls feet up and
rests his heels on the edge of the cushion then wraps his long arms around his shins.

“It’s been a hell of a few days,” John begins, blowing out a deep sigh. “Kept hoping we’d get a
chance to talk, but things got pretty busy up here.”

“How did you know I wasn’t going to the funeral?”

John shrugs. “Just a hunch.”

“I thought all the staff were attending?” Sherlock asks, looking at John over his drawn up knees.

“They are,” John admits, tilting his head to stretch his neck as he rolls his injured shoulder back and
forth a few times. “But I’m not a teacher here, or technically even a staff member when it comes
down to it. The library trust pays my wages, not the school. And I didn’t know Melody very well.”

Sherlock lifts one shoulder in a slight shrug. “Neither did the most of the people who were shedding
tears over her in that auditorium this morning.”

“That’s probably true. But even if they didn’t know her well, she was part of their community—and
it’s always hard to lose one of your own.”

“I suppose.” Sherlock looks at John for a moment before continuing. “Though the Melody I knew
wouldn’t have invited even half the people in attendance today if she’d had final approval of the
guest list.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” John replies, one side of his mouth quirking up in a grin. “But that’s the thing
about funerals: they’re not really for the person who’s died, they’re for everyone who’s still alive.
They remind people how fragile life is, how easily it could be any one of them. There’s comfort in the ritual of it, I think. Most people want to be a part of that.”

“I’m not like most people.”

“No, you’re really not.” John’s lips tip up into a slow smile, blue eyes crinkling softly at the corners as he looks at him fondly across the space between them—and something flutters in the pit of Sherlock’s stomach. His mouth feels suddenly dry, and when he runs the tip of his tongue over his lips to wet them John’s gaze flicks briefly down to follow the movement. When their eyes meet again he sees something new in those friendly blue eyes, something bass and electric that calls to the same subsonic rumble inside of him, a low spark that threatens to arc at any second…

*buzzzzzz*

The vibration of his mobile against the handful of coins in his trouser pocket fills the air, and the tenuous circuit is broken. John blinks a few times before clearing his throat while Sherlock fishes his phone out of his pocket to see the “NEW CONFESSION!” notification on the screen. Swiping through his icons to tap the acid green skull, Sherlock watches the anonymous message appear letter by letter:

*iConfess: The church looks beautiful, so many flowers!*

“Confession?” John asks, raising one eyebrow in curiosity as he sits up to strip off his suit jacket and lay it carefully over the arm of the couch a few feet from his chair.

“Yes.” Sherlock reads the message aloud to him just as the words begin to fade from the screen before exploding into a silent shower of white sparks, then sets the phone down on the arm of the chair beside him. “Though frankly I’ve never understood the impulse to commemorate the occasion of someone’s death through the involuntary exchange of floral arrangements.”

“I suppose it’s about an expression of sympathy, really,” John says, nodding thoughtfully. “Wanting to surround those who are grieving with something beautiful during a time when everything seems so bleak. A reminder that life goes on.”

“But that’s just it,” Sherlock argues, shaking his head at John over the tops of his drawn up knees. “A cut flower isn’t alive at all. The moment you sever the stem from the plant, its fate is sealed. You can bundle them together and give them a bit of water and tie it all up in a bow, and it looks pretty for the moment—but when you hand it over to someone who has just experienced a devastating loss you may as well say ‘These reminded me of your loved one, since they’ll be dead soon too’. It’s preposterous.”

“Happy thought, indeed,” John mutters, brows knitting slightly as he tilts his head and examines Sherlock for a moment. “I’d never really thought of it like that. And to be honest, I’m a bit afraid I’ll never be able to think of it in any other way now that you’ve mentioned it.”

“I just think it’s an odd tradition, that’s all,” Sherlock says with a shrug, a touch of defensiveness in his tone.

“I get it, actually,” John tells him, slipping two sturdy fingers under the knot of his tie and tugging to loosen it a bit before thumbing open the top button of his shirt. “My mum felt the same way I think. She hoped people would choose to make a donation in her name to Cancer Research UK in lieu of sending flowers to the church, asked us to put that request in the public announcement as well. But there were still a fair few arrangements that flowed in when she passed.”
“When did she die?” Sherlock eyes him cautiously, not sure if the question is one he’s allowed to ask.

“Two years ago next month,” John answers, no hesitation or anger coloring his reply. “Ovarian cancer. She was sick for such a long time, I barely remember the days before cancer was just another part of our everyday lives. I knew more about identifying and dispensing medications by the time I was thirteen than I’m likely to learn in my pharmacology class next term.”

“You took care of her?”

“My sister Harry and I did, yeah.” John shrugs. “She was all we had, after all.”

“You lost your father as well?”

“That’s one way of putting it, I guess.” John huffs out a heavy sigh. “Technically he lost us—or maybe it’s more accurate to say he got lost. He left for work one day and called that afternoon to say that he wasn’t coming back, and he was as good as his word. Harry remembers those days more clearly than I do, really. When people ask about our dad she tells them ‘the cancer moved in and he moved out’.”

“That was a heavy burden to leave on the shoulders of two young children,” Sherlock insists, tamping down the sudden wave of indignation that swells within him at the thought of someone treating John’s family—treating John—so carelessly. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” he replies, a sad smile tipping at his lips. “But it wasn’t so bad, really. She was a strong person, my mum. She refused to let that damn disease get the best of her. She was in the stands at every one of my matches, at all of Harry’s swim meets. She worked and helped with homework and puttered around in her garden got up every day and did it all again. She used to tell people she was living with cancer, not dying from it. It wasn’t until the last year that it started to get the best of her, but she fought hard right up until the end. And she was able to spend most of that time at home, which is what she wanted.”

“She’s the reason you want to be a doctor,” Sherlock says, and it’s not a question, merely a statement of fact.

“Big part of it, yeah. And she wanted that too. But then again my mum always wanted for us what we wanted for ourselves. I could have told her I wanted to be a trash collector and she’d have oohed and ahhed over my bagging technique and stood at the front door clapping and whistling as I dragged the bins out to the kerb each week.”

Sherlock chuckles at the thought, a familiar tingle of anticipation taking up residence behind his ribs when the low rumble of John’s laugh soon joins it, pitch rising steadily until the moment it tips and the air is filled with the sweet timbre of his infectious giggle as it rings through the airy, open space.

Warmth blooms through Sherlock’s chest as the last notes of John’s laugh echo in his head. “She sounds like a remarkable woman.”

“She certainly was,” John agrees, huffing out a satisfying post-laugh sigh as he tugs his tie off the rest of the way and undoes another button at his collar. He slips two fingers down the length of the strip of silk to smooth it, then matches the ends together and sets it neatly over the suit jacket already laid out beside him. “You’d have liked her, I think. Practically everyone did, really. The church was bursting to the rafters on the day of her funeral.”

“There were so many people at my parents’ funeral that I lost count,” Sherlock says, and the words
are already out of his mouth before it occurs to him that has no idea why he said them. He doesn’t talk about that day, not ever. Until this very moment, he never has. A small spark of alarm fires up his spine as he looks over to gauge John’s reaction. The blue eyes that stare back at him are clear and bright and full of honest curiosity, and the next words tumble out of Sherlock’s mouth with the same ease that the first ones had. “At first I tried to keep track of them as they came into the church, but every time I turned around to see who was coming through the doors my Aunt Violet would put her arm around me and whisper that it wasn’t polite to stare. So then I thought that perhaps I could estimate the number of persons sitting in each pew and then multiply that by the total number of benches but I hadn’t counted the rows when I came in, and before long there were people lined up and standing on each side of the aisles, and then the service started and there was no way for me know for sure…so I gave up.”

Sherlock shrugs then, chin tipping forward to rest on the top of one of his drawn up knees, eyebrows pulled closely together as he tries to discern exactly what it was that induced him to say any of that out loud in the first place. He’s still trying to puzzle it out when he realizes that the young man sitting across from him hasn’t said anything since he finished speaking. He cautiously raises his gaze, drawing in a surprised breath at the gentle expression that greets him.

“How old were you?” John asks, his voice warm and soft.

“Twelve,” Sherlock tells him, sensing the next question on John’s lips as he continues. “Car crash. A lorry driver fell asleep at the wheel, swerved into their lane and hit them head on. They died instantly.”

“I’m so sorry, Sherlock,” John says, his voice a bit rough as he clears his throat softly. “Lots of flowers in the church that day I take it?”

“More of those than I could count as well. In the church, at the cemetery, stacked up in the front hall, spread over every surface in the house...”

“Sounds as though they were well loved.” John's voice has gone a bit thick, and Sherlock feels his own throat tighten slightly in response as he presses his lips together and nods in answer. The silence stretches out for a moment, settles over them and weaves between them and wraps around them comfortably, not heavy like a shroud—but more like a jumper: woollen and warm and soft.

“My mum grew roses,” Sherlock tells him, then watches his pink lips stretch into a grin that travels up his tanned cheeks and brightens his eyes. “A whole garden full of them. Every colour you can imagine.”

“My mum loved flowers too,” John says, grinning fondly. “She was partial to wildflowers, especially. Grew a wide swath of them in the back garden—a jumble of colours and shapes and sizes and scents. If she wasn’t in the house, it was a good bet you’d find her back there. Spent more hours than I care to count on my knees next to her pulling weeds and spreading mulch. Even in her last days she was out there scattering seeds and trimming back stems, and when I told her she should come back inside she just waved me off and said that somebody had to keep the bees busy.”

Sherlock smiled at the thought of a young John Watson sitting beside his mum, golden hair shining in the sun while fat honeybees buzzed lazily in the air around them. A heavy sigh interrupted the vision, and he looked over to see John toeing off his polished dress shoes before rolling his ankles and wiggling his toes. Sherlock looked up from the suddenly shoeless feet and raised a brow inquisitively.

“The damn things were killing me. I’ve not worn them since mum’s funeral. Or this suit for that matter. I’d forgotten how uncomfortable the shoes were. And to be honest, I don’t remember there
being so little waist in the trousers either.”

“Well, you have put on a few—”

“Shut it, you,” John warns, pointing a finger in his direction and scowling dramatically.

“I’m merely suggesting that it might be prudent not to feel compelled to finish off every baked good that Mrs. Hudson puts in front of you.”

“Me? I’m not the one who was shoving macaroons into my face like they were cocktail peanuts the other day.”

“Clearly my metabolism can handle the extra calories more efficiently,” Sherlock teases, shaking his head and frowning at him patronisingly.

“Oh, sod off,” John huffs out with a good-natured laugh, leaning back and extending one leg to kick playfully at Sherlock’s shins. With a sigh he sinks lower into the chair and rests one heel on the cushion of Sherlock’s chair and crosses his other over it. “Besides, I don’t know what you’re talking about anyway. There’s no food allowed in the library—read the sign.”

Sherlock shakes his head and heaves out a put-upon sigh, unable to suppress a grin as John’s familiar chuckle turned laugh turned giggle fills the air.

*buzzzzzz*

He and John both look down at Sherlock’s mobile where it vibrates against the arm of the grey leather chair. Sherlock picks it up to see the familiar notification that a “NEW CONFESSION!” is available to view. He swipes open the app and silently reads the message that follows:

**iConfess: Melody’s Dad looks so sad, I want to give him a huge hug.**

Sherlock sucks in a soft breath, watching as the message slowly pulls out of focus and explodes before his eyes. He stares at the screen of his mobile for a long moment, sees his own expression of surprised distaste reflected in the glass, when a sudden warm pressure at his hip catches his attention. The insistent nudge of a stockinged foot tapping against him has him glancing up at John who looks back at him, eyes narrowed in concern.

“Another confession from the funeral?” John asks lightly.

“Mnhm,” Sherlock hums in reply, looking back down to where his phone no longer displays the message that filled it just moments before.

“Hey,” John says, then pulls his feet back down to the floor and sits forward to rest his elbows on his bent knees. He looks at the younger man for a moment, tongue darting out to quickly sweep over his lower lip before disappearing back behind his teeth. “I know there was no love lost between you and Melody, but—are you doing all right?”

Sherlock considers the question for a beat, searches the familiar features for guidance about how much—if anything—he should tell his friend about what he knows, and the moment John’s earnest gaze meets his own he makes up his mind.

“She came to see me,” he tells John, swallowing against the sudden dryness in his throat before continuing. “The day she died.”

“Did she?” John asks, clearly surprised by the revelation. “What happened?”
“She apologized,” Sherlock says, his voice troubled. “For outing me last year, for telling people Victor’s version of the story without knowing mine. She told me she was sorry, and that she wanted —no, needed me to say that I forgave her.”

“Well I’m sure she was scared, Sherlock. Dying’s a scary thought for anyone, I think.”

“The day that Melody came into the library, when she said those terrible things about Molly’s father? I saw something, several things actually, that led me to believe that Melody was harbouring a secret of her own—and I used that information, discreetly, to stop her from continuing to harass Molly.”

“What did you see?” John asks cautiously.

“That her relationship with her own father was of a sexually inappropriate nature.”

“Jesus,” John whispers, raising a hand to his mouth in shock. “That poor girl.”

“She didn’t confirm it, exactly, and I didn’t have any proof—but it kept her from hurting Molly any more than she already had,” Sherlock tells him, suddenly seized by the urge to explain himself, to make John understand. “The day she apologised, I could tell something was off. I told her that if she was scared of her father that I would help her, that we could go to Mrs. Hudson, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Oh god, Sherlock,” John says, shaking his head and looking at him with stricken eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

“She didn’t confirm it, exactly, and I didn’t have any proof—but it kept her from hurting Molly any more than she already had,” Sherlock tells him, suddenly seized by the urge to explain himself, to make John understand. “The day she apologised, I could tell something was off. I told her that if she was scared of her father that I would help her, that we could go to Mrs. Hudson, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“No, Sherlock,” John says forcefully, and the sudden change in tone pulls Sherlock out of the whirling funnel of thoughts in his head, his mind clearing a bit as he looks up and lets his own troubled grey-green gaze meet John’s earnest blue one. “Look, I don’t know what was going on in Melody’s life, and the truth is neither do you—not for sure. And we certainly can’t know what was going on in her head the night she took her own life. There are a thousand things about all this that we just don’t know—but there’s one thing I do know with absolute certainty: This was not your fault.”

Sherlock looks at him for a long moment, searching his face for any sign of doubt, for the smallest of tells, the involuntary markers of deceit that people who are being purposefully dishonest almost always unconsciously display—and finds none. The expression on the face before him is a jumbled mixture of concerned and worried and compassionate and steadfast and determined…and truthful.

“Are you sure?” Sherlock asks him softly, unable to resist the chance to hear John confirm what he’s already seen in his face.

“Yes, I am,” John Watson says with such quiet conviction that Sherlock Holmes can’t help but believe him.
Sherlock nods his head, then closes his eyes for a moment and pulls in a deep breath through his nose before letting it out slowly through pursed lips. When he opens his eyes again, John is looking at him thoughtfully and Sherlock raises an eyebrow in his direction, inviting whatever question it is that John is so obviously keen to ask.

“If you’re right about Melody’s father,” John begins, stretching out his arms and rolling his shoulder a few times, “it seems like there’s something we should be able to do about it, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps,” Sherlock agrees, looking pensive. “We’d need definitive proof, though. And I’m not sure that’s realistic at this point.”

“Neither am I,” John sighs, getting to his feet and leaning side to side to stretch the muscles in his lower back. “We’ll have to think on it a bit. And do you know what always helps me think more clearly?”

“Oh let me guess,” Sherlock says, rolling his eyes and sighing. “Listening to musical compositions that detail the order of the nine planets in our solar system?”

“Eight planets, Sherlock. How many times to I have to remind you?” John says, attempting to be stern but failing miserably when he sees the sour look on Sherlock’s face and dissolves into a fit of giggles. “And I was going to say exercise, you prat. There are still stacks of crates downstairs full of items from the Holmes Collection that need to be unpacked and catalogued. Let’s drag a few up here and see what’s inside them.”

“Boring,” Sherlock says dismissively, shaking his head.

“Deal with it,” John tells him, slipping his feet back into his shoes and shrugging amiably at the baleful look the younger man shoots him through the fringe of hair that’s fallen over his pale forehead. “I’ve got to work off all those macaroons somehow, don’t I?”

“Fine,” Sherlock sighs.

John smiles and extends his arm, palm up in open invitation, and while Sherlock is looking at it and trying to decide if John really means that he should take his hand his body rushes ahead of his mind —and suddenly he’s slipping his pale fingers into John’s palm to feel tanned fingers close over them in a strong, sure grip. He unfolds his long legs, puts his feet on the ground, stands up—and promptly stumble forward and nearly falls flat on his face. John steps in front of him just in time to throw out his unencumbered arm and catch Sherlock around the waist, their chests colliding and knocking a surprised breath out of both of them. Sherlock struggles to get his feet under himself again, and John drags his hand up the long plane of Sherlock’s back to grasp his shoulder and help steady him.

“What the hell, Sherlock?” John asks, his voice a mixture of amusement and alarm. “You all right?”

“Leg’s gone to sleep,” he says sheepishly, standing up straight and putting his weight on the foot that isn’t nearly devoid of feeling at the moment.

“Well it’s your own fault, you know,” John says, huffing out a chuckle and smiling up at him, “folding up those long legs of yours for so long. You looked like a bloody praying mantis perched like that. It was kind of impressive, honestly. Pins and needles started yet?”

“Just now,” Sherlock confirms, face scrubbed with discomfort as he stretches out the offending limb.

“Well, shake it out,” John orders, looking down and nodding his approval as Sherlock follows his orders. “The tingles will wear off soon enough.”
Sherlock nods as though he agrees with John’s assessment, but even as the feeling is returning to his foot, it’s another sensation that has his full attention at the moment: The warmth of a broad palm pressed to his, the slide of short fingers as they thread into the spaces between his own, the drag of a calloused thumb as it sweeps over the smooth expanse of the back of his hand—back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. While the circulation returns to his leg, he finds himself mesmerised by the metronomic slide of that thumb across his skin, by the comforting weight of John’s hand in his own…

“Better?” John asks, and Sherlock grudgingly drags his attention back up to his face, meets the inquisitive gaze with a tentative step forward onto the now fully functional limb, then nods in reply. “Good, let’s go get those crates now, shall we?”

“If we must,” Sherlock says with a sigh, and when John smiles in return and tightens his grip, Sherlock’s breath catches in his throat. A second later, John’s own eyes widen a bit as he tips his gaze down to where their fingers are joined—a look of mild surprise stealing over his tanned features, as if he’s just now noticed that he’s been holding onto Sherlock’s hand this entire time.

“Oh, sorry,” John stammers, extracting his hand slowly from Sherlock’s and looking a bit flustered. “I’m sure you can stand on your own now.”

“No, it’s…I mean yes, I can.” Sherlock clears his throat and smiles, trying desperately not to miss the warmth of John’s skin pressed into his own. “I mean, it’s fine now. It’s…all fine.”

“Good,” John says, relief washing over his handsome features as he nods and huffs out a deep breath. “So, then. Crates. Ready?”

“Ready when you are,” Sherlock tells him, and lets John lead the way.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated!

And in this chapter’s edition of “You know I can’t resist dragging out a specific theme so read this because it will become totally clear why I told you to pretty quickly”, this week’s rec is a hauntingly beautiful little tale by ridiculously talented fandom author suitesamba that I will cop to having read multiple times since the first day it was published.

Written in post S3 headspace, this touching tale finds John Watson raising his 4 month old daughter on his own, and when he stops at Baker Street to drop her off with Sherlock for the day events unfold that make the reader examine just what it is that constitutes a family—and has our boys doing the same thing along the way. Jerusalem is just under 3K words of pre-slash gorgeousness that is sweet and sad and soft and melancholy and hopeful and delicious and I loved every second of it. I hope you will too. Enjoy!
Hello, friends and a very happy “If Oprah can do it with cars, I can do it with the days of the week so YOU get a Thursday, and YOU get a Thursday, and YOU get a Thursday and EVERYONE GETS A THURSDAY, ON ME!” to you all.

Thanks for bearing with me during the travel-induced hiatus last week. If you were annoyed by the wait, it might make you feel better to know that it wasn’t relaxing for me either. Shout out (and by ‘shout out’ I mean ‘big middle finger to’) the Lakeside Hotel for their imaginary pool, stellar wi-fi (accessible only within a four foot radius of the ice machine), super gross open concept shower/bathroom combo complete with peeling wooden bench seat, and their optimistic belief that two adults and two children can happily sleep in a room with one queen sized bed and a lazy boy recliner. Good times. And oh yeah, the wedding was lovely, the bride looked gorgeous, best wishes to the happy couple, blah blah blah.

This chapter finds Sherlock and company celebrating a milestone in the wake of the recent tragic events at Morningside Academy. With cake! Chest thumps of solidarity to my brave and beautiful BFF/Beta owensm for whom I request you send out your most positive of vibes into the universe, and cold ginger ale and soda crackers to my girl cheytea7 as she gestates the newest member of team beta over the next several months.

Undying gratitude and affection for each click, kudo, subscription, comment, bookmark, and rec that this little story has collected thus far. Writing about these two idiots in this world is proving to be a real labor of love and I am so grateful for the support and encouragement. Please drop me a line in the comments if you’re so inclined, I love hearing from you more than I hate the idea of eating a free continental breakfast in a hotel I’m not totally confident about showering in.

Thanks so much for reading and I’ll meet you back here next week on whichever day announces that it now identifies as Thursday and would prefer to be referred to as such.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s waiting for him when he comes downstairs that morning.

Broad and deep and rectangular, smartly wrapped in thick paper printed with a tasteful tartan pattern and topped with a simple satin ribbon tied into a neat bow, it sits on the long expanse of the dining room table next to the place setting at his regular seat.

Sherlock eyes the package suspiciously as he slides silently into his chair, then pointedly ignores it as he slips the cloth serviette from underneath the silverware beside his plate and unfolds it primly across his lap. Leaning forward to grasp the handle of the thermal carafe, he fills his cup with the steaming liquid then scans the surface of the table with a confused look.

“Where’s the sug—”

The slight scrape of china against polished wood to his left interrupts the question as his brother’s
impeccably manicured hand drops from the edge of the newspaper he’s reading to slide the lidded sugar bowl towards him. Sherlock pulls it closer and transfers three heaping spoonfuls into his coffee, stirring vigorously.

“One wonders why you bother to drink coffee at all when it would be equally expedient to simply tip the entire contents of the sugar bowl directly into your mouth,” Mycroft drawls from behind his paper, tutting distastefully.

“One might also wonder,” Sherlock begins, pausing to take a sip of the sweet, hot liquid in his cup, “why, if the ultimate goal is to decrease the size of one’s considerable waistline, one would completely counteract the benefits of eating only half of a grapefruit each morning by first dousing it in the contents of the aforementioned bowl before consuming it.”

“That’s enough, boys,” a voice warns from the open kitchen door, and both Holmes brothers look up as their venerable housekeeper steps through it and eyes them with affectionate reproach. “Good heavens, to listen to the of you two bicker you’d never know how much you adore each other.”

“Adore? Try abhor,” Sherlock mutters under his breath as Mycroft folds down the corner of his paper and rolls his eyes wearily at him.

“Nonsense,” Marie says, crossing the room to set a platter of freshly baked Apricot scones between them before looking at Sherlock sternly. “Your brother is doing very well on his diet, I sent six pairs of his trousers to the tailor for alterations just this week.”

Sherlock watches Mycroft set his paper aside and reach for a scone. "If it’s not too late to do so, you may want to give them a call and tell them to hold off for the moment."

“Oh stop it, you,” Marie scolds, laying a hand on his shoulder and shaking her head at him with a soft smile. “He’s allowed a treat now and then, especially on a big day like this. I made those especially for you, you know.”

“If you made them for me, why does Mycroft get one?” Sherlock asks, watching his older brother split the scone and spread a thick layer of honey and clotted cream over each half.

“Because today is a special occasion,” Marie explains, smiling and tipping her chin toward the wrapped package still sitting untouched beside him. “Look, he’s bought you a present and everything. Aren’t you going to open it?”

Sherlock shrugs and feigns indifference, but Marie isn’t fooled by the display. She looks thoughtful for a moment. “Big box like that, what on earth could be inside, I wonder?”

“As you’re the one who picked it out, purchased and wrapped it, I should think you know exactly what’s inside of it.” Sherlock replies.

“I had nothing to do with it,” Marie insists, shaking her head at the disbelief on the younger Holmes’ face. “Well, I did wrap it, of course. But the rest was all Mycroft’s doing.”

Sherlock glances suspiciously at his brother who stares back at him over the pastry in his mouth and nods slightly, looking as bored as one can in mid-bite of something as delectable as one of Marie’s freshly baked scones. Turning his attention back to the package, his curiosity eventually gets the best of him. He huffs out a resigned sigh and reaches out to slide the box closer.

Sherlock runs the palm of his hand over the smooth paper before looking up at the woman beside him to mirror the soft smile on her face. “It’s wrapped beautifully, Marie.”
“Happy birthday, Sherlock,” she says, squeezing his shoulder and giving it a final pat before she removes her hand and runs it down the length of her apron to smooth it. She leans over and removes the grapefruit bowl in front of Mycroft and checks to see that the coffee doesn’t need refilling then exits back through the open kitchen door.

Sherlock pulls gently on one tail of the bow at the centre of the gift and loosens the ribbon enough to slip it completely off. Sliding the tip of his finger under the perfectly creased corner of the paper on the end of the package, he pulls up the taped edges and deftly unwraps the box (heavy, but not overly so) with just a few precise rips and tugs. The large, glossy green box marked with the Harrods logo (well-constructed, clearly designed for maximum sturdiness) reveals no clue as to the specific contents (clearly a garment of some kind, given the heft and slight give beneath his grip). He lifts off the lid, slips a finger below the gold sticker that holds the folded edges of tissue together, then peels back the thin paper to reveal what lies beneath.

He’s not sure what he’d been expecting, but it wasn’t this.

Running his hand over the tweedy fabric, the wool sturdy and well woven yet surprisingly soft to the touch, he traces the line of the collar down to the heavy buttons on the slim double breast. He picks it up by the shoulders and pulls it from the box, shaking the long hem straight and eyeing the large pockets sewn onto each side at the hip.

“I saw it during the recent preview of the fall collection,” Mycroft explains with his characteristic nonchalance, reaching for his cup and lifting it carefully to his lips. “It reminded me of you, somehow. I’ve had it tailored to your most current measurements on file, but if you’re not pleased with it I’m sure we can return it for something more to your liking.”

“No, I…I think it’s…” Sherlock begins, glancing up at his brother who looks back at him with an expectant, yet guarded, expression. “It’s fine,” he finishes with a shrug, laying it down flat over the open box and running the tip of one finger over the bright red stitching around the button hole on the lapel, an unexpected flash of colour that is incongruous and surprising…yet somehow just right.

“Very well,” Mycroft Holmes says simply with a perfunctory nod, setting his cup down and picking up the paper once again, and if his voice contains a hint of pleased relief, Sherlock doesn’t feel the need to mention it.

“Though keeping it cooped up in that box did it no favours,” Sherlock complains, a hint of the usual Mycroft-specific annoyance creeping back into his tone once again. “It’ll need to be pressed of course.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Marie says, swooping back into the room and depositing a gleaming stainless steel travel mug beside each of the Holmes brothers before scooping up the coat to drape it over her arm. “It’s about time you had something warm to put on, I’ll never understand why boys your age refuse to put on a coat even in the dead of winter. Though you’ll not be able to wear it today, of course.”

“I’m not saying I’ll wear it all the time,” Sherlock clarifies with a shrug. “It’s a bit broody and dramatic for everyday use, don’t you think?”

“Undoubtedly,” the elder Holmes agrees from behind his morning paper. “I did say it reminded me of you, after all.”

“Sod off, Mycroft,” Sherlock huffs.

“Lasted nearly three full minutes without sniping at one another, it’s a new mealtime record,” Marie
sighs, shaking her head and nudging the plate of scones towards Sherlock who reaches out to pluck one from the pile. “I suggest you use that mouth for eating instead of talking right now, the car will be out front in less than a quarter of an hour.”

“I was waiting to see if Mycroft was going to eat them all first, I didn’t want to lose a finger trying to take one during the feeding frenzy.”

“Your company at the breakfast table is always so pleasant, brother,” Mycroft simpers, eyes never leaving the paper in his hands as he turns the page. “It’s a pity you don’t join me every morning.”

“Now that’s a sentiment I actually agree with,” Marie tells them, nodding as they both look up at her with expressions of surprised confusion. “The letter, anyway, if not the spirit. Your parents always took their tea bright and early each morning—your dad with his morning paper listening to your mum talk all about her plans for the day, you boys sitting just there on either side of them. Now look at you both, so grown up, sitting in the same chairs they did. They’d be so proud of the men you’ve become.”

Sherlock swallows against the lump in his throat at the same moment he hears Mycroft clear his quietly. Marie looks between them with eyes gone a bit misty as she takes a deep breath and nods decisively. “Now finish up your breakfast, you’ve not got much time. Your coffees are just there ready for you to take along.”

Sherlock picks up his travel mug and flips open the hinge to sniff the fragrant steam that escapes. “Two sugars?” he asks the housekeeper, raising an eyebrow hopefully.

“Three,” Marie says with a wink.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Mycroft complains before looking back down to the morning’s news. “If you keep indulging him this way he won’t have a tooth left in his head within five years.”

“It’s his birthday,” Marie argues, a slight scold in her voice. “Everyone deserves a little spoiling on their birthday.”

Sherlock watches as Mycroft shakes his head and sighs heavily, but doesn’t miss that the corners of his older brother’s mouth twitch as he fights not to let them curl up into a smile. The younger Holmes sibling looks up to Marie where she stands in the door, the smile on her own face making it plain that she hadn’t missed it either. He tips his mug in her direction, and she beams at him before pointing at his cup, surreptitiously holding up four fingers and mouthing the words “four sugars” before winking again and disappearing through the doorway.

Sherlock huffs out an involuntary chuckle, then turns his head to see his brother watching him warily. He fidgets a bit under the scrutiny, then takes a scone and splits it before spreading it with sweet clotted cream and drizzling honey over the top. Taking a large bite he closes his eyes for a moment, enjoying the creamy, crumbly, sweet warmth on his tongue.

“She’s right, you know,” Mycroft says, tipping his head slightly as Sherlock opens his eyes and looks over at him with a questioning look. “Mummy and Father would be quite proud of you.”

Sherlock freezes in mid chew, staring as Rosamund and Sieger Holmes’ eldest child regards him with a look that is both achingly familiar and at the same time he can’t recall ever seeing on his brother’s face before. It’s a mix of tenderness and reproach and pride and exasperation and guarded British resolve, and beneath it all there is something else—something warm and constant and true. It’s an expression he recognizes, that he’s seen countless times before, that is etched indelibly into his memory.
It's the way their father used to look at him.

Sherlock returns the gaze, waiting for the inevitable array of snappy retorts and sarcastic replies to present themselves and vie for selection as the perfect way to break the tension and dismiss the moment as insignificant, but nothing comes. He stares at his brother, this grown man sitting in the chair his father used to occupy—at the long nose and arched brows and dark green eyes that so resemble those of the late Sieger Holmes—and just behind them he catches a glimpse of someone else he once knew. The chubby adolescent boy who folded newspapers into pirate hats and let him have the last slice of cake and put up with him staining the pages of his textbooks with sticky fingers and lifted the edge of the covers to keep him safe from the lightning that streaked the skies outside.

Sherlock looks down at the table, smiling softly to himself at the memory of the brother he knew before time and circumstance demanded so much more of him—then raises his chin to look at the brother he knows now, and nods.

Mycroft Holmes returns the gesture, lifts up his paper, and disappears behind it once more.

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“I’m not saying I disagree with you, Sherlock, I’m just pointing out that everyone deals with grief in their own way, that’s all,” Molly Hooper says, pulling open the heavy glass door to the library and ushering her lab partner through it with a wave of her hand.

“It’s completely maudlin,” Sherlock insists, rolling his eyes as he saunters through the doorway and makes a beeline for their regular seats, heaving his overloaded book bag up off of his hip and depositing it on the polished surface of the table. “Leaving Melody’s desk unoccupied as though it’s some kind of living shrine—might as well set a place for her at the lunch table so that everyone can stare sadly at the empty tray.”

“I think it’s just that no one wants to be the first person to sit there,” Molly explains, setting her own bag down onto the table across from him. “It’d be like admitting they’ve forgotten about her.”

He knows that she’s right. The fact that the former occupant of the chair in question never treated her with even half the kindness and compassion that Molly Hooper exhibits towards an empty chair is immaterial. Molly’s logic, as it has been so often of late (so frequently that it no longer manages to surprise him every time), is admittedly sound.

“How long is ‘long enough’?” Sherlock grumbles, reaching up to card his fingers roughly through the curls at the back of his head.

…A dining room table set for two, the chair at the head and the one directly to the left of it conspicuously empty—plates and cups and forks set before the two chairs on either side of them. Sitting beside his mother's empty seat, the weight of her absence filling the chair and his chest and the air around him and expanding to fill the whole room as he keeps his hands in his lap and looks across the table to watch his brother cast a sidelong glance at the other newly vacant chair while idly pushing his breakfast around the plate...

“I don’t think there’s a set time limit for these things,” Molly offers with a shrug, looking at him with mixture of gentle concern and mild exasperation.

“Perhaps that’s true,” Sherlock grudgingly concedes, sitting down heavily into his regular chair and yanking his biology textbook from his bag with a bit more force than is strictly necessary. “But it can’t go on indefinitely.”
...the same dining room table set for two, the head chair now occupied by someone hidden behind a newspaper, a cup of tea steaming at their elbow, a second plate and cup and fork set before the chair immediately to the right...

“It’s only been a week since the funeral, after all,” Molly points out, sitting down across from Sherlock and lifting the flap on her own bag and unzipping it.

...standing in the doorway, eyes on the newly occupied chair, frozen in place and holding his breath. “Come and sit down, Sherlock” his brother says from behind the paper, voice low and familiar and the same as always—but different, too. Everything is different on this side of the line drawn down the centre of their world just over a week ago, when there were four plates and four cups and four forks and four chairs and four voices and four heartbeats....

“A week can feel like a very long time,” Sherlock admits quietly, with a small shrug.

“Yeah, it really can,” Molly agrees, a melancholy look stealing over her pretty features for a moment. “But things always get back to normal, eventually. Life goes on, right?”

...staring at the chair that used to be his mother’s, eyeing it for a long moment before walking slowly forward. Slipping into the scant space between the chair and table, holding his breath as he sits in his mother’s chair and Mycroft sits in their father’s and it’s just the two of them and absolutely everything is different but in that moment nothing changes. The clock keeps ticking, the sun keeps shining, the earth keeps spinning, and steam rises from the teapot...

“Yes, it does,” Sherlock sighs, nodding slightly as he clears his throat and continues unpacking his bag, “and usually far more quickly than you’d ever imagined that it could.”

“That’s nice to know,” Molly says, looking over the table at him and smiling softly as she absently rubs her thumb over the worn, light blue rubberised bracelet on her wrist before taking in a deep breath and reaching back into her bag. She takes out her notebook and the thick folio where she’s been collecting their gathered research over the last several weeks and begins to flip through the stack of papers. “All right then, the human digestive system. Where were we?”

“We were discussing the finer points of large intestine output and the relative appropriateness of various visual aids, as I recall.”

“Oh good Lord, don’t remind me,” Molly says with a scowl and a furrowed brow.

“You just asked me to remind you.”

“You know what I meant,” she scolds.

“I don’t see why you’re so opposed to the idea,” Sherlock argues, flipping absently through his textbook and looking mildly put out. “It’s a fairly significant portion of the entire process, after all.”

“I don’t care how significant it is, we are not going to create and display various types of synthetic poo, Sherlock.”

“It’s actually quite a fascinating subject, if you’d simply open your mind a bit,” Sherlock insists, shaking his head at her as he pulls out his mobile and taps open the web browser. “The various textures and colours of faecal material can be indicative of any number of medical conditions and knowing what to look for can aid in early detection and treatment, or be used to determine cause of death. This one, for instance, is really interes—”

“Do not show me what is on that screen,” Molly warns, pointing a finger sternly in his direction.
“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Molly. You want to study **pathology** one day,” Sherlock reminds her, huffing out an exasperated sigh. “You’ll see far worse than this in medical school, you realise.”

“Of course I know that,” she says irritably, looking relieved as he slips his phone back into the front pocket of his bag and leans back in his chair. “But there’s a difference between studying bodily secretions in an academic atmosphere and looking at the results of whatever google image search that brain of yours dreamed up just now.”

“I searched for ‘disease indicators in human excrem—’”

“Oh my god, please stop before I lose my appetite completely,” Molly pleads, shaking her head at him.

*ping*

Sherlock watches her root through the open flap of her bag to dig out her mobile, then sees her smile sunnily at the message on the screen. She nods, gets quickly to her feet, and strides purposefully towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Sherlock asks as she walks away.

“To the door,” Molly calls over her shoulder, as she approaches the exit and looks through the glass pane and out into the hall.

“What for?” he demands, raising an eyebrow at her in confusion.

“This,” Molly says with a grin, then reaches out and quickly flips down the neat row of switches on the wall, plunging the library into darkness.

Sherlock sits up in his chair, eyes attempting to acclimate to the dark as Molly pushes the door slowly outward and holds it open. A shaft of light from the hallway slants across the floor, dimming slightly for a moment, then getting suddenly brighter as tall shadows begin to dance in the dark space just inside the room only to be immediately chased away by the festive glow of a fairly impressive number of candles.

Eighteen candles, to be exact.

Arranged in a perfect ring atop a veritable mountain of a cake and illuminating the smiling face of Martha Hudson as she steps through the door. She is followed closely by a second familiar silhouette—broad shouldered and slim waisted—walking carefully behind the librarian before Molly lets the door swish slowly shut and begins to sing:

“**Happy birthday to you**…”

The first note is barely out of her mouth before Mrs. Hudson’s trembling soprano chimes in, and a fraction of second later, a third voice joins them.

“**Happy birthday to you**…”

A confident tenor, warm and rich and bright, drifting through the dark and weaving between the other two voices and winding through the air as they make their way over to his table.

“**Happy birthday dear Sherlock**…”

The glow from the flames plays over their faces, illuminating Molly’s happy grin and Mrs. Hudson’s
misty eyed glance, but it’s the third face in the trio that truly captures his attention. John Watson, smiling broadly and singing loudly, blue eyes sparkling in the flickering light.

“Happy birthday to you!”

As the last notes of the song ring through the air around him in a valiant (though honestly not entirely successful) attempt at three part harmony, Mrs. Hudson sets the cake down in the centre of his table, and John steps up next to her and deposits the two steaming mugs of tea he’s had clutched in each of his hands before straightening up and flexing his fingers a few times then clapping his palms together enthusiastically. The other two join in and Sherlock tips his head in acknowledgement of the applause as he eyes the flaming confection before him.

“Did we really surprise you?” Molly asks, raising a skeptical eyebrow but still looking at him hopefully.

“Yes,” Sherlock admits, because—well—they had. He hadn’t said anything about his upcoming birthday to anyone, and none of them had even made mention of it to him this morning, a fact that didn’t seem unusual at the time. Staring into the flickering flames before him he realizes that it hadn’t even occurred to him that they would even remember his birthday, much less celebrate it.

With cake, no less.

And quite an impressive cake, at that. Three layers of chocolate sponge stuffed with strawberries and whipped cream topped with a thick, glossy layer of dark chocolate ganache that shines mirror bright in the light from the candles. It looks delicious.

He looks up at the three faces standing on the other side of the table, at their happy smiles and hopeful, eager expressions—and feels a sudden tightness in his throat, a growing lump he swallows against as a moist heat pricks at the corners of his eyes and threatens to overwhelm him until he pulls in a deep breath through is nose, shakes his head, and puts on a smile. “But you really didn’t need to go to all this trouble.”

“Of course we did,” Mrs. Hudson tells him, the slight scold in her voice coloured with the familiar warmth she always displays towards him. “But it really wasn’t any trouble, mind you.”

“It’s your birthday, Sherlock,” John says, smiling at him through the haze in the air above the candles. “Of course we’re going to make a fuss. Besides, what better way to celebrate the occasion than with food, drink and open flames?”

“Just this once,” Mrs. Hudson admonishes seriously, then rolls her eyes as Sherlock huffs out a breathy laugh at the pronouncement, Molly titters cheerily, and John’s throaty chuckle joins the fray—rumbling low in his chest as it makes its way slowly up his throat before dissolving into a melodic giggle that floats through the air to fill every empty space with the sound.

“Say cheese!” Molly says, and Sherlock looks up just in time be nearly blinded by the flash of her mobile as she snaps a photo. He blinks a few times as Molly tuts and fidgets with the phone. “Oh no, I forgot to turn off the flash. Hold on, one more.”

He smiles obligingly in her direction as she taps the screen, and watches as she beams down at the display. “That’s a good one,” she says brightly, tilting the phone to show it to Mrs. Hudson who smiles and nods in agreement, then passes the phone to John whose face breaks out into a wide grin as he looks at the captured image.

“Send me a copy of that, will you?” John asks Molly, who nods her agreement and then flashes
Sherlock a smug grin and wiggles her eyebrows as she takes her phone back. Sherlock feels his cheeks heat a bit at the implication.

“Sherlock Holmes,” Mrs. Hudson says, peering at him over the cake. “Are you blushing?”

“Of course not,” Sherlock denies, ignoring Molly’s stifled giggle and shrugging at John’s puzzled look. “It’s just the ambient heat from all these candles.”

“Well it’s probably just as well you blow them out then,” Mrs. Hudson says, reaching forward to slide the cake a bit closer to him.

“No, wait!” Molly exclaims circling around the table to stand next to Sherlock, while beckoning the other two to join her. “Let’s get one more photo, with all of us.”

She drops to her knees beside Sherlock as Mrs. Hudson comes to stand behind him, settling her hands on the top corners of the back of his chair and bending low to insert her face between his and Molly’s. Sherlock feels a sudden weight on his upper back as John settles his hand firmly onto it, short fingers curling over the edge of his shoulder as he crouches down beside Sherlock and looks at the screen of Molly’s mobile where she’s holding it in her outstretched arm, tilting it to try and find the best angle.

“Come forward just a bit, Mrs. Hudson,” Molly directs, lifting her chin and turning the camera a few degrees. “Scooch in closer, John, you’re half out of the frame.”

John adjusts his feet, one bent knee pressing against the outside of Sherlock’s thigh, strong fingers tightening slightly at his shoulder as he bends his neck and leans in, a tan cheek near enough to the pale one beside it that Sherlock is almost certain he can feel the heat from John’s skin warming his own.

“That’s it, everyone stay right where you are—and smile!” Molly orders as the synthesized click and whir of the photo app sounds though the air. She pulls the mobile down and smiles at the screen, then looks over at Sherlock excitedly. “Perfect. Ok, time to make a wish.”

“Make it a good one, love,” Mrs. Hudson advises, turning her head to smile affectionately at him.

“And don’t tell anyone what it is, or it won’t come true,” John adds with a grin, his hand still on Sherlock’s shoulder as he sits back slightly onto his heels.

“All right,” Sherlock sighs, nodding as he watches the candles burn for a moment, eyes following a shining bead of melted wax as it pools just below a burning wick and swells before it slides down the smooth side of the candle to slow and harden before it reaches the thick, dark icing below. A gentle pressure at his neck distracts him—the warm heat of a palm through the fabric of his shirt, the slight tightening of strong fingers over the curve of his shoulder, the (accidental?) sweep of a thumb over the tender skin just above his collar as John shifts his feet slightly where he’s still crouched down beside him.

Chancing a glance to his right, Sherlock looks over at the man next to him. John’s profile is distinctive and proud and pleasantly handsome in any light. But in this moment, lit by the soft glow from the flames, the pink lips and blue eyes and tanned skin and golden hair he’s come to know so well seem entirely transformed into something new and surprising and captivating and... beautiful.

He knows he can’t stare at John forever, that another second or two is all he’ll have before the silence becomes uncomfortable and someone breaks it to tell him to get on with blowing out the candles, so he makes the most of it by drinking in the image before him, committing every line and
curve and shadow and colour to memory. He tucks the moment away, somewhere warm and safe in his mind, and as he reluctantly turns his gaze forward Sherlock is struck by the thought that no matter what the rest of this particular day brings—or what any future birthday sends his way—he will forever remember this one as the day he saw John Watson’s face lit by candlelight.

Looking into the bright ring of light on the cake, Sherlock pulls in a deep breath, closes his eyes, and blows out the candles.

Three voices cheer as the flames are extinguished, then the cheering stops abruptly. Sherlock opens his eyes to see what’s happened, but the darkness prevents him from seeing anything at all, the dim outline of the library door the only spot of brightness to be seen.

“We didn’t think this through very well, did we?” Martha Hudson says wearily.

“I’ll get the lights,” John offers, using the hand still on Sherlock’s shoulder as leverage to push himself onto his feet, squeezing his fingers around it one last time before he lets go and heads towards the door.

“Ouch!” Molly Hooper exclaims, just off to Sherlock’s left.

“Oh hell, I’m sorry, Molly,” John says, his voice moving steadily away from them through the dark room. “I didn’t know your leg was there, and—OOF!”

“John, are you all right?” Mrs. Hudson asks, a bit of alarm in her voice as the soft thud of a body striking something large echoes through the darkness and John mutters something unmistakably profane under his breath.

“I’m fine. Bloody inconvenient place for an armchair, though.” John grumbles as he makes his way towards the door, stumbling (and cursing) once more before he reaches it, his compact silhouette briefly blocking the single source of illumination before he locates the switches on the wall and flips them all upward, flooding the room with light once more.

“Well done,” Mrs. Hudson says, beaming at John as he makes his way back towards them and clapping her hands together as she walks around the table. “Now, who’d like some cake?”

There’s a flurry of activity around him then as Molly pulls open a drawer behind the circulation desk to retrieve the plates and forks and stack of serviettes she’d stashed their earlier, presumably. John drags two more chairs to the table, nudging at Sherlock with his hip to budge over and make room as he distributes the mugs of tea while Mrs. Hudson plucks the last of the spent candles from the top of the cake before retrieving an alarmingly large knife from her handbag and cutting thick slices for each of them.

John sits down heavily in the chair beside him, taking the first piece of cake from Mrs. Hudson and presenting it to Sherlock with an exaggerated flourish. Molly hands him a fork and a serviette, then circles the table depositing one of each in front of the other three chairs before taking her seat across the table and accepting a slice of cake with a grateful smile.

Pressing the tines of his fork into the thick layer of chocolate ganache at the tip of his slice, Sherlock presses down to cut through the layers and lifts a good sized bite to his mouth and chews the morsel with relish, enjoying the burst of creamy sweetness on his tongue. He revels in the combination of dark chocolate and soft sponge cake and thick almond whipped cream and fresh berries, barely managing to stifle a moan of pleasure at the sensation.

Judging by the sounds coming from the other people at the table, he really needn’t have bothered.
“You’ve really outdone yourself, Mrs. H.,” John says seriously, closing his lips around his fork and humming with pleasure as he licks it clean. “If I had to choose what to have for my last meal on earth, this would definitely be my pick for the dessert course.”

“My late husband felt exactly the same way,” Mrs. Hudson replies, smiling at him as she wipes a bit of whipped cream from the corner of her mouth. “I haven’t made this cake in years, but it felt like the right choice for such a momentous occasion.”

“It’s amazing,” Molly raves, washing down a bite with a sip of tea. “Maybe you should turn eighteen again next week, Sherlock.”

“And the week after that,” John suggests hopefully, scooping another forkful into his mouth and smiling as he chews.

“I think one birthday per year is just the right amount,” the librarian says thoughtfully, looking fondly across the table at Sherlock who raises a curious eyebrow in her direction. “It’s a good time to take a look back over where you’ve been and what you’ve learned at the end of one chapter of your life—and then you get to turn the page and a whole new one is just waiting to be written. It’s quite exciting, really.”

“Hear, hear,” John says, swallowing down a last bite of cake and lifting his mug from the table. “Let’s have a toast.”

Sherlock sees Mrs. Hudson and Molly pick up their cups and look at John, who turns in his chair to face him, looking pointedly down at the mug of tea still on the table in front of his plate of half-eaten cake. With a sigh and a half-hearted roll of his eyes he grasps the handle and holds it aloft.

“To the turning of the page,” John begins, tipping his head and grinning at the wary expression that greets him. “May this new chapter of your life be filled with grand adventure, surprising plot twists, interesting characters and have the happiest of endings. Happy birthday, Sherlock.”

“Happy Birthday!” Molly and Mrs. Hudson both exclaim, extending their mugs across the table and clinking them softly in turns against the other two raised cups. Taking a sip of the warm, perfectly sweetened brew in his mug, Sherlock laughs along as tea sloshes down Molly’s chin and John jokingly asks if he can have a bit of whatever she’s added to hers and Mrs. Hudson scolds them all half-heartedly for ignoring the sign clearly posted outside and making a mess in her library.

Surrounded by the relics of his past, he looks at the unlikely group of people gathered around this table in his honour—at the four chairs and four plates and four cups and four forks—and the feeling that washes over him all at once is the oddest of sensations, both familiar and forgotten, comfortable yet strange…

It feels like home.

“There for presents!” Molly announces, pushing her empty plate aside and reaching down into her bag to pull out a slim, flat parcel wrapped in cheery striped paper and tied with a bright blue ribbon. “Mine first.”

Sherlock looks at her, unable to hide his surprise as he tentatively takes the package from her outstretched hand. He lifts the flap on the small folded card to read the tag:

Dearest Sherlock,

Happy Birthday!
Pulling off the bow and stripping the colourful paper away, he lifts the lid off the box to find a periwinkle blue cashmere scarf nestled inside, thin and fine and wonderfully soft beneath his fingers.

“I looked for one that seemed long enough that a giraffe could use it,” she teases, quirking a grin at him as he unfolds it from the box and drapes it around his neck, tossing one end over his shoulder. “I thought it would go nicely with your eyes.”

“It’s lovely, Molly,” Sherlock tells her, lifting it off and carefully folding it again. “Thank you.”

“These are from me,” Mrs. Hudson says, rooting through her formidable handbag to pull out a sizeable tin and sliding it across the table to him. When Sherlock pulls off the lid, the unmistakable scent of sugar and butter and raspberries floats through the air.

“My favourite,” Sherlock says, beaming at her and leaning over the tin to take a deep sniff before holding the open box out to John who looks surprised, but happily takes a jam biscuit and pops it in his mouth then grabs one more as Molly leans over to take one for herself. “Thank you, Mrs. Hudson.”

“You’re welcome, dear,” she replies, smiling as he fits the lid back onto the tin. “You be sure to share those with your brother.”

“No promises,” Sherlock says flippantly, shooting her a playful grin as she glowers at him and shakes her head.

“Just mine left, then,” John says, nodding as he pushes his chair away from the table and gets to his feet. He crosses over to the grey leather armchair in the nearby seating area and lifts up the red, white and blue Union Jack pillow propped in the corner to reveal a wrapped package hidden behind it. He walks back over to the table and sets it down in front of Sherlock before lowering himself back into his chair.

“Very festive,” Sherlock notes, eyeing the printed pattern of holly leaves and berries and suppressing a smile.

“Yeah, well, I wrapped it myself,” John admits with a sheepish grin, rolling his bad shoulder and raising a hand to rub absently at the back of his neck. “All I had in my flat was some paper leftover from Christmas, and it was either that or newsprint—and I wanted to keep it classy.”

“Mission accomplished,” Sherlock assures him with a slight chuckle, smiling back at him then peering down at the present. Pulling the heavy rectangular parcel towards the edge of the table he stands it on end then slips the tip of one long finger beneath a folded edge and carefully tears the paper away to reveal the spine of a large book. Not a new volume, clearly—the glossy red surface of the hard cover is nicked and dulled, the once sharp edges slightly bent and worn, the binding a bit loose as he lays it down flat to read the impressive title:

*Perspectives on Structure and Mechanism in Organic Chemistry, Second Edition*

Sherlock stares down at the cover as a grin of pleasant surprise steals over his face and he turns to look at John. “It’s an advanced chemistry text.”

“Well spotted,” John says, returning the smile then glancing down at the book and then back up to meet his gaze with an eager look. “Open it.”

Sherlock gives him an amused smirk, then turns back to the heavy book in front of him. He lifts the
front cover to reveal a standard thick gauge spacer page, the blank expanse of white broken only by a single line of text, hand written in black ink:

*Property of Sieger J. Holmes*

His breath catches in his throat, and he freezes in place—the edges of his vision blur and darken and creep inward as he stares at the book, and all he can see are those five small words, 21 letters written there by someone Sherlock never knew—the young man who would one day be his father.

“I found it in one of the crates,” John explains, voice soft and rich and melodic as it permeates the low hum of static that flows into his ears and fills his skull and wraps itself around his mind like a thick layer of cotton wool. “Technically, it’s part of the school endowment, but the moment I saw what it was I just felt—and Mrs. H. agreed with me, of course—that it belongs to you.”

Sherlock reaches out to run the tips of his fingers softly over the inscription, managing to nod his head slightly in reply.

“There are notes all over in the margins, formulas and questions and there’s even a pretty impressive doodle of a dog in there somewhere.” John slides closer to Sherlock in his chair, reaching over the edge of the volume to flip through to a random spot in the first section of the text. He points to the writing that nearly fills the blank space at the foot of one of the pages. “And check it out, Sherlock—you write like him.”

Sherlock stares at the handwritten script on the page, at the way the letters flow together and the narrow curve to the a’s and the hastily crossed t’s and the jagged hooks at the bottom of the j’s and g’s that his primary school teachers had given him such grief over years ago—and he realises that John is right. Sherlock writes just like his father. He hadn’t known that until just this moment.

“Do you like it?” John asks, a slight note of worry colouring his hopeful tone.

Sherlock wants to say something, to tell John ‘thank you’ or ‘I love it’ or ‘it’s perfect’ or anything really…but when he opens his mouth and tries to speak, no sound comes out. Instead, he feels himself pull in a shuddering breath as a fat drop of liquid lands on a section of the hand written text on the page, smearing the ink as it soaks into the paper. Staring down at the slowly spreading stain, he realises that he’s crying. He presses his eyes closed and tries to stop the flow of tears, reminding himself that emotions are simply complex chemical reactions, that he can control them if he just concentrates…

It doesn’t work.

“I think I’ll just clear off some of these dishes,” Mrs. Hudson says quietly, gathering up empty plates and sweeping a few errant crumbs from the surface of the table as she stands up from her chair. “And this cake really should go back into the fridge.”

“I’ll help,” Molly offers, picking up the mugs and forks and taking the plates from Mrs. Hudson’s hands as she lifts the cake from the table. Sherlock hears the library door swish open and then close again behind them, the metallic snick of the latch ringing through the stillness.

He knows exactly why they left: to save him the embarrassment at the discomfort that his tears would surely have caused them and he appreciates the gesture. After a moment he hears John push his own chair away from the table, then get to his feet and walk away—and he wishes he could call out to him, apologize for his outburst and ask him to stay and if he could please just forget the entire incident.
He’s so busy wishing John hadn’t left that he doesn’t hear his footsteps coming back to the table, doesn’t register that he’s sat back down into his chair beside him until a warm hand rests softly on his shoulder and squeezes lightly. He opens his eyes a just a crack to see a tanned hand sitting on the open book below him, a tissue clasped between two fingers. He stares at it for a long moment, then slowly reaches out and takes the offered tissue, blotting at his eyes and wiping his nose and huffing out a deep sigh. The hand on his shoulder tightens its grip, then lifts away, fingertips trailing softly down his upper arm before disconnecting completely.

“Sorry.” Sherlock sniffs, lifting a shoulder in an embarrassed shrug, still looking down at the open book before him.

“Don’t be,” John says, his voice soft and warm and even. “Though I think maybe I’m the one who owes you an apology. Was it wrong for me to give that to you?”

“No,” Sherlock says quickly, shaking his head and chancing a sidelong glance at John who is looking back at him, brow furrowed and blue eyes full of cautious concern. “It’s… (wonderful, amazing, the best birthday gift I’ve ever received) …good.”

Relief washes over John’s face, his features softening as a smile stretches over his lips and lifts his cheeks, making his eyes crinkle at the corners. Sherlock looks back down at the book and begins flipping idly through the pages, noting the highlighted passages and scanning the numerous hand written notes and sketches inked there.

“I don’t remember ever seeing this book in the library when I was younger,” Sherlock says, tracing the progression of a particularly complicated formula with his finger.

“Must have been one hell of a big collection, then, if this escaped your notice. It’s a pretty cool text, actually. There’s a really good section on aliphatic organic compounds in there, somewhere in the last third of the book as I recall.”

Sherlock lifts up the back cover with his right hand and pulls his thumb along the edge of the pages, scanning the contents as he fans through them when he sees something strange flip by. He pulls the book open and lays it down on the table, then flips back a few pages until he finds what caught his eye. Thin and papery and pressed flat between the pages, is a flower. A rose, more specifically, the once bright pink petals now dark with age but still vibrant against the green leaves still attached to the stem. He reaches out and carefully slips it from the page, then holds it up to show the man beside him.

“Oh yeah,” John says, nodding as he examines the item. “I’ve found quite a few flowers pressed into some of the larger books as we’ve been unpacking them. Mrs. H. has a whole box of them somewhere behind the desk.”

“That would be my mother’s handiwork,” Sherlock tells him, a smile softening his angular features as he remembers. “She could never bear to throw away the prettiest blooms, said that they should be pressed and dried and given the chance to be beautiful again later. My father used to give her grief about it, said it stained the pages.”

“Well, he’s not wrong,” John says, pointing to the page in the open book and nodding at the halo of pink and green and brown that radiates outward from the space the flower used to occupy.

“True. But she would shrug and tell him that the world was covered with the scars and stains of
violence and tragedy, and it was about time that something beautiful left a mark, for a change.”

“They sound lovely, your parents,” John says simply, a soft smile on his lips.

“They were,” Sherlock agrees, nodding as he carefully places the flower back between the pages and closes the book, laying his palm flat over the cover. “Thank you, John.”

“You’re welcome, Sherlock,” he replies, then leans back in his chair and lets out a long sigh. “So. Big plans at home tonight? Your brother taking you out for a fancy dinner to celebrate?”

Sherlock looks scandalised. “Good Lord, no. We had breakfast together this morning, and I think one meal with him on my birthday is ‘celebration’ enough. Not being forced to endure dinner with Mycroft is the best gift of all.”

Though the sound of John’s rumbling chuckle turned laugh turned giggle floating through the air is a very close second, he thinks.

“Did he at least get you a present?”

“A coat,” Sherlock says with a shrug. “Nice, but a bit formal. I’ll probably never wear it.”

“Might go well with your new scarf, though,” John nods at the open box beside Sherlock’s half-eaten cake.

“It would, actually,” Sherlock agrees, tipping his head in assent.

“So, I was thinking,” John begins, pausing for a moment, his top teeth worrying at the corner of his bottom lip. “I thought maybe—and you don’t have to say yes, or anything, but I just thought I’d ask…” He trails off and looks away for a moment, then presses his lips together and huffs out a breath from between them.

“Yes?” Sherlock prompts, looking curiously at him.

“Well, I was wondering,” John says as he looks over into Sherlock’s eyes then glances down at the desk before continuing, “are you going to finish that piece of cake?”

Sherlock huffs out a breathy chuckle as he rolls his eyes and reaches out to slide the plate towards John, who rubs his hands together in glee as he picks up Sherlock’s fork and scoops up a bite.

“What?” John asks, as Sherlock shakes his head at him while he’s swallowing down the mouthful of chocolate strawberry whipped cream perfection and then going back in for another. “It’s really good cake, you have to admit.”

“Undoubtedly,” Sherlock concedes.

“But that’s not actually what I was going to ask you,” John admits, pulling the last bite from the tines of the fork and chewing thoughtfully.

“No?” Sherlock asks, curiosity piqued, mind reeling with the list of possible things that John Watson might be hesitant to request.

“I mean, I did want the cake, don’t get me wrong,” John clarifies, licking the last bit of chocolate off of the fork before setting it down on the now empty plate. “But since you don’t have any big plans tonight or anything, I thought maybe I’d take you out for a pint, you know, since you’re legal now and all.”
“Okay,” Sherlock answers, nodding at John as something that looks suspiciously like relief steals over the library assistant’s face. “When?”

“I’ve got class at two, but I’ll be done by four,” John says, licking at the inside of his lips. “I could swing back round here then and pick you up and we could figure it out from there?”

“All right,” Sherlock agrees, warmth pooling in his stomach as he watches John’s face break into a wide grin.

“Great,” John says, clearing his throat and coughing dryly, then looking around the table and frowning. “Damn, she took my tea.”

“It’s cold, but you’re welcome to it,” Sherlock tells him, sliding his half full mug across the table.

“Thanks,” John says as he lifts it to his lips and takes a sip, tanned face scrunching immediately into a grimace of distaste. He sets the cup down and reaches for the crumpled serviette beside it and swipes it across his mouth. “Bloody hell. How do you stand it that sweet?”

Sherlock stares at him, the corners of his mouth twitching up involuntarily as John Watson look at him with a stripe of whipped cream smeared across his chin and a confused expression.

“What?” John asks suspiciously, as Sherlock’s shoulders start to shake with silent laughter.

“You’ve got,” he answers, between chuckles, shaking his head and lifting a hand to point at his own mouth, “just there.”

“Where?” John asks, swiping at his top lip and the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand, then picking up his serviette and swiping at his chin again with it, adding another smear of white cream to the one already there.

“Stop,” Sherlock insists, huffing out a breathy giggle and shaking his head. “You’re just making it worse. Hold still.”

John looks annoyed, but does as he’s told. Sherlock reaches out his right hand and lays his fingertips gently over the curve of John’s jaw, then swipes the broad pad of his thumb over the dimpled chin.

“Got it,” he says, nodding at John’s whipped-cream free chin as he pulls his hand back and examines the dollop of white on the tip of it. Without thinking he raises it to his mouth and closes his lips around it, sucking lightly.

A soft gasp reaches his ears, and Sherlock glances up to see John staring at his hand—at his thumb, in particular, where it still sits between his pursed lips. A warm flush rises up the tanned cheeks in seconds, and when the pink tip of John’s tongue darts out from between his parted lips Sherlock’s eyes can’t help but follow the motion as it slides along the length of John’s bottom lip and lingers briefly in the corner. Pulling his thumb slowly out of his mouth, he watches John’s eyes track the motion before they flick up to meet Sherlock’s, pupils wide and black against deep blue irises.

Sherlock sucks in a soft gasp of his own then, a low sizzle crackling somewhere near the base of his spine, and as John stares back at him he is almost sure that this feeling, this charge of electricity that builds inside of him when John Watson looks at him like that? John feels it too. He lets his gaze tip back down to John’s lips, and when he hears the sharp intake of breath hissed through them in response, his pulse quickens at the sound. John is right there and he’d only need to lean over a bit, just half way, just to see…
The sound of the bell ringing startles them both.

Sherlock jumps a bit at the sound, and John shakes his head slightly and pulls in a deep breath as the door swishes open and Mrs. Hudson and Molly step through it chatting amiably as they walk back into the room. Molly waves at them both as she gathers up her bag and continues her conversation with the Morningside Librarian.

“Didn’t realise the lunch period was so close to being over,” John says, rolling his shoulder and gathering up the now empty plate along with the fork and cup and dirty serviette into a pile.

“Neither did I,” Sherlock admits, clearing his throat and pushing his chair back from the table.

“You going to class?” John asks, standing up from his own seat.

“P.E. this period,” Sherlock says with a sigh. “Attendance is rather key to a passing grade, I’m afraid.”

“True,” John concedes, turning to walk back toward the circulation desk. “But you’ll be back before I have to leave?”

“I should be,” Sherlock confirms, piling up his presents neatly at his table and threading an arm through the long strap on his bag to settle it comfortably over his shoulder.

“Okay,” John nods, stepping behind the desk as Sherlock makes his way to the door. “We can set the plan for tonight then, yeah?”

“All right,” Sherlock agrees, returning his smile and waving as he steps out into the hall and the door swishes shut behind him. He pauses for a moment outside the door, takes a deep breath and silently curses the impeccably terrible timing of the school bell.

*buzzzzzz*

Lifting the front flap of his bag, he digs out his mobile to see a new photo that’s just arrived from Molly’s number: Four smiling faces gathered around a cake lit by a ring of flickering candles. He grins down at the image, slips his phone into his pocket, and sets off down the hall.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! As ever, comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated—I love to hear from you!

And in this chapter’s installment of “We are SOOOOOOO CLOSE to the TEENLICK, I swear, but in the meantime take this gorgeous piece of artistic smut and adore it as much as I do!” I present to you what may be my VERY favorite short form Johnlock fic of all time. And between you and me and the embarrassing number of fics I’ve read in the last few years, that’s saying something.

Gorgeous and graphic and filthy and romantic and sexy and poetic and funny and touching and damn near abso-fucking-lutely perfect, the fact that this fic doesn’t have like 14.2 million kudos and a kajillion bookmarks astounds me. Click on over to magikspell’s breathtakingly hot fic Sex with Sherlock and read it for the first—or hundredth—time. You can thank me later. ;)

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Hello friends, and a very happy “I’m not a lawyer or anything but it seems fair that a Thursday that falls before a holiday weekend is more or less just part of the weekend in question and therefore any day that occurs within that period of time can legally be construed as a Thursday as well” to you all!

Spent the last several days celebrating the birth of this great nation in the traditional manner: eating barbeque off of paper plates and yelling at the men and children to not to burn themselves as they polluted our atmosphere in the name of civic pride and nearly terrified the dog into an early grave. Because: America.

So a quick word about this chapter: I’ve added a few new tags, and I ask that you go ahead and read through those and heed them accordingly. Additionally, this chapter contains some fairly mild but still graphic depictions of violence, as well as a reference to physical abuse to an ancillary character. Also, watch your step there at the end, I don’t want anyone falling off a cliff. BUT HERE’S THE GOOD NEWS: If you can power through this mildly upsetting but totally necessary to the plot portion of the story, in the next chapter I promise you will find (cue orchestra and choir of angels): TEENLICK! So hang in there with me, ok?

Giant bowls of raw chocolate chip cookie dough delivered hourly by attractive, strapping young men to my incomparable beta/BFF owensm, and early birthday wishes in the form of virtual confetti and vuvuzela serenades to my second set of eyes cheytea7. And to you, dear readers, I offer all the leftover potato salad and jell-o cake you can eat for every hit, kudo, comment, bookmark, rec and subscription you’ve given this tale. I so appreciate your support and enthusiasm and I remain humbled and grateful in the face of it. Please drop me a line in the comments, you know that I look forward to your feedback with the same breathless anticipation I feel when I watch someone I gave birth to light a firecracker fuse and then PURPOSELY WAIT TO THROW IT UNTIL RIGHT BEFORE IT EXPLODES. *sigh*

Thanks so much for reading, and I’ll meet you all back here later this week for the next installment of this story which, oddly, might only contain 50% more nudity than this one does—but it's a more satisfying brand of nakedness. Stay tuned…
the nearby park, but a sudden spring storm had blown into the city, pelting the windows and roof of Morningside Academy with relentless wind and pounding rain that forced them to stay indoors instead.

It had been a slightly disappointing turn of events, really.

As sport in general has never held any particular appeal for him, Sherlock was surprised to find that this recent forced foray into distance running hasn’t been completely intolerable. He’d been skeptical, at first, lacing up his trainers and half-heartedly participating in the set of group stretching exercises led by the formidable Morningside P.E. teacher Mr. Bank. Staying near the rear of the pack, he’d prepared himself for a terribly dull hour of pointless activity as they’d set off through the heavy metal door that led from the locker room out into the alleyway behind the building, then jogged the two blocks to the entrance to the park. Bank the Tank had given them a quick lecture about minding their manners and watching their form before setting off down the winding path to lead them at a brisk pace over the wide expanse of grass and through the trees and around the broad pond set into the centre of the well maintained public garden.

It wasn’t until they’d rounded their first circuit of the park that Sherlock realised he hadn’t spent the last fifteen minutes lamenting what an enormous waste of time this entire exercise surely was. The initial burn that flared in his muscles had given way to a pleasant warmth, a low grade tingle of exertion that his brain no longer read as discomfort. The steady rhythm of his feet against the path matched the pattern of his breathing, the sensation of cool air sliding over his tongue and down his throat followed immediately by the warm rush of spent breath pushed out of his lungs and through his lips to hang in steamy wisps around his head in the chilly London air. Panting breaths and footfalls and the thud of his pulse weaving together and echoing in his head as they joined the symphony of sound all around him.

The din of the city never really fades, he’s learned. The endless bustle and commotion created by millions of people is an ever present hum, a perpetual low rumble of noise that carries on the air and thrums through the ground. He doesn’t mind it, most of the time. There’s a certain comfort in the constancy, the way it fills his ears and vibrates in his bones, a curtain of white noise that keeps the basest part of his brain occupied while leaving the rest of it free to concentrate on things that actually matter.

It wasn’t always that way.

When Mycroft packed up the house in Cornwall and moved them to the city, the relentless flow of noise had been difficult to get used to, at first. It was fascinating, to be sure—the seemingly endless onslaught of data to parse and dissect and examine. But there were moments, especially late at night, when the world around him was too filled with sound. When it was all too loud and too fast and too much and he had to cover his ears and hide away beneath the new covers on his new bed in his new room in their new home and wait for the panic to pass, for the clamour inside of his head to grow louder and stronger than the one that raged outside of it. The safety and silence of quiet nights in the house he’d grown up in were a luxury he couldn’t have prepared himself to miss, and it had taken time to adjust to the new noise, the new routine, the new normal of his life.

Running down the broad garden path with the rest of his P.E. class that first afternoon, Sherlock was amazed at how quickly the constant buzz of the city faded into the background, lost in the rush of blood through his veins and the slap of his feet on the pavement and the wind rushing by as he settled into a steady rhythm. He’d been so absorbed by the sensation that when he looked up to the group of students running just ahead of him he was surprised to find that they were turning back down the alley behind the school, stopping just short of the heavy metal door they’d exited through an hour earlier. Simultaneously exhausted and exhilarated, he shook out his heavy limbs and blew at
the fringe of curls stuck to his forehead as Mr. Bank fitted the key strung on the thick cord around his neck into the lock and pulled it open, watching them file past him back into the locker room and towards the showers.

Since that day, Sherlock had found himself rather looking forward to P.E. class, to getting out into the fresh air and losing himself in the rhythm of the run. Running indoors today hadn’t held quite the same appeal, unfortunately. He found himself annoyed by the rumble of all those feet against the hard wooden floor, the monotony of the less punishing pace, the dull echo of voices belonging to dull people discussing dull subjects bouncing off the steep walls, and the utter tedium of the exact same scenery passing by again and again and again with every lap.

It should have been awful. Unbearable, even.

And it most certainly would have been, on any other day. But on this particular day—when his stomach is full of strawberries and cake and tea and the flutter of anticipation that takes up residence there when he considers where he’ll be just a few short hours from now—Sherlock Holmes is having trouble finding it in himself to be bored.

Not that there’s anything to be overly excited about, of course.

It’s a drink, that’s all. It’s not a weekend in Paris, or a moonlight stroll by the Thames, or a candlelit dinner, or a blanket under the stars with a bottle of wine... It’s just a pint on his birthday. In the afternoon. With a friend.

It’s not a date.

John hadn’t said it was, after all. Hadn’t even hinted it was anything other than a friendly outing, just a trip to the pub to celebrate the fact that, as of today, Sherlock can legally be served a drink in one. And even if there had been that moment at the end—the one that started with the taste of whipped cream on his tongue and ended with his pulse racing in his ears when John stared at him with wide eyes and flushed cheeks and parted lips...

But this is hardly the time to be dwelling on such things.

The voices echo all around him, loud and boorish, the trademark soundtrack of boys at play—a kind of vocal insulation, a barrier of noise that distracts everyone from the reality that there are fifteen young men standing naked together in close quarters. Amidst the laughs and swearing and volley of ostensibly good natured insults, Sherlock has found that as long as he keeps his head down and stays silent he’ll be largely ignored during the post-class shower ritual. A result he finds far more palatable than the alternative.

While the water continues to beat down over his head, he runs long fingers through his soaked curls, attempting to rinse out every last trace of the hideous shampoo/soap that he’d worked into a pathetically thin lather there minutes earlier. Filling his palm with another generous handful of the hateful substance he sets about cleaning away the sweat produced by nearly an hour of running where it coated his skin and soaked the hair under his arms and between his legs. As the thick, chemical scent of some misguided approximation of pine needles wafts all around him, Sherlock finds himself wishing he had time to go home and take a proper shower, one with steaming hot water and thick hair conditioner and finely milled soap that won’t make him worry that he smells like a tree-shaped automobile air freshener.

Not that John’s likely to sniff him, or anything. But if, by some strange and unexpected series of circumstances, he were to find himself pressed against the rough plaster of a dirty wall in a dimly lit back corridor of a pub, held in place by strong hands curled around his hips while pink lips trail
softly up the curve of his jaw and a slightly stubbled cheek scrapes against his own as a tanned nose tucks itself into the space just under his ear and inhales deeply...

*Really* not the time.

Taking a deep breath he closes his eyes and tries to banish the image from his mind, to replace it with something innocuous and repetitive and distracting.

*Three point one four one five nine two six five three five eight nine seven nine three two three eight four six two six four three three eight three two seven nine…*

Nope. Not distracting enough.

*Actinium, aluminum, americium, antimony, argon, arsenic, astatine, barium, berkelium, beryllium, bismuth, bohrium, boron, bromine, cadmium, caesium, calcium, and…um…*

Still not working.

*Mrs. Hudson in her nightie.*

*Mycroft in his pyjamas.*

“Move it, Anderson!” a voice booms from the entrance to the shower room.

*Sebastian Wilkes.*

Oh. Well, *that* worked like a charm.

“I’m moving as fast as I can,” insists the whiny voice of Phillip Anderson, followed immediately by the crack of a towel being whipped. “OW! What the hell, Seb?”

“What’s the matter, Phil? I thought you liked it rough,” Sebastian sneers. “At least that’s what your dad told me.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, heaves out a weary sigh, then reaches forward and shuts off the taps. As the flow of water above him slows and ceases, he runs his palms over his hair to press out as much excess moisture as he can before shaking his head rapidly to dislodge the mess of wet curls from where they’re stuck to his scalp. He waits a few seconds as the last of his classmates leave the shower room, then turns and walks towards the exit, picking up a towel from the tall stack by the door and fastening it around his slim hips before grabbing another and rubbing it roughly over his wet head as he steps back out into the locker room.

“I’m going to have a bruise there for a week, you prick,” Phil admonishes, pulling on a pair of briefs and twisting his waist to stare down over his hip at the red welt rising the back of his upper thigh.

“Next time move your skinny arse when I tell you to,” Wilkes replies, carelessly propping one leg up onto the long bench set into the centre of the wide aisle that cuts between the rows of lockers on either side and running his towel over his calves and thighs and the junction between them. Bending his head low to scrub his neck and shoulders dry, Sebastian doesn’t notice Philip Anderson twirling the towel in his hand by one corner, doesn’t see him flick his wrist, doesn’t hear the lightning-fast swish of it through the air until he feels the sharp smack of it against the swell of his left arse cheek. “Fucking hell! That hurt!”

“Good,” Anderson replies with a shrug, the smile on his face not quite in sync with the edge of anger in his tone as he says it. “I meant it to.”
A series of chuckles sound around him, several of the other boys smirking as they stand in front of open lockers and pull out the clothes they’d stashed there earlier and start to tug them on over damp heads and sticky, wet skin.

“It’s not funny,” Sebastian mutters sulkily, as he rubs his fingers over the angry red welt rising on his skin, shaking his head and glaring at Anderson.

“Yeah, it actually is,” Philip insists, the small smirk on his face stretching wider in proportion to the increase in the volume of the laughter around him. “Besides, what’s one more bruise to you? Christ, did you get run over by a bus, mate?”

Sebastian’s posture stiffens slightly—just a momentary stillness, a mere fraction of a second that comes and goes without anyone else taking notice of it, the easy laughter and conversation continuing all around in its wake. Sherlock pauses in the middle of turning the combination dial on his locker to watch Wilkes from the corner of his eye, sees the moment when the other boy’s shoulders relax and the mask of indifference descends over his features again.

“Rough practice the last few days out on the pitch,” Sebastian explains with a shrug, pulling out a rumpled pair of grey boxer briefs and snapping them straight and flat by the waistband.

“Serves you right, Wilkes,” a tall ginger haired boy shouts across the open space, pulling at the edge of the towel wrapped around his own waist and lifting it to reveal a mottled series of small round blue-black marks that mar his freckled hip. “Caught me with your cleats three separate times in the last scrimmage, you tosser.”

“Maybe if you spent more time actually running down the field instead of flat on your back, you wouldn’t get run over, Perkins,” Seb fires back.

“Looks like the entire team took turns stomping on you,” Phil says, nodding down at the pattern of bruising over Sebastian’s thighs.

“You play hard, you’re gonna get hit,” Wilkes says with a shrug. “Funny how you’re the only one on the team who manages not to get scraped up, Phil. Must be nice to stand there by the net, safe and sound while the rest of us make sure the other team never has the ball long enough to make you actually do any work.”

“Oh, fuck you, Seb,” Anderson fires back, sitting down to pull on a pair of socks.

“All right, if you insist,” Sebastian says with a weary sigh. “But you’ll have bruises all up and down those pretty thighs by the time I get done with you.”

There’s a chorus of hoots and jeers as another member of the football team twirls his own towel and whips it forward to crack against the unmarked patch of skin at the small of Anderson’s back. Phil yelps in pain, reaching around to grab at the end of the improvised weapon and yanking hard enough to pull the boy on the other end of it forward so he topples face first into Sebastian Wilkes and they both fall back against the bench.

“There’s another bruise, since you like them so much,” Phil says smugly, as Seb gets to his feet then darts out a hand to roughly slap the back of Anderson’s head.

“Look around, Phil. Bruises separate the real athletes from the pussies,” he says snidely as he bends over and holds open the waist of his pants and steps into them. “Guess we know which one you are.”

There’s another round of catcalls and laughs as Phil shakes his head while pushing his arms through
the sleeves of his shirt and then begins to button it up.

Looking around the room at the group of students in various stages of undress, Sherlock is surprised to find that, crude word choice notwithstanding, he’s inclined to agree with Sebastian’s assessment. A cursory look over the marks (or lack thereof) on the numerous expanses of exposed skin is a fairly simple method of determining which of the people around him are involved in extracurricular activities that involve regular (and occasionally violent) bodily contact. The other members of the football team, for instance, all sport bruises on their thighs and calves and shins—the telltale evidence of contact with hard cleats in neat, evenly spaced patterns, as well as impact contusions from misplaced kicks, dark and deep and fading in colour from the centre of the injury—similar to many of those that mark the flesh on Sebastian’s thighs and buttocks and lower back.

But not identical.

As Seb Wilkes pulls his briefs up and over his thighs, Sherlock peers at him through the fringe of wet curls falling down over his forehead, narrowing his eyes and examining the pattern of bruises…and time slows to a crawl.

There are cleat marks (small, dark, evenly spaced) on Sebastian’s right thigh, two sizeable round contusions (the approximate size and shape of the toe of a shoe) on his left shin, one large area of lighter bruising on his hip and buttock (an impact injury, consistent with a hard fall to the ground during play), and a series of other marks, as well. A pattern of bruises in various states of healing (some fresh and new, others fading), darkening the flesh in an almost linear pattern (straight and long and ending in a single deeper mark) as though they were made by repeated striking with something pliable yet strong terminating in a vaguely square shaped object made of heavier material…

Oh.

It’s all right there, laid out before him, a series of breadcrumbs below his feet that he hadn’t realised were all leading to this moment. The bravado, the casual cruelty, the anger over his own perceived inadequacies, the tendency to assert and maintain control over those less powerful than himself, the voluntary engagement in activities that will cause injury as a way to mask evidence of the (repeated and persistent) beatings he’s received.

Who did this to you, Sebastian?

The skin on his forearms is clear and unblemished (no attempt to deflect the blows) his fingers and knuckles show no signs that he’s attempted to physically defend himself (or anyone else), his father lives abroad in America (Sebastian talks ad nauseum about his yearly summer visits to the states), he doesn’t have any siblings, and his mother never remarried after the divorce and it’s just the two of them in their posh, central London apartment. Which means that his abuser must be—

“What the hell are you lookin’ at?” a voice snarls, and in that instant time resumes—the world around him bursting into a flurry of activity once again as Sherlock looks up to meet the eye of one nearly naked, and very angry, Sebastian Wilkes. The chatter around them quickly fades as all eyes focus the confrontation in progress.

Sherlock considers the question, his knee jerk reaction is to deny that he’s been looking at Wilkes at all—but as he had been surreptitiously (though not as surreptitiously as he’d hoped, clearly) examining him, he expects that outright denial wouldn’t be a particularly effective strategy in this case. He’s still forming his response when Sebastian takes a step forward and glares down at him where he stands.
Sherlock Holmes is not a short man. He’s slight, to be sure, but at a height of just over six feet, he’s several centimetres taller than the British national average for young men in his age range, and taller than majority of the other boys currently assembled in the locker room. At the moment, however, dripping wet and clad only in a pitifully small towel with Sebastian Wilkes (who has eight centimetres and two stone on him) puffed up and looming angrily, he feels suddenly small.

“Have you gone deaf, or something, Holmes?” Sebastian demands, his voice growing louder now, echoing off the hard walls and floor as the other students look on in silence, smirking as he gestures a hand down the length of his bare chest and looks at Sherlock questioningly. “Were you, or were you not staring at my bare arse?”

“Of course I was,” Sherlock admits, heaving out a sigh and affecting a bored tone. “The possibility of even the slightest glimpse of your posterior is the only reason I come to PE, Sebastian.”

A few surprised laughs sound around them, but quiet immediately when Seb Wilkes snaps his head around to stare down the offenders. One or two sets of feet shuffle uncomfortably over the hard floor, but no one moves to interfere in the scene unfolding before them. Turning his gaze back to Sherlock, Sebastian narrows his eyes and regards him with hard eyes. “Who said you could look at my arse? Who said you could look at me at all?”

“As you were bent over not three feet in front of my locker while loudly discussing the proliferation of bruises across the arse in question, I could hardly avoid seeing it,” Sherlock replies, pulling his shoulders back and returning the taller boy’s stare unflinchingly.

“Like what you saw, did you?” Sebastian inquires, the corner of his mouth curling up into an ugly grin, disingenuous and cold.

“Not particularly,” Sherlock answers casually, lifting one exposed shoulder in an indifferent shrug.

“Oh that’s right, I forgot,” Sebastian says with a smirk, nodding at Sherlock patronisingly. “Not really your type, am I? You prefer dark meat, I hear.”

“You seem very interested in my preferences, Sebastian,” Sherlock says, tilting his head and looking at him thoughtfully. “Why is that, do you think?”

“I don’t give a damn what you like, Sherly,” Sebastian Wilkes hisses, a look of disgust stealing over his features as he stalks forward to loom menacingly over Sherlock. “I’m not a faggot.”

“And yet, here you are, standing in nothing but your pants while looming over a nearly naked man and demanding to know whether he finds your arse attractive,” Sherlock says coolly, raising an eyebrow curiously. He opens his mouth to continue the thought, but before he can speak Sebastian lunges forward and slams his forearm into Sherlock’s bare chest, pressing him roughly against the bank of lockers behind him and knocking the wind out of his lungs.

As the back of his head smacks against the metal locker door, Sherlock struggles to see through the shower of stars that fill his field of vision, gasping as the breath rushes back into his lungs. Red faced and furious, Sebastian Wilkes slides the arm pinning him up to press uncomfortably against the base of his throat.

“Calm down, Seb,” Sherlock hears Philip Anderson say from somewhere behind his assailant, a touch of anxiety colouring the nasally drawl. “Bank will be back soon, it’s not worth it.”

As the last half of Anderson’s warning sinks in, Sherlock turns his head and looks towards the far corner of the room, eyes searching out the small, window encased office where Reginald Bank
customarily stands, imposing and authoritative with his beefy arms crossed over his chest as he monitors the actions and behaviour of the students in his charge.

It’s empty.

“That’s right, sweetheart,” Seb jeers, lips curling up in a menacing grin. “The Tank’s not here to protect you now, is he?”

As the truth of Sebastian’s words sink in, the pressure on his throat increases and Sherlock fights against the swell of panic that rises within him at the realisation. He shrinks back slightly, turning his face away from the hot rush of Seb’s breath as it spills through his sneering lips, eyes darting to the faces of the other boys he can see from the position Wilkes has him wedged in. They’re looking on with expressions that range from amusement to horror—but no one moves to interfere.

“Mr. Bank could be back at any moment, Sebastian,” Sherlock says evenly, keeping his voice calm despite the extra effort needed to speak at all with the constriction to his windpipe. “And if this is the scene he returns to, I doubt this will end well for you.”

“Come on, Seb,” Anderson chimes in, stepping up beside Wilkes and laying a hand over the flexed bicep currently pinning Sherlock to the lockers. “If the Tank sees this, you’ll be off the team.”

“You’re right, Phil,” his assailant says with a small nod, and Sherlock allows a small sigh of relief to escape from his lips—then immediately draws it back in as a cruel smile stretches over the mouth hovering just inches from Sherlock’s own. “You better go keep watch, then.”

“I don’t think that’s—” Anderson begins, tightening his grip slightly on his friend’s arm before Sebastian shakes it off roughly, leaning harder against Sherlock in the process.

“I don’t give a damn what you think, Anderson,” Wilkes snarls, turning his head to shoot a look of warning in his direction. “Now go and watch the door.”

Sherlock watches a series of emotions flicker over Philip Anderson’s face, micro-expressions of fear and anger and panic settling over his features briefly until resignation takes up residence and he starts to back away towards the main entrance door to the locker room.

“You go with him, Perkins,” Sebastian orders over his shoulder, a smug grin stealing over his face as the boy immediately complies, pulling on his shirt as he crosses through Sherlock’s field of vision in the direction of the hallway at a run. Wilkes turns his attention back to the young man pinned beneath him. “Now we won’t be interrupted. It’s just you and me, Sherly.”

“And approximately eleven witnesses,” Sherlock reminds him, tipping his chin at the sea of faces all focused on them.

“Oh don’t worry about them,” Sebastian smirks. “They’ve all gone temporarily blind. Isn’t that right, boys?”

No one speaks, but the sudden shuffle of feet against the floor and the clang of locker doors opening and closing and the swish of clothing being pulled on is answer enough. Sherlock watches them turn away one by one, the panic he’d managed to keep at bay during the last few minutes suddenly swelling and threatening to consume him. He swallows against the feeling, the action made even more difficult by the constant press of the arm still trapping him against the wall.

“You don’t want to do this, Sebastian,” Sherlock begins, attempting to wriggle free, trying to gain any leverage he can but finding that in his current position his wiry frame and quick reflexes are no match for Wilkes’ brute strength.
“That’s where you’re wrong, Sherly,” Seb tells him, the genuine grin and pleasant tone of voice somehow more frightening than the snarling anger he’d exhibited before as he presses forward against the pale column of a throat under his arm. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this.”

“Why?” Sherlock asks, a note of desperation in the query as he lifts his hands to claw at the strong arm that continues, little by little, to restrict his breath.

“Because you think you’re so much better than everyone else, Holmes,” Sebastian tells him matter-of-factly, as though he’s answering a question posed in a civil conversation, and not while attempting to slowly suffocate another human being. “Someone’s got to teach you a little respect.”

“Is that what she says?” Sherlock croaks desperately, his voice barely a rough whisper under the pressure of the iron grip at his throat.

“Who?” Sebastian Wilkes says, a confused look passing over his face as he stares down at him, and the pressure against Sherlock’s throat lessens just enough that he can suck in enough breath to reply.

“Your mother,” Sherlock continues, keeping his voice low enough so that Sebastian has to lean in to listen. “Is that what she tells you? When she brings out the belt?”

Sebastian reacts immediately, a flash of fear tearing across his features as he drops the arm pinning Sherlock and jumps back as though he’s been slapped, the moment of confusion giving Sherlock just enough time to turn away, his eyes locked on the open office door in the corner of the room. If he can make it across the room and through that door he can lock it behind him, put a significant barrier between himself and Wilkes, buy himself some time until their instructor returns. It’s not a perfect plan, but it’s the only one he’s got.

He’s barely taken a step away when a large hand clamps itself around his bicep, and he’s being flung back against the same row of lockers he’d been attempting to flee from. His shoulder collides roughly with the door of one, the protruding shape of a combination dial poking into the tender skin above his pelvis with excruciating force. Strong fingers close over his right wrist, twisting his arm up behind his back and spinning him around and suddenly he’s being slammed face first against the lockers, a powerful body pinning him against the cool metal. Hot breath ghosts over his cheek as the arm behind him is wrenched up higher, his involuntary cry of pain eliciting what is unmistakably a smile from the mouth pressed close to his ear.

“You think you’re so clever,” Sebastian murmurs, his voice low and dangerous, his mouth so close to Sherlock’s ear that he can feel the slight scrape of teeth over his skin, and it sends a shiver of fear and revulsion down his arched spine. “That mouth of yours is going to get you into big trouble one day, you know.”

“You don’t have to do this, Seb,” Sherlock pants, the pain blooming from his wrenched shoulder making his voice tight and slightly shrill as he tries to reason with his attacker. “You don’t have to be like her.”

Sebastian’s reply comes in the form of fingers twining roughly through the wet curls at the back of his head that yank his face sharply back and then slam it forward again. This impact sets Sherlock’s teeth colliding sharply with his lips, and the coppery taste of blood floods over his tongue.

“Banks is on his way back, Seb!” Philip Anderson calls out suddenly, his voice breathy and panicked as he approaches from somewhere to Sherlock’s right. “Perkins ran out to ask him a question and slow him down but they’ll be here any second!”

“Fuck!” Seb snarls, and Sherlock finds himself being pulled away from the bank of lockers, one of
Wilkes' arms coiling around his shoulders and circling him in a rough headlock while yanking back on the arm still wrenched behind his back. He steers Sherlock away from the door that their instructor is sure to be entering at any moment. “Ok, Sherly, You like looking so much—how about we give the world a really good look at you.”

His bare feet struggle to find purchase on the slick cement floor, but scrabble uselessly against it as he finds himself being half dragged, half pushed down the narrow hallway at the other end of the locker room. There’s a sudden rush of cold, wet air as Sebastian lets go of his twisted arm and heaves open the heavy metal door to the alleyway behind the school, then shoves him through it. Sherlock stumbles forward, the momentum not allowing him to get his footing and he’s falling forward, the alley floor rushing up towards him. In a moment of self-preservation he twists at the waist and turns his shoulders, attempting not to land face first, and as he descends towards the ground the back of his head glances painfully against the edge of the large metal skip across from the door, and he lands hard on the crumbling pavement, back pressed up against the filthy trash receptacle.

“You keep your fucking mouth shut, Holmes,” a cold voice warns. Looking up through the pouring rain, Sherlock sees Sebastian Wilkes silhouetted against the open door, the look on his face equal parts fury and fear. The door begins to swing inward again, and with his senses momentarily dulled it takes him a moment to remember that it locks from the inside—that if it closes he’ll be locked out. He shakes his head against the pain that throbs through his skull, and scrambles to his feet, crossing the distance between himself and the heavy door, reaching it just as it closes. He listens to the metallic snick of the latch as it catches, then falls forward against it. He presses his eyes closed tight, rests his palms and cheek against the cold metal for a long moment, then takes in a deep breath and stands up straight.

The key to survival in nearly any circumstance lies in keeping a cool head, assessing the situation, and proceeding in the most logical manner possible. There’s always a way forward, an answer to the puzzle at hand, one only needs to step back and fit the pieces together correctly and the solution will present itself.

Standing here in a dirty alleyway in front of a locked door in the rain and the wind while injured and nearly naked, he’s finding it a bit difficult to believe that’s true.

A sudden gust of wind against his back, and the sting of cold rain that comes with it, jolts him out of his confusion. Crossing over to the skip he’d fallen against earlier, he crouches down and uses it as a shield against the relentless wind and rain, giving himself a moment to take stock of his options. He’s injured (split lip, assorted bruises, a wrenched shoulder, and an exploratory probe at the knot on the back of his head coats his fingertips with enough blood to be bothersome, but not alarming) but the wounds all seem to be superficial. He’s somehow managed to keep possession of the towel around his hips, so he’s not entirely naked (a definite plus). He’s knows exactly where he is, and he’s familiar with the area and that’s in his favor as well. Despite the grim circumstances, he actually has several options to resolve it.

He could pound on the locker room door, it’s quite likely that someone would eventually hear him and open it…and then see the state he’s in and ask dozens of intrusive questions inevitably ending in more drama than he’d prefer to endure. He could walk around the building but it’s doubtful he can casually walk through the front doors soaking wet and bleeding and dressed only in a towel. He can hardly stroll into the nearby bakery and ask to use their phone. He can’t call for help because his mobile is currently in his gym locker with the rest of his possessions, warm and dry and safe…

A shiver runs over his skin as he realises his teeth are chattering and he’s trembling, his body’s attempt to elevate his plummeting body temperature. Whatever he does, he can’t stay here. PE class
is officially ended by now and John will be expecting him, waiting to talk to him, to solidify their plans for tonight before he has to leave for class in just over an hour. An idea occurs to him suddenly, and of all his options it seems the least ridiculous. Which, as he considers the plan, is saying something.

Tightening the towel so that it’s snugly fastened around his hips, he stands up and walks quickly toward the end of the alley, mindful of where he steps but still cringing slightly as stones and various bits of street debris dig into the soles of his bare feet. Looking around the edge of the building, he’s relieved to see that the sidewalks are nearly deserted, no blurry figures making mad dashes between doorways through the pounding rain or moving towards him hunched under umbrellas for well over two blocks in either direction.

Eyeing the steady flow of traffic passing in both directions on the street, he looks beyond it to the small private parking lot on the corner. He can’t make out the details of the specific automobiles through the rain, but that’s not terribly important right now. He needs to get from here to there, attracting as little attention as possible, and he’ll worry about identifying the correct vehicle once he’s safely hidden from view amongst them.

Trying to get a feel for the timing of the traffic lights on the corner, he waits through a few cycles gauging the best moment to chance the half-block sprint from his current location to his destination. He clamps his jaw shut tightly against the wave of shivers that wrack his limbs, tries to keep his breathing even and regular as he hugs his arms around his own torso tightly, rubbing them over his clammy skin in a vain attempt to generate some much needed warmth. It’s not working.

As the last of the latest batch of traffic speeds by, he counts slowly in his mind—waiting for the bright green light in the distance to change to red. When it does, he throws a quick glance in either direction, then darts out into the street, sprinting as fast as his long legs will allow him, keeping his head down and hoping that no student or teacher currently in class on that side of the building will pick that exact moment to gaze out the window.

It’s not a long distance, but the effects of cold and soreness and the exhaustion that comes after a surge in adrenaline combine to make it seem much longer than it is, so that by the time he finds himself slipping into the scant space between two cars parked in the Morningside Academy staff lot, he’s breathing heavily and his muscles are quivering with exertion. He ducks down between two vehicles, leaning heavily against one of them as he catches his breath. Adjusting his feet beneath him, he winces at a sudden twinge in his foot, then pulls out a small piece of glass from the edge of his left heel with a slight grimace of pain. It’s a shallow cut, and the least of his worries at the moment.

Staying in a crouch, he slowly creeps between the parked cars, stopping occasionally to look through the windows, growing more and more frustrated with the process until he spots exactly the vehicle he’s looking for. Making his way to the small red four door model, he looks quickly over the windscreen, examines the front bumper, edges along the side of the vehicle to swipe the rain away off of the right side passenger window and peer down into the back seat. A weary smile stretches over his lips, and he heaves out a sigh of relief as he reaches up to pull at the door handle…and finds it locked.

Damn.

He repeats the process with the other three doors, with the same result. Swearing under his breath, he pounds his forehead lightly against the flaking paint on the door a few times, then rises up on his toes to make sure he doesn’t have any obvious observers. With cold, clumsy fingers he pulls the towel from his waist, wraps it a few times around the crook of his arm, then positions his now
padded elbow carefully at the centre of the small triangular pane of glass beside the back passenger window. He counts silently down in his head:

3…2…1…

He pulls his arm several inches from the window, then slams it hard against the glass. Nothing happens. He repeats the motion with greater force, and thankfully the glass shatters under the second blow. He turns to snake his other forearm through opening, patting his fingers over the inside of the door until he finds the lock release and presses it forward. He yanks at the door handle again with trembling fingers, then tugs it open and crawls into the back seat of the vehicle.

Pulling the door shut behind him, he unwinds the towel from his arm and shakes it out. It’s not as wet as he feared it might be, so he uses it soak up as much moisture as he can from the surface of his skin before pressing a corner of it cautiously to the throbbing bump on the back of his head. It comes away stained bright red, but a quick scrub to the back of his neck doesn’t reveal that an overly large amount of blood has been running from the wound.

Staring down at the blood stained towel on his lap, he finds that while he’s still shivering uncontrollably, he’s grateful to be out of the wind and rain. With a deep sigh, he lifts himself up with shaky legs to slip the towel around his waist once again, fastening it securely around his hips. He wraps his arms tightly around his torso, lays down over the seat, curls up into the smallest ball he can manage…and waits.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! As ever, comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated—I love to hear from you!

And in this week’s installment of “Can you smell that? That sweet, heady scent wafting on the breeze? That’s the smell of TEENLICK and it’s aaaaaaaaaalmost here!” I have something very special for you to enjoy while you endure this last leg of the long, long wait.

When I’m up to my neck in publishing a new fic, one of the most bothersome side effects is that I don’t have much time or energy to READ, and as I’ve spent the last few years of my life enjoying a steady diet of Johnlock stories, my empty fangirl tummy starts to grumble in protest. So when I need a break from all the stress of writing, I often pull out an old favorite and re-read it to wind down.

This particular rec is the very first Johnlock fic I ever fell in love with—a beautiful little friends-to-lovers tale that was written way back during the post series 1 hiatus. In [here, our minutes grow hours](#) author the_arc5 paints a charming portrait of our beloved boys as they navigate the winding path from who they are when they meet to who they were always meant to be. It’s 6,710 words that are as precious and perfect when I read them today as they were when I first read them years ago. This is the fic that sparked my love for all things Johnlock, and if I could leave a hundred kudos and shower it in rose petals, I would. I hope you love it too.

Happy reading, see you in chapter eleven!
Hello Friends, and a very happy “On the seventh day, God rested—but Sara didn’t because she’s not a slacker! And technically, it’s the seventh day depending on where you start counting, so if you happened to start counting on a Friday that would make today Thursday! Or not. I don’t even know anymore. *sigh*” to you all!

Well, I promised you last week that if you hung in there with me through the angst that this chapter would contain your first taste of TEENLICK—and let it never be said that I am not a woman of my word! (Unless said “word” includes implicit promises involving specific days of the week, in which case all bets are off. Naturally.) Will a certain golden haired hero swoop in to save our poor sweet shivering Sherlock from the ravages of injury and hypothermia? DUH! But maybe read on just so you can be sure.

A basket of litter box trained kittens to my amazing BFF/Beta owensm, and a pickle, ice cream & brisket burrito (or whatever pregnant women are eating these days) to my girl cheytea7. I gave Team Beta a workout this week with my last minute plot structure alterations and general arm flailing and hair pulling—and everyone made it out alive. Some weeks we’re not all that lucky…

Boundless thanks and nose nuzzles to each and every person behind the clicks, kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions, recs and comments this little tale has accumulated. You are all precious snowflakes and I want to run around in a giant storm of you and catch you all on my tongue! Woah. That didn’t seem nearly as creepy in my head but it’s out there now and I’m too tired to come up with anything else so it stays. Sorry. Please feel free to drop me a line in the comments if you’re so inclined, you know I love hearing from you even more than I can’t stand it when some ass hat takes up two parking spots with their brand new car just so no one dings their pristine doors and I’m all “Listen, Trevor, your 2015 Chevy Equinox isn’t exactly a Ferrari so maybe stop being a tool and park like someone who has a freaking SOUL.”

Thanks so much for reading, and I’ll see you all next week!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was strangely silent.

Dark and still and oddly peaceful, he floated further down, the noise of the world above now lost and muffled and distant.

The lack of sound surprised him. Just seconds before, his ears had been filled with the rush of the wind and the hiss of it through the bare branches of the trees and the sweet song of the fieldfares and blackcaps and waxwings flitting down from their perches to peck at the broad pans of seeds and crumbs and chopped fruits Mummy and Marie kept stocked to sustain them through the long, harsh winters.

There was the crunch of paws pacing back and forth over packed snow, punctuated by the staccato of sharp barks and distressed whines and the steady tap of his small feet against the frozen surface as
he carefully made his way toward the bright red and yellow orb where it lay fifteen feet away from the edge of the pond…

*CRAACK*

It wasn’t the sound itself that startled him, it was the sheer volume of it, harsh and sudden and jarring. It echoed through his skull as the world shifted, tilting and wobbling and pitching him sideways, his small body slamming into the ice beneath his feet—then falling through it.

The shock pushed the breath out of his lungs, air rushes from between his lips in a curtain of bubbles as the frigid water rose to cover his face. There was light above him, shimmering and bright and inviting and he knew that he needed to get back to it. From somewhere far away he could hear the muffled sound of Redbeard barking as he flapped his arms and tried to kick his feet—but the water had soaked into his trousers and mittens and thick winter coat and it was so cold it burned, it pulled at him and dragged him further down and he couldn’t move, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t cry out for help…

A sudden shadow blotted out the light and he felt a rough tug at his collar as the water rushed all around him and suddenly he was being pulled up, up, UP...and all at once the world burst back into sound—barking and birdsong and panting breaths and ragged coughs and the wet slap of trembling fingers against his cheeks.

“Sherlock!” the voice commanded, panicked and worried and markedly deeper than it had been just a few short months before when it bade him goodbye as he watched its owner leave for school. “Please—open your eyes and look at me.”

And he wanted to, he really did, but he was just so tired. Even when a wet nose snuffled at his ear and a warm tongue lapped at his cheek he could barely work up the energy to crack open his eyes and squint against the brightness to see the pale face of his older brother, red cheeked and wide eyed and terrified as it loomed over him, framed by a halo of sunlight and a ring of light blue winter sky.

“What were you thinking?” Mycroft demanded, the stern tone of his voice broken by a slight tremor that played at the edges of it while he worked to free the buttons on Sherlock’s sodden coat and yanked it open.

“R-r-rrr-edbeard’s b-b-ball…” Sherlock began, his jaw quivering so badly he could scarcely form the words. “It w-w-w-went out on the p-p-ppond.”

“And yet Redbeard was sensible enough not to go after it,” Mycroft snapped, pulling Sherlock up to a seated position and yanking the soaked garment from his shoulders before tossing it aside then dragging down the zip on his own coat and shrugging quickly out of it.

“I th-th-thought it w-w-w-would hold m-m-m-me.” Sherlock glared up at his brother and mustering up as much indignation as he could, under the circumstances.

“That was very foolish of you, Sherlock.” Mycroft shook his head, wrapping the warm, dry coat over his brother’s slim, shaking shoulders and bundling the thick fabric around him before snatching the woolen hat off of his own head and pulling it down firmly over the sodden mess of curls already beginning to freeze at the tips. “You could have drowned.”

“I d-d-didn’t d-dr-drown, M-m-myc”. “Only because it’s time for tea and Mummy sent me to find you,” Mycroft argued, reaching into the pockets of the coat wrapped around his brother and retrieving a soft set of mittens that he pushed
over Sherlock’s tiny fists. “Do you know what would have happened if I hadn’t heard Redbeard barking? If I hadn’t gotten here in time?”

“B-b-but y-y-you did.”

“Yes, this time,” Mycroft said as he pulled in a deep, shaky breath, then clenched his jaw and reached down to grasp Sherlock’s small, cold, pale cheeks between his palms. “I’m your brother, it’s my job to keep you safe. But I won’t always be there, Sherlock, so you have to learn to be more careful.”

Sherlock’s eyes welled with tears as he looked up into his older brother’s earnest gaze. “I’m s-s-sorry.”

“I know you are,” Mycroft said, his face softening as he leaned forward to press his lips against Sherlock’s smooth forehead. “Good lord, you’re freezing. Come on, let’s get you warmed up.”

Sherlock nodded as Mycroft got to his feet then bent over to scoop him up, looping small, shaking arms around his broad shoulders and hugging him close as he trudged through the snow towards the side of the house. The wide kitchen door swung open and Marie came running down the path to meet them, followed quickly by Mummy and Father, and he rested his head against Mycroft’s chest as warm hands reached for him and a chorus of voices echoed all around:

“Sherlock!”

“What happened?”

“Are you all right?”

“Sherlock, love, can you hear me?”

“Sherlock!” a voice says, demanding and worried and so very close by. As a sudden rush of cold wind brushes over his skin he curls against it, hugging his arms more tightly around his knees in an attempt to stop the constant shivering. Strong hands grasp his shoulders, pull at his limbs and yank him upward as warm fingers tap lightly, but insistently, against his cheeks. “Come on, open your eyes and look at me, okay?”

“Leave me alone, Mycroft,” Sherlock whines, turning his face away from the chilly blast of wind and attempting to go back to sleep.

“It’s me, Sherlock,” the voice insists with a note of alarm as strong arms wrestle him into a sitting position. A sudden warmth envelops him then, settles onto his shoulders and over his back and closes around his crossed arms and shivering torso. He nuzzles his face down into the softness that surrounds him, chasing the welcome heat and the scent of cheap shampoo and deodorant soap and the faintest hint of mildew as he smiles to himself, thinking: it smells just like…

“John?” His voice sounds rough and sluggish in his own ears as he cracks his eyes open, blinking at the familiar face that swims into view—pink lips and tanned cheeks and blue eyes ringed by gold lashes—and he smiles, then winces as the expression pulls at his split lip, re-opening the cut.

“Yeah, it’s me,” John says with a note of relief, nodding as he fastens the buttons of his coat around Sherlock’s shaking frame. “What are you doing out here?”

“I broke your window,” Sherlock confesses, looking guilty.

“Yeah, I can see that, but that’s not what I meant.” John crawls into the car and kneels in the scant
space beside Sherlock on the back seat, pulling the door mostly closed behind him. He quickly works open the buttons on his cardigan then tugs off the jumper and drapes it over the thin towel at Sherlock’s waist to cover his bare knees. “What the hell are you doing hiding in my car naked and wet and bleeding?”

“I’ll pay for the repairs on the window,” Sherlock tells him, watching John reach over him to tuck the edges of the jumper tightly under his pale, quivering thighs.

“Sod the window, Sherlock!” John replies, then tamps down the touch of hysteria that’s crept into his tone before reaching out to grasp Sherlock’s cheeks between his warm palms then looking hard into his eyes, thumbs dragging each lid up and down in turns. “I don’t give a damn about the window. Right now, I’m worried about you. Who did this to you?”

“I had P.E. today,” Sherlock explains, shrugging at the look of displeased admonition John aims at him.

“Oh, really? What was the lesson? Naked bare knuckle boxing?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Everything about this situation is ridiculous, Sherlock.” John slides the fingers of his right hand around the side of Sherlock’s head to cup the back of his skull while pulling the cuff of his shirt up over the heel of his left hand and pressing it carefully to Sherlock’s split lip. Sherlock hisses in pain at the pressure against his mouth. “That hurts!”

“Sorry,” John says softly, wincing apologetically while continuing to wipe gently at the injury. “This doesn’t look too bad, I don’t think. Won’t know for sure until it’s cleaned up properly.” He pulls his hand away from Sherlock’s head, eyes widening in surprise at the bright red smear of blood that coats his fingers.

“Hit my head on a skip,” Sherlock explains, a slight slur in his voice.

“That’s it, I’m calling an ambulance,” John says firmly, digging into his front pocket to fish out his mobile. Sherlock feels a swell of panic rising up behind his ribs as he threads his trembling arms through the sleeves of John’s coat wrapped around him.

“No, don’t,” Sherlock says, shaking his head, his voice tight and pleading as he pushes one hand out of the cuff of the coat and clamps it over the mobile in John’s hand. “I d-d-don’t want to go to A&E.”

“You’ve suffered a head injury, Sherlock,” John replies calmly, attempting to pull the phone out of Sherlock’s tight grip. “You could have a concussion.”

“I am not concussed, John.”

“Let’s leave that diagnosis up to a doctor, shall we?”

“You’re a doctor,” Sherlock points out.

John rolls his eyes. “I am not. I’m a first year medical student and a part time librarian, Sherlock. I’m hardly qualified to treat a major injury.”

“Oh, don’t be so d-d-dramatic,” Sherlock insists wearily, taking in a deep breath and concentrating on keeping his voice even and stutter-free. “A slight bump to the head is hardly life-threatening.”
“We don’t know how ‘slight’ it is. I don’t want to take any chances.”

“They’ll ask questions, John. They’ll want to involve the authorities.”

“Yeah, well, maybe they should be involved, Sherlock.”

“I don’t see why,” Sherlock complains.

“Of course you don’t,” John sighs, closing his hand over Sherlock’s and attempting to work his warm fingers under the cold ones still clutched around his phone.

“Please?” Sherlock asks him, his voice quiet and plaintive—and something in John’s resolve seems to break at the plea, his shoulders relaxing a bit as his gaze softens. He nods resignedly. Sherlock takes a shaky breath and continues. “Now, you’ve already examined my pupils and found nothing untoward, correct?”

“Dilation is even and equally responsive,” John confirms, if a bit grudgingly.

“What other symptoms should you look for?” Sherlock prompts, while attempting to sit up a bit straighter and looking at him expectantly.

“Headache?” John asks, still looking uncertain.

“Nothing inconsistent with a minor blow to the skull.”

“Any nausea? Vomiting?” John continues, his tone becoming more confident.

“Neither.”

“Loss of consciousness?”

“No.”

“Sherlock you were unconscious when I found you!” John points out, looking frustrated.

“I was asleep, John,” his patient explains, rolling his eyes. “I was waiting out here for quite a while, after all. I got bored.”

“Naturally,” John sighs, shaking his head. “Any ringing in your ears?”

“None.”

John drags one extended finger through the air, watching Sherlock’s eyes follow it back and forth as he slowly moves it from one side of his vision to the other. "What’s your full name?"

“William Sherlock Scott Holmes.”

“What, seriously?”

“Really, John, if you’re going to ask me questions to assess my mental acuity they should probably be ones that you know the answer to,” Sherlock scolds, looking as rueful as a half-naked, bleeding, shivering man possibly can.

“Fair enough,” John concedes. “When’s your birthday?”

“Today.”
“And who is the current prime minister?”

“No idea.” Sherlock shrugs at John’s incredulous look. “Ask me something important, John.”

“Sing the names of all the planets in the solar system.”

“Nice try,” Sherlock sighs, rolling his eyes as John huffs out a tired sounding laugh.

“What’s the atomic weight of Lead?” John asks, tone serious again.

Sherlock raises an eyebrow at him. “Two hundred point seven.”

“Good enough for me,” John concedes, slipping his phone back into his pocket and tipping his head slightly at Sherlock’s mild expression of surprise. “But I am going to look that up later, you know.”

“Knock yourself out,” Sherlock says, shrugging as a sudden wave of shivering steals over him.

“Looks like someone already tried that on you.” John reaches forward to grasp his shaking shoulders, rubbing his palms up and down vigorously over the length of Sherlock’s upper arms as he peers out the back window of the car. “The rain has finally let up a bit, I think. So here’s the deal: We’re going get you warm and dry and cleaned up—and then you’re going to tell me exactly what happened, here. And if—at any point—I decide that you need more expert medical attention than I can provide, you will go willingly and without a fight, understood?”

“Fine,” Sherlock sighs, managing to look put out even under the current circumstances.

“I’m serious, Sherlock!”

“All right,” Sherlock agrees wearily, clamping his chattering teeth together and nodding as John pushes the car door open and extends his arm to take Sherlock’s hand into his own and help him up. As he steps out onto the pavement the jumper across his knees slips down and John darts out his other hand to catch it, then quickly wraps it around the towel still clinging to Sherlock’s slim hips, tying the arms together snugly before reaching out to pull open the front passenger door.

“Watch your step,” John warns, his hand pressed to the small of Sherlock’s back as he guides him into the seat and shuts the door behind him before jogging around the front of the car and sliding behind the steering wheel. He starts up the engine, flips the heat up to high and fiddles with the vents until they’re all aimed at Sherlock, then puts the car into gear and pulls out of the lot.

“The stairs are a bit steep,” John says, pulling open the door to 221C a mere ten minutes later and stepping down the first couple of treads before turning and grasping Sherlock’s elbow to steady him as he starts to descend. “Just take it nice and slow, and keep hold of the handrail.”

“I am familiar with how stairs work, John,” Sherlock snaps, shooting him a baleful look as he descends on shaky legs that feel less equal to the task than he’s willing to admit.

“Yeah, well, I think I’ll keep hold of you all the same.” John tightens his grip on Sherlock’s arm, not removing it even after they’ve cleared the bottom landing and entered the flat. “Come on, bathroom’s just through here.”

Sherlock lets himself be led on numb feet through the cozy living room, past the small galley style kitchen, and down a short hall ending in two doorways. Visible through one is a tidily made bed and a tall chest of drawers, and John pushes open the other to reveal a bright, clean bathroom that houses
a toilet, a pedestal sink, and an enormous white claw foot tub. John guides him into the room and
gives his elbow a final squeeze before releasing it, then reaches up to sweep the shower curtain back
on the rod and lift the ends of it out of the bathtub before leaning over and twisting the taps.

The sound of water rushing through the pipes and spilling out of the faucet fills the air, and Sherlock
watches John roll up his sleeves then bend forward to stick his forearm into the stream, his other
hand moving to adjust the taps. After a few moments he nods, apparently satisfied with the
temperature, then leans over to set the plug into place and the tub begins to fill. He stands up and
shakes the water off of his hands, then turns back to look at Sherlock where he stands.

“You’re going to have a good long soak,” John orders, speaking over the roar of the water and
pointing from Sherlock to the rapidly filling bath behind him. “The water might feel too warm at
first, but it isn’t—you’re just really chilled. So don’t go messing with the taps, okay?”

“F-f-f-fine,” Sherlock replies, unable to stop his teeth from chattering, the shivering growing
somehow worse than it had been before.

“That’s just your body reacting to the change in temperature,” John tells him, nodding at his
quivering jaw and reaching up to lay a hand on his shoulder before gently guiding him closer to the
edge of the tub. “The shivers will get a bit worse before they get better, but that’s to be expected.
Do you think you can get in by yourself?”

“Y-y-y-yes.”

“All right,” John agrees, brow knitted in concern as he regards his friend, deep blue gaze sweeping
over the quivering jaw and shivering shoulders and wobbly knees. “But I’ll be right outside the
door, call if you need me, yeah?”

Sherlock nods his assent, and John presses his lips together and stares at him for a moment longer
before heaving out a resigned sigh and walking out into the hall. He pulls the door nearly shut
behind him, but leaves it cracked open an inch or two. Sherlock slowly works the buttons of John’s
coat free from their holes, letting the garment slip down off of his shoulders and onto the ground at
his feet. He untangles the arms of the sweater tied at his waist with clumsy fingers, finally loosening
it enough that it slips down over his thighs along with the soaking wet, bloodstained towel beneath
it.

It’s touch and go for a moment, but after a few false starts, a fair bit of leaning, and one involuntary
groan of exertion that sounds more appropriate for an eighty year old man than an eighteen year old
one, he finally lowers himself into the water. It’s very warm, almost uncomfortably so, and he
carefully eases himself forward a bit then reaches a shaking arm out towards the faucet controls—

“Leave the taps be, Sherlock!” a stern voice reminds him from out from the hall, and Sherlock
heaves out a frustrated sigh and drops his arm, curling it around his drawn up shins and resting one
cold, pale cheek on a bent knee. Just as John had predicted, the shivering begins to intensify until his
entire body is quaking with the force of it. He hugs his arms tighter around his legs and clamps his
eyes shut and breathes in the steam from the bath as the trembling grows worse…and then gradually
begins to lessen, his spent muscles slowly uncoiling and growing lax once more. He drags in a long
breath and releases it in a wide, slow yawn, then he closes his eyes and enjoys the heat and warmth
of the nearly full bath.

There’s the sudden, sharp rap of knuckles against wood as the door is pushed open a few more
inches.

“Sherlock?” John's voice cuts through the white noise of the rushing water and the gauzy haze in
Sherlock’s head as he opens his eyes and looks blearily towards the door. “I’m coming in, all right?”

“Okay.” His voice is low and gruff but thankfully tremor-free, and he watches John step into the room.

“Brought you something to wear,” John tells him, holding out the stack of folded clothes in his arms then crossing to set them down on the toilet tank before leaning over the edge of the tub to twist the taps closed, casually dipping his fingers into the water to test the temperature and nodding his approval. He sits down on the edge of the enormous tub, turning to balance on one compact thigh as he looks down at Sherlock with concerned eyes. “Warmed up a bit? Have the shivers finally stopped?”

Sherlock nods up him, vaguely conscious of the fact that it should feel more odd to him than it does that John Watson is fully clothed and casually questioning him as if it’s not the least bit unusual that Sherlock is in his flat, completely naked, submerged in his tub less than a foot away from where he’s precariously perched.

“Glad to hear it.” A look of relief steals over John’s tense features as he huffs out a sigh that echoes the sentiment. “Your cheeks have pinked up, so that’s a good sign.”

Sherlock watches him intently, his own eyes tracking John’s dark blue gaze as it travels over his face, pausing to look intently at each of his eyes, obviously reassessing his pupils for even dilation. When John reaches out and lightly cups a warm palm over his jaw, Sherlock sucks in a surprised breath through his teeth, fighting the urge to lean into the touch as John drags the tip of his thumb gently over the corner of his split bottom lip, eyes narrowing as he examines the cut.

“Doesn’t look too bad, we’ll get it cleaned up properly when you’re out of the bath,” John says, softly brushing over the injury once more before sliding two fingers beneath Sherlock’s jaw to find his pulse point. He peers up at the ancient analog clock mounted beside the door and counts the beats as he watches the second hand sweep a quarter of the way around, then looks back at his friend. “Heart rate is a bit more elevated than I’d like it to be, but all things considered that’s hardly unexpected.”

Sherlock Holmes is exhausted, he’s in pain, he’s been through an admittedly traumatic experience—and he’s also fairly certain that his elevated pulse rate at the moment has very little to do with any of that.

“What else hurts?” John asks, looking at him expectantly.

“Shoulder,” Sherlock admits lifting his right one in a shrug and wincing slightly. John reaches forward and wraps his palm around it, fingers massaging gently at the muscles, feeling for any abnormalities or areas of more severe pain. He closes his other hand around Sherlock’s wrist where it’s crossed in front of his drawn up knees and lifts it up, dragging his fingers down over a long, pale upper arm and cupping his hand around the elbow, eliciting an involuntary wince. “Shoulder feels all right, nothing major. But your elbow’s a bit swollen.”

“I may have used it to smash through a car window earlier.”

“Yeah, that’ll do it,” John agrees, a wry smile tipping at his lips. “It was a lucky thing you burgled the right car, by the way.”

“It wasn’t luck,” Sherlock says, looking affronted. “It was logic.”

“So I suppose I just look like the type of bloke who drives around London in rusty old
Volkswagen?” John continues to probe gently at his injured joint. “Or did you guess the make and model by the wear on the outside of my right shoe? Or maybe it was the angle of the wrinkles on my shirt from the safety belt?”

“Don’t be an idiot, John,” Sherlock admonishes, shaking his head.

“But maybe you just saw me pulling into the lot one morning,” John teases, biting back a laugh at the withering look Sherlock shoots him as he cups his swollen elbow in his palm, looking down at him with a playful twinkle in his eye. “Oh come on, Sherlock. I know you’re dying to tell me how you knew. So go on, then. Impress me.”

Sherlock examines him through narrowed eyes, and is met only by a look of genuine curiosity—and something else, as well. Something warmer and softer, something like affection. His own lips tip up in a slight smile, and he begins.

“You have a single ignition key on your keyring, but no remote fob to control an electronic locking system—therefore I could reasonably assume that the car in question is either too old to have one, or said fob was broken at some point and not worth the bother or expense to replace. As the majority of the vehicles in the Morningside Academy staff lot are owned by educators—a notoriously thankless job that pays far less than it should—this was hardly the most useful bit of information. But the fact that there have been two separate occasions in the last several weeks when I observed minute flecks of red clinging to the fabric of your trousers, I could reasonably assume that they were bits of flaking paint deposited there by the act of nudging a car door shut with your hip. Unfortunately, it seems that red is an exceedingly popular vehicular colour choice, so I had to examine several cars before I came upon a likely candidate that not only sported a slightly faded ‘Cancer Research UK’ sticker on the bumper but a Bart’s student parking permit decal on the windscreen as well. While those two items would surely have been evidence enough, the subsequent discovery of a frankly alarming number of empty Speedy’s cups littering the floor of the back seat led me to conclude that I had indeed found the vehicle I was looking for.”

“Amazing,” John says, staring down at him with a mixture of fondness and awe, one hand still carefully clutching Sherlock’s elbow while the other one drags lazily up and down his forearm, rubbing gently.

“Simple deduction,” Sherlock replies, attempting to keep his voice even as he revels in the warmth of the hand moving slowly over his skin.

“Not simple at all,” John insists, shaking his head as he continues to casually stroke his fingers up and down Sherlock’s arm. “It’s brilliant, the way that mind of yours works, you know. Especially after a blow to the head.”

Sherlock shrugs. “I told you it wasn’t serious.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll take a look and judge for myself.” John tightens his fingers around Sherlock’s arm and squeezes lightly before he lets go and gets to his feet. Leaning over the tub, John rests his right hand on one pale, exposed shoulder and carefully threads the fingers of his left hand through the still rain-damp curls at the base of Sherlock’s neck. As short, strong digits weave through his hair, Sherlock drops his chin, closes his eyes and enjoys the gentle slide of fingertips as they ghost across his scalp, around the bottom ridge of his skull and slide up to—

“Ouch!” Pain blossoms through his skull as John skims his fingers over the diameter of the sizeable lump at the back of his head.

“Sorry,” John says, moving the hand on Sherlock’s shoulder and rubbing it soothingly while
continuing to trace around the edges of the bump. “I know it hurts, but I need to get a better look.”

John drops his hand from where it’s grasping Sherlock’s shoulder and dips it into the water, lifting it to pour a handful of warm liquid slowly over the back of Sherlock’s head. He repeats the motion a few times, then brushes his fingertips lightly over the wound. “Yeah, it’s small, and it’s shallow. Head wounds bleed like a son of a bitch but you lucked out, it doesn’t need stitching. But—Jesus, Sherlock, what’s this?”

One hand falls to grasp his shoulder, and the other dips down through the water behind him—a broad palm rubbing down the length of his back until it reaches a tender spot just above his waist, and when John’s fingertips press gently over the area, Sherlock stiffens and stifles a whine of protest.

“There’s a good sized bruise forming already, did someone hit you here?” John's voice is tense and worried as he flattens his hand, pressing it gently to Sherlock’s lower back.

“He slammed me into a locker,” Sherlock explains, arching his back forward and gritting his teeth a bit against the pain.

The hand on Sherlock’s shoulder tightens a bit then, and John goes very still for a few beats. After a moment, Sherlock hears him drag in a deep breath through his nose, then slowly expel it. As John’s warm breath ghosts over the back of the neck he’s bent so close to, a shiver runs down Sherlock’s spine, his shoulders and neck quivering slightly in the wake of it. John, if the answering tremor in his own hand is any indication, notices.

“Water’s probably getting cold,” he says, clearing his throat as he drags his palm up the length of Sherlock’s back and out of the water, then pats his other hand against his shoulder then pulls it away as he stands up. Crossing from the tub to the narrow cupboard behind the door, he pulls out a few towels and clean washcloth. He sets the towels on the edge of the sink, then holds out the cloth to Sherlock, who lifts his hand to take it. “I’ll let you finish up here, then. Shampoo and soap are just there—be careful as you wash your hair, all right?”

“All right.”

“And I don’t like the position of that bruise on your back,” John says, one hand rhythmically clenching and unclenching at his side as he rolls his bad shoulder back and forth a few times. “So you’re going to have a piss when you get out, and if you see any blood at all, you’ll tell me. Understood?”

Sherlock takes in the tension and anger radiating from John and shrinks back a bit. "Yes, John.”

“Hey,” John says, stepping forward and reaching out to settle his fingers gently on the side of Sherlock’s head. “I’m not angry with you, okay? I’m angry that someone did this to you, I’m mad as hell about that. But I’m not upset with you at all, Sherlock. Got it?”

Sherlock lets out the breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding, his shoulders relaxing as he tilts his head slightly against John’s fingers, then nods.

John runs the pad of his thumb lightly over one sharp cheekbone, nodding once before he bends over to collect the discarded coat, sweater and towel Sherlock was wearing when he arrived, then walks out into the hall and pulls the bathroom door shut behind him.

As the water runs out of the tub ten minutes later, Sherlock steps out of the bath on feet that are infinitely more sturdy than they were when he’d gotten in, and sets about drying himself off. He
relieves himself as instructed, and finds no trace of anything unusual in the output. Flushing the
toilet, he lowers the lid and sits down on it, shivering slightly as he reaches for the clothes John left
him.

He stretches the waistband of the simple pair of y-front pants (red, John? How unexpected...) and
bends down to step into and drag them up over his hips. He pulls on the thick pair of woollen socks,
pushes his arms and head through the worn blue v-neck t-shirt, then snaps the dark grey track pants
to their full length and eyes them sceptically before huffing out resigned sigh and hauling them up
and over his legs. He smiles at the white and yellow letters sewn into the back of the black hooded
sweatshirt, then threads his arms through the sleeves and zips it half way up, enjoying the warmth of
the fleecy fabric over his chilled skin. He examines his injured lip in the mirror, grimacing a bit as he
prods at it with his tongue, then turns his back to the reflective surface and smiles over his shoulder at
the “WATSON 74” emblazoned there.

Walking towards the door he pauses for a moment as he reaches for the knob, knowing that John is
out there waiting for him, that he will want answers—answers Sherlock has promised to give him.
He leans forward and rests his forehead against the door, then takes in a shaky breath, pulls the soft
sweatshirt a bit tighter around him, and walks out into the flat.

John is on the couch in the sitting room, a textbook open on his lap and a mug of tea in his hand, a
second cup steaming on the coffee table in front of the seat next to him. John looks up from the page
he’s reading and stares at Sherlock where he stands, the smile on his lips growing more broad as he
looks down the length of him and fixes his gaze somewhere near Sherlock’s feet. His shoulders start
to shake slightly, and a low chuckle escapes from him mouth as he turns his head and tries to tamp
down the laugh that follows, but is utterly unsuccessful as the tone eventually tips and John Watson’s
signature giggle rings through the flat.

“Oh, shut up,” Sherlock says crossly, biting back the involuntary smile that John’s laughter always
seems to pull from him regardless of the circumstances, while looking down the bottom hems of the
track pants that hang a full eight inches (at least) from the floor. He crosses to the couch as John tries
to compose himself and lowers himself carefully onto it, then reaches for the mug of tea. The burst
of sweet warmth over his tongue almost mitigates the pain that blooms in his lip as the hot mug
presses against the cut there.

“Let’s clean up that lip,” John says, sighing away the last remnants of laughter before closing his
book and setting it aside. He bends down to retrieve a sizeable first aid kit from the floor and then
turns to face Sherlock, pulling one knee up onto the cushion and laying the open kit down across his
lap and pulling on a pair of neoprene gloves. Sherlock sets his tea down and turns to mirror the
position as John rips open a small packet and pulls out a sterile alcohol wipe, then leans over and
beckons with two fingers for Sherlock to do the same. As Sherlock tilts forward towards him, John
grasps his chin gently between two fingers and pulls him a bit closer then lifts his left hand towards
the cut. “This is going to sting a bit.”

“I know that, John, I’m not an—ow!” Sherlock’s head jerks to the side, nose scrunching up in
discomfort as John presses the sterile pad to his lip and begins to wipe it carefully over the injury.
“That’s more than a bit, John.”

“This will go faster and be a lot easier if you’d stop whining for two damn minutes,” John scolds,
letting go of Sherlock’s chin and sliding his right hand around the side of his neck to hold him still.
He works quickly and with deft hands, efficiently clearing the wound of dried blood and cleaning it
thoroughly in the process. He pulls out a small packet of antibacterial ointment and squeezes a
dollop onto the cut then smears it carefully over the wound with one gloved fingertip. “There, all
better. And for god’s sake, stop poking at it with your tongue. Now lean over and let me get your
head.”

Sherlock grudgingly leans forward, and they repeat the entire process (complete with indignant complaints about the pain and admonitions to just hold still, damnit!) until John is satisfied that Sherlock’s scalp injury has been attended to adequately. John disposes of the gloves and used first aid materials then gives his hands a good scrub at the kitchen sink before plopping back down on the couch and releasing a deep sigh.

“So,” John begins, reaching for his tea and turning to face Sherlock again as he raises the mug to hips lips and takes a long sip. “What happened?”

“Sebastian Wilkes,” Sherlock says with a resigned sigh.

“That’s a who, not a what.”

“Debatable.” Sherlock tips his head thoughtfully and shrugs his uninjured shoulder, cutting off John’s impending protest with a raised hand before continuing. “He’s a classmate of mine, and though we’ve never seen eye to eye, he’s never been physically violent.”

“Until today,” John observes, his jaw clenching as he swallows pointedly. “What changed?”

“We were in the locker room after showering, and Sebastian seemed to be under the impression that I was staring at his bare arse.”

“And why would he think that?”

“Because I was,” Sherlock admits, rolling his eyes at John’s look of wide-eyed surprise and shaking his head emphatically. “Oh, not like that, John. He’s a boorish, ignorant, disgusting brute. I wasn’t ogling him.”

John looks confused. “But you were looking at his bum?”

“I was examining the pattern of bruising across his buttocks and thighs, yes,” Sherlock clarifies, huffing out a frustrated sigh at John’s sceptical expression before continuing. “He was bragging to the other members of the football team about them, asserting that injuries sustained in play are an athlete’s badge of honour.”

John looks thoughtful for a moment. “Well, he’s not wrong about that, really. Had more than one bruise I was proud of after a hard day on the pitch, over the years.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” Sherlock concedes with a nod. “But the marks on Sebastian’s skin weren’t entirely consistent with those that I observed on the other members of the team. Some of his bruises were clearly earned on the pitch, but the majority of them were not.”

“What caused them, then?”

“Judging by the shape and size? Repeated and purposeful striking with a belt.”

“Oh, Christ,” John whispers, raising his fist to his mouth and pressing his knuckles against his lips. “His father?”


“What the bloody buggering fuck is going on in that school? Paedophile fathers, abusive mothers, how many other horrible stories are lurking about in that place?”
“Everyone has their secrets, John,” Sherlock says, his voice quiet and plaintive. “In Sebastian’s case, it explains quite a lot, really. The child who is bullied at home becomes the bully at school. It’s practically a textbook case.”

“That doesn’t make it okay.” John shakes his head, pursing his lips together tightly as he attempts to compose himself. “Lots of people have shitty lives, Sherlock. My Dad walked out on us when I was just a boy. Your parents died when you were twelve years old. Molly’s dad is so sick he probably won’t last through the year, and you don’t see any of us using that as an excuse to go around beating people to a pulp in locker rooms.”

Sherlock looks affronted. “I wouldn’t say he beat me to a pulp, John. That’s a somewhat dramatic interpretation of the facts, I thi—”

“The hell it is!” John fires back, shaking his head incredulously. “You didn’t see yourself when I found you, Sherlock. You were a right mess, and it scared me to death. I don’t care who hit him first or what kind of monster his mother is. What makes him think that he can treat people like that and get away with it?”

Sherlock sighs wearily. “I don’t know, John. You’d have to ask him that question.”

“Now there’s an excellent idea.” John nods, springing to his feet and crossing over to the bottom of the stairs to step into the pair of loafers he’d shed there when they’d arrived earlier. He pats down his front pockets and then reaches into one to pull out his keys. He crosses back through the flat to the small closet next to the kitchen and retrieves his coat, pushing his arms into the sleeves and fastening the buttons with practiced efficiency. “Make yourself at home, I’ll be back in a bit.”

“No!” Sherlock practically shouts, moving quickly to block John’s path and holding up his hands in a placating gesture. “That’s not a good idea, John.”

“It was your idea, Sherlock,” John reminds him, his pleasant tone at odds with the stormy glare in his eyes as he steps to move around the brunette where he stands. “And I think it’s a fantastic one.”

“It’s unlikely that he’ll listen to what you have to say.” Sherlock steps to the side, matching his movements and deftly keeping himself between John and the stairs.

“Oh, please.” John rolls his eyes and huffs out a frustrated sigh. “I’ve dropped men twice my size out on the pitch, I’m pretty sure I can handle one posh, public school arsehole.”

“I’ve no doubt that you could,” Sherlock agrees, changing tactics slightly. “But he’s a student, and you’re a staff member. You’d lose your job.”

“I don’t care,” John snarls, clenching his jaw and looking murderous.

“But I do,” Sherlock insists, attempting to keep his voice even and steady as he tries to reason with his friend. “It pays well and you’re good at it and it means I get to see you every day. Sebastian
Wilkes is nothing, John. He’s not worth losing all of that.”

“No, he’s not. But you are.” John looks up at him with stricken eyes as he huffs out a shaky sigh and raises a trembling hand, gently touching the tips of his fingers to the angry cut on Sherlock’s lip. “That bastard put his hands on you, he hurt you—and that is not okay. He doesn’t get to do that.”

“I’m fine, John,” Sherlock assures him softly, his breath ghosting against the skin of John’s fingers where they’re still hovering over his mouth.

“You were not fine,” John insists, his voice tight and strained and ready to break as he lifts his other hand and settles a palm against each of Sherlock’s pale cheeks, grasping his face gently. “You were hurt and bleeding and naked and shivering and you were so cold, Sherlock. Do you have any idea what could have happened if I hadn’t found you?”

“But you did.” Sherlock lifts his hands, gently circling his fingers around John’s forearms, running the pads of his thumbs softly over the delicate skin on the underside of his wrists. He watches the look in John’s eyes change, then—sees it go from hard and furious and worried, to something soft and warm and relieved.

“Yeah,” John says, his voice barely a whisper as he cradles Sherlock’s face in his hands. “I did.”

Strong hands tug him gently forward as John rises up onto his toes and presses his mouth against Sherlock’s—just a ghost of a kiss, tentative and tender and achingly soft—and John is still for a long moment before hauling out a warm breath and pulling Sherlock’s top lip between his own and kissing it gently, a tiny growl escaping from his throat in the process. Sherlock sucks in a gasp of surprise at the sound, then presses forward to chase it—opening his lips and welcoming John’s tongue as he licks his way inside, tilting Sherlock’s head between his hands and slotting their mouths together to deepen the kiss, sliding his hand around to tangle in the nest of curls on the side of his head and pulling Sherlock’s plush bottom lip between his own and sucking, hard—

“Unnghh!” Sherlock cries out, a sharp gasp following the involuntary whine of pain that preceded it, and John pulls back immediately—a look of embarrassed horror on his face as Sherlock runs his tongue over the cut on his lip, catching the coppery taste of blood once again.

“Oh, shit.” John releases Sherlock’s face from his grasp and takes a step back. “Oh, God, I’m sorry Sherlock. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s nothing, John,” Sherlock assures him, licking carefully over the split once more and pressing two fingers to his lip before pulling them away and examining the slight smear of blood over them. “It barely even hurts, really.”

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” John continues, the words tumbling out of his mouth in a rush. “I didn’t mean to do that, I’m really sorry.”

“Of course you didn’t mean to, you just spent all that time cleaning it up and all.” Sherlock dabs the edge of the cut with the cuff of John’s sweatshirt before looking up to smile at him—stopping suddenly at the look on John’s face.

He’s moved away from where he stood just moments ago, the hands that cradled Sherlock’s face are fisted at his sides, the eyes that brimmed with affection are filled with regret, the lips that so tenderly captured his own are thin and white and pressed into a tight line…and all at once Sherlock understands.

John isn’t sorry that he kissed Sherlock too hard.
He’s sorry that he kissed him at all.

Oh.

*Oh, no.*

Watching John stare back at him with troubled eyes, Sherlock takes a moment to let his eyes roam over the beloved features before him—the pink lips and tanned cheeks and blue eyes and golden hair—and deep within him he feels something small and fragile and hopeful *break*. For a second he’s afraid his legs will crumple beneath him, that the lump that is steadily rising in his throat will force its way out and the tears that are threatening to gather at the corners of his eyes will spill over and that *cannot happen*.

He won’t let it.

“I see,” Sherlock says, looking at John with what he hopes is an impassive expression. “Well. Thank you for the medical assistance, John. And the tea. My apologies for the damage to your car and I will of course reimburse you for any expenses related to today.”

He nods perfunctorily, then begins to turn towards the stairs.

“Wait, Sherlock, stop—”

“I will see to it that the clothes you’ve lent me are laundered and returned to you tomorrow,” Sherlock says over his shoulder as he begins to climb the stairs.

“Where are you going?” John follows closely behind him as Sherlock opens the door to 221C and steps out into the hall.

“Home,” Sherlock replies, walking down the garishly wallpapered entryway towards the door of the building. “I’ve troubled you enough today, I think.”

“Sherlock, please don’t go, just let me explain.” John catches up to him in front of the main staircase of 221, reaching out to lay a hand on his arm.

“I think you made yourself perfectly clear,” Sherlock says, shaking off John’s touch and continuing towards the door. “Don’t trouble yourself about it, John. It’s forgotten. Won’t happen again. I’m sure I’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

“Sherlock, will you please just *listen* to me?” John pleads, running ahead to place himself between Sherlock and the door. After a tense moment, Sherlock stops in his tracks and stares down at him warily. John huffs out a relieved sigh, then gathers his thoughts for a moment before continuing. “I am sorry, Sherlock—”

“Yes, so you’ve said,” Sherlock interrupts, rolling his eyes.

“Will you let me get more than two words out at a time, for Christ’s sake?”

“That was *sixteen* words right there, John.”

“William Sherlock Scott Holmes, you are the most *infuriating* man on the planet!” John says, throwing his arms up in exasperation.

“And yet you are the one responsible for prolonging your exposure to me,” Sherlock points out.

“Yeah, I am,” John agrees, “because I’m *trying* to apologise to you!”
“Yes, yes,” Sherlock says, affecting a bored tone. “You’re sorry that you kissed me, got it.”

“I am not sorry that I kissed you,” John growls, taking a step towards Sherlock and, despite the rather marked height difference between them, John seems to loom over him in that moment.

Sherlock looks slightly confused. “But, you said—”

“I said I was sorry, yeah. But that’s not what I meant. Which you would know if you’d given me a chance to tell you what I was sorry for in the first place.”

“Which is…?” Sherlock asks quietly, and John deflates a bit at the invitation, taking a deep breath and looking up at Sherlock, who nods for him to continue.

“I’m not sorry I kissed you—I’m sorry that I didn’t ask you if I could. I’m sorry that just because I’ve spent weeks thinking about kissing you that I just assumed that you’d been thinking about it too. I’m sorry that I took advantage of a vulnerable moment, and then simply took what I wanted—because it wasn’t mine to take. That’s what I’m sorry for. And I’m sorry that I let you believe for even one second that I regretted kissing you, because I don’t regret that, Sherlock. Not a bit.”

Sherlock watches John’s face, sees the stress and worry and fear etched into it—and he knows without a doubt that John is telling him the truth.

“So now the choice is yours. It always was, and I’m sorry I took it from you—so now I’m giving it back.” John steps aside, leaving the path to the front door clear. “You can walk out that door, and forget everything that just happened—delete it forever—or you can let me kiss you again. Your choice.”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, turning to face John, who looks up at him curiously.

“Okay,” John says slowly. “But just so I’m clear—is that ‘Yes, you think we should forget all about this and never speak of it again’ or ‘Yes, it’s okay to kiss you again’ because I don’t want to make the wrong move here, and—”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Sherlock steps forward to crowd John up against the wall at the bottom of the stairs and kisses him. It’s a slow slide of lips, gentle nips, soft presses and careful licks and when John snakes his hands around Sherlock’s hips and pulls him closer, Sherlock slots one long thigh between John’s and leans in, eliciting a positively delicious whimper from the man beneath him. Pressed up against John, the sound of his own pulse and their mingled breath is loud in his ears… which is likely the reason he doesn’t hear the door to 221A open or the telltale click of kitten heels as they approach.

“Oh there you are, boys,” Martha Hudson says merrily, and they quickly peel themselves apart and turn to face the Morningside Librarian where she stands smiling pleasantly at them. “John, I called Mycroft Holmes as you requested and let him know where Sherlock was. He asked me to thank you for your assistance and to let you know that he’ll be sending a car for Sherlock promptly at seven.”

“Oh, um, thanks, Mrs. H.,” John stammers, swiping the back of his hand across his lips and nervously patting down his (charmingly, Sherlock thinks) disheveled hair. “I appreciate it.”

“Oh, it was no trouble, dear,” Mrs. Hudson replies, then turns her attention to the young man he was just snogging and looks a bit alarmed. “Oh, Sherlock. What’s happened to your lip?”

“Minor incident, Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock assures her. “Nothing to worry about. John took care of it.”
“I’m sure he did,” she says, flashing him a cheeky wink. “Now, it’s just four o’clock now—and that means you’ve got three hours until the car arrives. And while you are certainly free to use the vestibule of this building for any variety of purposes, I think you might be a bit more comfortable in your flat.”

“Got it, Mrs. H.” John looks sheepish, nodding as he scrubs a hand over the back of his flushed neck.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Sherlock says as he reaches down to take John’s hand in his own, then marches past Mrs. Hudson and down the hall.

Sherlock Holmes has never really understood why people place so much emphasis on the celebration of birthdays. There is nothing particularly special about the day itself, after all. The guest of honour didn’t have any say in when it occurred, nor did they do anything remarkable on it other than simply be born—a feat which every single living creature on the planet has performed as well. The pomp and circumstance that surrounds the occasion seems gratuitous and self-congratulatory and he’s never really seen the appeal.

But as this particular day draws to a close, even Sherlock Holmes can admit that—as birthdays go—this one has been fairly eventful.

If you’d asked him that morning what events were likely to transpire on his eighteenth birthday, Sherlock would have confidently predicted that it would begin with freshly baked apricot scones, an expensive but likely impersonal gift from his brother, followed by just another normal day at school.

And he’d have been wrong.

There had been scones, of course. And a (surprisingly well chosen) gift from Mycroft. But nothing else that followed could be considered normal. Even for him. There had been cake and tea and presents, the unexpected promise of a pint with a friend, a relatively vicious physical assault, a nearly naked sprint through the rain, a focused stint into vehicular burglary, a daring rescue, gentle first aid, the exchange of angry words…and then kissing. And even after all of that, if you’d have told him how his birthday would end, Sherlock Holmes would never have believed you.

Lying back against the pillows, the bedsheets cool and smooth beneath his flushed skin, he pants up at the ceiling, top teeth pressing against the kiss-swollen skin of his bottom lip. Raising his head slightly, he stares down the length of his pale, bare torso then reaches out to thread his fingers gently into golden hair, to stroke his thumb over a tanned cheek, to lock his gaze on blue eyes, and watch the length of his cock disappear between pink lips.

John’s eyes crinkle slightly at the corners as he sees Sherlock watching him, and he lifts the hand curled around a sharp, pale hip to clutch the one stroking the side of his face. He threads their fingers together and squeezes Sherlock’s hand tight as he continues to bob his head rhythmically, licking and sucking and keeping the pace deliberately slow. John’s other hand is wrapped around him, squeezing and stroking and driving Sherlock mad in the process.

There’s a low flame of heat at the base of his spine, it flickers and licks and coils inside of him, and all at once it threatens to ignite—and he’s not ready. He doesn’t want this to end, not yet, not like this.

“John,” Sherlock pants, his voice trembling and tight.
“MmHmm,” John replies, the sound humming through him and around him where John’s lips are stretched and sliding faster now.

“Wait,” he begs, tangling his fingers into John’s hair and tugging lightly, not enough to hurt but with enough force to convey his wishes. “Please, stop…”

John slides up and off of him immediately, the slick head of Sherlock’s cock slipping from between his lips with an audible pop as he crawls up the bed and looks down at him with worried eyes.

“Are you all right?” John asks, untangling their fingers and sliding his palm up to cup Sherlock’s cheek. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No,” Sherlock assures him, shaking his head and smiling at John’s ever present, earnest concern. He lifts his arm, wincing a bit at the twinge in his shoulder, and smooths his palm over John’s bicep. “I just didn’t want to come yet—not without you.”

“Okay,” John says with a sigh of relief, leaning down to nuzzle their noses together and deposit a feather soft kiss over Sherlock’s injured mouth, darting his tongue out to graze softly over the seam of his lips, then he pulls Sherlock’s top lip between his and sucks lightly. “I don’t want to put too much pressure on your bruised hip or shoulder, so here—can you turn on your side? Face me?”

Sherlock nods, and John hugs an arm around him, helping him get positioned, pulling him close so they’re pressed chest to chest. John nudges a knee in between Sherlock’s, then lifts a pale, creamy leg and wraps it over his own. He slides his palm up the back of Sherlock’s thigh to cup one plump, round arse cheek and gently pulls it towards him, thrusting his own hips and slotting their erections together in the slick, tight space between their stomachs. Sherlock huffs out a breathy moan and John smiles, pulling the taller man tight against him and rolling his hips.

“How’s that?” John asks, finding a steady rhythm and slowly rutting against him.

“It…” Sherlock pants, looking into John’s eyes biting at his lip. “It’s amazing.”

“Hey,” John says leaning in to lick at Sherlock’s mouth. “Don’t bite your lip, you’ll open the cut again.”

“Sorry,” Sherlock replies, his breath catching in his throat with every stroke of John’s cock against his own.

“Don’t be sorry,” John tells him, laying a trail of wet kisses over his jaw and all the way down to his collarbone before dragging his tongue back up that long, pale column of a neck to trace the outline of Sherlock’s ear, whispering against it. “The cut just needs time to heal, because I have plans for that mouth.”

John kneads the handful of flesh beneath his palm, pulling Sherlock even closer as he rolls his hips faster against him. He presses their foreheads together, and Sherlock feels John’s hot breath spilling over his lips and the slight scrape of stubble as John peppers tiny kisses over his flushed cheeks.

“You’re really…good at this…John,” Sherlock stutters, the pressure inside of him beginning to wind tighter with each clever thrust of John’s hips.

“Yeah, well, I’ve had a lot of time to think about it, Sherlock.” John breathes, holding him close, his voice getting tighter as he ruts faster against the man in his arms. “I can’t believe this is happening, that you’re really here.”

“Oh…John, I can’t…” Sherlock says, the pitch of his voice rising with each word as he clings to the
There’s a jolt of electricity that crackles through him then, shoots up his spine and flows out through his limbs, sets off sparks behind his eyes and all at once he’s coming—and John is right there with him, holding him and kissing him and whispering to him as he rides it out. The last sparks of his orgasm are still arcing over his skin when John goes suddenly stiff in his arms and buries his face in Sherlock’s neck. John’s shouts and moans vibrate through his skin, and there’s a hot rush into the scant space between them, pulse after pulse splattering across his stomach as John shudders in his arms.

He can feel John’s lips moving against him, pressing soft kisses into his neck, whispering against his skin, and he doesn’t recall ever feeling quite like this before—so light and content and complete and surprised and relieved and amazed…it’s vaguely familiar, the feeling, as though it’s one that he used to know.

He can’t be sure, but he thinks he might be happy.

He floats on the sensation for a bit, the sounds of the traffic outside and the creak of old pipes and the blood rushing in his ears all fading, slowly fading away…

There’s a soft brush of warmth over his skin, and he opens his eyes to find himself splayed out on his back as John drags a wet flannel over his stomach and hips and groin, gently cleaning him up. A bit disoriented, Sherlock moves to sit up and groans as his injured shoulder burns and his bruised hip and lower back twinge painfully.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” John whispers, leaning forward to help ease him back down onto the pillows and pressing a fond kiss to his forehead. “I just didn’t want you to wake up all sticky.”

“I’m not even tired,” Sherlock protests, the last word nearly lost in the crest of the yawn that steals over him as he speaks.

“And I’ll wake you up to enjoy the last thirty minutes of it, I promise,” John says, bending down to kiss that protruding bottom lip before tucking himself up against Sherlock’s side and gathering him close. “Now close your eyes.”

“You can’t order me to sleep, John,” Sherlock complains, another yawn breaking over him as John threads his short, tanned fingers through the tangle of mahogany curls, and presses his lips against Sherlock’s forehead. “It’s my birthday.”

“Go to sleep, Sherlock.”

And Sherlock Holmes, for once, does as he’s told.

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True to his word, John woke Sherlock up ninety minutes later.
True to his character, Sherlock was having none of it.

But with the help of tea, and kisses, and a shared (though disappointingly utilitarian) shower, thirty minutes later Sherlock was dressed in his borrowed clothes and kissing John good bye (rather thoroughly, it should be noted) before climbing into the back of the sleek black town car idling at the kerb in front of 221 Baker Street.

“Interesting day?” Mycroft Holmes asks with a lifted brow, eyeing his brother’s unusual outfit and still damp curls.

“It was, actually.” Sherlock shrugs, ignoring the other questions implicit in the query and turning to gaze out the window at the city passing by.

“I took the liberty of retrieving your possessions from your P.E. locker.” Mycroft gestures to the schoolbag and stack of folded clothing on the floor between them. “I wonder how it was that they came to be stored there—and you, in turn, came to find yourself here?”

“Life is full of mysteries.”

“True. But most of them can be solved with the help of current technological resources, I’ve found. A few snatches of fortuitously captured CCTV footage does help one fit the pieces together.”

Sherlock shoots his brother a thunderous look. "It’s none of your business, Mycroft."

“You are my business, brother dear,” Mycroft replies, and Sherlock is surprised to find that the tone isn’t that of a warning or threat, but something more like…concern. “It is my duty to keep you safe, and if you have been harmed or endangered in any way—”

“I can handle this myself,” Sherlock insists.

“Are you sure?” Mycroft asks, lifting the handle of his ubiquitous umbrella and appearing to study it carefully. “History would tell us that you’ve never been a particularly good judge of how thick the ice beneath your feet truly is.”

“I’m not seven years old anymore, Mycroft,” Sherlock says, looking him in the eye. “I don’t need you to swoop in and rescue me this time.”

“No,” Mycroft Holmes agrees, nodding thoughtfully at his younger brother and tipping his head in assent. “It appears that you don’t.”

Sherlock tries very hard to quell the surprise that rises within him, and as the small smile on Mycroft’s face at that moment doesn’t seem any more smug than it usually does, he feels as though he may have actually pulled it off.

“You will let me know, however, if I can be of any assistance?” Mycroft turns and watches London passing by outside of the window.

“Yes,” Sherlock replies, nodding and turning to look out his own window.

“As you wish, then. Happy birthday, Sherlock.”

“Thank you, Mycroft,” Sherlock whispers, and they pass the rest of the ride in silence.
Thank you so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated!

And in this chapter’s installment of “Put down whatever you’re doing and go read this RIGHT NOW. Did you not hear me? WHY ARE YOU STILL READING THIS??” I present for your enjoyment a fantastic little tale that brought out feelings in me that I am equal parts ashamed of and astonished by.

I don't get jealous of other writers' work in this fandom as a rule. Overly attached to it? Sure. Effusive-bordering-on-creepy praise for it? On occasion. Wildly flailing love for it? Naturally.

The two short works in this series awoke a green eyed beast in me--and I'm torn between throwing my iPad across the room in a fit of juvenile envy that I wasn't the one to write these goddamn fabulous pieces and rushing over to pick up said iPad to hug it obsessively to my chest and never let it go.

I think I'll do both. And you should too.

Start with EinahSirro’s delicious What Would Sherlock Do?, then click through to read the second part of the series (told from the other POV) and then flop around the floor like a fish because you can’t breathe, it’s so good.

Enjoy!
Hello, Friends—and Happy Thursday!

(pause for gasps and screams)

I know right?!?

As this last week got busier and busier (and I’m not apologizing for that, it was super FUN!) I told team beta that I thought I’d just go ahead and hold off and post this new chapter on the next honest to goodness Thursday. And then I said that it was a good thing, because now maybe I could get back on an actual Thursday schedule.

And then we laughed and laughed and laughed. Because: Girl, please.

But for those enthusiastic souls out there who aren’t in on the whole “Thursday” joke yet (and I love you so much, I really do! Welcome to the crazy!), here’s the deal: I LOVE writing Johnlock fic. It’s like one of my favorite things to do. I do it for fun. And for free. And in my spare time. I would love nothing more than to find a way to monetize this obsession and commit to writing porny love stories about our two favorite British idiots all the live long day. Unfortunately, in addition to this creepy fixation, I also have a family. And a job. And a life (such as it is). So while I may not be able to update on each and every actual Thursday—I can promise you new chapters on a vaguely regular basis, and assure you that I would NEVER leave you hanging. Promise.

So this chapter finds our boys negotiating this new status of theirs, step right up and come along as they try to figure out just how much things have changed between them!

A million kajillion mini peppermint patties to my BFF/Beta owensm for the unwavering support of this adventure we truly thought would be fleeting (so much so that we coined 2013 as the “year of gay porn” and then have had to keep amending that annually). A big bag of chocolate covered Xanax to my girl cheytea7 for surviving a cross country move and still managing to squeeze in reading this little nugget of lunacy while out on the open road. Team Beta is the shit.

And legit Thursday sized love to each and every person behind the clicks, kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions, recs and comments this fic continues to accumulate. Writing this story wouldn’t be nearly as much fun without you, and I’m having a blast. I hope you are too. Please feel free to leave me a comment if you’re so inclined, you know I love hearing from you even more than I am embarrassed by the fact that the staff at my local Panera knows my name and lets me stay and write porn for a half hour after closing time while they vacuum because THAT’S THE ONLY PLACE I CAN GET ANY GODDAMN WORK DONE ANYMORE!

Thanks so much for reading, and I’ll see you all next week!!
Sherlock Holmes is exhausted.

Upon arriving home tonight, he’d been subjected to nearly an hour of Marie’s worried clucking and tender admonishments and pointed insistence that he finish at least one bowl of her (admittedly delicious) chicken stew before she could be convinced that a split lip and a bump on the head did not mean that he was in danger of imminent death, and could therefore be allowed to retire to his room for the night.

Finally.

Standing at his bathroom sink, he stares at his reflection through bleary eyes, wincing at the sharp sting of the strong mouthwash where it swishes up against tender wound on his lip before he spits the mouthful of liquid into the basin and rinses it down the drain. His head aches and his back hurts and his shoulder is throbbing and all he wants to do is crawl into bed and close his eyes—to settle back against his pillows and tuck himself under the duvet and sleep.

Switching off the light, he makes his way across his dark bedroom on heavy feet, stepping first onto the toe of one thick sock, then the next, pulling his feet free from them. He tugs the comically short trousers down his hips and lets them fall, stepping out of the pool of fabric they form around his ankles. He lifts a hand to drag down the zip on the black hoodie, raising his other hand to rub absently at his tired eyes—and stops.

The sleeve of the Bart’s rugby team sweatshirt is soft against his cheek, and as the fabric slides against his skin he catches the faint scent of fabric conditioner and soap and mildew…and something else. Soft and musky and warm and familiar—a smell he’d fallen asleep to that afternoon, then woke up surrounded by.

John.

A smile blooms slowly over his lips, stretching the skin at the split, but it’s already less tender than it was just a few hours ago and it holds. He presses his face into the crook of his elbow and inhales deeply, closing his eyes remembering the feel of John’s shoulder beneath his cheek, of strong arms pulling him close, of short fingers carding through his curls, of lips brushing against his forehead…

*buzzzzzzz*

The rattle of his mobile against the nightstand interrupts the memory, and he leans over to pluck up his phone from where he’d plugged it in to charge to find a text from John:

How are you feeling?

Sherlock considers several clever replies, but in the end decides that the truth is the most appropriate:

Tired. –SH

The three flickering dots appear immediately, and he stands at the edge of the bed watching the screen for John’s reply.

I bet. All tucked into bed?

Sherlock sways a bit where he stands, then shakes his head slightly and pulls back the duvet, climbs up onto the mattress, and sits back against the headboard to type out his reply:
Not quite yet. –SH

He slips his feet between the sheets and reaches down to haul the covers up over his bare legs when John’s next text appears.

Good, because you need to take some paracetamol before you lie down. Now. 1,000 mg, and a full glass of water.

Sherlock reads the directive and sighs. His eyelids are heavy and he’s sore and tired and he lays back on the pillows as he taps out his message to John.

I just got up and took some. –SH

The undulating ellipsis appears in the corner, blinking hypnotically for a few long moments before John’s next message pops into view:

Liar. I know you’re tired, and I promise I’ll stop bothering you and let you sleep…right after you do this.

Sherlock glares crossly at the display, then turns his head and looks at the open bathroom door… waaaaaaay over there. He’s contemplating how much energy it will take to get up when his mobile buzzes again in his hand.

Please, Sherlock? For me?

He heaves out a weary sigh, pushes off the covers then swings his legs to the floor. He pauses briefly to fire off a reply, his thumbs slapping against the screen with a bit more force than is strictly necessary.

FINE. I’m going right now. –SH

He gets to his feet and starts towards the bathroom. The phone buzzes in his hand a second later.

Really?

He wants to be indignant, he really does. But that seems like an awful lot of work at the moment. So instead he flicks on the bathroom light and types out an assurance to John:

Yes, John. REALLY. –SH

He sets the phone down on the counter, then pulls open the cabinet inset into the wall above the sink and fishes out a bottle of paracetamol. He’s shaking two pills out into his palm when the phone rattles against the marble surface at his hip.

OK. I believe you. But maybe you should send a photo just so I know my trust in you isn’t misplaced. :)

Rolling his eyes, Sherlock picks up his mobile and taps open the camera app then pops the pills into his mouth. He sticks out his tongue, balancing the two sizeable white tablets on the tip of it, and stares defiantly into the mirror as he snaps a photo and swipes his thumb to send it to John. He fills the glass beside the sink with water and has nearly finished it by the time John’s answering message appears. No words, just a photograph of bare, tanned shoulders, a golden head nestled into the pillow, blue eyes crinkled at the corners, and pink lips stretched into a sincere smile. Sherlock grins down at the image, then replaces the cup beside the taps before switching off the light and making his way back to bed. He’s crawling under the covers when the next message appears.
Are you wearing my sweatshirt to bed?

Damn. Busted.

Maybe. –SH

He pulls the neck of the garment up over his nose and mouth, then breathes in deeply as he watches the message indicator blinking at the corner of the window, until John’s reply pops up:

Good. :)

Sherlock smiles, huffing out something between a laugh and a sigh, then snuggles down more deeply into the pillows as he taps a message back.

Sleep well, John. –SH

A yawn steals over him then, and he stretches his arms wide—cringing slightly as the action pulls at his sore shoulder, the joint protesting creakily. But not even that unwelcome reminder of the less pleasant events of the day can wipe the smile from his lips when the next message appears on the screen:

My pillow smells like you.

Curling his fingers around the phone, Sherlock tucks his hands up under his cheek, and closes his eyes. He drifts off with visions of tanned skin beneath his palms, golden hair between his fingers, blue eyes full of affection, and pink lips grazing over his own dancing through his mind—and he’s fast asleep before John’s last text flashes onto the screen just seconds later:

Sweet dreams, Sherlock…

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Scaling the steps to the second floor of Morningside Academy, Sherlock finds himself wondering if his school bag has always been this heavy, or if perhaps Marie had secretly loaded it with bricks when she came in this morning to collect his laundry while he was in the shower. He’d woken up sore, the ordeal of yesterday lingering in the form of aches and pains and stiff muscles, though not as sore as he might have been if John hadn’t convinced him to take that paracetamol before bed. A bit of advice he’d heeded again this morning, as well. After scaling the first flight, he pauses on the landing for a moment to take a long sip from his coffee cup before he tackles the second run of stairs.

As he approaches the heavy glass door at the end of the hallway he can see the warm glow of light from within the library. It’s unusual (but not unheard of) for Mrs. Hudson to arrive before him, so it’s possible she’s already inside—though it’s much more likely that the person who beat him here this morning is someone he’s a bit more anxious to see.

Smiling at the thought, his footsteps quicken as he approaches the door, but as he reaches out to grasp the handle he stops—his fingers stilling a few inches away. Standing there alone in the deserted hall, Sherlock is suddenly seized by the irrational fear that, when he opens the door, John won’t be inside. It’s a fleeting thought, and he knows it’s silly, but he can’t quite shake the nagging suspicion that everything that’s happened since P.E. class yesterday has been some kind of hallucination—a cruel trick his mind is playing on him—and any second now he’s going to wake up soaked and shivering and bleeding next to the skip in the alley behind the school…

He’s being ridiculous.
He slips his hand into the front pocket of his book bag and pulls out his mobile. Tapping the screen to life he thumbs open the messaging app and reads over their text exchange from last night, smiling as the image of John’s face comes into view. He slides the phone back into his bag, reaches forward and pulls the door open, then strides purposefully into the Morningside Library…and finds it deserted.

The chair behind the circulation desk is empty, the comfortable furniture scattered around the central seating space is unoccupied, and his regular table is bare except for the small stack of birthday presents he’d left there yesterday before he went to class. He walks over to his chair, looks once around the quiet room, then slides his bag from his shoulder onto the table where it lands with a heavy thunk.

“Sherlock?” a voice calls out from somewhere in the stacks off to his right. “Is that you?”

He’s rounding the corner in seconds, coattails fluttering behind him as he advances down the aisle towards the golden haired young man who is busily shelving books from the stack balanced on the edge of the long abandoned study carrel beside him. John turns his head to watch as Sherlock hurries across the space between them—and then abruptly stops. Sherlock hovers close for a moment, fingers twitching at his side, aching to touch—but he’s suddenly unsure if he should. Noticing the hesitation, John’s face breaks out into a soft smile and he leans forward to close the gap, rising up on his toes and gently pressing his lips to Sherlock’s.

“Good morning,” John murmurs against Sherlock’s mouth, pulling back slightly and raising one hand to settle along Sherlock’s jaw, the pad of his thumb sweeping carefully over the healing split on his bottom lip. “How are you feel—oof!”

Sherlock darts forward, half falling, half lunging, winding his long arms around John’s waist and pulling him close. He nuzzles his face into the warm skin above John’s collar, closes his eyes and inhales deeply.

“Hey,” John says, sliding one hand around to grasp the back of Sherlock’s neck while the other rubs slow circles over his shoulder blades. “What’s all this about?”

Sherlock shakes his head slightly where it’s tucked firmly against John’s shoulder. “Nothing.”

“Doesn’t seem like nothing,” John replies, tightening the arm looped around Sherlock’s shoulder and turning his head so that his lips graze over the mess of dark curls that tumble over his forehead. He takes a step back and pivots slightly, guiding Sherlock around until the backs of his thighs nudge up against the edge of the desktop tucked into the stacks, then he bends forward to encourage the taller man to sit down onto it. Sherlock’s knees fall open and John steps into the space between them, tipping two tanned fingers under a pale chin and lifting gently. “Talk to me.”

“I’m just happy to see you,” Sherlock says quietly, gazing up into deep blue eyes full of concern and raising his uninjured shoulder in a slight shrug.

“I’m happy to see you too.” John reaches out and pushes an errant curl from where it’s tangled in Sherlock’s lashes as a smile lifts the corners of his lips. “For a while there after you left last night I just stood there in my living room wondering if all that had really happened, or if I’d just imagined it.”

“Really?” Sherlock asks, tilting his head and looking surprised.

“Yeah, but then I tripped over a wet towel laying in a heap on the bedroom floor, and that convinced me it was all real.”
“Sorry.” Sherlock smiles sheepishly, a pool of warmth spreading behind his ribs as John huffs out a low chuckle, shaking his head as it bubbles and changes to a bright laugh, then tips over into a melodic giggle that fills the air. “When I woke up this morning I thought maybe I’d dreamed the whole thing. Then I tried to get out of bed.”

“Poor thing,” John says, lifting one hand and probing carefully at the skin around the cut on Sherlock’s lip, then reaching around him to angle the desk lamp slightly to get a better look at the wound. “Swelling’s gone way down—it looks better already. How’s your head?”

“All right, I suppose.” Sherlock leans into the warmth of John’s touch as he runs the tips of his fingers softly over the tender bump at the back of his skull that is much less prominent than it was yesterday.

“Shoulder?” John asks, squeezing the joint gently through the layer of heavy wool settled over it, then running his palm down to cup Sherlock’s elbow. “Any worse?”

“No, just sore and stiff.”

“Well, that’s to be expected.” John nods, watching Sherlock’s face as he gently manipulates the joint, his eyes clouding over and his jaw clenching as he sees Sherlock wince slightly at the motion. “And it’s nothing to what that bastard Wilkes will be feeling if he dares to show his face anywhere near me.”

“It’s unlikely you’ll cross paths, John,” Sherlock says, grimacing as John drops a hand to the small of his back and probes gently in the general area of the angry bruise above his hip. “Sebastian’s not really the library type.”

“I’m serious, Sherlock,” John says, his voice low and tight as he tightens his fingers possessively over Sherlock’s hip.

“I’m all right,” Sherlock assures him, lifting a hand and settling it against a tanned jaw.

“I know, but—” John grits his teeth and presses his lips together tightly, then takes in a long breath through his nose. “I hate that he hurt you. He shouldn’t be able to do that and just get away with it.”

“He’s been hurt far worse, John,” Sherlock says softly. “For a very long time.”

“That’s not a good enough excuse,” John argues, shaking his head.

“Perhaps not,” Sherlock concedes, reaching out to cover the hand clenched at John’s side with his own then tilting his head thoughtfully. “But I can’t help but think that the consequences he’d face at home would be far worse than any disciplinary action the school could impose. And no one deserves that.”

“Well, you’re a better man than I am,” John sighs, opening his fingers and pressing his palm to Sherlock’s then threading their fingers together.

“That,” Sherlock says, raising their joined hands to his lips and pressing a gentle kiss over John’s knuckles, “is not possible.”

John shakes his head, a smile spreading across his face as he leans in for a kiss. Sherlock tips his chin up, pressing forward eagerly as John’s lips meet his—but John won’t be rushed. He keeps the contact light, soft brushes and sweet licks and the tiniest nips of teeth before he raises his free hand to cradle Sherlock’s jaw in his palm, nudging their noses together as he deepens the kiss. John gradually slips his other hand from where their fingers are tangled together, lifting it to grasp a pale
cheek while continuing to slowly lick his way into Sherlock’s mouth.

Sherlock draws in a shaky breath beneath him, long fingers grasping at the soft fabric of John’s jumper where it’s gathered at his waist and then slipping around to settle against the small of his back. John tastes like coffee and toothpaste and strawberry jam and something else—something spicy and mellow and salty and unique and perfect and fascinating. He tries to tug John closer, strains upward to capture that clever mouth more fully but John pulls back, pausing to lay a quick, chaste kiss at the corner of Sherlock’s mouth before grinning down at him. He slides his hands down from Sherlock’s cheeks, palms smoothing over the fine wool of his coat.

“Ooh, I like this,” John says, tracing the edges of the lapels with his fingertips and grasping the material between his thumb and fingers. “It suits you.”

“Despite ample visual evidence to the contrary, it would appear my brother actually has fairly decent taste on occasion.”

“Well, he certainly knows you.” John slips his fingers under the thick collar of the coat and flips it up. He steps back and regards his handiwork for a moment with a pleased nod. “Yeah, you should wear it like just like that.”

“You don’t think it looks, I don’t know, a bit pretentious?”

“Oh it’s completely pretentious, which is why it’s perfect,” John teases, giggling at Sherlock’s indignant scoff before leaning over and depositing a quick kiss on his pale forehead. “Now budge over so I can finish shelving these books, yeah?”

Sherlock heaves out a put upon sigh, then gets to his feet as John steps around him and picks up the next book in the pile, examining the spine and then scanning the shelf to determine where it should be returned to. He slips his hands into his pockets and leans back against the shelf behind him, watches the muscles in John’s back contract as he reaches up to insert a volume between two others, sees him roll his injured shoulder and stretch his neck to the side before leaning over to pick up the next item in the stack beside him.

“You know, if you’re going to just stand there and watch me all morning you might as well make yourself useful and give me hand,” John suggests genially, scanning the row of books above him with a furrowed brow as he searches for the correct spot on the shelf. When he finds it, he lifts up onto his toes, and as he stretches up to replace the book the hem of his shirt comes untucked from his trousers, leaving a sliver of his lower back exposed in the process. It’s the barest hint of skin, just a tiny patch of smooth flesh, and Sherlock longs to reach out and touch it—to slide his hands around John’s waist and pull him close and bury his nose in John’s neck, nudge it under his collar to breathe in the scent of him, press his lips to his skin and run his tongue over it to see if he tastes as good as he smells. He takes a step forward, then pauses reflexively—one hand already stretched toward the man before him, wondering if it’s okay to touch John simply because he wants to. Whether he’s allowed.

But this is John—who reaches for him so easily, who cards his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, who kisses him gently and gathers him close and whispers softly against his brow. And all at once he’s moving again, stepping up behind John and slipping his hands around his (soft, but trim) middle and pressing himself up against his (strong) back and leaning down to nuzzle his face into the (warm) space where his neck meets his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” John’s voice is soft and teasing, and Sherlock can hear the smile on his lips.

“I’m helping,” Sherlock says, then immediately goes back to kissing the base of John’s neck,
wrapping his lips around a small patch of skin and pulling it between his teeth, nibbling at it gently.

“You’re really not,” John insists in a tone that Sherlock is sure is meant to sound frustrated but is rendered less than convincing by the way John melts back against his chest, blond head falling to the side as he reaches one hand up to the side of Sherlock’s head, fingers tugging softly at the curls that wind between them. “And if you keep sucking on my neck like that, I’m going to throw you down on this desk and have my way with you.”

“I fail to see the problem with that scenario,” Sherlock says, between kisses.

“The problem,” John sighs, stepping forward slightly and spinning around in the circle of Sherlock’s arms to face him, “is that this is where I work. And where you happen to attend school. We can’t just toss each other up against the stacks and go at it during school hours.”

“What about after school hours?” Sherlock asks, raising an eyebrow and leering at him.

“Negotiable,” John says, tipping his head thoughtfully. “But, seriously, Sherlock. You’re a student, and I’m technically a staff member, and that makes this…complicated.”

“Oh.” Sherlock’s smile fades slightly as John’s words sink in—this thing between them, whatever it is, exactly—is a secret, then. “So, then, you don’t want anyone to know…about…this.”

“Are you kidding?” John asks, a mischievous smile tipping at his lips. “I want everyone to know.”

“But, you just said—” Sherlock begins, a look of confusion stealing over his features.

“I said that it’s complicated,” John clarifies, then lifts a hand to Sherlock’s face, one broad thumb sweeping tenderly over the edge of a prominent cheekbone. “Because, well, it is, a bit. I mean, clearly Mrs. H. doesn’t have a problem with it—and since we’re both adults and my wages are paid by the library trust there’s no legal issue at hand.”

“You sound as though you’ve given this some thought,” Sherlock observes, staring down at John intently.

John shrugs. “Yeah, I guess I have. I thought about it all night, to be honest. And I know it might be a little tricky, but if that just means we need to be careful while we’re on school grounds that’s a price I’m willing to pay.”

“You’re sure?” Sherlock asks quietly.

“Very sure.” He looks down for a moment, then looks back up at Sherlock and clears his throat slightly. “Look, I know it’s not perfect—and neither am I, for that matter. But complicated or not, I want to give this a go, Sherlock. I’m in if you are.”

Sherlock watches him carefully, takes in the hopeful gaze and furrowed brow and the worried press of teeth against a pink bottom lip, then leans into John’s touch and nods his head.

John blows out a relieved sigh between smiling lips. “Thank God. Because that was the best speech I could come up with, so I was really hoping it would work.”

“Like a charm,” Sherlock assures him, lowering his head as John raises his to meet him in a soft kiss.

“Glad that’s settled,” John says, turning to pick up the next book in the pile beside him and reaching up to scratch absently at his neck, just under the collar. “Now, I’d really like to avoid Mrs. H. walking in on you snogging me up against the wall—again. So I’m going to finish shelving these
books, and you’re going to go do some homework or something, got it?”

“Fine,” Sherlock sighs, taking a step back as John drops his hand from the patch of skin he was rubbing at a moment ago. The same patch of skin Sherlock had been nibbling at earlier. The patch of skin that now sports a fairly angry looking, vaguely mouth-shaped, red mark. Sherlock stares at the blemish, and he tries not to smile…but he can’t help it.

“What?” John asks as he notices him staring, then looks suspiciously at the grin Sherlock is attempting to suppress, then pulls his chin in and lifts his collar away from his neck and looks down at it. “Is there something on my shirt?”

“Your neck, actually,” Sherlock says, looking slightly guilty. “I’m afraid I may have been a bit…enthusiastic in my attentions, earlier.”

“Oh my God!” John presses his fingers against his neck and throws an accusing glance at him. “Sherlock Holmes, did you give me a love bite?”

“A small one, perhaps,” Sherlock concedes, barely suppressing a chuckle. “But don’t worry, it will be hidden by your collar.”

“Are you sure?” John asks, fastening another button on his shirt and turning to face Sherlock, lifting his chin so that he can get a better look. “Can you still see it?”

“A little,” Sherlock admits.

“Oh for Christ’s sake.” John rolls his eyes while buttoning his shirt all the way up. “So much for being careful.”

“To be fair, that actually happened before you said anything about needing to be cautious, so technically—”

“Oh, sod off,” John huffs, slapping Sherlock playfully on the thigh with the book in his hand. He shakes his head and lets out a weary sigh—that dissolves into a low chuckle, that evolves into a laugh, that breaks apart into a breathy giggle—that comes full circle to end in a sigh. “Well, at least this will give the girls something to gossip about.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic, John,” Sherlock scolds, rolling his eyes and backing away from him down the aisle towards the center of the library. “It’s already less noticeable than it was a few minutes ago, I’m sure it will fade away completely within the hour.”

It didn’t.

Nearly five hours later, Sherlock is surprised to note that the mark is actually a bit more noticeable than it had been at first. Though, in his defense, John’s shirt collar does do a fair job of hiding it. Mostly, anyway.

From his vantage point at his regular table Sherlock can see the rounded edge of it peeking over the top of the buttoned up collar, a mottled red spot of bruising that mars the otherwise perfectly tan expanse of John’s neck.

Molly Hooper sighs, closing the cover of the book she’s just finished flipping through and adding it to the stack of the other volumes that have also met with her disapproval over the last half an hour. “Well, all three of these are completely useless. There’s no new information in any of them.”
“We’ve been researching this subject for weeks now, Molly,” Sherlock says, staring somewhere over her right shoulder as he watches John assisting a group of fourth year girls. “Do you imagine there’s been some major scientific breakthrough in the understanding of the human digestive system that’s simply eluded you all this time?”

“Our project is due in less than two weeks, Sherlock,” Molly reminds him, wringing her hands anxiously before she sets about reordering the enormous stack of notes and papers strewn over the table between them, flipping through the pages and frowning slightly. “What did you do with that diagram of the portal vein and vascular map you made last week?”

“Whichever one you think is best,” Sherlock answers with a casual wave of his hand. His attention is focused less on the girls huddled in front of the circulation desk themselves, than it is on the brief glimpses of golden hair and tanned skin and blue eyes and pink lips that appear briefly in the spaces between them as they fidget and shuffle where they’re queued up waiting to be assisted.

Molly sighs. “You’re not paying attention to me at all, are you?”

“Hmm?” Sherlock hums absently, tearing his gaze away from the activity behind her as the girls gathered around John finally step away from the desk and move in a herd towards the exit.

“Exactly,” she huffs, rolling her eyes then tilting her head to regard him shrewdly. “You’re so distracted today—you’ve barely listened to a thing I’ve said all morning.”

“I never listen to you,” Sherlock points out.

“Yes, you do,” Molly insists, and when she flashes a grin at him, Sherlock can’t help but smile back. She purses her lips and drops her gaze to the injury visible on his bottom lip. “Are you worried about running into Sebastian in French class next period? Because I’d be quite happy to punch him in the mouth if he so much as looks in your direction. Or I could take a trip down to the headmaster’s office and tell him exactly what kind of person their star football player really is.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Sherlock assures her, a wave of warmth brushing over his skin at the indignant outrage in Molly’s tone on his behalf. “But I appreciate the offer.”

Molly looks back at him for a moment, a note of surprise playing over her features as she opens her mouth to reply, when—

*ping*

*buzzzz*

They both drop their gazes to the table, each picking up their respective mobiles to see the screens lit up with the announcement:

**NEW CONFESSION!**

Sherlock taps the notice closed and swipes through his apps to select the one with the acid-green skull icon, and seconds after the screen goes black the following text begins to appear, one letter at a time:

*iConfess: Hotson Watson has a LOVE BITE! I wonder who the lucky girl is?*

Sherlock’s eyes widen a bit as the message is revealed, and he hears Molly gasp quietly just before the words begin to blur and then explode into a shower of white sparks. He sets his phone down on the table and lifts his gaze cautiously to see Molly twisting around in her seat to look towards the
circulation desk. John is staring intently at his computer monitor, nodding at something Mrs. Hudson is pointing to from where she’s standing just behind him at his shoulder. As he lifts his chin to turn his head toward the librarian, the collar of his shirt slips down his neck a bit, revealing the majority of the purpling bruise seated just beneath it. Molly whips her head back around and leans forward over the table.

“Did you see that?” she whispers, her eyes wide. “It’s huge!”

“I don’t think it’s so big,” Sherlock replies, his tone a bit more defensive than he’d intended it to be. “Hardly noticeable, really.”

“Um, yes it is!” Molly insists, looking over her shoulder as casually as possible and then turning back to face Sherlock with a surprised look. “Is John seeing someone?”

“Well, I…” Sherlock begins, clearing his throat slightly as a blush creeps up his neck and settles over his cheeks. He scans the table for a distraction, then closes his fingers around the pile of books Molly had rejected a few minutes before. “You know, you’re absolutely right about these books, Molly. Completely useless. I think I’ll just go and put them back.”

Molly looks confused for a moment, narrows her eyes suspiciously at him, then all at once her eyes widen and she drops her phone onto the stack of papers in front of her and raises her hand to stifle the tiny squeak of surprise that tumbles out of her open mouth. Sherlock pushes back his chair and stands up, tucking the stack of books under his arm and crossing quickly through the wide common space and making a turn at the shelf marked 500-575, hurrying towards the end of the long aisle. He scans the shelves for the proper section to return the books to as a set of slight footsteps stalk purposely towards him.

“Sherlock Holmes,” Molly whispers, stepping up to insert herself between him and the bookshelf. “Did you hook up with John Watson?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Molly,” Sherlock replies, keeping his voice low as he cocks a hip and rolls his eyes at her. “Hook up? That’s such a crude phrase, what does it even mean?”

“Oh my God, you did!” Molly squeaks, flapping her hands excitedly. “Shhh…” Sherlock hisses, looking frantically toward the end of the aisle and raising a finger at her as she slaps her hand over her mouth. “Can we please keep the squealing to a minimum?”

“Sorry,” she whispers, then presses her fingers to her lips to stifle the elated giggle that bubbles out of her mouth. “I’m just so happy for you—tell me everything! When? Where? How?”

“Yesterday, his flat, and in the—usual way. In that order,” Sherlock tells her, attempting to keep his voice even and nonchalant, but pressing his lips together tightly to suppress the smile that threatens to Overtake his face at the memory.

“He took you to his flat?” Molly asks, nearly vibrating with gleeful energy.

“Yes,” Sherlock confirms, stepping to the left to return one of the books in his hand to the shelf beside her. “He found me after the…incident with Sebastian, and that seemed like the most practical place to sort things out, I suppose, since he had a first aid kit. And tea.”

“He took you to his home and took care of you,” Molly sighs, and for a moment Sherlock is worried she’s going to go into a full swoon and collapse to the floor—but she recovers. “That’s so romantic.”
“It was the logical thing to do,” Sherlock says with a shrug, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as Molly scoffs, slapping his arm playfully.

“Oh yeah, very logical,” she teases, shaking her head and grinning widely up at him. “So, what, then? He patched you up, made you a cuppa, and to thank him you summoned your inner vampire and took a bite out of his neck?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sherlock chides, reaching around her to shelve another book. “His neck was completely unscathed when I left last night. That happened this morning.”

“This morning?” Molly squeals, and Sherlock throws up his hands in frustration and raises a finger to his lips while glaring at her, and she lowers her voice before continuing. “You mean right here?”

“Of course not,” he admonishes, slipping the last book into its proper place on the shelf and looking down at her with a smirk. “We were a few aisles over.”

Molly breaks into a fit of quiet giggles, and Sherlock finds himself joining in—a low chuckle vibrating in his throat. And before he knows what’s happening Molly crosses the space between them and throws her slender arms around him—tugs him close and squeezes him tight and after the briefest pause of shock, Sherlock folds his arms around his friend and returns the hug. After a long moment Molly pats him firmly on the back, then steps back and smiles at him fondly.

“Well, it’s about time,” she says with a decisive nod. “I’m really glad for you, Sherlock.”

“Thank you, Molly,” Sherlock says quietly, returning the nod.

“Well,” his lab partner says, as they turn and start to walk back down the aisle. “Lunch period is nearly over, we should pack up our project notes. Are you coming to French class?”

Sherlock shoots her a withering look.

“Of course you’re not,” Molly sighs as they cross over to their regular table, excusing herself as she steps around a young, dark haired student who is on his way out of the library with a stack books under his arm. As they take their normal seats, Molly reaches down and plucks up her mobile phone, thumbs tapping away at the screen while Sherlock starts to gather up the stacks of papers strewn over the table.

*p*ing*

*buzzzz*.

Sherlock looks over to see his mobile screen lit up with the familiar notice:

**NEW CONFESSION!**

He glances up at Molly, who looks pointedly away from him and sets her phone face down on the table, then begins shuffling through the assorted pages spread out before her. Sherlock eyes her suspiciously, then picks up his phone and taps open the iConfess app to see the following message appear:

*iConfess: My friend is happy, and that makes ME happy.*

Sherlock watches the letters slowly pull out of focus then disappear in a shower of bright sparks. He smiles down at the screen, then slips his mobile into the front flap of his book bag.
Twenty minutes later, their biology project is all packed away and Molly waves a last goodbye from the door. John finishes helping the last member of a group of fifth year girls who descended on the library at the tail end of the lunch period like a swarm of locusts—lured there, no doubt, by the confession about the condition of a certain library assistant’s neck. As the last of the giggling horde makes their exit and the heavy glass door swishes shut behind them, John heaves out a deep sigh and looks across the room at Sherlock. Standing up from his chair, he shrugs into his coat, buttoning it up as he circles around to the front of the circulation desk. He stands there for a moment, then lifts his chin and jerks his head towards the row of shelves off to his left. Then he smiles, nods, and turns and walks in that direction, disappearing into the stacks. Sherlock gets to his feet and starts off in the same direction, coming to the edge of the aisle that John indicated, and as he turns the corner a pair of strong hands settle onto his hips, tugging him around and pressing him up against the tall stack of shelves. Sherlock barely has time to take a breath before John’s mouth is on his—gentle, but insistent—and his knees go a bit weak at the contact. He raises his arms to wrap them around a set of broad, compact shoulders, opening his mouth to welcome a soft, warm tongue and holding on tight as John takes control of the kiss and snogs him thoroughly senseless.

After what seems like an age, John finally pulls away, dragging his lips down over the edge of Sherlock’s jaw and leaving a trail of slow, wet kisses down his pale column of a neck.

“So, this is your definition of being careful?” Sherlock asks breathily.

“Well, I wasn’t going to leave without kissing you goodbye,” John says between licks. “I’ve got to get moving if I want to get down to campus on time.”

“You don’t have class on Fridays.”

“Not usually, no,” John agrees, nibbling softly. “But I’ve got to make up the lab I missed yesterday, or I’ll get too far behind.”

Sherlock slides a hand up to weave his fingers into golden hair and huffs out a chuckle as John nips playfully at the tender skin above Sherlock’s collar.

“Careful,” Sherlock warns, “You’ll leave a mark.”

“It would serve you right,” John says, leaning back and glaring at him with mock anger. “All day long I’ve had people staring at my neck.”

“Well, it’s a very attractive neck, John.”

“Oh, is that why you tried to eat it?”

“Yes,” Sherlock admits, with a shrug.

“Even Mrs. H. noticed,” John says, shaking his head. “It was mortifying.”

“What did she say?”

“A bunch of things about how pleased she was for us, and then a short lecture on discretion, and I don’t really remember much else because I sort of zoned out after she mentioned something about her late husband being a ‘biter’ as well.”
John shudders a bit at the thought, and Sherlock laughs at the reaction—and John starts laughing too.

Moments later, when John’s giggle fills the air, Sherlock can’t help but lean in and hold John’s face between his hands and try to catch that sound on his tongue. John sighs against him, then tugs him down to press their foreheads together. Sherlock reaches out and gently smooths his fingertips over the mark on John’s neck.

“Sorry about that,” Sherlock tells him softly.

“Don’t be,” John tells him, pulling back and smiling up at him. “I’ve got years of scrapes and scars on me. It’s about time something beautiful left a mark.”

Sherlock smiles softly down at him, and John reaches out to capture both of Sherlock’s hands and twine their fingers together.

“So, I was thinking,” John begins, tucking his hands behind his own back and dragging Sherlock’s arms around him, “since it’s Friday night, maybe we could go out and get that pint we talked about?”

“All right,” Sherlock agrees. “What time?”

“Well, I’ll be a few hours in the lab—but I could swing back by and pick you up after?”

“I have a violin lesson this afternoon,” Sherlock tells him. “But I could have Mycroft’s car drop me off at Baker Street afterwards.”

“Perfect,” John says as he untangles their fingers and reaches into his pocket and retrieves his keys, slipping one deftly off the ring and pressing it into Sherlock’s palm. “You’ll probably beat me there, so go on in and make yourself at home.”

“Are you sure?” Sherlock asks, staring down at the key in his hand and looking back up at John in surprise.

“Yeah, of course. Raid the fridge, watch some telly, snoop through my drawers—you know, the usual stuff,” John says, then lifts up on his toes and presses a quick kiss to Sherlock’s mouth before starting to back away. “I’ve got to run—I’m already late. I’ll see you back at the flat, okay?”

“Okay,” Sherlock says with a smile, raising a hand and waving as John walks away.

Standing in the middle of the small living room of 221C Baker Street, Sherlock Holmes is finding it somewhat difficult to believe how much his life has changed in a single day.

In the last twenty four hours he’s been in John Watson’s car, in his flat, in his tub, in his bed—and now here he is again, waiting for John to come home. Which should be fairly soon, he thinks. He slides his bag off of his shoulder and onto the couch, then slips his fingers into the front pocket to retrieve his mobile to check the time—and it’s dead.

Damn.

He’d meant to text Mycroft and let him know where he was, but he’s fairly certain that the driver will have recently updated him as to his younger brother’s whereabouts. And in all likelihood, Mycroft had already known where Sherlock was anyway.

Slipping his new coat from around his shoulders, he walks over to the small closet next to the kitchen
and hangs it on a hook beside the door, then unwinds his new blue scarf from his neck and drapes it over the collar as well—his right shoulder protesting a bit at the action. Wincing slightly, he walks into the kitchen and opens a few cabinets until he finds one with a few neat rows of glasses, then pulls one down and fills it with water from the tap. He takes a long pull, then crosses to the fridge and opens it. Standing in the sliver of light from the appliance he looks over the contents: milk, bread, fruit and veg—and a surprisingly impressive assortment of jams.

Closing the refrigerator door, he heads down the short hall towards the bathroom, flips on the light and crosses over to the medicine cabinet. He rifles through it until he finds a bottle of paracetamol and shakes out two pills, swallowing them down and finishing the water before refilling the glass.

Flicking off the light, he steps through the open bedroom door and crosses to the neatly made bed at the centre of the room. He stares down at the pillows, remembering the feel of soft sheets against his skin—of John’s skin against his own—and smiles. Sitting down on the edge of the mattress, he sets the glass of water on the small bedside table, then switches on the lamp.

He eyes the small drawer in the table, curious as to what’s inside. He reaches for the handle, then pauses for a moment. It feels illicit, to freely explore this space that isn’t his own, but John did explicitly say that he should make himself at home, so…

He tugs open the drawer and looks over the contents.  

A paperback book (novel, spy thriller, dull), a tube of lip balm (the man does lick his lips an awful lot) a box of tissues (utilitarian, sensible), a bag of jelly babies (sweets in bed, John?), a box of condoms (new, unopened) and a bottle of lubricant (plastic seal still intact).

Interesting.

Closing the drawer, he toes off his shoes as a yawn steals over him—long and satisfying and shivery at the end. Swinging his feet up onto the bed, Sherlock leans back and lets his head sink into the pillow, then turns his face slightly and breathes in deeply. A smile stretches over his lips as he rolls over onto his side and tucks his hands up underneath this chin, the scent of John all around him.

_He’ll just close his eyes and rest, he thinks. Just for a minute..._

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated!

So this week’s rec is something from way back in the vault of the fandom, and it’s a fairly unusual pic for me because it’s not in the least bit porny. Or even Johnlocky. It’s _maybe_ pre slash if you squint. But it’s a really lovely little character study involving a super stroppy Sherlock, a patient and loving John, and a likeable Mycroft (which I have a HUGE soft spot for).

For a delicious little romp into improbable Sherlockian Horticulture, hop on over to author thesardine’s _Seeds_. It’s fun and creative and there’s a solid punctuation based joke in there that STILL makes me laugh when I think about it. Because I am a nerd.

Enjoy!
Hello, Friends—and a very happy late Sunday night damn near Monday morning to you all.

You know that old Mother Goose rhyme that starts ‘Monday’s Child is full of Grace…’ and then ticks off the attributes of children born on each day of the week? Well this was originally going to be a joke about how ‘Thursday’s Child has far to go’ (because how true is that?) but then I read that ‘The Child born on the Sabbath day is bonny and blithe and good and gay’ and if THAT doesn’t sum up this chapter just about perfectly then I don’t know what does. Plus, writing it was a lot like birthing a child, so there’s an extra layer of inappropriate comparison for you all to enjoy. No charge!

So this chapter finds our boys finally getting to spend some quality time together outside of the Morningside Library where they get to try on a little more TEENLICK for size, eat a few meals, maybe play a board game, who knows? Guess you’ll just have to read it and find out.

Oodles of thanks and praise and all things good to my spectacular beta/BFF owensm who only occasionally tells me to shut up about this stupid fic, already (because apparently it’s “inappropriate conversation” for a child’s birthday party. Pfft!). Extra thanks and love and heaping helpings of whatever that little alien inside of her is craving these days to my girl cheytea7. Team Beta is the bees knees.

Smeary lipstick kisses to each and every one of you behind every click, kudo, subscription, comment, rec, and bookmark this little tale has accumulated. I continue to be stunned and humbled and tickled pink by the response. Thank you. Please feel free to leave me a comment if you’re so inclined, you know I love hearing from you even more than when the UPS man leaves a shiny box on the front stoop and I’m all “QVC? What did I order from QVC?” and then I open it and I’m like “Oh yeah—I DID order that didn’t I?” and then someone hides all the red wine and credit cards. Because THAT’s how we ended up with a $500 blender.

Thanks so much for reading, and I’ll see you all next week!!

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Moving with practiced speed and skill, the two broad knives in her hands cut deftly through the cold cubes, their sharp edges clinking softly against the smooth stoneware. From his perch on the heavy wooden chair beside her, he watched her work—slicing and separating and slicing again, chopping up the tiny pieces of butter, gradually working them into the snowy pile of sugar and flour and soda. Puffy white clouds kicked up around the blades, billowing just up to the edge of her bare wrists before fluttering back down into the heavy vessel. Transferring the handles of both knives into one hand, she tipped up the edge of the bowl for inspection.

“Well, what do you think?” Marie asked, reaching into the bowl to gather up a small handful of the mixture and holding it out for her assistant to inspect. “Do these bits look ‘pea sized’ to you?”

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Standing up onto his toes, Sherlock leaned over the broad kitchen counter and peered down into her hand, small fingers reaching out to pluck up one tiny nugget of the crumbly substance.

“Hmm,” he said, considering it carefully. “It looks the same size as a pea. But not all peas are the same size.”

“Very true,” Marie agreed, turning the bowl slightly so that bits of the mixture cascaded down over each other as Sherlock stared down into it. “But neither are the crumbs, see? We just want them all to be about the size of peas.”

“I think it’s ready, then,” Sherlock told her, dropping the small nugget back into Marie’s hand and nodding sagely. “I like peas.”

“You always have, since you were just a wee babe,” Marie said fondly, setting the knives aside and righting the bowl onto the counter before reaching in to carve out a well into the center of the mixture. “And it’s a wonder that you do, I might add. Your mum wouldn’t touch them, you know, no matter how I tried to hide them. She’d pick them out of her supper and toss them over the edge of her highchair, that one. Just the way you used to do with carrots.”

“Redbeard loves carrots.” Sherlock shrugged, and they both looked over to the open back door where the lanky Irish Setter sitting patiently outside of it chuffed happily at the sound of his name, silky tail wagging merrily.

“Oh, so it’s Redbeard’s fault. I see,” Marie teased, shaking her head as Sherlock giggled. Wiping her hands on a nearby towel, she crossed behind his chair to retie the strings of the apron wrapped twice around his tiny waist where they’d managed to come undone (again). She rolled the cuffs of his sleeves up one more time on each arm, then stepped back up to the counter and pointed to the wide mouthed measuring glass beside her young charge. “All right, time to add the buttermilk.”

Sherlock reached out to gather the heavy cup into both of his hands, then lifted it over the bowl. He tipped it carefully, pink tongue protruding from the corner of his cupid’s bow of a mouth, tiny brow furrowed in concentration. As the last of the thick, creamy liquid dripped out of the cup, Marie skillfully stirred it into the crumbly mixture, working to combine the ingredients just until the ball of sticky dough began to chase the spoon around the bottom of the bowl.

“All right, are your berries all dried off and ready?” Marie asked him, looking over towards the tea towel beside the sink covered with a layer of the glistening blackberries they’d gathered together from the bramble near the edge of the woods not quite an hour ago. Sherlock hopped down from his chair and ran to look at them over the edge of the counter.

“They look dry to me.” Sherlock reached out to pluck one up from the towel and eyed it carefully. “But I should probably taste one, don’t you think? Just to make sure they’re still sweet.”

“Very sensible idea,” Marie agreed, reaching out to take one herself then popping it into her mouth. She watched the youngest Holmes in residence chew his berry thoughtfully, dark juice colouring his lips further where they’d already been stained a bit purple from all the sampling he’d done during their sunrise berry picking expedition. “So, what do you think?”

“Delicious!” Sherlock said with a grin before clambering back up onto his chair to watch as Marie gathered up the corners of towel and shook the fruit out carefully into the bowl. “Do you think Mummy will be surprised?”

“I do,” Marie assured him with a smile, picking up a lemon and quickly grating a bit of zest over the dough (and if she happened to notice a small, pale hand reaching into the bowl to pinch a few
berries, she declined to mention it). “Your mum has always loved scones for breakfast, and blackberry is her favourite.”

“What’s your favourite, Marie?” Sherlock asked, edging closer to watch her carefully fold the delicate fruit into the fluffy batter.

“I’m rather partial to apricot, myself.”

He flashed her a wide-eyed grin. “That’s my favourite, too!”

“So it is,” Marie told him with a smile, giving the mixture one last stir before sliding the bowl off to the side and reaching out to drag the canister of flour towards them. “That’s why you always get apricot scones on your birthday. And why your brother gets cinnamon buns, and your Dad gets crumb cake.”

“And why Mummy gets blackberry scones today!” Sherlock chimed in, reaching out to help spread the flour Marie sprinkled over the countertop.

“Just so,” Marie confirmed, dusting the hard stone surface liberally before turning out the pastry batter onto the middle of it. “Now, flour up your hands a bit more, and we’ll pat this out into a nice rectangle.”

“A rectangle has two long sides and two short sides,” Sherlock said, nodding wisely and slapping his small palms over the top of the dough as Marie quickly shaped it. “A square has four sides that are all the same size.”

“Exactly right,” Marie agreed with a nod. “And in a moment we’re going to cut the dough into triangles. How many sides do those have?”

“Three!” Sherlock said immediately, smiling up at her.

“Such a clever young man,” Marie sighed, looking quite impressed as she reached over to retrieve the rolling pastry cutter and regarded him with soft eyes. “I can hardly believe how grown up you are. Soon you’ll be off to school and learning all sorts of new things.”

“Myc says that in his class they have a pet rabbit!” he said, bouncing excitedly beside her. “His name is Mr. Biddles and they get to feed him and pet him and hold him if they’re very careful. And there’s a whole library full of books just for children. And then, when I get to year four, I can play in the orchestra!”

“That all sounds very exciting,” Marie agreed, smiling as she dusted the top of the dough with a dash of flour. “Hands up, love.”

“I don’t want to play the cello, though,” Sherlock continued seriously, lifting his hands and holding them palms up and away from the counter as Marie quickly sliced the dough into neat triangles. “Myc says it’s the best one but I think that’s just because it’s what he plays. I want to play the violin.”

“I think that the violin would suit you very well,” she replied, reaching down to retrieve a heavy baking tray and lining it with a smooth sheet of parchment paper then deftly transferring the pastries onto it.

“And he says that all the teachers are very nice and some of them are even clever,” Sherlock continued, peeling up a triangle of dough and setting it carefully next to the others on the tray.
“Some of them, huh?” Marie inquired, a smile tipping at the corners of her mouth as she spaced the scones out evenly then picked up the small bowl of coarse sugar crystals and set it on the counter between them.

“Mhm hm,” Sherlock agreed, nodding enthusiastically as he watched Marie sprinkle a pinch of the sugar over one of the scones then deliberately mimicked the action. “But he says that the food they give you for lunch is terrible.”

“Well, if you decide you don’t care for it, then I will pack up a lunch for you every day just like I do for Mycroft.”

“Every day?” Sherlock asked, eyeing her sceptically.

“Yes, every day,” Marie assured him as she sprinkled sugar over the last scone on the tray. “I would never let either of my favourite boys go hungry, you know.”

“With biscuits?” Sherlock asked hopefully.

“Always,” she assured him with a wink.

Sherlock tilted his head and looked at her curiously. “Marie, why don’t you have a little boy of your own?”

“Things just didn’t work out that way for me,” Marie answered with a slight shrug, a melancholy expression flickering briefly over her pleasant features as she looked back at him with kind eyes.

“But don’t you want to be someone’s mum?”

“I suppose I did, once upon a time,” Marie admitted, nodding thoughtfully. “My Charlie and I talked about it, of course, but after I lost him, well...” She cleared her throat and smiled softly down at him. “Then I came to work for your Grandparents, and soon your Aunt Violet was born, and then your mum—and I got to help take care of them and watch them grow up into lovely young women. And when your Mum married your Dad she asked me to come with her to Cornwall, and here I am.”

“And now you take care of me,” Sherlock said happily, smiling broadly up at her.

“Yes, I do,” Marie agreed. “And Mycroft, and your Mum and Dad. It’s a very nice life, I think. Every day I get to make sure that you’re all well-fed and happy—just the way you are doing this morning for your Mum.”

“Do you think she’ll like them?” Sherlock asked her then, his voice a bit unsure as he bit at his bottom lip, his brow furrowed with concern as he nodded towards the tray of pastries.

“Of course she will,” Marie told him with certainty. “And do you know what she’ll like best?”

Sherlock cocked his head for a moment, then shook his head.

Marie smiled, wiping her hands on her apron then reaching out to tap the end of his upturned nose gently. “That you made them.”

“Really?” he asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

“Really,” Marie nodded. “She will love the scones, Sherlock. But even more than that, she’ll love that she gets to spend the day surrounded by the people who love her most in all this world. Now, how about we get these in the oven?”
Sherlock nodded enthusiastically, jumping off his chair and landing with a loud thump before running over to stand beside the oven. He watched as Marie opened the heavy door, staying well back from the blast of heat that still managed to wash up and over his skin, then leaned over to look at the tray of pastries through the thick glass window.

“And now we wait,” Marie told him, setting the timer for twenty five minutes then stepping over to untie the strings from his slight waist before lifting the apron from around his neck. “Why don’t you give your hands a wash, then go on out into the garden and throw Redbeard’s ball around for a bit? He’s been waiting so patiently all this time.”

As if on cue, a sharp bark sounded just then from the kitchen door, the Irish Setter bounding around in joyful anticipation, a bright red and yellow ball clutched in his jaws. Sherlock dragged his chair over to the sink and hopped up onto it, then held out his small palms to accept a few pumps of soap from Marie before setting about scrubbing the flour from his hands under the warm stream of water as Marie did the same beside him.

“Marie,” he said as he turned to look at her while rinsing the suds from between his fingers, “when is your birthday?”

She snatched a clean towel from the bar on the wall, folding it over Sherlock’s hands and gently rubbing them dry. “The twenty-third of September.”

“Can I spend that day with you?” he asked, looking at her hopefully.

Marie went still for a moment, eyes focused on the towel in her hands, then she cleared her throat quietly and raised her gaze to meet his with a soft smile.

“I’d like that very much,” she told him, giving his hands a final pat and pulling the towel away.

“Now go and enjoy the sunshine for a bit. I’ll call you when it’s time to lay the table.”

“Come on, Redbeard!” Sherlock called out, climbing down from the chair and bounding towards the door as the sweet smell of sugar and butter and blackberries filled the air…

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His eyes flutter open gradually, blinking against the glow of the fading light from the window set high up on the wall, long lashes whispering against the smooth cotton of the pillowcase beneath his cheek. Mouth stretching wide in a deep yawn, he tugs the cosy blanket more tightly around him, the faint sound of a familiar voice singing a quiet tune and the savory aroma of frying onions and garlic floating tantalizingly at the edge of his senses. He inhales deeply, a smile playing on his mouth as he closes his eyes and snuffles his face deeper into the pillow, breathing in the comforting notes of soap and shampoo and musk and sweat that combine to create the unique and unmistakable scent of John.

His eyes snap open at the realisation, and he lifts his head to look blearily at his surroundings. He pushes himself to a sitting position, wincing slightly at the pull it causes to the muscles in his shoulder and lower back, then grins at the brightly coloured knitted afghan that slides down his chest and settles into a puddle around his waist. He hadn’t actually meant to fall asleep, and he finds himself momentarily surprised that he didn’t hear John come home, sleeping so soundly that he didn’t even stir when John had (apparently) covered him with a blanket.

Lifting it off of his legs he swings his feet to the floor, grimacing at the low throb of pain that ripples through him from head to toe. It’s barely been twenty four hours (twenty eight? Twenty nine? What time is it?) since the altercation in the locker room with Sebastian Wilkes, and he knows that a single day is hardly enough time to recover from the injuries he received, relatively minor though they
were. To think otherwise would be entirely illogical.

But there’s a part of him, the sliver of his mind that—no matter how he attempts to train it—simply won’t be bowed into submission by the \textit{(rather formidable, he thinks)} capacity of the rest of his brain for rationality and sensibility. And it is this facet of his intellect that is constantly surprised, and slighted, by his body’s stubborn refusal to speed up the healing process, already. With a tired sigh, he starts to get to his feet when there’s a bright glint off to his right as a bit of late afternoon light from the window plays off of the tall glass of water that sits on the bedside table along with two white pills.

Sherlock huffs out a grateful chuckle, shaking his head slightly as he reaches for the them, tossing the tablets into his mouth and swallowing them down while draining the glass in one long, steady pull. The water is cool and slick and feels marvellous going down, quenching a thirst he hadn’t even known was so dire. Levering himself to his feet he steps out of the bedroom then pauses in the short hall to listen to the steady metallic clink of something soft and fragrant being chased around the bottom of a hot pan, a pleasant tenor alternately humming and singing along to a tune Sherlock can’t hear, and the low sizzle of something frying that crackles beneath it all.

He crosses to the bathroom, shutting the door softly behind him before he relieves himself, splashing a bit of cool water over his face after he washes his hands and then makes his way back out into the flat. As he approaches the wide opening to the narrow kitchen, Sherlock catches a glimpse of John —standing in front of the stove, hips and shoulders swaying slightly to the music being pumped directly into his ears, the slender cords of his earbuds dangling down on either side of his head as he sings along:

\textit{“Someone saved, someone saved, someone saved my life tonight...”}

Sherlock quirks a smile at the sight, crossing the space at a leisurely pace and reaching out to put his empty water glass down onto the counter before settling his hands lightly on John’s hips and sliding them slowly around his waist. John startles a bit at the contact, but relaxes almost immediately—leaning back against Sherlock’s slim chest as a chin rests heavily onto his shoulder and a pale, slightly stubbled cheek rubs lightly against a tanned one. John turns his head towards Sherlock’s and presses a peck to his cheekbone, then reaches up to pull out the earbud on that side before tucking it into the low collar of the vest beneath his unbuttoned shirt.

“Hello, sleepyhead,” John says, continuing to stir the heap of caramelized onions and garlic around the pan. “How are you feeling?”

“Sore.” Sherlock shrugs against him. \textit{“Still.”}

“Yeah, well, healing takes time,” John says, nodding sympathetically. “I left you some paracetamol by the bed.”

“Took them.” Sherlock tips his chin towards the empty glass on the counter as confirmation. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” John replies, reaching to turn down the flame below the pan before tapping the spoon against the edge and setting it carefully aside, then checking on the progress of the pot of water simmering on the back burner. He takes a step back from the stove, pressing against Sherlock who moves with him. John turns to face him then, running his palms up Sherlock’s chest before snaking his arms around his neck. He tips his chin up, smiling invitingly, and Sherlock bends down to taste that grin—to flick his tongue lightly over the seam of John’s lips and catch the top one between his teeth as he cradles the compact body in the circle of his arms. Pulling back after a long, sweet exchange of kisses, John huffs out a contented sigh and looks up at him through slightly narrowed
eyes. “When you weren’t answering my texts or the bell I thought maybe you’d changed your mind, so I rang Mrs. H. to let me in. You were out cold when I found you, didn’t even stir when I took your pulse just to be sure you were alive.”

“Sorry about that, I hadn’t planned on falling asleep, but—”

“You don’t have to apologise for sleeping, Sherlock,” John says with a soft grin, settling a warm palm against his cheek. “And, if I’m being honest, I liked coming home to find you asleep in my bed.”

“My plan was for you to come home and find me awake in your bed,” Sherlock tells him, smiling as John’s lips part to release a delighted giggle.

“Yeah, well, that would have been nice too,” John admits with a wink, laughing against Sherlock’s lips as he bends down for another kiss.

“What time is it?” Sherlock asks, following John’s gaze as he looks at the digital readout on the microwave where it announces that it’s nearly half past seven. “Oh, I didn’t realize I’d slept for so long.”

“You obviously needed the rest. Though I was getting a bit worried that you’d sleep so long I’d be waking you up just in time to tell you that the car was here to collect you.”

“Mycroft isn’t sending a car.” Sherlock notes the look of surprise on John’s face before continuing. “But I could request that he do so if that would be easier for—”

“No,” John says immediately, shaking his head and sliding one hand from Sherlock’s shoulder to splay a warm palm over his chest. “I’ll be happy to drive you.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Sherlock,” John insists, still not meeting Sherlock’s eye as he rubs at a shirt button with the pad of his thumb.

Sherlock tilts his head and examines John then, momentarily confused by the inconsistency between his words and his manner. He watches tanned fingers continue to worry at the edge of his shirt, sees golden eyebrows gathered together tightly, hears John huff out a soft breath between pink lips before finally looking up at him with dark blue eyes that seem uncharacteristically... shy.

“I can drive you home any time you’d like,” John says with a nod, top teeth catching his bottom lip and pressing down slightly for a moment. “Or, you could, just, I don’t know—stay. Here. If you like. I mean, if you want to.”

Oh.

And suddenly it’s Sherlock’s turn to feel shy—to notice the burn of the slight blush crawling up his neck before it stains his cheeks pink as the implication of John’s invitation provokes a (frankly embarrassing) flutter in the general vicinity of his stomach, the feeling so unexpected that he fears if he opens his mouth now the only answer he could voice would be a terribly undignified squeak—so instead he presses his lips together, smiles, and nods.

The tension in John’s shoulders eases immediately, a pleased expression blooming across his handsome face as he lifts up on his toes to deposit a happy kiss over Sherlock’s smile.
“Good,” John sighs, nodding and sliding his palm up to the back of Sherlock’s neck and squeezing lightly.

“Can I borrow your phone?” Sherlock asks suddenly.

“Sure,” John says, looking slightly puzzled, the expression changing to surprise as long fingers reach into his front trouser pocket and fish out the mobile tucked there and quickly pull out the earbud cord. He watches interestingly as Sherlock steps back and taps the screen to life, staring down intently at the display. “Calling your brother to let him know?”

“I prefer to text,” Sherlock says absently, thumbs flying over the glass.

“Where’s your phone?” John asks, his tone curious but not bothered as he crosses to the freezer and takes out a bag of frozen veg.

“Battery’s dead,” Sherlock answers with a shrug, continuing to type. “I forgot to plug it back in last night after someone kept texting to harass me into taking medication.”

“Yeah, I’d apologise for that, except I’m not actually sorry,” John tells him with a grin, holding the bag from the freezer aloft and dropping it onto the counter to break up the contents.

“Done,” Sherlock announces, handing John the phone.

“Great,” John replies, turning to fit the mobile onto the small charging dock on the kitchen counter. “And now your brother has my phone number. Lucky me.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous, John,” Sherlock replies, gesturing dismissively. “He’s likely had your number for weeks.”

“Well, that’s a comfort.” John taps at the screen and the first notes of a new song float out from the speakers. He spills the contents of an open box of linguine into his palm, then lets the thick bundle of noodles slide into the pot of water that is now rolling along at a steady boil. He adds a bit of salt to the pot, then turns his attention back to frozen vegetables, slicing open the edge of the bag while absentmindedly singing along with the lyrics.

“Blue jean baby, L.A. Lady, seamstress for the band. Pretty eyed, pirate smile, you’ll marry a music man...”

Sherlock leans against the edge of the counter, observing John as he moves about the space with unhurried confidence—turning up the flame under one pan while turning down the other, binning an empty package, retrieving various ingredients from the fridge—every movement purposeful and measured. There’s a certain unconscious grace to it all, and watching him work Sherlock can’t help but be fascinated by the sight, as well as charmed by the accompanying vocal performance.

“But oh, how it feels so real, lying here with no one near. Only you, and you can hear me when I say softly...slowly...” John sings, lifting the bag up over the sizzling pan and then pausing to look over at Sherlock quizzically. “Do you like peas?”

“I do,” Sherlock says, the amused chuckle he’s been holding at bay spilling out alongside his affirmative answer.

“What?” John asks, tipping the bag and spilling out a stream of bright green peas into the caramelized onions and giving them a stir. “Please tell me you’re not laughing because I said the word ‘pea’.”
“No,” Sherlock answers, shaking his head and regarding him fondly. “I’m just enjoying the serenade.”

“Yeah, well,” John says with an embarrassed smile, tanned cheeks colouring slightly. He rolls his bad shoulder a few times, shrugging as he lifts the pot of pasta off of the stove and pours it into the waiting colander in the sink, clouds of steam billowing up around him as he explains. “My mum was a **big** fan. I could never get her to admit it, but I’m pretty sure it’s not a coincidence that my name is **John**.”

“Well, Elton would have been a bit on the nose.”

“Exactly,” John agrees, grinning sheepishly as he nods towards the pan, staring wistfully down into the sizzling mixture of peas, onions and garlic. “This was one of her favourite stand-by suppers, you know. I suppose I got a bit sentimental there for a minute. Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Sherlock says quietly, crossing the space and stepping up beside him, bending to brush a kiss over his temple, smiling against John’s hair as the shorter man leans into the contact. He snakes an arm around John’s waist, pulling him close. “It smells delicious. Can I help?”

“Sure,” John says, nodding gratefully. “Get out the milk?”

Sherlock squeezes John’s hip gently, then does as he’s told. They fall into a cooperative rhythm: John grating cheese into the pan while Sherlock adds a splash of milk every so often. John adding the pasta to the sauce while Sherlock stirs. John leaning up for a kiss while Sherlock drops the spoon and tugs him close…

And all the while, Elton bids the yellow brick road goodbye.

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An hour later, two empty plates sit next to two drained bottles of beer on the coffee table in front of the couch, and Sherlock practically purrs with pleasure while short, tanned fingers tunnel through his curls as he rests his head on John’s thigh. There’s a grating, repetitive, metallic whir from the television as a bright blue police box fades in and out of view while a young, red-headed girl watches it gradually disappear from her back garden, her eyes wide with astonished wonder.

“This is a ridiculous show,” Sherlock sighs.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear you say that,” John says, continuing to scratch his fingertips against Sherlock’s scalp.

“Well, it **is,**” Sherlock continues, managing to shrug dismissively even from his reclined position. “As though anyone sensible would throw away perfectly good **toast** in favor of eating fish fingers dipped in custard? Completely improbable.”

“Really? The culinary choices of the 900 year old two-hearted alien who zips about the galaxy with pretty girls in his time traveling police box are what’s tripping you up, here?”

“**Fish fingers and custard,** John,” Sherlock scoffs, sitting up and looking at him incredulously. “Disgusting.”

“Have you ever **eaten** fish fingers and custard?”

“Of course not.” Sherlock rolls his eyes. “I’ve never eaten tuna fish and chocolate sauce either, but I don’t need to try **that** to know it’s vile. Same principle.”
“All right then.” John nods decisively, picking up the remote control and muting the telly, silencing the theme song as it plays over the ending credits. “No more Doctor Who for you.”

Sherlock huffs out a put-upon sigh. “We could watch something else.”

“We could. Or we could just turn in for the night.”

“At this hour?” Sherlock says, glancing down at John’s phone and noting that it’s only a few minutes shy of nine o’clock.

“You’re recuperating,” John reminds him.

“I’ve slept more in the last two days than I have in the last two weeks,” Sherlock complains. “It’s insufferable, and frankly a waste of valuable time when there are so many more interesting things that one could be doing than lying unconscious.”

“Agreed,” John says, switching the telly off and turning to face him. “Which is why I’m merely suggesting that we go to bed. I didn’t say anything about sleeping.”

Sherlock goes still for a moment, mouth falling slightly open as he stares at John—lovely, patient, perfect John—who looks back at him with the smallest of smiles stretched across his pink lips, blue eyes twinkling with amusement…and something else. Something warm and rich and base that steals the breath from Sherlock’s lungs sets a prickle of electricity sparking up his spine.

Sherlock leaps to his feet and holds his hands out towards John, who smiles and slips his fingers into Sherlock’s palms.

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“Oh, Christ,” John pants at the ceiling, his voice taut and strained as he tightens his fingers into the curls on either side of Sherlock’s head. His back is pressed up against the headboard, strong thighs spread wide, one knee curled over a slender shoulder as the tip of his thick erection bumps rhythmically against the back of Sherlock’s throat.

Hollowing his cheeks, Sherlock concentrates on keeping the pulls long and even, one hand cradling John’s heavy bollocks while he gently presses his knuckles against the tender patch of skin just behind them, a thrill snaking up his spine each time John’s hips jerk beneath him in response. He drags his lips up the length of John’s shaft, allowing just the slightest scrape of teeth as he moves, then laves his tongue over the delicate skin, swirling it just under the edge of the furl of retracted foreskin then up over the weeping slit before relaxing his throat and plunging his lips back down.

“Oh, fuck,” John whines, voice trembling slightly as he slides one hand down from where it’s tangled into Sherlock’s hair and rubs it over the contracting muscles between a pair of pale shoulder blades. With his lips pressed into the nest of golden hair at the base of his cock, Sherlock can feel John’s thighs quivering, feel the muscles of his abdomen tightening, hear the ragged pace of his breathing becoming more rapid as he chokes out a warning, “I’m going to come, Sherlock—oh, God, I’m coming…”

Sherlock hums in understanding, presses his lips down even further…and swallows. There’s a loud keening in his ears, a series of strangled shouts that echo through the room, the broken moans sounding in time with rhythmic, hot spatter against the back of his throat. After a long moment he drags his lips upward, swallowing down John’s ejaculate and gently licking him clean from root to tip.

John’s hands scrabble at his shoulders, fingertips tugging at his skin, urging him upward. Sherlock
lays a final kiss over the head of John’s softening cock then crawls up to plant a trail of kisses over his trembling stomach, across his heaving chest, over his collar bone, then up his neck before John grasps his face between shaking hands and smashes their mouths together, breathing heavily against Sherlock’s skin and biting at his lips and whispering praises. Sherlock threads an arm behind John’s back, holding him close and working to gentle the frantic pace of the kisses until John’s breathing begins to even out.

He moves to pull back slightly, then without warning the world is suddenly spinning around him. In an instant he’s flat on his back and John is settling himself between Sherlock’s legs, pushing back his knees, nipping at the sensitive skin on his inner thighs. Broad palms grip his hips, pressing them down into the mattress as a pair of warm lips slip over his cock to swallow him down.

Sherlock sucks in a surprised breath, mouth stretched in a silent moan. He’s already so aroused from going down on John—from rubbing his leaking cock against the soft sheets as he worked to bring John off—that he is helpless to prolong the experience now. He reaches down to twine his fingers into John’s sweat soaked golden hair, raising his head and focusing on the sight of his erection disappearing between pink lips, staring at hollowed tanned cheeks and locking his gaze on John’s deep blue eyes, unable to even voice a warning before he comes with a shout, head thrown back and eyes closed tight as John’s clever mouth pulls the orgasm from the core of him, wave after wave of it washing over his skin until he’s trembling and spent.

John presses a final kiss to Sherlock’s hip, then crawls up the bed and collapses onto his back beside him. John pats at the scant space between them to find Sherlock’s hand and thread their fingers together while they catch their breath. As the panting begins to subside, Sherlock sucks in a few deep, measured breaths, attempting to muster enough energy to speak.

“John,” he says between heavy exhales, “I have a confession to make.”

“Oh?” John answers breathlessly.

“Yes,” Sherlock confirms, blowing out a long breath between swollen lips. “When we met, I thought you were straight.”

John smiles. “Yeah, well, obviously not. Not entirely, anyway. Though technically I’m not gay, either.”

“Are you sure?” Sherlock asks, lifting their joined fingers and pressing a lazy kiss to the back of John’s hand. “Because that thing you did just now, with your mouth? That was pretty gay.” And when John huffs out a quiet chuckle that evolves into a rolling laugh that tips over into the melodic ring of his signature giggle, Sherlock can’t help but laugh himself.

“Fair enough,” John concedes, turning on his side to face Sherlock. “I guess I’m bi, when it comes down to it. I mean, I’ve always known I was attracted to men, but I’ve always been quite attracted to women as well. And the truth is that I’ve had sex with blokes before, but nothing like this.”

Sherlock looks at him quizzically, and John sits up, folding his legs beneath him and dragging their connected hands into his lap. He folds his free hand over their tangled fingers, then looks down at Sherlock with an earnest expression.

“All my hook ups with men have been pretty casual,” he explains, biting at his bottom lip and looking thoughtful, as though he’s trying to decide what to say next.

“Okay...” Sherlock nods slowly, desperately trying to keep his expression impassive. “So you want this to be casual, then.”
“No, that’s not what I’m trying to say,” John insists, shaking his head tightening his grip on Sherlock’s hand. “I mean, this doesn’t feel casual to me, Sherlock. It’s not some drunken snog and a grope, or a convenient shag between girlfriends. It’s not about you being a man—it’s about you being, well, you.”

“So you don’t want this to just be a casual thing,” Sherlock replies, his tone more hopeful than he’d intended it to be.

“Yeah,” John says, nodding and shrugging one tanned shoulder. “I mean no. Or whichever answer is the one that means I think that this—that we—could be serious.”

“All right,” Sherlock says, smiling at the look of relief that washes over John’s face. “I’d like that too.”

“Oh, good. That’s settled then.” John leans down and presses their kiss-swollen lips together, gradually licking his way into Sherlock’s mouth until he’s a whimpering, boneless pile of flesh beneath him. He pulls Sherlock close, smiling against his brow as the taller man yawns against his neck, then sits back up and slides to the edge of the bed and tugs Sherlock to his feet. “Come on, let’s go clean up a bit and get ready for bed.”

Sherlock runs his tongue over his teeth as they make their way to the bathroom. “You don’t have a spare toothbrush, by chance?”

“I do not,” John tells him as he flicks on the light and steps over to the sink.

“Pity,” Sherlock sighs, as he watches John pick up the single toothbrush by the sink and then stripe a bit of paste over the bristles.

“But after all that,” John gestures vaguely toward the bedroom and waggles his fingers meaningfully as he extends the toothbrush towards Sherlock, “you can probably just use mine, don’t you think?”

Sherlock shakes his head, smiles, leans in for a quick kiss, then brushes his teeth.

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When a ray of early morning light slanting through the high window falls over his face, Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut more tightly, letting out a low groan and yanking the covers up and over his shoulders while attempting to burrow more deeply into them. He’s pulling at the duvet, cursing it’s stubbornness when there’s a sleepy sigh from somewhere beside him as the mattress shifts and a heavy arm settles around his shoulders, tugging him forward. The offending brightness is suddenly blotted out and he shuffles forward to nuzzle closer to a broad expanse of chest, soft golden hairs tickling his nose as a warm palm slips under the sheet and rubs down the length of his spine before settling at his hip.

Sherlock huffs out a satisfied sigh, smiling as John’s arm tightens possessively for a moment before relaxing again, the chest beneath his cheek rising and falling with a steady, slow rhythm once more. He closes his eyes and drifts in and out for a bit, cocooned in the warmth of John’s arms, but it’s not long before sleep eludes him. He rolls his shoulders slightly, leaning back to rest his head on the pillow beside John’s so that he can see his face in the faint morning light—the handsome features smoothed by unconsciousness, pink lips parted as quiet snores huff out between them. He wants to taste them, lean in and press his mouth to John’s and kiss him awake.

So he does.

Trapping John’s bottom lip between his own, he sucks at it gently, smiling against his mouth as the
hand at his hip skates slowly up the length of his back. He can feel the moment John starts to wake, hear the change in his breathing and feel the pull of fingers that go from blindly grasping to purposefully tugging him closer. John’s hand slips up the back of Sherlock’s neck and into his sleep-tangled curls, an insistent tongue pushing it’s way into his mouth as John rolls slowly onto his back and drags Sherlock with him.

Half on top of him now, Sherlock settles one long thigh between John’s knees and hums happily as strong arms hold him close. The kisses are soft and wet and slow and languid, a lazy morning snog that ignites a warm fire in his belly that crackles pleasantly, but there’s no urgency to it at the moment. It’s a sweet, slow burn, and he finds that he’s content to ride it out—to catalogue each touch and breath and sigh and whisper against his skin, to commit them to memory and file them away for endless reexamination later. John’s hand slips down from the nest of curls at the side of his head to settle softly against his jaw, and Sherlock pulls back slightly to look down at him.

John sighs, smiling at him with soft eyes still hazy with sleep. "Good morning."

Sherlock trails the tip of one slim finger over the divot in John’s chin. “Hello.”

“Sleep well?” John asks with a yawn, warm palms rubbing gently from Sherlock’s shoulders down his biceps and back up again.

“Mmhm,” Sherlock confirms with a nod. “You?”

“Very.” John raises his head to press a soft kiss to Sherlock’s mouth before settling back down against the pillows and lifting his arms to tuck them behind his head. “So, what do you want to do today?”

Sherlock slides off of John abruptly and sits up, leaning over to tug open the bedside drawer and rooting around in it blindly until he finds what he’s looking for. He turns back to John with the box of condoms in one hand and the unopened bottle of lube in the other.

“Let’s use these,” Sherlock says, dropping the condoms on the pillow beside John’s head and nodding eagerly as he sets about removing the plastic seal from the cap of the lubricant.

John looks slightly confused. “What, right now?”

“Yes,” Sherlock confirms, cursing as he attempts to slip a fingernail under the slippery sheath of shiny film that clings to the cap of the small bottle. “It’s the next logical type of sexual activity we should engage in, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Sherlock,” John sighs, huffing out a nervous laugh as he throws back the covers and sits up beside him, “just hang on a minute, will you?”

“I assume you’ll want to be the penetrative partner.” Sherlock continues, face scrunching up in concentration as he attempts to break the seal by simply twisting the cap off by force. “Which is fine with me—assuming I can actually open this blasted bottle, of course. Do you have a knife?”

“Sherlock, just stop.” John's tone is stern enough that it catches Sherlock’s attention and he looks down to see a tan hand folded over his fingers where they’re grasping the still-sealed bottle. When he looks up to meet John’s gaze, he’s relieved to see that there’s no anger in the blue eyes that stare back at him. “Just—slow down, okay?”

“You stocked the bedside table with condoms and lubricant, John,” Sherlock says, slightly confused. “I assumed you’d want to use them.”
“Yeah, I do. I mean, of course I do.” John huffs out a deep sigh and shakes his head. Looking back up at Sherlock, he quirks a cautious grin as he takes the bottle from Sherlock’s hands and sets it aside before gathering their hands together once more. “I want everything, Sherlock. As much as you’ll give me, as much as we both want. But there’s no hurry, is there? I mean, I haven’t even had coffee yet.”

“So you’re saying I should run up to Speedy’s and get coffee.” Sherlock nods eagerly, moving to stand up.

“No,” John laughs, keeping hold of Sherlock’s hands and dragging him back down onto the bed. “I’m saying that we’ve got plenty of time to ease into all of this. We’ve just started, after all. Let’s take some time to enjoy things a bit, learn what we like and what we don’t like and figure out all the ways we can drive each other mad before we dive right into the graduate level stuff.”

“Is this because I’ve never done it before?” Sherlock asks, tilting his head and regarding John curiously. “Because I’ve read quite a lot on the subject and done some practical research as well, and using my own fingers I’ve determined that I—”

Sherlock’s words are cut off as John surges forward and presses their mouths together, extracting one of his hands from where they’ve been grasping Sherlock’s and threading it gently through the mess of curls on the back of his head. Sherlock leans forward to meet him, but John holds him in place—purposefully guiding the contact, tightening his grip slightly as Sherlock surrenders control, allowing John to gentle the kiss gradually until their foreheads are pressed together and they’re both breathing calmly.

“I’ve never done it either,” John says, nuzzling his nose against Sherlock’s as he speaks. “And I want to, with you. I really do. Let’s just, I don’t know, maybe have some breakfast first, all right?”

“Fine,” Sherlock says, rolling his eyes and huffing out an impatient sigh, smiling as John’s giggle rings through the bedroom. He tips his chin up in a silent request, and John meets him half way in a sweet, soft press of lips.

A sudden loud, grating noise makes them both jump, and John looks up in surprise at the sound.

“That’s the door,” John says, standing up and looking at the pile of hastily discarded clothing strewn over the floor before striding into the bathroom and pulling his dressing gown off the hook and wrapping it around himself. “Be right back.”

Sherlock listens to him padding bare-footed up the stairs, exhaling wearily as he gathers up the (still) unopened box of condoms and the (infuriatingly) sealed bottle of lube, then deposits them back into the bedside table drawer. He stands up and locates his pants, dragging them up his thighs as he hears the door to 221C shut again, followed by footfalls on the stairs.

John appears in the bedroom doorway holding a large duffel bag and looking somewhat confused.

“Who was it?” Sherlock asks, bending down to retrieve his discarded trousers and snapping them to their full length by the waist in an attempt to shake out the wrinkles.

“No idea,” John says, shrugging as Sherlock raises an eyebrow in his direction. “I mean she didn’t give me her name. Just said ‘Hello Mr. Watson, please give this to Mr. Holmes’ then turned around and disappeared back into the car idling at the kerb.”

Sherlock steps forward and takes the bag from John’s hands, setting it down on the unmade bed. "Let me guess—stunningly attractive, aloof, didn’t look up once from her mobile?”
“That about covers it, yeah.”

“Mycroft,” Sherlock says, his voice low and menacing.

“No, I’ve met your brother,” John reminds him, coming to stand beside him near the bed and staring down at the unexpected delivery. “If he had legs like that, I’d have remembered.”

“I’m sure you would have,” Sherlock teases, rolling his eyes as he reaches down to pull the heavy zipper open. “That was his assistant, Anthea.”

“Is she as scary as her boss is?” John asks, only half joking.

“Every bit as.” Sherlock opens the bag and starts pulling out the contents, setting them aside one by one. “Mobile charging cord, toothbrush, shaving kit, pyjamas, a change of clothes, and—oh, this is for you, apparently.”

John looks down at the thick, oversized manilla envelope, eyes the ‘John H. Watson, c/o Sherlock Holmes’ printed in neat block letters over the front, then takes it from Sherlock who begins to spin slowly around the room, eyeing the walls.

“Are there no outlets in here, John?”

“Just the one,” John says, turning the envelope over in his hands and gesturing vaguely towards the bed. “Behind the headboard.”

“How convenient.” Sherlock sighs, dropping down onto all fours and working his shoulder and chest under the bed as he pokes around blindly in an attempt to plug in the charging cable Mycroft had so obligingly sent him. He can hear the faint sound of paper being ripped open above him, catches the soft swish of a sheaf of documents being extracted from the envelope, and just as the prongs of the plug slide home into the outlet he hears the bedsprings creak above him as John sits down heavily on the edge of the mattress. Wriggling free of the (now even tighter) space under the bed, he sits up and looks at John curiously. “Well, what is it?”

“It’s me,” John says, eyes narrowed as he flips slowly through the stack of papers. “It’s my whole life. Here’s my birth certificate, and my immunization file from the NHS. And I’m pretty sure these are my grammar school report cards.”

“Oh, standard background check,” Sherlock says, getting to his feet and shrugging nonchalantly. “Dull.”

“Are these my dental records?” John’s eyes widen with shock as he waves the bound stack of documents in Sherlock’s direction. “What the hell, Sherlock?”

“It’s just Mycroft being an overprotective berk,” Sherlock says, holding his hands up in a placating gesture as John continues to shake his head more vigorously as he flips through the pages.

“These are my university transcripts—and my police record!”

“You’ve been arrested?” Sherlock asks, his tone more impressed than anything as he sits down beside John and looks over his shoulder.

“I bloody well have not,” John snaps, tipping the blank NSY criminal record search results page towards him. “But if I had, it would all be right here. Christ, Sherlock—is this some kind of threat?”

“No, of course not,” Sherlock assures him. “In fact, I think it’s just the opposite.”
“Really? Because it *seems* a bit threatening.”

“John, believe me. If my brother were actually threatening you, you’d know it.”

“What *exactly* is it that he does, again?”

“Depends on who you ask. He’d tell you that he holds a minor position in the British Government—though I think it’s more accurate to say that he *is* the British Government. Or he will be, one day, if he has his way.”

“And I suppose he always gets his way?” John asks, sounding wary.

“More often than not,” Sherlock confirms. “But not *always*. Besides, to be honest, I think he rather likes you.”

“So this is fan mail, is it?” John asks, gesturing down to the stack papers in his hand. “His way of saying ‘You seem like a decent fellow, but now that you’re shagging my brother, I’m keeping an eye on you?’”

Sherlock shrugs. “Essentially, yes.”

John looks at him for a long moment, eyes narrowed and lips pursed, head shaking slightly from side to side, and after a long moment his shoulders start to shake slightly—a low chuckle rumbles up from his chest only to become a laugh that gets caught in his throat before it spills out into the room as a charming giggle. He tosses the sheaf of papers aside and presses his mouth tenderly to Sherlock’s.

“What on earth have I gotten myself into with you?” John asks, pulling back and shaking his head while reaching down to twine their fingers together.

“There’s still time to get out,” Sherlock offers, squeezing John’s hand and shrugging.

“Not a chance,” John says, getting to his feet and tugging Sherlock up as well. “Now come on, let’s get dressed and go out today. Do something fun.”

“I’ve got to get my car window replaced,” John reminds him, as he pushes the curtain aside and bends down to twist on the shower taps. “I thought we’d drop it off and then go and get some breakfast. Maybe see a movie.”

“Sounds *tedious.*”

“Such a sweet talker,” John teases, shaking his head and untying the belt of his dressing gown before letting it fall from his shoulders to the floor. “Tell you what. Why don’t you join me in the shower and I’ll see if I can’t make your morning a bit more *interesting* before we go.”

Sherlock raises his eyebrows and pretends to give the offer some thought as John shrugs a shoulder and steps into the tub. As soon as he disappears behind the curtain Sherlock quickly strips off his pants and follows.

“Favourite meal?” John asks, slicing a bit of tomato and spearing a bite of sausage onto his fork along with it before popping it into his mouth and chewing with relish.

“Apricot scones,” Sherlock answers immediately, spreading honey over a slice of toast and nibbling
“Scones aren’t a meal,” John scoffs, scooping up a bite of beans with a triangle of toast.

“They most certainly are,” Sherlock argues, reaching across the table to steal a slice of John’s bacon. “I have them for breakfast every year on my birthday.”

“Fair enough,” John concedes, swallowing his mouthful of beans on toast and looking thoughtful. “I’d have to go with Shepherd’s Pie. My Mum’s was world class.”

“Favourite holiday?” Sherlock asks, dumping (another) packet of sugar into his coffee cup and stirring vigorously.

“Christmas, right? I mean, it’s got to be,” John begins, brows scrunched in thought. “All the decorations and the presents and the singing, pulling crackers and wearing silly hats. And people are so nice that time of year, strangers on the street wishing each other good cheer and awful holiday movies on the telly. Yeah, definitely Christmas. You?”

“New Year’s Eve,” Sherlock says, a small smile on his lips. “My parents would throw these grand parties every year with fireworks, and a band, and dancing. We’d get to stay up late and just before midnight my parents would find Mycroft and me and we’d all count down together, ring in the new year to the sound of champagne corks popping and confetti raining down.”

“Wow, that sounds lovely.” John reaches over the table to grasp Sherlock’s fingers in his own and squeezes gently. “You have so many wonderful memories of home, Sherlock. I can’t wait to hear them all. Now, how about an easy one? Favourite colour.”

“Purple. Yours?”

“Blue.”

“First love?” Sherlock quirks a grin at John’s surprised look and takes a sip of his (now perfectly sweet) coffee.

“Hmm,” John says, narrowing his eyes and appearing to consider his answer carefully. “Requited or Unrequited?”

Sherlock shrugs. “Both.”

“Ok, unrequited—Jeff Bowman. Year nine, we were best mates. Took me a while to figure out what that little flip in my belly was every time he tackled me on the pitch or why I’d start thinking of him when I had a wank. Never did let on how I felt, though. He moved away at the end of that year, so I never got the chance.”

“Tragic,” Sherlock sighs, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a slight grin.

“It was,” John insists, kicking at him playfully under the table. “But then when I was a fifth former I met Caroline Darby, and we fell for each other hard. Lost our virginity together that year, and I was sure that I’d found my lifelong soulmate. That is, until Caroline met my some bloke named Damian from another school and decided she’d quite like to shag him instead of me.”

“That tart,” Sherlock scoffs, chuckling softly as John’s huffs out a self-deprecating sigh.

“Yeah, well, last I heard Caroline and Damian were married and expecting a baby, so I guess it worked out all right for them. How about you?”
“Unrequited, Billy Masters,” Sherlock says, setting down his coffee cup and looking into it wistfully. “He was the eldest son of our head gardener, and he would work on the estate in the summers. I was too young to really understand why he fascinated me so much—but I found myself spending a great deal of time peering out between barely parted curtains to watch him mowing the grass or trimming the hedgerows.”

“Head gardeners and estates and hedgerows, Sherlock? It’s like you grew up in a bloody Edith Wharton novel,” John teases, smiling at him. “So where’s handsome young Billy now?”

“No idea,” Sherlock admits, with a shrug. “Though I do know where he spent a great deal of time that summer when I was eleven.”


“On an old mattress in the loft of the carriage house. With Mycroft.”

“No!” John laughs, his mouth dropping open. “Mycroft and the gardener’s son? Scandalous!”

“I followed him out of the house one night,” Sherlock says with a shudder. “I’ve deleted most of what I saw, thank God.”

John grimaces. “I completely understand. I wasn’t even there and I wish I could unsee it! So that covers unrequited, who was your real first love?”

“Victor Trevor,” Sherlock says quietly, looking down into his coffee cup, watching the soft ripples on the surface of the liquid as they eventually spread out and still. A silence settles over table, and after a long moment Sherlock dares to lift his gaze to John’s—and he’s surprised by the combination of things he sees in the familiar blue eyes. There’s a touch of anger, hard edged and dangerous, but Sherlock knows it’s not aimed at him so he’s not alarmed by it. There’s a tinge of sadness in the gaze too, a weariness around the corners that makes his chest hurt a bit. But beneath those things is something else: something soft and warm and ancient and true, something that surprises him, something he recognizes, something that makes him want to reach across the table and…

“Watson?” a voice calls out from Sherlock’s right, and he and John turn at the same time to see a man waving and approaching their table. “Oi, mate. I thought that was you.”

“Guilty,” John says with a smile, standing to shake hands with the round faced, bespectacled young man. “How are you, Mike?”

“I’m well, John,” he says agreeably, lifting a hand to push his wire rimmed glasses up to the bridge of his nose. “Was worried about you though, we missed you in lab the other day.”

“Something important came up,” John explains, shrugging as the pleasant young man nods sympathetically. “Made it up on Friday, though, so it’s all good.”

“Glad to hear it,” Mike says, with a smile. “Just popped in here to meet Ellen and her parents for breakfast, they fancied a quick chat about the wedding, I think. Something about seating charts or invitations of some such nonsense.”

“Sounds fascinating,” John commiserates, huffing out a laugh as the other man rolls his eyes.

“It’s hell,” Mike says gravely. “What about you? Just out for a bite to eat?”

“Oh, where are my manners?” John says, shaking his head and turning to look down at his breakfast companion. “Sherlock, this is Mike Stamford, he’s a classmate of mine at Bart’s. Mike, this is my
boyfriend, Sherlock Holmes.”

“Hello, Sherlock.” Mike grins, stepping over and extending his hand. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“And you,” Sherlock replies, taking Stamford’s hand and noting his firm grip and honest smile.

“You’ve got a good one here,” Mike says, smiling cheerily while cocking a thumb in John’s direction. “Runs circles around us all at school, going to be a hell of a doctor one day.”

“Yeah, well, Sherlock’s the reason I’m not drowning in Bio-Chem this semester,” John says with a note of pride. “He should be teaching that class.”

“Speaking of,” Mike begins, and Sherlock guesses that he and John are discussing the finer points of some recent exam questions but he can’t be sure because he’s not actually listening. He’s putting on a good show of it, following the flow of the conversation with his eyes, looking moderately interested, but he hasn’t absorbed a single word that they’re saying because he’s too busy replaying the sound of a single word that John said earlier, it rings in his ears and plays across his vision and fills his mind…

“Lovely to meet you, Sherlock,” Stamford is saying, and Sherlock smiles and nods as Mike pats John on the shoulder then ambles off towards another table across the diner.

John slides back into the booth and reaches for his coffee cup to take a sip. “Mike’s a good guy.”

“Seems so,” Sherlock agrees, attempting to keep his voice even and calm.

John’s brows knit together as he cocks his head and sets down his mug. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Sherlock says, and when John opens his mouth he shakes his head and lifts a hand to halt whatever protest or query is queued up to come out next. “I’m fine, John. It’s just…you called me your boyfriend.”

“Well, yeah.” John looks confused or a moment, then nods before biting at his bottom lip self-consciously. “Was that all right? I mean, if you think it’s too soon, I can—”

“No,” Sherlock says as a flood of warmth blooms behind his ribs and rises up through his chest and threatens to spill out of his mouth in the form of an involuntary giggle. He tamps it down just in time, a slow smile spreading across his face instead. “It was…good.”

“All right,” John says, nodding as he returns the smile.

Under the table, Sherlock slides his right foot slowly forward, nudging it between John’s feet where they’re planted slightly apart on the floor. He feels John’s ankles slowly slide towards each other to close the space, trapping Sherlock’s foot between his own, watches as John picks up his coffee mug and sets it to his smiling lips, sees his throat working as he swallows down a long pull.

“Okay, back to business,” John says, putting down his cup and picking up his fork. “Favourite book?”

“Wrong,” John says, shaking his head.

“What do you mean ‘wrong’?” Sherlock asks, peering at him suspiciously.

“I mean wrong as in the opposite of correct.” John tucks the small stack of cards back into the tiny
manilla envelope before setting it back down on the coffee table.

“Check them again,” Sherlock insists, crossing his arms and glaring at him confrontationally.

“I’ve checked them three times, Sherlock,” John tells him, throwing up his hands and shaking his head incredulously. “You’ve seen them yourself.”

“I am telling you, John Watson,” Sherlock begins with a long suffering sigh, looking at John as though he is a particularly stupid house cat. “It was Ms. Scarlet, in the Conservatory, with the lead pipe.”

“And I am telling you, Sherlock Holmes, that the murderer and the victim cannot be the same person.” John replies, his tone equally condescending and measured.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s against the rules!”

“Well then the rules are wrong!”

“Yeah,” John says shaking his head and sitting forward to gather up the game pieces. “This was clearly a terrible idea.”

“Clearly,” Sherlock agrees, picking himself up from his seat on the floor opposite John and throwing himself down on the couch dramatically. He hadn’t wanted to play the stupid game to begin with. They’d spent the morning out and about, chatting over breakfast and taking a walk in the park and going to the cinema where they’d watched some ridiculous film full of explosions and car chases and insipid one-liners. Frankly he can’t remember a single thing about it now other than the fact that John held his hand the whole time and didn’t even get angry at him for eating most of the popcorn. By time they picked up John’s car and came back to the flat that afternoon, Sherlock was still floating a bit from the events of the day, so when John asked what they should do next, he’d just shrugged and said John should choose. Which, it turns out, had been a colossal mistake. “I would like the record to reflect, however, that it was your idea to play it in the first place.”

“Well, I’m an idiot,” John says, folding up the game board and tucking it away into the shallow, rectangular box.

“Finally, something we agree on.”

“All right, that’s it!” John springs to his feet and launches himself directly at Sherlock, landing on top of him heavily and crashing their mouths together. Sherlock squeaks in surprise, then lifts his arms to thread them around John’s shoulders, pulling him closer as John slips one arm under Sherlock’s lower back and then slides the other hand around his slender neck and holds his head still as he kisses his way down Sherlock’s jaw and begins licking at his throat.

“John, I—”

“I’m going to need…for you to stop…talking, Sherlock.” John says patiently, between broad sweeps of his tongue.

“Why?” Sherlock asks, aiming for petulance but achieving something closer to plaintive whining instead.

“Because I very much want you to still be alive at the end of this evening,” John says, leaving a trail of kisses down towards Sherlock’s collar. “And that means that you need to be quiet for a bit now.”
“Duly noted.” Sherlock gasps as John settles his teeth over his collar bone and bites down softly.

*buzzzzz*

“Was that your phone?” John asks, lips grazing against the pale column of Sherlock’s throat.

“Yes,” Sherlock confirms, sliding one hand up to tangle his fingers in the back of John’s hair while lifting his knees and wrapping his legs around a compact set of thighs.

“Could be important,” John says lightly, sucking a small patch of skin near Sherlock’s collar bone into his mouth and biting at it gently with his teeth.

“Don’t care,” Sherlock insists, arching up beneath John as he bites down a bit harder.

*buzzzzz*

This second faint rattle of Sherlock’s mobile phone against the surface of the bedside table in the other room has John lifting his head to look towards the hall, prompting Sherlock to growl in protest and glare up at him while pouting spectacularly.

“You didn’t have your phone on you all day,” John says with a smile, leaning down to mouth softly at Sherlock’s protruding bottom lip. “You should take a look. I know you want to.”

*buzzzzz*

“Fine,” Sherlock hisses, looking very put-out as John raises himself up and off of him. He stomps into the bedroom and disconnects his mobile from the charger, then taps the screen to life to see the familiar notification:

**NEW CONFESSION!**

With a sigh he turns around and marches back into the living room, steps up to where John is sitting on the couch, then plants a knee on either side of his thighs and sits down on his lap. He taps the notification closed, then swipes through his screens to find the acid green skull, a small number “3” hovering in the corner of the icon.

“Three new confessions, John,” Sherlock says, nodding down at the screen and tapping the first message open. As the display goes black and the text begins to appear, he turns the screen towards John and looks at him expectantly. “I’m sure they will absolutely be riveting enough to warrant interrupting what was turning out to be a very pleasant snog. Don’t you?”

**iConfess: St Mary’s is running all over us out there, where’s our defence?**

“Sounds like Morningside’s football match isn’t going so well,” John says, nodding as the confession bursts into sparks.

“Good to know,” Sherlock agrees, rolling his eyes and tapping the next confession open, holding it up so they can both read the screen.

**iConfess: Wilkes misses another one! That’s three just in this last half!**

“Well, Wilkes is having a shitty game, at least.” John grips Sherlock’s hips and smiles broadly up at him. “That’s good news.”

Sherlock smirks at the sentiment, shaking his head as the confession disappears in a shower of digital
light. He moves his hand to tap on the next confession in the queue, but John raises one hand to close it around his fingers.

“Can I open this one?”

“Sure,” Sherlock agrees with a shrug, handing him the phone.

John takes it, then slides his thumb up the edge of the phone and presses it to the power button, holding it there until the screen goes black. Then he tosses the phone across the room.

“Now. Where were we?” he asks, settling his hands back over Sherlock’s sharp hipbones then slipping them up and around to grab a plump arse cheek in each palm.

“I believe you were telling me that you were never going to play Cluedo with me again,” Sherlock says, pressing his hands to John’s chest and sliding them up to grasp at his shoulders.

“Exactly right,” John says with a firm nod. “Never again.”

“So you admit it was a bad idea?” Sherlock asks lightly, leaning forward and bringing his lips within millimetres of John’s.

“The worst,” John agrees, tipping forward and growling slightly as Sherlock shadows the movement and pulls away.

“To be fair, I had an idea for what we could do today, too,” Sherlock reminds him, snaking his long fingers around John’s neck and scratching lightly at the short hairs there, smiling as John’s eyes flutter under his touch.

“I remember,” John says, tugging Sherlock closer and rubbing the tips of their noses together. “Let’s go with your idea, then.”

Sherlock’s eyes widen with disbelief. “Really?”

“Really,” John says, surging forward pressing his lips to the surprised “o” of Sherlock’s mouth and smiling as the man in his lap melts against him.

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There’s a crack in the ceiling above John’s bed. Not too wide, or particularly long, or even structurally troublesome in any way—but it’s there, approximately thirty centimetres long and mostly straight until it veers suddenly to the left about twenty centimetres in. Sherlock concentrates on it intently, noting how it swims in and out of focus as John prepares to slide a second finger next to the one that’s already slowly working him open.

“Are you ready?” John asks, peppering soft kisses over his cheeks and holding him close as Sherlock nods tightly. “All right, just breathe.”

As the second slick digit pushes slowly into his body, Sherlock groans at the intrusion—top teeth biting down firmly on his kiss-swollen bottom lip, and John leans forward to lick at his mouth gently.

“Careful, let’s not open up that split again, yeah?”

“Right,” Sherlock pants, nodding as John’s fingers pick up a steady rhythm—pressing forward and plunging more deeply with each stroke.

“God, Sherlock,” John whispers, mouthing at the tender skin below his jaw and laving his tongue
over the rapid beat of his pulse. “You’re so warm inside. So smooth and slick. It’s gorgeous.”

Sherlock turns his head and John lifts his face to meet him, obliging him with soft kisses and words of praise. The initial burn has passed now, and each stroke of John’s wrist sends tiny sparks of pleasure up his arched spine. He’s taken three fingers before, he knows that with enough preparation his body is capable of taking everything John has to offer—but he’s surprised by how much different the sensations are when the fingers slowly stretching him open aren’t his own, when he’s being cradled and kissed and invaded so tenderly.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” John’s fingers are moving faster now that Sherlock is relaxed and they’re no longer meeting his body’s natural resistance. He pulls them slowly out, then reverses course to push them all the way back in with a long, tight press. Sherlock feels him bend his wrist slightly and all of a sudden his spine is arching off the bed, heels skittering across the sheets as a shower of sparks fires behind his closed eyelids and he lets out a long, broken moan.

“Likeda...” John asks, smiling against his cheek and holding him tight. Sherlock nods frantically, fingers scrabbling for purchase as he searches desperately for something to hold onto.

Sherlock reaches both hands towards John, fingers trembling as he settles one onto John’s broad shoulder, and John captures the other one and lifts it to his mouth. He gently kisses Sherlock’s knuckles, then guides the hand down between Sherlock’s own legs and helps him wind his long, graceful fingers around the strong wrist where it moves as it slowly works him open.

“You’re in control now, okay?” John says, reaching out to run the backs of his fingers gently down a pale cheek, then picking up the bottle of lubricant, flicking the cap open and dribbling several more drops over his fingers as they emerge every few seconds before disappearing back into Sherlock’s body. Sherlock grips John’s wrist tightly, and starts to quicken the pace tilting his hips up each time he pulls John’s fingers more deeply into him. “That’s perfect, Sherlock. Just let me know when you’re ready for a third finger, all right?”

“No...” Sherlock pants, nodding and pulling at John’s wrist and grinding himself down with each stroke—and it’s so much better this way, so much easier when he knows what happens next. He stares up at John, who doesn’t stop to ask if he’s sure, doesn’t coddle him or humour him or argue at all. He simply nods, reaching out to still Sherlock’s arm as he positions a third finger at his stretched entrance and then nudges softly forward, letting go of Sherlock’s arm and trusting him to set the pace.

So he does.

As three of John’s fingers slide up inside of him, he’s surprised to find that the new addition isn’t uncomfortable at all. He feels full and stretched but it doesn’t hurt—it’s warm and thick and surprising and…amazing. John slides his free hand softly over Sherlock’s abdomen, lays his palm over the length of his erection where it’s pressed up tight against his stomach and rubs lightly, lifts one long thigh up over his shoulder and presses kisses to the inside of his knee.

“How...” Sherlock asks, stilling his fingers around John’s wrist and looking up at him.

“Yeah?”

“I’m ready.”
John goes very still, searching Sherlock’s gaze intently for a long moment, then pulls in a deep breath and nods his head. He slowly slips his fingers out of Sherlock’s arse, moaning in sympathy as Sherlock gasps when he’s empty at last. He wipes his hands absently on the duvet, eyes clouded and hungry as Sherlock settles back against the pillows, thighs splayed wide as he reaches out to capture John’s neglected erection and closes his fingers around it and begins to stroke. John’s breath catches and his head falls back, he reaches blindly towards the nightstand to grab the foil packet he’d placed there earlier. When his fingers close around it he nearly sobs with relief, his other hand reaching up to cover Sherlock’s and still it.

“I won’t last if you keep doing that,” John tells him with a smile, lifting the condom packet to his lips and tearing it open with his teeth. He gets up onto his knees, then sits back onto his heels, tossing the wrapper aside and deftly rolling the condom over his rock hard, leaking prick. John stares down at him then, shaking his head and smiling. He leans forward and presses their lips together, sliding his hand under Sherlock’s neck to cradle it as he strains upward to meet him. After a long, sweet, slow kiss he presses his forehead to Sherlock’s and takes a deep breath. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Sherlock says, nodding and laying back against the pillows. John shuffles forward slightly, pushing Sherlock’s thighs up and back while he lines them up, the tip of his thick erection nudging against Sherlock’s stretched hole as he leans forward…and slides into him. Sherlock groans at the sensation, lifting his head to watch as John’s cock slowly disappears inside of him, inch by inch.

“Oh, Christ.” John whispers, looking down at Sherlock with an amazed expression on his face, smiling as Sherlock lifts his head and curls a palm around his neck and tugs him down for a wet, messy kiss. “Can I move? I need to move.”

“Yes,” Sherlock pants, winding his long legs around him as John plants a palm on either side of Sherlock’s ribs and starts to slowly pump his hips. Sherlock clings to John’s shoulders, a jolt of heat sparking up his spine with each clever stroke of John’s cock within him. He doesn’t know what he expected it to feel like, but this? This is so much better than he ever imagined. It’s friction and heat and sweat and he’s filled with and surrounded by John. He can smell him and taste him and feel him and hear him moaning in his ear, saying his name. And suddenly his hand is closed around his own erection, stroking and pulling and his knuckles are rubbing against the soft hair on John’s skin and he’s filled with and surrounded by John…

“JOHN!”

“Oh, fuck, Oh Sherlock—Oh God!”

And it’s all noise for a moment, shouts and moans and growls and cries and the world goes white for a long time—too bright to bear, he clamps his eyes shut against it, nuzzles his face into the safety of the man collapsed on top of him.

After what seems like an age, he feels soft lips mouthing at his neck, hears a sweet voice whispering his name.

“I’ll be right back, Sherlock. Okay?”

Sherlock nods, breath hitching as John pulls out of him. He hears bare feet pad into the bathroom, hears the water running, hears the snick of the light switch being flipped, then listens to John walking back into the room. He feels the warmth of a wet flannel being dragged over his skin, opens his eyes to watch as John slowly wipes him clean then leans in for a kiss. When John returns from the bathroom again, there’s a dip in the mattress beside him as John crawls into bed. Sherlock
automatically rolls towards him, sighing as John gathers him into his arms and pulls him close.

“That,” John whispers into the nest of curls on top of Sherlock’s head. “Was amazing.”

“Good idea, then?” Sherlock asks, mouth stretching wide in a long yawn.

“How good idea,” John confirms, pulling the covers up over them both.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated!

And in this week’s edition of “Go give this under traveled little slice of perfection some love, my sweet snowflakes, pretty please???” I present for your reading pleasure a lovely little examination of post S3 sleepy morning Johnlock that is spare and sweet and sexy and pretty and makes my little heart ache with happiness. Because that’s a thing, right?

Get thyself over to author thedeathchamber’s Wake Me Up and let it charm you awake. Or to sleep. Or to dinner. Or whatever.

Enjoy!
Hello Friends, and a very happy “Saturday is only two days from Thursday, and is thirteen days from the last update and 13 minus 2 is 11—and do you think it’s a COINCIDENCE that there are exactly ELEVEN characters in the word ‘Thursday!!!’ when you spell it with three exclamation points? If you answered YES, then you are correct. Good job, smarty pants!” to you all!

So summer is coming to an end—the children are back in school, the lawn is a pleasant shade of brown except where the crabgrass has taken over (which is everywhere), and we’re nearing that sad time of year when wearing a ratty tank top in public can no longer be considered a valid fashion choice. Good times.

This chapter finds our boys at the end of their glorious first weekend together. They’ve been sequestered away from the world, knee deep in TEENLICK and far away from the perils of pesky things like “story arcs” and “plot”. Back to the real world, my sweet babies. But maybe a little more TEENLICK first. Because I’m not a monster.

A very poorly scraped brownie batter bowl and spatula for my glorious beta/BFF owensm who casually asked how this chapter was going without even ONCE feeding my anxiety re: the length of time it was taking to wrestle it out of my head. A box full of whatever random culinary treat my girl cheytea7 and the tiny alien growing within her womb is craving this week for the plot convo and her uncanny ability to act as my personal google for random fic related queries I’m too lazy to look up myself. Team Beta is the shizzle!

And a million kajillion chest thumps and fist bumps to each and every person behind the clicks, kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, comments and recs this little story continues to accumulate. As we start our descent down the back slope toward the finish line of this tale, I continue to be honored and humbled by how many of you have signed up to come along for the ride. Please feel free to leave me a comment if you’re so inclined, you know I love hearing from you as much as I don’t mind sharing my lip balm with anyone who asks, for some reason. Seriously, ANYONE. An alien with four gaping mouths could tap me on the shoulder in the Target parking lot and I’d be all “Sure, knock yourself out, buddy—it’s coconut raspberry flavored!”

Have a wonderful week!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The room is dim and cool, the barest hint of grey morning light brightening the edges of the thick curtains drawn over the single window set high into the wall. There’s the muffled honk of an occasional horn, the rumble of the street sweepers rolling through, and the customary groan and pop of old wood and stone and brick as 221 settles and shifts the way that old buildings do. It’s a pleasant soundtrack, constant and familiar, a reminder that, even at this hour, London is alive and abuzz just outside these walls.

But in this room, at this moment, the noise of the rest of the world fades away to nothing more than a
faint layer of white noise acting as the backdrop for an entirely different set of sounds: the swish of skin sliding against rumpled sheets, the rhythmic creak of bedsprings, the wet slide of flesh on flesh, the breathy hiss of whispered pleas and praises and *oh god, yes…*

Sherlock closes his eyes and sighs, sliding his palms down a muscled chest and quivering abdomen then dragging them up a tan pair of wrists. He presses his hands over John’s where they cling to his slender hips, thumbs pressed tightly to the crease where thigh meets torso, fingertips digging into the soft flesh at the top swell of his arse. Pink cheeked and breathless, he rocks back and forth, lifting up onto his knees, tipping his hips, whimpering softly each time the head of John’s prick drags over the sensitive nub of his prostate, then sits back down to let John fill him completely once more.

“Oh, that’s perfect,” John gasps up at him, head thrashing against the pillow as he pushes up from the mattress each time Sherlock rocks back. When long fingers dig into the skin at his wrists, John tightens his grip on Sherlock’s hips and pulls him down to meet each upward stroke, smiling as pale thighs begin to tremble and long black lashes flutter and a sweet moan escapes from a slightly parted cupid’s bow of a mouth with every slick thrust. “You’re fucking *perfect.*”

Sherlock lets his hands slide back up John’s strong forearms, then he drags them inward to settle against his chest. Palms pressed flat, he skims the pads of his thumbs in small circles over rigid nipples, smiling at the stutter in John’s breathing—already laboured from the pace he’s set driving up into Sherlock in a rapidly increasing rhythm. Panting heavily, he leans forward onto his hands, using the resistance for leverage as he rides John relentlessly, the molten core of his own arousal beginning to melt and spread through his pelvis, heat licking at the base of his spine. He bites his lip and stares down into John’s eyes, anchoring himself in the familiar pools of blue.

Sherlock shudders as a strong hand closes around his erection, squeezing and pulling in time to the rhythm of his hips, a thumb swiping up over the sensitive head every few strokes to spread the bead of moisture that rises each time the last one has been wiped away. He can feel the first crackle of his impending orgasm in the involuntary clench around John where they’re joined, in the quiver of his abdominal muscles, in the shiver that shoots through him as John yanks him down to meet a deep, upward thrust.

“Oh God, that’s it,” John says breathily, nodding and looking up at him with wonder in his eyes. “You’re so close, I can *feel* it, Sherlock. I can feel you getting tighter.”

“Oh, John...” Sherlock’s voice breaks slightly as he continues to rock frantically, hands scrabbling over the sweat slick skin of John’s chest.


Sherlock closes his eyes and throws his head back, shouting a strangled cry at the ceiling as glossy ribbons of semen stripe over John’s stomach and chest. The hand stroking him begins to slow as his orgasm peaks, leaving him breathless and shaking, still impaled atop John who looks up at him with gentle eyes and a satisfied smirk.

“Good?” John asks, pulling him down and wrapping him in his arms, pressing kisses to his sweaty forehead and cheeks. Collapsed against him like this, Sherlock notices John’s stomach muscles quivering with the effort of staying still, and he feels every inch of the cock still buried deep inside of him, hard and wanting.

“So good,” Sherlock groans, lifting his chin to claim John’s mouth in a wet, messy kiss before sitting back up and staring down at him, a determined twinkle in his eyes. “Now *you.*”
Sherlock lifts up onto his knees until just the tip of John’s erection is still inside of him before plunging back down, hard, then grinding his hips. John growls beneath him and sits up abruptly. He wraps his arms tightly around Sherlock’s slim torso, effortlessly lifting him up and then tugging him right back down. John tips his chin up and Sherlock accepts the invitation, winding his long arms around John’s neck and meeting his lips in a bruising kiss.

Sherlock holds on tight as John bounces him in place, biting at his lips and sucking on his neck until all at once John pulls him down roughly against his lap, pushing as far up into Sherlock as he can. John stiffens and cries out—shouting against a pale shoulder as he empties himself into the thin latex barrier Sherlock rolled onto him when he was still half asleep, just before he straddled his hips and sank down onto him after kissing him awake.

John clings to him tightly in the aftermath, chest heaving and arms shaking, his breath spilling hot and fast against Sherlock’s neck. Sherlock slips the fingers of one hand into the sweat-soaked hair on John’s head and rubs the other in slow circles over his back. Leaning forward, he cradles John in his arms as he eases him back down onto the mattress, smiling at the soft sigh of contentment that escapes from his mouth as he sinks heavily into the pillow. Sherlock licks gently at his parted lips, enjoying a few long moments of lazy, sated kisses before reaching down between them to grasp John gently before easing off of him.

“I can take care of tha—” John insists sleepily, but Sherlock shushes him with a kiss, stripping off the condom and padding through the dim flat to the bathroom where he tidies it away. He rinses out a flannel with warm water and gives himself a quick wash before he makes his way back into the bedroom, smiling as John huffs quiet snores into the silent room. He doesn’t wake when Sherlock gently wipes him clean, or when he tenderly kisses his forehead, or even when he climbs back into bed and pulls him close.

With John’s head tucked snugly against his shoulder, soft breathsghosting over his collar bone, Sherlock lies awake for a while, listening. To the soft patter of footsteps above as Mrs. Hudson rises and goes about her early morning routine, to the faint scrape of metal against concrete as tables and chairs are dragged out onto the sidewalk in front of the café upstairs, to the soft thump of the morning Times as it lands on the stoop outside. With the sounds of the city waking up all around them in his ears, Sherlock closes his eyes and drifts back to sleep.

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The light from the window is brighter now, glowing warm and yellow through the thin veil of his eyelids as he rolls instinctively towards the other side of the bed to avoid it, to burrow below the covers and take shelter from the cruelty of morning in the protection of John’s arms. He reaches out a hand and finds only open space, the sheets rumpled and empty, but still slightly warm. He lifts his head and looks blearily towards the open bedroom door, when a long creak and the clatter of old pipes fills the air, followed by the sound of water rushing out of the taps and splashing into the tub. Sherlock rolls onto his back and indulges in a good long stretch, wincing slightly as his body protests a bit—his shoulder and back still sore from the events of his birthday, other parts of him aching for decidedly more pleasant reasons.

Listening to the steady thrum of water from the bathroom, Sherlock yawns lazily then climbs out of bed. He locates his discarded pyjama trousers (which, it turns out, had been flung a rather impressive distance in his haste to remove them upon waking this morning, though not quite as far as the pair of pants he’d stripped off of John—which are still hanging precariously over the top edge of the bedroom door) and drags them up over his hips. He roots around in the bag Mycroft sent over for a clean t-shirt, slipping it over his head before heading out into the kitchen in search of coffee.
He locates the tin of coffee grounds in the cupboard beside the fridge, eyes the old French press tucked up against the wall near the kettle suspiciously, then promptly puts down the tin and goes back to the bedroom in search of his wallet before slipping his bare feet into his untied shoes and traipsing up the stairs.

When he returns to the flat a few minutes later with a large Speedy’s cup steaming in each hand, he toes off his shoes and cocks an ear towards the hall. The water is still running, so he sets John’s cup down on the scuffed coffee table and walks across the room to retrieve his mobile from where it landed after it was unceremoniously tossed aside last night. Grinning to himself as he recalls everything that’s transpired since *(a post-coital catnap and lazy half-awake snogging and late night Chinese takeaway and eating noodles in bed and fighting over who gets the last egg roll and letting John win)* he scoops up the phone and presses the power button until the familiar logo appears at the centre of the screen, glowing brightly as he backs up to the couch and drops down onto it…wincing slightly as he makes contact with the cushion.

Smiling against the lip of his cup, he swirls a careful sip of the steaming hot liquid around his mouth, convincing himself that it’s the warmth of the coffee that causes the sudden heat in his cheeks—and definitely not thoughts about the origin of the pleasant ache that twinges a bit beneath him as he tries to find the most comfortable position to sit in. Seconds after his home screen appears on the display, there’s a sudden vibration against his fingers.

*buzzzzzz*

Sherlock rolls his eyes as the text blooms immediately into view:

*Good morning, brother. Sleep well? –MH*

Ignoring the technological implications of his freakishly impeccable timing, Sherlock taps out a response.

*Very. Was having quite a pleasant morning, as well, until just now. –SH*

The response indicator blinks as Sherlock takes another sip of his coffee and awaits Mycroft’s reply.

*I’m sure. But every lost weekend must come to an end, unfortunately. Aunt Violet and Uncle Alex are passing through London and will be arriving for a late luncheon at 1 PM. –MH*

Sherlock narrows his eyes at the screen.

*Not hungry. –SH*

He taps open his email and scrolls quickly through the contents as he waits, thumbing open Mycroft’s answer when it arrives:

*A fairly unimportant fact, in the grand scheme of things. They intend to offer you belated birthday wishes, if I’m not mistaken, and as such your presence is required. –MH*

Sherlock shakes his head as his thumbs fly over the virtual keyboard.

*Tell them thank you very much, but I’m busy. –SH*

He stares down at the keyboard, watching the flickering ellipsis and awaiting the inevitable reply.

*Tell them yourself, when you see them. Today. At lunch. The car will be at Baker Street at precisely 11:30 AM. –MH*
Sherlock huffs out a resigned sigh and closes the messaging app, scowling as it disappears. He checks the time at the top of the display, noting with a slightly sinking feeling that it’s nearly half past nine. Listening to the steady thrum of the water still running in the bathroom, he stands up from the couch, deciding that if he’s only got two hours left with John, he intends to use them well.

He moves to slip the mobile into his pocket, but soon remembers that there are none in his flimsy pyjama bottoms. He sets the phone face up on the lid of his cup, and as he bends over to retrieve John’s coffee a flash of colour catches his eye. He stops in mid reach, gaze drawn to the familiar acid green skull and the small number “1” that floats at the corner of the icon. He picks up the phone and taps open the app, sliding his thumb over the NEW CONFESSION! announcement then watching the screen as it fades to black, one white letter at a time coming into view:

iConfess: Wilkes is taking quite a whipping out there tonight. It’s like watching the MOTHER of all beatings!

Sherlock reads the words as they appear, a prickle of alarm firing in his brain and quickly settling somewhere near the base of his skull as the last character appears. He rereads the entire message, reconciling it with the two that preceded it last night. The Morningside football team had been losing their match, Wilkes had missed several shots at goal—and in light of that information the content of this confession isn’t out of line with the other two, nor is the tone—but given what he observed the other day, the way Sebastian reacted, it seems…

The words on the screen begin to blur as the image pulls out of focus, and Sherlock hurries to set his cup down, nearly knocking John’s over in the process as he grips the phone in both hands, one thumb pressing down on the home button as he quickly clamps the other one down on the power switch—just in time to capture a screen shot of the message right after it bursts into a shower of white sparks.

Damn.

He stares down at his mobile, at the familiar home screen again visible across the display, and turns the text of the last confession over in his mind. The word choice had been unfortunate, it’s true—or perhaps it was the opposite—too fortunate. Deliberate, even. But by whom? And to what end? It doesn’t make sense…

“Sherlock?” a voice calls out from down the hall, distant and questioning, the water having stopped running at some point in the last few minutes while Sherlock was preoccupied with his phone. “Are you up?”

“On my way,” Sherlock answers immediately, a smile lifting the corners of his mouth as he sets the phone down onto the table and scoops up the second coffee, the (mysterious?) confession momentarily forgotten at the sound of John’s voice from behind the bathroom door. He makes his way down the short hall and nudges open the partially closed door with a hip. He steps into the bathroom to find John reclining comfortably in the tub, submerged nearly to his neck in water so warm it’s sending thick ribbons of steam curling in the air around him. John grins brightly at him, tipping his chin up in invitation as Sherlock crosses the room and bends over to deliver a lingering kiss.

“Good morning,” John sighs against Sherlock’s mouth.

“I found coffee,” Sherlock replies with a smile, holding out John’s cup (milk, no sugar) as the man in the tub extracts one arm from the bath and shakes the excess water off of his fingers.

“I see that.” John lifts the cup to his lips and takes a long sip, swallowing it down with a satisfied
sigh. “I didn’t want to wake you when I got up, but I didn’t hear you snoring anymore so I figured you were already up and about.”

“I don’t snore, John.”

“You most certainly do,” John replies pleasantly, taking another long pull of his coffee and nodding up at him.

“You’re obviously mistaken,” Sherlock insists, shaking his head dismissively and setting his cup down on the edge of the sink before beginning to lift the hem of his shirt up his chest.

“I’m not,” John assures him, moving to set his coffee cup down on the floor, his eyes following the long lines of Sherlock’s lean arms and torso as he strips off his t-shirt and tosses it away. “Unless of course that racket that woke me up from a sound sleep was Mrs. Hudson doing a little three a.m. hoovering upstairs.”

“Seems probable.” Sherlock shrugs, smirking as John’s melodic giggle rings through the air before pushing down the waistband of his pyjama bottoms and shimmying out of them.

“It’s a very sweet snore, if that helps at all,” John says with a smile, raising his eyebrows and gazing appreciatively at Sherlock as he steps out of the trousers pooled at his feet and climbs into the tub. He lifts his knees as Sherlock lowers himself into the water then turns to lean back into the open vee of John’s thighs.

“It does, a bit,” Sherlock agrees, smiling as John’s arms close around him, wrists crossed over his flat stomach, broad palms settling to curl possessively over his slender waist. He pulls in a deep breath and closes his eyes, revelling in the warmth of the bath and the safety of John’s embrace. “And in the interest of sparing your feelings I will refrain from pointing out that you are quite an accomplished snorer yourself.”

“I appreciate the restraint,” John says, nodding seriously and pressing a kiss to Sherlock’s temple as he snuggles back against his chest, slipping down further into the water and resting his head heavily on John’s shoulder. “You know, I’d have never guessed you’d be such a cuddler.”

“And I didn’t figure you for the type who enjoyed a soak,” Sherlock replies, turning his head to look up at him.

“It helps sometimes, when my shoulder gets stiff,” John explains with a shrug, grinning down at him. “Though it’s not usually this crowded in the tub.”

Sherlock stiffens slightly against John, suddenly aware that he hadn’t bothered to ask before joining him in the bath. “Is this all right?”

“More than,” John assures him with a nod, tightening the embrace and pulling him impossibly closer. “It’s not as though it’s the first time you’ve been in my tub. And frankly, I’m still trying to get used to the idea that I’m allowed to touch you like this. Though my bad shoulder won’t be able to take this position for too much longer—here, budge up a minute.”

Sherlock sits up quickly, forgetting himself for a moment and grimacing slightly at the sudden pressure against his sore bottom. He fidgets a bit, leaning to balance most of his weight to one side as John rolls his shoulder and stretches his neck before settling against the back of the tub and eyeing him curiously.

“Bit tender, are we?” John asks carefully, looking at Sherlock with a mix of concern and something…else. Something that seems suspiciously like pride.
“A little,” Sherlock admits, a small smile spreading over his lips as he shrugs.

“Come here.” John reaches for Sherlock and pulls him in for a long, lazy kiss before the taller man turns to lean against him and John gathers him close once more, sighing into his curls. “These last few days have been, well, wonderful. I’m glad we ended up here, Sherlock.”

“So am I.” Sherlock rests his head against John’s uninjured shoulder and settles his hands over the pair of tanned forearms encircling his waist beneath the water. “Unfortunately, Mycroft has informed me that my aunt and uncle will be dropping by for lunch today and I’m expected at home to receive them. The car will be here at 11:30.”

“Well, I suppose this couldn’t last forever,” John sighs, craning his neck to look at the clock on the wall and then tightening his hold on the man in his arms. He tips his chin forward slightly, pressing his lips to the pale expanse of Sherlock’s neck and continuing to talk as he lays a trail of kisses down to one partially submerged shoulder. “We’ve got…two hours…might as well…make the most…of them…”

“What did you have in mind?” Sherlock purrs, head lolling obligingly to one side as he lifts an arm out of the water and reaches up to thread his wet fingers through John’s golden hair.

“A little breakfast...maybe some telly…” John suggests between gentle licks, smiling against the sensitive skin below a stubbled jaw. He slides one hand down the flat plane of Sherlock’s stomach, fingertips tunnelling through the silky thatch of hair between his legs before palming the length of his rapidly filling erection and slowly rubbing up and down the length of it.

“Toast does sound nice,” Sherlock agrees, a breathy moan escaping his throat as John grasps him more firmly while continuing to his attentions to Sherlock’s neck. “Perhaps a game of Cluedo?”

“Never again,” John reminds him, nipping playfully at Sherlock’s skin and chuckling softly.

“Well, then I’m afraid I’m out of ideas, John.” Sherlock sighs, closing his eyes and breathing heavily as John strokes him in a slow, steady rhythm.

“Don’t worry,” John whispers, kissing his cheek while sliding the pad of his thumb over the sensitive head of Sherlock’s cock below the water. “I’m sure I’ll think of something…”

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Closing the heavy leaded glass door behind him, Sherlock sets his bags down on the marble floor of the foyer. He’s stripped the soft blue scarf from around his neck and is unbuttoning his coat when the steady footfalls of sensible rubber soled shoes approach from behind him.

“I’ll take those,” Marie says as she holds her arms out for the garments.

“I do know how to use the closet, Marie,” Sherlock reminds her while obediently handing over his coat and scarf as directed.

She looks at him sceptically through narrowed eyes. “Since when?”

“It’s a relatively recent phenomenon,” Sherlock admits with a shrug, a grin stretching over his face as Marie smiles up at him fondly.

“Well, it’s good that you’re trying new things,” she says with a wink, draping the heavy greatcoat over her arm and smoothing the scarf out as well. “Speaking of which, did you have a nice time with your young man—John, is it?”
“Yes,” Sherlock says in answer to both questions, feeling his cheeks heat slightly and clearing his
throat nervously as their venerable housekeeper regards him shrewdly.

“I’m glad to hear it.” She nods, looking up at him with soft eyes and a slightly furrowed brow. “I
hope you’ll bring him around for dinner soon. I’ll be happy to make whatever he’d like best.”

Sherlock tips his head thoughtfully. “He’s quite fond of Shepherd’s pie.”

“Oh, an excellent choice, I’m inclined to like him already. And your brother seems quite impressed
by him, you know, so there’s a big mark in his favour as well.”

Sherlock glowers moodily. “Or against it.”

“Oh, hush,” Marie admonishes, reaching out to lay a hand on his arm and squeezing gently. “He’s
just looking out for you, the way he always has. If he’s been lucky enough to win Mycroft’s good
opinion, that says quite a lot about your John right there.”

“He’s not my John, Marie.”

“Isn’t he?” she asks, looking at him meaningfully with an amused twinkle in her eye before patting
his arm a final time. “Your brother wanted a word with you when you returned, by the way. He’s
in the study.”

“Do I have to?” Sherlock complains.

“Yes,” Marie insists, crossing in front of him to pick up his overnight bag before throwing a stern
glance in his direction over her shoulder. “And your Auntie Vi will be here soon, so you’d best get a
move on.”

“Fine.” He sighs dramatically, shoulders drooping as he turns in the opposite direction and walks
resignedly down the hall. He doesn’t bother knocking on the closed door when he reaches it, but
simply pushes it open and stands in the doorway staring expectantly at the young man seated behind
the polished mahogany desk perusing a copy of the Sunday Times.

“The prodigal son has returned,” Mycroft drawls, lowering his paper to the desk and clasping his
hands primly as he looks up at his brother with a strained smile. “Marie is no doubt preparing the
fatted calf at this very moment in celebration of the blessed event.”

“I believe she’s making lamb chops,” Sherlock says, sniffing at the air and considering. “With
rosemary, if I’m not mistaken.”

“How refreshingly literal.” Mycroft shakes his head slightly as he regards his brother for a long
moment. “I trust you enjoyed your weekend holiday in Baker Street?”

“Very much,” Sherlock confirms, blithely returning the elder Holmes’ unflinching stare. “Until it
was interrupted, of course.”

“It was inevitable that you would return home at some point today, Sherlock,” Mycroft points out, a
touch of condescension in his otherwise pleasant tone. “Sixth formers are not, as a general rule,
permitted to permanently cohabit with their medical student boyfriends, after all.”

“One weekend is hardly shacking up, Mycroft,” Sherlock sighs, rolling his eyes and attempting to
sound as bored as possible.

“True,” Mycroft agrees, tipping his head in agreement. “Which is why I allowed it.”
“Allowed?” Sherlock asks, eyes narrowing angrily.

“Yes,” Mycroft confirms, his pleasant tone and even volume tempering his younger brother’s outrage at the very concept.

“I’m eighteen now, Mycroft.” Sherlock steps into the room and approaches the desk to stare down at his brother with a defiant gaze, arms crossed over his chest. “I’m not a child.”

“Is that so?” Mycroft asks curiously, looking his brother up and down. “An odd assertion, as you are essentially a mere pout away from disproving that fact at this very moment.”

“You do realise, no matter how much you are beginning to resemble him in your advancing age, that you are not actually our father?”

“I am well aware of that fact, brother,” Mycroft replies, a touch of something weary and sorrowful playing at the edges of his still genial tone. “But has it occurred to you that, if Father were here, it’s highly unlikely you’d have been permitted to spend even one night tucked away in 221C with young Mr. Watson?”

Sherlock wants to argue with him, to snap back at his older brother with a retort that disproves the assertion he’s made—but he can’t. Because, as much as it pains him to admit it (even silently), Mycroft is almost certainly correct.

“I thought not,” his brother says, nodding astutely and sliding a hand down his tastefully expensive tie to smooth it against his immaculately pressed shirt. “You are still in school, Sherlock. Your educational and financial future remain very much my concern.”

“Oh, please. You were barely older than I am when you had full control of your trust fund,” Sherlock reminds him.

“True,” Mycroft admits, pausing to regard Sherlock shrewdly for a long moment before continuing. “But at the time, circumstances dictated that my responsibilities were a bit broader than those currently settled upon your shoulders, wouldn’t you agree?”

And once again Sherlock is forced to admit that, for the second time in as many minutes, his brother is right. He huffs out a long sigh, then nods grudgingly in Mycroft’s direction.

“While I am no longer technically your legal guardian, Sherlock, I am still your older brother—and the trustee of this estate,” Mycroft reminds him, his tone softer now than it was just moments ago, but still firm. “However, you are indeed eighteen now, and as such I believe that some allowances must be made.”

“How generous of you,” Sherlock mumbles, pointedly refusing to meet his brother’s gaze.

"I am pleased that you have found someone whose company you enjoy,” Mycroft presses on, clearing his throat softly and sounding slightly uncomfortable for the first time in the conversation, “I would simply like to remind you not to use this new—entanglement—as an excuse to neglect your studies or other familial responsibilities.”

At the change in tone, Sherlock pauses his indignant internal monologue long enough to register that his brother is no longer looking directly at him—that his steady fingers are currently busy worrying at the edges of the newsprint splayed out on the desk before him, that his brow is knitted to form an uncharacteristic wrinkle in the skin above the bridge of his long nose, and that he’s shuffling ever so slightly from side to side in his chair.
His brother—the proper, cool, implacable Mycroft Holmes—is fidgeting.

“Is this your attempt at cautioning me against becoming ‘boy-crazy’ Mycroft?” Sherlock bites back a smile as Mycroft rolls his eyes in reply, but doesn’t deny it. “Because it if is, I can assure you that I intend on doing nothing of the sort.”

“Good to know,” Mycroft replies, huffing out what Sherlock is almost sure is a quiet sigh of relief before composing himself with admirable speed and looking back up at his younger brother with his well-practiced impassive expression firmly in place once again. “I have only your best interests in mind, you realise. Fortunately I am inclined to believe that Mr. Watson does as well.”

“I suppose that explains why you bestowed your rather menacing blessing upon him, wrapped up in a manila envelope and tied with a string.”

“I prefer to think of it more as my tacit, conditional approval,” Mycroft clarifies with a nonchalant shrug, his lips tipping up into the smallest of grins. “Now, Alex and Violet will be arriving shortly, I assume you’ll want to take a few moments to make yourself presentable?”

“Naturally,” Sherlock agrees with a sigh, turning to leave the room.

“I do understand the excitement surrounding this moment in your life, brother,” Mycroft says quietly. “I was once your age, you know.”

“When?” Sherlock asks, looking over his shoulder with a sceptical smirk.

“A fair question,” Mycroft sighs, grasping the edges of his newspaper and lifting it once again. Just before he disappears behind it, Sherlock is almost certain that the brief flash of emotion that flickers over his brother’s face—that creases the edges of his eyes and dims the small smile on his lips—is something very close to regret. Sherlock stands there for a moment longer, pondering what he saw, then turns to leave the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

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“All right, then. Let’s review,” Molly Hooper says, standing at the edge of their regular study table and surveying the piles of papers and notebooks and folders and brightly coloured poster boards stacked all over the surface, laid out on the floor, and propped up against the chairs of the adjacent table as well. “Our research is complete, the outline is fully fleshed out, our visual aids are ready, and we’ve still got over a week to practice the oral presentation. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I think we’re actually going to be ready for this.”

“I’ve been ready for weeks,” Sherlock points out, shrugging and smirking down into the open calculus text in his lap in response to her indignant huff.

“Oh really?” she demands, gesturing wildly to the stack of meticulous charts and anatomical drawings leaned up against the table beside her. “Because I’m pretty sure I spent every night this last week putting the finishing touches on our posters and diagrams, which count for twenty percent of the grade, Sherlock.”

“You will recall that I offered to prepare an entirely unique set of three dimensional visual aids, but was told in no uncertain terms that I should not,” Sherlock reminds her, idly flipping to the next page in his book.

“Oh, enough about the synthetic poo!” Molly snaps. “It’s not happening. And don’t you DARE show up with some anyway on the day of the presentation, Sherlock Holmes, or so help me God I
will tear you a new—"

“I’m only teasing, Molly.” Sherlock closes his book and holds up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “We are eminently prepared, even a week out from the presentation date. You’ve done an admirable job of keeping us on task and I am confident that we’ll receive the high marks your hard work deserves.”

“Oh. Well, um, thanks,” Molly replies, her earlier anger deflating immediately as it’s replaced with equal portions of surprise and pride. Looking up at his friend, Sherlock finds himself pleased to note that the constant squint of panic over this project that she’s been wearing for weeks is, at least for the moment, absent from her pretty features.

He knows that things at home have been difficult of late, that her father’s illness is progressing at a rather alarming pace after such a long period where it seemed under control. He’s heard her talking to John about it in quiet tones, listened to him comfort her in the way that only someone who has lived through the same experience can. Looking at her pleased expression now, at the momentary absence of the sorrow and exhaustion that have been etched across her face for so long that he’d forgotten what she looked like without them, it occurs to him that his helpful praise might have had something to do with the change, and he finds himself glad of it.

“So,” Sherlock says, looking over the impressive array of documents strewn about, “is there anything else I can do to help?”

“Actually, there is one thing,” Molly says, looking thoughtfully at him.

“Name it.”

“Well, my little brother Steven’s primary school science fair is coming up, and I was wondering if you might be able to help him out with part of his project.”

“Possibly,” Sherlock says, with a shrug. “What’s the subject?”

“He’s making a three dimensional model of the solar system,” Molly says seriously, nodding down at him. “And I was thinking it would be nice to add a bit of pizazz to the whole thing—maybe a musical number of some sort? Do you know of any songs that might work with that theme?”

Sherlock stares at her blankly for a moment, then rolls his eyes as her lips tip up in a cheeky smile. He leans slowly to one side to look around her and at the golden haired young man sitting behind the circulation desk who is (unsuccessfully, it should be noted) stifling a giggle while pretending to read from the text book spread out in front of him. Sherlock heaves out a weary sigh and looks up at his lab partner through narrowed eyes and shakes his head.

“Et tu, Molly?”

“Sorry, John,” Molly apologises over her shoulder, laughing as she begins gathering up their project materials in preparation for the end of the lunch hour. “I gave it my best shot.”

“It was a really good try,” John concedes, unable to suppress another deep chortle that morphs into a rolling laugh that dissolves into a fit of musical giggles that float through the air around them.

“You’re both ridiculous,” Sherlock grumbles, attempting to maintain a displeased scowl, but soon succumbing to the infectious nature of laughter and breaking into a reluctant chuckle of his own as he stands to help Molly pack away their notes. When the bell rings a few moments later, Molly bids them both goodbye and heads out into the hall. As the door snicks shut behind her, he and John stand staring at it as the silence of the otherwise deserted library settles around them.
After a moment, John gets up from his chair and walks purposefully around the desk, then pivots towards Sherlock’s table to grasp his hand as he passes, pulling to his feet and leading him back into the stacks. Sherlock follows willingly in his wake, emitting a squeak of surprise as John pulls him suddenly forward, then spins him around against the edge of his long abandoned study carrel and tugs him down to sit on the desk. John looks down at him with parted lips and hungry eyes and when Sherlock nods up at him John presses forward, grasps his face between warm palms and proceeds to slowly kiss Sherlock senseless—nibbling at his lips and sucking on his tongue and licking at his mouth until they’re both panting out hot, quick breaths with their foreheads pressed together tightly.

“I’ve been thinking about that mouth all day,” John whispers, depositing a chaste peck over the peak of Sherlock’s upper lip and smiling against him.

“I’m not surprised.” Sherlock winds his arms around John’s waist, pulling him closer to drag the tip of his nose against a stubbled cheek. “Considering what it did to you in this very spot earlier this morning.”

“I remember,” John says, laying another soft kiss at the corner of Sherlock’s mouth. “And I would have returned the favour, if a certain head librarian hadn’t chosen that moment to arrive uncharacteristically early for the day.”

“That woman does have the worst timing,” Sherlock agrees, tipping his head back to allow John’s wandering mouth access to his neck.

“Indeed she does,” John sighs, pressing his tongue to the tender patch of skin just below Sherlock’s jaw then mouthing at it gently. “I’d pay you back in kind right now, but you know the rule.”

“No sex during school hours,” Sherlock repeats grudgingly, a disappointed growl escaping from his throat as John pulls away from his neck and rests his forearms on Sherlock’s shoulders. “It’s a stupid rule.”

“It’s not. It’s a very sensible rule, and one I’m quite determined not to let you talk me into breaking.”

“Good luck with that.” Sherlock says smugly, smiling innocently at him as John laughs quietly and grants him another kiss—this one softer and less urgent—a sweet, effortless snog that Sherlock is fairly sure he could endure happily for hours. Unfortunately, he doesn’t get the chance to test the theory.

“I’ve got class,” John mutters against his lips, stepping back and sliding his palms down Sherlock’s arms and clasping his hands. “Then my study group is meeting to get ready for our exam this week. And then I’ve got to lock myself in the campus library for a few hours and catch up on some reading, because for some reason I didn’t get any studying done this weekend.”

“Sorry,” Sherlock says, looking guilty.

“It was worth it.” John shrugs, smiling as he darts forward to press a final kiss against Sherlock’s willing mouth, then he pauses to lift his thumb to the dark split on his bottom lip and rub at it gently. “This is healing up well. Haven’t run into that dick Wilkes yet, have you?”

“No,” Sherlock assures him. “I would have seen him in P.E. today but per Mycroft’s insistence I’m excused through the end of the week. Medical exemption.”

“Well, that’s probably for the best. You’re still healing, best not to put your body through anything too strenuous right now.”
“Interestingly, I don’t remember that being your attitude yesterday morning,” Sherlock replies with mock confusion.

“Yeah, well, that’s because I’m a terrible human being. And a hypocrite.”

“You’re neither,” Sherlock says softly, shaking his head. “You’re wonderful.”

“So are you.” John lifts their tangled fingers to his lips and kisses Sherlock’s knuckles gently. “Now come on, let’s get back out there before Mrs. H. comes looking for us.”

Sherlock watches John gather up his books and stuff them into his backpack, smiles as he buttons up his coat and heaves the heavy bag onto his shoulder, then laughs to himself as John makes one slow circle looking for any stray items he might (definitely will) have missed.

“I’ll text you when I get home tonight, all right?” John says. “Could be late though.”

“I’ll wait up,” Sherlock promises, smiling as John throws him one last wave before disappearing through the door.

Sherlock looks around the silent library, then glances down at the table trying to decide what he should work on next. He reaches over and plucks up his French text, intending to complete next week’s listed homework assignments to turn in to the instructor’s mailbox before he leaves this afternoon in an attempt to keep the grumbling about his lack of attendance to a minimum, when he notices that there’s a stray reference book beneath it. He picks up volume on human biology, crosses the wide common space, then walks down the proper aisle and shelves the book. On his way back to his table he hears the library door swish open. He expects to hear the distinctive click of kitten heels that always serves to announce the presence of the Morningside Librarian returning from her lunch break, so what he actually sees when he exits the stacks takes him by surprise.

There, standing in front of the circulation desk, is Sebastian Wilkes.

Wilkes takes a few steps toward the desk, his posture oddly unsure, a barely perceptible hitch in his gait each time his left foot hits the ground. He stops and makes a face down at his phone, then looks back up as if he’s searching for something.

Sherlock freezes in place, his breath catching in his throat, and for a brief moment he’s aware that Sebastian hasn’t seen him yet—and if he’s very quiet, he might be able to slowly back down the aisle he just came from and disappear...

Too late.

Wilkes seems to sense his presence at just that moment, turning his head in Sherlock’s direction, his eyes widening slightly as he catches sight of him.

“You’re here,” Seb says, a note of surprise in his voice.

“I’m always here,” Sherlock replies, his heart racing in his chest as he attempts to keep his voice even and casual.

(Sebastian is much closer to the door than he is at this moment, and Sherlock likely wouldn’t reach it first. Not a viable exit strategy.)

“Yeah, but I wasn’t sure you would be, today,” Wilkes says, brow furrowed in concentration as he looks at Sherlock’s face, his gaze zeroing in on the healing cut on Sherlock’s lip. “Because of, you know...”
“Because of the injuries I sustained in the assault you perpetrated on me last week?” Sherlock prompts, praying that he sounds as nonchalant and bored as he’s intending to.

“I guess,” Sebastian mumbles, blunt fingers opening and closing around the mobile phone clutched in one of his meaty hands. “You weren’t in P.E. today, so I thought I would, um, check up here.”

“Shouldn’t you be in P.E. at this very moment?” Sherlock asks.

(His bag is on the floor beside his chair at his regular table, it’s possible he could reach it and retrieve his mobile from the front pocket but it’s unlikely he’d have time to call for help, and even more unlikely that help would arrive in time to be of any use.)

“Yeah,” Wilkes says as he turns to face Sherlock where he stands, wincing slightly as he readjusts his stance, his eyes shifting around the room before he looks up at Sherlock with a grim expression.

“But not today. Medical exemption. You know, like you.”

“Like me?” Sherlock asks, looking at him sceptically.

“Yeah,” Seb says tightly, looking down at the floor. “Just like you.”

Sherlock sucks in a short breath at the deliberate nature of the phrase, and suddenly time slows to a crawl…

Sebastian Wilkes is a tall man, but today he seems smaller (cowering slightly, shoulders drawn in, expression tense and troubled) and his stance is off as well (feet too close together, shuffling slightly from foot to foot, hand resting heavily on his left hip as though that might offer needed support) his facial expression is strained (ruddy cheeks unusually pale, a slight sheen of sweat over the bridge of his nose, eyes narrowed and the edges creased), his chest is expanding and contracting rapidly (breathing laboured, respiration and heartbeat elevated to heavy exertion levels even though he’s standing still). Sebastian Wilkes wears no physical marks or indicators of injury that are obvious—but everything about his demeanour and carriage say that he is currently in pain.

A lot of pain.

Oh, Sebastian.

And in that instant, time resumes.

“What has she done to you this time?” Sherlock asks quietly, taking a tentative step towards the young man swaying slightly on his feet before him.

“Oh, this?” Seb says, shaking his head and gesturing vaguely down the length of his body. “It’s nothing. This is just what happens at my house when you miss three goals in a single match.”

“It shouldn’t be that way,” Sherlock begins.

“Yeah, well it’s really none of your business, is it?” Sebastian replies, his voice shaking as he lifts his phone and stares down at the display for a moment before dropping his hand back to his side.

“Maybe not,” Sherlock agrees, watching his classmate’s face closely as a look of grim determination settles over the harsh features. “But if you need help, I might be able to—”

“I don’t need your help!” Wilkes snarls, shaking his head and clenching his jaw. “That’s not why I came up here.”
“All right,” Sherlock replies, matching Wilkes’ increase in volume with a decrease in his own. “Then why are you here?”

“I just came to say that…I mean, I’m meant to tell you…” Sebastian huffs out a frustrated sigh and transfers his mobile phone from one hand to the other, his fingers tapping nervously over the back of it. “I want to say that I’m sorry for what I did to you the other day. And for all the things I’ve said about you being, you know, the way you are.”

“Is ‘gay’ the word you’re searching for, Sebastian?”

“Yeah, yeah, _that_,” Seb says, huffing out a relieved sigh and nodding to himself. “So we’re good, right?”

A prickle of recognition sets hair at the back of Sherlock’s neck on end as he observes Sebastian carefully, taking in the desperate plea in his eyes. Sherlock stares for a moment longer, then nods his head.

“Just _say_ it, Holmes. Just tell me that we’re square now. That you got what you wanted and now you’re not gonna tell anyone about my Mum.”

“What I wanted?” Sherlock asks, looking at Sebastian with a puzzled expression.

“Say it!” Wilkes demands angrily, throwing up his hands.

“Fine,” Sherlock says, putting up his own hands. “It’s fine, Sebastian. It’s all fine.”

“Good,” Sebastian sighs, closing his eyes and nodding to himself. “That’s good.”

Wilkes heaves in a deep breath, then slips his mobile phone into his front pocket and starts to walk towards the library door.

“Sebastian,” Sherlock calls out, taking a few steps towards him and then stopping short. “You don’t deserve it, you know. What she does? It’s _not_ okay.”

“Don’t worry about me, Holmes,” Seb Wilkes says as he pushes the door open. “I can take care of myself.”

And with that, he steps through the door and is gone.

Leaning against the cool marble vanity, Sherlock slowly counts to thirty as he swishes the minty liquid around his mouth, mentally replaying (again) the conversation he had with Sebastian Wilkes in the library that day. He wishes (again) that he could talk to John about it, that he could help Sherlock make some sense out of the exchange. He rinses the spent mouthwash down the drain, looking down at his phone and checking (again) that he hasn’t missed John’s promised goodnight text. His notifications are infuriatingly blank as he scoops up the mobile and switches off the bathroom light, pausing to plug his phone in on the bedside table before climbing up onto the mattress and reaching for the familiar old chemistry text with the red cover and flipping it open and beginning to read. He’s well entrenched in a passage about the finer points of converting alcohols to alkyl chlorides when:

*_buzzzzz*_

Sherlock practically throws the book across the length of the bed in his haste to talk to John, reaching
for his mobile and nearly yanking the charging cable right out of the wall in the process. Looking down excitedly at the screen, he’s disappointed to find that it isn’t John at all. Instead he finds the familiar notification:

**NEW CONFESSION!**

He’s letting out a disappointed sigh when the phone suddenly vibrates again in his hand, a second identical notification popping up directly below the first.

**NEW CONFESSION!**

He’s tapping each notification closed when a third one appears.

**NEW CONFESSION!**

Sherlock swipes through his icons until he finds the one he’s looking for, then taps on the acid green skull with a small “3” hovering in the corner and watches as the first message begins to appear:

*iConfess: I need to know if it’s true. Has anyone heard if he’s OK?*

Sherlock stares down at the words, alarm spreading through his gut as the words slowly pull out of focus and explode into a shower of digital fireworks. He automatically taps open the next confession, the dread increasing as he reads it:

*iConfess: We’re at the hospital now, they won’t tell us anything!*

As the proclamation dissolves into sparks, he swipes at the screen with his thumb, his eyes tracking the next message as it is revealed one letter at a time:

*iConfess: I can’t believe this is real. Be strong, Seb!*

Sherlock watches the words burst into twinkling lights, then stares down at his home screen as it reappears. His mind is stuck on the exchange he had with Sebastian Wilkes earlier that day—and on an eerily similar conversation that happened weeks ago in the very same place. He doesn’t even realise he’s shaking until his phone buzzes again in his hand, and he has to set it down on the bed so that he can read the notification.

A text this time.

But not from John, from Molly:

*Did you hear about Sebastian Wilkes??*

Sherlock takes a deep breath and picks up his phone, willing his fingers to be still as he types out his reply.

*What happened? –SH*

The three dots begin undulating immediately and Molly’s reply pops up mere seconds later.

*Car crash, ran right into a bridge support, going too fast. The rail stopped him from going over, but it was really bad, I heard.*

Sherlock focuses on the virtual keyboard and taps out a question.
Is he alive? –SH

He watches the ellipsis blinking for a long moment, holding his breath until Molly’s answer appears:

Yeah, but just barely. He’s in a coma.

Chapter End Notes

So in this week’s installment of “OMG, if you’re going to recommend something this sweet you could at least include a pre-loaded syringe of insulin, lady!” I have a lovely little gem of a fic that combines two of my favorite Johnlock staples:

Post S3 gradual Parentlock and slow burning friends-to-lovers angst that ends in a heap of sweaty limbs and smiling faces. Because that’s kind of my jam. And it if happens to include a great internal Sherlock POV, so much the better.

If it’s YOUR jam as well, make sure you click on fandom author (and all around groovy chick) slashscribe’s adorable Iris and get your fingers wayyyy down into that jelly jar and then lick all that sweet stuff off. Which, now that I see it in print, seems a little skeevier than it did in my head, but I’m trusting you to understand I meant it in the least creepy way possible.

Go forth and read, and I’ll meet you all back here next week…ish. :)
Hello Friends, and a very happy “yes, I am well aware that it’s been three weeks since the last update and while that might seem like a super long time between chapters I think it’s only fair to point out that I’ve waited months—YEARS even—between updates on fics I’ve loved so 24 days is only like 7 days in fic years. Or is that dog years? Oh, hell, I don’t even know any more (insert your own ‘Thursday’ joke here)…” to you all!

So after I posted chapter 14, Team Beta and I had our usual plot pow-wow and I sat down at the computer and was like, “All right my sweet babies—the game is on!” And chapter 15 was all “BORED!” Then it shot up my walls, pulled a silky blue dressing gown around its delicate shoulders, and flopped dramatically onto the sofa for an epic sulk. And I was like “FINE! You just lay there and when you’re ready to act like a grown up you let me know!” And lo, two weeks later, it suddenly stood up and politely asked if I might make it a cup of tea…and here we are. I swear, sometimes this fic can be such a drama queen.

This chapter finds Sherlock reeling from the news that Sebastian Wilkes has been nearly fatally injured in the wake of his unexpected apology—and our sweet little future consulting detective and his golden haired doctor-to-be simply aren’t content to sit idly by and do nothing. Because that’s not how they roll.

Oodles of slightly under baked brownies for my beta/BFF owensm, and a perfectly lump-free mattress to my girl cheytea7 for going above and beyond in the ‘putting up with my histrionics’ department as they battled personal stress and unexpected sorrow. Team Beta is the cat’s meow.

Boundless, effusive, humble thanks to each and every person behind the clicks, kudos, bookmarks, recs, subscriptions, & comments this story continues to accumulate. As a gesture of gratitude you may all come over and pick out any one thing you’d like from my fridge. :) Please feel free to leave a comment if you’re so inclined, hearing from you makes me even more excited than when I see something on a menu that starts with the words “Chili-Cheese”! (Burrito? Fries? Fritos? Footlong? BRING. IT. ON! With a side order of Tums. Oh, what the hell--make it a whole bottle of ’em!)

Have a fabulous week(s)(ish)(whatevs)!

Shuffling from foot to foot on the open stoop, he presses the buzzer (again) absently wiping the driving rain out of his eyes. Bouncing impatiently on the balls of his feet, he reaches for the ornate brass knocker, yanking it upward just as the dull metallic clank of lock-works disconnecting (finally) reaches his ears.

The door cracks open and John Watson squints out into the street, dressing gown hanging loose to reveal the threadbare t-shirt and pair of athletic shorts he’s wearing underneath it. “Sherlock?”

“Oh good, you’re awake,” Sherlock says with a relieved sigh.
“I’m not, actually. Or I wasn’t, anyway, before you started leaning on the bell,” John begins, rubbing at his eyes as he steps aside to pull the door open. “What are you doing here—oof!”

Sherlock stumbles directly into him, wet face pressing into the sleep-warm skin of John’s neck, exhaling deeply as a pair of strong arms circle him instinctively. John holds him close for a stunned moment, shivering against the wind and the sharp sting of the rain as it blows through the open threshold of 221 Baker Street. He takes a few wide steps back, tugging Sherlock into the entryway before lifting one hand to push the door closed behind him, fingers quickly working the locks closed before his arm settles around Sherlock’s shoulders once again. John moves to pull away from the embrace—but when long fingers scrabble at his back and resist the motion he tightens his grip on Sherlock’s trembling form instead.

“Sherlock, what’s happened?”

“I’m not sure. It’s just…” Sherlock shakes his head against John’s shoulder as he huffs out a frustrated sigh and clings to John a bit tighter. “I needed to see you.”

“It’s okay, I’m right here,” John assures him, pressing his lips into the sodden mess of curls and making soothing shushing noises as his palms rub broad circles over the saturated wool. “Jesus, you’re soaked to the skin.”

“It’s raining,” Sherlock says, voice muffled by the thick fabric of John’s dressing gown.

“Yeah, I noticed that.” John slides a hand up the back of Sherlock’s damp neck and squeezes gently. “Did you walk all the way here?”

“Oh course not. I took the tube.”

“Was there a flood in one of the tunnels?” John asks, lifting his hand to shake off the excess moisture before settling it back on Sherlock’s neck.

“I got off a stop too soon by mistake, had to run for it.”

“Yeah, that’d do it.” John cocks his head, listening to the sound of the relentless downpour outside. “What the hell were you doing coming all this way on the underground at this time of night?”

Sherlock shrugs in John’s arms. “I couldn’t find a cab.”

“Obviously,” John sighs, huffing out a breathy laugh in spite of himself before pressing a kiss to the top of Sherlock’s wet head and pushing him back gently to look him in the face. “But why are you out in this weather at all?”

“I had to talk to you.” Sherlock looks stricken, his teeth chattering slightly. “I texted you—I even tried to call, but you didn’t answer your phone.”

“I set it to silent while I was on campus,” John explains, dragging Sherlock by the hand towards the open door of 221C. “I texted you as soon as I saw the missed call, but you didn’t reply. I thought you’d gone to sleep.”

“I didn’t get any texts from you,” Sherlock says with a confused look, patting down his pockets with his free hand before releasing a frustrated sigh. “Damn, it’s in my bedroom. I must have walked out without it.”

“Now you’re starting to scare me.” John grins half-heartedly. “What’s going on?”
“It’s Wilkes,” Sherlock begins, noting the sudden change in John’s expression and demeanor at the mere mention of the name.

“What’s that bastard done now?” John growls, jaw clenched tightly.

“He found me in the library today, after you’d left, and he—”

“Are you hurt?” John demands abruptly as he runs his fingers clinically over pale cheeks and a long neck and broad shoulders before hastily working open the buttons of Sherlock’s coat to see what damage might lie underneath it.

Sherlock shakes his head impatiently. “No, I’m fine.”

“If that son of a bitch so much as laid one finger on you, so help me God I will end him.” John skims his palms up Sherlock’s ribs, looking positively murderous.

“I’m fine, John,” Sherlock insists, wincing and attempting to twist away as John slides determined hands around his waist and probes at the still tender bruise on his lower back.

“Oh, fine, are you?” John eyes him doubtfully while stripping the heavy coat off of Sherlock’s shoulders and tossing it aside before spinning him around to face the wall.

“I meant I don’t have any new injuries,” Sherlock clarifies, propping himself up against the wall with his palms.

“Yeah, well I think I’ll just take a look anyway if it’s all the same to you.” John tugs Sherlock’s shirttails out of his trousers and lifts them hastily before settling a hand firmly over one squirming hip and bending over to examine the area more closely.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, boys,” a voice scolds from behind them. “And on a school night, no less!”

Sherlock and John turn their heads to find Martha Hudson shaking her head at them from the open door of her flat. They both freeze in place for a few seconds, then John straightens up and drops the hem of Sherlock’s shirt so it slides back down to cover his bared back.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” John begins, cheeks colouring slightly as he shakes his head at his landlady.

“He’s right.” Sherlock rolls his eyes as he drops his hands from the wall and turns to face the Morningside librarian. “John was simply attempting to examine me for imaginary injuries.”

“Oh, is that what they’re calling it these days?” Mrs. Hudson asks, a note of amusement creeping into her slightly frustrated tone as she reaches up to pat at the rollers in her hair. “Well, in that case, perhaps it would be best to continue this examination in your flat?”

“Oh course,” John agrees, blowing out an embarrassed sigh. “But for the record, we weren’t doing anyth—”

“It’s not that I’m not pleased as punch for you both,” Mrs. Hudson continues, putting up a hand to halt his explanation while shaking her head and tugging her lacy floral dressing gown more tightly around her slight frame. “But the neighbours…”

“Say no more, Mrs. H.,” John says hurriedly, bending over to scoop up Sherlock’s coat and ushering the younger man towards the open the door to 221C. “Sorry to wake you.”
“Sherlock, love—does your brother know you’re tearing about London at all hours of the night?” Mrs. Hudson asks, looking around John at the Morningside sixth former and eyeing him shrewdly.

“No idea.” Sherlock waves a hand dismissively as he turns and descends the stairs into the sitting room of 221C. He can hear the conversation between John and Mrs. Hudson continue for a few moments in hushed tones, and when the door finally closes he turns greet John at the bottom of the steps.

“What did he do to you?” John asks, all business again as he stalks towards Sherlock and settles his hands around his slim waist once more, strong fingers probing gently at the tender expanse of skin.

“Nothing,” Sherlock insists (again) lifting his hands to settle them over John’s wrists to still them. “He didn’t touch me at all.”

“You’re sure?” John asks through clenched teeth, looking up at him through the ridge of his furrowed brow.

“Yes, John,” Sherlock assures him, nodding and looking him in the eye until John’s jaw relaxes slightly and the deep creases in his forehead begin to smooth out a bit.

“Oh, John,” John sighs, settling his hands over Sherlock’s hips and lifting up on his toes to press a soft kiss against his lips before stepping back to regard him worriedly. “So what did he do, then?”

“He apologised.”

“He did?” John asks, looking slightly confused as he slides his hands up Sherlock’s arms. “When?”

“This afternoon, just after you’d gone,” Sherlock begins as John closes strong fingers around his slender wrist and turns on his heel, gently leading the way through the darkened flat to the bathroom. “I thought at first he’d come to finish what he’d started, but it quickly became clear that he was in no shape to be a physical threat.”

“Oh yeah? Why is that?” John pulls a dry towel out of the narrow linen closet, shaking it to its full length before tugging Sherlock down to sit on the commode.

“He’d been beaten,” Sherlock answers quietly. “Quite severely, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Bloody hell,” John mutters under his breath, draping the towel over Sherlock’s wet head and gently patting the absorbent fabric over his soaked curls. “His mum?”

“He admitted as much,” Sherlock confirms, lifting a corner of the towel to swipe at the dampness where it still clings to his cheeks and chin and the vee of pallid skin revealed between the unbuttoned plackets of his shirt. “He intimated that it wasn’t a particularly rare occurrence, either.”

“Jesus Christ.” John shakes his head and pushes at the towel so that it settles around the back of Sherlock’s neck. “No one should have to go through that.”

“That’s what I told him,” Sherlock agrees, brow furrowed and lips pressed into a tight line. “I even offered to help him, if I could.”

“I take it he refused?”

“Naturally,” Sherlock confirms with a frustrated shake of his head. “He said it was none of my business, which—I suppose he’s right, isn’t he?”
“Actually, no,” John says, dropping to one knee in front of him and letting his hands slide down the tails of the towel draped around Sherlock’s neck before grasping the edges of it between his fingers as he looks at him intently. “I don’t think he is. Not about this. Whether he likes it or not, Wilkes made it your business when he told you his mother was abusing him—and offering to help is exactly what any decent person would have done in the same situation.”

“Perhaps, but it doesn’t really matter now,” Sherlock sighs, looking at John with troubled eyes. “He said he didn’t need my help, that it wasn’t what he’d come there for.”

“What the hell did he want, then?” John asks, the barely checked anger he’s been successfully suppressing until now rearing its head once again.

“My forgiveness,” Sherlock says, meeting John’s confused expression with an anguished one of his own. “He said he was sorry for attacking me last week, and for the way he’d treated me in the past.”

“Well, that’s…unexpected.” John tips his head thoughtfully while narrowing his eyes. “Four days ago he’s assaulting you and now suddenly he’s sorry? Why the change of heart?”

“That’s just it, John—I’m not sure he was sorry at all,” Sherlock argues. “I think he was scared.”

“Scared?” John asks, looking surprised as he drops his hands down to rest on Sherlock’s thighs. “Of what?”

“I don’t know.” Sherlock huffs, tossing up his hands in a gesture of exasperation before scrubbing his palms roughly over his damp hair. “But I don’t believe that this was just a sincere apology by a bully who’s suddenly seen the error of his ways. Sebastian wasn’t contrite, John—he was frightened. But I don’t have any idea what—or who—he was afraid of.”

“Maybe you could just ask him?” John suggests.

Sherlock shakes his head. “It’s too late.”

“Yeah, that’s for sure,” John sighs, looking up at the clock on the bathroom wall and patting his hands firmly over Sherlock’s knees. “But maybe tomorrow we can—”

“No, John,” Sherlock insists, shaking his head and looking at John miserably. “He won’t be able to tell us.”

“Well, sure—he may not want to, at first,” John argues, “but I can be pretty persuasive, you know.”

“Sebastian can’t tell us anything,” Sherlock clarifies, biting at his bottom lip and looking stricken, “because he’s in a coma.”

“What happened?” John asks, voice low and rough with shock.

“Car crash, according to Molly,” Sherlock explains, tipping his head and scanning the neat pattern of tiles on the floor between his feet. “Nearly drove off of a bridge, apparently. Sometime early this evening.”

“Oh, Christ.” John blows out a deep breath, his eyes wide with concern. “Was anyone else hurt?”

“No,” Sherlock assures him, shaking his head. “He was alone, and no other vehicle was involved.”

“Well thank god for that. Is he expected to pull through?”

“I have no idea,” Sherlock admits. “I only know what Molly told me, and her information was
"I hope he does, of course," John continues, shaking his head. "I mean, I may not like the bastard, but I don’t want him dead. And I hate to think what losing another student would be like for the school."

“That’s why I had to come and see you tonight.” Sherlock pulls the towel from around his shoulders and casts it aside as he stands up and steps around John to begin pacing the short expanse of floor. "Don’t you see, John? It’s Melody all over again!"

“What do you mean?” John asks from where he’s still kneeling on the floor, looking up at him with a confused expression, eyes tracking Sherlock’s progress back and forth across the floor.

“Think about it,” Sherlock begins, raking his fingers roughly through his curls looking at John intently as he ticks off his points one by one on long, pale fingers. “Melody and Sebastian were being abused at home, and within days of my deducing that information one of them is dead by her own hand and the other is lying comatose? That can’t be a coincidence.”

John squints up at Sherlock thoughtfully. "Yeah, it actually can."

“Do you seriously believe that two events with such striking similarities are unrelated?”

“I think ‘unrelated events that share striking similarities’ is pretty much the definition of coincidence,” John offers as he gets to his feet.

“The universe is rarely so lazy,” Sherlock insists, shaking his head and fixing his grey-green gaze on John’s patient blue eyes intently.

“The universe is full of random, chaotic events—stars exploding and comets colliding and black holes collapsing to devour everything around them,” John tells him, reaching a hand up to brush a damp curl off of his creased forehead. “Or did you delete everything about space from that massive brain of yours?”

“I knew what they were going through, John,” Sherlock says miserably, top teeth worrying at his bottom lip. “I knew, and I didn’t do anything to stop it.”

“You tried,” John reminds him, shaking his head slightly at Sherlock’s sigh of frustration.

“I should have tried harder.”

“It wasn’t your job to save them, Sherlock.”

“Wasn’t it?” Sherlock asks, his voice strained and pleading. “I didn’t see it with Melody,—but with Sebastian I should have known. They both came to me John, acting afraid and uncharacteristically apologetic—and then hours later met the exact same fate.”

“But it wasn’t the same,” John reasons, shaking his head slightly at Sherlock’s sigh of frustration. “Melody took her own life, and Sebastian had a car accident.”

“Semantics,” Sherlock huffs, rolling his eyes impatiently.

“What?” John asks, looking puzzled.

“Words are important, John. They have meaning,” Sherlock says earnestly, taking John by the
shoulders and gazing down at him intently. “Sebastian Wilkes was injured in a car crash, that much is true—but an accident? No, I don’t believe it was an accident at all.”

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” John sighs, flicking the lock down and closing the car door behind him as he hurries to catch up to Sherlock on the nearly deserted sidewalk. Their footsteps slap out a brisk rhythm against on the rain-wet pavement, the earlier downpour having eventually thinned into the current misty sprinkle.

“You didn’t have to come along,” Sherlock reminds him, slowing his long strides just enough so that John doesn’t have to jog to keep pace with him.

John rolls his eyes. “Right, like I was just going to go back to bed and let you go running off across London alone in the middle of the night.”

“I could have taken a cab.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I said I’d drive.”

“After arguing about it for fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah, well, a little pushback seemed in order given the hour and all,” John says as they approach the main entrance of the imposing, well-lit building. “And frankly, I’m still not entirely clear why this couldn’t wait until daylight, to be honest.”

“Time is of the essence, John,” Sherlock insists, stepping up his pace slightly. “But now that you’ve delivered me safely to my destination you’re free to go back home, of course.”

“Enough with that.” John stops in his tracks, reaching out to take Sherlock’s wrist and halt him as well before stepping around to face the taller man where he stands. “You made your case, all right? I’m here, Sherlock.”

“I am merely pointing out that you’re under no obligation to accompany me any further if you’d rather not be involved,” Sherlock says, eyes flitting away from John’s as he shrugs with feigned indifference.

“Yeah, it’s a bit late for that, don’t you think?” John asks, smiling softly at the slightly wary look in Sherlock’s eyes. “This is important to you, and you are important to me. Can’t get more involved than that.”

Sherlock’s lips tip slowly upward into a grin that widens just a bit more as John’s fingers slide down from where they’re encircling his wrist to weave effortlessly between his own. Pink lips stretch into an answering grin, and Sherlock lifts a hand to softly trail the tip of one finger over the edge of a tanned jaw before swooping down to press a kiss to John’s mouth.

“Thank you,” Sherlock says quietly, nuzzling the cold tip of his nose against John’s. A strong arm circles his slender waist to pull him close, and Sherlock dips his chin to slide their lips together once more, long fingers threading into golden hair, one lean thigh slipping slightly forward to press into the space between John’s.

“You’re welcome,” John sighs, their warm breaths mingling to become a slip of steam between them in the chilly night air. “But if you keep kissing me, I’m pretty sure it’s going to lead to something that has a good chance of getting us both arrested.”
“Convenient location for it,” Sherlock purrs, nipping playfully at his lower lip, growling with frustrated displeasure as John drops the arm wrapped around him and steps back.

“That’s for sure,” John admits, huffing out a quiet chuckle and shaking his head as it becomes a breathy laugh for a few seconds before tipping over into a soft giggle that lilts through the cool, damp air. “All right, let’s do this.”

John gives Sherlock’s hand a final squeeze, then steps forward to grasp the long handle on the tall glass door. A blast of warm, dry air rushes out over them both as he tugs it open, gesturing for Sherlock to enter before taking a deep breath and following him into the lobby of New Scotland Yard.

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From the street, the imposing glass and metal exterior of the London Metropolitan Police headquarters might give passersby the distinct impression that the interior of the building would feature the same clean lines and modern décor befitting the important work of keeping order in one of the largest cities on the planet. The well-appointed, though in no way ostentatious, lobby of the main building had certainly lived up to that expectation.

The remote area of the compound to which they’d been quickly referred and hastily escorted, however, decidedly did not.

Seated on one of the long benches bolted to the floor in the NSY Central Processing Department, Sherlock watches the seemingly endless parade of recently apprehended criminals being dragged in by their police escorts make a brief stop at the busy reception window before disappearing through an imposing set of locked double doors that the desk sergeant briefly buzzes open to receive them.

Those who arrive unescorted and not wearing handcuffs are waved over to a small expanse of dirty linoleum containing a few rows of uncomfortable metal benches generously referred to as the ‘waiting area’, a name that seems fairly apt as that’s what they’ve been doing for nearly ninety minutes now:

Waiting.

Long enough that the initial nervous excitement he’d felt upon their arrival had faded, long enough that the novelty of attempting to deduce the crimes the various detainees had committed (petty theft, driving under the influence, minor drug possession, dull) had worn off, long enough that John had long since stopped being amused and impressed by the aforementioned deductions and at some point in the last thirty minutes had slumped against Sherlock’s shoulder and fallen asleep.

Glancing up at the stark white wall across from where they’re sitting, Sherlock huffs out an impatient sigh as he squints and tilts his head in an attempt to accurately read the time through the metal cage surrounding the ancient analog clock mounted there:

1:49 AM

When the jarring buzz of the receiving door lock disengaging rings through the air once more, Sherlock watches the officer lead the cuffed young man in her charge stumbling through it (public intoxication, a night in the drunk tank and an ASBO in his immediate future). Taking advantage of the lull in activity, Sherlock shifts in his seat and pats John gently on the thigh to wake him.

“Is it morning already?” John mumbles sleepily, rubbing his palm roughly over his face and squeezing his eyes shut more tightly as he leans heavily against Sherlock.
“Technically, yes,” Sherlock answers, a small smile playing over his lips despite his frustration. “I can’t believe you fell asleep here, of all places.”

“I can sleep anywhere,” John shrugs, looking around the room through bleary eyes and sitting up to stretch his arm and roll his bad shoulder back and forth a few times. “Though you’re a bit pointy, as pillows go. How much longer do you think it’ll be?”

“Not long at all,” Sherlock says, a determined gleam in his eye as he stands and strides purposefully towards the receiving officer’s window.

“Can I help you?” the officer asks, tone as bored as his expression.

“It seems unlikely, now that you mention it,” Sherlock begins brusquely, peering through the fine mesh barrier separating them. “My friend and I spoke to you when we arrived, at which time you instructed us to sit down and wait to speak to the next available detective. Surely one must be available by now.”

“And what was your business, exactly?” he asks disinterestedly, brushing a spattering of crumbs off of the placket of his shirt.

“I have pertinent information about recent tragic events befalling students at my school,” Sherlock tells him, a note of frustration colouring his tone. “I told you all of this before.”

“Oh yeah,” the officer replies, narrowing his eyes at Sherlock and shaking his head. “And I believe I told you that you should go home and call your local precinct in the morning and make an appointment to speak to someone.”

“And I believe that I told you this was a matter of life and death and that I wished to speak with someone tonight,” Sherlock fires back.

“Then you’re just going to have to wait,” the desk officer repeats.

“We’ve been waiting for nearly two hours,” Sherlock argues, fingers clenching over the edge of the narrow counter, knuckles white with tension. “How much longer will it be?”

“As long as it takes,” the officer replies unhelpfully, reaching for the large pastry on a paper plate beside him then lifting it to his mouth to take a large bite.

“A crime has been committed. A crime that has consequences, a crime that someone needs to be made aware of,” Sherlock fumes. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t the investigation of such crimes the entire purpose of the police department?”

“Of course that’s what we do here, sir,” the officer says, looking offended. “And if you’d sit back down, I could get back to doing it.”

“Oh really?” Sherlock asks, looking incredulous. “Because it appears to me that the only business you’re engaged in at the moment is shoving inadvisable amounts of carbohydrates into your face whilst being purposely unhelpful!”

“Sir, if you continue to conduct yourself in this aggressive manner I’m afraid I’ll need to call another officer in to manage the situation,” the desk sergeant says wearily, reaching for the phone and lifting the receiver to his ear.

“Oh, you mean there would suddenly be an officer available?” Sherlock asks angrily. “Then yes, by all means, make the call!”
“That won’t be necessary,” a calm voice says, as John Watson steps up beside Sherlock and presses one hand on the small of his back and puts on a winning smile as he looks through the barrier at the officer seated behind it and glances down at the ID badge clipped to the pocket of his uniform shirt.

“Um, Officer Morton, is it? Yeah, we know you’re very busy, and we’re sorry to be a bother—”

“No, we certainly are not,” Sherlock says, looking affronted at John then hissing in surprise as a size nine trainer steps over the tip of his size 12 foot and presses down purposefully on his toes.

“We really are,” John reiterates, smile never fading. “And we appreciate how important it is that you use departmental resources wisely. And of course you’ve got to deal with more pressing matters first, but—if you can manage it—we’d just really like the chance to talk to someone tonight, if at all possible.”

“Well, I can’t make any promises,” Officer Bernard Morton replies, nodding at John and looking slightly appeased as he sets the phone back down onto the cradle. “But I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you,” John tells him, huffing out a relieved sigh and glancing at Sherlock meaningfully. “That would be very good of y—”

A sudden rush of cool night wind blows through the room as the entrance doors from the street swish open and two pairs of footsteps approach from behind.

“I told you, I didn’t do it!” a gruff voice insists, “I wasn’t anywhere near there all night until just before they drove up and slapped the cuffs on me! I’d just parked my car and was going up to my flat! You gotta believe me!”

“Oh, well, why didn’t you say something before?” A deep, pleasant voice asks. “If you say you didn’t do it, I’ll just take these off of you and you can be on your way.”

“Wha—really?” the first voice asks, and Sherlock turns to see a tall, somewhat rotund man (late twenties, secondary education at best, shoulder length hair tied it in a rather unfortunate pony tail in a vain attempt to compensate for the fact that it’s beginning to thin) being guided towards the reception window by a fit young plain-clothed officer of about the same age.

“No, not really,” the detective says with a wry grin, the garish overhead lights glinting off the liberal streaks of premature silver peppered through his full head of dark hair. “They picked you up two blocks away from the scene of a robbery/murder, suspicious red stains on the cuffs and front of your shirt, with a trunk full of what looks a lot like stolen merchandise. You’re not going anywhere, for about twenty years, I’d wager.”

“Look, I never said I was perfect,” the other man insists, working-class accent growing thicker as he continues to protest. “But I didn’t kill nobody! I wouldn’t hurt a fly, ask anyone!”

“Oh I will, don’t worry,” the officer assures him as they make their way across the room. “And maybe while I’m doing that you’ll be able to come up with a better alibi for the hours of eight PM to midnight.”

“I already told you, I was nowhere near Islington during that time. I was with my brother!”

“Oh yeah, doing what?” The detective asks, rolling his eyes as he drags his prisoner up to the window, and Sherlock feels a tug at his sleeve as John pulls him to the side to make way for them to approach the officer behind the desk.

“Just, ya know….hanging out,” the cuffed man says vaguely.
Sherlock tries to suppress the incredulous laugh that threatens to bubble out of his mouth, and in the end is partially successful. He doesn’t laugh. He snorts.

“Sherlock,” John warns, his voice pitched low as he slides his hand over the damp wool of the greatcoat and squeezes gently at his waist.

“Hey, Morty,” the detective says in greeting, nodding at the officer behind the desk. “One for processing, need to get him to intake immediately so they can preserve his clothes for forensics.”

“You really should tell him the truth,” Sherlock interjects, looking pointedly at the suspect and shrugging as one familiar pair of deep blue eyes looks at him with shock and two other gazes snap towards him as well—one filled with practiced scepticism and the other with a look of surprised hope.

“Who the hell are you?” the detective with the salt and pepper hair asks, peering at Sherlock shrewdly through narrowed eyes.

“He’s a right pain in the arse, that’s what he is,” Officer Morton mumbles.

“The name is Sherlock Holmes, and this is John Watson,” Sherlock says, turning to face the newcomer and extending his right hand. “And you are?”

“Detective Sergeant Greg Lestrade,” the officer replies, sounding wary but accepting the handshake nonetheless, then turning to shake John’s hand as well.

“Oh, a detective,” Sherlock repeats, sounding impressed as he turns to send a smug glare through the mesh barrier. “What a coincidence, we’ve been waiting for hours to talk to a detective.”

“Yeah, sorry, I’m a bit busy at the moment,” DS Lestrade says with a frown.

“Ah yes, I can see that,” Sherlock agrees, peering around him at the man secured in handcuffs and examining him slowly from head to toe before nodding once and looking back at the detective. “You’ve got the wrong man.”

“Yeah, he’s right! You do!” the suspect cries, nodding forcefully. “Listen to him!”

“You, shut it!” Lestrade orders, pointing his finger at the man in his custody before spinning around and aiming the same finger at Sherlock. “What are you on about?”

“I thought it was fairly self-explanatory the first time I said it,” Sherlock replies, looking slightly confused. “You’ve arrested the wrong man.”

“Oh is that so?” the detective asks, shaking his head and huffing out an incredulous laugh.

“Yes,” Sherlock confirms.

“And why on earth should I trust some kid who just walked in off the street to tell me how to do my job?”

“You shouldn’t, that would be ridiculous,” Sherlock agrees, with a smile. “You should, however, trust the evidence—and there’s plenty of that right in front of you. It’s literally all over him.”

“You want me to call in someone to have this troublemaker chucked out, Lestrade?” Officer Morton asks, standing up from his chair and reaching again for his phone.

“Nah, stand down, Morty,” Lestrade says dismissively, waving him off as he keeps his eyes fixed on
Sherlock. “What evidence?”

“Well for starters, he’s telling the truth: he wasn’t anywhere near Islington during the hours of eight to twelve PM.” Sherlock offers confidently.

“He’s right! I wasn’t!” the suspect confirms.

“Shut up.” Lestrade says, shooting another glare of warning in his direction before looking back toward Sherlock curiously. “How do you know that?”

“Because it was raining rather heavily during that time,” Sherlock begins, looking the suspect up and down shrewdly. “I know, because I was caught in the downpour for a time myself, and my coat is still wet, just like our friend’s here is. His trousers are dark with damp as well, the lower half a bit more so than the top from where the legs sucked up the rain like a wick. Must have been out in the elements for quite some time for that to happen.”

“That’s all you’ve got?” Lestrade asks, rolling his eyes. “That doesn’t prove anything, it was raining all over London.”

“True, but your suspect’s boots are caked in an impressive amount of mud,” Sherlock points out, and four sets of eyes look down to where two decidedly muddy shoes are presently dirtying up the already less than sparkling clean floor. Even Officer Morton stands up from his chair and leans over to peer through the mesh. “And it’s fairly distinctive mud, at that. High clay content, dark and shiny in appearance, imbued with the smell of petrol and sewage noticeable even from this distance—that’s Thames mud, which never fails to find its way into all the adjacent lower lying alleyways and streets during a downpour.”

“Islington’s not on the river,” Lestrade says, pursing his lips while staring thoughtfully at Sherlock.

“No, it isn’t,” Sherlock agrees. “There’s quite a bit of it present—and it’s still wet, meaning it was deposited there relatively recently. It’s seems unlikely that he could be both accumulating that particular type of mud on his shoes and breaking into a home in Islington.”

“But we found him with a trunk full of stolen goods,” Lestrade reminds him.

“I didn’t say he wasn’t a thief, only that it’s unlikely he was committing the particular crime you’ve arrested him for,” Sherlock says with a shrug. “Our friend here more than likely was engaged in a bit of housebreaking this evening. With his brother, I suspect.”

“My brother had nothing to do with this,” the suspect insists, shaking his head.

“Of course he did,” Sherlock admonishes. “You’re the one who offered him as your alibi in the first place.”

“How do you know he wasn’t working alone?” Lestrade asks, his earlier doubt now replaced with a cautious curiosity.

“Oh come now, Detective Sergeant—look at him,” Sherlock says, gesturing to the handcuffed man. “Nearly three stone overweight and equally heavy on his feet? This is not the physique of someone who can easily squeeze into open windows or creep about a residence unnoticed. No offence, of course.”

“Oh, none taken,” the suspect assures him with a shrug.

“But his build does lend itself well to doing the heavy lifting often necessary in urban crime,”
Sherlock says, gesturing again to the suspect’s feet. “You can see where the mud is thinner along the inside edge of his boots, just as you’d expect to find if he’d been using his feet to steady something—say, the base of a tall ladder.” Sherlock stoops over to examine the boots more closely for a moment then nods before standing back up and looking at Lestrade. “There are small flecks of green paint clearly embedded in the leather. If his brother has a green ladder, arrest him as well.”

“But what about the blood?” Officer Morton asks, shrugging as they all turn to look at him in surprise. “It’s all over his cuffs, I can see it from here.”

“I can see where it might be mistaken for blood at just a cursory glance on a darkened street. But here in the light? It’s far too red,” Sherlock says dismissively. “And if the stench of garlic that fills the room every time our friend here speaks is any indication, I think it’s much more likely to be marinara sauce.”

“I made pasta for dinner just tonight!” the suspect confirms. “My mum’s recipe, it’s legendary.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” Lestrade whispers, shaking his head as he leans over to take a closer look at the dark red spots staining the wet cuffs of his prisoner’s shirt. “He’s right.”

“It’s just like I’ve been telling you,” The suspect says, nodding his head vociferously. “You’ve got the wrong man!”

“Technically, he’s got the right man—just for the wrong crime,” John clarifies, speaking up for the first time.

“Yeah, it’s beginning to look that way,” DS Lestrade says, shaking his head and huffing out a long sigh.

“Excellent,” Sherlock says, rubbing his hands together and looking at the DS expectantly. “Well, now that’s been settled, perhaps we could have a moment of your time on an unrelated matter?”

“Yeah, all right,” Lestrade agrees, looking slightly shell shocked but recovering quickly. “Morty, call up one of the lieutenants to meet me inside and get him processed, and let’s send someone out to pick up the brother as well.”

“Got it, Sarge,” Officer Morton replies, picking up his phone and then depressing the button to buzz the doors open.

“You two wait right here,” Detective Sergeant Gregory Lestrade orders, pointing to Sherlock and John in turn, then leading his subject through the double doors as they swing slowly open. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“I won’t forget this, you know,” the handcuffed man says over his shoulder, smiling at Sherlock as he’s being led away. “I’d have gone to prison if it wasn’t for you, Mr. Holmes!”

“You’re probably still going to prison,” Sherlock points out, watching him go.

“But not for murder!” the man says merrily, as the doors begin to close. “You ever need anything—anything at all—you find me. Just ask for Angelo!”

As the heavy doors shut and the locks click into place once more, John stares at them for a long moment before slowly turning to face Sherlock.

“That,” he begins, a smile stretching slowly across his lips, “was amazing.”
“Simple logic,” Sherlock says with a dismissive shrug.

“Not simple at all,” John argues, shaking his head and beaming up at him with pride. “It was fantastic, really.”

“You think so?” Sherlock asks, biting at the inside of his cheek and shuffling slightly from side to side.

“I know so,” John confirms, shaking his head slightly and reaching out to grasp Sherlock’s fingers between his own. “And I suspect you know exactly how extraordinary it was, you vain git.”

“I don’t know about extraordinary, John,” Sherlock says, the corners of his lips tipping up into a sly smile. “But it did get us in the door.”

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“I don’t know about extraordinary, John,” Sherlock says, the corners of his lips tipping up into a sly smile. “But it did get us in the door.”

“These are some pretty serious allegations you’re making,” Detective Sergeant Lestrade says, staring at Sherlock shrewdly over the lip of his paper coffee cup. “Can anyone corroborate what you’re telling me?”

“John can,” Sherlock says, tipping his head towards the golden haired young man sitting in the next chair.

“I don’t have any first-hand information, myself,” John clarifies, laying a hand on Sherlock’s arm to forestall the inevitable protest. “I do know what Sherlock observed, though—and his conclusions seem sound.”

“I don’t disagree,” Greg Lestrade replies, taking another sip of his coffee and looking thoughtful. “But I’m not convinced that’s enough to open an investigation.”

“Two young people in your jurisdiction have been subjected to prolonged, purposeful, systematic mistreatment by a parent,” Sherlock says, long fingers drumming against the table impatiently. “One of them is dead by her own hand, and the second very nearly succeeded in ending his own life just a few hours ago”

“We don’t know that the boy’s car accident was an intentional act,” the officer challenges.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” Sherlock argues, tossing up his hands in a gesture of frustration. “They’d each been hiding their abuse for god knows how long, able to harbour that secret as long as it stayed just that: a secret. But I saw what was happening—saw the truth—and now…”

Sherlock’s voice trails off and he sucks in a shallow breath, swallowing thickly around the words that seem to be temporarily stuck in his throat. There’s a soft hiss of thick fabric against metal, then a gentle pressure as John slides a hand across the space between them and settles it over his clenched fist. He stares down at the tanned fingers for a moment, then shifts his wrist to allow John’s warm palm to slip against his own. Taking in a slow, deep breath, he clears his throat and lifts his chin to find the young detective regarding him with quiet interest.

“I know it seems unfair,” Lestrade says somberly, leaning forward and looking at him intently. “And hell, it is bloody unfair, when it comes right down to it. If you had something concrete, some real proof—”

“I rather thought finding proof fell under the purview of your job,” Sherlock parries, returning his gaze steadily.
“True enough,” Lestrade admits, huffing out an impressed chuckle before his expression turns serious again, shaking his head slightly at the young man sitting across from him in the small, sparsely furnished interview room. “But abuse cases can be tricky to prove under the best of circumstances—and without physical evidence or direct testimony, it’s damn near impossible. And that’s when the victims are alive.”

“Sebastian Wilkes is still alive,” Sherlock reminds him. “Or at least he was, a few hours ago.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to sound callous,” Lestrade says, rubbing a palm over his weary face. “It’s just that our first vic, the girl, is—”

“Melody.” Sherlock’s long fingers pick at the rim of the paper coffee cup in front of him. “Her name was Melody.”

“Right, sorry,” Lestrade says, his tone softening slightly as he continues. “Unfortunately, Melody is gone. And the young man, Sebastian, is it? He can’t tell us anything at the moment.”

“Maybe he can,” Sherlock says, sitting up straight in his chair and looking pensive. “When he came to see me earlier I could tell that he was in quite a bit of pain, he admitted that he’d received a beating after his team’s losing football match on Saturday. There’s bound to be physical evidence from that.”

“Yeah, but he’s just been in a car wreck—a severe one, by the sound of it,” Lestrade argues.

“The damage we’re interested in would have preceded that,” Sherlock reasons.

“He’s right,” John says, looking at Lestrade and nodding in agreement. “Older wounds present differently than those sustained more recently. An examination of his injuries could reveal evidence of past abuse.”

“But I can’t just march into his hospital room with a team of investigators while he’s unconscious and demand to examine his injuries,” Lestrade tells them. “He’s got rights.”

“That’s certainly true,” Sherlock agrees, leaning forward to fix his gaze on Lestrade’s. “He had the right to feel safe in his own home. It was his right not to be viciously and regularly beaten by the one person in his life who was supposed to protect him from harm. It was his right not to be so ashamed of the state of his life that ending it seemed like the only option. Those were his rights as well—and if you don’t defend them now, who will?”

John tightens his grip on Sherlock’s hand, squeezing long, pale fingers with short, tan ones. Lestrade looks at each of them in turn, examining their hopeful gazes and eager expressions, and his shoulders relax slightly as he tips his chin in a decisive nod and blows out a resigned sigh through pursed lips.

“All right, I’ll look into it,” the detective sergeant says, holding up a hand to halt any reply and looking sternly at them for a moment. “I can’t make any promises, but I’ll see if I can get my hands on the accident report and medical file, maybe take a look back through CFS records and see if anything sticks out.”

“Thank you, Detective Sergeant,” John says, getting to his feet as the police officer stands and circles the table. “We really appreciate that you took the time to speak to us.”

“Yeah, well, I could hardly say no, could I?” Lestrade says, smiling as he shakes John’s hand and turns to grasp Sherlock’s. “You’re a very persistent young man, this Sebastian fellow is lucky to have a friend like you.”
“Oh, he’s not my friend,” Sherlock clarifies, taking the detective’s offered hand and shaking it firmly. “Quite the opposite, actually.”

“What, seriously?” Lestrade asks, brow crinkling in confusion as he looks to John for confirmation, receiving a tired nod and a shrug in response. “Then why the hell are you doing all of this?”

“A question he’s been asked with surprising frequency over the years,” a confident voice proclaims from the open door of the interview room, causing three heads to turn at once and focus on the imposing figure leaning on an umbrella in the open doorway.

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock demands.

“You disappear from your room late on a Monday night without so much as a word to anyone, only to be located a few hours later in a police interrogation chamber,” the newcomer replies calmly, strolling casually into the room. “A trip downtown to investigate seemed eminently appropriate under the circumstances.”

“Who the hell are you?” Greg Lestrade asks, watching the visitor curiously as he walks confidently forward and extends a hand in greeting.

“Mycroft Holmes,” he says, accepting the detective sergeant’s firm grasp and returning it in kind. “And you are Detective Sergeant Gregory Lestrade, I assume?”

“Holmes?” Lestrade asks, quirking an eyebrow in Sherlock’s direction. “Relative of yours?”

“Unfortunately,” Sherlock glowers, rolling his eyes.

“His brother and, until very recently, legal guardian,” Mycroft confirms, shooting a weary glance at Sherlock’s scoff of protest before looking back at the police officer with a tight smile. “My sincerest apologies if young Sherlock and Mr. Watson have been an imposition this evening.”

“They weren’t,” Lestrade tells him, lips tipping up in a smile at the look of surprise on the elder Holmes’ face. “Well, not much of one anyway.”

“How did you know where to find us?” John asks, looking confused.

“Haven’t you learned yet, John?” Sherlock asks him, never taking his eyes off of his brother. “His spies are everywhere.”

“Really, Sherlock,” Mycroft Holmes sighs, waving one perfectly manicured hand in his direction nonchalantly. “Classifying a kindly secondary school librarian as a ‘spy’ is a somewhat dramatic pronouncement, don’t you think?”

“If the sensible kitten-heeled shoe fits,” Sherlock hisses, lip curled in a snarl.

“All right, boys—let’s not do this tonight,” John says wearily, stepping up next to Sherlock and sliding a hand over the small of his back. “It’s really late, and I, for one, am exhausted.”

“We’d best get you both home then,” Mycroft says with a sigh, looking at his brother with a disappointed frown and shaking his head. “I’m a bit tired myself, what with all the excitement of fetching you from the police station in the early hours of the morning, and on a school night, no less? Mummy and Father would no doubt be very proud.”

“I think they would be, actually,” Greg Lestrade says, shrugging at the three surprised glances suddenly aimed in his direction before turning to speak directly to Mycroft Holmes. “Sherlock came
here to do a good thing, tonight. Something he wasn’t under any obligation to do, I might add.”

“Did he?” Mycroft asks, a slight note of surprise in his tone as he looks over at his brother and then at John, who nods his agreement.

“Yeah, he did,” Lestrade confirms, reaching out to clap a hand on one of Sherlock’s shoulders. “Helped me out with a totally unrelated case as well. Your brother is a very clever young man, Mr. Holmes. I’d cut him some slack on this one, if I were you.”

“Duly noted,” Mycroft says quietly, regarding the detective sergeant for a long moment before tipping his head at him in impressed assent. “Thank you, Detective.”

“Any time,” Greg Lestrade replies, with a smile.

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“Your presentation is coming along really nicely,” John says breathily, backing Sherlock up against the tall walnut shelf and pressing him flush against Morningside Library’s impressive collection of art history volumes.

“Thanks,” Sherlock says with a smile, tipping his chin down to meet John’s lips in a feverish kiss.

“It was a definite improvement from yesterday,” John mumbles, sucking Sherlock’s plush bottom lip between his teeth and nibbling at it gently. “Molly didn’t look nearly as terrified this time.”

“Public speaking really isn’t her forte,” Sherlock agrees, sliding his hands up the front of John’s coat and working loose the top button.

“Not everyone is as fearless as you are,” John reminds him, pressing their mouths together once more as he re-fastens the top button of his coat. “She just needs a bit more practice, that’s all.”

“And she’s determined to have it,” Sherlock complains, slipping the second button of John’s coat out of its hole and moving his hands lower to attend to the third as he licks at the seam of John’s lips. “I’m sorry you’ve been recruited to be our rehearsal audience.”

“I don’t mind,” John assures him, laying a trail of kisses over Sherlock’s jaw as he re-fastens the second button of his coat and playfully slaps Sherlock’s hands away from where they’re working determinedly at the third. “Stop that, or I’ll be late.”

“Don’t care,” Sherlock says winding his arms around John’s waist and pulling their hips flush.

“Well, I do,” John insists, sliding his hands over Sherlock’s chest and pressing up on his toes for a quick kiss before looking at him sternly. “I’ve been studying like mad for this exam.”

“It’s just—I’ve barely seen you at all the last few days,” Sherlock says sulkily.

“I know,” John sighs, lifting a hand to cup a pale cheek. “So how about I go and take my test, and you head over to Baker Street after school?”

“Deal,” Sherlock agrees immediately, smiling as John steps back and digs out his fob, slips off the key to the flat, then presses it into Sherlock’s hand.

“I’ll see you when I get home, then,” John says, flashing him a wide smile before lunging forward to steal one more kiss then pulling away with a regretful sigh and backing down the aisle. “Don’t start without me, yeah?”
“No promises,” Sherlock teases, smiling as John shakes his head and gives him one last wave, the sweet sound of his laughter fading away as he disappears from view.

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The small sitting room of 221C is deserted, dust motes swirling out random patterns in the streaks of warm afternoon sunlight that sneak through the drawn curtains of the single window set high up on the wall. The thin beams break the gloom where they fall along the floor, illuminating the various items currently strewn across it:

A worn leather school bag, flaps still fastened tightly, lying at the bottom of the steps. A pair of sleek black leather shoes, toed off and kicked hastily aside, laces still tied in neat bows. A long, heavy wool coat tossed carelessly over the back of the couch, a blue cashmere scarf strewn over the kitchen floor. A pair of navy blue tailored trousers, one leg inside out, tangled with a pair of khaki chinos hanging over the edge of the coffee table. A white button down shirt lying in a heap in the hall, the cuff of one sleeve trapped beneath a lump of tan wool jumper. A trail of hastily discarded socks strewn like breadcrumbs down the short hallway to the doorway of a room where sensible cotton y-front pants are balled up next to a pair of dove-grey boxer briefs…

“God, I’ve missed this,” John whispers, dragging his mouth up the length of Sherlock’s impossibly long neck, pausing to run his tongue over the sharp edges of a prominent Adam’s apple before closing his lips over the wildly beating pulse point below his jaw and sucking gently at the tender patch of skin. “Your neck should be illegal.”

Buried beneath the blankets, Sherlock chokes out a broken groan as John slides into him with ease where slick fingers and a soft tongue have already prepared the way. Pressed chest to chest, John’s warm weight traps Sherlock’s aching erection in the scant space between them, subjecting it to the constant, delicious friction that comes with each push and pull of his hips.

When Sherlock gasps out a low moan through clenched teeth, John smiles against his neck and thrusts harder. Picking up the pace slightly, John lifts his chin and licks at the perfect cupid’s bow of a mouth, letting it tangle with his own, closing his mouth around it and sucking greedily, letting it plunge deeply and glide wetly over every bit of skin that John can reach. When a strong hand reaches down to hitch a pale thigh higher, the change in angle has Sherlock crying out involuntarily, sparks winding their way around his pelvis and up his spine with every slick thrust.

“Like that?” John asks, voice tight and breathy, a satisfied gleam in his eye.

“Y-y-yes,” Sherlock says, nodding as he slips his hands beneath the tangled sheets and duvet that cocoon them, digging his fingertips into the sweat-slick skin of John’s back, feeling the sharp, wet slap of their bodies colliding in the humid, musky air that envelops them completely. His breath is coming quickly now, so hard and fast that he feels light headed, eyelids fluttering as he struggles to maintain control—to hold off the orgasm that threatens to overwhelm him any second now.

He’s not ready for this to end.

Not yet.

Sherlock forces his eyes open, desperately seeking out John’s, then huffs a sigh of relief when a deep blue gaze meets his own, the connection instant and perfect and true. Shifting his knees slightly, John loosens his hold on Sherlock’s thigh before sliding it up to his hip, and the minor change in
angle eases the building pressure just a touch—allowing Sherlock to relax, to stay just on the edge, to breathe again.

John maintains his steady rhythm, eyes never leaving Sherlock’s as one strong hand releases its grasp on a pale hip to skate up and over his slim waist and heaving chest and stretched neck and blushing cheek until short fingers tangle into damp curls and pull softly.

“So beautiful,” John whispers, the pad of his thumb skimming over Sherlock’s plush lower lip as he tugs at his hair gently, exposing more of his creamy throat and taking a broad swipe at it with his tongue.

Sherlock moans at the contact, one hand sliding up the back of John’s neck to weave itself into the short relentless strands of gold. He’s panting faster again with each pass of John’s mouth over his skin, each relentless stroke of the hard cock buried deep inside of him, each rumble of John’s voice against his ear.

“What do you need, gorgeous?” John asks softly, teeth tugging playfully at his earlobe, the tip of his tongue trailing over the inside edge, hot breath ghosting over the trail of moisture left in its wake. “Slower?”

“No, John,” Sherlock insists, his voice a sub-sonic rumble, low and quiet and dangerous as he lifts his chin and presses his lips against flush against John’s ear. “Faster!”

John growls in response, rising up onto his knees and throwing the covers off of them so that the cool air of the room collides suddenly with their flushed, burning skin. He slips his hands down Sherlock’s sides and clamps his fingers over sharp hipbones and tugs roughly—yanking Sherlock impossibly closer as he thrusts forward to fill him completely.

Sherlock gasps as John hauls one long, trembling thigh up over his shoulder and spreads his own knees a bit, widening his stance before leaning forward and planting a palm on either side of Sherlock’s ribcage, gaining the leverage he needs to obey Sherlock’s command. Hips thrusting, chest muscles straining, his breath coming fast and hot and rough—he locks his deep blue eyes on the silver grey pair beneath him—then sets about the business of fucking him into the mattress.

Sherlock stretches his arms back behind his head, fingers grasping wildly at the edge of the heavy headboard for purchase and hangs on tight. His eyes roam John’s determined features as the tension behind his bollocks winds ever tighter with each clever stroke of John’s erection inside of him. It’s a brutal rhythm, powerful and relentless and unyielding—and exactly what he wanted, what he needed, what he asked for.

As the first telltale sparks of impending orgasm begin to crackle across his pelvis, Sherlock tugs hard at the headboard and raises his shoulders from the bed, neck stretched and straining as he seeks out contact, and John—his wonderful, clever, perfect John—leans forward to meet him half-way, smashing their mouths together in some rough semblance of a kiss, tongues seeking and teeth gnashing and pink lips closing over his own as electricity shoots up his spine and his vision goes white and suddenly he’s mumbling, he’s whimpering, he’s shouting John’s name, over and over and over….

“SHERLOCK!” John roars—and for a brief moment everything is still…

He feels warm breath spill against his neck, feels strong fingers slowly tunnel under his prone torso, feels shaking hands curl possessively around his shoulders—then John collapses against him, limp and heavy and spent.
Sherlock doesn’t know how long they stay that way—limbs shaking and chests heaving and skin cooling—before John’s mouth eventually seeks his out, before desperate kisses give way to sweet brushes of lips, before breathy whispers of affection give way to soft assurances that John will be right back. It doesn’t really matter how long he’s been tucked up here against John’s side, face pressed into his neck while short, tanned fingers trail in an endless, lazy circuit up and down the length of his spine.

Could be minutes, could be hours.

Could be forever.

“That,” Sherlock says softly, lips grazing over the warm skin of John’s neck, “was amazing.”

“Hey, I think that’s my line,” John protests.

“Usually, yes,” Sherlock agrees, grinning as John chuckles. “But you have your moments.”

“Thanks,” John says dryly, shaking his head and huffing out a long sigh. “So, how long do I have you tonight?”

“Mycroft’s sending the car at eight,” he says, burrowing a bit closer.

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it? We’ve got a few more hours, then,” John sighs, skimming his palm once more over Sherlock’s bare skin. “That was quite a homecoming, by the way.”

“I missed you,” Sherlock says with a shrug, tipping his chin up to look at him. John smiles. "I missed you too.”

“How did the test go?” Sherlock asks, lifting up onto one elbow.

“Quite well, I think. These long exams are hard to gauge sometimes, but I was prepared and I finished well within the allotted time,” John explains, then exhales deeply. “How was the rest of your day? Any word about Sebastian?”

“No change.” Sherlock shakes his head, his eyes troubled. “Breathing on his own, a fair amount of electrical activity in his brain, but he’s still comatose for the third day running.”

“Well, that’s actually good news,” John says, reaching out to smooth Sherlock’s hair back from his face.

“I suppose,” Sherlock concedes, looking uneasy.

“I know you’re worried,” John says, trailing the tip of his finger softly over a prominent cheekbone. “But there’s nothing more to be done right now.”

“You’re right, of course,” Sherlock mutters.

“That does happen, on occasion,” John says, his playful smile fading as he regards Sherlock’s glum expression. “Is something else bothering you?”

“No,” Sherlock tells him, shaking his head.

“You sure?” John asks, looking thoughtful. “Because if there is, you know you can talk to me about it, right?”
Sherlock looks at him for a long moment, teeth worrying against his bottom lip—and all at once an unexpected rush of affection washes over him. A fresh wave of wonder that John Watson exists in the world, and that he, Sherlock Holmes, gets to be with him like this. Gets to talk to him and laugh with him and touch him and be held by him. It’s a realisation that still manages to take him by surprise every time it arises. And it’s also, as it turns out, exactly what’s bothering him.

Which is ridiculous. It doesn’t even make any sense—and he doubts anyone would understand what he was talking about even if he did try to say it out loud.

Well, anyone besides John.

“I know there’s nothing to be done,” Sherlock begins cautiously, and when John’s expression remains soft and open and honest he takes a deep breath and continues. “It’s just that, with Sebastian where he is—and knowing what I know—it seems wrong, somehow, to feel so...”

“Happy?” John asks gently.

Sherlock nods, looking slightly embarrassed.

“Come here,” John says, reaching for Sherlock and tugging him close. As strong arms envelop him, Sherlock presses his face into John’s neck and breathes deeply, melting into the embrace and smiling when soft lips brush gently across his forehead. “You’re allowed to be happy, Sherlock.”

“I know I’m being ridiculous,” Sherlock sighs.

“I wouldn’t call it ridiculous, exactly,” John replies, tightening his grip around Sherlock before continuing. “You know, my mum used to say that when it comes to happiness, there are really only two kinds of people in the world. Some people believe that happiness is a scarce resource—that there’s only so much of it to go around—so if someone else has more of it than you do, then it’s their fault that you’re not as happy as you want to be. But other people see happiness as being an abundant resource—they believe that there’s enough for everyone in the world, and how much of it you have isn’t dependent on how happy anyone else is. And at the end of the day, you just have to decide which camp you fall into: scarcity or abundance.”

“I wish I could have known her.”

“Me too,” John sighs. “She’d have liked you. And she was all about abundance, my mum.”

“So are you, you know,” Sherlock whispers.

“Well, I try to be, anyway,” John says with a smile, then squeezes Sherlock’s shoulder before depositing a kiss into the mess of curls on the top of his head. “And do you know what would make me happy right now?”

“Do tell.”

“Dinner!” John swoops down to press his lips to Sherlock’s before sitting up and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed.

“But I’m not hungry,” Sherlock protests half-heartedly, appreciating the view as John crosses to the tall chest of drawers and pulls the top one open.

“You always say that, and then I put a plate of food in front of you and you practically lick it clean,” John reminds him, fishing out a pair of clean briefs and smiling as he tugs them on. “I’ll whip us up some omelets and you can criticise my vegetable chopping technique, then we’ll eat them on the
couch in our pants. I’ll even let you steal my toast.”

“Will there be coffee involved?”

“Of course,” John confirms, stepping out in the hallway and then returning immediately with a balled up pair of boxer briefs that he lobbs in Sherlock’s general direction. “Because you need the caffeine.”

“What for?” Sherlock asks, sliding to sit on the edge of the bed and stepping into his pants.

“Round two,” John says with a wink, then disappears into the flat.

Sherlock smiles at the empty doorway, tugs the briefs up and over his hips, then follows.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! As ever, comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated.

And in this week’s installment of “Listen, you’re JUST going to have to trust me on this one because I was skeptical too and then I remembered that I had nothing to lose so I went ahead and read this and it was so unexpectedly adorable that my teeth STILL HURT from all the sweetness”, I have an improbably perfect little gem of a story that you gotta read to believe!

Ever wonder what John and Sherlock would have been like together if they’d met as babies? Like legit, pre-verbal, diaper-wearing, actual babies? No? I hadn’t either. Because that’s just CRAZY TALK. But then I read thereichenbachfalloutboy’s Crybaby and I changed my mind.

Seriously, it’s sweet and unexpected and darling and delicious and I am so happy I gave it a read—and I bet you will be too.

Enjoy!
Hello Friends, and a very happy “You know what? Sometimes shaking 11K+ words out of your head takes a little longer than you think it might, especially when you’re someone who is notoriously bad at estimating how long things are going to take in general (like one year you think ‘Hey, I’ll make everyone in the family a robe for Christmas, that should take like one weekend, TOPS’ and then suddenly it’s three weeks later, you’re up your ass in fleece scraps, and no one has seen the cat in days) so cut me a little slack, please, because THURSDAY HAPPENS WHEN IT HAPPENS” to you all!

So if chapter 15 was a stroppy, belligerent teenager, chapter 16 was a clingy, whiny toddler. Seriously, I’d hammer out a couple thousand words and for the next few days it would be all ‘noooooo, this paragraph itches!’ and ‘I don’t want to sit by that scene, it has cooties!’ and ‘NO, I will not calm down and take my punctuation like a big boy!’.
*sigh* Finally I got it to cooperate by giving it a juice box with one finger of bourbon and plopping it in front of season 2 on Netflix so it would shut up and let mommy get something done for a damn change.

A pan of brownies marked “low fat” but which totally AREN’T for my incomparable beta/BFF owensm (because life is short, so don’t be trying to slip applesauce into my baked goods and tell me it tastes just as good as the real thing because it DOES NOT! LIAR!) and a big old bottle of OB/GYN approved cold medicine to my girl cheytea7 who could have used it when the martian death flu swept through her house last week. Team Beta is the bomb-diggity.

And to each of you behind every click, comment, bookmark, subscription, rec and occasionally over enthusiastic demand for updates, I offer you my undying gratitude and appreciation and whatever else you can find in my purse. Have at it. Please feel free to leave a comment if you’re so inclined, you know I love hearing from you even more than I hate even the vaguest notion of moldy food. Seriously, I would rather throw AWAY a dish than clean out mold. Which doesn’t bode well for whatever is in that container behind the three remaining bottles of cheap beer no one drank over the fourth of July. Fare thee well, brave Tupperware container. You will be missed.

Have a fabulous week(s)(ish)(insert reasonable period of time here)!

(Also, a very special shout out to the prodigiously talented and all around delicious slashscribe for gently pointing out my glaringly obvious lack of knowledge re: musical terminology and helping me sound less like an uncultured swine. It takes a village to write Johnnlock, people!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Weaving his way through the throng of bodies, past the familiar smiles of neighbors and relatives and friends and countless revelers wearing faces he doesn’t recognize at all, he slowly made his way towards the centre of the massive room. When at last he reached his destination and a large palm
slipped over his shoulder and dragged him close, the boy curled an arm around his father’s waist and tipped up his chin to smile at his mother who winked at him from over the top of the champagne flute she’d just been given by one of the countless white-coated waiters circulating through the room. As Sieger Holmes reached out to accept a glass of his own, Sherlock leaned in close and let the symphony of noise surround him.

Layer upon layer of sound filled the air (calling voices and eager replies and the clink of ice cubes and the sharp crash of glass against the polished parquet floor and the shouts of surprise and the tinkling of laughter and the smatter of applause as the mess was quickly cleared away), a clamorous chorus—loud and overwhelming and frenzied and chaotic…

And fascinating.

His eleven year old mind racing, Sherlock struggled to make sense of the rush of information: the noise of hundreds of voices and feet against the floor, the tap of heels and drag of soles and the swish of gowns and the smell of perfume and sweat and smoky whiskey and sweet wine and the heat of bodies and the warm breath of hundreds of people expelled in shouts and laughs and sighs. This level of chaos was something new, exciting and different and unique to this one night each year and he adored it, revelling in the in the seemingly endless rush of data to be identified and classified and catalogued and filed away for later examination and dissection.

Tipping his head against his father’s broad chest, he closed his eyes and concentrated on tuning out the racket all around him, isolating each individual noise and pushing them aside, one by one, clearing the space inside his head as he waited for the sound he liked best to begin once more: The music.

At first it was just a jumble of discordant notes—B flat (clarinet), F (piano), D (trumpet), A flat (saxophone)—short and staccato, barely audible over the cacophony that filled the huge space—and then an instant later it was a swell of sound, a rising tide of melody that rang above the noise and instantly quieted all the others, heads turning towards the raised stage as the conductor stepped up to the microphone and smiled out over the crowd.

“There you are,” Rosamund Holmes said fondly, tilting her cheek to accept a kiss from the tall, slim young man who had just appeared at her side before reaching up to straighten the edges of his bow tie. “I was beginning to think that you’d decided to ring in the new year surrounded by more exciting company.”

“Never, Mummy,” Mycroft Holmes assured her with a smile, running one hand down the smooth satin lapel of his tuxedo jacket and twirling the stem of the crystal champagne flute between nimble fingers with the other.

“You can’t keep him all to yourself forever, Rose,” Sieger Holmes teased, slapping a large palm over Mycroft’s shoulder and looking at him proudly. “He’s an Oxford man, now.”

“I know,” she sighed, shaking her head and smiling at her eldest son with unguarded affection. “But tonight he’s home, and for the moment he’s still all mine.”

“Always,” Mycroft assured her, plucking a second glass of champagne from the tray of a nearby waiter and passing it smoothly into the outstretched hand of his younger brother with a sly wink.
“Just a sip,” Sieger Holmes reminded his youngest son, ruffling his fingers through the unruly curls on the back of Sherlock’s head.

The roll of a snare drum broke the air just then as the lights dimmed and the four Holmes’ turned to face the enormous wall of windows along with everyone else in the crowded ballroom.

“Ten!” began the conductor, waving his arms as the band punctuated the announcement with a short note.

“Nine!” the crowd joined in, voices raised in unison, “Eight! Seven! Six!”

“Five!” Rosamund Holmes sang, threading one arm around her eldest son’s waist and reaching down with the other to grasp her youngest child’s small hand in her own.

“Four!” Mycroft called out, smiling down at his brother before tipping his chin back up to gaze out into the darkness.

“Three!” Sieger Holmes boomed, his voice rising above the chorus of the hundreds counting down as well.

“Two!” Sherlock shouted excitedly, standing up onto his toes and looking at the darkened windows with barely contained anticipation.

“One!” the Holmes’ cried in unison, as the room took a breath…

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!” The crowd roared, the words soon lost in the cacophony of gasping and clapping and whistling as the sky outside the windows burst into colour, gigantic sprays of sparks—red and gold and green and white—illuminating the night sky as the band broke into spirited song and showers of confetti rained down over them all.

Sherlock felt his feet leave the floor as Sieger Holmes swooped him up in his arms, pulling him into a bone-crushing embrace then leaning forward to deliver his youngest son’s face to his mother’s waiting hands. Rosamund Holmes pressed her warm lips against his forehead, tousling his curls affectionately before Mycroft slipped his arms around Sherlock’s torso, hugging him close as he lowered him back to the ground.

While the room dissolved into a flurry of good wishes and hugs and kisses and pats on the back, Sherlock smiled as the band played on, face raised to the soaring ceiling, palms outstretched to collect the sparkling bits of gold and silver paper that filled the air all around.

Even now, with his eyes pressed closed, he could see the flashes of light as they played across the midnight sky, could taste the sweet fizziness of the champagne on his tongue, could hear the swell of the music and the shouted good wishes, could feel the press of lips against his skin and the crush of familiar arms holding him close...

If he kept his eyes closed, he could believe he was still there—the smallest link in an unbreakable chain of four, joined together in that beautiful, fragile moment when one year ended and a new one began, when the notion that the whole world could be transformed in the space of a single second was something exciting and joyous and celebrated.

Sitting alone in the darkened space at the centre of the empty ballroom one year later, Sherlock hugged his knees to his chest and slowly opened his eyes.

The grounds beyond the row of tall windows were inky black tonight. The moonless sky was illuminated only by the faint twinkle of starlight where it peeked through the clouds to cast the barest
of glows across the gleaming parquet floor.

Sherlock trailed the tip of one pale finger idly over the wood, tracing the ornate inlay while he pointedly ignored the footsteps that echoed through the cavernous space. As they approached, he kept his eyes resolutely on the dim patch of floor, paying no heed to the pair of slippered feet as they rocked casually from heel to toe, not even deigning to acknowledge the soft exhalation of a sigh as his older brother lowered himself to the floor and sat down beside him.

“Marie was concerned when you didn’t come down for dinner,” Mycroft began. “She made an impressively large strawberry trifle just for the occasion, you know.”

Sherlock shrugged. "I wasn’t hungry."

“A curious assertion, as the frankly enormous bowl of it she sent up to your rooms on a tray came back decidedly empty,” Mycroft replied, eyes still fixed on the bank of dark windows before them. “Which did seem to placate her for the moment, at least. She worries that they’re not feeding you enough at school.”

“They feed us plenty, though calling it ‘food’ seems a somewhat generous description, in my opinion.”

“The dining hall offerings certainly pale in comparison to Marie’s cooking,” Mycroft agreed. “I lost half a stone in my first term.”

“Luckily you soon found it again, and then some,” Sherlock said, suppressing a grin at his brother’s answering sigh.

“Nutritional deficiency hasn’t dulled your wit, I see,” Mycroft said, with a slight shake of his head. “I am merely suggesting that you cannot subsist entirely on the occasional care package of scones and chocolate biscuits alone.

“I don’t,” Sherlock insisted. “The tea and toast is surprisingly tolerable.”

“Well, it’s comforting to know that you’re eating something,” Mycroft conceded as he stretched his long legs out in front of him and crossed his ankles. “Though I am given to understand that the menu has improved quite a bit in the last few years.”

“How would you know?” Sherlock asked coolly.

“I am sorry that I wasn’t there,” Mycroft said quietly, a hint of contrition in his tone.

“Yes, you’ve said.”

“It bears repeating,” Mycroft replied, turning to face his brother who continued to gaze resolutely out at the darkness beyond the windows. “I had several exams looming, and I’m afraid I misjudged how important it was that I—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sherlock interrupted, lifting one shoulder in a careless shrug.

“It does,” Mycroft insisted, his posture slumping slightly. “When I was at school, Mummy and Father always attended, never missed a single year. Of course I should have been there.”

“It’s called Parent’s Weekend, Mycroft,” Sherlock said, rolling his eyes and shaking his head dismissively. “But if the school should happen to add ‘Self-Absorbed Chubby Legal Guardian’s Weekend’ to the schedule in the future, do feel free to miss that as well.”
Sherlock pressed his lips together and tried very hard not to smile as Mycroft huffed out a surprised chuckle of reluctant amusement beside him.

“It won’t happen again,” Mycroft assured him quietly, drawing up his knees and winding his long arms around his shins as he stared through the wall of glass into the black night. “I am trying to make the right decisions, but clearly I haven’t been entirely successful in that endeavour. I confess that when it comes to such matters I find myself a bit…at a loss.”

“Well, that’s hardly surprising,” Sherlock said, turning to look his brother in the eye. “I am quite the burden, after all.”

Sherlock watched his older brother’s face, saw the look of raw surprise and dismay bloom across his features.

“You are not a burden, Sherlock,” Mycroft told him, brows drawn close as he looked at him intently.

“Of course I am,” Sherlock challenged, returning his gaze. “You said so yourself. Not even a week ago, in this very house.”

“My parents stated their wishes quite clearly, Aunt Violet,” Mycroft Holmes interrupted.

“Yes, but that will was written years ago,” Violet implored, turning her gaze from the crackling fire in the grate to fix it on her beloved sister’s eldest son. “Sherlock was just a baby at the time.”

“And it was subsequently reviewed annually by a qualified attorney and ratified several times over those same years,” Mycroft reminded her. “The section outlining custody of their surviving children remained unchanged.”

“But they couldn’t have known how young you would be,” Violet said softly, reaching out to lay a hand on her nephew’s arm.

“Perhaps not,” Mycroft conceded, lifting the crystal tumbler in his hand and taking a small sip of the amber liquid inside before setting it aside. “But their intent was explicit, nonetheless: In the event of their death, guardianship of any minor children would first be entrusted to any non-minor children.”

“Your uncle and I only want what is best, Mycroft. For both of you,” his aunt assured him. “We could give him a very happy home.”

“Sherlock already has a home, Aunt Violet. It is here, with me,” Mycroft told her, raising one elegant hand to forestall the inevitable protest. “Our parents made this the happiest of homes while they were with us, and I will honour their memory by honouring their wishes. I am grateful for your support, but the burden is mine to bear.”

“You’re getting much stealthier,” Mycroft sighed into the darkness of the empty ballroom, shaking his head while examining his younger brother through narrowed eyes. “I had no idea you were eavesdropping on that particular private conversation.”

“Not very private,” Sherlock shrugged. “You didn’t even bother to shut the study door.”

“Yes, well, lesson learned.”
“It was a very generous offer, though,” Sherlock said lightly. “You should consider taking her up on it.”

Mycroft stilled beside him, and Sherlock imagined he could physically feel his brother’s sharp gaze examining him.

“Do you want to go live with Aunt Violet and Uncle Alex in America?” Mycroft asked quietly.

Sherlock shrugged. “No. But it would certainly make things easier for you, relieve you of your burden, and all.”

“That was a poor choice of words on my part,” Mycroft began.

“It wasn’t,” Sherlock interrupted, shaking his head and turning to meet his eye. “Burden: a weight, an onerous or difficult concern, an encumbrance. Sums me up perfectly.”

“It doesn’t,” Mycroft insisted. “Father used to say that words are important. They have meaning—but they also have texture, and tone, and even flavour. We should take care in choosing the correct one for the circumstance.”

“You chose the word, Mycroft,” Sherlock reminded him.

“Yes, I did. And it was the wrong one. I am sorry.” When Sherlock’s defensive posture relaxed slightly, Mycroft released a slow breath and turned to follow his brother’s gaze back towards the dark panes of glass. “Though, in my defence, you’d behaved rather monstrously at dinner earlier that night, and my frustration may have been at least partially to blame for the verbal misstep.”

Sherlock smirked. “If Uncle Alex wished to be discreet about his performance issues perhaps he should have chosen a more private moment than Christmas dinner to wash down the distinctive blue triangular pill hidden in his jacket pocket.”

“I presume that he felt that an intimate holiday dinner with family was not an occasion in which he would be forced to endure public shame.”

“I was only making an observation.”

“Inaccurate.” Mycroft turned to regard him shrewdly through narrowed eyes. “You were voicing an observation, with the express intent to cause embarrassment.”

“He started it!”

“How, exactly?”

“He was just sitting there, pretending to be happy,” Sherlock said, an angry blush rising on his pale cheeks. “Laughing and drinking and complimenting Marie’s goose and talking about the weather and asking me about school—acting as though nothing had changed.”

“A crime which you deemed punishable by the disclosure of vastly inappropriate personal medical information?”

Sherlock pressed his lips together and inhaled a long breath, then blew it out dramatically before lifting his shoulders in a small shrug.

“Aunt Violet was mortified,” Mycroft said, his voice low and tired. “As was I, for that matter. Fortunately, Uncle Alex reacted to your outburst with admirable grace and understanding. It was he
who first broached the idea that a change of domestic scenery might do you some good. And after your abominable behaviour, I was tempted to take him up on the offer.”

“Why didn’t you then?” Sherlock demanded, chin raised as he glared defiantly.

“Because, Sherlock, love and anger are not mutually exclusive emotions.” Mycroft sighed, his expression softening as he looked at his brother. “Just because you are upset with someone, it doesn’t mean that you wish to give up on them entirely.”

Sherlock looked at him for a long moment, head tipped and eyes narrowed, top teeth worrying softly at his bottom lip.

“Is that true?” Sherlock asked, the timid murmur nearly lost in the cavernous space.

“Undoubtedly.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am,” Mycroft said, regarding him silently then nodding slowly. He let the moment stretch out between them, until at last Sherlock’s shoulders slumped forward and he released a long, shaky sigh.

“I told him to go away,” Sherlock admitted, chin trembling slightly as he kept his gaze fixed on the floor. “That evening, Father knocked on my door and said that I should come downstairs, that he and Mummy wanted to say goodbye, but I told him that he’d grounded me and that meant I couldn’t come out of my room—so he left.”

“Oh, Sherlock,” Mycroft said, his voice quiet and thick.

“I didn’t mean to knock over the flame,” Sherlock insisted, looking at his brother imploringly. “It was an experiment, and I’d put out the fire before it spread to any of the hay in the loft, but he was still so angry with me, and I said I was sorry but he wouldn’t listen—just sent me to my room and told me he’d deal with me later. He said we would talk about it in the morning, but…”

Sherlock dropped his chin to his chest and pressed his eyes closed, clenched his jaw and fought to keep his breaths steady as a gentle hand settled over his shoulder and pulled him close.

“I miss them so much,” Sherlock whispered with a broken sigh, then tipped his head slightly and rested it against Mycroft’s shoulder, silent tears trailing down his pale cheeks to splatter onto the polished floor below.

“I know,” Mycroft said softly, breath ghosting across the fringe of curls over Sherlock’s forehead. “We bear that burden together, you and I.”

After a few minutes Sherlock lifted his head and sniffed, sitting up as Mycroft pulled back his hand and reached into the pocket of his dressing gown to retrieve a handkerchief. Sherlock swiped it roughly over his wet eyes and cheeks then blew his nose quite inelegantly into it, grinning at his older brother’s heavy sigh of amused disapproval before relaxing into the silence that settled around them once more.

When, at last, the first deep chime echoed through the room, Sherlock tipped his head and held his breath—closed his eyes and counted each tone until the final one faded slowly away.

“Happy New Year, Sherlock.”

“Happy New Year, Mycroft.”
For a long time they simply sat together in the dark. Side by side, knees drawn up before them, eyes fixed on the endless night beyond the windows.

“Slightly to the left,” Molly says, tapping the stack of white notecards in her hands against her pursed lips and looking thoughtful. “Two or three centimetres more, I think.”

“Are you sure?” Sherlock asks from his position behind the presentation easel.

“Yes, I think so,” Molly says with a nod, then shakes her head as soon as Sherlock complies. “No, that’s still not quite right.”

“Shocking,” Sherlock mutters, rolling his eyes and awaiting further instruction.

“I feel like it’s not quite central enough, but if we move it over any further it will block the diagram of the Krebs cycle,” Molly sighs, brows knit together in frustration. “Maybe we should try it on the left side of the banner. What do you think?”

“I think the merits of either configuration are equally inconsequential.”

“This is important, Sherlock,” Molly snaps. “The audience needs to be able to see all of our visual aids clearly.”

“As our audience currently consists of a single, empty chair, I’m fairly certain it’s not an issue.” Sherlock lifts up the presentation tripod and carries it to the other side of the table.

“Where is John, by the way?” Molly asks, looking around the deserted library and shooting him a quizzical look.

“He quit,” Sherlock says straightening the edges of the poster board and centering it on the easel.

“What?” Molly asks, looking alarmed. “When?”

“Texted me last night,” Sherlock says with a shrug. “Said he’d rather end up penniless and on the streets than be forced to sit through this presentation for a fourth time.”

“He said no such thing,” John Watson admonishes as the heavy door swishes shut behind him. He pauses at the edge of the circulation desk long enough to slide his overstuffed backpack onto it, then hurries over to join them. “Sorry I’m late, the midday traffic was a mess—and I had to park so far away from campus I may as well have just walked there.”

“Exam this morning?” Molly asks.

“Um, no, just an advisory appointment, of a sort,” John says, then turns to survey the various presentation aids on display. “I see you’ve moved the anatomical diagram to the left of the display space. Nice choice.”

“Thanks,” Molly beams, shooting a satisfied smirk at Sherlock as she pulls out her mobile to snap a few pictures of the current setup.

“Don’t encourage her,” Sherlock says, shaking his head as John makes his way around the table to stand beside him.

“Can’t help it, I’m a very dedicated practice audience,” John says with a grin, looking around the room once before rising up to press a quick kiss against Sherlock’s frown before settling back down
onto his heels. “Hello, you.”

“Hello,” Sherlock replies, the corners of his lips lifting involuntarily as John skims a warm palm down the length of his arm, pausing briefly to give his fingers a squeeze. Sherlock returns the pressure and sweeps his broad thumb over the back of John’s hand before releasing it, reluctantly. “Your meeting went well?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” John replies with a shrug, smile faltering slightly for the briefest of moments—a change of expression so fleeting that by the time Sherlock registers it, John has already turned away and is crossing over to sit in his customary chair. “All right, you two. Time to dazzle me with your knowledge.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, John,” Sherlock sighs, stepping up next to Molly and waving away the second stack of notecards she tries (again) to force into his hands. “You’ve seen this presentation three times already. You should be able to recite the entire thing from memory by now.”

“I’d need to see it more than three times for that to happen,” John tells him. “After all, there is a lot of information to digest.”

Sherlock stares blankly at his cheeky grin while Molly huffs out a chuckle beside him.

“That joke wasn’t funny the first three times you attempted it, John,” Sherlock sighs. “I regret to inform you that it still isn’t.”

“No? Hmm. I thought maybe you’d find it easier to stomach this time around,” John says seriously, winking at Molly who bursts into a fit of giggles.

“Seriously?” Sherlock asks, shaking his head ruefully. “Puns are, by far, the laziest form of humour.”

“You’re giving me comic advice?” John rebuts. “I find that a bit difficult to swallow.”

“He’s right, you know,” Molly interjects, nodding at Sherlock. “You’ve got a lot of guts, that’s for sure.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes and heaves out a weary sigh, but his attempt to glower at them both is thwarted by the low rumble of a laugh starting deep in John’s chest that slowly melts into a breathy chuckle that gradually gives way to the melody of a familiar giggle that rings through the room—circling around him and brushing against him and filling every empty space inside him. He looks from one laughing face to another and shakes his head slowly.

“You’re ridiculous, the pair of you,” Sherlock tells them. “Now can we get on with things, please?”

“Yes, of course,” John says seriously, clearing his throat and looking somber. “By all means.”

“Thanks again for doing this,” Molly tells John sincerely. “I’m sure it’s a bit boring, at this point.”

“Not at all,” John assures her. “Human digestion is a fascinating process…but the ending is shit.”

As John and Molly devolve into a fresh wave of laughter, Sherlock stands between them and shakes his head and almost manages not to smile.

Almost.

“Yes, yes, you’re hilarious,” Sherlock sighs, biting at the inside of his cheek. “May we proceed?”
“Sorry,” John says, wiping at his eyes and taking in a deep breath. “Ready when you are.”

“Okay,” Molly says, shaking out her limbs and taking a short moment to compose herself while looking over her first notecard with an expression of intense concentration. After a moment she turns and gives a Sherlock a short nod then looks up at John. “The philosopher Rousseau once said: ‘Happiness is a good bank account, a good cook, and good digestion’…”

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Though the physician-signed directive that Mycroft forwarded to the administrative office after his run in with Sebastian last Thursday clearly stated that he was to refrain from participation for the entirety of the week, when Sherlock showed up in Reginald Bank’s locker room on Friday afternoon dressed and determined to embark on a run with the rest of the class he wasn’t met with much resistance.

“All right, Holmes?” the formidable PE teacher asked, casually.

“Eminently, sir,” Sherlock answered confidently.

To which Bank the Tank had replied by simply looking him over once, then nodding.

Two blocks from the locker room door in the alley behind Morningside Academy, as the class rounded the corner and turned onto the wide path of the park, Sherlock was forced to admit that he may have slightly overestimated his readiness level.

While the events of the last week’s physical altercation with Sebastian Wilkes had left him aching and stiff, the confrontation in the library and the automobile accident (suicide attempt?) resulting in Sebastian’s current comatose state had taken a significant toll on him as well. He found himself increasingly irritable and tired, unable to fully concentrate, barely able to sleep. Which, on the whole of things, wasn’t particularly unlike his normal state of being now that he thought about it.

He’d tried all the usual methods to distract himself. He attempted to drown out the constant barrage of thoughts by continuing his ongoing experiment on the effects of different acids on specific common household materials, but was forced to abandon it when Mycroft refused to believe that the damage to three of his (atrocious) favourite ties were the result of a very contained moth infestation. He found some small comfort in playing his violin, practicing the same piece over and over in an attempt to master it, but that particular pursuit had been halted when Marie barged into his room at two AM in her dressing gown, handed him a steaming mug of chamomile tea and left with his bow tucked under her arm. He’d even started an entirely new set of reaction summaries, staying up late into the night with his father’s old textbook open before him as he tried to puzzle them out—but nothing seemed to help.

Well, one thing helped.

When the noise in his head gets too loud to bear, it’s the touch of tanned fingers against his own, the brush of pink lips over his skin, the feel of golden hair against his cheek, and the gentle gaze of warm blue eyes that never fails to calm him. When the funnel of thoughts and feelings and fears picks up speed, blowing and howling and threatening to overtake him completely, John Watson is his port in the storm.

Sherlock knows that he (regrettably) cannot be with him every second of every day—that John has classes and study sessions and a job and appointments—so he must content himself with the time they can spend together while finding other methods to keep the din in his head to a minimum. Like, say, going for a run.
Rounding the second turn of the winding path, Sherlock ignores the stitch in his side and the ache in his shoulder and the ragged pace of his laboured breath and concentrates instead on the steady rhythm of his feet against the pavement.

(Left…right…left…right…)

The cool breeze slips against his flushed skin, the chatter of his classmates and the wind through the trees and the sound of traffic in the distance all fade as his mind wanders to the feel of a muscled chest pressed against his own, to the scrape of teeth over rough stubble, to the full weight of John collapsing onto him, warm and heavy and perfect.

(Left…right…left…right…)

Each impact vibrates up through his legs and hips and spine, connects him to the ground below his feet as a prelude to the brief moment when he’s unbound from the earth completely—the fraction of a second between footfalls—before his other foot descends and the process repeats, and repeats, and repeats…

Scaling the stairs towards the second floor of the building, Sherlock shakes his head in an attempt to dislodge the stubborn fringe of damp curls that cling to his forehead. Hiking the strap of his heavy bag up further onto his shoulder, he winces slightly at the twinge it causes—though it’s not nearly as bothersome as it was just a day or two ago—and now it’s joined by the pleasant, post-run ache of exertion that has settled into his muscles. His post PE shower hadn’t done much to alleviate the soreness, and he finds himself looking forward to the prospect of a long soak in the enormous claw footed tub that dominates the small bathroom in 221C.

It’s Friday, after all, and the thought of Mycroft’s driver dropping him off at Baker Street after his violin lesson has a smile blooming over his face that not even the lingering fragrance of abominably scented shower gel can suppress. Maybe they’ll order takeaway and watch something insipid on television that John likes, then Sherlock can distract him with kisses that taste like green curry and mulligatawny and spicy beer. The thought has him grinning broadly as he pulls open the heavy glass door to the library.

Two girls sweep through the doorway without acknowledging his presence (fourth years, patently oblivious and equally dull) chatting animatedly and staring down at their phones while Sherlock steps back to let them pass before he crosses the threshold himself and walks towards his customary table. As he passes the circulation desk, John Watson looks up and flashes him a bright grin before turning his attention back to the dark haired student (young, slight, male, fourth year?) he’s assisting. Sherlock heaves his bag up onto the table and unbuttons the flap while watching the exchange with mild curiosity.

“Yeah, that’s one of my favourites,” John says, scanning the barcode on the inside cover of one the books in the sizable pile before him. “He uncovers a really nasty conspiracy, gets tangled up with some pretty bad guys in the process.”

“But he still comes out on top, right?” A soft voice asks anxiously, a slight lilt colouring the edges of the words.

“Of course,” John assures him, with a grin. “Don’t worry, Jack Reacher always gets his man. The fun is in getting to watch him do it. Besides, you’re not even half way through the series—so you know he lands on his feet for a while yet, anyway.”

“They’re really exciting,” the young man gushes, nodding enthusiastically as John continues to scan the rather formidable stack of books he’s brought up to him for checkout. “Thanks for
recommending them to me.”

“No problem,” John says, smiling warmly as he closes the cover on the last of his selections and sliding them across the desk. “I figured you could use a little entertainment to balance out all the serious reading you do.”

“Not very serious,” the boy protests, cheeks colouring slightly as he sets his backpack next to John’s on the circulation desk and begins stuffing the library books into it.


“There are plenty of mathematicians who would disagree with that statement,” the young man says with a smile.

The laugh is out of his mouth before Sherlock even thinks to suppress it, and two sets of eyes turn to fix on him with surprise.

“Well, he’s not wrong,” Sherlock says with a slight shrug. “The suggestion that all the truths once deemed absolute might indeed be relative was a fairly radical notion, it caused quite a furor at the time.”

“If you say so,” John says, shaking his head fondly at Sherlock and scooping up the remaining books and holding them out to the student, who doesn’t reach for them—because he’s too busy staring at Sherlock and looking dumfounded. John looks between the two of them before his mouth quirks up in a grin. “Have you two never met before? Jamie, this is Sherl—”

“Sherlock Holmes,” Jamie says quickly, voice quivering slightly as he nods enthusiastically with a nervous grin. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Sherlock replies, examining the young man with narrow eyed curiosity as the peal of the school bell slices through the air.

“Oh, I’m late for class,” Jamie says, forehead creasing with worry as he turns to shove the last few books into his already overstuffed backpack then hauls it up onto his shoulder. “Thanks again, John.”

“You’re welcome, Jamie,” John says amiably. “Have a nice weekend.”

As the young man turns to go, the bottom edge of his heavy bag snags on the hanging strap of John’s backpack and drags it along the edge of the desk where it sweeps up a framed sign and a cup of pens before crashing to the floor.

“I’ll get that,” Jamie blurts out, looking embarrassed as he falls to his knees and starts gathering up pens while John makes his way around the desk to help. When Jamie reaches towards John’s bag, Sherlock sees what’s about to happen just a fraction of a second too late, stepping forward to help just as Jamie grabs the unzipped backpack by the bottom corner and lifts it up towards the desk and the entire contents spill out of the open bag in an impressive display of the power of gravity. Jamie looks horrified as books and papers scatter all over the floor. “I’m sorry, John, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay, Jamie,” John says with a wave of his hand, bending down to pick up one heavy textbook. “No harm done. The bell’s already rung, you go ahead and get to class, all right? We can get this.”

“You’re sure?” Jamie asks, looking sheepish, gathering up a stack of papers and tapping them
against the floor to straighten the edges.

“Totally,” John assures him, smiling as Sherlock crosses over and to stand next to him and Jamie sets the stack of papers down carefully onto the floor beside Sherlock’s feet before standing up. “And if your instructor gives you any guff about being late, tell him to come talk to me.”

“Thanks,” Jamie mumbles, nodding gratefully and practically running out the door.

“He’s a sweet kid,” John sighs as the door closes, shaking his head at the mess on the floor.

“Not particularly graceful, though,” Sherlock observes wryly, dropping to his knees as he begins gathering up the spilled contents of John’s bag.

“He’s a little awkward, I suppose,” John agrees dropping down beside Sherlock to help. “I don’t think he has many friends. He checks out a big pile of books a couple of times a week.”

“Well, that’s hardly surprising. He has quite a crush on you, after all.”

“What?” John asks, quirking a sceptical eyebrow in his direction. “No he doesn’t.”

“Of course he does,” Sherlock says, rolling his eyes. “Reading the same books you do, praising your taste in novels, practically preening when you compliment his intelligence. It couldn’t be more obvious.”

*buzzzzzz*

Sherlock pauses for a moment to fish his mobile out of his front trouser pocket and huffs out a resigned sigh when he sees the notice:

**NEW CONFESSION!**

When John looks questioningly at him Sherlock tilts the phone so he can see the screen and executes a series of quick taps and they watch the display go black before the promised message begins to appear:

**iConfess: The view in the library is especially nice today**

“Well, that’s flattering, I suppose,” John says lightly, as the letters slowly dissolve and explode into a shower of sparks. “A little tame, though.”

“You were expecting something more poetic?” Sherlock asks, looking amused. “An ode to your ‘locks that shine like spun gold’ or ‘eyes the colour of the sea after a storm’? Perhaps a ten point essay on the relative attributes of your backside?”

“I’ll remind you that my arse was once described as spectacular on that very app,” John chides, lifting a stack of books onto the edge of the circulation desk.

“Well, perhaps Jamie simply hasn’t gotten a close enough look at it,” Sherlock replies, slipping the phone back into his pocket before shaking out a pitifully wadded up cardigan and folding it neatly against his chest.

“I should hope not,” John says reproachfully. “He’s a child, Sherlock.”

“He’s only a few years younger than I am,” Sherlock points out with a shrug.

“But a few very important years,” John reminds him, taking the folded jumper from him and setting
it atop the stack of books on the desk before turning to regard him with a broad smile. “And besides, even if he were older I’m afraid I’d still have to disappoint him. I’m quite taken.”

Sherlock feels a wave of warmth stirring somewhere deep in the pit of his stomach that rises up his neck and over his cheeks as he returns John’s grin.

“Well, look at that,” John says, reaching out to cup one pink tinged cheek in his broad palm as he leans in close. “I’m making all the boys blush today.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes and opens his mouth to reply—but as soon as John’s lips make contact he suddenly can’t remember what it was he meant to say, the words lost in the gentle pressure and warm breath and the soft slide of an insistent tongue against his own. When the kiss eventually ends, Sherlock pulls in a shaky breath and lets it out slowly as John sits back on his heels.

“So, what’s on tap for tonight?” John asks.

“Violin lesson here shortly,” Sherlock says, gathering up a handful of pencils from the floor and dropping them into the cup in John’s outstretched hand. “But after that, I’m all yours.”

“I like that sound of that,” John says with a wink, setting the cup back up onto the edge of the circulation desk and righting the small framed sign outlining the checkout guidelines beside it. “Why don’t you text me when you’re done and I’ll—”

At the sound of the door swishing open, they look up to see Martha Hudson ushering a young man pushing a handcart stacked with boxes through it.

“Just inside here is fine,” the Morningside Librarian tells him merrily, pointing to a space next to the entrance. “John, dear, the new shipment of contemporary fiction volumes you suggested have arrived. Would you have a look at the invoice and make sure we’re all set?”

“Sure thing, Mrs. H.” John says, getting to his feet and crossing to the door.

Sherlock watches him walk away, silently ticking off more than ten (twelve, no thirteen) positive attributes of John’s backside in his head before he picks up the last few stray items still strewn about and gets to his feet. There’s a rustling sound near his left foot and he looks down to see a neat stack of papers still on the floor. He bends over to retrieve them, and is reaching out to set them with the other items from John’s backpack when the graphic at the top of the first page catches his eye.

He recognizes the central image as the ‘Rod of Asclepius’, a snake coiled around a golden staff that is the nearly universal icon of the medical profession. This particular version is flanked by a wreath of laurels, capped with a crown and sitting atop a banner reading “In Arduis Fidelis” (Latin, Translation: Faithful In Adversity), and—according to the printed letterhead beneath it—is the cap badge of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

Mr. John H. Watson

221C Baker Street

London

SW1E 6QP

Dear Mr. Watson,

We appreciate your inquiry into the opportunities available in the RAMC and are pleased to inform
you that your initial application has been accepted...

Sherlock knows that this is John’s private correspondence—he hasn’t been given explicit permission to read it and such he has no right to do so—and yet he can’t find it within himself to look away. He scans the rest of the letter, his fingers shaking as he flips through pages, the cold ball of dread in the pit of his stomach expanding and flowing outward, rendering him more numb with each form and list and page of informational material attached. From far away he can hear voices (thank you and sign here and Mrs. Hudson droning on about escorting someone back downstairs) and when someone says his name it doesn’t register at first, and only after he repeats it does Sherlock look up to find the source.

“Give me a hand with these?” John asks hopefully, stepping behind the circulation desk to set one large box down onto the surface before pulling out his key fob and slicing through the packing tape with the sharp edge of a key. When Sherlock doesn’t reply, John looks up from the box and regards him quizzically. “You okay?”

“You’re joining the Army?” Sherlock asks quietly.

John freezes in place, eyes widening a bit as he swallows pointedly and looks down at the sheaf of papers clutched in Sherlock’s hands.

“Where did you get those?” John asks him, clenching his jaw.

“They were on the floor,” Sherlock answers, looking back down at the letter at the top of the pile.

“They must have fallen out of my bag,” John explains quickly, stepping out from behind the circulation desk and walking towards him. “I didn’t mean for you to see that.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock says, concentrating on keeping his expression blank and impassive as he looks up from the letter. “These are from your ‘advisory appointment’ today, I assume?”

“Yeah,” John admits, with a nod, looking slightly guilty as he moves to close the space between them. He reaches out to take his hand, sighing as Sherlock pulls his arm away before he can grasp his fingers. “I was going to tell you about it, Sherlock, I—”

“When?” Sherlock asks, wincing inwardly at the obvious edge of hurt that seeps into the question.

“When I’ve made a decision.”

“So you haven’t said yes, then,” Sherlock says, hating how small and pathetic and hopeful his voice sounds to his own ears.

“No,” John assures him emphatically, reaching out again to take his hand, his shoulders slumping with relief as Sherlock lets him twine their fingers together.

“But you’re seriously considering it?”

“Well, yeah—I mean, I have to.”

“Why?” Sherlock asks, brow knitted in confusion.

“Because medical school is expensive, Sherlock,” John says, squeezing his hand and closing his free palm over their joined fingers. “My rugby scholarship was the only reason Bart’s was a possibility for me. When I lost it, I hoped I could make it work, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to afford two more years.”
“So this is about money,” Sherlock says, looking relieved. “That’s a simple problem to fix, John.”

“It really isn’t,” John argues.

“It is,” Sherlock says dismissively, untangling their fingers and moving to set the pile of papers on the desk. “I’m eighteen now, I have partial access to the trust my parents left me and I’ll have full access in another three years. Problem solved.”

“I can’t take your money, Sherlock,” John sighs.

“Why not?”

“Because some of us didn’t grow up on estates in Cornwall with gardeners and carriage houses and giant trust funds at our disposal to finance our every whim,” John says, squaring his shoulders and clenching his jaw.

“The circumstances of my birth were no more of my choosing than yours were, John,” Sherlock says coolly, refusing to rise to the bait. “But they could be to your benefit, if you would simply set your pride aside for a moment.”

John shakes his head impatiently. “You really don’t get it.”

“I’m not the one who is being obtuse here,” Sherlock insists. “You need money, I have money. I don’t see the problem.”

“The problem is that I don’t need you to pay my way through school.”

“Clearly that statement is inaccurate, or you wouldn’t be considering joining the army for the express purpose of having them do exactly that.”

“It’s not the same thing, and you know it,” John says.

“You’re right, it isn’t,” Sherlock agrees, nodding his head. “I’m not asking you to risk your life in return. I’m offering you a way to pay for school that doesn’t involve you being sent half way around the world to be shot at.”

“Why would you do that?” John asks, shaking his head incredulously.

“Why wouldn’t I do it?” Sherlock asks, taking a step closer and staring earnestly into John’s blue eyes, willing him to understand.

“Sherlock, listen to me.” John closes the distance between them, reaching up to hold his face between his hands. “You are so important to me, and I appreciate the offer, I really do—but I want to find a way to do this on my own.”


“Yeah, of course it does,” John concedes.

“What I want is you,” Sherlock says, closing his fingers around John’s wrists and squeezing lightly. “Here. Home and safe. With me.”

“I know you think that now, Sherlock,” John replies, his voice trembling slightly. “But you’re eighteen—and in a few years, you might want something else entirely.”

Sherlock recoils as though he’s been slapped, eyes blinking against the sudden pressure settling in
the corners of his eyes as he pulls his face out of John’s hands and backs up a step.

“Is that what you think?” Sherlock asks, unable to keep the hurt out of his voice. “That this is some silly schoolboy crush?”

“No,” John says, moving closer again but stopping at the wary look in Sherlock’s eyes. “But this thing between us is still so new, and I don’t want to complicate it—”

“Oh, I see,” Sherlock says, a mask of feigned indifference settling over his features with practiced ease. “So when you told me you thought we could be serious, you didn’t actually mean it.”

“What? No, of course I meant that, Sherlock,” John says wearily, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and taking a deep breath.

“But you think I’m too young to know what I want,” Sherlock clarifies.

“That’s not what I said,” John argues, shaking his head in frustration. “I just don’t want you to wake up in a few years and feel like you missed out on anything.”

“Then tell me, John,” Sherlock begins, looking at him with interest, “as someone who has achieved the ripe old age that you’re afraid will bring forth these feelings of regret in me—what is it that you want?”

“I want to be a doctor,” John tells him. “I want to find a way to make that happen that I can be proud of, and I want—”

*buzzzzz*

The sound interrupts John’s thought, and Sherlock reaches into his pocket to check the display.

“The car is here,” Sherlock announces, crossing over to his regular table to retrieve his school bag.

“Look, this is really not the way I wanted this conversation to go,” John says, stepping up beside him and laying a hand at the small of his back. “And it’s not over, all right?”

“Sure,” Sherlock says with a shrug, looping the long strap over his shoulder and turning to walk away.

“Hey,” John says, catching Sherlock’s fingers and tugging at them lightly. “I’ll find you after your lesson, okay?”

“Fine,” Sherlock agrees, pulling his hand from John's grasp and continuing towards the door.

“It’s not just about the money, Sherlock,” John calls after him, a slightly desperate edge in his voice. “It’s about making my own way in the world and serving my country and helping people. It’s about my future. Please understand that I have to consider it.”

“Tell me, John—this future of yours?” Sherlock asks quietly, hand hovering over the handle of the library door. “Does it include me?”

“I hope so,” John says quietly.

Sherlock nods, then slips out the door.
Chopin isn’t his favourite composer.

It’s not that he dislikes his work. As a general matter, Sherlock finds his piano concertos to be both deftly constructed and pleasant to the ear. He’s learned several transcriptions at the request of his teacher over the years, appreciating that the combination of complex runs and soaring melodies are excellent for practicing finger-work and honing bow technique, but never developing a particular attachment to any of his works.

Until now.

Making his way through Nocturne no. 19 in C-Sharp Minor for a fourth time, Sherlock registers the unexpected faint rap of something hard against glass, but doesn’t stop to investigate.

The second time it happens he pauses briefly to look towards the curtains fluttering in the cool breeze from the open window, but quickly resumes his playing.

When the last soaring note of the piece is punctuated by a barrage of sharp taps slapping against the glass (and the brick surrounding it) in quick succession, Sherlock carefully sets his violin aside and pulls back the curtain to peer down into the street below. He stares dumbfounded for a long moment, then lifts the sash and leans against his elbows on the sill.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock calls down to the figure standing on the sidewalk three floors below.

“Trying to get your attention,” John Watson shouts back.

“By throwing rocks at my window?”

“Of course not,” John says, reaching into his pocket and holding up a small rectangular object that flashes in the gleam of the streetlight. “I was throwing Altoids.”

Sherlock fights back the smile that threatens to overtake his face without his permission. “Why?”

“Because you’re not answering my texts!” John says, his broad smile visible from three floors away. “I was practicing the violin,” Sherlock explains with an exaggerated shrug.

“I heard,” John says, his broad smile visible from three floors away. “What was that you were playing?”

“Chopin.”

“Well it sounded great to me. You’re really good.”

Sherlock sighs. “What do you want, John?”

“I want to talk to you,” John replies, looking up and down the quiet street. “We can do it just like this if you want, but people are starting to look out of their windows now, and I don’t know how long it will be before one of them calls the police. Oh, hello there!”

Sherlock watches as John turns his attention to the townhouse next door, focusing his gaze somewhere near the second floor before aiming a pleasant wave in that direction.
“Just…stay there,” Sherlock says, huffing out a resigned sigh before reaching up to drag down the sash.

He makes his way down the dark staircase, stopping briefly to retrieve his coat from the closet. He pulls it on over his t-shirt and flannel pyjama pants and stands for a moment inside the foyer, forehead resting against the heavy leaded glass door—then flips up his collar and slips out onto the stoop. John is sitting on the steps, hands stuffed into his pockets, shoulders raised up against the cool evening breeze. Sherlock slowly descends the stairs and lowers himself to sit next to John. They stare out at the deserted street in silence for a bit, sending twin white plumes of breath into the air.

“The first time I talked to the recruiter was right after my surgery,” John begins, continuing to look straight ahead as Sherlock turns to regard his profile. “I’d just lost my scholarship, and I had no idea how I was going to pay for school after the year ended. He said that if my shoulder healed well enough it wouldn’t prevent me from enlisting. It seemed like the perfect solution at the time. But now…”

Sherlock lets the moment stretch out between them, sensing that John is simply collecting his thoughts and will continue when he’s ready. He relaxes slightly beside him, tugging his coat more closely around his chest, listening to the quiet hum of the city all around them.

“When Mrs. H. offered me a job I thought, great—that'll get me through the end of the year and buy me some more time to heal before enlisting,” John explains, shaking his head and sighing. “I didn’t expect this.”

“Expect what?” Sherlock asks, looking at him curiously.

“You,” John replies simply, huffing out a quiet chuckle. “I didn’t see you coming at all, Sherlock. I never expected that I’d walk into that library that day and find you, and I certainly didn’t expect to fall in love with you.”

Sherlock freezes in place, breath catching in his throat, eyes widening as John turns to look at him with gentle eyes and a slight grin.

“You heard me right,” John says softly, lifting his good shoulder in a shrug as he slowly raises a hand and rakes his fingers through the curls on the side of Sherlock’s head. “It may be too soon or really uncool to tell you that, but it’s true.”

Sherlock opens his mouth to reply, but his words are halted by two fingers pressed gently against his lips.

“No, just let me say this, all right?” John asks, a slight tremor in his voice as he looks at Sherlock with pleading eyes, his face relaxing into a relieved smile as Sherlock nods silently for him to continue. “I love you, Sherlock Holmes, and I couldn’t wait even one more minute to tell you that—because no matter what else happens between us, I don’t want you to ever doubt what you mean to me. And it’s okay if you don’t want to say it back, or if you can’t say it—really, it’s fine. It’s all fine.”

Sherlock wants to reply, wants to tell John that he loves him too—wants to shout it at the top of his lungs and write it in the sky and whisper it against John’s skin until it’s branded over every inch of him—but the lump in his throat won’t allow it at the moment.

He’ll have to show him, instead.

Sherlock leans forward and catches John’s mouth with his own, lifts shaking hands to cradle them
over tanned cheeks as he slips his tongue gently between pink lips, watching blue eyes flutter closed as he threads his fingers through golden hair and pours every word he cannot say into this kiss, his very breath speaking the truth for him—*I love you, I love you, I love you, too…*

After a long moment John exhales shakily against Sherlock’s lips and tips their foreheads together.

“Good thing I ate all those breath mints, huh?”

“So you didn’t throw all of them at my window?”

“It was more of an ‘eat one, throw one’ situation,” John explains.

“How long were you standing out here?”

“Fifteen minutes, maybe.”

“That long?” Sherlock asks, huffing out an amused chuckle.

“Well, it took me quite a few tries to hit my target,” John says, pointing up at the townhouse. “That window is far away and Altoids are *tiny*. I had to start throwing handfuls of the damn things, hoping one of them would connect.”

Sherlock descends the last few stairs and eyes the single lighted window sceptically. “It doesn’t look that difficult to me.”

“Oh yeah?” John challenges, digging the tin out of his pocket and tossing it to Sherlock who catches it gracefully. “You try it, then.”

Sherlock flips open the tin and extracts one small white mint, walks back several feet into the deserted street, looking up at the window through narrowed eyes. He raises his arm, pulls it back, then tosses the tiny object towards the house…where it makes a sharp tap as it connects with Sherlock’s bedroom window.

“Beginners luck,” John scoffs.

Sherlock grins smugly. “I could try it again, if you like.”

“No way,” John snaps, coming over to pluck the Altoid tin from Sherlock’s hands and shoving it back into his pocket. “My ego has taken enough of a beating tonight, thanks.”

“It’s possible that my height gave me a slight advantage in this matter.”

“Oh my god, a *short* joke?” John says, tapping an indignant finger against Sherlock’s chest. “I forget, why did I come over here again?”

“Because you love me,” Sherlock reminds him, smiling as John reaches for his lapels and drags him into a long, messy kiss.

“Yeah, god help me, I do,” John sighs against his mouth, then licks at his own lips and wrinkles his nose before reaching into his pocket to fish out the Altoids tin once more, pressing it into Sherlock’s hand. “Here, you need these more than I do.”

“Shut up,” Sherlock says with a scowl, flipping open the tin and popping a few of the curiously strong peppermint discs into this mouth. “Good thing you didn’t lob them all at my house, I suppose.”
“How else was I supposed to get your attention?”

“What about simply ringing the bell?” Sherlock suggests.

“And risk your brother answering the door?” John replies, affecting a shudder. “No thank you.”

“Mycroft isn’t here,” Sherlock says. “He’s away on business.”

“Is he?” John raises one eyebrow mischievously as he trails a finger down the long line of Sherlock’s lapel.

“Would you like to come in?” Sherlock asks hopefully.

“Thought you’d never ask.” John grins, pressing up on his toes to lay a kiss over Sherlock’s lips before nodding towards the ancient Volkswagen where it sits at the kerb a few doors down. “But I should move my car, I don’t think I’m parked legally.”

“No problem,” Sherlock tells him, grabbing John’s hand and heading down the street.

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After punching in the four digit code on the wall mounted key pad, Sherlock steps into the garage and waves John forward, directing him to park in the empty space on the left side of the wide, underground space, then presses the button to close the automatic door behind him. John kills the engine and gets out of his car, rounding the back of it and letting out a low whistle as he examines the automobile parked in the next space.

“Now this is a Jag,” John says, running his hand appreciatively over the front quarter panel of the sleek, midnight blue vehicle. “I’ve seen an F-Type out on the streets before, but not the convertible. Which model is it?”


“Oh wow, it’s gorgeous,” John gushes. “And the colour is amazing, custom?”

“Mycroft picked it out,” Sherlock confirms with a shrug. “He said it made more of a ‘statement’, or something.”

“And the interior?” John asks, cupping his hands around his eyes and peering through the tinted side window. “Saddle tan?”

“No, ‘dove grey’, custom as well, naturally.”

“Well, whatever else your brother is, he’s one lucky bastard to get to drive around town in this.”

“Oh, that’s not Mycroft’s car,” Sherlock says, turning to walk towards the stairs. “It’s mine.”

John’s mouth drops open as he stares at Sherlock with wide eyes. “I’m sorry, what?”

“That’s my car,” Sherlock repeats with a shrug, scaling the first two stairs and looking at John expectantly. “Are you coming inside or not?”

“So you mean to tell me that we’ve been driving around London in my rusty old bucket of bolts,” John says, gesturing to his car, “when we could have been riding in that?”

“I suppose, technically, that’s accurate,” Sherlock concedes.
“Well, that stops now.”

“We’re not going back out tonight.”

“Maybe not, but tomorrow? We’re definitely going somewhere.” John says, giving the Jaguar one more lustful glance before following Sherlock up the stairs.

“Where?” Sherlock asks over his shoulder.

John shrugs. “Don’t care. But wherever it is, you’re driving.”

Sherlock roots through the top drawer of his tall dresser until he finds the pair of red pants John loaned him on the day he’d found him shivering and nearly naked in the back seat of his car, then tosses them across the room to where John is scrubbing at his wet hair with a towel next to the bed.

“Thanks,” John says, giving himself one last pass with the towel before stepping into the clean pants and dragging them up his legs and over his bare arse. “They’re clean and everything.”

“Of course they are,” Sherlock says, looking affronted. “Marie laundered them that very night.”

“And you kept them in your drawer, why again?” John asks, with a grin.

“I just kept forgetting to bring them back to you.”

“Just like you did with my rugby sweatshirt,” John teases, walking into the bathroom to hang his towel over one of the long bars set into the wall.

“You can have it back, if you like,” Sherlock tells him, slipping into a pair of slim fitting grey boxer briefs and following him into the bathroom.

“You keep it, it looks better on you anyway,” John says with a smile, threading an arm around Sherlock’s slim waist and tugging him close for a lingering kiss before taking the second bath towel from his hands and swiping it over the still-damp small of Sherlock’s back and shoulders before hanging it neatly on the bar next to his. “And now I’ve got clean pants and a set of clothes to wear tomorrow. Win-win.”

They brush their teeth side by side, trading kisses between spitting out toothpaste and swishing mouthwash and rinsing the whole mess down the drain. Sherlock flips off the bathroom light and watches John pull down the covers and climb into the large bed and settle back onto the pillows. He smiles as Sherlock slips between the sheets, then turns on his side to face him.

“I’m sorry, again, about earlier,” John sighs.

“Me too,” Sherlock agrees.

“I hate fighting with you,” John says, then the corner of his mouth slowly quirks up into a grin. “But I am rather fond of making up.”

“Mmm, agreed.” Sherlock smiles, remembering clouds of fragrant steam and the musky taste of come still heavy in his mouth as John chased after it with his tongue—his broad, wet chest pinning him against the cool tile, fist pumping mercilessly until Sherlock’s knees went weak, John swallowing his hoarse cries as ribbons of thick, white ejaculate spilled over tanned fingers…

“Thanks for looking out the window,” John yawns, stretching his arms out wide then tucking one
down below the covers and slipping the other under the pillow. A look of puzzled surprise settles over his features, and he drags his arm out from beneath the pillow then tilts his head to examine the lump of fabric in his hand. Blue eyes trail over the broad yellow and black stripes, the frayed translucent layers of fabric stitched along the top, the arcs of bent wire protruding from the end—and his face breaks into a slow grin. “Who’s this?”

“Oh,” Sherlock says, swallowing as he stares at the tattered stuffed bee cradled in John’s palm, “that’s, um, Bertram.”

“Bertram, huh?” John asks, turning the small stuffed insect in his hands and nodding thoughtfully at the black button eyes, a delighted giggle escaping from his lips as he examines the toy. “Looks as though he’s been with you for a quite a long time.”

“My mother gave him to me,” Sherlock explains, with a shrug. “I’d been stung trying to touch the bees in her rose garden, so she made me this one that I could touch whenever I liked.”

John eyes the stuffed bee seriously. “Hello, Bertram. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Sherlock says, reaching for the toy.

“No, not so fast,” John admonishes, pulling his hand back holding up a finger. “Bertram here has known you a lot longer than I have, I’d like to ask him some questions.”

“He doesn’t talk, John,” Sherlock sighs. “He listens.”

“Does he?” John asks, eyeing him curiously.

Sherlock’s cheeks colour slightly. “It’s stupid.”

“It isn’t,” John assures him, tucking Bertram up close against his chest and nodding for Sherlock to continue.

“Mummy told me that bees make good friends because they’re excellent listeners.” Sherlock smiles at the memory, reaching out a hand to trail the tip of his finger over the curve of one wire antennae. “She said I could tell him all my secrets, and he’d keep them safe.”

John looks at him across the pillows, his glistening blue eyes full of something so warm and honest that it steals the breath from Sherlock’s lungs—stops the heart in his chest, and for a moment the world is completely still. After what seems like an age, John sighs softly down at the much loved stuffed bee, then extends his hand slowly until Bertram is pressed right up against Sherlock’s cheek…then makes an exaggerated smooching sound with his lips.

Sherlock huffs out a surprised laugh, John’s signature giggle soon joining in. Sherlock shakes his head, letting out a deep sigh and looking at John curiously as he holds up a finger and brings Bertram up to one ear, cocking his head with a look of intense concentration.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock asks, looking at him suspiciously.

“Shh,” John orders, glaring at him testily. “Bertram is trying to tell me something very important. Go ahead, Betram.”

“He keeps secrets, John,” Sherlock reminds him, shaking his head. “He doesn’t tell them.”

John shrugs. “I guess I just have a trustworthy face. Now hush, this is good stuff.”
“Oh really? What exactly is he telling you?”

“He’s just about to sing the names of all the planets in the solar system.”

“Oh for god’s sake,” Sherlock sighs, reaching out to snatch Bertram away from John, hugging the stuffed bee to his chest. “You’re relentless.”

“It’s one of my very best traits,” John agrees, with a grin.

“Make yourself useful and switch off the lamp,” Sherlock says around a yawn, giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the sudden darkness as John complies, putting up no resistance as strong arms wrap around to tug him close. He tucks his face into the warm skin of John’s neck and breathes deeply.

“Goodnight, love,” John says, lips brushing softly against his forehead.

Sherlock lies awake for a while, listening to the steady thrum of John’s heartbeat, feeling the tension slowly drain from his muscles. When at last John’s long, deep breaths give way to quiet snores, Sherlock lifts the small lump of fabric still clutched in his hand and presses it against his lips.

“I’m in love with John Watson,” Sherlock whispers, pressing his eyes closed and taking a deep breath.

As he drifts off to sleep, he can almost smell the lingering scent of roses and dark, rich soil.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated!

So you know when you see a fic with a description that seems like it’s probably your jam but you consider not clicking on it because you’re tired or busy or whatever, but in the end you DO click on it and after you start reading it you panic because you ALMOST DIDN’T CLICK ON IT AND THEN YOU WOULD NEVER HAVE LOVED IT SO MUCH YOU TRIED TO MAKE OUT WITH YOUR IPAD?

Just me? Really?

*sigh*

Well, for the record, this chapter’s rec is that kind of fic. In ancientreader’s FAQ, a post S3 John Watson finds himself the widowed, single parent of a baby girl, and he and Sherlock must navigate what that means for their future. Also there’s a lot of stuff about swans. AND IT’S FABULOUS!

Seriously—this fic is beautifully characterized, tightly constructed, refreshingly original and a true thing of beauty. I adored it, and I know you will too.

Enjoy!
Hello friends, and a very happy “Yeah, believe me, I KNOW how many actual Thursdays have elapsed between the last update and today, and I’m sorry about that, but one of them was a major holiday so it doesn’t count and the other six were filled with things like massive pain and exploding laptops and home remodeling and family stress and a summons for JURY DUTY (which I suppose technically could be filed under ‘massive pain’ too) so you’re just going to have to believe me when I say that it wasn’t fun for me either” to you all!

You know how we all have an internal monologue of all the stuff we think and feel and have to get done? In general, mine goes something like this: “OMG! Crisis, must crunch numbers! Be careful wrestling with the dog, her legs are spindly! I don’t know where your shoes are, where did you take them off? God I hate doing laundry. South? Which way is south? Give me landmarks, people! Coffee and a scone, please--I gotta write some porn!” But for several weeks recently, it was more like this: “Ouch! OUCH! Ow ow ow ow ow ow owwwwwww! OMG ITS SO OUCHY, MAKE IT STOP!” So that sucked. But now it’s a lot better.

When my brain was able to concentrate on writing again, it went into overdrive and what Team Beta and I had agreed would be the general outline for this chapter suddenly ballooned into a creature of monstrous proportions. Apparently 20K+ words and two distinct arcs is not considered a ‘chapter’ so much as a ‘possible psychotic break’ so you’ll see that the total chapter count has gone up by one as a result. And now please direct your attention to the imaginary screen I’m pointing to where you’ll see Team Beta mouthing the words “I TOLD YOU SO!” and looking insufferably smug. But don’t worry, I pushed the imaginary mute button so you don’t have to hear them too. You’re welcome.

So when we last saw the boys they’d just made up after having their first real fight. Declarations were made (or whispered to stuffed bees, same diff) and they were snuggled up in Sherlock’s bed just waiting to live happily ever after. Which they will, of course. You know, eventually.

A super illegal (and not at all serious) coupon good for one contract murder made to look like an accident for my beautiful BFF/beta owensm who refused to let me feel too sorry for myself during the Great Screaming Knee Pain incident of 2015, and a giant box full of old jars and other canning-related paraphernalia to my sweet cheytea7 for being a constant ray of support and optimism even when I was zero fun to deal with. Which was a LOT lately. Team Beta is like a heart shaped box of chocolates. Except without the weird chewy maple one that tastes like it’s filled with demon toothpaste.

And last but not-even-a-little-bit least, endless thanks for each click, kudo, bookmark, subscription and rec this story has received. You are appreciated more than you know, and I would offer you something funny in return but mostly I just want to give you each a hug. Form an orderly queue, please. Feel free drop me a line in the comments if you’re so inclined, you know I love hearing from you more than I hate it when my adorable physical therapist Jeremy is all “Ten more reps, you can do it!” and then he doesn’t even stop smiling when I growl at him and call him a nazi and tell him I hope
he gains 20 pounds in the next week. Seriously, that man may actually be an android. Or a saint. But probably an android.

Thanks so much for reading, see you all Thursday! (Ha! It NEVER gets old!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Is this what you wanted?"

Low and demanding, the voice spilled hot and rough against his neck--and it took him a moment to register the sounds as words, distracted as he was by the unexpected presence of wet lips mouthing at the flushed skin below his collar.

Well, perhaps not completely unexpected.

True, they hadn't known each other long--but they'd spent quite a bit of time sitting side by side up here of late, and if their hands happened to brush against one another as they both reached to turn the page, or their thighs occasionally slid together in the close quarters beneath the desk, that was simply because his regular study carrel was a space only ever designed to fit one person comfortably.

And if, once or twice, while he was pacing back and forth explaining (again) to his reluctant pupil the importance of considering every given in a specific geometric proof as integral to the solution, he looked up just in time to catch a pair of chocolate brown eyes flick quickly back up to meet his own, it didn't mean they'd been particularly focused on any other part of his body moments before.

And simply because the twice a week schedule they'd agreed upon at the start had fairly quickly turned into meeting here every weekday without either of them explicitly requesting the change, that wasn't necessarily indicative of anything more than the shared realization that there was far more subject matter to cover than was initially expected.

It didn't mean anything.

Backed up against the tall shelf, the corner of a particularly large world atlas digging rather painfully into his hip while clumsy fingers tugged his first few shirt buttons from their holes, he finds himself forced to reconsider the matter in light of new evidence.

"You've thought about this haven't you?" the voice rumbled against his throat.

"Y-y-yes..." Sherlock stuttered breathily.

"I knew it," Victor Trevor growled, a note of triumph in his voice as he dragged his lips up over Sherlock's jaw and locked eyes briefly with him before smashing their mouths together. Unpracticed and overeager, their teeth clashed sharply before Victor dropped his chin and breathed heavily into the flushed skin of Sherlock's neck.

"How?" Sherlock panted, hands scrabbling over broad shoulders for purchase, fingertips grasping at the smooth fabric of Victor’s shirt, mind racing as the overwhelming tide of thoughts and sensations
washed over him, too fast to examine, to catalogue, to enjoy ...

"Because when I moved my chair closer to yours," Victor began, licking a broad stripe up the column of Sherlock's neck and over his jaw until they were eye to eye again, "you didn't move away."

"That would have been a bit difficult," Sherlock replied, their lips nearly brushing. "You were practically sitting in my lap."

"Now there's an idea," Victor mumbled, lips twitching up into a grin as he leaned forward to grind his hips against Sherlock's, smiling smugly at the resulting gasp.

Sherlock slid his hands down the hard plane of Victor's back, tightened his long fingers over the other boy's hips and yanked their bodies together more tightly with a long, low groan.

"Shhh," Victor hissed, one hand detangling itself from the thicket of disheveled curls wound around his fingers to press insistently over Sherlock's parted lips before he pulled back and narrowed his eyes slightly, hot breath spilling rapidly over the back of his fingers and pink flushed cheeks as he raised a questioning eyebrow. "Can you be quiet?"

Sherlock nodded tightly, eyes wide and pleading. Victor blew out a long breath and loosened his grip.

"Sorry," Sherlock whispered against Victor's retracting palm, sucking in a sharp breath as the same hand slipped around the back of his neck and dragged him in for a long, messy kiss.

"I tried not to want you," Victor said against his mouth, teeth nipping at Sherlock's full bottom lip as he continued to mutter softly between kisses. "But you're so (kiss) fucking (kiss) pretty."

Sherlock bit back a groan, swallowing it down as Victor pressed him roughly against the shelf and rutted against him, pressing their clothed erections together and breathing heavily as he continued his litany of whispered praise.

"Gorgeous...(kiss)...clever...(kiss)...sexy...(kiss)...can't resist..."

"Don't want you to," Sherlock sighed, lifting one knee as Victor's palm skated down his thigh and pulled it insistently upward to twine around his waist, the change in angle making them both groan as the friction increased deliciously.

"No one can know," Victor whispered, his forehead pressed tightly to Sherlock's as the rhythm of their hips reached a fevered pace. "No one, Sherlock. Got it?"

"Okay," Sherlock choked out in reply as the pool of heat gathered in his pelvis wound ever tighter, a familiar prickle of electricity sparked at the base of his spine as he wound his arms more tightly around Victor's back and held on.

"Oh god," Victor gasped, his voice taut and strained as he buried his face in Sherlock's neck and rutted frantically against him. "So good, so good...."

Victor's breath was hot against his skin and his vision was going white at the edges and he wished (again) that time would slow down, that he could make the feeling last--and suddenly he wasn't thinking at all. He was coming, shaking apart in Victor's grasp, biting back a shout as teeth clamped down over the juncture of his neck and shoulder and Victor went stiff in his arms before collapsing against him heavily.
Sherlock tightened his grip around the shuddering young man in his arms, letting their combined weight keep them upright against the heavy walnut shelf, where they stayed for a long while, clinging to each other as they caught their breath.

Victor blew out a long breath and rested his head on Sherlock's shoulder, humming quietly as long fingers trailed tentatively in random patterns over his back before he let out a sigh and pulled himself back to stand on shaky feet. Biting at his bottom lip he looked up into Sherlock's eyes.

"Well. That was...something," Victor said quietly, huffing out a soft chuckle as he looked down over the front placket of his Sherlock's trousers. "Made a bit of a mess, there."

Sherlock gestured to the dark stain spread over the front of Victor's trousers as well. "You too."

"Yeah," Victor sighed, pressing one hand against his stomach and grimacing slightly as he examined the soiled fabric, then let his gaze trail back up to meet Sherlock's, one corner of his mouth quirking up into a shy smile. "Didn't think that through very well, did we?"

"No, we didn't," Sherlock agreed, blowing a heavy breath through pursed lips to dislodge a curl stuck to the thin sheen of sweat on his forehead. "Though, for my part, I confess there was very little thinking going on at all."

The sound of Victor's answering laugh made him smile and huff out a chuckle of his own. The sudden peal of the school bell startled them both, prompting another round of nervous laughter.

"Lesson learned for next time," Victor said, yanking his shirt tails from his trousers and letting them hang loose over the offending stain, his smile faltering as he registers the look of surprise on Sherlock's face. "I mean, if there is a next time. If you want to..."

"Yes," Sherlock said quickly, looking at Victor with wide eyes, lips tipping up into a smile as Victor nodded in reply. "If that's what you want, too."

"Definitely," Victor said, voice pitched low as he stepped forward and threaded a hand around Sherlock's neck and dragged him into a kiss, softer and less urgent than those they'd shared earlier. After a final press of their lips he tipped his head back and grinned. "I meant what I said, you know."

"Oh?" Sherlock asked, smiling softly as warmth pooled in his chest as he remembered the words Victor whispered to him between kisses (gorgeous, clever, sexy). "Did you?"

"Yes," Victor confirmed with a nod, threading his dark fingers between Sherlock's pale ones and looking at him intently. "No one can know."

Sherlock stared at him for a long moment, willing his face not to reflect the disappointment that flooded through him and pushed its way into every space that had been filled with light just moments before. He stared at the smiling face, at the wash of crimson over the burnished cheeks and the hopeful twinkle in his deep brown eyes.

"All right," Sherlock agreed, clearing his throat softly.

"Good," Victor said, the relief in his voice palpable as he squeezed Sherlock's hand before letting go and reaching for his book bag. "I've got to go and wash up before class, same time tomorrow?"

When Sherlock nodded Victor darted forward to press their mouths together before backing quickly away down the aisle and disappearing around the corner. Sherlock listened as his footfalls crossed the deserted common space, heard the heavy library door swish open and click shut behind him.
He stood there for a long while, the seconds ticking slowly by, until the bell rang once more through the air and broke the silence. Looking around the deserted aisle, he wondered for a moment if any of that had actually happened, or if he'd simply imagined the whole thing... until he looked down over the front of his trousers.

Sticky and uncomfortable, he quickly yanked his shirt tails free and tugged them down low. He counted out another minute in his head—long enough that the halls should surely be deserted again by now—then cautiously made his way out of the stacks.

He pushed open the door to the second floor boys' washroom, relieved find it empty. Stepping over to the sink he ran the water until it was warm, pulled several disposable towels from the dispenser, then set about the business of cleaning away the evidence of his first sexual experience. He worked quickly and efficiently, one ear cocked towards the door for the sound of approaching footsteps, then heaved out a deep sigh as he fastened his flies and smoothed the tails of his shirt over the dark, wet patch in the fabric.

As he turned to toss the soiled towels into the bin, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror—all mussed hair and pink cheeks and kiss swollen lips—and with a gasp of panic he bent low to splash cool water over his face repeatedly, then ran his wet fingers through his curls to tame them, frantic breaths slowing gradually as his appearance returned to normal. He gave himself one last appraising look before leaving the bathroom, satisfied that he'd been successful in what he'd set out to accomplish:

_No one would know._

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It's the cry that wakes him.

High and distressed, the plaintive wail pierces through the veil of sleep that had settled over him like a second skin, cloaked him in warmth and comfort so completely when he'd nodded off in John's arms. His eyes snap open at the sound, the familiar shapes and shadows slowly defining themselves in the dark as he holds his breath, listening.

The room is silent but for his own shallow breaths and the slightly laboured one's from the man asleep beside him—and for a moment he wonders if the sound was real or just the relic of a dream. Until he hears it again.

A whimper this time, soft and mournful and _heartbreaking_.

"John?" Sherlock asks softly, turning onto his side and examining his outline, barely visible in the dim glow of moonlight through the curtains. A quiet sob sounds into the darkness, pathetic and small and muffled as John's head thrashes against the pillow. Sherlock sits up immediately and stretches over John to flick on the beside lamp. Blinking against the sudden illumination, he looks down to find John curled up into a tight ball beneath the covers, a look of deep distress stretched across his sleeping face. Alarmed, he reaches out and slips his fingers gently over John's shoulder. "John, are you all ri—"

"I can't," John whines, voice tense and thin and so very unlike himself that it makes Sherlock's stomach clench with worry. "Please, I can't..."

"John," Sherlock says again, a bit louder and more forcefully this time, as he grips a bare shoulder and shakes it firmly. "Wake up."
“No!” John’s eyes snap open, arms raised defensively as he sits up abruptly. One muscled forearm collides roughly with Sherlock’s bare chest, forcing a gasp of surprise from his lungs. “Please…”

“It’s all right,” Sherlock assures him, injecting a calm into his tone that he doesn’t feel even as he circles long fingers around John’s wrists and struggles to control his flailing arms. He tugs them close to his own chest and keeps talking. “It was just a dream, John. It’s not real, I promise.”

John’s eyes are wide pools of blue as he stares through Sherlock, shaking his head and gasping for breath, a panicked plea in his voice as he mutters, “I can’t, I don’t want to, I can’t…”

“You don’t have to, John,” Sherlock insists, a touch of fear creeping into his voice that he tamps down immediately, transferring both of John’s struggling wrists into one large hand as he lifts the other to cup a flushed, tear-stained cheek. “Look at me, I’m right here, and you’re safe.”

John clamps his eyes shut as his entire body tenses, and for a few terrifying moments Sherlock is sure he’s witnessing a seizure—when John suddenly sucks in a sharp breath and begins blinking rapidly. His eyes flit around the dimly lit room, then come to rest on Sherlock. As an unmistakable look of recognition settles over his features, Sherlock lets out a pent up breath, his shoulders slumping in relief as the tension in John’s body starts to abate.

“Sherlock?” John asks, his voice small and wrecked.

“I’m here.” Sherlock breathes a sigh that is equal parts relief and heartbreak as he watches the look of fear on John’s face slowly give way to confusion. “You were having a nightmare.”

“Was I?”

“Yes, but it’s all right. ” Sherlock swipes away the moisture on one tanned cheek gently with the pad of his thumb. “It’s over now.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Sherlock interrupts, his voice soft and kind, but firm. He slides the hand still holding John’s face around to thread his fingers through the short hair at the base of his skull and scratches idly, smiling slightly as John’s eyes close and a soft sigh escapes from between his lips. He leans forward and presses a kiss to John’s brow. “I’ll be right back.”

When he flicks the bathroom light off a minute later and crosses back towards the bed, John is sitting with his knees drawn up, looking at him through bleary eyes and he takes the glass of water with fairly steady fingers. As he tips it against his lips, Sherlock crawls back up onto the mattress to settle a cool flannel over the back of a tanned neck, holding it gently in place while John drains the cup in one long pull. He watches the pink tip of John’s tongue trail over his slightly chapped bottom lip, sees his top teeth press against it before he draws in a long breath and turns to face Sherlock.

“Thanks,” John says softly, tipping the glass towards him and nodding. “I’m really sorry, Sherlock.”
Sherlock’s brow furrows in confusion. "For dreaming?"

“Yeah,” John confirms, with a weary shrug. “I have nightmares sometimes, I should have warned you.”

“The fact that you experience occasional bursts of unconscious hallucinations during periods of REM sleep hardly qualifies as something that needs specific disclosure, John.”

“But I hit you.” John shakes his head miserably as Sherlock takes the empty glass from his hand and sets it on the bedside table.

“You did not.” Sherlock lifts the flannel from the back of John’s neck and wipes it gently across his creased brow, then over each of his cheeks. He tosses it carelessly over the edge of the bed before reaching down to tug the covers back up over their bare legs. “Your arm accidentally collided with my chest. It’s not even red anymore, see?”

John scrutinizes the pale expanse of Sherlock’s chest through narrowed eyes, reaching out to run his fingertips lightly over the creamy skin before nodding wearily. Sherlock leans forward and presses a kiss to his mouth, his long arms slipping around him to gather John close as he relaxes into it. It’s a sweet exchange, all comfort and gentle assurance, and after a few moments Sherlock deposits a final peck to tip of John’s nose then slips back down under the covers. John settles onto his side and tucks his hands up under his chin, looking at Sherlock curiously in the soft lamplight.

“You didn’t ask me what the dream was about,” John says quietly, mouth stretching into an exhausted yawn.

Sherlock turns to face him with a look of open curiosity. "Did you want to talk about it?"

“Not particularly,” John says with a small shake of his head, his eyes clouding over slightly as he clears his throat softly. “I mean, I will if you want me to, but no, I don’t really…”

“All right then.” Sherlock nods, sitting up to lean over and turn off the lamp before settling back against the pillows and slipping his arms around John. He tugs him gently against his chest, raising his chin to make room for him to tuck his face into the warm crook of his neck. As John’s breath goes a bit ragged against his skin he makes small shushing sounds, holding him close, long fingers trailing softly in random patterns over his back. When John’s breathing begins to even out after a few minutes, Sherlock takes in a deep breath, lips grazing over soft golden hair as he speaks. “John, did you know that the honeybee is the only insect that produces food that is eaten by humans?”

John sniffs slightly against his neck, then shakes his head.

“It’s true, they are unique in all the world in that respect. And honey, as it turns out, is an incredibly labor intensive thing to produce, relatively speaking. In fact, on each trip out of the hive, a worker bee will visit anywhere from fifty to a hundred blooms, and an entire hive of bees will fly 90,000 miles—the equivalent of three orbits around the earth—to collect enough nectar to produce just one kilogram of honey.”

John snuggles closer, warm fingers slipping over Sherlock’s stomach before curling around his hip and tightening gently.

“The average worker bee lives for approximately six weeks, and only produces about a twelfth of a teaspoon of honey in their entire lifetime. Which means that nearly every piece of toast I’ve ever consumed was the culmination of the life’s work of at least twenty-four bees—with the assistance of tens of thousands of obliging flowers.”
“Hmm,” John hums softly against Sherlock’s neck, his breaths growing steadily longer and more even.

“And while they’re busy gathering nectar to make honey, they are simultaneously pollinating the plants that provide it to them. In fact, seventy percent of the crops that provide ninety percent of the world’s food supply rely on honeybees for pollination. They play an essential part in the survival of the human race.”

John’s warm breath ghosts over Sherlock’s skin, his chest rising and falling in a gentle rhythm beneath the palm splayed possessively between his shoulder blades.

“Amazingly, all of that crucial work is performed by creatures that have a brain approximately the size of a sesame seed, yet they have a remarkable capacity for learning and memory. They make complex calculations involving distance and efficiency, and they communicate these things to one another by dancing. They’re fascinating creatures. One day, I’d like to have hives of my own, I think.”

When John huffs out a quiet snore across his collar bone, Sherlock turns his head to brush a kiss against his hair, smiles, and goes back to sleep.

When his eyes flutter open the next morning, the light streaming in through the tall window bathes the room in a buttery glow, the sounds of the city floating in on the cool breeze that drifts in through the cracked window. He snuffles down more deeply into the pillow, dragging the covers up over his face and rolling instinctively towards the other side of the bed, seeking out the warmth of John’s compact body.

He finds empty space instead.

Pushing his head out from under the duvet, he lifts his neck and gazes blearily around the room. The bedroom door is closed, the bathroom door is open and the light is off, John’s shoes and discarded clothes from last night are still strewn over the bedroom floor, but John himself is nowhere to be seen. Sherlock eyes the closet door suspiciously before assuring his sleep addled brain that John is not likely to be huddled inside of it. He’s just about to get up and go in search of him when he hears the sound of footsteps approaching in the hall. There’s a pause, followed by a heavy rattling thud, then the knob turns and the door swings inward.

Peering through the doorway, he’s met by the unexpected (though by no means unpleasant) sight of John Watson’s bum, red cotton y-fronts stretched over the swell of his arse as he’s bent over at the waist. After a moment John stands up, and backs slowly into the room, catching the edge of the door with his bare toes and swinging it closed before turning slightly and bumping it shut with one pants-clad hip. As he turns towards the bed, Sherlock watches him cross to the broad desk by the wall to set the large object in his hands carefully down onto it.

“What’s all this?” Sherlock asks, sitting up and stretching his long arms out in a luxurious yawn.

“Breakfast,” John says, with a terse nod, reaching down and clearing a bit more space for the enormous tray filled with various dishes and cups and beverage containers. “Hope you’re hungry.”

“Is there coffee?” Sherlock asks hopefully.

“There is. There’s also tea, and milk, and fresh squeezed orange juice,” John confirms, lifting the thermal carafe and pouring a measure of the steaming liquid into a large mug on the tray, then lifting
the lid from the accompanying sugar bowl and adding several spoonfuls before stirring the resulting concoction.

Aggressively.

“Coffee’s fine for me,” Sherlock says casually, eyeing John’s bare chest appreciatively as he makes his way towards him.

“Are you sure?” John asks, his pleasant tone at odds with the tight set of his jaw as he crosses the room to hand Sherlock his coffee. “Because there’s also bacon. And toast. And eggs—poached and boiled—and fresh fruit.”

“That’s quite a lot of food,” Sherlock says, looking slightly confused as he lifts his cup to his mouth and blows across the surface before taking a sip. “You really shouldn’t have gone to all that trouble.”

“Oh, I didn’t,” John says, crossing back over to the tray and preparing himself a cup of coffee before turning to lean one hip casually against the edge of the desk. “Marie did.”

Sherlock pauses in mid sip to stare at John for a long moment, his eyes trailing over him from sleep mussed hair to bare toes, before he looks back up to meet his eye. “So you met Marie, then?”

“I did,” John says, taking a sip of his coffee and nodding thoughtfully. “Lovely woman. We had a nice long chat, she and I.”

“Dressed like that?” Sherlock smiles against the lip of his cup as a blush creeps up John’s cheeks. “Well, I say dressed…”

Sherlock tries not to laugh—he really does—but in the end he’s terribly unsuccessful. The giggle bubbles up and out of his throat and soon he’s chuckling. He catches sight of the disappointed head shake John aims in his direction, and suddenly realizes that he couldn’t stop laughing if he tried to.

Which, to be fair, he doesn’t.

“It’s not funny,” John insists, jaw clenched as he looks at Sherlock through narrowed eyes.

“You’re so wrong, John,” Sherlock wheezes, his shoulders shaking so forcefully with laughter that hot coffee sloshes up over the lip of his cup and splashes down his wrist. “Ouch!”

“Serves you right,” John quips before dipping one of the thick cloth napkins on the tray into the tall carafe of ice water and crossing over to the bed just as a second wave of giggles causes more coffee to spill over the back of Sherlock’s hand.

“Damn,” Sherlock hisses, transferring the cup to his other hand and shaking his arm vigorously.

“Give me that, you git,” John says with a sigh, setting his own coffee cup on the bedside table before doing the same with Sherlock’s. “Let me see your hand.”

“It’s fine,” Sherlock assures him, still breathless with laughter, but allowing him to examine it anyway. John drags the cool cloth over the pink skin a few times, pausing to blow softly across the area between swipes until he seems satisfied that there’s been no appreciable damage. Sherlock smiles and huffs out a long sigh as John hands him back his coffee cup. “So. Been awake long?”

“A while, yeah,” John confirms, snapping the wet napkin at him playfully before taking a sip from his mug. “I went downstairs in search of coffee—and it didn’t occur to me to put on my trousers
“I said Mycroft was away,” Sherlock clarifies.

“Which is why I went wandering down to the kitchen in my pants,” John explains, rolling his eyes. “I didn’t expect anyone else would be here.”

“Marie lives here.”

“Yes, I know that now, thanks,” John says with a wry nod. “I know all sorts of things now, actually. I know Marie’s been with your family since before your mum was born, and that she grew up in a little Welsh town called Talgarth. I know how Mycroft’s diet hasn’t been going well of late, and that you are rubbish at picking up your dirty clothes. Oh, and I also know that you went through a phase when you were two where your favourite game was to escape from the bath and run starkers through the halls until she chased you down.”

“So I’ve been told,” Sherlock says with a shrug. “Mycroft insists there is photographic evidence of that stage in my life somewhere, but he has never been able to produce it.”

“Marie may have mentioned that as well,” John says, looking thoughtful. “But to be honest, she was sharpening a very large knife during that portion of the conversation, which I admit was a bit distracting.”

“How long were you down there?”

“Nearly half an hour. I know this because the first thing she said to me when I wandered into her kitchen half naked was: You must be John, the scones will be ready in twenty minutes.”

“There are scones?” Sherlock asks, his interest suddenly piqued as he leans to look around John towards the desk.

“A mountain of them,” John confirms.

“Excellent,” Sherlock says excitedly, climbing out of bed and crossing over to examine the breakfast tray more closely. Satisfied by what he sees, he picks it up by the handles and sets it down on the bed and climbs back up to sit cross legged before it. While he’s choosing a fresh scone the mattress dips as John settles beside him, their coffee cups in hand. As he reaches to take his mug from John’s fingers, Sherlock pauses for a moment, leaning in for a coffee flavoured kiss. “Good morning, by the way.”

“Good morning, indeed,” John says, shaking his head fondly before looking over the various offerings. “So these are the famous apricot scones.”

“The very same,” Sherlock says, plucking one from the tray and handing it to John on a small plate. “Once you’ve had one, no other will do.”

“Looks delicious,” John says, raising it to his lips and opening his mouth. A look of alarm flashes over Sherlock’s features as he darts out a hand to tug at John’s wrist. “What are you doing?”

“Having breakfast?” John answers, sounding a bit unsure.

“You’re doing it wrong.”
“There’s a wrong way to eat a scone?”

“There are infinite wrong ways to eat a scone,” Sherlock tells him with a patronising sigh. “There is only one correct way.”

“All right, then,” John says, biting back a smile and placing the scone back on his plate. “Educate me.”

“First you split it—by hand, not with a knife,” Sherlock instructs, slipping a thumb into the wide edge of the scone and gently prying it into two halves. John mimics the action, and when warm ribbons of steam rise from the crumbly centre he lowers his head to sniff the heavenly scent appreciatively. “Now you spread on the clotted cream.”

Sherlock slathers each half with a layer of the thick white cream, handing the knife off to John and nodding his approval as he does the same. Once the task is completed to his satisfaction, Sherlock carefully plucks up the small clay pot cast in the shape of a beehive and extracts the wooden dripper, twisting it deftly in his long fingers.

“It’s all about proportion,” Sherlock explains, lifting the utensil over his plate and guiding the thin string of amber liquid that drips slowly from it in an intricate criss-cross pattern over one half of his scone before returning to the jar to gather more honey. “There’s a very fine line between not enough honey and too much. I’ve found approximately two teaspoons per half to be optimal.”

“Very precise,” John says, his tone equal parts impressed and amused. “That’s like the entire life’s work of, what, twenty-four honeybees?”

Sherlock’s hand pauses, hovering above the jar as the thick liquid drips lazily back into the vessel, then after a moment he dips it back into the honey. “I wasn’t sure you’d remember,” he says, rolling the dripper skillfully once more.

“It’s all a bit hazy, to tell the truth,” John admits, raising one hand to rub absently at the back of his neck, tanned cheeks flushing slightly. “It was… nice. I don’t usually fall asleep so quickly, you know, after.”

Sherlock shrugs. “That was rather the point. A technique I picked up from my brother years ago.”

“What? Relaxation through late night insect related lectures?”

“Essentially, yes,” Sherlock says with a nod, smiling slightly at the look of confusion that crosses John’s face before turning back to preparing his scone as he continues. “Mycroft was never afraid of storms as a child. I, however, was. When the thunder inevitably drove me from my bed to take refuge in his, he would talk to me.”

“About bees?”

“Among other things.” Sherlock drizzles honey carefully over the second half of his scone. “Subjects he’d been reading about or studying at school. The storm would rage against the windows and I’d hide under the covers listening to him talk on and on about algebra equations and chemistry experiments and the golden age of piracy.”

“Sounds riveting,” John teases, raising an eyebrow in his direction.

“Some of it was, actually,” Sherlock admits, with a reluctant grin. “Though I suspect he altered the subject matter based on how quickly he wished to bore me to sleep. The finer details of parliamentary procedure had me nodding off within minutes on more than one occasion.”
“So you thought bees would bore me to sleep?”

“I should hope not, John. Bees are terribly fascinating creatures, after all,” Sherlock says, returning the honey dripper back to the pot. “The goal was simple distraction, nothing more.”

“I get it,” John says, lips curved in a grateful smile as he looks at Sherlock with eyes full of warmth. “After the dreams—well, it’s hard not to get lost in my own head. When I was a boy, my mum used to sing to me. Always calmed me down.”

“If Mycroft had sung to me, I believe it would have actually induced a nightmare.” Sherlock affects a theatrical shudder, a move rewarded by the rumble of a chuckle turned laugh turned giggle from John.

“You don’t fool me, Sherlock Holmes,” John chides, leaning over to bump their shoulders together. “You may complain about your brother, but I know you secretly love him.”

“Just for that, John Watson, it’s parliamentary procedure for you next time.”

“Don’t threaten me,” John says on the cusp of a laugh, leaning forward to press his lips to Sherlock’s scowl, slowly coaxing it into something much less dour before pulling back with a sigh. “Now quit hogging all the honey.”

Sherlock hands the dripper off to John, smiling at the sight of golden brows creasing over blue eyes and pink lips pressed together in concentration as the thick amber substance drips inexactly all over his plate.

“Damn.” John pauses to wipe a sticky glob of honey from where it’s fallen onto his bare ankle before lifting it to his mouth and licking it from his fingers. “That looked a lot easier when you did it.”

“Years of practice,” Sherlock reminds him, reaching out to retrieve the honey dripper just as another fat drop lands on John’s knee and returning it to the jar. “It looks like most of it landed on your scone, though.”

“What I’m not wearing, anyway.” John sighs, looking critically over his bare chest and then swiping away the thick bead of honey on his knee with one finger then examining it intently. “Not exactly how I envisioned getting all sticky this morning.”

Sherlock’s arm freezes as he returns the honey jar to the tray, just a brief pause, long enough to glance over and register the playful smile and glint of amusement in John’s eyes. He turns to face him then, eyes following John’s hand as it stretches slowly towards him, his lips parting automatically as the tip of John’s finger comes to rest gently on his mouth.

“Seems a shame to waste it,” John says, voice gone a bit husky as he smears the honey over a plush lower lip.

Sherlock pulls in a sharp breath and closes his lips around John’s finger, swirling his tongue gently over the tip. John’s face breaks out into a wicked grin as he presses his finger a bit further into Sherlock’s mouth, exhaling roughly as pale cheeks hollow slightly and suck. John drags his finger slowly out from between Sherlock’s lips then leans in to taste the honey smeared there.

*buzzzzz*

The rattle of the mobile phone on the bedside table startles them both, and John huffs out a sigh against Sherlock’s mouth.
“Oh, go ahead,” John says with a smile, shaking his head and darting forward to press their lips together one more time before lifting one half of his scone to his mouth and taking a large bite. His eyes grow wide then press closed as he chews with a near groan of pleasure. “Oh my god, you’re right—this is amazing.”

“Always the tone of surprise,” Sherlock mutters with a smirk, crawling over the mattress to retrieve his mobile.

“I’ll never doubt you again,” John promises, taking another bite and looking on with interest as Sherlock stares down at his phone with narrowed eyes. “Something important, I hope?”

“It’s from Marie,” Sherlock says, cheeks heating slightly. “She says it was very nice to finally meet you, and she wishes to warn us that she’s planning on coming up to gather the laundry in twenty minutes.”

John swallows down his mouthful of scone and huffs out a breath that becomes a chuckle that quickly devolves into a laugh that seconds later breaks apart into the sweetest of giggles.

“Well, that gives us plenty of time to get dressed, at least,” John muses, reaching for a piece of bacon.

“Or to get un-dressed,” Sherlock says, reaching down and slipping a finger under the elastic band of John’s pants, snapping it playfully.

“Marie will be up in twenty minutes,” John protests, his breath hitching as Sherlock sweeps their plates aside and gently pushes him back against the pillows. “There’s not enough time.”

“Sounds like a challenge,” Sherlock purrs, tugging at the soft cotton and leaning in close to mouth at the trail of golden hair that starts just below John’s navel, lips tipping up into a triumphant grin as short fingers tunnel through and tighten around his sleep tangled curls. He presses a kiss to the base of John’s rapidly filling erection, long fingers dragging the elastic band of John’s pants slowly down over the length of it until it slips over the swollen head and his cock springs free—smacking Sherlock directly in the nose.

He pulls his head back reflexively, eyes blinking in surprise as he watches John’s stomach contract, then quiver, then tremble uncontrollably as a familiar giggle fills the air. Sherlock stares at him through his lashes, offended.

John just smiles back at him, shaking his head as he looks down the length of his torso. Dislodging one hand from Sherlock’s curls, he brushes the fringe away from his pale forehead, one finger idly wiping at the glossy smear of pre-come on his upper lip. Sherlock opens his mouth and tips his chin up to catch the fingertip between his teeth, pulling it into his mouth and sucking lightly. He watches John’s expression change from amused to aroused in a mere fraction of a second.

Fascinating.

Sherlock laves his tongue around the digit in his mouth, palms sliding up and over John’s hips, thumbs rubbing small circles at the junction where thigh meets groin as he pulls the entire length of John’s finger into his mouth until his lips come to rest against a row of tanned knuckles. John’s hips twitch beneath him on the mattress, a broken groan escaping from pink, parted lips.

“Get up here,” John growls, low and dangerous, and Sherlock obliges—slowly crawling up the length of John’s body, sucking insistently on the finger still in his mouth, pale grey eyes locked on the smoky blue pair beneath him. John trails the fingers of his free hand down miles of pale chest,
his short, neatly trimmed nails dragging lovingly through the sparse hair and then lower, fingertips slipping under the band of the soft grey boxer briefs and tugging them down slowly until he frees the straining erection beneath them, his eyes never leaving Sherlock’s.

He glances down to Sherlock’s mouth, to where his finger disappears between lips glossy with saliva, then slowly drags it free. He raises his wrist and presents his open palm.

“Lick.”

Sherlock does as he’s told without hesitation, lavishing John’s palm with broad, flat, wet strokes of his tongue. By the time John tugs him close and reaches between them to take them both in hand, Sherlock is so close to climaxing that he squeezes his eyes shut and simply holds on, his earlier bravado all but forgotten as he rocks into John’s fist, groaning through gritted teeth with each thrust, the electric crackle of orgasm rocketing up his spine with so little warning that he barely notices when John’s lips close over his, swallowing down his cries before filling Sherlock’s mouth with his own.

Sherlock collapses heavily onto John, the space between their bellies now a wet, sticky mess. He feels John slip an arm around his shoulders, feels fingertips trailing softly over the sweat-slick skin of his back, feels soft kisses pressed against his curls as their breathing returns to normal.

With a deep sigh, he lifts his chin and looks at John—at his smug grin and sex-mussed hair and pinked cheeks. He looks positively debauched.

It’s glorious.

Sherlock leans forward, takes a kiss and gives a few back, then rolls off of him with a groan. John huffs out a deep breath, then reaches over to snatch up the napkin he’d soothed over Sherlock’s coffee-burned skin earlier and swipes at the mess on his stomach, efficiently clearing it away before pulling his pants back up and handing it to Sherlock who does the same before tossing the decidedly soiled square fabric over the edge of the bed. John picks up Sherlock’s mobile from the tangle of bedsheets and squints at the display.

“Six minutes,” he says, dropping it back onto the mattress. “A new record.”

“Told you we could do it,” Sherlock says, huffing out a chuckle as John giggles beside him. “What should we do with the other fourteen minutes?”

“I don’t know, maybe put on some trousers?”

“Boring.”

“Yeah, well, I think poor Marie’s seen enough of me to last her a lifetime,” John says, cheeks flushing with residual embarrassment.

“Not possible,” Sherlock says dismissively. “In fact, I would prefer we never wear clothes again.”

“We can try out that plan next time we’re at my place,” John promises with a grin as he levers himself into a sitting position, his eyes lighting up when he spots the forgotten breakfast tray and reaches down to drag it towards them. “Right now, I’m having another scone.”

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“I think I’m dying.”
Sherlock shakes his head as he continues to read over the detailed properties of nitrogen based functional groups in his father's old advanced chemistry text. "You're not dying."

"I'm serious, Sherlock." John sighs miserably, stretching out one hand to settle it limply on Sherlock's shoulder before bringing the other up to drape it dramatically over his own brow.

"So am I, John. You’ve just eaten a bit too much, it’s hardly a fatal condition."

"Why did you let me do that?"

"I did advise you against accepting the third helping," Sherlock reminds him, setting the book aside and stretching out to warm his stockinged feet by the flames crackling pleasantly in the main sitting room’s enormous fireplace. “And your rather colourful response was to tell me to ‘shut my shepherd’s pie-hole’. Or am I remembering that incorrectly?”

“But it was so good,” John moans from his reclined position on the sofa before curling onto his side and looking at Sherlock seated beside him on the floor. “And Marie made it just for me.”

“True, but I don’t believe it was her intention that you attempt to consume the entire casserole by yourself.”

“A little sympathy would be nice, Sherlock,” John pouts, pink lips curled into a frown.

“You’re right,” Sherlock agrees, raising a hand to brush through the golden fringe on John’s forehead and leaning in to deposit a soft kiss over his brow. “I am very sorry that you felt compelled to eat far more than was prudent for any single individual and are now paying such an uncomfortable price for your gluttony.”

“Yeah, now you’re just making fun of me.”

“Perhaps a little.” Sherlock cards his fingertips softly through John’s hair, smiling as he leans his head into the touch. “But I am sorry that you’re in distress, perhaps I should ask Marie to brew you a pot of her special—”

“Peppermint tea,” Marie finishes, striding into the room with a steaming mug in each hand. “Up you get, now,” she says to John, cooing sympathetically as he slowly manoeuvres himself into a sitting position before transferring one cup carefully into his outstretched hand. “My secret recipe, just a cuppa and you’ll soon be right as rain.”

“Thank you, Marie,” John says gratefully, clutching it in both palms, inhaling the fragrant steam before blowing over the top of the cup and taking a careful sip. “Lunch was delicious, of course, I don’t want you to think I didn’t enjoy it.”

“Nonsense, dear. Enjoying it is exactly what got you into this condition. And you’re hardly the first young man in this house to suffer because his eyes were bigger than his stomach.”

“That’s a patently ridiculous expression,” Sherlock scoffs with a dramatic roll of his eyes. “To begin with, it’s a physical impossibility for mammals—and even if it were not, can you imagine what a creature with such unrealistic ocular proportions would look like? It would be completely grotesque.”

“A lovely thought indeed, and so helpful to the conversation at hand,” Marie says dryly, shaking her head slightly and turning to glance at John. From his position between them on the floor Sherlock watches a look pass between them, a flash of shared understanding that ends in Marie’s eyes crinkling at the edges and John’s mouth stretching into a grin against the edge of his mug. He
narrows his eyes suspiciously at each of them in turn but the moment seems to have passed as quickly as it came.

“Is that one for me?” Sherlock asks, his hopeful gaze falling back to the second mug in Marie’s grasp.

Marie smiles and extends the cup in his direction. "Naturally."

“Is your stomach upset as well?” John asks, looking at him with a mixture of confusion and concern.

“No,” Sherlock and Marie answer in perfect unison, the former smirking as he blows over the top of the steaming mug and the latter shaking her head.

“This one just loves peppermint tea,” Marie tells John with a smile. “Always has. Used to come padding into the kitchen late at night in his pyjamas, hand clutched over his middle and a dramatic scowl on his face, begging me for a cuppa ‘sweet minty’. Funny how his tum was always well enough to enjoy a biscuit or two dunked into it.”

“It helped me sleep,” Sherlock says with a shrug, closing his eyes and savouring both the burst of sweet, minty warmth on his tongue and the delighted giggle that escapes from John’s lips.

“I have found it to be quite an effective sleep aid as well as a digestive,” Marie says, looking thoughtful. “Though I suspect that’s more to do with the splash of brandy I add to the nighttime version.”

“You served me spiked tea all those years?” Sherlock asks, looking scandalised.

“Of course not,” Marie scolds, shaking her head at him before turning back to John. “But don’t think I wasn’t tempted, some nights. Barely slept a wink, this one. Up at all hours, wandering the house getting into all sorts of trouble from nearly the time he could walk. Then he’d sleep the day away if you let him. It was like living with a very tiny vampire.”

“With a taste for peppermint tea,” John says, looking at Sherlock with warm eyes as a soft laugh escapes over the lip of his mug.

“It’s no wonder he likes it so much, really,” Marie explains. “His mum was quite a fan as well, I think Sherlock developed a taste for it while still in the womb.”

“A highly improbable theory, scientifically speaking,” Sherlock admonishes with a sigh.

“Morning sickness?” John guesses, ignoring Sherlock while taking another sip of his tea as Marie nods in his direction.

“She needed a cup each morning for months just to be able to face a bit of breakfast, he certainly didn’t give her an easy time of it,” she confirms, waving a dismissive hand that effectively silences the scoff of protest Sherlock had just opened his mouth to expel. “But he was born healthy and happy and right on time, so it was all worth it in the end.”

“What was he like as a child?” John asks, an interested gleam in his eye.

“A bit of a handful on occasion, but all in all he was a delight. Still is, as a matter of fact,” Marie says fondly, staring down at Sherlock with eyes full of affection before looking back up at John and raising one eyebrow. “Most of the time, anyway.”

John smiles up at her. “Yeah, that sounds about right. I’d say that sums him up pretty well at this age
“Good to know that some things never change,” Marie agrees.

“I am still in the room, you know,” Sherlock says, a slight pout on his lips as he looks back and forth between them, huffing out a sigh as his boyfriend and his housekeeper exchange a knowing glance.

“There’s rarely ever any doubt of that, love,” Marie says with an exaggerated sigh as she smooths her hands down the immaculate white apron hanging at her waist. She reaches into the large pocket of her apron to retrieve a mobile phone that she passes to Sherlock before busying herself tidying up the books and papers strewn over the floor and the wide coffee table. “That was rattling all over the nightstand while I was up changing your bedlinens.”

“New confessions?” John asks, swallowing down another mouthful of tea.

“Weather alerts,” Sherlock mutters, swiping through several screens as he scrutinizes the display.

“Still clear tonight?” Marie asks.

“Storms are expected to move in later, but zero cloud cover is still predicted for most of the evening,” Sherlock confirms.

“Excellent news,” Marie says, reaching down to lay a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder and flashing him a wink before turning back to regard John shrewdly. “Now, how are you feeling?”

John swallows down the last of his tea, then pauses as if considering the question carefully. He tilts his head, eyebrows raised as he looks up at Marie with wide eyes and a surprised expression.

“Much better, actually.”

“Glad to hear it,” Marie says, a look of distinct pride lighting up her pleasant features.

John eyes his empty mug curiously. “What’s in this stuff, anyway?”

“Oh, bit o’ this and a bit o’ that,” Marie answers vaguely. “Just a little something I came up with years ago when my late husband was ill, for the days when it seemed like the cure was worse than the disease.”

Sherlock’s hand freezes in mid tip, the last of the warm liquid in his cup sloshing up against his teeth, his eyes flicking up to Marie’s face as she makes a very rare mention of the husband she lost long before he was born.

“Cancer?” John asks, his blue eyes full of compassion.

“Pancreatic,” Marie confirms, her voice quiet and a bit tired. “He gave the chemo a good go, and I think the tea helped make it bearable, but in the end there wasn’t much to be done.”

“I’m sorry, Marie,” John says softly, reaching out and taking her small hand into his own. “It’s an awful thing to watch someone you love go through that.”

“It is indeed,” Marie agrees, regarding him for a long moment. “Who did you lose, love?”

“My mum,” John replies, his voice a bit thicker than usual. “Ovarian. Two years ago, now.”

“Too young to be taken.” Marie sighs, lifting her free hand and folding it again over John’s. “Such a lovely young man she raised, though. I’m sure she was terribly proud of you.”
“Even when I didn’t deserve it,” John admits with a small nod.

“Oh, I’m sure you did,” Marie admonishes, shaking her head at him fondly. “And you still do.” When John’s lips curve up into a grateful smile, she gives his hand a last squeeze then reaches for his empty cup. Still paused in mid drink, Sherlock comes back to himself and tips his mug up to drain it of the last few drops of tea then hands it to Marie who takes a deep breath before nodding at each of them in turn. “All right then, I’m going out for a bit to do the shopping. I trust you two will behave yourselves while I’m gone?”

“Yes ma’am,” John assures her sincerely.

“No promises,” Sherlock says, dragging the organic chemistry text back into his lap and scanning the page he’d been reading earlier.

“I’ll keep him in line, Marie,” John promises, his face breaking into a wide grin at the petulant look Sherlock aims his way.

“I’ve no doubt you will, dear,” Marie replies, granting them each a warm smile before she sweeps out of the room.

Sherlock is well immersed in a complicated passage involving the primary, secondary, and tertiary amines when John slides off the couch and sidles up close to read over his shoulder.

“Carbon-nitrogen functional groups?”

“Obviously,” Sherlock replies, continuing to read as a hand slips into the space between the small of his back and the front of the couch and strong fingers curl around his hip.

“So, what was all that about the weather?” John asks, resting his chin on Sherlock’s shoulder.

“There’s a highly technical weather observation station located in this very room, John,” Sherlock says blithely, lifting one hand to point towards the front of the house. “It’s called a window, I’m certain it can provide you with the information you’re looking for.”

“Don’t be an arse,” John chuckles, tightening the hand on Sherlock’s hip and slipping his other arm around a trim waist to meet it. “I meant, why are you getting regular weather alerts on your phone?”

“I like to be prepared,” Sherlock says impassively, keeping his eyes on the book.

“For what?”

“Any number of things.”

“I see,” John says, leaning up to deposit a kiss under Sherlock’s jaw. “Any one thing in particular?”

“Perhaps,” Sherlock says, his head tilting slowly to one side to allow John’s mouth greater access.

“Do you want to tell me what it is?” John asks, trailing kisses down the length of his neck.

“No,” Sherlock admits, a long sigh escaping from between his lips as John grasps the edge of the heavy chemistry text and sets it aside before rising up on to his knees and climbing into Sherlock’s lap to take its place. “Not yet.”

“All right,” John says with a shrug, sliding his palms slowly up Sherlock’s chest to rub soft circles over the pert nubs of flesh pushing up against the fabric with the pads of his thumbs. “It’s up to you, of course.”
“Thank you,” Sherlock says, his breath hitching as insistent fingers pinch at his nipples. John leans in to press their mouths together, his eager tongue licking into Sherlock’s mouth, all wet warmth flavoured with the ghost of cool mint and sweet honey.

“It’s really okay,” John whispers, his hips tilting so that the round swell of his arse is nestled perfectly into the cradle of Sherlock’s lap. He grinds down purposefully, drags the tip of his nose over the length of one sharp cheekbone until his lips are pressed against the delicate shell of an ear, short fingers carding through dark hair and tugging gently. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“Good,” Sherlock says with a sigh. “Then I don’t think I will.”

“Oh come on,” John whinges, all pretence forgotten as he extricates his fingers from Sherlock’s curls and sits back to toss his hands up in exasperation. “I’m throwing my best stuff at you here, Sherlock.”

“And I’m enjoying it immensely,” Sherlock assures him, running his palms up John’s muscled thighs and tightening his long fingers over compact hips, fingertips digging into the curve of flesh behind them.

“Then why won’t you tell me what you’re up to?”

“Because it’s meant to be a surprise,” Sherlock says, smiling slightly at John’s furrowed brow. He slips his hands around John’s waist and threads his fingers together over the small of his back, tugging him close enough to press a kiss to his frustrated frown. “Besides, last night you said you didn’t care where we went out today, as long as we did.”

“I did say that, didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“Damn,” John sighs, looking defeated. “Well, if you won’t tell me where we’re going, will you at least tell me when?”

“Oh course,” Sherlock says with a smile. “We’re going out later.”

“Prat,” John says playfully, huffing out a chuckle while rolling his eyes. “Fine. What should we do until then, do you think?”

“I was going to suggest that we study.”

“Let me get this straight,” John says, looking at him incredulously. “We’re virile young men in the prime of our lives, we’re all alone in the house, I am sitting in your lap, and you want to study? I thought you were supposed to be an actual genius, Sherlock. Surely you can come up with something a bit more creative.”

“I admit that a few other possible activities crossed my mind,” Sherlock says with a smile. “But I’m fairly certain that your recent run in with a certain shepherd’s pie renders those options moot for the time being.”

“Pfft, oh please. I feel perfectly fine now—oof!” John instinctively darts out a hand and clutches the two long, pale fingers that just moments before had prodded (quite gently, it should be noted) at his abdomen, and looks a bit green before heaving out a sigh and pursing his lips in defeat. “Yeah, I see your point.”

“I’ll make it up to you later, though.”
“I’ll hold you to that,” John pouts.

“Deal,” Sherlock promises. “Besides, last weekend you didn’t study at all so you had to spend nearly all your free time during the week to make up for it. I barely saw you for days. It was quite inconvenient.”

“Okay, maybe you’re right.” John concedes with a sigh, palms skating up the length of Sherlock’s arms and over his shoulders.

“Think of all the time we could save if you simply began each argument with that thought as the starting point.”

“Not a chance,” John says with a grin, swooping in for a kiss then folding himself against Sherlock’s chest, cheek resting against one broad shoulder, nose tucked into the soft bit of skin just under his jaw. “Someone’s got to keep you on your toes.”

“If that’s an attempt at humour regarding our height difference, It seems to me the directive works better the other way around,” Sherlock says, lifting his arms to wrap them tightly around the solid bundle of John in his lap.

“Shut it, you,” John warns. “I won’t have you ruining this cuddle with a short joke.”

“To be fair, you are the one who said—”

“Shh! Cuddles now, talking later.”

Sherlock turns his head slightly to press a kiss to the fringe of golden hair beneath his lips, smiling as John sighs contentedly against his neck.

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“I’ve got it, Sherlock.”

“You’re sure? Because I can carry it if you’d rather, I don’t min—”

“It’s fine,” John insists crossly as he tightens his arms around the large covered basket. “I drag giant crates of books up two flights of stairs on a regular basis, you know. I’m fairly certain I can handle one picnic hamper.”

“All right,” Sherlock says casually, letting the matter drop. He clutches the stack of folded blankets against his chest as he follows John down the stairs into the garage. They make their way around the ancient Volkswagen towards the gleaming Jaguar convertible, and Sherlock reaches into his pocket to press the button that opens the boot. The latch disengages nearly soundlessly as the lid raises slowly at the back of the car.

“What the hell is in this thing anyway,” John mutters, heaving the basket into the surprisingly accommodating space, rolling his bad shoulder a few times while Sherlock tucks the blankets into place beside it and shrugs.

“Not sure, honestly. I assume there’s a small variety of items to eat and drink.”

“You call that small?”

“You’ve seen what Marie considers to be a reasonable assortment of food for a breakfast tray, John. Do you imagine her offerings for a simple picnic supper would be any less abundant?”
“Point taken,” John concedes as they move from the back of the car, their hands colliding as they both reach for the door handle.

On the passenger side.

“Opening the door for me?” John asks, blue eyes glinting with surprised amusement. “And they say chivalry is dead.”

“Oh, no, I…” Sherlock begins, looking from John’s face to the car as he attempts to quash the spark of alarm that ignites somewhere deep in his gut. “I thought you would drive.”

“But I don’t know where we’re going,” John says, his easy smile starting to fade slightly.

“I can direct you,” Sherlock offers with a shrug and a wave that he desperately hopes read more as ‘nonchalant’ rather than ‘weirdly panicked’. “It’s a location you’re very familiar with, I assure you.”

“Yeah, but, Sherlock this is your car—and I’m pretty sure it cost more than the house I grew up in.”

“So what? I trust you.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” John replies, the lines on his forehead deepening slightly as he looks at Sherlock with increasing confusion. “But I’ve never driven a car this nice before.”

“No time like the present.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to drive it,” John insists, running his hand appreciatively over the top edge of the closed rag top.

“Then what’s the problem?” Sherlock argues, convincing himself that John won’t possibly notice the slightly manic edge in his voice.

He does.

“Sherlock, do you not know how to drive?” John asks, his tone light and careful.

“Of course I know how to drive, John,” Sherlock says, rolling his eyes and huffing out an exasperated sigh. Which is the truth, of course. After just three sessions on a closed course, the private instructor Mycroft hired had pronounced his skills more than ready for city traffic. The fact that Sherlock had refused to show up for any of the subsequent scheduled lessons was another matter entirely. He’d been quite busy, after all. “I’d just…rather not.”

“But, Sherlock, I can’t jus—”

“Please, John,” Sherlock mutters softly, eyes fixed on the polished concrete floor between their feet. He watches the tips of John’s trainers, sees them shift slightly as John leans forward, one hand reaching out to close over Sherlock’s fist where it’s clenched tightly around the Jag’s fob, while the other settles warmly against his jaw, lifting at his chin gently until he’s looking at John.

“Okay.”

Sherlock lets out a shaky breath, nodding as John smiles up at him with eyes that hold not even the smallest trace of pity, but instead are filled with quiet understanding. John lifts up onto his toes and presses a soft kiss to Sherlock’s lips, then reaches behind him to open the passenger side door, bowing at the waist and gesturing grandly for Sherlock to enter. With a shake of his head and a grateful smile, he climbs into the car, laughing softly as John practically skips around the front of the
Jag, rubbing his palms together with anticipatory glee before slipping into the driver’s seat and hitting the ignition switch. As the engine purrs to life, Sherlock fastens his safety belt and depresses the small button on the console that’s been programmed to open the garage door.

John watches the door lifting slowly in the rear view mirror, shifts the car into reverse, then turns to look at Sherlock.

“All right. The suspense has been killing me all day. Where to, love?”

Sherlock looks at him for a long moment, at golden hair shining in the reflected light of the headlamps, at pink lips stretched into a soft smile, at blue eyes brimming with affection. With a sigh he settles back against the smooth leather seat and at last reveals their destination:

“Morningside Academy.”

So this is the big surprise?” John asks sceptically.

Again.

“It’s not that a late night picnic in the library doesn’t sound lovely, mind you,” John continues as Sherlock ushers him through the front door and closes it behind them before locking it from the inside and leading the way to the stairwell. “And I’m not saying I haven’t thought of a few things I’d like to do to you on various pieces of furniture in there.”

“Have you?” Sherlock asks, throwing an amused glance in his direction as they round the first flight of stairs and approach the second floor landing.

“You’ve no idea.”

“Oh, I’m sure I do, actually. I have a similar mental list of my own. But we’ll have to table that discussion for the moment, because we’re not going to the library.”

“We’re not?” John asks, stopping his automatic turn towards the second floor corridor. “Where are we going then?”

“Up,” Sherlock says with a wink, then starts up the next flight.

“Great,” John sighs, pausing to readjust the basket in his arms and trudging up the stairs behind him.

As they pass the fifth floor landing, John stops for a moment to lean the bottom of the basket against the handrail, huffing a few deep breaths of exertion in and out as he rests.

“Nearly there, John,” Sherlock assures him, bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet. “Just one more flight.”

“Thank god,” John says wearily, picking up the basket and nodding for Sherlock to lead the way. “This thing is a lot heavier than it looks.”

“I did offer to carry it earlier,” Sherlock reminds him.

“Yeah, well, that was before I knew I’d be lugging it up a few thousand stairs.”

“One hundred and eight stairs, John.”
“Really?” John asks, cresting the last few to where Sherlock is waiting at a large metal door. “Are you sure?”

“Very. I counted them.”

“Maybe it just feels like more when you’re hauling a twelve course meal up them.”

“I’m sure it isn’t twelve courses,” Sherlock assures him. “And I carried the blankets.”

“Yeah, that makes us even, then.” John sets the basket down carefully before indulging in a long stretch. “So I can see how you talked Mrs. H. into giving you a key to the front door and the library, but how on earth did get her to give you one to the roof?”

“I didn’t,” Sherlock says, dropping the stack of blankets onto the basket, then reaching into his coat to pull out a small leather bundle. He lifts the flap and extracts two slender silver instruments, then falls to one knee before the door.

“Sherlock,” John says, his voice pitched low with shock. “Tell me you are not picking that lock!”

“All right, but it would be a slightly misleading statement, as that is exactly what I am doing.”

“Where did you even learn to do that?” John whispers urgently.

“Youtube,” Sherlock answers with a shrug. “And why are you whispering?”

“I don’t know!” John hisses, sounding a bit hysterical. “What if someone catches us?”

“There’s no one else here, John.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Well, for one thing, it’s Saturday,” Sherlock says confidently. “And for another, the only other person who might be here on this day and at this hour is the school’s head custodian, and I happen to know for a fact that he is otherwise engaged.”

“How?” John asks sceptically.

“Because on this particular evening he is out enjoying dinner and a film in the company of one Martha Hudson.”

“Really?” John asks, looking surprised. “So Mr. Dahiri finally asked Mrs. H. for a date. It’s about time.”

“Actually, she asked him,” Sherlock replies, brow knitted in concentration as he holds the pick rake steady while twisting the tension wrench, listening intently for the telltale ping of the final pin falling into place—his face breaking into a triumphant grin when it does. He looks up at John as he twists the knob and pushes it open. “After you.”

John bends over to pick up the basket, but Sherlock shoos him through the door empty handed, following behind with the hamper and the blankets. He deposits both near the centre of the wide, flat space, watching as John wanders over towards the edge, setting his elbows onto the waist high wall and leaning over to peer down into the street.

“Why do I get the feeling this isn’t the first time you’ve picked that lock?” John asks, turning around to lean against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest as he watches Sherlock approach.
“Probably because it’s not,” Sherlock admits, leaning a hip against the wall beside him, shrugging at John’s quizzical look and shoving his hands into the wide front pockets of his coat. “I used to come up here quite a bit, last year.”

“What, to enjoy the view?” John asks, an eyebrow raised as he surveys the unremarkable jumble of adjacent rooftops and rows of windows that surround them on all sides.

“Hardly,” Sherlock replies, the low rumble of a chuckle vibrating in his chest. “It was a convenient place to sneak a cigarette, on occasion.”

“Those things will kill you, you know.”

“Undoubtedly,” Sherlock agrees, tipping his head in assent. “Which is why I left the smoking to Victor, for the most part.”

“Oh, I see how it was,” John teases, one side of his mouth curling into a knowing grin as he glances around the rooftop with a more critical gaze. “Not a bad place for a smoke and a snog, I suppose.”

“The former, anyway, if not the latter,” Sherlock says with a sigh, gesturing vaguely to the darkened windows across the street before sliding his hand down the edge of his lapel, fingers worrying at a stray thread peeking out from under one broad button. “Victor was far too cautious for that. He was always afraid someone would see us.”

John pushes away from the wall and closes the space between them in an instant, strong hands reaching up to grasp his long face, dark blue eyes wide and focused and intense as he gently brushes his thumbs over the sharp edges of prominent cheek bones. John tugs him down and Sherlock goes willingly, smiling as the tip of a tanned nose nuzzles gently against his own.

“Let them see,” John says, his voice low and warm and thick like honey against his lips, and Sherlock opens his mouth to taste it—chasing after it with his tongue and swallowing down each delicious whimper the kiss wrings from John’s throat. “That will certainly have improved the view for anyone looking out the window tonight.”

“Perhaps,” Sherlock says, peering at the adjacent buildings through narrowed eyes. “Though I doubt there are many prying eyes focused in this direction.”

“Well,” John pants, smiling as he slides his hands out of Sherlock’s hair and down the length of his neck before smoothing his palms over the fine wool that covers his shoulders. “That will certainly have improved the view for anyone looking out the window tonight.”

“Perhaps,” Sherlock says, peering at the adjacent buildings through narrowed eyes. “Though I doubt there are many prying eyes focused in this direction.”

“Well, I can’t really blame them for that,” John nods, surveying the area again with a sigh. “Not a particularly impressive view of the city, is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” Sherlock concedes, nodding in agreement as he turns to survey the rather boring cityscape. “But the view is indeed the reason we’re here tonight. It’s rather excellent, actually.”

“Really?” John asks, stepping up next to him and looking at the rows of darkened buildings and jagged rooftops with narrowed eyes and furrowed brow. “What’s so special about it?”

Sherlock turns to watch him for a moment, warmth pooling in the pit of his stomach to chase away every trace of chill in the air as his eyes follow the edges of the familiar profile. He can feel the smile blooming across his lips as he reaches up to rest two fingers lightly under John’s dimpled chin.
“Not that view, John,” Sherlock says, pressing lightly to tilt John’s gaze towards the night sky, deep and dark and scattered with a thick blanket of stars. “This one.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated!

And in this chapter’s installment of “SQUEEEEEEENNNGGGGGGOOOGGGOOOOOOOOOD!!” I humbly present to you fandom author Ragazza_Guasto’s wonderful Read Between My Lines.

A sweet and sexy mid S3 canon divergent romp, this fic made me grin like a loon and squeal like a little girl. Or, you know, like a grown woman in love with the idea of two fictional British idiots being in love with each other. Either way, there was squealing.

I hope you love it too! Happy reading! (and squealing)
Hello Friends, and a very happy “Still January because this is being posted form the central time zone and therefore I do not have to cop to it being February yet no matter WHAT the posting date says. TAKE THAT, SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM!” to you all!

A lot has happened since the last update—there was jury duty and a couple of major holidays and the first new Sherlock episode in over TWO YEARS and then the most exciting thing of all: Team Beta welcomed its newest member when cheytea7 and her husband welcomed baby Emma Phoebe to the world! She’s adorable and perfect and I would dedicate this chapter to her but somehow honoring the birth of a baby with super-specific self-published gay porn seems wrong somehow. Because, against all prior evidence to the contrary, it turns out I have standards.

So when we last saw our boys they’d scaled the stairs to the roof of Morningside Academy and were just about to embark on the stargazing date Sherlock’s been thinking about taking John on since like 80 thousand words ago. Will the skies stay clear? Will there be discussion of music of a planetary nature? Will there be TEENLICK? Read on and find out…

A million kajillion thanks to my tireless BFF/Beta owensm who didn’t badger me endlessly as the writing process for this chapter dragged on, and an equal imaginary number of thanks to my girl cheytea7 who walked the line between cheerleader and taskmaster, all while being like 11 months pregnant. Mazel, my ladies. Team Beta is the whipped cream on the sundae of life. But not the cherry. Because maraschino cherries are gross. Oh, and a special shout out to Mr. cheytea7 who contributed all sorts of astronomy facts to the research for this chapter--so many that I actually had to make big cuts to the first draft because Team Beta said it was, and I quote, "too sciency". And they were right.

And to you, dear readers, my deepest thanks to for your patience as this story winds ever closer to its conclusion, I remain humbled by and grateful for every click, kudu, bookmark, subscription, rec and comment this tale has accumulated. As a token of my gratitude, you may each rifle through the piles of junk mail on the kitchen counter to see if there’s anything that can help you to steal my identity. Please drop me a line in the comments if you’re so inclined, you know I love hearing from you even more than I am looking forward to one of those Mickey Mouse shaped ice cream bars on a stick that I’m going to make it my personal mission to eat for every meal when we’re in Florida exploring The Happiest Place on Earth next week. Wish me luck!

See you all next Thursday! (Bwahahahaha ha ha…heh…ahem.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Remind me to tell Marie that I love her.”

“Duly noted,” Sherlock says, sipping from the cup in his hands as he watches John pour out the last
of the steaming tomato soup from one of the large Thermoses sitting beside the thick blanket spread out beneath them. “Shall I also remind you tell her how you were cursing her name not half an hour ago while we were lugging all this up six flights of stairs?”

“We?” John asks, one eyebrow raised as he wraps his fingers around the warm mug and looks at Sherlock over the lip of it.

“I did carry the blankets.”

“Again, not exactly the same thing.” John picks up a piece of crusty French bread spread with soft herbed cheese, dipping the edge of it into his cup before taking a large bite.

“Perhaps not if measured by weight,” Sherlock says, grabbing a blanket from the pile beside them and folding it in half again before lying down and tucking it under his head like a pillow. “But equally important to our overall comfort, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Oh, I don’t know, this is very good soup.”

Sherlock cocks a brow at him, running one large palm over the empty space beside him. “And this is a very soft blanket.”

“A fair point,” John concedes, smiling against the edge of his mug. He drains it in a few swallows then sets it aside before stretching out beside him, lying back onto the arm Sherlock obligingly provides as a headrest. He bites off another bit of bread and cheese, looking down his chest to brush away the crumbs that tumble over the front of his coat. “Bit harder to eat lying down, though.”

“After what happened at lunch, I’m surprised you’re able to eat anything at all, frankly.”

“That was hours ago,” John says, taking another bite and waving dismissively, sending a shower of crumbs sprinkling over the buttoned placket of Sherlock’s coat as well. “I feel fine now. Nothing a bit of magical peppermint tea couldn’t handle, apparently.”

“I have a feeling that’s exactly what’s in the third Thermos tucked away in the bottom of the hamper beneath the rather extensive array of baked sweets, just in case.”

“No wonder the damn thing was so heavy,” John mutters, licking a bit of creamy cheese from the edge of his finger and humming appreciatively as he looks up at the night sky above them. “Totally worth it. And the view is rather nice as well.”

“It is,” Sherlock agrees with a nod, staring at the unusually dense tableau of stars overhead. “It’s a rare thing, a night like this, when the atmosphere is clear enough that the ambient light from the city doesn’t occlude the view. It would have been a shame to miss while it lasts.”

“How long until the storms roll in?”

Sherlock reaches into his pocket to retrieve his mobile, thumbing the screen to life and examining the display. “We’ve got some time,” he says, dropping the phone onto the blanket beside his makeshift pillow.

“Good.” John rips off another bite of bread and chews contentedly before swallowing it down with a sigh and examining the last bit of left in his hand. “I think I’m finally full. You want this last bite?”

“No.”

“Oh come on,” John insists, turning over onto his side and affecting an exaggerated French accent.
“It’s only a tiny leettle thin one.”

Sherlock narrows his eyes suspiciously. “But I’m full.”

“Oh but Monsieur,” John says, waving the crust tantalizingly in front of his face while waggling his eyebrows. “It’s only waffer-thin.”

“Are you quite all right, John?” A prickle of alarm plays at the edge of Sherlock’s voice as he examines John’s eyes for signs of distress, noting the even pupil dilation while also vaguely registering the growing look of confusion stealing over his features. He raises one arm and holds a hand up between them. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“What, are you serious?” John asks, the confused looking giving way to amusement.

Sherlock’s stares at him, brow knitted with worry. “Answer the question.”

John’s eyes focus on the three raised fingers on Sherlock’s left hand, then flick back up to meet his own, then crinkle at the edges as a rumbling chuckle starts deep in his chest. The chuckle quickly becomes a throaty laugh, then suddenly tips into a melodic giggle that escapes from his lip and rings through the night, echoing all around them.

“John,” Sherlock says, waggling his fingers impatiently.

“Three, Sherlock.” John darts forward to press their mouths together, his delicious giggle spilling warm and soft over Sherlock’s lips. “I’m not having a stroke, you git. It’s Monty Python.”

Sherlock quickly searches his memory, flipping through the mental index of zoological knowledge he’s amassed in his eighteen years. Vertebrates, reptiles, snakes, constrictors, pythons...Monty?

Nothing.

As John registers the distinct lack of recognition the name invokes, he shakes his head and pops the last bit of bread into his own mouth, smiling at Sherlock as he swallows it down.

“Yeah, let’s move that bit of classic British comedy up the top of the queue, shall we?” John swoops down to press another kiss to Sherlock’s mouth before leaning over him to grab a blanket from the pile. He shakes it out flat and drapes it over them both as he settles again onto his back, head tucked next to Sherlock’s as they stare up at the sky, starlight reflecting in his eyes. “They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are.” Sherlock smiles as John shuffles a bit closer and tugs the blanket up, his left hand searching out Sherlock’s right to press their palms flush before threading their fingers together in the cosy space between them.

“All right, let’s see what we’ve got here.” John scans the sky critically before huffing out a triumphant ‘aha!’ as he lifts his right hand to point straight up and slightly to the right. “So there’s The Plough, see the how the handle curves just there and then ends in four stars that make up the blade?”

“Well spotted.” Sherlock’s eyes trace the familiar ladle shape in the sky, bright lines appearing to connect the spaces between the stars in his mind. “My uncle Alex refers to it as ‘The Big Dipper’.”

“Makes sense,” John says, with a nod. “My mum grew up calling it the ‘Butcher’s Cleaver’. I read somewhere that it’s the most recognizable constellation in the sky.”
“Then you were misinformed, unfortunately.”

“Says the man who deleted the solar system from his brain.”

“The stars that comprise the ubiquitous plough-shaped formation known by various names across countless cultures and geographic locations are millions of light years away from our solar system, John,” Sherlock corrects, eyes focused on the sky. “And you’re only half-wrong.”

“Well, that’s a comfort. Which half did I get right?”


“An astro-what?”

“Asterism,” Sherlock repeats, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. “A recognizable pattern of stars in the night sky.”

“Yeah, isn’t that what a constellation is?”

“Yes, and no,” Sherlock answers cryptically, reaching up to retrieve his mobile with his free hand and thumbing the screen to life. “An asterism may or may not be part of one or more official constellations.”

“So every constellation is an asterism, but not every asterism is a constellation?”

“Exactly. In this case, the asterism we call The Plough is part of the constellation Ursa Major, which is Latin for—”

“Great bear,” John finishes, rolling his eyes at the impressed glance Sherlock shoots his way before he reaches out to take the phone while shifting to bump their shoulders together playfully. “I did graduate from university, you know. I’m not a complete idiot.”

“No, you’re not,” Sherlock agrees, turning to press his lips softly against John’s temple. “High praise, indeed.” John leans into the contact as he looks at the pattern of stars in the sky that correspond to those at the posterior of the picture of a bear drawn over those on the phone’s glowing display screen. “And honestly, it does look a lot more like a plough than a bear’s arse.”

Sherlock chuckles in assent as John hands him back the phone, then clicks the screen to black before setting it aside once again at the edge of the blanket and tucking his arm up under the blanket supporting their heads. “Any other stellar configurations of note you’d like to point out?”

“Sadly, that’s more or less the only constella—sorry, asterism, that I can easily find.”

“Well, as astronomical features go, that particular asterism is actually quite a useful one to know,” Sherlock says, sliding his face closer to John’s and reaching over him to take his wrist. He presses their palms together and aligns their index fingers, then raises their arms towards the pattern of stars above. “If you start at Merak—the star at the bottom of the far edge of the plough blade, and trace it up through Dubhe—the star at the top corner, then draw an imaginary line straight up…it leads you straight to Polaris.”

John smiles as his eyes follow the trajectory their fingers traced to the distinctive bright object in the sky. “The North Star.”
“The very same. Though it would actually be more accurate to refer to it in the plural rather than the singular. For thousands of years men have been using its position to guide them, never realising it wasn’t one star that led them home, but light of six separate stars clustered together.”

“I had no idea.” John squints at the twinkling light where it hovers just above the tips of their extended fingers. He turns to look at Sherlock, eyes narrowed shrewdly as he pulls their joined arms down and tucks them up against his chest. “So it seems that line you gave me all those weeks ago about the stars being uninteresting and irrelevant was all just an act?”

“Not entirely,” Sherlock denies, with a slight shrug. “Though I haven’t thought much about them in a very long time.”

“Why not?”

Sherlock shifts his chin to look back up at the sky, grey-green eyes scanning the familiar patterns and shapes, his mind labelling and outlining them automatically. He braces himself for the familiar sting of regret, for the dull throb of loss to start beneath his ribs and spread outward until he can barely breathe under the weight of it…but it doesn’t come. He considers its absence for a moment, then slowly becomes aware of a different sensation—the proximity of another body pressed close to his, the warmth of the man beside him somehow permeating multiple layers of fabric to spread over his skin and pool inside his chest to fill every empty space. He turns his head slowly to meet John’s patient gaze.

“My father loved the stars.” Sherlock pauses as John’s hand tightens slightly around his own, then returns the gentle pressure. “On clear nights he’d take us up onto the roof of the stable where he kept his telescope, and tell us all about them.”

“Fuelled by plenty of Marie’s hot soup and coffee, I assume?”

“Naturally. Though it was mostly biscuits and tea back then.”

John smiles. “Sounds like the perfect way to learn about the constellations. Or asterisms, for that matter.”

“And meteor showers, and a rather spectacular lunar eclipse. Oh, and we tracked a comet one summer, as well.” Sherlock’s eyes twinkle at the memory. “Once, when I was eight years old and Mycroft was away at school, Father woke up me up hours before dawn saying he had something special to show me. I remember looking through the eyepiece, turning the knobs in the tiniest of increments just as he’d taught me to, waiting for the image to come into focus—and when it finally did, it took me a moment to realise what I was seeing.”

John looks at him, eyes wide with anticipation. “What was it?”

“Jupiter,” Sherlock says, a tinge of the original wonder he felt that night creeping into his tone all these years later. “I’d seen pictures of it in books, of course, but they didn’t do it justice. Suddenly it was just hanging there in the sky—bright and crisp and real, perfectly round and striped with mad swirls of color. It was…”

“Amazing?”

“Amazing,” Sherlock’s lips curl into a smile. “It was an odd feeling, to see something exponentially larger than the very planet I was standing on, but still it looked so small, like I could reach out and hold it in my hand.”

John narrows his eyes, looking at him curiously. “Jupiter is a planet, right?”
Sherlock eyes him suspiciously. “Yes.”

“Oh, okay,” John says with a relieved nod. “I thought so, but I just wanted to make sure. I get confused sometimes about the names of the planets—it would be so much easier to keep track of these things if I had a way to remember them, maybe a song of some sort?”

“You’re relentless.” Sherlock shakes his head as John’s giggle rings out all around them in the cool evening air.

“I bet your Dad would have sung it for me.”

“I doubt you could have stopped him from doing so.” Sherlock chuckles softly at the thought, a low rumble of a thing that thrums in his chest. “He tracked the orbits of the planets and their positions in the sky from year to year. The constellations were his favourite, though. He knew them all, their origins and histories and the various mythologies. Ancient gods and monsters and the battles waged between the two, tragic tales of jealousy and deceit, of epic love and eternal loss.”

“So just your basic astronomical soap opera, then?”

“In a way, yes,” Sherlock admits, head tipping in a thoughtful nod. “The names may have changed over the years, but the themes are, as ever, essentially the same.”

“Makes sense, actually,” John says, eyes roving the sky with its countless points of light overhead. “They say there’s nothing new under the sun, I suppose the same goes for the stars as well.”

“My father would have agreed with you, I think.” Sherlock shifts his chin slightly to rest a cheek against John’s crown. “He always said that the sky was humanity’s first library, our oldest stories forever written in the stars.”

Warm fingers tighten around his own, just the slightest squeeze—a gentle tether to the here and now as the past swells up around him, a reminder that he is not alone any longer.

John is here.

Right beside him.

Sherlock breathes in a deep lungful of cool night air, closes his eyes, and remembers:

*Crisp fall evenings and sticky summer nights under endless black skies dotted with sparkling light... the smell of hay and roses and chimney smoke on the breeze and the spicy scent of aftershave on well-worn tweed... the rush of the wind and the bray of horses, the rumble of laughter and the sound of his name in deep, familiar tones...*

He opens his eyes slowly, breath escaping in a soft sigh as he scans the sparkling sky above, lips stretching into a smile as John shuffles closer beneath the blanket, cold nose trailing up the edge his jaw and warm lips pressing softly against his cheek before John tucks his head back up next to Sherlock’s on the makeshift pillow.

“All right, then,” John says, breathing out a sigh of his own. “Tell me a story.”

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“So it’s just a big square?” John pauses to lick a bit of chocolate from the pad of his thumb before popping the rest of the biscuit into his mouth, chewing it while staring up at the four stars at the corners of the asterism in question.
“Yes, if one refuses to employ even the slightest bit of imagination.” Sherlock thumbs his mobile screen to life and does a quick image search. “The Square of Pegasus is the body of the beast himself, see?”

John looks over the image of the mythological horse superimposed over the expansive map of stars: front legs and chest rising from a roiling sea, proud head held high, wings unfurling from his shoulders. He looks back up into the night, eyes picking out the same pattern in the sky above them.

“Yeah, I see it now.” John points towards the two distinct lines of stars that protrude from one corner of the square, representing the great horse’s legs. “I suppose it’s a good thing I wasn’t in charge of naming the constellations, because to me it looks less like a flying horse than an old television set with bent up antennae sticking out of the top.”

“The resulting artwork would certainly be a bit less majestic,” Sherlock teases, clicking the mobile screen into sleep mode and setting it aside. “Though the names of the constellations themselves are simply a construct of the time and culture they originated in. That particular asterism is known by several names throughout the world.”

“So if I start calling it ‘The Space Telly’ now, it could catch on?”

“It’s possible,” Sherlock concedes. “Though highly improbable. As mythological creatures go, Pegasus is rather ubiquitous.”

“Yeah, it’s a bit hard to compete with a flying horse,” John admits. “He belonged to Hercules, didn’t he? A gift from Zeus to his newborn son?”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, John,” Sherlock says with a withering sigh. “Are you actually referencing a cartoon as the basis for your knowledge of Greek mythology?”

“Are you insinuating that Disney films are historically inaccurate?”

“Glaringly. Pegasus wasn’t some sneezing little plushie moulded from a bit of cloud, he was a rather fearsome beast in actuality—the product of an illicit encounter between Poseidon and Medusa.”

“What, seriously? The lady with the snake hair and the god of the sea had a baby?”

“A foal, to be more accurate.” Sherlock smirks at the look of confusion on John’s face. “The rules of romantic entanglement with a god and the various progeny resulting from those unions are admittedly a bit woolly. Suffice it to say that despite his unconventional parentage, Pegasus went on to play a rather important role in several of the great myths.”

“Seems like all that would make Mum and Dad proud.”

“One would think,” Sherlock agrees, with a thoughtful nod. “But it should also be noted that he served as the mount for his own mother’s killer, delivering him into battle with her severed head in tow.”

“So…some fairly obvious mummy issues there, then?”

“Undoubtedly. Though it was all part of the very noble quest to save a damsel in distress,” Sherlock says, looking toward the patch of sky just above Pegasus, his mind drawing imaginary lines between the bright points of light. “The legendary beauty Andromeda had been chained to a rock, a sacrifice to the sea monster Cetus as a punishment for her mother’s hubris. Pegasus flew her saviour in to defeat the beast and save the day. Her image lives just above his in the sky, they even share a star—their constellations forever connected, just like their stories.”
John reaches across to find Sherlock’s hand and presses their palms flush, aligning their index fingers as he folds their remaining digits together. “Show me.”

“Andromeda is one of the largest constellations in the sky, though not a particularly easily identifiable one despite that fact.” Sherlock raises their arms, smiling as John shuffles closer to fit his stubble-rough cheek against Sherlock’s, then drags their joined hands slowly across the sky. “You can find her position in the sky on clear nights like this by locating the top left corner of The Square of Pegasus, then scanning up and slightly to the left for her most notable feature.”

John stares at the bright spot surrounded by a halo of light hovering just above their fingertips. “What star is that?”

“Not one star, John. Billions of them.”

“A galaxy?” John asks, eyebrows raised in surprise.

“The Andromeda Galaxy. The most distant object in the night sky that can be seen with the naked eye.”

“That’s amazing. It’s got to be like, what, a million light years away?”

“Two point three million, to be precise. But getting closer every day—it’s on an inevitable collision course with our own galaxy, in fact.” Sherlock smiles at the look of alarm that steals over Johns features. “But that won’t happen for about four billion years, so I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

John breathes an exaggerated sigh of relief, a smile tugging at his lips.

*buzzzzzz*

They both turn towards the sound, the light from the mobile casts a bright glow over the blanket. Sherlock reaches for the phone and twirls in his long fingers until the display is right side up to read the notice on the screen:

**NEW CONFESSION!**

“Well, let’s see it.” John tips his chin at the screen, leaning in a bit to get a better view as Sherlock locates the acid green skull icon with the small “1” floating in the corner and taps it with his thumb. The screen goes black and letters begin to appear one by one:

**iConfess: The sky is so clear, what a perfect night for stargazing.**

“Huh.” John nods, smiling at Sherlock as the words gradually pull out of focus and explode into a shower of white sparks. “Great minds think alike, yeah?”

“I suppose,” Sherlock says grudgingly, a prickle of—something—nagging at the nape of his neck.

“Oh don’t be like that.” John huffs out a soft laugh, then presses a swift kiss to a pale cheek before settling back down against the makeshift pillow. “You’ve been planning this all day, after all. Don’t worry, your clever mind is still the greatest of them all.”

“If you say so.” Sherlock sighs, rolling his eyes but biting back a smile at the teasing praise all the same.

“I do.” John nods, exhaling heavily as he scans the night sky, eyes seeking out the bright, hazy
patch of light Sherlock had pointed out moments before—gasping when he finds it. “Wow. I can’t believe that’s and entire galaxy. It looks so small.”

“It’s much more visible away from the city lights,” Sherlock says, remembering ink black country skies and countless images of the bright floating spiral of light through the eyepiece of his father’s telescope. “But you can find its glow on most nights, even when they’re not as clear as this one, if you know where to look.”

“Square of Pegasus, up and to the left.”

“That’s one way. Well done, John.”

“Yeah, thanks,” John says, tipping his head to roll his eyes at Sherlock’s impressed look. “I can be taught, you know.”

“Indeed,” Sherlock agrees. “You’re rather a star pupil, in fact.”

John squints at the pronouncement and looks at him suspiciously for a long moment, eyes widening slightly as Sherlock gives up on suppressing the grin that stretches slowly over his face, eliciting John’s familiar chuckle turned laugh turned giggle.

“Seriously?” John asks, raising an eyebrow. “I seem to recall someone telling me that puns are, by far, the laziest form of humour.”

“You’re obviously a terrible influence on me.” Sherlock sighs, shaking his head and frowning sadly.

“No I’m not.” John leans onto one elbow and taps a finger against his chest. “I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to you.”

“Yes, well, that too,” Sherlock agrees, smiling as John darts forward to press a kiss to his mouth before settling back down beside him and tugging the blanket up under his chin.

“So what’s the other way?” John asks, shuffling over until they’re pressed tightly together chest to thigh.

“The other way for what?” Sherlock lifts an arm obligingly to make room for John’s head to settle onto his shoulder.

“We ask her mother.” Sherlock threads his arm around John, grinning at the puzzled look that crosses over his features before continuing. “Andromeda was the daughter Cassiopeia, a notoriously vain woman who made the grave mistake of declaring her daughter to be more beautiful than the Nereids—Poseidon’s legendarily attractive harem of sea nymphs.”

“Ooh, I bet that went over well.”

“Naturally, the nymphs took offence to this and demanded that she be punished for her vanity. Which is how Andromeda found herself chained to a rock awaiting her death via vicious sea-monster.”

“The gods were really just a bunch of vindictive arseholes, weren’t they?” John shakes his head, tightening the arm slung over Sherlock’s middle.

“You’d certainly do well not to cross them,” Sherlock agrees, reaching for his phone and tapping it
to life to pull up a star map of the constellation. “And just to drive the point home, Cassiopeia’s place in the sky forces her to look upon the image of her daughter in chains for all eternity. She’s fairly simple to find though, just five stars in a distinctive peaked pattern.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve seen this one before.” John nods at the mobile screen, then looks back up to the sky, reaching out and connecting the stars with a fingertip. “It’s a like a great letter ‘W’ in the sky.”

“Exactly,” Sherlock says, thumbing the screen dark once more and setting it aside. “Though for years Mycroft insisted it was actually an ‘M’.”

“Talk about hubris. He’s lucky the gods didn’t hear him say that, or they’d have stuck him up there for all of eternity with the rest of the people who pissed them off for various reasons.”

“He’d probably enjoy that,” Sherlock says, lips tipping into a reluctant smile as John huffs out a chuckle. “The summer before he went away to school he made a show of pointing it out any time it was visible in the sky, saying that even when he wasn’t here that the ‘M’ would be, ever watchful, helping him to keep an eye on me.”

“That’s actually quite sweet.”

“Sweet? Really?” Sherlock raises an eyebrow. “Seemed rather like a threat, to me.”

“Of course it did,” John says, shaking his head against Sherlock’s shoulder. “Seems like someone just looking out for his little brother, if you ask me.”

“John, you’ve seen first-hand how Mycroft ‘looks out’ for me. Do you find unsolicited offers of bribery and extensive background checks charming as well?”

“A bit, yeah,” John admits, shrugging at the look of alarmed surprise that Sherlock tips his chin down to aim in his direction. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s a little scary on one hand, but it’s quite nice in some ways as well. This is the same person who distracted you with talk about bees and chemistry and pirates during thunderstorms, after all.”

“And parliamentary procedure.”

“Yeah, well, nobody’s perfect.” John presses up on an elbow to look at him curiously. “It sounds like you used to be really close.”

“I suppose we were,” Sherlock concedes, nodding as a soft smile spreads over John’s face. “But after the accident…”

Sherlock’s voice trails off, and the lump that rises in his throat surprises him—along with the prick of heat behind his eyes—and he swallows against the sensation, pulling in a long breath to steady himself as he considers the end to that sentence. As the silence drags on, he finds himself suddenly aware of the quiet, a spark of panic firing low in his gut and he struggles to find the words to fill the empty space, eyes flicking up to assess how anxious John is for his reply…

The expression that meets his own is open and affectionate and infinitely patient. The panic recedes almost immediately, a low warmth spreading in its place.

“Things were…” Sherlock closes his eyes as a rapid parade of adjectives float to the top of the seemingly endless jumble of words that each convey some aspect of just how much the whole world changed with the loss of Sieger and Rosamund Holmes—but in the end, there is only one word that seems to fit:
“...different,” he finishes.

Somewhat anticlimactically, he fears.

“Yeah, I get that.” John’s fingers search out Sherlock’s beneath the blanket and he weaves them between his own. “He wasn’t just your older brother any longer.”

“Exactly,” Sherlock says, surprised at how easily John manages to distill the complicated change in fraternal dynamics surrounding most pivotal event in his life into just seven words.

“You were so young.” John looks down at him with soft eyes full of empathy. “And so was Mycroft, for that matter. Losing both parents then stepping in to raise your twelve year-old brother—that’s a lot to deal with.”

“Dealing with things is a particular talent of Mycroft’s. He single-handedly dealt with all the arrangements and notifications and legalities and eventually assumed control of all the various interests of the estate. On his ever expanding list of responsibilities, I became just one more thing to be dealt with.”

“And you always made it easy for him, I’m sure.”

“Easy?” Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Easy is boring.”

“I figured as much.” John shakes his head, a small smile tipping up the corners of his mouth. “I bet he had his hands full with you—and he was all of, what, nineteen at the time?”

“Nearly the same age you were when your mother died.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s not quite the same thing, is it?” John tucks the arm he’s propped up on back down beneath him before resting his cheek against Sherlock’s shoulder. “I didn’t have any one else to take care of when she was gone. Well, unless you count Harry, I guess.”

“You hardly ever mention her,” Sherlock says, fingertips brushing lightly through the short hairs on the nape of John’s neck.

“We’re not close,” John shrugs. “We were, though. Once upon a time.”

“What changed?”

“Everything.” John sighs, shaking his head and shuffling closer to thread an arm around Sherlock’s waist beneath the blanket. “We were a team, Mum and Harry and me. It was that way for years—the three of us against the rest of the world. But at the end, as Mum got sicker, things got...”

John’s voice trails off, and Sherlock feels his brow furrow against his jaw as he searches for the right word.

“Difficult?” Sherlock offers, tipping his chin down to brush his lips against John’s hair.

“More like...complicated.” John leans slightly into the contact. “Harry is a lot of things, but easy isn’t one of them. If your brother has a talent for handling difficult situations, my sister is the exact opposite. It was all fine when Mum didn’t seem sick. But in that last year, when it was clear the cancer was going to win? She simply refused to believe it—wouldn’t talk about the fact that Mum was going to die, couldn’t even hear about it.”

“We all deal with tragedy in our own way, I suppose.”
“Or we don’t deal with it, as the case may be,” John mutters into the night. “Now, me? The sicker Mum got the harder I worked. In my classes, on the pitch, even at home—managing her meds, taking care of the bills, getting the shopping. What needed doing, I did.”

“It’s fascinating how two people with identical parentage can be so different,” Sherlock says, his mind a jumble of images from the days after his parents’ accident. Watching around corners and through cracked doors as his brother fielded every request, took every condolence call, handled every arrangement—wondering all the while just who this *man* was that had suddenly replaced the boy he’d always known.

“Mum always said Harry was a lot like my Dad, but I don’t remember enough about him to know what that means, really. And to be fair, she did *try* to do her part, I think. She would stay with mum while I was at class or had a match—but as soon as I walked through the door she was waving goodbye, off to god knows where, only to come stumbling back in at all hours. After a while she stopped even bothering to leave the house, just locked herself in her room and drank until she passed out.”

John’s voice is even and resigned, but Sherlock can hear the undercurrent of repressed anger buzzing beneath the measured words, can feel the tension in the muscles of John’s neck where it rests against his arm.

“That left quite a lot of responsibility on your shoulders,” he says, fingers stroking lightly up and down the length of John’s bicep.

“Yeah, well, someone had to keep it together,” John sighs. “All Mum wanted was to spend her last days at home, so while Harry was busy crawling into bottle every night, I was busy taking care of everything else. I was mad at her for a long time, you know.”

“Sounds as though you had every right to be.”

“I suppose,” John says, the concession punctuated by yet another sigh. “But she was mad at me, too. Still is, I think.”

“What for?” Sherlock asks, gaze fixed on the countless points of light reflected in John’s eyes.

John pauses for a long moment, staring at ridge of storm clouds in the distance, a thick curtain slowly making its way across the sky.

“The night Mum died, Harry had been drinking, of course,” John begins, shaking his head slightly. “I knocked on her door, even popped the lock with a screwdriver and tried to rouse her, but she was out cold. She didn’t wake up when the doctor came by to sign the certificate, didn’t even wake up when the funeral home came to collect the body. She was furious when she finally came to. Said I must not have tried hard enough to wake her.”

“That’s more than a bit unfair.”

“Maybe,” John concedes, his voice low and tired. “But then again, maybe not. I mean, I *did* try to wake her, but I can’t say I’m particularly upset I wasn’t able to.”

Sherlock turns his head slightly, brow creased in a mixture of curiosity and confusion, but the troubled look in John’s eyes is enough to make him pause—quelling the inevitable question in favor of letting the silence stretch out a bit until John is ready to fill it.

“She’s not a very nice drunk, my sister,” John says, mouth curling slightly at the corner in an unmistakably sad smile. “She’d have made a scene, I’m sure of it. Wailed and cursed and caused a
spectacle.” John shakes his head ruefully, pulling in a long breath through his nose before letting it out slowly. “Hell, she probably wouldn’t have remembered it in the morning either way. Maybe on some level I just figured it was easier to let her sleep.”

“No one could blame you for that.”

“Yeah, well, tell that to Harry.” John huffs out a humourless laugh before settling his head back down into the cradle of Sherlock’s shoulder. “She missed the chance to say goodbye. I don’t think she’ll ever forgive me for that.”

“She may. Eventually.”

“I’m not so sure.” John turns his head slightly towards the delicate plume of steam that brushes against his hair with each exhale.

“I wanted to see them,” Sherlock murmurs, lips barely grazing John’s forehead. “The morning after the accident, Mycroft had already made the identification—but I was convinced he must have been mistaken. He’d been away at school, after all, he hadn’t seen them in months. I wanted to be sure. Mycroft wouldn’t allow it.”

John pulls in a long breath, fingers searching out Sherlock’s beneath the blanket once more and brushing over them tentatively. “I imagine he was trying to protect you,” he says, his brow furrowing against Sherlock’s mouth.

“I understand, now, why he refused. But part of me still wishes I’d been able to see them, just one last time.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.” John presses up onto his elbow to fix him with an earnest gaze, shaking his head at the look of confusion that meets him before reaching for Sherlock’s hand and tangling their cold fingers together. “I get why you feel that way, I really do, but—it’s just, people talk about death in all these gentle terms like ‘passing away’ and ‘eternal rest’, like it’s something beautiful. But the truth is that it’s not always like that. Sometimes it isn’t peaceful at all—it’s difficult and painful and ugly. Your memory of your parents isn’t tainted by that reality. You get to remember them as they were—whole and happy and alive—and that’s such a gift, Sherlock. Not everyone can say that.”

John looks away then, gaze falling on a patch of the blanket beneath them, but clearly fixed on an image only he can see. Sherlock watches his face, his own gaze tracing the lines of an expression far too weary to be worn by such a young man.

“She was so frail by the end,” John says, his voice quiet and sad in the darkness. “Mum was a whippet of a thing to begin with—I was taller than her by the time I was fourteen, believe it or not. But she never seemed small, to me. Not before those last few weeks. It happened almost overnight, really. One day she was up and about, chatting and making tea—and the next she couldn’t even get out of bed on her own. I’d carry her from the bedroom to the bathroom, and she barely filled my arms.”

Sherlock runs his palm up the length of John’s arm to settle it over his shoulder. “She was lucky to have you caring for her.”

“Was she?” John asks, his voice small and troubled as he stares intently at Sherlock.

“Yes.” Sherlock slips the hand on John’s shoulder up to curl around the nape of his neck, fingertips tunneling through the fringe of golden hair at the back of his head. “Who better to attend to her needs than someone who loved her?”
“She was an independent soul, my mum. Always on the go, always taking care of everyone else—then one day, suddenly she was completely dependent on others for even the simplest things.”

Sherlock tips his head thoughtfully. “Perhaps that’s how it’s meant to be, really. A natural reversal of roles, in the end.”

“She hated it,” John says through clenched teeth, shaking his head and staring off into the distance. “She never wanted to live that way. She told me so herself.”

Sherlock’s fingers still against his neck, grip tightening slightly as the silence drags on for a long moment before John begins to speak again. “I was helping to put away the laundry one morning when I found the vial of morphine in her drawer. She came in and I was just standing there at the dresser, staring down at it in the palm of my hand. She was so matter of fact about it. Said it was her insurance policy against the cancer, a way to choose for herself when she’d had enough—and that I shouldn’t worry because she still had plenty of living to do. Then she took it from me, tucked it back in the drawer, and we never talked about it again. Until the night she died.”

Sherlock squeezes the back of John’s neck briefly, broad thumb tracing the curve of his jaw. “So, that night, she…”

“No,” John says as his eyes drift back up to meet Sherlock’s. “She didn’t.”

The air leaves Sherlock’s lungs in a long, slow, stream—his chest aching under the weight of John’s stare, the jumbled mix of despair and fear and resignation that radiates from the familiar pools of blue. When John’s fingers begin to slip from his grasp he tightens his grip on them, clasping their hands together more firmly as he slides his other palm forward to cup John’s cheek, exhaling in relief as John leans into the touch.

“She was too weak to do it herself,” John says, teeth pressing tightly into the chapped skin of his bottom lip. “She asked me to, and I…I couldn’t say no.”

“Oh, John.” Sherlock swipes gently at the skin of a tanned cheek, clearing away the moisture that spills over his fingers.

“I don’t regret it,” John insists, shaking his head against Sherlock’s palm, raising his chin to fix him with a determined look. “It was her choice, and I believe I did the right thing. I know I did. I know it, Sherlock. At least… I do when I’m awake.”

Sherlock hears the ghost of a whimper in his mind, sees John’s sleeping face, hears his voice—small and plaintive and agonised: ‘please, I can’t…I don’t want to…please...’

“That’s what you dream about,” he whispers, his throat tightening as John’s expression crumples into a frown, his eyes wet with tears as he nods against Sherlock’s grasp.

“Yeah, but it gets all mixed up in my head.” John clenches his jaw. “It isn’t like it was at all. In my dreams my hands are around her throat, or I’m pushing her under the water, or there’s a gun in my hand…and I…oh god, I just…” John shakes his head, presses his eyes closed and swallows hard. “Please don’t hate me.”

Sherlock slips his hand from below the blanket and slides it up and over John’s other cheek, grasping his face firmly between his palms. He sweeps his thumbs over John’s cheekbones, then up and over the ridge of his brows, gently coaxing his deep blue eyes open.

Sherlock meets John’s wary look with his own steady, unflinching gaze.
“I could never hate you, John. I love you.”

John chokes out a sob and Sherlock tugs him forward, slipping one hand up to curl around the back of his head while winding the other around his back to pull him close. John presses his face into the crook of his neck, shoulders shaking silently as Sherlock holds him, lips pressed against his crown.

John cries, and Sherlock watches the stars blink out one by one, obscured by the blanket of clouds rolling steadily across the sky. John’s breathing smooths out gradually, his chest rising and falling more evenly beneath Sherlock’s hand where it moves in gentle, rhythmic circles over his back.

The wind picks up a bit, the smell of rain thick in the air as the storm continues to move in. Sherlock pulls the blanket more snugly over them before circling John with his long arms once more. When he presses a soft kiss against golden hair, John snuggles closer, the cold tip of a tanned nose tucked into the warm space just below Sherlock’s coat collar, soft lashes brushing wetly against the skin of his neck.

The sounds of the city float up from the ground—the rush of traffic and honking horns and the low hum of thousands of people just going about their regular Saturday night business—a cocoon of white noise, a layer of gauze that protects this silence that surrounds them now. It’s not oppressive or uncomfortable or unwelcome, Sherlock thinks. It’s solid and real and honest—like John.

And yet it also feels fragile—vulnerable and soft and…precious.

Also like John.

John, who is always so strong and self-assured. John, who laughs and smiles and touches and says amazing and brilliant in a way that makes him believe it might actually be true. John, who held such a terrible secret so closely for so long. John, who trusted Sherlock enough to reveal it. John, here in his arms.

Sherlock knows there are things he should say—gentle whispers of comfort, sincere assurances and promises and declarations that, for John, he would gladly give. The words are right there, on the tip of his tongue.

But the longer he thinks about what to say, the more certain he becomes that this isn’t the time for talking at all.

His mind made up, Sherlock closes his eyes, takes a long, deep breath, clears his throat gently—and begins to sing:

“Oh, the Sun’s a hot star, Mercury’s hot too…”

Sherlock feels a soft gasp against his neck, as John goes very still in his arms.

“Venus is the brightest planet, and Earth is home to me and you…”

A deep breath seeps through the delicate fabric of Sherlock’s scarf to warm the skin beneath it as he continues.

“Mars is the red one, and Jupiter’s most wide…Saturn’s got those icy rings, and Uranus spins on its side…”

A hand tightens slightly at his waist, fingertips pressing divots into the skin below them.

“Neptune’s very windy, and Pluto is quite small…”
John raises his head slowly and stares at him—blue eyes wide with surprise, pink lips tipped up in a soft smile.

“So you wanted to name the planets—and now we’ve named them all.”

Sherlock holds the last note for a few beats, just the way his father used to, then looks at John with a slight grin and shrugs. “That’s the whole of it, I hope it was wor—mmff!”

John darts forward and smashes their lips together, short fingers raking through the curls on either side of Sherlock’s head as he coaxes the cupid’s bow of a mouth open with his tongue. Sherlock gasps in surprise, and John takes the opportunity to lick his way inside, warm breaths mingling to send thin streams of steam into the cool air around them. Sherlock’s fingers scrabble at John’s back as John throws a leg over lean, muscled thighs and crawls over him under the blanket, planting a knee on either side of Sherlock’s slender hips before proceeding to snog him senseless.

Winding his long arms around John’s torso, Sherlock struggles to keep up, losing himself in the ferocity of the kiss, soon abandoning the notion of give and take for the sweet surrender of letting John lead the way. Gentle nips and sweet licks and bruising collisions and the rough slide of stubble—he’s so lost in the rush of sensation that the first cold drop that hits his skin doesn’t even register.

Neither does the second.

The third, however, when it lands directly on his forehead, is a bit harder to ignore. As the fourth drop splatters over the back of his hand splayed over the small of John’s back, he is suddenly aware of the increasing patter of the rain all around them. He can hear the wet slap against the flat tar of the roof, the soft thump of it on the blanket beneath them, can see it shining in John’s hair as it slides down the short strands of gold to drip over his face.

“John, it’s raining,” Sherlock mutters against John’s mouth.

John drags his lips over Sherlock’s Jaw and nuzzles at his thrumming pulse. “Don’t care.”

“We can’t stay out here, we’ll get soaked to the skin,” Sherlock insists, gasping slightly as John sucks a patch of skin into his mouth and worries it between his teeth. “We should go.”

“Home?” John asks, shaking his head as he continues his ministrations to Sherlock’s neck. “No way. Too far.”

Sherlock threads his fingers into John’s hair, tugging lightly as he levers himself up. He pulls John into a sitting position with him, chuckling softly at the groan of protest this provokes before leaning up to plant a kiss over a very put-upon frown.

“Not home, John. The library.”

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He didn’t know.

He’d thought about how it might feel, of course. Closed his eyes as he took himself in hand, long fingers coated with slick. Pictured the expanse of golden skin spread out beneath him, imagined the flutter of delicate flesh pulled taut over trembling muscles as he thrusted up from the mattress into the tight circle of his own fist.

He knows exactly how it feels from the other side. The stretch and burn and the brief instant of panic (fleeting but real) at the initial breach, how it steals his breath and sets his heart pounding until
the first long, slow slide ends in the comforting weight of another body nestled flush against his own. He knows the feeling of being cradled and protected and invaded and possessed all at once. He knows the comfort and relief of that surrender.

But this?

He had no idea.

It’s plush velvet and trembling heat and the silken slide of sweat. It’s whispers and moans and give and take and fear and trust—so much trust. It’s cool leather against the length of his back and John’s warm back pressed flush against his chest. It’s pressure and release and the need to be closer.

“Sher….Sherlock…”

John’s voice is ragged and breathless, vibrating against Sherlock’s lips where they’re pressed to the side of his neck. Short fingers reach back to tangle in his curls, exposing more tanned throat to kiss. He slides one palm over John’s hip, fingertips scratching through the nest of golden hair at the base of his cock before he wraps his hand around it and squeezes, eliciting a delicious gasp from the man cradled in his arms. He loosens his grasp and slides his fingers up the length of John’s erection, fingertips slipping over the slick head and then beneath it to splay his palm over the trembling muscles of his stomach.

Lifting his knees to curl his thighs snugly against the back of John’s, he revels in the warmth of being spooned so perfectly together, and he wonders, again, at exactly how they got here.

When they’d made their way to the library, stumbling and laughing and shaking the rain out of their hair, he barely had time to set down the hastily gathered armful of blankets and cups and plates before John was on him once more—fingers working at the buttons of his coat as he pushed him down onto the long leather couch at the centre of the wide, open space.

There were seeking lips and playful nips and the slide of fingers beneath hemlines and waistbands until at last they were pressed skin to skin. There were searching hands and exploring tongues and wet mouths and strangled moans—and when John’s voice rumbled the question in his ear, Sherlock dragged his discarded coat closer to retrieve what he’d been sure to stash in the pockets before they left.

Light from the desk lamp glinted off the foil packet as John ripped it open with his teeth, then curled a hand around Sherlock’s neck and dragged him close for a long, messy kiss. Pale fingers scrabbled at the top of the bottle of slick, flicking it open as he waited for John to press him back onto the couch, knees falling open in anticipation—eyes widening in surprise as the hand at his neck slipped down between them to grasp his aching cock while the other worked the condom over the swollen head.

He watched John’s fingers deftly unroll the latex sheath over his erection, then raised his chin—the question in his grey green eyes met with a determined deep blue gaze. A strong hand closed over his wrist, and Sherlock stared in disbelief as the other took the bottle of slick and tipped it over his pale fingers. John leaned forward then, nose nudging against his until their lips met in a long, slow kiss.

“Please?” John whispered, sucking gently at Sherlock’s lower lip, teeth dragging slowly over the delicate skin before breaking away as he tilted back onto the couch, dragging a cushion from the floor and settling it under his head. He pulled one knee up and let the other fall to the side, laying himself open. “Please, love?”
Sherlock stared down at him for a long moment, eyes travelling up the length of the body spread out before him, then nodded—lips stretching into a smile that mirrored the one on John’s face. It was trembling fingers and quivering bellies and frantic breaths calmed with whispered praises and gentle kisses until at last he rolled John onto his side and spooned up behind him, slid one broad palm over the curve of his arse and down the back of a muscled thigh, then slowly pushed his way inside…

John.

Four small letters—one simple syllable—yet it expands tenfold inside of him, fills his head and consumes his mind and overwhelms his senses. It’s too much and not enough and all he ever wanted and in this moment he cannot imagine a world where John is not an inextricable part of him. Even now, buried deep inside of him, he longs to be closer.

He presses his palm against John’s stomach, tilts his hips back and relishes the slow drag of sensitive skin where they’re joined, then he presses forward again. He can feel the movement beneath his hand—feel himself inside of John—and the sensation steals his breath. A strong hand clasps itself over his, pressing his palm more tightly against quivering muscles and Sherlock’s control breaks for a moment and he thrusts forward roughly.

“Nggh—” John gasps, and Sherlock startles a bit, moving to pull back—but John shakes his head, hand reaching back to tug at his hip. “No, don’t stop.”

Sherlock moans against John’s neck, long toes digging into the arm of the couch, and he uses the leverage to press himself as deeply into John as he can. The strangled cry that rings through the air sends a shiver up his spine, and he continues to rock into John, their panting breaths synched with every slick thrust.

“Oh, Christ, Sherlock—more…”

Sherlock lifts up onto an elbow, trying to gain more leverage, desperate to give John what he wants. With a growl of frustration he slides his hand up John’s chest until he finds the corner of the cushion beneath their heads, then drags it free with one quick tug. He shoves it flat against John’s leaking cock where it’s pressed up against his stomach and rolls them over. John wriggles beneath him for a few moments, struggling to pull his arms free, then folding them above his head so he can lie face down on the couch. Sherlock nudges John’s thighs a bit further apart before settling on top of him. He’s nestled against John from hips to shoulders, and when he presses forward the sensation of his entire length being swallowed into the wet heat of John’s arse makes him gasp—and for a moment he can’t move, can’t see, can’t breathe…

The answering moan that reverberates up through John’s chest makes the air rush back into his, and he pulls out a few inches before thrusting immediately back in. The rhythm set, he concentrates on the sensation of John beneath him—the salty taste at the back of his neck, the musky smell of his sweat drenched hair, the sudden flutter of muscles clenched around him, the hoarse cry that that tears itself from his own throat as John chokes out a warning.

“Sher…lock…I’m…oh…oh…fuck….”

John stiffens beneath him and Sherlock presses forward as deeply as he can—willing himself to be still until the moment John’s strangled cry of release rings through the air. Two more deep thrusts is all it takes before his own orgasm crashes through him, ripping its way through his tense muscles as he shouts against John’s shoulder, his vision whiting out as the world goes silent and he collapses, spent.
He runs his palms up John’s shaking sides, tunnels his hands under his torso to hold him close, presses exhausted kisses into the broad line of his shoulders. He drags his lips over the pink rope of flesh that extends over the edge of one tanned shoulder, tracing the length of it softly with the tip of his nose.

“Are you making out with my scar?” John asks, his voice muffled against the leather couch cushions.

“Mmhm.” Sherlock continues to lavish kisses over the healed injury, smiling at John’s answering chuckle and wondering silently at that single moment in John’s past—how the future that he lost that day led to this present they share. He presses his lips against it reverently, then lifts a hip to roll off of John, who tenses slightly as Sherlock reaches down between them and gently pulls himself free.

He slips a foot down onto the floor then stands, ambling towards the circulation desk on shaky knees, snatching up a few tissues before stripping off the condom and tidying it away. He grabs the box and makes his way back to the couch, smiling at the sight of John still stretched out on his stomach, all hooded eyes and a lazy, sated grin. Sherlock leans over to press a kiss to a stubbled cheek, swiping a tissue over the worst of the mess on John’s bum, before pulling a blanket from the floor and crawling back over him to wrap it around them both.

John wriggles onto his side to face him, reaching below the blanket to pull the cushion from where it’s still wedged beneath his hips. He holds it at arm’s length, looking it over before huffing out a resigned sigh. “Yeah, I think this pillow’s a goner.”

Sherlock lifts his head, wrinkling his nose at the garish pattern of overlapping rainbow trout and the wet, sticky stain soaked into the fabric. “Actually, I think you’ve improved it,” he says with a shrug, mouth curling into a smile as John’s throaty chuckle morphs into a breathy laugh and eventually tips into the melodic giggle that he feels increasingly sure he will never tire of hearing.

John tosses the soiled pillow away, then snatches up another from the floor. “Budge up.”

He tucks the clean cushion below their heads, settling his cheek against the blue and white and red stripes then looking at him for a long moment. He leans forward and touches his mouth gently to Sherlock’s.

“Thank you,” John mutters against his lips.

“You’re welcome,” Sherlock says, wrapping his arm around John’s waist below the blanket and tugging him closer.

“Don’t you want to know what I’m thanking you for?”

Sherlock shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. Whatever I have, you are welcome to it.”

John pulls back slightly, and Sherlock watches the smile fade away. For a few terrible seconds, he’s convinced he’s said the wrong thing—but a moment later the smile is back, stealing across his lips and blooming over his cheeks and filling his eyes. John deposits a kiss on the tip of his nose, then tucks his face into Sherlock’s shoulder, snuggling in before heaving out a yawn against his neck.

Sherlock pulls him close, presses his lips against the soft fringe of golden hair, and closes his eyes.

““To a job well done!”’ Mrs. Hudson lifts her mug, smiling at the three faces gathered around the table.
“Hear, hear!” John clinks his mug against Molly’s, then touches it to Mrs. Hudson’s before holding it towards Sherlock and raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, fine,” Sherlock sighs, reluctantly lifting his own mug of tepid tea for a round of congratulatory clinking. He rolls his eyes before bringing it to his mouth, and when John flashes him a wink he tries very hard not to smile against the lip of the cup.

Unsuccessfully.

“Well, I’m glad that’s over,” Molly says, blowing out a relieved sigh. “I’m pretty sure we earned full marks for content, even if I did stumble a bit during the list of amino acids. But I still think we could have focused a bit more on the Krebs cycle.”

Sherlock nods, his expression serious. “Yes, Molly. I’m sure the diagram, PowerPoint presentation, and very thorough verbal explanation of the process left everyone in attendance longing for more detail on the subject.”

“You should have added a song,” John says.

“Perhaps an interpretative dance number?” Mrs. Hudson suggests, smiling against her mug as John and Sherlock both burst into laughter.

“Oh stop it, all of you,” Molly says, cheeks pinking as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “We worked for ages on that presentation, I just wanted it to be perfect.”

“And it very nearly was,” Sherlock tells her, setting his mug down onto the table and tracing the edge with a fingertip.

“You think so?” Molly asks, brow crinkled with concern.

“I do,” Sherlock assures her. Again.

“Good,” Molly says, lips curling into relieved smile. “Though it will be nice to spend the noon hour actually eating food instead of just reading about what happens to it afterwards.”

“Speaking of which, the lunch period is nearly over.” Martha Hudson pries open the lid on the tin in front her of and pushes it into the centre of the table. “Finish these up, I made them to celebrate your victory, after all.”

“Mmm, to the victor go the spoils.” Sherlock inhales the sweet scent of butter and sugar and raspberry jam, then plucks the last one from the tin and pops it whole into his mouth.

“It’s a good thing our presentation went so well,” Molly says, smiling at the librarian. “Might not have been a great time for tea and biscuits if it hadn’t.”

“There’s never a bad time for biscuits, dear,” Mrs. Hudson says, snapping the lid closed and standing up from her chair. “All right, finish up your tea and brush away those crumbs. The bell is going to ring soon and I’d like to clear this mess away before it does, lest anyone get the idea that all the rules have been suspended.”

John drains his cup and looks at her. “Not all the rules, Mrs. H. Nothing’s been set on fire.”

“Not yet,” Sherlock says, reaching into his pocket to retrieve a book of matches that he twirls between two long fingers.
Mrs. Hudson darts a hand across the table, moving so quickly Sherlock barely has time to protest before she’s sliding the matches into her own pocket and eyeing him sternly. “Nice try. Now give me your mugs, if you please.”

“I’ll help,” Molly says, rising to gather up the four cups and looping the strap of her bag over her shoulder before following Mrs. Hudson through the door.

As their chatting voices recede, Sherlock lets out a heavy sigh.

“What’s the matter, love?” John asks, sweeping the last of the crumbs over the edge of the table and into his palm.

“She took my matches.”

John chuckles, then leans over to plant a quick kiss over Sherlock’s pout before crossing the floor to dump the crumbs into the bin behind the circulation desk. “Well, you know the rules.”

“Rules are boring.”

“I know,” John sighs, picking up his coat and slipping his arms into the sleeves before picking up the stack of library books perched on the edge of the desk and walking back to where Sherlock is still glaring moodily at the door. “But don’t worry, I’ve got more at my place and you can have as many boxes as you like.”

“Let’s go now,” Sherlock says, rising to his feet and reaching for his coat.

John shakes his head and huffs out a laugh. “We can’t. I’ve got class, and so do you for that matter.”

“Again, boring.”

“Maybe so, but it can’t be helped.” John smiles as Sherlock sighs dramatically, then nods down at the books in his arms, looking back over his shoulder as he walks off towards the stacks. “I’m going to shelve these quick, then I’m off to campus. But I’ll be back to pick you up straight away after, all right? Now get your things and go to French class.”

Sherlock watches him disappear between two long rows of shelves.

“Merde.”

“I heard that!”

Sherlock grins, rolling his eyes and reaching down to heft his bag onto the table. He’s rearranging the contents to make room for his biology text when the heavy glass door to the library swishes open. “You can rest easy,” he says, anticipating the click of kitten heels over the hard wood floor. “I haven’t set anything on fire in the last three minutes.”

“Oh, that’s…good, I guess?”

Sherlock freezes in place, the deep timbre sending a tingle of recognition up his spine. He blinks his eyes closed, then opens them slowly before raising his chin to look at the person standing just inside the door. His gaze sweeps up over long legs and a trim waist and broad shoulders and cinnamon skin and ink-black hair…before coming to rest on a familiar pair of chocolate brown eyes.

Sherlock stands there, staring, breath stuck in his chest—and they stay that way for a moment,
neither of them speaking. After a few seconds, the visitor shifts his weight from foot to foot, then clears his throat and opens his mouth…

“Sherlock, are you still here?” John asks, fingers fastening the buttons of his coat as he steps out of the stacks and walks towards him. “I thought I heard—oh, hello.” John looks towards the visitor with a pleasant smile. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

The other man looks surprised, eyes flicking away from Sherlock and onto John. He thrusts a hand into his pocket and drags out a mobile phone, looking down at it before raising his eyes back up to meet John’s gaze.

“Um, no, I don’t need…” He clears his throat softly, then waves a hand in Sherlock’s direction. “I was actually looking for him.”

“Oh, all right,” John says, looking over at Sherlock, his brow knitting with confusion as he takes in the wary expression he finds there. He takes another step forward until he’s standing next to him. Sherlock’s breath comes back in a rush, and the oxygen helps to clear his mind. He turns to see John looking at him curiously, then directs his gaze back towards the door. “This is John Watson,” Sherlock says, gesturing to the man beside him. “John, this is Victor Trevor.”

John stiffens, then slowly widens his stance—his shoulders moving up and back until he’s standing taller and straighter than he was just seconds before.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” Victor says, brow creasing as he looks again at John and then back to Sherlock, fingertips worrying at the edges of the mobile clutched in his hand. He sucks in a sharp breath, top teeth pressing into the skin of his bottom lip as he lifts a hand and rakes it through his hair. “I thought you’d be alone.”

“Well, he’s not,” John says, taking a step to the side before raising an arm to splay his palm over the small of Sherlock’s back.

Victor’s eyes track the movement, widening slightly as he stares at John’s arm where it disappears behind Sherlock’s waist. He swallows slowly, gaze flitting around the room before coming to rest somewhere near his own feet. “Yeah, I see that.”

“Did you need something, Victor?” Sherlock asks, the heat from John’s palm radiating through him, the slight pressure of his fingers sending warm waves of sensation over his skin.

Victor shakes his head, still not raising his eyes from the floor. “Um, no. It’s…nothing.” He lifts his chin and nods at them, lips curling into a smile that doesn’t quite meet his eyes. “It was nice to meet you,” he mumbles at John, glancing briefly in Sherlock’s direction before turning and disappearing into the hallway.

Sherlock watches the door swing slowly shut, hears the scrape of metal against the jamb and the sharp snick of the latch clicking into place. He hauls in a shaky breath, then feels John’s fingers dig more tightly into the skin of his back. He turns to look down at him, at the narrowed blue gaze and the determined set of his jaw. John’s posture relaxes slightly, eyes softening as he turns to look up at him—then widening as he looks down to Sherlock’s waist.

“Oh, hell,” he says, nodding sheepishly down at his arm and moving to pull it away. “I didn’t mean to play the possessive arsehole, but he was just so—”

Sherlock lunges forward then, throwing his arms around John and tugging him close to press their lips together. He slides one hand down to the small of his back and the other up to cradle his head,
then licks his way into John’s mouth. Strong hands slide up and over his shoulders, fingers twining themselves into his hair to hold on tight as he tugs John onto his toes and kisses him until they are both panting for breath.

“What do you think he wanted?” John asks, hot breath spilling over Sherlock’s mouth.

Sherlock nudges their noses together and smiles.

“What cares?”

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Sherlock closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

He blows it out slowly, concentrating on the warmth of the palm curled around his bicep, of the soothing voice speaking softly in his ear.

“We don’t have to do this.”

“I want to,” Sherlock assures him, keeping his eyes pressed closed as he concentrates on the various sounds and sensations that surround him.

John runs his hand up the length of Sherlock’s arm to tighten his fingers around the back of his neck. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Sherlock opens his eyes and meets John’s gaze with a determined nod.

“All right,” John says, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek. “Whenever you’re ready, then.”

Sherlock reaches out a trembling hand, slides his fingers over the hard length, closes his palm over the slick round knob…and shifts the car into drive.

“Check your mirrors,” John reminds him, then drops his hand to his thigh and squeezes gently as they pull out into traffic.

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He makes a right hand turn, judging the gap in the oncoming traffic and timing his acceleration with just the right amount of force, merging seamlessly into the rush of traffic in front of and behind them.

“Well done.” John pats him on the shoulder, beaming at him proudly from the passenger seat. “Are you sure you haven’t done this before?”

“Only on a closed course,” Sherlock says, feigning indifference (rather well, he thinks) at the praise.

“You’d never know it. Figures you’d be a bloody genius at driving, just like everything else.”

*buzzzzzz*

The vibration from his pocket startles him, and Sherlock reaches towards it instinctively before strong fingers close around his wrist.

“Not while you’re driving,” John scolds.

“But what if it’s important?”
“Important enough to risk your life?”

“The anonymous confessions of Morningside Academy students are of utmost importance, John,” Sherlock says, flicking on his turn signal and looking over his shoulder before executing a textbook perfect lane change. “What if someone is waxing poetic about your arse again and I miss it?”

“Well, I can’t argue with that logic.”

“Exactly.” Sherlock reaches towards the phone again, protesting loudly as John slaps his hand away once more.

“I’ll get it, you prat,” John says, reaching into Sherlock’s pocket to retrieve the mobile, eyes narrowing as he examines the display.

“Well, what’s the latest deep dark secret to be revealed via iConfess?” Sherlock applies the brake as the traffic signal at the intersection ahead glows red.

“It’s not a confession,” John says, tapping at the screen. “It’s a text. From Victor.”

Sherlock raises his eyebrows, turning to look at John’s face, his troubled expression lit by the glow from the mobile’s screen. “What does it say?”

“It says: *I didn’t mean to interrupt earlier, I just came up to tell you that I’m sorry. For everything. I hope you can forgive me.*”

A prickle of alarm races up Sherlock’s spine, and the world around him slows to a crawl as he thinks back to earlier in the afternoon.

Victor standing in the doorway of the library, teeth worrying at his lip, hand nervously raking through his hair, brow knitted as he repeatedly looked down at the phone clutched in his hand—clearly wanting to tell him something…

The world comes suddenly back on line with the sound of horns blaring behind him and the rush of his own pulse in his ears and John speaking beside him.

“Sherlock? The light is green.”

Sherlock shakes his head and hits the accelerator, his mind racing as he calculates the route across town that will get them where they need to go as quickly as possible.

“He’s going to die,” Sherlock says, glancing in his rear view mirror and slamming on the brakes before cutting across three lanes of traffic to take a hard left turn.

John grabs the door handle and presses his other hand against the dash. “Who?”

“Victor,” Sherlock says, jamming down the accelerator to blow through the intersection ahead while the light is still amber.

“What are you talking about?” John asks, his voice tense as he holds on tight while their tires squeal around the next corner.

“He came to the library to apologize to me, John. Just like Melody did—and Sebastian. We know what happens next!”

John’s eyes widen, nodding as the realisation clicks for him as well. “Do you want to pull over? You can direct me.”
“There’s no time.” Sherlock shakes his head as he weaves around slower moving vehicles to reach the next intersection while the light is still green. “I’ll drive.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated!

So you know how sometimes you pick up a fic and the ENTIRE TIME you are reading it you can’t stop squealing at decibel levels only sea creatures (and dogs, natch) can hear — and then you get to the end and you immediately read it AGAIN because you love it so much you don’t want it to end?

Of course you do.

If you’d like to relive that feeling, may I humbly suggest that you immediately click on the link to this week’s rec and devour it as though the good ship Johnlock is sinking and this fic is your last meal? Author 221b_hound’s delightful Captains of Industry is just such a fic.

This story imagines our boys as Melbourne hipsters who meet in a fabulous coffee shop where a mustachioed John plays Barista to a fabulously awkward Sherlock with slicked back hair and a decidedly mutual crush. The rest of our favorite characters are in residence as well, and if you don’t love this fic then maybe call a cardiologist because there is SOMETHING WRONG WITH YOUR HEART.

I adored this fic—and I know you will too. Go and read and shower it with love!
Hello Friends—Long time no Thursday!

So I could simply ignore how long it’s been since the last update—because let’s face it, I love a healthy dose of denial as much as the next gal—but as the old saying goes: You can try to ignore the elephant in the room, but sooner or later it’s hard to deny that someone’s been eating all the peanuts. Or something like that, anyway. Maybe it was about hippos. Or rhinoceroses (rhinoceri?). Oh hell, I don’t really know, but I’m pretty sure it had something to do with a pachyderm of some sort that no one likes to talk about.

A lot has happened since the last update. There was a long awaited vacation, a bout of post-vacation exhaustion, the great head lice infestation of 2016, the not totally unexpected (but still a super bummer) diagnosis of the chronic joint condition that is my birthright, all capped off by that time I agreed to do two full time jobs for an indeterminate period of time THAT IS STILL GOING ON. Suffice it to say that there was a lot on my plate, which didn’t leave me much time to write. And writing, it turns out, takes time. Which, for a while there, I just didn’t have. Until now. So have your tickets ready, folks. The TEENLICK express is back on the rails and picking up speed!

So when we last saw our boys, they’d spent a lovely night gazing at stars and sipping soup and doing naughty things to each other on school property. Confessions were uttered, songs were sung, fluids were exchanged, science projects were finally presented, and old flames unexpectedly met new ones...culminating in the start of a madcap chase across town to try and stop the unthinkable. Will they make it in time? Read on to find out…

Six months worth of apologies for all the outbursts of “GOD, MOM! I AM WORKING ON THE CHAPTER! GET OFF MY BACK!” to my incomparable BFF/beta owensm who has been dealing with a dramatic saga of her own that has finally come to a surprisingly satisfactory conclusion. A pile of soft blankets and downy pillows for my sweet (and exhausted mother of two) cheytea7 who handled me with such kindness and much less pointy stick-poking than I likely deserved during this unplanned fic hiatus.

And to YOU, dear readers, I sincerely thank you for your patience and encouragement while my real life wrestled my fandom life to the ground and pretended to spit in its face before sucking it back in at the last minute over and over. To each of you behind every click, kudo, bookmark, rec and comment—your support means more to me than I can express. If you ever need anyone to watch your dog, let me know, because we are SUPER good at it. Just ask my brother about that time last month when we agreed to dog sit for their adorable little bichon mix while they went on vacation, and how he was still alive at the end of it. Which is saying something, because that dog is a TOTAL ASSHOLE. My brand new carpet will likely never recover.

Feel free to drop me a line in the comments, you know I love hearing from you even more than I hate spiders. That’s not a joke or anything, I just REALLY HATE spiders. Once when I was in the shower, I looked up and there was this giant hairy black eight legged beast on the wall and it was super inconvenient because I had to get out of the shower with conditioner still in my hair, hastily pack a bag, then burn down my house.
“He’s not picking up,” John says, looking down at the display on Sherlock’s mobile and tapping the red *end call* button before immediately tapping to redial the number. “It’s not going directly to voice mail, though, so he hasn’t turned it off.”

“Keep trying!” Sherlock orders, eyes fixed on the road as he executes a sharp left turn, the old Volkswagen’s tires squealing around the corner as they tear down the middle of a street lined with posh city homes.

John throws out an arm, bracing himself against the dash while tapping at the screen, then holding his breath as the fourth ring ends abruptly and there’s a second of dead air before a rich baritone voice breaks the silence:

“Vic here--leave a message, I guess.”

John huffs out a frustrated sigh, eyes widening as Sherlock swerves suddenly to give a woman pushing a pram a wide berth where she’s just stepped off the kerb without taking her eyes off of the mobile clutched in her free hand. “Oi, watch it!”

“I am paying attention! She wasn’t.”

“Maybe just slow it down a little,” John suggests, hissing as Sherlock blows through a (thankfully) deserted intersection and flies down the wide, tree lined street.

“*Life and death*, John,” Sherlock snaps, eyes quickly scanning each side of the road before completely ignoring a stop sign.

“Yeah, but we need to get there alive!” John says through clenched teeth, the safety belt straining across his chest as the front wheels leap up over the kerb and the car screeches to a halt inches from the sturdy brick column supporting one end of a heavy black gate.

“And now we have.” Sherlock shifts the car into park, not bothering to turn off the engine before throwing open the driver’s side door and hitting the pavement at a run. Grasping the heavy bars of the wrought iron barrier, he tries to force it open—first pulling out, then leaning his full weight against it—chest rumbling with a frustrated growl as the gate refuses to budge. A hiss of white noise fills the air, followed quickly by a tinny ring, and Sherlock whips his head around to see John standing beside him.

“Maybe someone’s home to buzz us in,” John says, short fingers tapping impatiently on the top of the keypad set into the stone support column.

Sherlock lets out an impatient huff, fingers raking roughly through his curls as he paces down the length of the gate. “We can’t wait long enough to find out,” he insists, nodding once as he reaches up to press his palms to the top of the chest-high stone wall surrounding the property, then leaping up and over in one swift movement. Landing gracefully in the soft grass on the other side, Sherlock gets to his feet and sprints towards the house, shouting over his shoulder as he runs, “Come on, John!”

“Damnit, Sherlock!” John’s voice is muffled and far away—too far away, Sherlock suddenly
realises. He slows his gait as he looks back towards the fence, at a pair of tan hands scrambling for purchase at the tall edge of the wall and a golden shock of hair just cresting the top as John works to pull himself up and over. In seconds, Sherlock has doubled back and is reaching up to help when a trainer clad foot nearly kicks him in the face as John throws his legs over, then lands beside him.

Arse first.

Hard.

Sherlock extends a hand, eyeing John with concern. “Are you all ri—”

“I’m fine, you bloody ostrich,” John mutters, grasping Sherlock’s hand and bounding to his feet. He gives his bad shoulder a quick stretch, chin jerking towards the front steps of the stately home.

“Lead the way.”

Sherlock turns on his heel and sprints over the well-trimmed lawn, bounding up the stone steps to the wide front entrance. Leaning on the bell, he presses it several times in succession, then pounds at the door with the side of his fist for good measure. After a few seconds he repeats the process, his mind racing with the possibilities as it goes unanswered. Bouncing on the balls of his feet, hands clenched into tight fists at his sides, he imagines Victor somewhere on the other side of that door—unconscious or bleeding or already cold and stiff and all alone…

He lets out a frustrated snarl, raises both hands and pounds frantically at the door, hears himself loudly demanding that it be opened immediately when John steps up beside him and lays a hand at the small of his back.

It’s the smallest of gestures, barely more than a whisper of contact, but even through layers of thick wool and smooth cotton Sherlock is almost certain he can feel the warmth of John’s skin radiating through his own. The touch grounds him, quiets the racing funnel of thoughts that had picked up enough speed that the roar drowned out everything else in the world.

Everything but John.

“Maybe he’s not here?” John offers, stepping forward to press his face to one of the tall cut glass windows on either side of the door, shielding his eyes as he squints into the dim foyer.

“Suicides are most likely to occur at home, statistically speaking,” Sherlock says, noting the manic edge to his own voice but unable to quell it. “Where else would he be?”

“I don’t know,” John lays a calming hand on Sherlock’s forearm and squeezes lightly. “I don’t know Victor, but you do, Sherlock. Think: Is there somewhere he might go? Does he have a car?”

“Yes! BMW, seven series, two door, silver.” Sherlock’s eyes widen as he turns and flies back down the steps and races around the side of the large house, John at his heels. The detached garage sits at the far corner of the property, a three bay structure taking up a large part of the back garden, accessible from both the curved driveway in front of the house as well as the paved private drive that snakes behind the cluster of impressive homes in the posh neighbourhood. Sherlock approaches the middle door then points up to the small round window inset into the space just below the peak of the shingled roof. “We can look through there, see if it’s parked inside.”

John shakes his head, squinting up at the glass. “That window is ten feet off the ground, Sherlock.”

“I’ll give you a boost.” Sherlock bends his knees and slaps one hand onto his thigh, then braces the other against the closed garage door. He extends a hand to John then nods down at his bent knee. “Step here, then up onto my shoulder, and I’ll lift you.”
“Are you sure about this?” John asks, looking sceptical but already reaching to grasp Sherlock’s fingers, the toe of his right shoe worrying nervously against the pavement.

Sherlock shakes his head and huffs out a dismissive sigh. “Of course I’m sure, John.”

“All right, but I don’t want either of us to break an arm or—”

“You’re wasting time,” Sherlock scolds, tugging their joined hands forward, then bracing himself as John lifts his foot and steps onto his thigh. He bears John’s full weight easily on his leg, supporting him with one hand while steadying himself by flattening his other palm against the garage door. He concentrates on staying still as John wobbles slightly then curses under his breath and steps back down onto the pavement.

“Shit, sorry, my fault,” John grumbles, stepping back and preparing to try again.

Sherlock locks his legs and braces himself against the door, palm pressed flat to the painted wood, distracting himself from panic threatening to rise within him by concentrating on the feel of it beneath his palm—the rasp of the tiny wood fibres against the whorls and swirls on his own fingertips, and the faint but steady vibrating hum that rumbles through the door and up through his fingers and arm…

“Stop!” Sherlock cries suddenly, waiting until John has stepped back down onto the ground before pulling his hand free of his grasp and then raising a finger to halt the question forming on John’s lips.

Sherlock leans forward and presses his cheek to the wood beside his hand, and with his ear against the door he can hear the sound as well as feel it. A low rumble, a purr really, quiet and distinctive—all finely tuned mechanics and barely contained power—the unmistakable sound of an engine.

A car engine.

Fear rises in Sherlock’s gut as he realises what that sound means. “He’s in there!”

“What, in the garage?”

“Yes,” Sherlock answers, nodding frantically and slapping his hands hard against the solid door. “There’s a car running inside the garage. It has to be his!”

John steps forward and presses his ear to the door, eyes widening briefly before his jaw sets into a grim line and he reaches down to tug roughly at the brushed silver handle set into the middle of the door, but it won’t budge. Sherlock watches him quickly repeat the process with the adjacent door with the same result.

“They must have automatic openers,” John says, crossing back quickly to the third door. “Do you know the code?”

“Code?” Sherlock asks, his own voice sounding muffled and hysterical through the haze of panic that wells up and starts to spread.

“Garage code, Sherlock!” he says sternly, pointing to the keypad inset into the frame of the door beside him. “Do you know it?”

“I don’t...he never told me…”

“Any brilliant guesses?” John asks as he strains against the final door handle and finds it locked.
Sherlock stares at the keypad, the numbers familiar but suddenly foreign—an infinite set of possible combinations presenting themselves in waves of digits floating in space around him. He shakes his head and tries to focus. “People are predictable—birthdays, anniversaries, anything with meaning,” he mumbles, eyes roaming over the keys, noting the slight wear on the edges of the buttons. Some more worn than others.

Victor’s birthday is in October, the nineteenth, he’s an only child, it makes sense that his parents would choose that date…

Sherlock quickly presses the digits: 1-9-1-0 and….nothing.

He tries the date again.

Again, nothing.

He rakes his fingers roughly through his curls and huffs out a growl of frustration. Thinking fast, he adds the year: 1-9-1-0-9-8.

Nothing. The whole year then?

1-9-1-0-1-9-9-8

Still nothing.

He doesn’t know Victor’s parents’ anniversary, or their birthdays, or any other date that might be important to them—in the months he and Victor were…whatever they were, he’d never even met them. He tries the same digits again in a different order, and once more, and once more…

“Damnit!” Sherlock chokes out, slamming his fists against the door in a futile fit of frustration when a sudden loud thud reaches his ears a split second before there’s a faint matching vibration below his hands. He looks at the door, confused, as a second (and louder) thud echoes through the air, shaking the door.

A moment later there’s a mighty CRASH, the high pitched crack of splintering wood and the loudest thud yet.

Sherlock feels the impact reverberate through the door, when suddenly the vibration increases tenfold as the wood beneath his palms begins to move. He steps back in shock, looks down to see clouds of thin, grey-white smoke puff out from beneath the rising door, watches as it snakes around his ankles and billows out over the pavement, rushing out to surround him as the door moves steadily upward. His lungs rebel against it, coughing out the careless breath he just took in, his vision occluded by the wave of exhaust that pours from the garage. He waves a hand in front of his face to attempt to clear it away, when a shape emerges from the haze and begins moving towards him…

“Give me a hand!” a familiar voice shouts, before breaking into a fit of ragged coughs.

Sherlock stares as John’s face swims into view, looking back at him over his own shoulder through the clearing smoke as he struggles to drag something out into the open.

Something large and heavy and long with ink black hair and…

“Victor!” Sherlock cries, rushing forward.

“I don’t know how long he was in there,” John chokes out on the cusp of another cough, hands threaded below Victor’s arms and clutched around his chest.
Sherlock gapes at the sight. “How did you—”

“Side door,” John says, shaking his head impatiently. “Bashed it in, took me three tries.”

“But your shoulder—”

“Not important,” John insists, tipping his chin down to nod at Victor’s limp form in his arms. “Now for Christ’s sake, get his bloody feet!”

Sherlock responds to the command instinctively, and the two of them are able to make quick work of moving Victor to a safer position, away from the garage. He watches John drop immediately to his knees, two fingers quickly seeking out the carotid artery as he says Victor’s name, tapping briskly at his cheeks. He sweeps a finger through Victor’s mouth to clear possible obstructions before leaning in and placing an ear to parted, slack lips and listening intently.

“Faint pulse, no breath sounds,” John says aloud, tipping Victor’s chin up, pinching his nose closed, then covering his slack mouth with his own. Sherlock watches as Victor’s chest rises once, then again, before John takes in a deep breath and tilts his head to listen—then repeats the process.

_Breath, Breath, lull…_

John’s mouth closes again over Victor’s, a clash of soft pink lips slipping against cinnamon skin—both separately familiar but suddenly strange in combination—now fused together forever in his mind as Sherlock watches him continue to breathe life into Victor’s still form.

_Breath, Breath, lull…_

It’s hypnotic, really.

_Breath, Breath, lull…_

The exchange of life-giving oxygen reduced to the most basic of rhythms, a miracle distilled into something so simple that it doesn’t _seem_ miraculous, like a cell dividing in a water droplet on a slide or the first moment a bicarbonate meets an acetic acid and the reaction is _just_ beginning to bloom, and—

“Sherlock!” John’s near shout startles him back to attention, the speeding funnel of thoughts in his head freezing instantly as he tips his chin to look down at him with rapidly blinking eyes. John shakes the mobile clutched in his hand in Sherlock’s direction. “Call 9-9-9, now!”

Sherlock reaches forward to take the phone as John swoops down and delivers two more breaths to Victor’s still form. Dropping to his knees he dials the emergency services number with shaking fingers then starts to lift the phone to his ear, but stops when John shakes his head.

“Speaker!” John orders, slightly breathless.

Sherlock does as he’s told, holding the phone with one hand and listening raptly as John converses with the operator between bouts of rescue breathing, throwing out terms like ‘cyanotic’ and ‘unresponsive’ and ‘CO toxicity’, then dutifully chiming in with Victor’s address when asked, listening as the comforting voice on the other end of the phone calmly assures them help is on the way.

“Sherlock,” John says, huffing out a weak cough while looking down the flat plane of Victor’s chest. “I need you to take…over for a bit. Just need…to catch my breath.”
Sherlock looks at John with panicked eyes. “What do I do?”

“Two breaths, five second rest, like this,” John demonstrates another round, and when he finishes the second breath he sits back on his heels and counts to five, then nods at Sherlock—who pulls in a deep breath and leans over, seals his mouth over Victor’s parted lips, and blows once…

Then again.

*Breath, breath, lull…*

“Perfect, Sherlock,” John encourages, reaching out to press his fingers under Victor’s jaw, eyes fixed on the watch at his wrist.

*Breath, breath, lull…*

“Pulse faint but still even,” John says aloud, and Sherlock wonders for a moment if he’s supposed to respond, but the emergency services operator chimes in with an acknowledgement and then it’s been five seconds and it’s time to breathe again…

*Breath, breath, lull…*

He can hear the whine of sirens in the distance, hears them getting steadily louder. He hears the rush of air that was just in his own lungs flowing into Victor’s.

*Breath, breath, lull…*

He feels the warmth of slightly stubbled skin against his lips and for the life of him he cannot link the sensation with the moments his lips met that same skin so many times before.

*Breath, breath, lull…*

He hears the thud of feet and the squeak of wheels approaching, feels a hand on his shoulder firmly pulling him away, hears a quiet voice in his ear…

“Let go, love,” John says, and Sherlock is surprised to find that Victor’s hand is in his own, pale fingers clutching at cinnamon skin, tanned fingers closing over them both to gently pull them apart.

“We need to give them space to work.”

Sherlock steps back, chest heaving as he watches the flurry of activity around the body on the ground. He hears someone speaking to John, hears John answering, hears the hiss of an oxygen tank, then a single faint cough.

Then *another.*

John heaves out a weary sigh and squeezes Sherlock’s hand. “He’s breathing.”

Sherlock nods as the gurney snaps to full height, then watches as the crowd of people surrounding it push it around the corner and out of sight.

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“It’s not fair!”

Sherlock pushes the door open with slightly more force than he perhaps intended to, but he is willing to admit that the sharp crack of it smacking against wall at the top of the steep staircase is a somewhat satisfying sound.
“Yeah, I know it isn’t,” John sighs, stepping down the first two steps behind him then pausing to run a palm over the wall behind the door, inspecting the plaster for damage. “There’s no use taking it out on the wall.”

“The wall had it coming,” Sherlock mutters from the bottom of the steps while toeing off his shoes. He shrugs out of his coat, leaving it in a pile around his feet before stomping across the room to throw himself down onto the worn cushions of the couch that dominates the small sitting room in 221C Baker Street.

“Only family members are allowed into the critical care unit, Sherlock. It’s hospital policy.”

“Well, it’s a stupid policy,” Sherlock pouts, sighing dramatically as he crosses his arms over his chest and throws a challenging stare in John’s direction.

“At least the nurse was able to tell us that he’s conscious,” John says, pushing Sherlock’s discarded shoes into alignment with the tip of one foot. “Which, by the way, I’m pretty sure she let slip just so you’d stop trying to push past her into the trauma unit.”

“She was being obtuse!”

“She was doing her job, Sherlock.”

“Is it her job to be uncommunicative, unhelpful, and unpleasant?”

“It’s her job to care for and protect her patients,” John explains, stepping out of his own shoes and toeing them into place neatly beside Sherlock’s.

“We were the whole reason she still has a patient to protect, John.”

“Which is probably why she opted not to call security and have us expelled,” John tells him with a sigh. “I thought she might call for a psych consult, to be honest, what with you shouting at her about ‘serial suicides’ and needing to ‘gather vital evidence from the victim.’”

“I wouldn’t have needed to shout if she’d simply listened the first three times I explained myself.”

“Well, even if she had let us by, it’s not likely Victor would have been in any condition for visitors,” John insists.

“I don’t want to visit with him, John,” Sherlock scoffs. “I want answers.”

John tugs open the door of the small closet next to the stairs. “Rules are rules, love.”

“She was being obtuse!”

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“Well, even if she had let us by, it’s not likely Victor would have been in any condition for visitors,” John insists.

“I don’t want to visit with him, John,” Sherlock scoffs. “I want answers.”

John tugs open the door of the small closet next to the stairs. “Rules are rules, love.”

“Rules are boring.”

“Sometimes they are,” John agrees, shrugging carefully out of his own coat and hanging it up neatly. “And sometimes not. They exist for a reason, you know.”

“To inconvenience me, apparently,” Sherlock snaps, rolling his eyes at the slightly weary smile that tips up the corner of John’s lips. “It’s hateful.”

John shakes his head fondly, then stoops to pick up Sherlock’s coat from the floor. When he reaches to retrieve it, an involuntary groan escapes from between lips and he winces at the movement. Sherlock is up and off the couch in an instant, hands darting out to grasp John’s shoulders—then pulling back immediately when John hisses at the contact. His grey-green gaze flickers over John quickly from head to toe and then back up to his face.
“Your shoulder,” Sherlock says, looking at him intently.

It’s not a question, but John answers it nonetheless.

“Yeah, it smarts a bit,” he admits.

“Well, you did break down a door.”

John shrugs, then grits his teeth at the movement. “I guess the impact must have jarred it more than I thought.”

“You should have said something,” Sherlock scolds gently, leading him over to the couch. “The paramedics could have looked you over while—”

“They were a bit busy, weren’t they?” John asks, shaking his head as he lowers himself onto the cushions.

Sherlock kneels down before him, then reaches out to slip his fingers over the offending joint, pressing lightly at the tender muscles and tendons, eyebrows knitting with concern as John’s lips press into a grimace. “Maybe we should go back to A&E.”

“No,” John says, shaking his head. “I think they’ve seen enough of us for one night. Besides, it’s nothing a cold pack and some paracetamol can’t take care of.”

Sherlock springs up immediately and nearly sprints down the hall to the bathroom, throwing open the medicine cabinet and emerging seconds later with two white pills cradled in his palm. Slipping into the small kitchen he turns the tap and lets the water run cold while rooting around in the freezer for a few moments before turning back to fill a glass then crossing back to the couch.

“Take these,” Sherlock orders, dropping the tablets into John’s open palm and watching him swallow them down obediently along with a few long pulls of water. He positions one knee on the cushion beside John, kneading the bag in his hands a few times before palming it carefully just above John’s shoulder blade.

John lets out long breath of relief as the cold seeps through the fabric of his shirt. “I was going to use that bag of carrots in a casserole, you know.”

“Then I’ve saved you from ruining dinner,” Sherlock tells him, nose wrinkling in distaste, before easing himself down to sit next to John while maintaining steady pressure on the cold pack. “You’re welcome.”

John smiles. “Frozen peas make a more effective ice pack.”

“But they make for much tastier casserole,” Sherlock argues, his tone serious. “No use wasting perfectly good peas.”

John lets out a weary chuckle, a small rumble of a thing that starts in his chest then bubbles up his throat into a laugh and Sherlock finds himself closing his eyes and holding his breath in anticipation of the moment when the sound changes—when it tips into the bright giggle that rings from John’s lips and fills the space between them. The same space that grows suddenly smaller and then disappears all together when John leans over and presses his lips gently to Sherlock’s, the last notes of laughter spilling out of John’s mouth and into his in a warm rush…John’s very breath filling his mouth and flooding into his lungs…

_Breath, breath, lull…_
“Sherlock?” The voice sounds far away at first, distant and faint—but coming steadily closer. “It’s all right, love. Look at me.”

Sherlock opens his eyes to see a blue gaze full of soft concern trained on him, feels a palm cradling his waist and short fingers brushing away the fringe from his forehead. “There you are. Where’d you go just now?”

Sherlock sucks in a breath, head clearing slightly. He glances down to see the bag of frozen carrots on the cushion between them, sees the fingers of one hand where they’re tangled in the fabric at the side of John’s shirt, sees the other balled into a fist on his lap.

“I loved him,” Sherlock whispers, avoiding John’s gaze.

“I know,” John says quietly, resting a hand gently against Sherlock’s cheek.

Sherlock leans slightly into the touch. “I don’t now, not anymore. But seeing him like that, it…I felt…and I know you don’t like him, but…”

John lets out a soft sigh and reaches out to carefully gather Sherlock close, pink lips pressed into the riot of curls atop his head. “I hate the way he treated you, but I don’t wish him dead for it. Victor Trevor may not have deserved your love, but he’s very lucky to have had it. He’s alive today because of it.”

Sherlock pulls back slightly to fix John with a surprised look, then raises a hand to trace his fingers tenderly over the line of John’s lips. “But you’re the one who saved his life.”

“Actually, you did,” John says, pursing his lips and pressing them lightly against Sherlock’s searching fingertips. “You’re the one who realised he was in danger, you got us there in time, and you deduced that he was in the garage.”

“But you’re the one who went in and got him out,” Sherlock argues, fingers still rubbing softly over the pink, slightly chapped lips that are so often lovingly pressed against his own. “You kept him breathing.”

“So did you,” John points out.

Sherlock nods, remembering the rasp of ink black stubble and the slide of soft cinnamon skin—and how the sensation bore absolutely no resemblance to the way those same features once felt against his lips and tongue.

It wasn’t the same at all.

He continues to trace his fingers over the beloved face before him, slender fingertips grazing softly over tanned cheeks, up and around dark blue eyes framed by golden lashes, then back down over pink lips—lips he can’t bear the thought of not kissing for even one moment longer.

When he presses his mouth to John’s, heat blooms through him—starting where their lips are joined and slowly washing over every inch of his body. It tingles over his skin and sets his heart beating wildly and fills his lungs with the breath of life.
When John slips an arm around his waist and pulls him onto his lap, Sherlock goes willingly, settling a knee on either side of John’s hips and tilting his head to slot their faces together more perfectly. He cradles John’s neck, long fingers tunnelling through soft golden hair, moaning slightly at the sensation of strong hands sliding down the curve of his arse to grip snugly and pull him closer.

The answering groan John releases into his mouth seems tinged with pain as much as pleasure, and Sherlock breaks the kiss to sit back and stare down at him, one eyebrow raised in a silent question.

“I’m fine,” John assures him, tugging him closer then wincing slightly at the movement.

“You’re not,” Sherlock says, ignoring John’s protests as retrieves the bag of frozen veg from where it’s slipped between the cushions. “But you will be.”

He tucks the frozen carrots snugly between the back of John’s shoulder and the couch, leans forward and kisses him soundly, then slides off of his lap to kneel before him on the floor. Slipping himself into the space between John’s already spread thighs, he sets about the business of quickly undoing his flies and tugging down the soft fabric of his briefs to reveal his prize. John’s already half hard in his pants, springing free and thickening rapidly under Sherlock’s fingers.

“Keep still,” Sherlock orders, shooting John a stern look through long black lashes, then licking his lips before leaning in to take the leaking head of John’s cock between them.

John does as he’s told, trembling with the effort and lifting a hand to rake his fingers through Sherlock’s curls, mussed and tangled from the action of the day. Sherlock relaxes his throat to take John in more deeply, humming contentedly as John’s clever fingers skim over his scalp—then pause to pull gently at his hair each time Sherlock presses his tongue just there…

“Oh, Christ, love,” John pants, the palm of his other hand slipping over the curve of Sherlock’s shoulder to knead at the muscles as they flex and release with each bob of his head.

Sherlock closes his eyes and slips one hand into the fabric of John’s pants, seeking out and cradling his bollocks, rolling them gently where they nestle heavy and warm against his palm. His other hand skates up the hard plane of John’s sturdy, denim clad thigh, long fingers digging into the curve of a slim hip, thumb pressed into the deep crease where leg meets torso—and even through the thick fabric of John’s jeans Sherlock can feel his pulse, the strong and regular flow of blood where John’s femoral artery rests just under his tight grasp.

He concentrates on the job before him, licking and sucking and enjoying each gasp and moan his tongue and teeth and lips elicit—all the while relishing the feel of John’s increasingly rapid pulse where it thumps below his thumb and shoots up his arm and vibrates through his very core, the muscle in his own chest syncing up to match the rhythm of it’s perfect pair—his heart beating in time with John’s as Sherlock takes him apart.

When John chokes out a warning Sherlock doubles the pace, lips sliding wetly and palm squeezing gently as he hums around him—a deep and encouraging rumble that wrings a hoarse cry from John’s throat as he ejaculates down Sherlock’s, sending ribbons of hot come spurting against his tongue while short fingers tangle in his hair. Broken shouts of uhn…unh…unh spill from John’s lips in perfect time to the thump…thump…thump of his pulse.

Sherlock is dimly aware that his own pants are uncomfortably tight, his neglected erection thick and throbbing with arousal, but he can’t be arsed to care much about it at the moment—not with the steady beat of John’s pulse beginning to slow slightly beneath his hand and soft fingers carding through his curls and the rasp of denim against his cheek where his head rests heavily on John’s thigh.
He closes his eyes and enjoys the quiet, perfectly satisfied right where he is—where he can still taste John on his tongue, smell the musk of him all around, feel his warmth against his skin, and hear the deep, steady thrum of his heart.

The heavy front door closes quietly behind him, the soft snick and faint metallic clink of well-oiled locks as they engage echoing faintly through the deserted front hall. He sets his school bag down onto the gleaming marble floor and stands for a moment in the dim foyer, waiting for the telltale tap of footsteps on the stairs or the call of Marie’s familiar voice from the kitchen.

Neither come.

He is momentarily taken aback by the silence, but soon recalls the reason for it:

*Tuesday.*

Marie’s weekly bridge night is as regular as the clock on the mantle—more so, one might argue, since without regular winding the clock would eventually slow and stop, but the Highgate Ladies Bridge Club has been meeting weekly without fail for as long as Sherlock can recall. It’s clearly not Marie’s night to host—the titter of animated voices calling out bids amidst the rattle of ice against glass and the clink of forks scraping plates being distinctively absent from the air.

Distinctly *present,* however, is the faint scent of butter and sugar and fruit and cinnamon—the unmistakable evidence that Marie has recently baked a batch of her apple-raisin tarts, a much loved regular feature of many a bridge night. And while the women of the HLBC have been known to lay waste to an astonishing number of them each week, Marie is sure to have left a few back for him in the kitchen.

His stomach *growls* in anticipation.

“If it is your goal to successfully employ stealth in your movements, might I suggest that you eat more regularly?” a voice asks from the darkened sitting room, followed by the faint click of a lamp switch. Sherlock starts at the sound, coattails whipping around his calves as he turns towards the doorway to meet his older brother’s relaxed gaze where it’s focused on him from a large wing-backed chair. “I could hear your stomach rumbling from all the way over here. Marie left three tarts on the bench for you.”

Sherlock blinks a few times against the sudden light, then narrows his eyes as he quickly scans over the seated figure, lips quirking into a knowing grin. “How many were there before you got to them?”

Mycroft tips his chin to stare down his own chest, a resigned sigh passing through his lips as elegant fingers reach up to brush away an errant crumb where it clings to the smooth, deep green silk lapel of his dressing gown.

“A few more than that,” he confirms with a slight nod and a benign smile. “Well spotted.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, affecting a blank expression that is befitting of someone who definitely does *not* feel even a faint spark of pleasure at the praise. “As you are wearing nearly as many crumbs as you consumed, it was hardly a difficult leap to make.”

“Your observational skills continue to improve, brother.”

“The world is full of people who see but do not observe. I am not one of them.”
“And yet you failed to notice someone sitting not ten feet from you for nearly a full minute after you entered the house.”

“I hardly expected someone to be lurking about in the dark in my own home,” Sherlock argues, sounding a bit more defensive than he’d meant to.

“Malevolent presences rarely conform to social niceties, Sherlock.”

“Clearly,” Sherlock drawls, eyes narrowing. “What are you doing here?”

“As ever, I am concerned about you.”

“It would seem to me that your primary concern was shoving as many tarts into your mouth as possible.”

“It does help one pass the time,” Mycroft concedes.

“Judging by the ever shortening lengths of the silk belt ends tightened at your waist, it seems you’ve been passing quite a bit of time recently.”

“True enough,” Mycroft agrees, looking at him pointedly. “The hours you’ve been keeping of late have left me a great deal of time to wonder at your whereabouts, after all.”

“It’s barely ten o’clock, Mycroft.” Sherlock glances at his watch and then gestures to the large antique clock ticking on the mantle. “Hardly the middle of the night.”

Mycroft nods down at his own watch, examining the cuff of his dressing gown before looking back up at his brother. “And yet you and Mr. Watson managed to condense quite a bit of excitement into a few short hours.”

Sherlock freezes for an instant, letting Mycroft’s words hang between them in the air. He feels a look of surprise begin take shape over his features, and quickly attempts to suppress it with a well-practiced mask of boredom. Not quickly enough, judging by the smug tilt that barely lifts the corner of his brother’s mouth.

Mycroft knows. Of course he knows.

Sherlock bites idly at his lower lip and lifts a shoulder in a casual shrug. “It was nothing.”

“Victor Trevor would disagree, I think.” Mycroft shifts slightly in his chair while pulling his dressing gown a bit more tightly around his frame. “It was fortunate for him that you and John were in exactly the right place at exactly the right time.”

(a flash of ink black hair against green grass, chapped pink lips closing over a dusky pale mouth)

_Breath, breath, lull…_

“Sherlock?” Mycroft asks, his voice low and soft as he leans forward, fixing his younger brother with a penetrating gaze. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock says quickly, inhaling deeply and shaking his head to clear it. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Mycroft clears his throat quietly. “I believe Mr. Trevor was, something to you at one time, and it’s
only natural that you might find yourself…affected by the events of the aftern—”

“Oh for God’s sake, is there no area of my life that you don’t feel the need to insert your overly large nose into?” Sherlock stares defiantly at his brother, fists clenched tightly at his sides. “It’s none of your business.”

“Your safety is my business, Sherlock.”

“But my love life is not.”

“It is somewhat difficult to separate the two areas as they seem so often to be inextricably combined where you are concerned,” Mycroft tells him, his tone and demeanour remaining calm in direct contrast to Sherlock’s growing agitation. “Mysterious injuries sustained under suspicious circumstances, late night trips to New Scotland Yard, daring rescues that result in barely averting certain death? These are not the common woes of the typical British adolescent.”

“Typical is boring,” Sherlock huffs, shrugging out of his coat and tossing it in the general direction of the staircase. “Don’t be so dramatic, Mycroft. It doesn’t suit you as well as you think.”

Mycroft eyes the coat as it flies through the air and lands flawlessly over the edge of the heavy bannister. “Interesting advice, given the source. I am merely concerned that perha—”

“Your concern is misplaced,” Sherlock insists, leaning over to retrieve his school bag from the floor. “You really needn’t worry about me.”

“Do you imagine that I don’t do so constantly?”

Sherlock pulls a face and affects a dramatic shudder. “I try not to imagine anything about you at all, Mycroft.

“I am merely suggesting that if there is anything that I can do, anything that you need from me, that you can ask for it—”

“Excellent. For a start, I would like you to stop boring me with this conversation and let me go upstairs to bed.”

Mycroft sighs, passing a palm over his face as though attempting to rub away the weary expression on it that makes him look far older than he is. He meets Sherlock’s stubborn gaze for a long moment, holding it steadily. The silence stretches out between them, the clock on the mantle ticking away the seconds. Just as Sherlock’s eyes are starting to burn with the effort of refusing to blink, Mycroft finally tips his head in barely perceptible nod.

Dismissed at last, Sherlock turns and heads up the stairs.

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Scrubbing the soft bristles over his teeth, Sherlock uses his other hand in an attempt to tame the wild nest of curls that spring out in every direction from his scalp. As his fingers get stuck in random tangles he remembers how short, tanned fingers created those same knots earlier in the evening—and for a moment allows himself to smile, to let the joy of that memory blot out the other, less pleasant events of the day.

(slack limbs and dusky skin and smoke snaking around his ankles)

_Breath, breath, lull…_
He presses his eyes shut—willing the image of Victor lying motionless on the ground to dissolve, to be pushed down a long hall and into a small room behind a thick door that slams shut and locks somewhere deep inside his mind—then vowing to fill the vacated space with things that he doesn’t want to forget.

Concentrating on slowing his breaths to a regular rhythm, he opens his eyes and studies his reflection, examining the jumble of angles and planes that make up his face. It’s a map of disparate features that are common and unremarkable when viewed separately, but are utterly unique in combination.

The wide forehead (where John presses his lips), the sharp cheekbones (that John caresses with his thumbs), the roped tendons at his neck (that John loves to worry gently between his teeth), the overly plump lips (that make John gasp and pant and tremble), the strange grey-green eyes that change colour depending on the light (cat’s eyes, John says).

It’s not a typical face, he knows, but it’s the one he’s got (John calls it beautiful).

With a tired sigh he rinses the toothpaste down the drain, and flips off the light. He’s turning down the thick duvet when the sudden rattle of his mobile on the bedside table begs for his attention, the screen lit with the familiar phrase:

NEW CONFESSION!

Tapping the notification closed, he swipes until he finds the acid green skull with a floating number ‘1’ hovering at the corner. He’s just moved to tap it when the phone vibrates against his hand again. And then once more.

Clearing away two notifications identical to the first, he taps on the iConfess icon where a red numeral ‘3’ now replaces the ‘1’. Resigned, he sits down at the edge of the mattress and watches as the first message lights up the screen one letter at a time:

iConfess: We love you, Victor! So glad you’re OK.

Sherlock huffs out a weary sigh as the message dissolves into sparks and the next one begins to appear. He knew it was only a matter of time before the news made its way to the student population, frankly he’s a bit surprised it took this long.

iConfess: Get well soon, Vic! We need you on the pitch to beat those tossers at Holy Cross on Friday!

Sherlock squints at the screen in confusion for a moment before the image disappears into a glittering shower of light. The sentiment is undoubtedly positive (rather inappropriately so, given the gravity of the situation, in his opinion) but people do love to be supportive, he supposes, so he sets aside the thought as the third message presents itself:

iConfess: That was a close one, Vicky. Thank the stars a hero arrived in the nick of time to give you the kiss of life. Lucky, lucky boy!

A prickle of alarm snakes its way up Sherlock’s spine, sparking a chill that starts in the pit of his stomach and spreads steadily outward into a full-body shiver. As the image begins to blur, he quickly holds down the power switch and then taps his thumb firmly on the home button, sighing with relief when the screen blinks quickly dark and then lights back up just as the message pulls out of focus and self-destructs.
“They’re not going to let us in.”

“You don’t know that,” Sherlock says, tossing his school bag into the back of John’s car and climbing hurriedly out of the passenger side.

“I do know that,” John argues, leaning over to lock Sherlock’s door then double checking his own before closing it firmly and following Sherlock up onto the pavement. “It hasn’t even been twenty four hours since he was admitted, Sherlock. Visitation will still be restricted to family only.”

“I’m sure they’ll make an exception, what with you being a hero and all.”

John rolls his eyes and lets out a weary sigh. “Oh let’s not start this again, please.”

“I didn’t start it in the first place,” Sherlock reminds him, responding with an eye roll of his own as he strides towards the entrance.

“That could have been referring to both of us, you know,” John says, struggling to match Sherlock’s impossibly long strides.

“You saw the confession, John. It very specifically said ‘hero’ in the singular.”

“Yeah, well, it also referred to rescue breathing as the ‘kiss of life’, which is by far the more objectionable bit of the whole thing, if you ask me,” John mutters, nearly jogging now in an effort to keep pace.

“The phrase does wax a bit poetic,” Sherlock concedes.

“If by poetic, you mean creepy—then yeah, it was very poetic.” John steps up beside Sherlock where he’s stopped just outside the wide automatic doors of the hospital lobby. “Whoever sent it, I’m just glad they weren’t more specific.”

Sherlock hums in agreement as he ushers John ahead of him through the door. When he’d sent the screen shot via text the night before, John had agreed that it was odd—but he’d been quick to point out that it was still fairly vague. That part of the story could have come from any number of sources, after all. Sherlock went to sleep mildly appeased, but the unsettling feeling hadn’t disappeared with the rising the sun. Though no similar confessions appeared since, Sherlock had still braced himself for the news of their involvement to be made public. Much to his surprise, it hadn’t been.

Yet, anyway.

The speculation as to the identity of the ‘hero’ was the subject of many hushed (and not so hushed) student conversations that day at Morningside Academy, but as the news of Victor’s hospitalisation spread through the student body, there seemed to be a great deal of confusion about how he’d ended up in need of a hero in the first place. There were competing rumours ranging from a car accident to a drug overdose—and when Mrs. Hudson rushed into the library that morning telling a story of Victor’s brush with ‘carbon monoxide poisoning’, John and Sherlock agreed not to speak to anyone else about their role until they had gathered all the facts.

A task that he’d convinced John was a much better use of their time than a tedious afternoon spent shelving books or attending French class. Not that it had been a particularly tough sell, mind you. Sherlock can be very persuasive, after all.

“We need to check in at the information desk,” John protests, following in Sherlock’s wake as he
strides right past the reception area and heads for the bank of elevators behind it.

“Why?” Sherlock asks, shrugging as he depresses the call button and looks at John expectantly. “As you’ve pointed out, repeatedly, they’re not likely to let us in.”

“So why are we here, exactly?”

“To talk to Victor, John. Do try and keep up.” The elevator doors hiss open and he steps into the car and presses the third floor button.

“Yeah, I know that, you git,” John says, shaking his head as the doors close and they begin to ascend. “But how? What’s the plan?”

“Absolutely no idea,” Sherlock answers with a shrug. “But, I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

“Great,” John mutters, nodding and expelling a resigned sigh. When the doors open, he follows Sherlock out into the hall and up to the large circular desk at the centre of the unit.

“We’re here to see Victor Trevor,” Sherlock tells the nurse on duty with no preamble. “Which room is he in?”

“Are you family?” she asks, reaching for the clipboard at the edge of the desk.

“No,” Sherlock answers, smiling back at her. “Problem?”

“I’m sorry, but only family is allowed in at this time, sir,” the nurse explains, abandoning the sign in sheet and turning back to her monitor and tapping away at the keys.

Sherlock huffs out an impatient sigh. “All right, then yes. We’re family.”

The nurse eyes him suspiciously. “But you’ve just said that you’re not family.”

“I was mistaken,” Sherlock says, affecting a tired expression and fixing her with a sad frown, lower lip trembling slightly. “I misunderstood the question. It’s a very trying time, after all.”

“What’s your relation to the patient?”

“He’s my cousin,” Sherlock says, reaching up to swipe at a bead of moisture gathering in the lashes at the outer corner of one grey-green eye. “Twice removed. On my mother’s side.”

“I’m going to need to see some identification,” the nurse replies, looking unconvinced.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, we just want to speak to him,” Sherlock snaps, all traces of sorrow disappearing from his face. “What difference does it make if we’re related or not?”

The nurse reaches for the phone beside her on the desk. “I’m calling security.”

“That really won’t be necessary,” John says, stepping up beside Sherlock and flashing a bright smile at the nurse who doesn’t put the phone down, but hesitates with her fingers just over the keypad. “Look, we don’t want to cause any trouble. We’re…friends of Mr. Trevor’s. We were there, last night, before they brought him in. We called the paramedics.”

The nurse looks at him for a moment, then her expressions softens slightly. “What’s your name?”

“I’m John Watson, and this is Sher—”
“John Watson?” a melodic voice (female, middle aged, slight east Indian accent) calls out, and both Sherlock and John turn in the direction of the question to see a couple emerging from an adjacent door.

The man is tall, his tan skin striking against salt and pepper hair and the gold band shining on his left ring finger (Mediterranean descent, Italian most likely, a few years older than his wife). The woman is slight and small—with ink black hair and dark cinnamon skin, her chocolate brown eyes sharp and focused on John as they approach.

“Um, yeah,” John says, clearing his throat slightly and eyeing her curiously. “Yeah. I mean, yes, I’m John Watson.”

Without warning, the woman closes the space between them in seconds and launches herself at John. Sherlock watches him instinctively fall back into a defensive position, and when his own body tenses in reaction it takes him a few seconds to realize that John’s not being attacked—he’s being hugged. Rather fiercely.

“It was you,” she says, pulling back to look up into his eyes, her small palms grasping his cheeks firmly. “You’re the man who saved my son.”

“Oh, well, I…” John stammers, blushing as the woman rises up onto her toes and presses a kiss to each of his cheeks.

“Marcus Trevor,” the man says, stepping up beside the woman and jutting out a hand to grasp John’s and shake it firmly and flashing him a wide smile, his other arm reaching out to drape over the woman’s slender shoulders. “So you’re the bloke you shattered my door frame, eh? Now I know who to send the bill to.”

The expression that flashes across John’s features is equal parts disbelief and confusion. “Yeah, sorry about that, we didn’t know the code, so…”

“That was a joke, son!” The man says, slapping John genially on the shoulder. John winces at the contact, throwing a sideways glance of alarm in Sherlock’s direction. “Vic’s told us the whole story, it’s a lucky thing you happened by when you did.”

Sherlock stiffens slightly, a posture mirrored by the woman whose lips press together to tighten into a thin line. The man doesn’t seem to notice.

“I can’t believe that boy was so careless,” he continues, shaking his head with an exasperated sigh. Sherlock watches John’s smile begin to fade, his expression growing more confused as the man continues to speak. “Always got his nose stuck in that phone, that one. Couldn’t even bother to turn off the car and go in the house and keep chatting or texting or whatever it is you young people do. I’ve told him a thousand times to put that damn thing dow—”

“What my husband means to say is thank you.” The woman interrupts, shooting a pointed look at the man before turning her attention back to John. “We are very grateful you were there. You’re friends with my Victor?”

“Actually, I just met him,” John explains, reaching out to grab the sleeve of Sherlock’s coat and drag him closer. “But Sherlock knows him, yeah. Quite well.”

At the mention of Sherlock’s name the woman’s eyes widen and she turns her attention towards him. Sherlock allows himself to be examined while returning the favour, eyes flitting briefly over features that are so very much like her son’s. He begins to fidget a bit under the scrutiny,
looking puzzled as she steps away from John and stands before him, her shrewd gaze softening as a sad smile turns up the corners of her mouth.

“You’re him, aren’t you?” she asks, reaching up to lay a small hand gently at his jaw. “You’re the boy my son loved.”

Sherlock looks at her for a long moment, searching her face for any sign of distaste or disappointment or judgement…and finds none. He takes in a deep breath, and nods against her soft grasp. “I didn’t think you knew.”

“Of course I did,” she says, looking at him earnestly. “A mother knows her son.”

“Victor doesn’t know that,” Sherlock says. “He’s terrified you’ll be disappointed.”

“That he’s gay?” she asks, looking confused. “Why should that disappoint me?”

“What?” the man who had until now remained silent says sharply. “What are you talking about, Prisha?”

“Quiet, Marcus,” Mrs. Trevor replies, her voice low and soft but her tone brooking no argument.

“I’ll not stand for this nonsense,” the man rebuts, his voice tight with anger as he gestures dismissively at Sherlock. “I don’t care what he says, my son is not a fagg—”

“Silence!” Mrs. Trevor hisses, rounding on him, her tone measured and even but fire blazing in her eyes. “Whatever else Victor is or is not, he is your son. We nearly lost him once, and I will not risk losing him again.”

Marcus Trevor waves a dismissive hand in her direction. “Yesterday was an accident.”

“Do not be so naïve, Marcus,” his wife admonishes. “There has been enough untruth in this family to last many lifetimes. It stops here.”

“I won’t stand by and hear this kind of talk about my boy,” Mr. Trevor stammers.

“And I will not hear you speak of my boy with anything but love and respect. Ever again.” Prisha Trevor stares up at her husband unblinkingly, and though he looms over her by several inches, she still manages to strike the far more imposing figure of the two.

Marcus Trevor opens his mouth, then snaps it closed, jaw clenched tight as he breaks his wife’s stare and looks at the floor before pushing past her and sitting heavily into a chair in the nearby waiting area, bending low to cradle his head in his hands.

Prisha takes in a slow breath, her shoulders relaxing slightly before she turns back to Sherlock with a soft smile. She reaches out to take one large hand into both of hers, tilting her head back towards the open palm for a moment. “Go, talk to my son. Tell him he no longer has to be afraid. Tell him that his mother makes him this vow.”

“I will,” she promises, releasing his hand. She nods at each of them once more before taking a deep breath, squaring her shoulders, walking towards her husband.

She crosses the open space and sits down beside him, her back straight and head held high. When she slowly extends a hand, the man lifts his chin slightly then simply stares at the open palm for a moment before nodding, his face unreadable.
long moment—and just when Sherlock is certain that he will not accept the offer, he lifts his own hand and slips it into his wife’s, thick and slender fingers twining to become one.

John clears his throat softly, and when Sherlock tears his gaze away from Victor’s parents to meet his eyes, John tilts his head towards the closed hospital room door. “You ready?”

Sherlock looks at the door, at the light from the room beyond it diffused by the long rectangle of frosted glass inset into the light stained wood, and realises that he has no idea what he expects to find behind it. He’s been so intent on finding a way to get in to see Victor that he hasn’t given much thought to what he might actually say to him if he did.

What if Victor doesn’t want to see him? What if he won’t speak to him? He’s not purposely sought out his company in well over a year, after all—hasn’t even spoken two words together to him until yesterday, when Victor appeared in the library…

(clouds of pale grey smoke drifting over him, ashen and pale and still on the ground)

_Breath, Breath, lull…_

There’s a sudden tingle at his wrist, feather light and familiar, as a compact palm slides into place and John’s fingers curl around his own. He holds his breath for a moment, revelling in the warmth from that single point of contact.

John looks at him, deep blue eyes crinkled at the edges with concern. “Maybe you should go in alone?”

Sherlock shakes his head.

John squeezes his hand. “All right. Together, then?”

Sherlock squeezes back. “Together.”

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, as ever comments are 100% encouraged and appreciated!

You know how sometimes you happen upon a fic and maybe it looks like it’s your jam, but you haven’t heard much about and it’s late and you just wanted a little dollop of Johnlock to send you off to dreamland but you read the first few pages and suddenly you’re all “hey, it’s after midnight and I’m already not sleeping so what the hell” and then you start it and nine chapters and 35K later your throat is sore from squealing with delight into your pillow and you’re going to need a lot of coffee to survive your workday tomorrow but you have no regrets because it was TOTALLY WORTH IT?

We've all been there, amirite?

If you’re hungry for for a heapin helping of delicious parentlock garnished with fluffy layers of domesticity, drizzled with slow burn sauce and sandwiched between thick slices of skillfully penned character study, sorion’s _Through the Open Window_ will hit the spot.
This post S3 imagining captured my attention and then stole my heart (so much so that it made me write that ridiculous sentence just now. Hey, it was either that or shitty poetry because that’s what hopelessly smitten people write. I mean, so I’ve heard.)

I loved this fic, and when it came time to pick the rec for this chapter I went looking for it and couldn’t find the link in my bookmarks or my spreadsheet or in my usually steel trap memory and I had to text team beta and regurgitate my favorite line and cheytea7 was all “It’s this one, Sara. Get your act together.” Thank goodness SOMEONE is paying attention around here!

Do me (and yourself!) a favor and go read this fic and give it the attention and feedback it deserves!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!