He thinks about going to Sherlock, wrapping his arms around his slim body, holding him and comforting him in his terrible sorrow. But the distance between them feels like an ocean, like the expanse of the cold Atlantic between here and London, and he has no idea how to cross that vast chasm, or even if Sherlock wants him to.

They are here together, the two of them against the world a thousand miles from home--but John suddenly sees that in a profound way, each locked inside their private grief, they’ve never been more alone.

Notes

HEED THE TAGS, LOVELIES. PEOPLE DIE IN THIS. NOT SHERLOCK AND JOHN, I AM NOT A MONSTER NO MATTER WHAT YOU MIGHT HEAR.

Ahem. Anyway.

I swore I wasn't going to post any more WIPs. I am a weak, weak woman.

Update: So here we are in 2017. I AM STILL WORKING ON THIS FIC. I will not abandon you or them!
I'm back on tumblr:

caitlinmissesjohnlockawholelot

...or hit me up at CaitlinFairchild1976@gmail.com.

A million thanks to everyone for reading. You truly don't know how much you mean to me.
Newark

...and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines.

1. Newark

John awakes, disoriented, in a bed that is not his own. The rough sheets tangled around his bare torso smell of cheap, unfamiliar detergent.

The air is stale and too warm. The dip of his lower back is damp with pooled sweat.

“Sh’lock?” he mutters, his voice slurred and drowsy.

“Go back to sleep.” Sherlock’s voice is quiet, but thick and dark as treacle, vocal cords roughened from stress and sorrow and lack of rest.

John scrubs at his eyes, tries to reacquaint himself with reality. “What time is it?” he mutters.

“Six minutes past three.”

“It’s morning at home, then.”

“Splendid grasp of how time zones work,” Sherlock murmurs with a touch more acid than necessary. He rolls his shoulders, shifts in the cheap desk chair he has pulled up next to the window. The blackout curtains are parted to reveal the car park outside the door of the motel room. He sighs, closes his eyes, runs fingers through lank hair. “I know your internal clock says to get up and have a cuppa.” His tone is softer. “But you must try to sleep. Four hours won’t do, and I need you functioning at full capacity tomorrow.”

John doesn’t bother asking why. “What about you?” he says instead. Sherlock doesn’t answer. Even in the low light, John can see he is still fully dressed, down to jacket and shoes. The second bed is tightly made, completely untouched. “Sherlock. You need to sleep. You’re running on fumes.”

“I don’t need to rest,” Sherlock mutters dismissively. “I need to think.” Without another word he turns away from John, steepling his long fingers under his nose, and returning his gaze to the window and the dreary, glare-washed landscape beyond.

John almost says the last thing Sherlock needs to do right now is focus on his thoughts; what he needs more than anything is sleep, oblivion, a moment of reprieve from the waking nightmare of the past five days. But he knows it won’t make a damn bit of difference. Sherlock is going to do what Sherlock is going to do, and John feels a passing moment of gratitude that at least this time Sherlock deemed him important enough to be included, at least physically if not mentally.

*He probably only included me because he needs a confidante, and I'm all he's got now--now that Mycroft's--*

John can’t bring himself to finish the thought.

“I could keep you company,” he offers lamely.

“Thank you. Truly. But no. What I need you to do now is rest.” Sherlock swallows, Adam’s apple bobbing, and turns his head briefly to look at John. “Go back to sleep. Please.”
The harsh light and inky darkness throw shadows across Sherlock's too-sharp cheekbones, the hollow at the hinge of his jaw. He looks almost ghoulishe, undead, a mysterious figure carved from living stone.

John’s inner thoughts turn a touch melodramatic, perhaps, under emotional duress.

Outwardly he merely sighs, nods, turns his back to Sherlock and rearranges himself on the hard, unfamiliar mattress.

God, how he hates motel rooms, hates the weird smell that seems to permeate them all, hates the thin stiff sheets and cheap pillows and unhygienic duvets. He is vigilant, on alert, attention snagging on every unfamiliar light and shadow and rattling, thumping noise.

The absolute strangeness of it all is viscerally wrenching to a man like John, a man who, for all his love of danger and intrigue and adrenaline, is still in so many ways a creature of hearth and home and habit.

It’s all just… so, so strange. So wrong.

Wrongness is here to stay, he thinks. This is the new normal. This is where the two of us live, now, in a world gone utterly, inescapably wrong.

In a world without Mycroft Holmes in it to set it right.

John feels certain he won’t be able to go back to sleep, not now, maybe not ever again. Within moments, though, he finds he’s drifting off despite himself. His worn body gives in as he slips into a restless slumber, terrifying memories melding seamlessly into troubled dreams.

***

In a rubbish-strewn abandoned warehouse near the river, the bitter enemies faced each other one last time.

John felt frozen in place as he stood beside Sherlock, his eyes transfixed in shocked horror on the gun his wife (his pregnant wife, Jesus Christ) aimed point-blank at Sherlock's chest.

He knew what she was capable of--he has seen the evidence of it with his own eyes, symbolized by the round red cratered scar marring Sherlock’s pale torso--but to witness it firsthand was somehow profoundly horrifying in a visceral way he’d not imagined.

Sherlock was still, calm, his posture relaxed and open. On the surface, he was all calm confidence on the surface--but this close, John heard the shallow, rapid respiration that betrayed his true fear underneath.

His gun was tucked into the waistband of his trousers. If he reached for it, he knew Mary would pull the trigger and end Sherlock's life for good.

And this time, Mary wouldn’t miss her target.

He tried desperately to think of something, anything, to say to try to buy another moment, change her mind, stay her lethal hand.

Before John could open his mouth to speak, however, footsteps echoed softly from the shadows of the cavernous room.
“No more of this,” Mycroft said coolly, confidently as he emerged from the shadows, the assuredness of his tone belied by the tightness around his eyes. "All of this nonsense ends. Now."

“This was always the endgame, Mycroft,” Mary says, her aim still trained on Sherlock, not wavering a fraction. “You strolling in here at the last moment like you own the place doesn’t change that. It doesn’t change a thing.”

Mycroft gave a final sidelong glance to Sherlock that spoke volumes, a lifetime of hidden sentiment revealed without a single word. “This is finished, Mary. We’re done here. You think you have the upper hand, but you don’t. Not anymore.”

“You’re changing the terms of our agreement?” Mary asked. Her voice was civil, even conversational yet still, somehow, dripping with utter contempt.

“I am indeed. Your offshore accounts are frozen, your passports flagged.”

"You think so?"

"I know so. You’re done. Put the gun down."

Mary gives a brief, nasty laugh, and shakes her head. “As usual, Mycroft, your hubris blinds you to the reality of your situation.”

“That may be true,” Mycroft replied neutrally, “but understand this: you’re finished.”

“We're not done until I say so.” Mary cocks her head slightly, as if considering. "Sherlock is the heart of the Holmes Brothers. Everyone knows that. And carrying the metaphor a bit further, that makes you the head, doesn’t it, Mycroft?”

“Yes,” Mycroft said, his voice tighter now, careful, wary. “I am the head, and you know I will negotiate to keep Sherlock safe. Tell me what you want in exchange for his life.”

A flash of frustrated anger flared in her cold blue eyes.

“Yours,” Mary said. In a single instant she shifted her aim away from Sherlock and fired.

The world exploded in sound and confusion, as the loud crack of the shot echoed in his ears at the same time Sherlock cried out, an inhuman wail of terror and rage.

Mycroft dropped to the ground, as suddenly and completely as a marionette with cut strings.

John pulled his weapon in one fluid motion, trained it on Mary in the same moment she again took aim at Sherlock.

His finger trembled on the trigger as he thought of the baby.

Time stood still for an endless split second, a tableau somehow frozen in eternity.

Then time somehow resumed as she turned and ran, shockingly fast on her feet despite her gravidity.

Sherlock, staggered forward, collapsed to his knees beside his brother. He took a deep, ragged breath, then exhaled and shook his head, as if to clear it of fog. He grabbed his brother's shoulder, shook it.

“Mycroft,” he rasped, sounding almost angry. “Mycroft. Get up. This is ridiculous.” The edge of jagged terror in his voice grew sharper as he shook him again. “She’s escaping. We have to catch
John dropped to one knee, pressed fingers to Mycroft’s carotid artery, searched for a pulse he knew he wouldn’t find.

“Mycroft.” Sherlock was pleading, pinwheeling on the edge of hysteria. “You can’t do this. You can’t. Please. Get up.” He looked up at John, eyes wide and terrified as one of his gloved hands grabbed at John's jacket in a fiercely strong grip. “John. Do something.”

“Sherlock,” John said helplessly, dread and horror spreading thick and black through his veins. “I can’t.”

Distantly, John heard voices shouting and the pounding of feet as agents poured into the building.

Mycroft stared up at them with sightless blue eyes, his dark pupils fixed and dilated.

The hole in his forehead was neat, round and perfectly centred, as the dark pool behind his head grew ever larger.

***

Sherlock is gone when John wakes.

It's late morning, bright sunlight filtering under the blackout curtains. His body is leaden and aching, his mind fuzzy with the confusion of the time change, the internal and external clocks still at war with one another.

He’s always been shit with jet lag.

After a piss and a gulp of lukewarm water from the bathroom tap, he fumbles with the ridiculous in-room coffee pot, finally succeeding in coaxing out a brew that is somewhat coffee-coloured in appearance and smell, if not exactly taste. He’s on his third cup of this somewhat pointless concoction when Sherlock returns, tossing plastic bags onto the untouched bed nearer the window.

John pokes through them as Sherlock fiddles with one of the shrink-wrapped plastic coffee cups on the bathroom countertop. Inside one bag are worn jeans, tee shirts, a frayed dark green military jacket. In the second are pants and socks, toothbrushes, a comb and a cheap electric hair trimmer. The third contains—thank God—a cheap electric kettle and a box of PG Tips.

“Goodwill and Walmart,” Sherlock explains tersely, pouring himself a cup of the brackish brew, tipping it to his mouth and gulping it down without seeming to notice the dubious taste.

John looks up at him, states the obvious, as is his role. “Trimmers. You’re cutting your hair?”

“In point of fact, you’re cutting my hair. I’m assuming you’re familiar with a basic induction-style clipper cut.”

“Of course I am. But why?”

“I need to avoid recognition at all costs. My everyday look is too...distinctive. Especially for America. And there are eyes everywhere, John. Make no mistake.”

“What about me, then?” John asks, more curious than annoyed. “Am I changing my look as well?”

“No need,” Sherlock replies matter-of-factly. “You have the gift of an unremarkable appearance.”
“Really?” John says, narrowing his eyes a bit. “Do tell.”


***

John cuts Sherlock’s hair.

It feels so strangely intimate, even after everything they’ve been through, to stand so close to Sherlock’s body in the tiny bathroom, to feel the heat radiating off his skin as he runs fingers through the thick glossy curls he’s always secretly longed to touch.

It is something close to sacrilege to slice through those waves with a number three guard, to watch the dark locks of hair drift to the tiled floor at their feet.

It makes something deep inside John ache, in a way he doesn’t fully understand.

When he’s finished, Sherlock looks both younger and older, achingly vulnerable and yet somehow dangerous, a sad child’s eyes peering out from the pale, angular visage of a cold, grief-hardened man.

It makes John feel lost, somehow, unmoored from their own lives, from who they really are.

Before stopping to think better of it, John runs his hand slowly over the back of Sherlock’s near-naked skull. The short dark hair feels like smooth fur under his fingertips.

He has to make a conscious effort has to suppress the shiver that runs through his body.

Their eyes meet in the rippled glass of the cheap, chipped bathroom mirror. A moment passes in silence, their breathing loud in the confines of the small room. John’s hand still cradles the back of Sherlock’s skull.

“John,” Sherlock murmurs, then again falls silent.

John can’t speak, can’t tear his fingers away from the feel of shorn velvet under his fingertips.

“It will grow back eventually,” Sherlock finally murmurs several moments later. His voice is soft, coloured with a note of something hesitant, almost uncertain.

“Of course,” John says, dropping his eyes, finally pulling his hand away.

Somehow John can’t shake the feeling that’s not what Sherlock really intended to say, at all.

***

In the bus station there are NO SMOKING signs plastered on every vertical surface.

“Come outside with me,” Sherlock says.

In front of the building, Sherlock pats the pockets of his jeans and jacket. “Damn,” he says conversationally, surprising John with a shift into a American accent, inflected with a bit of a Southern drawl. It sounds completely, shockingly natural. “Must have left them in the room.” He turns and approaches a young kid standing nearby. He’s maybe nineteen, earbuds firmly in place, messenger bag slung over his shoulder, burning cigarette between his fingers.

“Excuse me,” Sherlock says, with an open, friendly “I’m not a creep” smile that doesn’t quite hang
right on his face.
The kid takes out his earbuds, regards Sherlock neutrally.

“Don’t suppose I could trouble you for a smoke?” Sherlock asks.

“They’re Parliaments,” the kid says. “That cool?”

“I usually smoke Marlboro, to be honest. But whatever you have will do just fine.”
The kid fishes a battered pack out of his messenger bag.

“I’ve only got one left in here,” he says. “Take it.”

“Thanks so much,” Sherlock says.

“No worries,” the kid replies, putting his earbuds back in and walking away without another word.
Sherlock returns to John, fishes out the last cigarette from the pack and lights it.

"So." John gives him a considering look. "Florida?"

"Florida," Sherlock confirms.

They stand in silence as Sherlock smokes and John watches the passerby, mulling over the interaction with the kid.

A bus pulls up. The marquee reads PATERNOSTER.

“This is us,” Sherlock says, stubbing out the smoke on the heel of his trainer before tossing it into an overflowing bin.

John follows him onto the bus, drops into the seat next to him. A few more straggling passengers climb on before the doors close and the vehicle lurches awkwardly into traffic.

“So what is it?” John asks.

“What is what?” Sherlock replies blandly.

“What you got from the kid. In the cigarette pack. What is it?”
Sherlock gives a tiny, pleased nod, and John doesn’t miss the flare of the old spark in his eyes, his pleasure in the game bringing something cold and dormant in him back to life, if only for a moment.

“Well done, John. How did you know?”

“Your preferred fag is B and H. I’m not actually a moron, you see.”

“Never once thought you were.” Sherlock pulls the crumpled pack out of his pocket, opens it and carefully fishes out a folded scrap of paper. “It’s a name. A name of a man who owes my brother quite a big favour.”

“He has information on Mary.”

“He knows the people who have information on Mary.” Sherlock refolds the note, stows it away in his jacket pocket along with the battered Parliament packet.
“So this man is in Paterson.”

“No,” Sherlock replies, and doesn’t elaborate.

The momentary spark in Sherlock's eyes flickers and dies as quickly as it flared. He lapses back into distant silence on the hour-long ride, giving John plenty of room–too much room– to dwell on recent memories.

***

Sherlock didn’t speak a single word at the graveside service.

He was stone-faced, cold as Antarctica, a dry-eyed ivory statue sitting next to his weeping parents as his brother was lowered into the ground.

John, seated at his other side, pressed a reassuring hand between sharp shoulder blades. Sherlock neither pulled away nor acknowledged the gesture.

The service was more sparsely attended than John had anticipated, but even still, in the space of a single moment--when John was distracted by the introduction of an elderly aunt--Sherlock somehow managed to slip away unseen.

After he realised Sherlock was gone, John looked across the room and locked eyes with Lestrade, who stood by himself, a respectful distance away from the knot of family members.

Even at a distance, their communication was nonverbal yet instantaneous.

--Did you see him go?

--I thought you were watching him.

--I was. I thought you were watching him, too.

-- I was. Goddammit. I knew this was going to happen.

John made brief excuses, checking to make sure arrangements were in place to get Mr and Mrs Holmes safely back home (“Of course, Dr Watson,” Anthea murmured, her tone measured and respectful yet still somehow sounding mortally offended) before leaving with Greg to make a predetermined sweep of all Sherlock’s known haunts.

He knew it was utterly futile, but John couldn't stop himself from texting and trying to ring him, over and over, cursing under his breath every time he reached his voicemail.

“Fucking stupid reckless fucking bastard,” he muttered, stowing his mobile in his coat pocket, only to pull it out and try again minutes later.

As afternoon turned into evening, a damp drizzle started to fall. The pair tore through every known drug market in the city, visited the major homeless camps, made the rounds of every one of Sherlock’s known informants and “extrajudicial associates.”

With every blank look, with every terse shake of a head and every negative reply, John grew more and more agitated and frustrated.

Night wore inexorably on into morning.

“You need some sleep, mate,” Lestrade finally said as a thin sliver of dawn lightened the eastern
John shook his head. “You’re a fine one to talk. You look like ten miles of bad road yourself.”

“I woke up like that, and anyway, if I’m ten miles you’re twenty. Let me take you home. You’re exhausted. He will turn up.”

“You think so?” John asked, wanting desperately to believe.

I really do. Off his face, most likely, and this time I can’t really fault him for it.” Lestrade scrubbed a hand across his grey, creased face. “And when he does, he’s going to need you, I reckon, and in a spectacular way. Let me take you home to get some rest.”

John thought about the house he shared with his lying, murdering sham of a spouse, the forlorn row home overflowing with unhappiness, the nursery silent and shuttered behind empty windows.

A memory surfaced, unbidden; he recalled a sunny afternoon, a hugely pregnant Mary smiling and humming as she sat in a yellow painted rocking chair, folding onesies and blankets. The sweet memory faded as quick as it rose, however, followed inexorably by the haunting image of her pitiless blue eyes as she put a bullet into Mycroft’s brain.

She murdered Sherlock’s brother and stole John’s child, and at the thought of walking into the house he shared with her the bile rises in his throat, slimy and bitter. No, there was nothing left in that house for John, not ever again.

It could burn to the ground and John would honestly feel nothing but relief.

He was about to say this, or at least some part of this, when Greg said “Baker Street it is, then,” in a tone that telegraphed his understanding, mercifully sparing John from having to bare this raw, bleeding part of his soul. “He might turn up there sooner rather than later, anyway.”

John nodded, grateful and suddenly exhausted.

He let himself in with the key he never took off his keyring, treading up the stairs as lightly as he could, hoping against hope he would find Sherlock inside sleeping or smoking or just sitting silently in the dark as he sometimes did when the things that dwelt in his mind grew particularly sharp claws.

When he slipped into the flat, however, John knew instantly by the stale, still feeling of the air that Sherlock wasn’t there.

He dropped onto the sofa, wondering what the hell to do next.

A few minutes rest suddenly sounded like a really incredibly good idea. A fresh head, that’s what he needed. A moment to rest his eyes, and then--

He fell asleep within moments, his coat still on and shoes still on his feet.

He woke, startled, to Sherlock standing--no, looming--over him, vibrating with frantic impatience.

“Scared the shit out of me,” John mumbled, struggling to sit up. He peered up at Sherlock through eyes gritty with interrupted sleep. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock replied in a surprisingly (unsettlingly) crisp, businesslike tone. He was so very tense, his skin stretched too tightly across sharp bones. Of course, he smelled like far too many
cigarettes, but he wasn’t visibly high to John’s trained eye. John sighed in relief.

“Sit down,” he said a bit blearily, running a hand through disheveled hair. “I’ll make tea.”

“No time,” Sherlock replied as he fished something small and rectangular out of his coat pocket and handed it to John.

A booklet. Deep maroon cover, stamped in gold. Recognizable to any Brit at twenty paces.

“A passport,” John observed.

Sherlock didn’t actually roll his eyes, but managed to breathe and tilt his head in a way that perfectly conveyed the same impression. “Yes.”

“A new one.” John opened the booklet to find his own image staring back at him—a photo he didn’t recognise or remember, to be honest—with the name alongside: Wallace, Joseph Patrick. He flipped through the blank pages to the back cover. Tucked inside was a driving licence bearing the same false name.

John stood slowly, his back creaking a bit in protest. He rubbed his arms against the gooseflesh suddenly pebbling his skin.

“Sherlock. What the hell is this about?”

“I’m going after her. To America. Her home country. It’s where she’s gone to ground, I’m certain of it.”

John’s brows furrowed in...not confusion, exactly, but in a certain lack of full understanding that he really ought to be used to already. “And you—you want me to come with you?”

“Obviously. I’d not have spent a frankly extortionate sum on those documents if I didn’t.” Sherlock paused, looked at him carefully, and for a moment the facade of cool purpose slipped just a fraction, revealing a glimpse of the unspeakable grief in the depths of those pale green eyes. “I have to find her,” he said, softer, almost beseeching. “And she has your daughter. Your child, John. We can’t allow her to slip away.”

Sherlock’s gaze was imploring, close to pleading, and John knew with bone deep certainty there really wasn’t a decision here to be made. Of course his lot is cast with Sherlock. Of course it is. Wherever Sherlock goes, whatever he does or plans on doing, John knew he could never bear losing him again. He swallowed, licked dry lips.

“When do we leave?” he asked.

“Right now,” Sherlock answered. “Flight leaves in fifty-three minutes. There’s a cab downstairs.”

“Oh,” John said, a bit poleaxed.

“If you don’t want to come—”

“Jesus, Sherlock.” John snapped, annoyed and afraid and completely, unquestionably devoted to the man. “Shut up. Of course I’m coming. Can we leave a note for Mrs Hudson?”

“If you can be quick about it, I suppose so.”

***
In a different--and noticebly seedier--motel, John wakes again in the middle of the night; his body won’t stop insisting it’s well past eight am and he’s had an unforgivably late lie-in.

A tiny, smothered gasp for air catches his attention.

Sherlock is lying on the other bed, wearing only his jeans, curled tightly in a foetal position with his back to John. His naked shoulders tremble with each ragged breath.

John doesn’t know if Sherlock is crying, or desperately trying not to cry.

He thinks about saying something.

He thinks about going to Sherlock, wrapping his arms around his slim body, holding him and comforting him in his terrible sorrow. But the distance between them feels like an ocean, like the expanse of the cold Atlantic between here and London, and he has no idea how to cross that vast chasm, or even if Sherlock wants him to.

They are here together, the two of them against the world a thousand miles from home-- but John suddenly sees that in a profound way, each locked inside their private grief, they’ve never been more alone.

His heart is heavy with sorrow for both of them, but he’s helpless, powerless. He can’t do anything, really, but close his eyes and wait for morning to arrive.

It feels like cowardice.

He doesn’t think he sleeps, but he must have done, because next thing he knows he’s opening his eyes to morning sunlight and a short-haired, momentarily unrecognizable Sherlock putting the kettle on to boil.

John finds he’s not entirely certain if what he saw the night before was even real, or only part of another odd, disjointed dream.
Chapter Summary

John almost objects to Sherlock carrying a gun. Something about the flat, cold look in his eye is deeply unsettling, chilling John right down to the bone.

It’s a look John has seen before. It’s the look of a man who’s not overly fussed about pulling a trigger.

He’s never been afraid of Sherlock, not once in their entire relationship; but not for the first time, John finds himself becoming very, very afraid for him.

2. Scranton

“We have to get a car,” John mutters sometime after the Greyhound bus lumbers past the sign proclaiming “Pennsylvania Welcomes You” on Interstate 80. “I don’t mind slumming a bit, but honestly, Sherlock? This is fucking barbaric.”

Sherlock hums noncommittally, never even taking his eyes from his phone.

“I swear to God, I saw someone carry on a live chicken at the last stop.”

A grin pulls at the corner of Sherlock’s mouth. “It’s Pennsylvania, not rural Guatemala. We’re an hour from New York City. You’re just irritable. You’ll survive.”

“I’m not irritable,” John snaps, but even as he says it he knows it’s true. He’s stroppy as hell and for good reasons, poor sleep and jet lag and crap food and worry all piling up on his shoulders until he’s practically crawling out of his skin.

The only thing that could be worse than being here with Sherlock, though, would be not being here with Sherlock, being left behind again. That implications of thought snaps John out of his little wallow instantaneously; his righteous indignation fizzles away into embarrassment, and he feels like a right arsehole.

“I’m sorry,” he sighs. “I’m just. You know.”

“It’s all right,” Sherlock replies. “Welcome to international espionage. To use the common vernacular, it’s really rather shit most of the time.”

John shrugs in resigned acceptance and slumps down in his seat, pressing his cheek to the cool glass of the window, watching the unfolding landscape grow more rural with each passing mile.

Spring is painfully slow to arrive in this rocky, wooded terrain. Wet brown earth peeks out from between patches of tired snow, the trees sooty brown sticks against a smear of indifferent grey sky.

It reminds John of the more depressing parts of Wales, a place he finds relentlessly dreary under the absolute best of circumstances.

If he’s being absolutely honest, he loathes it here.
He wants to go home.

***

John knows Sherlock is correct (if a bit needlessly rude) about the ordinariness of his appearance; he’s always had an unassuming air, always been easy to miss until he wanted to be noticed. It’s a quality he’s used to his advantage many, many times and it serves him well in their current situation. Nobody sees him, not really.

(He never speaks to anyone but Sherlock, though, if he can possibly help it; though he’s worked and lived with many Americans, there’s no way he can fake any sort of native accent, and he’s not going to embarrass himself with an attempt.)

Sherlock wears ratty jeans slung low on his hips and faded band tees. He stops shaving every morning, letting the surprisingly gingerish stubble linger on his jaw for two or three days. He keeps his hair short, cropped close to his skull, sleek and dark as otter fur. He looks far younger than thirty-eight, unless you look closely at the crows-feet at the corners of his eyes, fine spidery lines etched across his pale skin, growing deeper with each passing day.

It’s somehow not a costume, or a sham. Sherlock wears these clothes like he was born to them, his entire posture and body language shifting subtly yet completely to inhabit this persona. His American accent never wavers, his deep voice taking on a soft, drawling hint of Southern cadence that never veers into parody or caricature.

In the grotty cafe next to the Greyhound terminal, Sherlock tells the waitress he’s from a little town just outside of Tallahassee. *Just a wide spot on the road*, he says as he fiddles with his coffee cup. *Nothin’ special. Got out soon as I hit eighteen, never goin’ back. Gators and palmetto bugs can have it, far as I’m concerned.*

The waitress dotes on him, tucking her hair behind her ear, refilling his coffee cup every five minutes and slipping him a piece of free pie that he won’t eat. He looks up bashfully through long dark lashes as he smiles shyly in thanks.

It’s a flawless performance.

The smile is the only part that doesn’t ring perfectly true. It never quite reaches his eyes, which remain distant and hard, pale and cool as diamonds.

John thinks of Sherlock’s real smile, the way it transforms him, lights him up from the inside out.

He’s kept that memory locked up tight, a treasure tucked away deep in his heart.

He doesn’t think he’ll see it again any time soon.

***

Guns are shockingly easy to obtain in the States.

An Armenian pawnbroker in his early thirties opens a square shopping bag and slides two used Glock 17s across a battered Formica countertop. Sherlock nods and pulls an envelope out of his inside jacket pocket, opens it so the man can see the stack of hundreds contained within. Then he pauses, as if a thought just suddenly occurred to him. He turns to glance out the dusty window at the front of the shop.

“I think,” he says, with the air of a man contemplating a great decision, “We’d like to purchase that
2002 silver Ford Focus as well. With the tags, if you please.”

The response is instantaneous. “No way, man. Not for sale.”

“It hasn’t been driven in over a month, though the plates are current. No one is driving it, clearly you can bear to part with it.”

“That’s my mom’s car,” the man protests. “She’s overseas. Visiting relatives. She’ll kill me if she comes home and I’ve--”

Sherlock counts out another full handful of hundreds. “I’ll pay full blue book value plus twenty percent.”

The man angrily crosses his arms. “Absolutely not.”

“Thirty percent.” Sherlock lifts an eyebrow. “And, I won’t let your mother know what you get up to with the young man you see on Tuesday and Friday afternoons.”

The man’s olive skin goes greyish. He breathes out, swallows once and nods once, glaring daggers of pure fire at Sherlock.

Sherlock, of course, is unruffled by the man’s laser-focused hatred. He counts out another stack of hundreds onto the counter. The pawnbroker snatches them up and practically throws the keys at him in return.

“Pleasure doin’ business,” Sherlock calls out as they leave the shop, the tinny bells on a string jingling as the door swings shut behind them.

He hands the shopping bag to John, unlocks the car and gets behind the steering wheel without a moment of hesitation, starting the engine and pulling easily into traffic. He drives on the right side of the road like he’s done it his whole life. It makes John feel like he’s fallen into some kind of mirror universe.

Sherlock takes them a mile or so down the road, then stops for petrol at the first station they encounter. He gets out and fills the tank, then pulls around the back of the building and parks. He pulls their newly acquired weapons out of the bag and inspects them, checking the frames and pulling back the slides before handing each one over to John to do the same.

“Cheap and poorly maintained,” Sherlock pronounces.

“Terribly,” John agrees. “But they’ll do.”

Sherlock nods in agreement. His eyes meet John’s as he holds out his hand, palm up, in expectation.

John almost objects to Sherlock carrying a gun. Something about the flat, cold look in his eye is deeply unsettling, chilling John right down to the bone.

It’s a look John has seen before. It’s the look of a man who’s not overly fussed about pulling a trigger.

He’s never been afraid of Sherlock, not once in their entire relationship; but not for the first time, John finds himself becoming very, very afraid for him.

When it’s all said and done, though, John hesitates for only a moment before handing over the gun anyway. It’s not as if Sherlock isn’t going to get what he wants in the end, one way or another.
The baby’s due date comes and goes without a mention from either of them.

John is very careful to not think about the baby, about whether she’s being fed and held and cared for properly.

If he does, he will collapse, cease to function, like a laptop with a fatal virus, or a marionette with cut strings.

He can’t collapse now. He can’t. Sherlock needs him too much.

So he...doesn’t.

Ever the good soldier, John marches on.

Despite traveling incognito, Sherlock maintains deep connections, somewhere, somehow.

Throughout their journeys, he picks up packages in strange places. Bulging shipping envelopes are slipped across counters by bored teenage bowling alley attendants, gum-chewing diner hostesses, sad-eyed Pakistani gas station clerks. They contain burner phones, prepaid American-style Visa cards, envelopes full of fresh green twenties and hundreds.

Today’s package is handed over by an alarmingly leathery-looking woman at the front desk of a tanning salon. In addition to the usual, it contains a dark metallic grey flash drive.

“Someone’s helping us, then,” John says as he sits on his neatly-made bed (they may be living out of wretched one-star motels, but he’s not about to become a fucking slob) and watches Sherlock empty the contents of the latest package across the desk.

“We’re keeping a low profile,” Sherlock says. “That doesn’t mean we are entirely without resources.”

“Sherlock.” John furrows his brow, considers how to phrase his question. “This thing that um, whatever we’re doing right now.” Sherlock is silent, so he stumbles forward awkwardly. “Is this on or off the radar of...your brother’s associates?”

“Yes,” Sherlock replies tersely, inserting the flash drive into the USB port of his laptop.

“That’s really illuminating,” John mutters, a bit annoyed. “Ta so much for clearing that up.”

Sherlock doesn’t answer as as he pulls up pages and pages of images on his laptop screen, from receipts to photographs to travel documents in several different languages. John stands, crosses the small room to peer over his shoulder.

“What’s all that, then?”

Sherlock scrolls rapidly through the pages. “The woman we knew as Mary Morstan was born in America, somewhere in the Mid Atlantic region. Her layers of false identity are deep and complex. My connections confirm that she’s of Ukrainian descent, with deep family ties to a diverse Ukrainian/Lithuanian organised crime network operating primarily in the area between Philadelphia and New York.”

“You think they’re helping her?”
Sherlock sighs. “I suspect it’s more complicated than that. Murder for hire tends to alienate a lot of former friends. She may have some allies, but also some very dangerous enemies. But I do think they have information on her whereabouts. We get a solid toehold with them, our chances of finding Mary and your daughter increase exponentially.” He turns to look at John. “I have no doubt she’s on CIA radar as well. If they get to her before we do, I’m certain she’ll be disposed of with brutal efficiency.”

“So we need to find her first.”

“Exactly.”

“And we need to tangle with Ukrainian organised crime to do that.”

“Essentially.”

“Fantastic.” John’s tone is sarcastic, but inside he feels a surge of elation at the prospect of action, of engagement. “Which we do… how, exactly?”

“First,” Sherlock says, “We go for a drink.”

***

Sherlock drives them to an unprepossessing little strip mall in a nicer, cleaner, more suburban part of town. The pub, at the end of the row, is blandly innocuous from the outside; if one wasn’t looking it would be easily missed. The lettering on the window proclaims it to be Flynn’s Taphouse, and according to the neon sign above the door it is OPEN.

“Not from around here,” Sherlock says when the waitress asks what they’d like to drink. “What do you recommend?”

Which is how John comes to find himself sitting in the darkened corner of a pub (“It’s a bar, John”) drinking a very nice lager early on a Tuesday afternoon. The local brew is honestly quite tasty, or very possibly the fact that he hasn’t had a pint in weeks is affecting his perception.

It’s not overstating the case to say this is the undisputed high point of the past couple of dreadful weeks.

John has just finished his pint and is starting in on Sherlock’s untouched glass when a somewhat chubby, gingerish, pleasant-faced man in his early forties slides into the booth next to Sherlock.

“How’s the beer, John?” the man says jovially. His voice contains more than a trace of an Irish lilt. “I’ve been given to understand you wish to speak with me.”

“You’re Kelly,” Sherlock replies.

“Aye. Flynn Kelly, proprietor of this fine establishment, at your service and all that.” He cocks his head and smiles. “And who am I speaking with, then?”

“I’m Bill, and that there is Joe,” Sherlock says. “And that’s really all you need to know for the moment, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind a bit,” Kelly says. “Of course, the situation may change, you understand.”

“Of course,” Sherlock says neutrally.

“What can I help you with, then?”
Sherlock pulls a photo from his pocket. “I understand you can help me find this woman.”

When he hands it to Kelly, John sees the photo clearly. It is an image of Mary in her bridal gown.

The picture is torn carefully in half on the right, where John stood at her side.

“Ah, Christ on a bike,” Kelly sighs. “Yeah I know her. Knew her. Been ages ago.” He shakes his head. “Maria Zimya. Maria the Snake. Pretty accurate name, except a snake is warmer and cuddlier. One of you lucky blokes got mixed up with her, then?”

“I guess you could say we both did,” Sherlock says.

“Really? That’s surprising, because looking at you two I would have sworn that…”

Sherlock cocks an eyebrow at Kelly, his eyes pure ice. The chill that descends over the table is immediate. Kelly shuts his mouth with an audible snap of his jaw.

John looks away, takes a long pull of lager.

“Anyway,” says Sherlock, in a tone so sharp it could be used to perform surgery. “Maria Zimya. What can you tell us about her?”

“Nothing recent. Last I heard of her was about ten years ago.” He hands the picture back to Sherlock, digs his phone out of a trouser pocket. “This is the guy who has what you need. Petro Dobrev.” He pulls up a photo, shows it to the two men. It is a store sign, blue block letters on a white background indicating ‘Big Pete’s Discount Furniture.’

“Owns a furniture store in Wilkes-Barre. Sells sofas and dining sets out the front. Does a lot more interesting work out of the back, if you catch my meaning.” He puts his phone away. “He does a lot of… subcontracting, I guess you’d say. Collecting debts, settling scores. If Maria Zimya is back in town, I’d wager he knows something about it.”

John catches Sherlock’s eye, tilts his head in a questioning manner.

“Why are you helping us?” Sherlock asks. “You don’t even know us.”

“No, but I know Maria,” he says. “She’s brought nothing but trouble to me and mine. If you’re of a mind to stop her, good on ya, I’d say.”

“You worked with Maria,” Sherlock says. “Back in the day.”

“You could say that,” Kelly allows.

“And when you did…you weren’t Irish,” Sherlock states. It’s not really a question.

“Let’s put it this way. I’m every bit as Irish as you are American.” Kelly stands. “Best of luck, gentlemen. Drinks are on me.”

Sherlock nods silently as Kelly takes his leave, then turns back to John.

"Come on, John," he says, rising from the table. "We have work to do."

"There is free beer in front of me," says John, a bit of steel in his tone, “and it is fresh and delicious, and you had better believe I am drinking it. Sit your arse back down and let me finish.”

***
They spend the entire evening staking out at the back of Big Pete’s Discount Furniture on 5430 Kidder Avenue, waiting for the building to go dark.

John picks at a bag of jelly babies while Sherlock chainsmokes, lights one cigarette from the butt of the last, blue smoke wreathing around his head. John has given up trying to stop or even slow his consumption. He’ll buy him an entire crate of patches when this whole thing is over.

Even a man as mentally disciplined as Sherlock usually gets bored on stakeout, willing to chat or trade stories or tell stupid jokes. But not this time. Sherlock says little, muttering terse one-word replies to John’s queries.

Soon enough John gives up trying to make conversation.

The entire enterprise is, as a former CO of John’s would say, mind-numbingly, tooth-grindingly, goat-fuckingly dull.

A little after nine p.m., the last employee finally leaves for the night. Sherlock gestures minutely with a tilt of his head ––let’s go–– and the pair leave the car, sticking to the shadows as they make their way to the back door. From an inside pocket Sherlock produces a heretofore unseen set of lockpick tools.

It takes him less than three minutes to work the back door open. Immediately the alarm system begins to chime in warning, the LED over the keypad next to the door flashing red.

"Sherlock,” John mutters nervously.

"Give me a minute.”

"That's all you have," John replies. “Make it good.”

Sherlock studies the keypad intently. "This model of security system uses a four digit PIN. The zero is the most worn number, so it could be a birthdate. Or... “ Sherlock looks to their left, where the glass window of the door allows a square of light. "Oh, good Lord, they're not even trying,” he mutters in disappointment before punching in four digits. The LED goes green. The chiming ceases.

"0345. The street number, backward. Just as it appears when you look up at the numbers on the back door.” Sherlock huffs a chuckle, amusement mixed with irritation, as he hands John a small torch. “They're basically asking to be burglarised.”

"Wouldn’t want to disappoint, then." John murmurs in reply, flicking on the torch.

Big Pete’s office is easy to find, behind the last door at the end of the dark hallway.

"What are we looking for?” John asks as they survey the messy room, overflowing with boxes and papers.

“Anything that looks like it’s not about furniture,” Sherlock says, sitting at the cluttered desk and opening the battered black laptop. “Take pictures. We’re not taking anything with us.”

In an hour of searching, John finds a handful of transit documents and a small blue notebook filled with handwritten pages of dense Cyrillic scrawl. Sherlock downloads a handful of suspect files from Petro’s laptop. (The password is big_pete01. Sherlock is personally offended by this.) John keeps expecting to be interrupted by a security guard or intrepid employee, but this particular bout of B&E goes off without a hitch. They are careful to leave the office exactly as they found it, rearming the security system before they exit the building.
“Good night’s work,” John says quietly as Sherlock starts the car. Sherlock gives an indistinct grunt in reply, brain already spinning at a mile a minute, piecing together information even as he drives back to the motel, careful to stick to the smaller side streets just to be on the safe side.

***

Late the next afternoon, Sherlock is pacing the short length of the motel room, smoking and muttering to himself.

He’s gone almost completely nonverbal now, hasn’t eaten other than a slice of pizza John pushed on him earlier in the day, a few bites taken before the plate was pushed aside and forgotten. He’s only not succumbed to dehydration because John presses mugs of tea and bottled water into his hands. He takes one or two sips, ignoring the rest until it goes either cold or warm.

The room is a disaster; scribbled bits of paper, photographs, and receipts are taped to the wall above the television.

John is about to lose his mind.

He is, of course, thoroughly used to occupying himself when Sherlock is hard at work on a case; at home, though, he can at least go to the shops or have a pint or take a walk in the park. Here he’s hemmed in by four (shabby) walls, trapped in a room with a mumbling, nicotine-poisoned madman--but he’s unwilling to leave Sherlock alone even if he felt at ease about going out on his own, which he absolutely doesn’t.

In short, he’s going more than a little stir-crazy.

Trying to keep his brain occupied, John field-strips and cleans the guns carefully, trying valiantly to undo a decade of neglect with an hour of gun oil and elbow grease. By the time he’s finished they are far from perfect, but it’s a huge improvement. When he’s done he cleans up after himself, then tidies up the room before taking a long, hot shower, scrubbing away the smoke and the annoyance, reminding himself of why they are here, of what they are trying to accomplish.

Thoughts of his daughter threaten to surface. He pushes them away.

He thinks about shaving, decides to keep the stubble. It seems to fit with the life they’re leading now.

It’s full dark when he emerges in just pants and vest, toweling off his hair. Sherlock doesn’t even glance up.

(John remembers just a few days ago, when he cut Sherlock’s hair, the moment that passed between them. He had been so very certain that they were on the brink of...something. But that moment is long past, the memory receding, and Sherlock is so...not uncaring. No, not that. He’s different now, in that way. John knows he cares, and deeply. But he’s still so locked up in himself right now, so wrapped up in the warp and weft of his mental threads, the very idea of something like that happening between them seems almost ludicrous, somehow.)

Feeling clean and organised gives John the energy to try again.

“I could help, you know. If you told me what’s going on in your head. I could help.”

Sherlock ignores him, goes blank and silent, lost deep in the forests of his thoughts.

“I’ll just fuck right off then, shall I?” John asks the back of Sherlock’s head. He receives no reply.
John tugs on his jeans, flops down barefooted on the bed, clicks on the telly just for something to fill up the empty space. Sherlock lights another cigarette, and something in John snaps.

“I’ve had enough with the fucking cancer sticks for tonight. I can’t stop you, God knows I’ve tried, but take it outside for just ten goddamn minutes so I can breathe.”

Sherlock doesn’t even answer, just snatches his cigarettes off the desk and stalks out the door, not even bothering to pull it shut behind him.

The fresh cool air is welcome, so John doesn’t bother to close it.

Through the open door, John can see him pace back and forth relentlessly down the narrow concrete walkway outside. It’s still annoying, but at least he can breathe a bit easier, though the room still reeks of old smoke.

Annoyed and damn tired of being shut out, John fetches himself a cold slice of pizza and makes a cuppa. He takes his dinner back to bed, sitting down crosslegged and picking up the remote. He flips distractedly through the channels, still acutely aware that Sherlock has ceased his relentless stalking up and down the narrow pavement. He is standing in front of the open doorway, palms resting on the steel railing that edges the walkway, lean frame silhouetted by the streetlights just beyond.

American television is even worse than telly at home, John soon realises, growing annoyed after a few minutes, clicking the set off with a sigh. He finishes his dinner without even tasting it and pushes the paper plate aside, sliding down on the bed to stare blankly at the ceiling.

Sometime later he ends up curled on his side, staring out the open doorway. Which, predictably, somehow gradually becomes staring at Sherlock’s back in unguarded fascination.

Sherlock’s neck is pale and painfully thin, looking especially naked and vulnerable without the familiar curls of hair resting there. Even at this distance, the knobs of his vertebrae are visible under his slightly too-small t-shirt, his shoulders far too narrow.

He needs a snack and a hug and about fourteen hours of sleep, none of which he will allow himself right now.

John is half-asleep, drifting off on the floating current of his thoughts, when Sherlock slips back into the room. John is fully awake, sensing instantly that Sherlock is on high alert, tension tightly wound in every muscle of his slim frame.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Someone’s watching us,” Sherlock says, pulling on his shoes. “Man in a black car, parked at the end of the street.” He shrugs into his jacket, picks up one of the guns from the top of the dresser, opens the top drawer to retrieve a magazine and chambers it.

“Sherlock, what the fuck are you doing?”

“Confrontation. Statistically, it’s the best avenue.”

“Are you sure you’re not…” John trails off, uncertain.


“No,” John concedes.
Sherlock chambers a clip into the second gun, holds it out to John. “Then come on.”

John nods, tucks the gun into his waistband, scrambles for his own shoes and jacket.

Once outside, Sherlock moves with controlled ferocity, elegant with focused purpose as he strides to the black car, John following in his path. Sure enough, a ponytailed man in a black jumper is sitting behind the wheel. When he sees the two of them approaching, he starts the car, but Sherlock is faster. His gun is out and pointed at the driver’s side window before the man can pull away. John peels away to take position in front of the vehicle. He draws his own gun and aims it at the man’s head, careful to keep his finger off the trigger until the situation warrants.

With his free hand, Sherlock gestures unmistakably for the man (just a kid, John sees up close, probably not even twenty-three) to get out of the car. The man glances briefly at John, as if questioning. John nods, tilts his head. *Do as he says.*

The man opens the door. Sherlock is on him in a flash, hauling him out of the vehicle one-handed.

“Who sent you?” he snarls.

“I don’t know what--”

Sherlock presses the muzzle of the gun to the man’s head, making him whimper and cringe. John can clearly see Sherlock’s finger trembling on the trigger, the sight sending a sick jolt of fear through him.


“You know who,” the man wheezes. “Big Pete. He knows you broke in. He has *cameras*, dude, but he doesn’t know who you are. He’s offering ten grand to whoever can find you first.”

Sherlock shoves him hard into the side of the car, steps back, gun still aimed at the man’s head. “Go. Don’t tell anyone you found us, or I will find you and *I will kill you.*”

The man looks at John. John nods solemnly in agreement, gestures at the car with the muzzle of his gun. *Get in and drive away, mate.*

The man nods and gets back into the car, his body visibly shaking as he starts the ignition. John moves to Sherlock’s side as the car pulls away, tires squealing in haste. Sherlock is still breathing heavily, eyes wide and feral.

They watch the car turn the corner and disappear from sight.

“Trigger discipline, Sherlock,” John hisses. “Jesus.”

“Apologies,” Sherlock says.

“Sorry isn’t going to put someone’s brains back in their skull,” John snaps.

Sherlock doesn’t reply, but his shoulders slump a bit in unspoken contrition.

“Just be more careful next time,” John says, his tone a bit softer.

“I will. I promise.”

The two men are silent for several seconds.
“He’s going to tell Big Pete,” John states.

“Likely on the phone with him as we speak,” Sherlock agrees. “We have to leave. Right now.”

“Where are we going?” John asks.

“Philadelphia,” Sherlock says with certainty.

***

Even with the help of Google Maps, it takes a few missed turns to find the entrance to the Pennsylvania Turnpike, which apparently costs money to drive. Sherlock takes the oddity in stride, plucking a ticket out of the tollbooth machine with practiced ease.

Even several days in, John is impressed and a bit surprised by how Sherlock takes so easily to America, to driving on the wrong side of the road and paying with the wrong kind of money. He wonders, occasionally, about Sherlock’s life before they met, about the months—years?—spent in Florida, how his path crossed with the HUDS in this strange and huge country. It never seems like the right time to ask.

Suddenly, despite everything—or is it because of everything?—John feels like he never really knew the man next to him at all. He wonders if he ever will.

The smells of cheap vinyl upholstery and stale smoke, ever present in John’s nostrils, suddenly make him overwhelmingly queasy, and he’s absolutely certain he’s going to be ill. He rolls down the window, leans out, gulps lungfuls of damp, green-scented air.

It doesn’t help, not really.

Sherlock looks over at him, line between his brows creasing in concern.

“I’m all right,” John declares, rolling up the window and slumping back into his seat. “I’m all right.”

The clouds begin to break up as they make their way across eastern Pennsylvania. The moonlight is lovely, painting the wooded landscape in tones of silver and white.

***

They are sitting in an improbably-gaudy cafe, the likes of which John has never before encountered in his life. Mirrors and neon cover every vertical surface, and the laminated menus are almost as large as the table itself. Next to the hostess stand is a tall glass case where a variety of cakes and pies are proudly displayed.

The shelves of the case rotate slowly. John finds it oddly, soothingly hypnotic.

“He’ll have a mushroom and cheese omelette, home fries, wheat toast, coffee, and water,” Sherlock says to the waitress. “And just coffee for me.”

John looks away from the revolving case, breaks his self-imposed silence. “No,” he says firmly.

The tired-looking waitress turns her head to him, silver hoop earrings swinging, penciled eyebrow raised in query. Her pen hovers over the order pad.

“He’s having the grilled ham and cheese,” John tells her. “With tomato on it. And chips.”

“Fries,” Sherlock corrects automatically.
“Right. Those. A large order. Well done. And a coffee, and a glass of ice water.”

The waitress looks uncertainly at Sherlock for confirmation. He shrugs his shoulders, slides down in his seat in defeated acceptance.

When their food arrives, Sherlock takes one bite of a corner of the sandwich. He then proceeds to stares glumly at the plate for the next twenty minutes as John inhales eggs and toast.

“Two more bites, Sherlock,” John says, hating the wheedling note in his voice but unable to stop himself. “Or I’ll sit on you and force it down your throat.”

A ghost of a grin twitches at Sherlock’s lips.

“I’d like to see you try,” he murmurs.

“So help me, Sherlock, I’ll do it.” John sighs, takes a sip of his coffee, tries another tack. “Honestly, you’re about to collapse from starvation. I know you…” he drops his voice lower. “I know it’s hard to eat right now. But you need fuel. Please, Sherlock.”

Sherlock picks up the sandwich, bites into it, chews mechanically, swallows. Repeats. “Satisfied, doctor?”

“Not nearly. But it will have to do, I guess. Drink some water.”

Sherlock complies.

As they’re leaving the restaurant, John sees how Sherlock’s hands are trembling minutely. The circles under his eyes are deep and shadowed, bordering on bruised.

He makes a decision.

“Give me the keys,” John says. “I’m driving.”

Despite his exhaustion, Sherlock gives John a look of bemused disbelief that makes him look more like himself than he has in days. “You can barely make it to the Asda half a mile from your house.”

“That’s a bloody lie,” John protests.

“You crashed into your own bins.”

“A minor slip.”

“Twice.”

“And you haven’t slept in days. Statistically, I’m still a better risk.” He stops, gives Sherlock his best Captain Watson stare. “Give me the keys, Sherlock.”

Sherlock sighs theatrically, handing the keys over to John.

“Fine,” he says in resigned annoyance. “Let’s go, then.”

John nods sharply and heads to the car. He narrowly manages to avoid getting in on the right hand side, making Sherlock snort quietly. He chooses to ignore it.

“There’s a skip a hundred feet away, at the other side of the lot. Do try not to hit it.”
“Shut up.”

Sherlock shuts up; in fact, his eyelids are already drooping as they leave the car park. He is asleep before they get back on the turnpike, leaving John to deal with the bloody tollbooth contraption on his own.

John somehow manages to get them the rest of the way to Philadelphia in one piece, and Sherlock manages a little over two hours of desperately-needed rest.
Philadelphia, Part One

Chapter Summary

John thinks of the terrible things both of them have done, the deaths, the deceptions, the lies they have told to keep the other safe.

He remembers making a decision, as Sherlock lay in hospital fighting for every breath. Pushing past a shocked assistant to drop a silver USB stick on Mycroft Holmes’ desk.

_I want to know what you know about her_, he said to Mycroft without preamble, _and what you and I are going to do about her, to keep her from ever hurting Sherlock again._

_What are you willing to do?_ Mycroft asked him. _Think carefully about your answer, Doctor Watson. What are you willing to do to keep Sherlock safe?_

John’s response was instantaneous. _Anything. I'll do anything at all._

3. Philadelphia, Part One

Sherlock sleeps like the dead all the way to Philadelphia, long body curled awkwardly into the car seat, threadbare green jacket rolled up and wedged under his head for a pillow.

Resolve steeled by his determination to not wake Sherlock, John manages to navigate the end of the turnpike on his own. An awkward smile pasted on his face, he hands the toll-taker the beige card and a ten dollar bill, hoping silently for the best. The man hands him a palmful of bills and coins without comment, and John pulls away, cringing inwardly at the painful awkwardness this huge, loud, brightly-lit country seems to bring out in him.

He’s British to the bone, no doubt about it, suited for something cozier and damper and a good deal smaller in scale.

In Afghanistan, he had the security and structure of the Army to keep him grounded. Here, all he has is Sherlock, who’s every bit as dislocated and traumatised as John, and very possibly more so.

Which brings him to this epiphany: John might not like it here, but he had better learn to deal, for both of their sakes.

But especially, for Sherlock’s sake.

Feeling oddly calmer and more centered after his long, quiet think, John stops for petrol, checks Google Maps, successfully navigates I-95 heading towards the airport.

He stops at the first decent motel he sees. He pulls into the car park and hesitates, unsure of exactly what to do next.

_Man up, Watson_, he tells himself sternly. _It’s a Marriott, not the Badlands of fucking Kandahar._

He leaves the car running (and Sherlock snoring gently), ventures into the lobby.
This motel is a marked improvement over establishments they've been patronizing of late. The counter is faux marble instead of faded and gouged Formica. The young woman on shift is bored and distant, but she is well-groomed and wearing a smart navy blue jacket (a touch too big, not tailored, but at least it approximates a decent fit) and a striped scarf knotted at her neck.

She slides her iPhone under a pile of papers behind the counter, looks up at John. Her face is polite, her eyes remote.

“How can I help you?” she asks.

“Need a room for the night,” John says, not bothering to hide his accent, giving her his best nonthreatening smile as he slides the prepaid Visa card across the counter. “Ground floor, outside, if you have it.”

The clerk doesn’t even ask for ID, just processes the credit card, hands him a slip of paper to sign before she encodes two key cards, tucking them into an envelope and handing them over. She distractedly bids him goodnight as she’s already reaching under the paperwork for her mobile.

She turns away from him as if he never existed.

Back in the car, Sherlock is still asleep, mouth open slightly as he snores delicately. *He looks so much older these days*, John thinks, the fine lines etched into the thin skin around his eyes and mouth visible even in the smooth slackness of deep sleep. His skin is pale to the point of greyness, drawn tight over razor-sharp cheekbones. He can’t go on like this, he really can’t. He’s going to get ill or collapse or have a breakdown if this continues much longer.

John hates to wake him, but needs must. He places a hand on the warm firm muscle of his thigh, shakes him gently.

“Sherlock. Hey, Sherlock.”

Sherlock wakes with a disoriented start, turning his head to look at John in bleary confusion.

“I hate to wake you, I really do. I got us a room, you need to get up now just for a few minutes. Come on, ground floor. It’s not far.”

Sherlock makes an unintelligible noise in response, yawns, unbuckles his seatbelt as John climbs out of the car, opens the trunk, grabs both bags before opening the passenger side door. Sherlock allows himself to be led like a child into the building, waits passively as John fishes out the keycard to open the door to their room.

“Your accent,” Sherlock murmurs, his voice rough with sleep. “We’re trying to escape notice, John. You took a risk.”

“Yes, I know,” John avers. “I didn’t want to wake you. We’re very near the airport. I figured that gave some reliable cover for the presence of a non-native.”

Sherlock hums thoughtfully for a moment. “Good plan,” he finally allows, before giving a huge, jaw-cracking yawn.

“I thought so,” John agrees as he swipes the card and ushers Sherlock through in front of him. He closes the door, drops the bags in the hallway before fumbling for the light switch.

The room is higher quality than their previous arrangements. It is actually more of a quasi-suite; the first half of the room is set up as a living area, with a sofa and small dinette set. A kitchenette alcove
to the right contains a small under-counter refrigerator, sink, and two burner stovetop. Past the
kitchenette, a dividing wall runs three quarters of the width of the room; beyond are two queen beds
and the ensuite bathroom.

As John completes his survey of their quarters he realises Sherlock is just standing there, gazing at
him blankly, almost robotically. He’s not really fully awake, and John decided to take full advantage
of the moment.

“I’m going to start you a shower,” says John. “Because even though you desperately need to go to
bed, you frankly don’t smell very good and you’ll sleep better if you’re clean.”

Uncharacteristically, Sherlock doesn’t argue. John decides to interpret his silence as assent and heads
into the bathroom, switching on the overhead light. He half expects a snarky retort, something along
the lines of Sherlock not being a mentally deficient child. He doesn’t get one. Instead, Sherlock
merely follows him meekly into the bathroom.

John starts the water, tests the temperature, turns on the shower. He turns back to Sherlock, who’s
still wearing the blank thousand-yard stare of someone who needs about a week of sleep.

“Arms up,” John says in a slightly softened version of his crisp, no-nonsense Doctor Watson voice.
Sherlock complies wordlessly, and John grasps the hem of his worn t-shirt, tugging it up and over
Sherlock’s head in one swift motion.

Sherlock hasn’t bathed in thirty six hours, at least. The scent of his body is strong and sharp, but far
from being unpleasant, it lights up something bright and fierce in John’s limbic system. A strong
wave of intense emotions wells up in him, a tangled mix of protectiveness and caring and fierce,
tender devotion.

It’s intense, terrifyingly so--yet John finds it’s not sexual, exactly. It’s something far more bone-deep
and profound. It’s intimate, achingly so, a desperate need to hold him and protect him, as best he can,
from the cruelties of an indifferent universe.

John blinks, surprised by a sudden hot prickle of tears. Christ, he thinks, I’m running on fumes
myself. Emotions all over the place. Sherlock is looking down at him a bit quizzically, big green eyes
blinking owlishly, and John suddenly feels very self-conscious and more than a little foolish.

“I’ll just…” John trails off awkwardly, gestures at the door. “You can handle the rest, yeah?”

“Of course,” Sherlock murmurs. He turns away from John as his long fingers undo the button of his
jeans, beginning to shimmy the material down his hips as John backs out of the ensuite, attempting to
stay casual, to neither look too closely nor look away.

“I’ll get you some clothes,” John says, carefully neutral, and turns away to fetch Sherlock’s bag. He
digs through the layers of clothing and toiletries, locating clean pants, toothbrush and toothpaste. He
takes them into the ensuite; Sherlock is mercifully ensconced behind the shower curtain, lines of his
body obscured by the ivory and beige patterned fabric.

“Everything okay in there?” John asks.

“I’m tired, John, not mentally deficient. I know how to take a shower.”

“Ah, there you are.”

“What?”
“Nothing,” John says as he leaves the bathroom, closing the door carefully behind him.

John has his own duffel bag opened on the bed, looking for something clean for himself (it’s a definite challenge; a trip to the laundrette is desperately overdue) when the ensuite door opens and Sherlock emerges, dressed only in black boxer briefs, scrubbing at the back of his head with one of the scratchy, undersized bath towels. His dark hair is growing in quickly, now long enough to stand up on top of his head in damp spiky clumps.

Sherlock has always been enthusiastically indifferent to traditional modesty in the confines of their flat, and John has seen him many, many various states of undress over the years. That doesn’t mean that he fails to notice the flat, hard planes of his stomach, or the shadowy trail of dark hair that starts just below his navel, disappearing into the waistband of his snug pants. It does mean, however, that he’s gotten quite skilled at hiding the fact that he notices.

Well, he’d like to think he’s skilled at hiding the fact. It is Sherlock Holmes, however, so balance of probability states he’s not concealing a damn thing from the most observant man on the planet. At the moment, though, Sherlock is still pale and glassy eyed, exhaustion clearly sapping him of his prodigious abilities, and for that John is momentarily grateful.

He gestures Sherlock towards him, folds back a corner of the bedclothes. “Come on. Hop in.”

Sherlock squints, as if he’s working out a particularly difficult deduction. “John. I’m not going to…” he tilts his head. “I have work to do,” he says, as if this fact should be self-explanatory.

“You can barely string a sentence together, and you look like you’ve been exhumed. You need sleep.”

“I slept in the car.”

“Yes, and well done, you. But two hours wedged into a Ford Focus are a drop in the bucket of what you actually need.”

Sherlock’s gaze grows a bit sharp. “I’m not resting while she is out there.”

John tries to hold back the annoyed sigh as his exasperation threatens to outweigh his patience. “Your dedication is legendary, and admirable, but it won’t keep you from collapsing with raging pneumonia, or a terrible kidney infection. You’re going to make yourself sick, Sherlock, and sooner rather than later, and then you’re not going to be any good to anyone at all.” He softens his voice, tries a different tack. “Fifteen minutes. Please, Sherlock? Fifteen minutes of a lie down and if you don’t fall asleep, I won’t keep you from getting up and going back to work. Promise.”

He thinks of crossing his fingers behind his back, dismisses it as a bit childish but reserves the option for later if needed.

Sherlock huffs a bit, but John stands his ground, refusing to drop his gaze. Sherlock finally nods in resigned acquiescence.

“Fifteen minutes,” he mutters, getting into bed.

“Thank you,” John says, looking down at him. It comes out quieter and more fond than John intended, and he has to push away a stray impulse to bend down and place a kiss on that pale forehead. Instead, he turns away, gathers his own clothing and toiletries, and heads to the loo to wash off the sweat and grime of his own long, exhausting day.

After his own brief but thorough wash, John pulls on clean boxers and vest and opens the door to the
main room. He’d rather hoped he would find Sherlock asleep. Instead, he is lying on his back, the sheets ruched down around his waist, hands clasped across his bare, concave belly.

He is staring fixedly at the ceiling.

He looks almost like a corpse, except for the minute rise and fall of his slender ribcage.

“You really don’t look like you’re trying to sleep,” John observes.

“Nine minutes,” Sherlock replies.

“Nine minutes?”

“You asked me to lie here for fifteen minutes. I agreed. Six minutes have passed.”

“So...nine minutes until you can get up.”

“Correct.”

“Sherlock, I…” John sighs. “That’s not what I was asking for.”

“In point of fact, it is precisely what you asked of me.”

“Well, yes. But that’s not the spirit of what I intended. What I intended was for you to allow yourself to fall asleep.”

“Then that is what you should have requested. I can’t be blamed for taking advantage of your imprecise language. And now it’s eight minutes.”

“Okay. Eight minutes.” John considers briefly, and in his desperation, commits to a course of action he’d otherwise not dream of. “For those eight minutes, then. Do you think I might lie down with you? I’m knackered as well, and it might, you know. Help you fall asleep.”

Sherlock’s head turns and he gives John a sharp, searching glance for a single microsecond. Then his expression smoothes out into one of studied, deliberate indifference as his gaze refocuses upward.

“Why on earth would that help?” Sherlock asks blandly.

“I don’t really know why, but having someone there...it just does, sometimes.”

Sherlock is silent for a moment. “If you insist,” he finally says with studied indifference. “I’m sure I don’t care.”

“I’m sure you don’t,” John murmurs as he turns down the other side of the covers, slips under the sheets and turns out the bedside lamp.

The two of them lie in the dark, both wide awake and nowhere near sleep. John feels himself marinating in his own awkwardness, and can almost hear the gears in Sherlock’s brain turning, around and around, inexorably, unable to slow long enough for his body to relax.

Seven minutes left. Six. Five.

Sherlock gives a tiny, almost inaudible sigh. “John,” he murmurs. He is different, somehow, in the dark, quieter and softer, more vulnerable than John has ever heard him.

“Yes?” John replies, voice low and carefully even.
“Sometimes,” Sherlock says, and then stops to consider as if uncertain what to say next. “Sometimes, when I was a child, when I couldn’t— my brother.” He inhales, exhales the next words in a rush of air. “He would read to me.”

“What did he read?” John asks.


John briefly wonders how on earth those examples constitute a sort of thing, but he decides to stop overthinking it and instead gets out of bed without comment, retrieves his discarded trousers and fishes his mobile from his pocket. He pulls up the Times website, navigates to the crime page.

“Rejected sexaholic kills wife,” he begins. “A sex-obsessed husband was convicted yesterday of murdering his wife by deliberately driving their car into a tree at 84 mph. Ian Walters, 51, a driving test examiner and church treasurer from Swindon, Wiltshire, veered off the M1 after his wife, Tracy, asked for a divorce because of his insatiable demands….”

After he finishes the article about the homicidal sex maniac church elder, he moves on to a piece about an attempted murder via parachute tampering, and then a hedge fund manager appealing his conviction for embezzlement.

Five minutes passes, then ten. Sherlock makes no move to rise from bed.

Fifteen minutes in, John glances over to see that Sherlock’s eyes are closed, the tightness around his eyes and mouth smoothed by sleep. He continues to read for several more minutes, just to be on the safe side, and after a final article about a murderous orderly at The Royal London Hospital he stops and puts his mobile on the bedside table.

Sherlock sighs in his sleep and rolls onto his side, facing John, but he doesn’t wake.

John can’t stop himself from reaching out to Sherlock, stroking his short dark hair with tender fingers, wishing for heavy curls underneath his palm. Sherlock snuffles and presses closer against John, seeking the comfort and contact he won’t allow himself when awake.

I love him, John thinks, unable or maybe unwilling to repress the wild hot flare of tenderness under his ribs as he watches Sherlock sleep. I do. I love him I love him I love him.

This is not the first time he has had these thoughts. Of course it’s not. He’s not an idiot. But God knows he doesn’t know what to do with the information, or if Sherlock even would welcome these kinds of feelings.

John had wanted him from the very start, from the very first moment he saw him in that lab at Barts, had wanted him with a dizzying, punch-to-the gut intensity he’d never felt before in his life. But then right on the heels of first hot rush of desire came the surprise of actually liking him, liking him enough to gracially deal with Sherlock rebuffing his tentative advances that first night (and relatively kindly, though it didn’t feel that way in the moment), liking him enough to put up with his many, many annoyances and peccadilloes, his odd habits and rude responses and thumbs in the fridge and jars of eyeballs in the microwave.

John doesn’t even know for certain when he realised he loved Sherlock, loved him more than he’d ever loved anyone else in his life.

He knows that when he finally understood the depth of his feeling, Sherlock was already a fixed point in his emotional landscape, a central truth that he could no more do away with than he could
gravity, or needing oxygen in his blood.

In his more maudlin moments, John thinks he loved Sherlock before he ever even met him, that the instantaneous pull he felt that day in Barts was not so much animal desire as it was relief, recognition, an unnamed bone-deep need fulfilled at long last.

*I'd been looking for you all my life,* John thinks, *and I didn’t even know it until that moment, the first moment I saw your face.*

(Underneath it all, John has discovered that for the right person--for this person--he is a hopeless, helpless, stupidly sentimental romantic, and how he desperately wishes he weren’t. It’s exhausting, feeling these things, trying to control emotions so terrifyingly uncontrolled. It’s so very embarrassing for a private, reserved, properly British man to have these kind of melodramatic impulses bouncing around in his brain. Honestly, the whole thing is mortifying. He hates it. It’s ninety percent of why he likes a drink probably more than he ought. He’s proper, he’s inarguably overly repressed, but he knows himself. He’s not un-self-aware. And despite what Sherlock says, he’s not an idiot.)

And even after all this, John doesn’t know for certain how Sherlock feels, not really. He understands, now, that Sherlock cares for him deeply, cares for him more than anyone else in the world. What he doesn’t know is if that means Sherlock loves him.

As in, loves him the way John wishes he would.

Sometimes, he thinks *maybe.* Sometimes, he even thinks *probably.* But God, everything has been such a mess between them for so long, John honestly doesn’t know anything for certain anymore.

In between faking a death and marrying someone else, the waters do tend to get a bit...muddled, after all.

John thinks of the terrible things both of them have done, the deaths, the deceptions, the lies they have told to keep the other safe.

He remembers making a decision, as Sherlock lay in hospital fighting for every breath. Pushing past a shocked assistant to drop a silver USB stick on Mycroft Holmes’ desk.

*I want to know what you know about her,* he said to Mycroft without preamble, *and what you and I are going to do about her, to keep her from ever hurting Sherlock again.*

*What are you willing to do?* Mycroft asked him. *Think carefully about your answer, Doctor Watson. What are you willing to do to keep Sherlock safe?*

John's response was instantaneous. *Anything. I’ll do anything at all.*

John knows, viscerally, that while he profoundly regrets Mycroft’s death and agonises over Sherlock’s razor-edged grief, he would do it all over again in a heartbeat. He would sacrifice Mycroft Holmes ten, twenty, one hundred times over to keep Sherlock Holmes safe.

(The fact that Mycroft himself agreed wholeheartedly with this assessment is what keeps John’s conscience from eating him alive.)

He sees so much better, now, the pain of making an agonizing decision to keep someone you love from harm. He had forgiven Sherlock’s jump from the roof of Barts ages ago, but only now is he starting to truly understand.

Understanding Sherlock’s actions that day brings a whole other flavour of regret into the mix, but
he’s truly not angry any longer. It’s come at a terrible cost, but John is grateful for that one small relief.

John turns these thoughts over and over in his mind as he watches Sherlock sleep, the faint horizontal crease between his brows still faintly visible even in repose, dark fringe of long lashes resting against too pale cheeks, full, slightly chapped pink lips slightly parted as he breathes, deep and even.

Sherlock sighs in his sleep, snuggles closer to John, pressing himself against his shoulder. John runs his thumb gently along the edge of one sharp cheekbone.

The fierce protectiveness he feels in this moment is huge, overwhelming.

"I would do it again," John murmurs roughly. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but I would. I would do it again."

Sherlock sleeps peacefully through this heartfelt declaration.

After awhile John sleeps as well, comforted by the warmth and nearness of Sherlock’s body.

***

John wakes, cracks open one bleary eye to see a Starbucks coffee cup and a paper-wrapped sandwich set out for him on the night table.

Sherlock is seated at the desk, long fingers tapping at the keys his laptop with astonishing speed. He’s not so involved in the work at hand, however, that he fails to notice the moment John wakes.

"Morning," he murmurs, nonchalant as he picks up his coffee cup and drinks, eyes still on the laptop screen.

"Morning," John mutters, squinting at the window. "Is it?"

"Almost noon," Sherlock replies. "I got up a little more than an hour ago."

John does the math. Sherlock managed six solid hours of sleep, and the improvement in him is visible even from across the room. His color is better, the circles under his eyes lessened by orders of magnitude.

And he’s eating. A crumbling half of a scone sits next to his laptop, alongside his coffee.

“Good,” John says. “That’s...really good.”

Sherlock doesn’t look at John, but he can hear the ghost of a smile in his warm, deep voice. “You were correct, as usual. I was far too impaired to function well, and a decent night of sleep has restored my mental faculties. Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome,” John replies, rubbing at his bleary eyes before reaching for the cup of coffee next to him. It’s a triple latte, no sweetener, just the way he likes it and still hot. “This is perfect,” he says with approval.

Sherlock merely hums a bit under his breath in acknowledgment, but there’s a warmth radiating off him that John hasn’t seen in...months, perhaps, and just like that John realises that by the very act of waking in a shared bed, despite the very (well, mostly) platonic nature of the gesture, they’ve somehow stepped over an invisible threshold into a deeper intimacy than they’d known before.

Before John can spend more than a moment contemplating this development, however, Sherlock’s
voice pulls him from his brief reverie. “Do stop lazing about and get up, John. I have important information to share with you, when you decide to stop impersonating a narcoleptic hedgehog.”

Well, John thinks as he climbs out of bed with a pained sigh, *clearly some things are not going to change.*

He hurries to complete his usual ablutions before picking up his cup of coffee and pulling a chair up to Sherlock's side.

“Let’s start with the bloody obvious,” John says. “First of all, why are we in Philadelphia to begin with?”

Sherlock clicks several keys, pulls up a cached image on his laptop. “For whatever reason, Dobrev had a fondness for messaging over Google chat. I located several conversations with Maria. Most of their communication was in Ukrainian. Google translate tends to make a bit of a hash between English and non western languages, but I was able to parse several references to both 30th Street Station and a man named Lou, who apparently has, shall we say, job opportunities for Maria.” Sherlock minimises the document on screen, pulls up a series of images. “Then this morning, one of my sources found a match via facial recognition software. These were taken at the train station four days ago.”

“Four days ago?” John exclaims. “What took so damn long?”

“They managed to locate images of one specific woman, in a station where twelve thousand plus passengers pass through daily. This is real life, John, not one of your Bond films.”

John makes a noise of annoyance in his throat, but doesn’t argue with the objective truth of that statement, turning his attention to the images onscreen instead.

The pictures show Mary--*Maria*, John mentally corrects himself; he has noticed Sherlock no longer calls her Mary, and it does help somehow, provides a valuable emotional distance--stepping off a train, looking around warily, as though on alert for danger. Although the resolution is grainy, she is clearly unwell. Her face looks ill, puffy, tired, dark circles etched deeply under her eyes. She is wearing a voluminous black coat, disguising the shape of her body.

“Is she…” John begins, then finds himself unable to finish this sentence.

“At this resolution, wearing the clothes she is, unfortunately, it’s basically impossible to tell.”

“Do we know where she went from there?” John asks.

“No. However, what we do know is that she was met at the station.” He zooms in on an image of Mary embracing a slightly shorter woman wearing a long navy coat. Her face is turned away from the camera, her head and neck covered by a flowing scarf.

“We weren’t able to identify her companion by facial recognition,” Sherlock continues, “But we did get a licence plate number, and five minutes ago I traced it to a woman named Jennifer Hallman, who lives with her husband in Darby, a suburb of Philadelphia.” Sherlock picks up his coffee, takes a swallow, turns to John, his eyes dancing with the glint of genuine enthusiasm in his pale eyes. “This is the woman who will lead us to Maria.”

“Then let’s go,” John replies, rising to cross the room and pull on his jacket.

“Bring your sandwich,” Sherlock tells him. “You need to eat.”
Saying Darby, Pennsylvania is not a wealthy suburb is an understatement at the very least.

The stone and brick terrace houses have a uniformly neglected, rundown air to them, giving that certain unmistakable impression of homeowners who lack either the money or the time (or both) to paint porches or replace worn shutters. It reminds John of the several similar neighborhoods his family lived in during his own unhappy childhood, growing up just barely hanging on to the lower middle class.

It feels familiar, in a grim, resigned kind of way.

Sherlock makes a series of what feel like random turns, parks on a narrow side street.

“Take this,” he mutters, reaching into a pocket and thrusting something flat and shiny into John’s hand.

“Lestrade’s badge?”

“Just follow my lead,” Sherlock replies before exiting the car.

John expects them to knock on the front door of one of the houses, but instead Sherlock leads him towards a bus shelter on the corner of a busy intersection.

John groans. “Not another bus, Sherlock.”

“Not for us,” Sherlock informs him. “This is the bus route Jennifer Hallman takes to work.”

“Why are we not just--”

“Going to her house?” Sherlock interrupts, then shakes his head. “If Maria is still there--which I do doubt, but it is possible--I want to preserve the element of surprise.”

“How do you know her route?”

“Easy. Jennifer and her husband share a single car, which he drives to work daily. I learned her work schedule simply by calling the senior care home where she works and asking. It’s amazing, incidentally, how much trust Americans will generally place in British accent. Her shift starts at 4 pm, this bus stop is two blocks away from her residence, ergo--”

As Sherlock is speaking a pretty, light-skinned black woman in her early thirties approaches the bus shelter. She is dressed in a plain grey longsleeved shirt and trousers under a long black coat. Her head and neck is covered by a simple black headscarf, wrapped and pinned at her throat.

She studiously ignores the two men, keeping a careful distance away.

“Excuse me,” Sherlock murmurs in his usual, posh accent.

The woman eyes the two of them with open suspicion.

“Yes?” she says curtly.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Hallman,” Sherlock begins. I’m William Scott, with the International Criminal Police Organization.” He flashes an identification card that John has never seen before. “And this is Inspector Greg Lestrade with the Metropolitan Police of London.”
“You don’t look like cops,” the woman says. “You look like repo men.”

“I assure you we are indeed police officers,” John ventures, showing the badge Sherlock pressed into his hand moments earlier.

“I’m not in the habit of talking to strangers,” she states flatly, eyes hard and suspicious.

“We don’t intend to harass you,” Sherlock states. “We’re merely here to inquire about the whereabouts of the woman you picked up at 30th Street Station three days ago. Maria Zimya.”

The woman shakes her head just slightly. “That’s not her name, though. Kochencko. Maria Kochencko.”

“You’re very quick to give up information on a friend,” Sherlock observes.

The woman snorts in derision. “She’s not a friend.”

“Why do you say that?” Sherlock asks.

“She took a bunch of my clothes and my credit card,” Jennifer replies. “Called me up out of nowhere, said she was back in town, needed a ride and a place to stay. We used to run in the same...social circles, you could say. Once upon a time.”

“Meaning, you met in prison,” Sherlock clarifies.

“How did you know that?” Jennifer asks.

“You’re easily eight years younger than Maria, so you didn’t meet in school. In addition, the edge of a facial tattoo is visible despite your headscarf, and the later-in-life conversion to a conservative religion are highly indicative of a history of incarceration.”


John steps closer to the angry woman, hands spread placatingly. “Ms. Hallman. We believe---we know Maria is a murderer. We’re not trying to intrude on your life. We just want to find her before she hurts anyone else.” John maintains steady eye contact, speaking in a calm, even tone. “Please, Jennifer. Anything you know can help us.”

Jennifer huffs in offended annoyance, but allows John’s calming presence to mollify her ire. “Yeah,” she says. “I met her in Mahan. She helped me out of a few tight spots, but I knew she wasn’t someone to trust. She’s always been the snake, right? And I should have known better, but she calls me, out of the blue, says she needs help. Eric--my husband--says don’t get involved, but our faith preaches forgiveness, so I did her a favor. It was a mistake. She’s here for two days, sleeps the entire time, then disappears in the middle of the night with a bunch of my stuff.” She shakes her head, sighs. “I should have known better than to think she’d change, right?”

“You changed,” John says kindly. “Turned your life around. Found a good man, a steady job. You thought she just needed a little help to do the same.”

Jennifer nods. “I thought maybe... she seemed tired, sick. She asked me for help and I thought.” She shakes her head. “I don’t know what I thought.”

“Do you know anything about a man named Lou?” Sherlock asks.

“No, I don’t,” Jennifer says, and even John can tell by the way she shifts her eyes away that she’s
not being truthful.

“Jennifer--” Sherlock begins, but she cuts him off.

“I don’t know why I’m still talking to you. And anyhow? What gives you the right to use my first name? We’re done here, and don’t think I won’t pepper spray your ass if you don’t leave me alone.”

Sherlock nods. “I apologise. Have a good afternoon, Ms. Hallman.”

He moves away from the woman, but John doesn’t follow.

“Ms. Hallman,” he ventures.

She reaches into her pocket. “I swear I’ll--”

“I’m sorry, I am, but was she…” John pauses briefly, considering. “This may sound odd, but was she pregnant?”

Jennifer gives him a baffled look. “No. She was kind of puffy, I guess? Sweaty, and feverish. She seemed really sick. But no, definitely not pregnant.” She narrows her eyes at the two men. “Now leave me alone. I mean it.”

Sherlock nods curtly, turns away, strides down the pavement, brain clearly whirring in six different directions at once. John hurries after him.

“So much new information,” Sherlock says, sounding half distracted, the way he does when he’s already deep in thought. “Her last name, her residence in New Jersey...she’s bound to pop up again soon, John. I’m certain of it. The trick is knowing where to look.”

John is silent until they are back at the car. Sherlock fishes out the keys, unlocks the doors.

“Sherlock?”

“Hmm.”

“Jennifer said she was certain Maria--”

*I will never call her Mary again, he thinks, there never really was a Mary, that woman never even existed. She was Maria all along, plotting, scheming, planning the whole while--*

“-- wasn’t pregnant.”

“Yes. She did.”

“Sherlock…” John trails off, comes to a halt on the pavement, not quite able to finish the sentence, the thought.

Sherlock moves closer to him, places his hands gently on his shoulders. “Wherever she is, whatever has happened...the best thing we can do to find her is to move forward. In fact, it’s the only thing we can do. We cannot let ourselves get bogged down in fear and worry. Not now.”

John nods. Of course Sherlock is right. Of course he is. He takes a deep breath, tries to push down the knot of useless terrified uncertainty.

He lets out a long exhale.“Yes,” he says. “Of course.” He follows Sherlock silently into the car.
The two of them are quiet for some time. John pulls out his phone, Googles for any news stories about abandoned newborns in Eastern Pennsylvania or New Jersey while Sherlock finds his way back to I-95.

Unless Maria disguised herself as a teenager and gave birth in a Taco Bell restroom, his query comes up empty. Sherlock gives him a sidelong look, his eyes asking an unspoken question. John shakes his head, leans his head back on the headrest.

*Put it away, now,* John tells himself. *It’s a useless emotion, worry, and it won’t help to find her. Focus on the practical, on the here and now.*

He swallows it down, hard.

“So,” he finally says aloud. “What do we do next?”

“Research, John. Jennifer hasn’t notified the actual police, I’m certain, due to her criminal history. If Maria’s ill and desperate, she may slip up, use the credit card more than once or twice, leave a trail for us to follow. Even if she hasn’t, we have her birth name, we can look up school files, property records, construct a data map of her known areas…”

“Not to bring up the utterly mundane,” John interrupts, “but we also really need some clean clothes.”

“We’re trying to look a bit disreputable,” Sherlock points out. “Repo men, indeed. I like that.”

“Disreputable is fine,” John says. “Not to put too fine a point on it, I draw the line at smelly.”

Sherlock looks at him incredulously. “You’re honestly suggesting that I hunt down my brother’s murderer, the kidnapper of your child, an internationally wanted assassin...from a launderette.”

“They have this thing called WiFi,” John replies evenly. “Marvellous invention, I’ve heard.”

To his surprise, Sherlock laughs, a rich, warm, genuine sound. “I must admit, Doctor Watson. Your focus on routine tasks keeps me remarkably grounded.”

“That’s my job, isn’t it?” John replies, a smile forming on his own lips. “Keep you fed, hydrated, and in clean pants.”

“Your job, as it were, encompasses far more than the mundane,” Sherlock says, suddenly more serious. “Surely you know that.”

“Ohay,” John says. Sherlock’s sincere words bring him up a bit short, and he doesn’t know what else to say so he doesn’t say anything at all.

They drive the rest of the way back to the hotel in silence.

***

Late that afternoon, John does indeed find a nearby launderette with both high speed WiFi and a coffee shop next door.

Sherlock immediately wedges himself into one of the molded plastic chairs, laptop precariously balanced on bony knees. John navigates the coin changer, slotting in a ten dollar bill in exchange for a double handful of silver quarters. He buys washing powder from the vending machine and starts a load of laundry.

“You want a coffee?” John asks, dropping into the seat next to Sherlock.
“Later,” Sherlock replies absently, fingers flying over the keyboard. John settles in for a long wait. He glances up at the telly in the corner tuned to Fox News. He wonders briefly why it seems every television in a public space is always on bloody obnoxious Fox News, then files that tidbit away to ask Sherlock later and picks up the copy of today’s newspaper in the chair next to him, flipping through the pages idly as Sherlock types and mutters softly to himself.


“Sherlock--” John begins.

The phone chimes. Sherlock reads the message, sighs, types again. “I know this is above her paygrade,” Sherlock grumbles to no one, “but I need her to coordinate with her inside source at the CIA to uncover what Maria had of value to--”

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock looks up at him sharply. “What?”

John hands him the local section of the newspaper, taps a single-column news item with an index finger.

As Sherlock begins to read, the crease between his brows first appears, then deepens. “Armed pharmacy robbery in Camden, by a female of unknown ethnicity wearing sunglasses and Islamic garb, including hijab. She surprised the pharmacy tech as she closed the store for the night. Didn't get cash from the drawer but did make off with large supply of antibiotics and sundries. No narcotics were taken, which is likely what makes it newsworthy."

“Is it her?” John asks, already knowing the answer in his bones.

“It’s her,” Sherlock confirms, then closes his laptop, springs out of his chair. “We need to go and question the pharmacy tech immediately.”

John places a restraining hand on his arm. “I’m as eager as you,” John tells him. “I am. But we still have washing in the machine.”

Sherlock scowls, sags back into the plastic chair.

“How much longer do we need to be here?”

“An hour. Maybe ninety minutes.”

“All right,” Sherlock replies, re-opening his computer. “That should be enough time to look up family history, property records. Set up a grid of possible movements based on known past locations.” Sherlock looks up at John, a familiar glint in his pale silver-green eyes. “We’re closing in on her, John. She’s still in Camden. I’m sure of it. “
Camden, Part One

Chapter Summary

From the front, the house looks as completely abandoned as from the back. Sherlock checks the boarded windows, pokes at the painted, peeling iron latticework security door.

“Locked up tight,” Sherlock mutters. “No sign whatsoever of forced entry.” He stumps across the tiny, debris-strewn front porch, momentarily seeming to forget his hair is only half an inch long as his hands slide up the back of his head to tug at his locks in frustration. He groans as he scrubs at his scalp instead, turning to John in wordless entreaty.

He looks pale and wan in the light of the rising moon, and John sees, for the first time on this entire strange trip, the glimmer of uncertainty in Sherlock’s eyes.

“I was sure, John. I was so sure.” Sherlock’s voice is cracking with stress and frustration. “And now we’ve got nothing.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

4. Camden, Part One

Philadelphia reminds John of London in many ways.

It’s a large city, so parts of it are of undeniably beautiful, and other parts of it are...quite rough and tumble, to put it kindly. But either way, the streets feel alive, vibrating with activity and energy and purpose.

John finds himself more at home there than he has felt anywhere else on his strange journey through the United States.

But Camden. Oh, Camden.

Camden is an entirely different entity. Camden is half-abandoned, entire city blocks reduced to empty rotting shells. Camden is, just in terms of first impressions, arguably more grim than Kandahar.

Camden is, in a word, desolate.

As the sun drops below the horizon, Sherlock pulls the car into the gravel lot behind the squat, grey cement block building that houses D’Annibale Family Pharmacy on the north side of the city.

The minutes tick past in silence as the sky darkens from blue to purple to black and the yellow sodium streetlights flick on, one by one.

guided tour of the most tragic, abandoned rubbish-strewn outposts of the urban East Coast.”

Sherlock lights a cigarette, breathes out a puff of smoke as he half-chuckles in reply.

“No, it’s fine,” John continues. “Take this car park. Very educational. Very...informative.”

Minutes pass in silence as Sherlock smokes and John contemplates his life choices to date.

“So,” John finally says after what he believes is a reasonably patient interval. “We’re just...waiting.”

“We’re not waiting,” Sherlock says, exhaling a twin plume of smoke from his nostrils that puts John in mind of a dragon in repose. “We’re watching.”

“Watching what?”

“The customers.” Sherlock gestures with his lit cigarette at the car park, more than half full and busy with vehicles pulling in and out. “What do you see?”

“I see a lot of activity,” John says. “A remarkable amount. But it is the end of a work day, so I can see how people might be picking up prescriptions or whatnot on the way home.”

“True. But take a closer look. Focus on the details.”

John narrows his eyes, tilts his head a bit as he contemplates. “Quite a few Pennsylvania number plates.” John considers a moment longer. “Which might make sense if we were just off the highway, but we’re well into town, and it’s not a great neighbourhood.”

“Excellent. What can we further deduce?”

“There’s a Rite Aid on practically every corner,” John says, thinking aloud. “Why would people drive that kind of distance—not far, not really, but just more than one would expect—to a small local chemist’s on the other side of the river, in a really dodgy part of town?”

“Why indeed,” Sherlock murmurs, then takes a final drag of his smoke, flicks the glowing cherry out the half open window and field strips his cigarette, pocketing the filter. “Let’s go find out, shall we?”

The pharmacy is smaller than the usual chain chemist's; it's perhaps a bit dated in appearance, paneled walls and fluorescent fixtures overhead, but the aisles are clean and well-lit, and the shelves fully stocked. John expects Sherlock to stride briskly to the dispensing counter at the back of the shop; to his surprise Sherlock chooses instead to take his time, wandering down several aisles, closely investigating product displays, bending down to investigate the merchandise on the lower shelves.

John is anxious to move the investigation forward, but assuming a method to his madness he forbears Sherlock’s meandering, biting his tongue instead of giving in to the urge to hurry Sherlock along.

The dispensary counter itself is behind a thick layer of bulletproof Lexan, as befits the neighborhood.

The tech behind the counter looks up as they approach. She is young, not older than nineteen or twenty, but she carries herself with confidence, her white lab coat clean and pressed. Her shoulder-length hair is pulled into neat flat twists, her makeup carefully applied, her eyes cated with black liner in the style so popular with the younger set.

Sherlock glances briefly to the framed certificates on the wall, then gives her a blinding, fake smile and flashes the ID card he used earlier.
“Tamara Walker?” Sherlock asks in his natural accent.

“Yes sir,” she answers, her tone clipped and professional. “How can I help you?”

“William Scott, he says briskly. "Interpol. This is my colleague, Gregory Lestrade. We need to ask the pharmacist on duty a few questions.”

The woman turns her head away, looking over her over her shoulder, but before she can speak a tall, pale, slightly stooped, balding man of about forty-five comes out of the inventory area, extends his hand to Sherlock.

“Christopher D’Annibale, head pharmacist and store manager. What can I do for you?”

Sherlock takes the offered hand. “This is your business?” Sherlock asks as they shake.

“Technically,” the man replies, "it is my grandparent’s business. However, they are both well into their nineties, so for all intents and purposes, yes, it is my store. How can I help you?”

“We’d like to ask a few questions about the armed robbery that occurred two nights ago.”

The pharmacist looks them up and down, coolly assessing, then turns to the technician.

“Tamara, there’s a new shipment in back, just arrived. Can you take care of it, please?”

There seems to be a moment of nonverbal conversation between the two before the young woman ducks her head and moves away silently to the storage area. The pharmacist places his hands on the counter, leans his weight forward. His gaze is direct.

“The police have already conducted their interviews,” he says, conversationally, but there’s an unmistakable layer of cold stone lurking just underneath the surface. “I don’t know who you two are, but I don’t buy the crappy British accent, and I know you’re not real cops.”

John has to bite his laughter back so hard his teeth hurt.

He completely expects Sherlock to eviscerate the pharmacist with a razor-sharp retort. Instead he merely shrugs, regards the man in front of him levelly.

"Half right, at best. We may be or we may not be, as you so quaintly put it, 'real' police. We are, however, genuinely investigating the woman we think is behind the robbery committed at your store last night, and we would appreciate any assistance you could provide."

The pharmacist crosses his arms, gives Sherlock a condescending smirk. "What makes you think I would agree to share information with a total stranger--out of the goodness of my heart? I’m a very busy man, Mister Scott."

Sherlock doesn't answer immediately. Hands in his pockets, his stance is deceptively casual as he pivots a half turn, gazes over the neat aisles, the well-organised inventory, the small knot of customers congregating in the waiting area for their prescriptions.

He turns back to the pharmacist with a small, inscrutable smile on his face and John knows, with the same burst of that awed pride he always feels, that the man is in it up to his neck--and best of all, doesn’t even realise it yet.

"It's a tough business,” Sherlock states blandly. “Being an independent chemist these days. Takes a lot to stay competitive, I imagine.”
"That's true," the man replies evenly, holding Sherlock's gaze without looking away.

"Yet you seem to be doing well. Remarkably well."

“Yes, we are.” The man’s eyes narrow a fraction. “What are you implying?”

And in the space of a breath, Sherlock's congenial facade drops away. His pale eyes glitter, hard and cool as moonstones as he speaks.

"How is it that you're doing so very well, Mister D'Annibale, in this hard town so mired in hard times? All these customers, coming from all over, just to have their prescriptions filled at your little shop. Why, I wonder? Why are they making that kind of a trip, all the way over the bridge?"

Comprehension dawns in D'Annibale’s eyes and his nostrils flare in anger. "Make your point or get the hell out."

“You’re a small shop. You still have a manual recordkeeping system, not converted to electronic and internet-enabled, like the chains. There’s a doctor in Philadelphia, I think. Perhaps two. Doctors who are very...liberal with the prescription pad, and they’re funneling their patients to you, to a pharmacy who fills in the logbooks by hand and doesn’t ask too many questions. Doubtless you’re filling falsified scrips as well, selling the pills at street value and pocketing the profits. I would wager, in fact, that the pills sold two blocks away on the street corner came from your inventory.” Sherlock’s voice goes hard and sharp as honed steel. “You’ve kept your family shop nice and clean, at the cost of dumping even more illicit drugs on the streets, just that many more straws straining the back of this tragic little city. Quite a bargain you’ve struck with the devil, there. Tell me, how do you sleep at night? Not well, I reckon."

“You have no proof,” D'Annibale protests, but even as he says it John knows he’s not quite certain of his assertion.

Sherlock smiles thinly. “I got all that from spending twenty minutes in your parking lot. What else do you think I’ve gotten just from standing here, observing your clientele, and looking at the paperwork behind the counter while we chat?”

D'Annibale glares at him.

“You don’t want the answer to that question, mate,” offers John. “Trust me on this.”

“What do you want?” D'Annibale growls, spitting each word out like a rusty nail.

“Information. Namely, we want to see the police report, surveillance footage, and to speak with your pharmacy technician.”

“We have customers.”


The pharmacist gives them one final, white hot glare of pure fury; he turns his back to them without another words, and slams the buzzer that opens the electronic lock on the door leading to the dispensing area.

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In stark contrast to the neatly organised dispensing counter, the back office is cramped and cluttered,
with papers, boxes and invoices flowing over every available surface.

The three men crowd into the small room. The pharmacy technician, Tamara, hovers at the doorway, seemingly uncertain as to whether or not she’s been summoned.

"I’d have a copy of that police report," Sherlock says briskly.

D'Annibale digs around his desk, fishes out a stapled set of paperwork, thrusts it towards the general direction of his technician. “Tamara, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Tamara takes the papers and disappears.

“The surveillance tapes?” Sherlock asks.

“The surveillance camera was broken," D'Annibale states through clenched teeth. "No usable footage was recovered.”

“Broken,” John echoes. "Of course."


Tamara reappears, hands a copy of the report to Sherlock, and turns as if to leave.

“Ms. Walker,” Sherlock says mildly. “A moment of your time, if you please.”

The woman stops in the doorway, turns, shoots a worried look to her boss.

“We were both here on the night in question,” D'Annibale says.

“I’m aware of that,” Sherlock replies. “and I’d like to hear what Ms. Walker has to say about those events. Privately. At any rate, weren’t you just telling us about all the customers being kept waiting?”

D'Annibale turns to the technician. “Tamara, are you all right with this?”

“It’s fine, sir,” she replies, meeting his eye. “If I need you, I’ll let you know.”

He nods, and leaves the small office without another word, closing the door behind him with rather more force than necessary.

Sherlock hands the copy of the police report to John to peruse before he turns to Tamara.

“We don’t have any hostile intent, Ms. Walker. We’re just trying to find the woman who committed this robbery.” He pulls the wedding photo of Mary from his breast pocket, hands it over. “Is this her?”

Tamara takes the picture, studies it carefully. “Her hair wasn’t blonde,” she notes. "She had a scarf on, a hijab like a Muslim lady wears, but it had slipped back a bit and i could see the hair above her ears was black, or dark brown. And she had sunglasses on, covering most of her face. But aside from that...” She hands the photo back to Sherlock. “It definitely could have been her.”

“Can you tell me exactly what happened, in your own words?” asks Sherlock.

“It was just before ten pm. I opened the back door to take the garbage out. Mister D'Annibale was with me--you can’t take chances in this neighborhood--and the lady came out of nowhere. She had a gun. She had us go back inside, told us exactly what she wanted. She definitely knew her prescription drugs."
"She's a nurse," John murmurs. "Or at least she knows enough to fake it well for several years."

Tamara nods. "That makes sense. She was after antibiotics, specific ones, strong ones. I wondered why she didn't just go to the hospital. I'm guessing now, meeting you two, she's in a whole heap of trouble or something, couldn't take the risk of getting found?"

Sherlock inclines his head slightly. "Very perceptive," he notes with a hint of you're not completely stupid approbation colouring his voice. "And correct, but we're veering from the subject. Please do continue."

"Anyway," Tamara continues, "she definitely seemed like maybe she was sick. Like, she looked sweaty, her cheeks were red and she seemed a bit out of breath. I considered trying to take her down - I've taken plenty of self defense classes, and I'm pretty tough, but she seemed like a lady who didn't mind shooting, if that makes sense."

"Excellent judgment on your part," Sherlock replies. "Did she take anything else besides the drugs?"

"She wanted the money from the register, but we'd already made the drop into the time lock safe. She had me go into the store with her, took a few items from the shelves."

"Do you remember the items?"

"Yes. Gatorade, candles and matches. A box of feminine pads, the big ones like they use at the hospital. And Fig Newtons." She shakes her head. "I remember because Fig Newtons are just the worst."

"Agreed," Sherlock replies solemnly. "They're not a biscuit, they're a punishment. And then she left the way she came?"

"Back door, yes, sir. She didn't tie us up or anything, which surprised me, kind of, but like I said, she seemed sick and maybe not on her best game that day."

"Help me understand something," Sherlock says. "The robbery happened just before ten pm. Yet the police didn't arrive until almost eleven. Is there not a silent alarm somewhere in the dispensary?"

Tamara laughs, but there's little humour in it. "Of course there is, and Mister D'Annibale pressed it. But with all due respect, sir, have you seen this town? Armed robbery may rate in other places, but here…" She trails off, shrugs her shoulders. "No one came. Mister D'Annibale called again, on his cellphone, around 10:40 pm. They said they never received the silent alarm. That's Camden for you."

"I can see that," Sherlock replies. "Thank you for your time, Ms Walker."

"You're welcome." The technician nods, turns to open the door.

"One more thing," Sherlock adds. "Before you go."

Tamara turns back to Sherlock, her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you like what you do?"

"Yes, sir. Very much."

"You hope to make a career of it?"
“Yes, sir. I’m enrolled at the pharmacy program at Rutgers.”

“You seem like a smart, perceptive, ambitious person.”

“Thank you.”

“You know what your boss is involved in.”

Tamara eyes him warily the goodwill of moments, ago evaporating. “I don’t follow, sir.”

“Working here is not going to end well. When the DEA catches up to Christopher D’Annibale—and they will, undoubtedly, maybe not right away, but someday—you’re going to get caught up in it, and I am certain it won’t go smoothly for you.”

The coolly professional demeanour slips as Tamara laughs, more than a trace of bitterness in her tone. “Is that so, Mister Scott?”

“It is.”

“You think Mister D’Annibale is a criminal?”

“Do you?” Sherlock counters.

“I think he pays me well and treats me like family. This is a good job, Mister Scott. How many good jobs do you think there are around here?”

Sherlock’s eyebrow lifts a millimetre. “Not many, I’d guess,” he allows.

“My boss does what he has to do to keep this business alive.” She steps closer to Sherlock, shoulders squared, eyes blazing and locked with his. “And I think that with all due respect, you don’t know a damn thing about what it takes to stay alive on these streets. Do you, Mister Scott?”

Sherlock doesn’t back down, but his shoulders sag just a barest touch as he exhales. “Perhaps I don’t,” he replies, his tone softening a fraction.

“Perhaps you don’t,” Tamara echoes. “Am I free to leave, then, sir?”

“Of course, Ms. Walker.”

She turns the handle, opens the door. D’Annibale is standing there, a thunderous look on his face.

“Is everything all right?” he asks. “Tam, did these two upset you?”

“I’m fine, sir,” she mutters, brushing past him.

D’Annibale glares daggers at Sherlock and John. “You’re finished here.”

“Yes, we are,” Sherlock says in mild agreement, much to John’s surprise. “If you’d be so kind as to buzz us out, we will be on our way.”

***

It is full dark when the two men leave the shop.

“D’Annibale didn’t sound the alarm, did he?” John asks.

“Of course he didn’t. He’s possibly not a villain, not in the classic mustache-twirling sense, but he is
very interested in protecting his arse. He told Tamara he pressed the panic button, then used the time gap to make sure his falsified logs were in order before calling the police, relying on the general unreliability of their response to cover his actions.”

“Not a villain?” John protests. “He’s running a pill mill in a poverty-stricken ghetto, and almost certainly committing a laundry list of felonies in the process.”

“Well, he’s not a hero either,” Sherlock concedes. “He’s a human being trying to provide, keep his business alive.”

“He’s doing it on the backs of opiate addicts, and funding the criminals in his own backyard.”

“Well, yes, that is more than a bit of a grey area,” Sherlock replies. “In fact, I’m beginning to think a place like Camden might tend to foster a certain extremely morally dubious outlook on life in general. It explains a lot about the woman we’re chasing, if you think about it.”

John considers this a moment, then nods his head in agreement. “Yeah. It really does.”

***

A few miles down the road, the grim scenery improves considerably as they leave the city limits, heading towards Cherry Hill.

In a generic-looking, green-roofed strip mall on Route 30 they find a pizza joint that advertises late night hours and free WiFi.

They’ve been sitting in here for a long time, long enough that the employees are starting to give them the eye as they sweep floors and wipe down sticky tables under sickly fluorescent lights.

John has read and reread the police report so many times his eyes are starting to cross, searching for any fragment of information to push them forward and failing miserably.

“We’re no damn closer than we were yesterday,” John grumbles as he pokes dispiritedly into the congealed remains of a spinach and cheese calzone.

Sherlock sighs. “Can you please do something...with that?” He waves an annoyed hand at the deconstructed meal. “It looks like, I don’t know, some kind of botched pizza autopsy. It’s revolting.”

“You barely ate.”

“Because it’s disgusting. Please make it go away.”

John scowls, a combination of worry and annoyance, with annoyance definitely winning at the moment. “Yes, your majesty,” he snipes as he stabs his fork into the cold cheese innards one last time for effect before huffing dramatically as he rises and gathers the debris of their meal. He takes it to the nearby bin and dumps the mess in with an annoyed, exaggerated flourish before returning to the table.

“Better, princess?” John snarks.

Sherlock ignores John’s little performance completely, never taking his eyes from his laptop. “Maria chose her target well. She surely knew the police would be slow to respond, giving her time to slip away. The question on my mind right now is her getaway. Is she walking, using taxis, calling car service? Her mode of transportation will define the radius of our search.”
“She would need to use a credit card for Uber,” John points out, crossing his arms. “She stole Jennifer’s credit card, but using it to take a car to her hideout? Even ill, she wouldn’t be that sloppy.”

Sherlock nods in agreement. “I suppose a taxi may possible, theoretically, but I find it unlikely. The neighborhood around D’Annibale’s is not conducive to cabs taking street fares, to say the very least. On the outside chance, I’ve got connections accessing the travel logs from the four most used local cab companies, but I’m not really anticipating anything.”

“Could she be driving?” John asks.

“She came into Philadelphia by train. As of three nights ago, she didn’t have her own transportation. The stolen vehicle reports aren’t turning up anything likely. She could have purchased a vehicle for cash, as we did, but if she’s reduced to trying—and failing—to steal from a chemist’s till, I doubt she has the funds to pick up a car under the radar. So the balance of probability says she is either using public transportation—”

“Good Lord,” John sighs, “enough with the fucking buses—”

“—or hiding somewhere within walking distance of the robbery. Either way, she is not drifting. She has a bolthole, a base of some sort.”

“How else can we search for her?” John asks.

“Camden has a comprehensive network of street level surveillance cameras, surprisingly enough. I’m trying to obtain access, but an inconsistent level of public funding means less than sixty percent of them are functioning at any given moment.” Sherlock sighs. “I can overcome security measures, but I can’t overcome poverty and poor infrastructure.” He shuts his laptop, closes his eyes, rubs them tiredly.

“She has a history in Camden, right?” John says musingly. “She knows this area on a much deeper level than we possibly could.”

“Indeed she does. It was her home from birth until age fourteen. Her parents were young, uneducated, never quite managed to establish a steady address. Mainly, they bounced from one relative to another.” Sherlock purses his lips, deep in thought. “This town has one of the highest percentages of abandoned property in the country. There are literally thousands of empty buildings.”

“So what about property records then?” John asks. "Any buildings or houses owned by friends, relatives. Places that she knows from her growing up."

“Excellent thinking,” Sherlock says with a note of approval in his voice as he straightens in his seat and opens his laptop.

***

In relatively short order, Sherlock locates three addresses in Camden with a possible family connection to Maria Kochenko.

The first two location they visit are clearly utterly abandoned, weeds grown up tall around rusted iron gates. every window and doorway covered by nailed boards undisturbed for years.

It’s past ten, the full moon moving overhead, as they pull up and park in a narrow alley a block away from the third and final address. The overhanging tree branches partially obscure the combined glow of moonlight and orange sodium streetlamps, giving them a bit of shadow for cover.
John can sense, somehow, Sherlock’s coiled, anticipatory body language. He doesn’t even fully understand his own intuition, but he can tell as they cautiously move down the dark back alley that Sherlock thinks this may be the jackpot, the place where Maria is hiding, that their final confrontation may finally be at hand.

The back garden of the brick two-story duplex is a tangled riot of weeds. The fence surrounding the garden is six feet tall, made of woven metal chainlink. The padlock holding the wooden gate shut is rusty but solid. Without a word Sherlock doubles back, stalking up the alleyway, leaving John to scurry after him as he rounds the corner.

From the front, the house looks as completely abandoned as from the back. Sherlock checks the boarded windows, pokes at the painted, peeling iron latticework security door.

“Locked up tight.” Sherlock mutters. “No sign whatsoever of forced entry.” He stomps across the tiny, debris-strewn front porch; momentarily seeming to forget his hair is only half an inch long as his hands slide up the back of his head to tug at his locks in frustration. He groans as he scrubs at his scalp instead, turning to John in wordless entreaty.

He looks pale and wan in the light of the rising moon, and John sees, for the first time on this entire strange trip, the glimmer of uncertainty in Sherlock’s eyes.

“I was sure, John. I was so sure.” Sherlock’s voice is cracking with stress and frustration. “And now we’ve got nothing.”

“We’ll try again tomorrow,” says John quietly, evenly, conveying a calm he certainly doesn’t feel inside. “But right now, Sherlock, we’re making way too much of a scene for this time of night. In this area, frankly, the police are the least of our concerns.”

Sherlock finally halts his frenzied pacing. Breathing heavily, he braces himself against the dilapidated porch rail. John makes a quick silent prayer that the damn thing doesn’t collapse and send Sherlock sprawling to the cracked pavement six feet below.

“Come on,” John says, not unkindly. “We’ll go back to the hotel, talk it out. You’ll figure out a different approach. You always do.”

Sherlock doesn’t answer, but he shrugs and nods minutely. John takes the lead going down the porch steps, and Sherlock follows.

On the way back to the car, the abandoned houses look even eerier and more menacing under the light of the rising full moon. Here and there a few trees are interspersed among the buildings, maples struggling to put out the first spring leaves, budding branches rustling in the slightly gusty wind that’s sprung up seemingly out of nowhere.

He’s following Sherlock across the empty intersection he when glances to his left, at the moonlight slanting through a small clump of trees in an overgrown yard at the end of the street.

John stops in the middle of the pavement as something flutters, deep in his mind. A recollection unspools, a sliver of something murmured in the dark over two years ago.

“Sherlock,” he says, and some note in his voice, some edge of dawning understanding, catches Sherlock’s attention instantly.

“What is it?” Sherlock asks, his attention laser-focused on John’s face.

John squints, trying to work it out in his own head before giving his thoughts voice.
A look of concern crosses Sherlock’s features. “John, are you all right?”

A memory breaks free from somewhere deep in John’s mind, struggles to rise to the surface.

***

It was dark, and the air between them was thick, warm and musky from their sweaty bodies.

It wasn’t the first time they’ve had sex. It was the fourth, maybe, or the sixth, or somewhere in that area. They’d been together enough times that it wasn’t brand new and terrifying, but the novelty and excitement of it was still fresh and sharp.

John was just...God, he was grateful. Happy, and relieved, and so damn pathetically grateful just not to be alone any longer. The cold, aching void in his heart (it had a name, he knew that, a name that he struggled to keep from his lips even now) he has carried with him for so long was shrinking, and while it wasn’t gone it was finally receding a bit, just a bit, into the past and he felt warm and his body was sated and he was just so damn grateful for those small acts of mercy.

He was so grateful that he could almost believe he was in love.

John pressed a kiss to her shoulder in the dark. “I’m happy,” he said, and he could hear the surprise in his own voice.

“Me too,” Mary said, sounding almost equally surprised.

The long quiet that stretched between them was comfortable, intimate.

“The last time I was this happy,” Mary finally murmured, “I was six, maybe seven years old.”

Mary almost never spoke about her childhood except in generalities; John knew—or at least intuited—that Mary had a difficult childhood, maybe not so different from his own in some ways, so he never pressed her. He waited silently for her to continue.

“It was an old Victorian house, big and gloomy, cut up into flats. We didn’t live there long—a year, maybe two—but I remember my bedroom so well. It was on the top floor, in the turret, with windows going all around. We were on the corner of the block, and there was a cemetery across the street. Even when I was that little my life was pretty hard during the day, but at night I could lay in bed and all I could see were the outlines of the tall trees and I could pretend I was a princess, in my castle overlooking a beautiful land.” Mary gave a tiny, rueful chuckle. “It sounds silly when I say it out loud.”

“It doesn’t sound silly at all,” John answered quietly.

“It made me feel special,” Mary said, quieter, almost too soft to hear. “And safe. And then we moved, and I never felt like that again. Until I...until I met you.”

And then John gathered her close, and kissed her, and resolved to try as hard as he could to be worthy of those whispered words.

***

“I think,” John says, slowly. “I think I know where she is. Or at least, I know how to find where she is.”

Sherlock moves closer, narrows his eyes. “Explain.”
“How big is Camden?”

“Relatively small. About ten square miles, according to Wikipedia.”

“If I knew certain specific landmarks, type of house, location on the street, how hard would it be to triangulate that information into a productive search?”

“Depends on what you have. John. What do you have?”

“Maria lied about everything,” John says, “Except I think one time, she may have inadvertently told me the truth. And I think we we can use that to find her.”

***

It’s nearing three a.m. when Sherlock parks the Focus on the edge of a weedy, ramshackle graveyard. The overhanging trees obscure the few still-functioning streetlights, casting the narrow street in thick darkness.

The pair exit the car without a word. John follows Sherlock, unable to keep himself from reflexive admiration as he glides gracefully, almost silently down the pavement, keeping to the shadows as if by instinct.

“Keep quiet,” Sherlock murmurs, “and stick to the shadows. We may be able to get the drop on her.”

The lock on the back garden fence is gone; the hinges swing freely, though the squeal seems loud in the silent night air.

Trash and broken furniture are piled on the small covered porch. The back windows are boarded up, but the back door isn’t. The door is locked. Sherlock fishes a small torch and his lockpick kit from a jacket pocket, hands the torch to John.

“Don’t switch it on unless I tell you to,” he instructs John and proceeds to pick the lock in the semi-dark purely by feel.

The door swings open with a low groaning creak. Sherlock breathes a curse under his breath at the noise.

John hears a faint scratching scurry of rodent feet, but otherwise the dark void before them is utterly silent.

“I was really hoping,” Sherlock says after a long moment, and John can hear the disappointment in his voice. “Oh well. I suppose it was a long shot. Turn the torch on, please?”

John complies, sweeping the beam across the dirty, abandoned space.

“She’s not here,” Sherlock says, “But she was, not long ago. Dust was wiped away from the kitchen table.” He pulls a pair of latex gloves from somewhere deep in a jacket pocket, pokes at the pile of disposable dishes on the counter. “These plates next to the sink aren’t fresh, but were recently used. Less than a day old, hours even. We just missed her.” He touches a gloved finger to the porcelain of the sink. “It’s still wet.”

Sherlock twists the sink tap, tilts his head in surprise when water gurgles out.

“How is there water?” Sherlock mutters. “House derelict for years, and yet there’s water?”

John snorts. “Didn’t get your water cut off much growing up, did you.”
“No,” Sherlock admits. “You did?”

“I did. There’s a key, a long metal thing, to turn the main water valve back on. Almost everyone had one, in the cellar or whatnot. Easy peasy. I knew folks growing up who hadn’t paid the city for water in years. Maybe ever.”

“Interesting,” Sherlock says, filing this new information away as he moves deeper into the house. John follows.

There are a few random pieces of decayed furniture scattered about what used to be the sitting room—a side table, a rotting couch. The flocked wallpaper is peeling and there is a heavy, earthy smell of mildew in the air.

They make their way upstairs, the small torch beam barely making a dent in the thick gloom. The steps groan and creak loudly in the heavy, damp-scented silence.

All the doors are closed, no skylight, no windows to allow in even the tiniest sliver of light. The darkness around them grows so thick it is almost palpable.

John does a quick mental comparison to the outside of the house to their position and knows which bedroom to look in.

He opens the second door on the right.

The bedroom is circular, just as Mary described it to him, with windows ringing the entire perimeter. The floral wallpaper is torn, faded. On the floor lies a blanket-covered mattress, a pillow, a hairbrush, several items of clothing in a tangled pile.

“She stayed here for several days,” Sherlock says. “Alone.”

“Those aren’t maternity clothes,” John says.

“No,” Sherlock replies shortly.

There is a cardboard carton piled to overflowing with rubbish. Sherlock gestures at it with the toe of his battered trainer.

“Bring the torch over here,” he murmurs to John.

John shines the light directly on the carton. Sherlock kneels and examines the debris, poking carefully through with his gloved fingers.

On top of the pile is a pile of wilted, crumpled dark green leaves. Sherlock nudges them aside; underneath is an empty Gatorade bottle and a handful of discarded packaging from the antibiotics Maria stole from the pharmacy. Sherlock hands the cartons to John.

“Vanomycin and metronidazole. Some pretty powerful stuff.” John trains the torch back on the cardboard box. “What are those leaves?”


“I’ve heard of it,” John says. “But how do you--”

He stops mid-sentence as Sherlock looks up at him, his eyes pale silver in the torch’s flickering beam.
Of course Sherlock knew. Sherlock knew because he had been reading, learning, getting ready for the birth of John’s child.

“Oh,” is all John can say.

Sherlock looks away, embarrassed. “Let’s keep going,” he mutters, rising to his feet.

In the cavernous tiled bathroom the air has a thick, organic, coppery smell. There is a bottle of shampoo on floor, and a ring of hair dye around the edge of the tub.

John turns, shines the torch towards the toilet.

Behind the plumbing is an overflowing box of used hospital-style sanitary pads. The floor is spattered with dark-brown trails of what John knows is dried blood.

“Postpartum endometritis,” John says, and his voice is robotic and far away, even to himself, as the part of his brain that’s still functioning shifts into distant, professional mode. “That’s what the antibiotics are for. Likely caused by incomplete uterine involution after birth, due to inexperienced attendants or an unattended birth.” He turns to Sherlock. “Jennifer Hallman said Mary wasn’t visibly pregnant when she saw her. And there’s lochia here—the bleeding that occurs after delivery—in amounts that far exceed normal, but no evidence of birth fluids, or placental or fetal remains. She didn’t give birth here.”

“No,” Sherlock agrees quietly, looking at him oddly.

Why is Sherlock looking at him oddly?

The smell of decaying blood seems to increase tenfold, thick and fetid in his nostrils, and suddenly the reality that John had been pushing away comes crashing down over his head.

John is slammed between the eyes with new awareness. He sees, in stark, crystalline sharpness, that he’s been stubbornly clinging to a fantasy rooted in pure denial, a fantasy that somehow Mary had been shamming, been deceiving them both the entire time and that the baby wasn’t real, that his child, his daughter, hasn’t been lost or given away or…

Or..

The darkened room around him spins alarmingly.

He is vaguely aware that Sherlock is calling his name.

“John. John.”

Sherlock’s taken his gloves off; his strong hands are on John’s shoulders, holding him firmly, almost tightly, keeping him from sliding bonelessly to the filthy floor.

“The baby.” John rasps, awash in terror, the fear and nausea rising, his dinner threatening to escape. “Sherlock. What happened to the baby?”

“I don’t know,” Sherlock says quietly. “I’m sorry, John. I don’t know.”

“Oh God,” John breathes. His wall of denial is crashing down; every fear about the fate of his daughter he has so steadfastly suppressed and ignored comes rushing out at him, hitting him with the force of a knee direct to the solar plexus.

“Sherlock,” he gasps. “Sherlock. Do you think she --would she--”
He can’t even finish the thought. He can’t even breathe.

Sherlock’s warm palms are pressed into his biceps, his strength an anchor. “No,” he says instantaneously.

“But--”

“And not because I’m trying to spare your feelings, or because I harbour any illusions about Mary’s maternal tendencies. Look at where she was, what she’s been reduced to. She is broke, desperate, on the run. The baby is, to put it bluntly, the only asset she had remaining. Mary is very ill, and the baby isn’t here, but whatever happened, Mary didn’t kill her. John. I’m absolutely certain of it.” Sherlock's strong hand rubs gentle, reassuring circles in his back. “Deep, even breaths, now.”

John clings to Sherlock’s voice, does as he is told. In through his nose, out through his mouth. The stench of decay is overpowering.

“I have have to get out of here,” John says, his voice rough and choked.

“Yes,” agrees Sherlock, and plucks the torch out of John’s nerveless palm before taking him by the hand. John clings to the comforting sensation, to Sherlock’s strong fingers weaving in between his own as he guides John down the steps and out of that awful, rotting, dying house.

They make it halfway down the empty street before John turns away from Sherlock and vomits without warning, spinach and cheese and stomach acid pouring out of him and splattering on the pavement, the sound loud and violent in the silent predawn darkness.

Sherlock rubs his shoulder until the retches become hiccuping dry heaves, then gently steers him to the parked car with a large hand gentle at the small of his back. He unlocks the passenger side door, guides John into the seat before closing the door and rounding to the driver’s side. Once in the car, Sherlock silently hands him a half-empty water bottle.

John stares at it, confused, until Sherlock takes it back and unscrews the cap, places it into his nerveless fingers.

“Drink it,” Sherlock tells him, kind but firm.

John drinks it. It’s flat and warm, and though it doesn’t take the raw sting out of his throat, or the thick film of sick and bile out of his mouth, it helps settle the roiling in his belly.

Sherlock roots around the glove box and unearths an ancient cough drop from the glove box. He unwraps it, hands it to John.

The wave of menthol is strong enough to make John's eyes water, but it does push back the awful taste just a little.

“You're all right,” Sherlock tells him, in a measured, careful tone. "You're all right."

John doesn't have the strength to contradict him. Instead he stares straight ahead and watches the moon, grown bloated and yellow as it sinks towards the horizon.

***

There are dark grey clouds of oncoming rain, rolling in from the southwest horizon as they leave Camden.
The sky behind them is still clear, though, except for a few wisps of thin clouds scudding low across the horizon. The pale peach and pink beams of sunrise illuminate the landscape from the east, the skyscrapers of the city proper rising in the distance as they cross the bridge over the Delaware River, returning to Philadelphia.

It’s actually quite lovely, in this flattering rose-gold light of early morning.

John gazes at the landscape slipping past without a word. He feels numb. Frozen inside. He barely even feels real.

None of this feels real.

His defense mechanisms have failed, just collapsed utterly, and the overwhelming avalanche of emotions, the fear and guilt and worry and grief—they’ve just stampeded over him, flattened him, left him without any semblance of human form or shape.

He’s so tired, exhausted beyond words, beyond thought.

He pulls the packet of Marlboros from the storage pocket between the seats, holds his hand out wordlessly.

Sherlock looks at him sideways, but hands over the lighter without comment.

The smoke is harsh and acrid, making John’s eyes water, but as it did in his worst moments on the Helmand campaign it helps tether him to reality, grounding him in the moment, bringing him back into his body.

John cracks the passenger window, taps the cigarette ash.

Sherlock takes a breath, tilts his head just a little, seeming to consider something before speaking.

“He was from here, you know,” Sherlock ventures, seemingly apropos of nothing.

His timbre is quiet, deep, soothing without being patronizing or false, and John clings to it like a lifeline. He doesn’t answer, but he turns his upper body just the tiniest bit towards Sherlock, almost involuntarily, acknowledging the lifeline of his voice, his presence, his attempt at connection. *I’m listening.*

“Walt Whitman,” Sherlock continued. “They named this bridge after him. He was from Camden. You wouldn’t think someone capable of that kind of art, that kind of beauty, could come from somewhere so…” Sherlock shakes his head. “Somewhere so.”

Sherlock sighs a little, just a tiny exhale of breath really, and even in his depths of misery John sees how much Sherlock is trying to reach out to him, to care for him, to remind him he’s not alone.

And he’s not alone. Sherlock is here, with him, for him, and he’s *not alone.*

So he reaches down deep, pulls himself together just a bit. For Sherlock.

“Didn’t delete poetry, then,” John says. His throat is sore and raw, his voice gravelly and rough.

Sherlock smiles a bit, but it’s a wistful, melancholy thing. “No.” He holds out his hand towards John, and John passes over the cigarette. Sherlock takes a deep drag, hands it back to him as he exhales. “Not quite all of it, at least.”
Clarifying a few points...

D'Annibale is pronounce "Dee-annibelle."

Apologies to Camden, though in real life large parts of it are even grimmer than depicted in this story.

Sherlock uses the phrase "parking lot," even though it's an American idiom, deliberately. Just saying, to forestall any accusations of linguistic inaccuracy.

Also, the change from 'Maria" back to calling her 'Mary' is very intentional on my part, and speaks to upheaval and loss of emotional distance.
“It’s not your fault,” Sherlock says softly. “None of this is your fault. You need to understand. I could never--” He shakes his head, tries again. “You’re the one good thing in my life, the best thing. John, you’re so much better than I deserve, and I--”

“I’m not,” John murmurs with a shake of his head. “Sherlock. Don’t say that. I’m a mess, I’m angry and I’m rude and I don’t even know what I’m feeling or thinking half the time, I never understand the simplest things--”

“That’s not true,” Sherlock interjects.

“--I bitch about everything and my shoulder hurts when it rains and I buy my shoes from Asda--”

“John.”

“--and hey, let’s not forget the time Jim Moriarty planted a freelance assassin square into my life, and I was too fucking stupid to notice for two years. So how could I be better than you deserve? In fact, how could I possibly be good enough, Sherlock? How could I even begin to be good enough for someone as amazing as you?”

5. Philadelphia, Part Two

Still feeling somewhat dazed, John allows Sherlock to guide him into the hotel, one hand pressed to the small of his back. At their room he swipes the keycard and turns the handle, gently ushering John through and closing the door behind them with a quiet click.

John shrugs out of his jacket, lets Sherlock tug it off his shoulders and drape it over the nearby desk chair, then stares at it for longer than is really reasonable, wondering what he’s supposed to do next.

He can’t really quite remember.

Sherlock draws the blackout curtains three-quarters closed against the new day, letting just a slim vertical slice of oncoming daylight in between the heavy drapes to illuminate the room.

“I need to go take care of something,” Sherlock tells him.

John nods. “Okay.”

Sherlock tilts his head, gives him a look of unvarnished concern. “Do you think you’re going to take a shower?” he asks.

John’s not so out of it that he can’t recognise Sherlock’s awkwardly-phrased question is in fact a thinly disguised directive, and he nods again. “Think so,” he replies, trying for something close to his normal tone. Even in his slightly disoriented state, a question occurs to him. “Where on earth do you need to go at half six in the morning?”
“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” Sherlock replies, and slips out the door again before John can question him further—if John were even in the frame of mind to question him, which he honestly isn’t. He’s pulled himself together somewhat since his meltdown, but his mind is still a bit fuzzy and indistinct, the connections sparking and shorting out if he tries to focus too hard on any one thing.

He realises he’s been standing behind the chair where he dropped his jacket, staring stupidly at the door for several minutes. He rubs at the back of his head, blinks several times, trying to clear away the fog that’s obscuring his mental processes.

What was he doing?

Shower. Sherlock said to shower. All right, then.

John takes himself into the bathroom, strips down naked, wincing slightly at the smell of mildew and old smoke that comes off his clothing as he unbuttons his shirt and pulls off his jeans.

The shower is hot and stinging, and John is grateful for the higher quality of soap a decent hotel provides as he scrubs himself nearly pink under the spray, then uses a liberal dollop of the Paul Mitchell shampoo Sherlock insisted on buying at some point in their travels even though his hair is currently military short.

John’s own hair always grows out quickly, much to his annoyance in his bygone Army days, and has already gone shaggy around his ears and the nape of his neck. John can’t help but note that for the first and probably last time, his own hair is longer than Sherlock’s.

Just another strange little reminder of how fractured and confused their lives have become, and as small a thing as it is, it makes John feel just that much more unsettled and unmoored.

He shakes off the thought as he rinses, shuts off the taps, dries off with the inadequate towel.

His beard has grown in enough that it’s beyond stubble, only a day or so away from being a proper beard. John doesn’t have the energy to deal with it, and it’s past the itchy stage, anyway. So he leaves it be.

He’s brushing his teeth (and God, is that a profound relief) when Sherlock taps at the door, then opens it just enough that a long arm can reach in. He’s holding clean underwear and a tee shirt.

“Laundry was in the car,” Sherlock says, his voice muffled by the door. John spits and rinses hurriedly.

“Thanks.” He takes the clothing; Sherlock withdraws his arm, closes the door carefully. John pulls on the boxer briefs and tee, then enters the bedroom to find Sherlock is standing at the desk, jacket off, his back to John. He holds a half-full plastic bottle of what looks to be exceedingly cheap vodka in his hand.

Sherlock pours a measure of the liquor carefully into each of their two (purloined) diner coffee cups, then opens a can of Coke and carefully tops off the drinks before adding two ice cubes to each from the square plastic ice bucket. He turns, hands one of the mugs to John with a small, wry grin.

“Desperate times, but a drink is a drink, and we both need one.”

John squints at the mug in his hand, and back up at Sherlock in honest befuddlement. “Where on earth did you get this at the crack of dawn?”

“Mahesh, the night manager. He regularly reeks of alcohol, and his father is the owner of the
property. I was able to relieve him of his hidden bottle through a clever application of threats and cash.” Sherlock quirks an eyebrow, shrugs. “Mostly cash,” he admits. “I was aiming for expediency rather than cleverness. I spent more on that Bunnahabain 25 I bought you for Christmas, but not by very much.”

“You consistently astound me,” John replies with complete sincerity, accepting the cup gratefully.

Sherlock sketches a toast with his mug, drinks, swallows, makes a bit of a graceless choking noise immediately after.

John does the same, with identical results. The sweet fizz of the cola barely blunts the searing burn of resoundingly cheap alcohol as it carves a path down his throat into his belly.

“That was...” he says, wiping his freely-watering eyes with the back of his hand.

“Adequate,” Sherlock pronounces with just a bit of a wheeze. “Though I find it lacks the sophisticated notes of, say, a quality hand sanitizer.”

John can’t help but laugh, and Sherlock grins, his eyes crinkling at the corners in pleasure at John’s amusement.

“Quite right,” John replies, taking another swallow. This time, the fiery sting in his throat that’s a bit reminiscent of a lethal chemical mishap transmutes into something more pleasurable, a soft, comforting numbness starting to creep up his spine, wrapping his nerves in a thin layer of soft cotton wool. “No, this is good, actually. Positively medicinal. Thank you, Sherlock.”

The pink flush creeping into Sherlock’s pale cheeks is perhaps not entirely due to alcohol. “You’re welcome,” he murmurs, then drains the rest of his cup in one go, shuddering a bit as he turns away, places his cup back on the desktop next to the ice bucket and open can of Coke. “I’m going to take a shower myself.” He gestures at the drink in John’s hand. “Finish that while I’m gone, all right?”

Sherlock disappears into the ensuite, and John places his cup on the bedside table and after a moment of contemplation, arranges himself on Sherlock’s bed, the bed they shared the night previous, hoping he’s not being presumptuous in doing so.

The bed is rumpled and slept in; John never bothered to make up the bed before they left the day earlier, and the “do not disturb” sign is a permanent fixture on the door to keep out Housekeeping. Despite his earlier mental assertions, apparently he is becoming a fucking slob, kicking the tangled sheets to the foot of the bed as he gets himself comfortable.

He never even seriously considers removing himself to the second, made-up queen bed nearer the wall. In his most secret of hearts, John he doesn’t think that he can go ever back to that gulf, that level of physical separation. Not now, now that they’ve crossed that threshold. He needs Sherlock close to him, close enough to anchor him to earth, close enough to keep him from spinning off into the cold void of grief and fear.

He needs Sherlock, full stop. He sees now that the whole time he’s told himself Sherlock was the needy one, he’s needed Sherlock every bit as much.

Very possibly--probably--even more, if he’s being completely honest with himself, and why the fuck not at this point?

Something about having your psychic defenses stomped flat a thousand miles from home, he thinks as he sips at his drink. It really helps one get to the truth of the matter in a shockingly direct fashion.
And when Sherlock steps out of the bathroom a few minutes later, damp, clean-shaven and clad in only underwear, John suddenly sees that the truth is really, ridiculously, laughably simple.

He wants Sherlock. Completely, totally, in every possible sense of that one little verb.

Sherlock’s eyes meet his, hold his gaze for several long moments. John knows what he feels is written on his face, plain as day; he’s unable to dissemble, to hide behind his usual walls of denial and sarcasm and glib defensiveness.

He is undefended. And Sherlock doesn’t look away, doesn’t break eye contact, pale eyes locked on his, pupils dark and dilated— and the heat in his gaze is searing John down to the bone, the heat suddenly pooling between his legs fiercer and rawer than even the ferocious bite of the cheap vodka.

Sherlock advances towards him, holds out his hand. “Another?” he murmurs.

John picks up the cup, drains it, hands it silently over to Sherlock. Sherlock takes it, turns away to fix him a second drink. John can’t help but gaze at the pale, surprisingly broad planes of his well-muscled back, the long-faded scars silvery white across his shoulders.

Sherlock brings both mugs over to the bed, hands one to John, takes his own around to the other side of the bed, climbs in next to John without pretense or explanation.

The two of them sit in companionable silence against the headboard, Sherlock’s long pale legs stretched out alongside John’s much shorter ones.

They are sipping vodka and Coke in their underwear at seven am on an unmade hotel bed, and it’s a testament to the unspooling insanity of John’s life that honestly, it doesn’t even really feel all that strange.

Beyond the confines of their room, John can see the narrow rectangle of grey morning, sandwiched between the heavy blackout curtains. The rain has finally arrived, pattering softly against the window, fat drops sliding down the glass pane.

“So,” Sherlock says after a bit. “How are you feeling.”

His tone is tentative, in a declarative sort of way; it’s not a question, really, it’s more of a notification, a telegram, a “I’m here if you want to talk but I don’t quite know how to go about this” semaphore.

John is silent for a minute as he sips at his drink in consideration. How is he feeling, he wonders? The pain and confusion inside is still razor sharp, the pain only barely dulled by the introduction of alcohol into his system.

He almost says “I’m fine,” but he can’t, he’s too tired, to beaten up to try and lie even that little bit. Before he can stop himself, before he can steer away from the dangerous shoals of impulse, John opens his mouth, gives voice to the one thought that rises above all others in the cacophony of his heart.

“It’s my fault,” he says.

Whatever Sherlock had been expecting John to say, that wasn’t it. He turns his head toward John, the line between his brows furrowing.

“What?” he says.
“All of this.” John gestures with the mug at… well, at nothing, really. At everything. “Being here. The baby. What happened to Mycroft. It’s my fault, all of it, and I’m sorry. Fuck, Sherlock. I’m so sorry.”

Sherlock shakes his head, then drains his drink, sets it on the bedside table and turns to face John, sitting up and leaning forward intently. “John. Listen to me. You did absolutely nothing wrong. You did precisely what I would have done in your position, and I don’t blame you.”

“I…” John looks into his cup, at the tannish-brown liquid and slowly melting ice cubes. “My daughter is missing, your brother is dead, you’re in so much pain it comes off you in waves, and… how could you not blame me? For fuck’s sake, I blame me.”

Sherlock shakes his head. “John, no. I was gravely wounded, in mortal danger, and you went to Mycroft for help. He calculated the risks, and when the plan fell apart he did what he had to do. That was his decision. What you did was exactly the right thing to do. The only thing you could do.”

Slowly, as if having an out of body experience, John drains his drink and sets it aside on the table before turning his hand slowly, palm up, so his and Sherlock’s hands press together.

Their fingertips meet, an achingly tentative touch of just the barest centimeters of flesh.

They stay like that, hands just barely touching, for an eternity of a long silent moment.

“It’s not your fault,” Sherlock says softly. “None of this is your fault. You need to understand. I could never--” He shakes his head, tries again. “You’re the one good thing in my life, the best thing. John, you’re so much better than I deserve, and I--”

“I’m not,” John murmurs with a shake of his head. “Sherlock. Don’t say that. I’m a mess, I’m angry and I’m rude and I don’t even know what I’m feeling or thinking half the time, I never understand the simplest things--”

“That’s not true,” Sherlock interjects.

“--I bitch about everything and my shoulder hurts when it rains and I buy my shoes from Asda--”

“John.”

“--and hey, let’s not forget the time Jim Moriarty planted a freelance assassin square into my life, and I was too fucking stupid to notice for two goddamn years. So how could I be better than you deserve? In fact, how could I possibly be good enough, Sherlock? How could I even begin to be good enough for someone as amazing as you?”

“John. Shut up and listen to me. Please.”

John shuts up, suddenly aware of a sinking feeling that tells him he’s just revealed far more to Sherlock than he ever, ever intended.

The fate of everything--their relationship, their lives, the very fate of the universe--seems to hang in the balance, waiting to see which way to fall.

Without breaking the contact of their hands Sherlock shifts on the bed, sliding down on to the mattress, turning on his side toward John. He doesn’t look up, he doesn’t make eye contact; he keeps his eyes fixed on their joined hands, as if he cannot bear to look at John’s face.
His long thumb strokes the inside of John’s wrist, the gentlest touch imaginable, as he takes a deep
breath as if steeling himself for something huge, something terrifying.

“For the one I love most,” murmurs Sherlock, “lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool
night. In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me, and his arm lay
lightly around my breast. And that night I was happy.”

“Whitman,” John breathes.

“Told you I didn’t delete it.” Sherlock tears his gaze away from their hands and finally looks up at
John’s face. His irises are pale slivers around huge pupils wide and dark in the low light.

John realises that Sherlock...is afraid. Terrified.

“You are…” Sherlock stops, closes his eyes, breathes in and out once and opens them again. “You
are the very best thing I’ve ever had in my life, John Watson, and you make me happy, happier than
I ever even dreamed I could be. You’re everything to me, even if you’re too thick to see it, and—well,
now that you know it, don’t you dare think otherwise, not ever again, not for even a moment.”

John stares at Sherlock, dumbstruck. His heart pounds wildly, understanding washing over him,
cresting like a wave.

Sherlock looks back at him with the dawning panic of a man who’s just sawn off the very tree limb
he’s been standing upon and is now treading thin air.

“Too much?” he asks, sounding almost jovial, almost suppressing the wavering tremor in his voice.
“Too much. I shouldn’t have—I apologise, John, I presumed too much. I don’t want you to feel
obligated in any way or think that I--

He sits up, begins to pull his hand away.

John wraps his own hand around Sherlock’s fingers, holds him fast.

“Sherlock,” John says, gently.

Sherlock stares at him wordlessly, silver-green eyes huge. His carotid artery jumps visibly under the
pale, fragile skin of his throat.

John knows the inevitable is upon him; at long last, he is unable to stop the tsunami building up
inside him, unable to keep the maelstrom of feelings contained for even a single moment longer.
Every huge feeling, every melodramatic thought John’s ever had feels poised to tumble out of his
mouth in a whirlwind of emotion, the true nature of his heart revealed at last in a torrent of
unstopable feeling.

When he opens his mouth to speak, what actually comes out is, “I always hoped that—I mean, it
never seemed like—I thought maybe--”

The faint line between Sherlock’s brows makes an appearance, as Sherlock’s expression goes from
terror to something more frankly confused.

“Oh, Jesus,” John sighs. “Hell with this. Come here.”

He tugs Sherlock forward by their joined hands, wraps his other hand around the back of his neck,
and kisses him.
The kiss is undeniably clumsy; there is a clacking of teeth, and after the initial press of lips Sherlock freezes, as if shocked into stillness by the boldness of the act. John pauses, considering, then tilts his head in order to better slot their mouths together, pressing forward, deepening the kiss. After his first moment of surprise passes Sherlock rallies, bringing his free hand up to cradle John’s head as they kiss, thumb stroking against his cheek as they shift against each other, seeking the perfect fit.

The kiss is fervent, heartfelt, but still closemouthed, uncertain, more than a little tentative. After a few more moments John breaks free, pulls back a bit to look at Sherlock.

Sherlock’s eyes are closed. He opens them, looks at John half-dazed.

“Ohay?” John asks softly, hoping against hope.

Sherlock huffs a breath that sounds almost like laughter and nods. “Okay.”

“Thank God,” John mutters, diving in to kiss him again, bolder this time, more assertive, flicking his tongue against the closed seam of Sherlock’s lips in encouragement. Sherlock whispers, once, low in his throat, as he opens his mouth to John, the kiss growing wetter and freer as their tongues taste each other for the first time, and the heat blazes up inside John as his mind connects to his body and he gets the message at last, electricity in every nerve cell as he feels it, truly feels Sherlock’s desire for him for the very first time.

The revelation is everything he ever wished for in the secret spaces of his heart and everything he feared he would never have, and the new awareness makes his heart pound, his head swim as his tongue eagerly explores the heat of Sherlock’s willing, welcoming mouth.

Sherlock kisses him hungrily, passionately, but without the finesse born of experience, and the question forms itself in John’s mind and demands an answer. John moves his head, gently breaks the kiss, presses his lips into the fresh-shaven edge of Sherlock’s sharp jaw.

“Sherlock,” John murmurs in between kisses. “Is this something you’ve--I mean. Before this--”

“Yes,” Sherlock’s voice has gone breathy, soft at the edges. “Well, some. Not much. Mostly research.”

“And this is something you want? You’re absolutely certain?”

“Oh, Good Lord,” Sherlock murmurs, both needy and irritated, a uniquely fascinating combination John’s not heard but before but somehow knows he will again, and often. “I’ve never been so certain of anything in my entire life. I’ve been driven to distraction by wanting you for years now. You’ve just been too dense and routinely ignorant to make the necessary observations. Wait. I mean that in--”

John doesn’t even register the insulting portion of the sentence. “To distraction?” he says, feeling a kind of undeniable pride that he, short unremarkable John Watson, had inspired the kinds of urges that could derail a man like Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock sighs, but it’s a sound of fondness, not annoyance. “To utter distraction. I want this, I want you, immensely, so oh my God will you please shut up and kiss me again.”

“Well. Okay,” John murmurs as he complies, finding Sherlock’s mouth with his own and kissing him again, deeply, before sliding his lips to his long pale neck, sucking a bruise into the delicate, scraped-pink skin of this throat. He’s drowning in sensation, in taste and aroma, the intoxicating scent of shaving cream and soap and the ghost of tobacco smoke, and the sandalwood and musk notes that are the essence, somehow, of Sherlock himself.
John wraps his hand around the sharp edge of Sherlock’s pelvis, pulling him even closer as he slides himself down to fully horizontal on the tangled bed. Sherlock takes the hint, swinging a leg over John’s torso, twining their legs together as they kiss hungrily. Their hands grow bolder, daring to explore each other’s bodies for the first time as their mouths smear messily against each other.

Sherlock breaks the kiss, breathing rough as he gazes wide-eyed at John. “You don’t know,” he says, quiet but still direct, matter of fact, his hand rubbing restless circles into the small of John’s back. “I wanted you for so long. God, John. So long.”

John’s fingers roam through his shorn hair, trace the ropes of strong muscle that adorn his slim shoulders. “I do know,” he says softly. “I swear. Me, too.”

Sherlock looks at him, and his face is open, vulnerable and so shockingly young. “What took us so long?” he asks, and there’s no teasing or flirtatiousness in his voice. It’s a serious, direct question.

“We were afraid,” John says. “Of different things, and for different reasons, but we were both afraid.”

Sherlock nods. “Are you still afraid?”

“God, yes,” John tells him. “But I think maybe I’m more afraid of never taking the chance.”

“Me too,” Sherlock whispers, and bends his head to kiss the curve of John’s neck, nipping gently at the juncture of his shoulder. Needing to feel him, all of him, John pulls Sherlock’s body flush against his own, a low groan spilling from his throat at the press of Sherlock’s hips against his. The first contact of Sherlock’s sizable and very hard cock against his own surging erection sparks a white hot flame of desire deep inside his belly, the likes of which he doesn’t think he’s ever really felt before in his life.

“Tell me this is real,” Sherlock murmurs, his voice rough and pleading as he strains against John, rolling his pelvis in an ancient, instinctive rhythm born of need as John kneads the springy flesh of his arse with his fingers in encouragement. “John. I need to hear it.”

John understands exactly, precisely the reassurance he is looking for, his need to find an anchor, to tie a lifeline to their real selves, their real lives left behind in London. He feels exactly the same.

“This is real,” John whispers fiercely into his ear, then traces the delicate, blood-hot shell with his tongue, making him gasp softly. “This is us, and this is real. I swear it is. Do you believe me?”

“Yes,” Sherlock breathes out the word in a low moan, grabs John’s head with both hands and brings their mouths together again, fierce and a bit clumsy with surging desire. Their mouths are open and wet, tongues tangled together as they kiss and kiss, nipping and licking and biting at each others’ mouths in a blind, inchoate tangle of need.

“Yes,” John echoes. “Oh, God, yes.” His own hands scrabble against the hard muscle of Sherlock’s back as Sherlock’s hot, searching fingers slip under the edge of John’s tee, tugging it upward.

“Please?” Sherlock murmurs, and John hesitates for just a split second. He’s never been comfortable without at least a tee shirt on since it happened; even with Mary he’d more often than not kept his vest on or turned the lights out. He doesn’t dwell on it, not exactly, but he knows that strictly objectively speaking it’s more than a little disconcerting, and he’d just really rather--

“Yes,” Sherlock says again, and buries his face into the sweat-damp curve of John’s neck, nibbles at him with his sharp white teeth, soothes the nip with catlike swipes of his soft tongue. “I want to see you. All of you. Please, John.”
And John knows he’s lost, knows he’s never been able to deny Sherlock any single thing he ever wanted and won’t suddenly be able to start now. “Okay,” he murmurs, and lifts his torso up a bit, raises his arms to allow Sherlock to tug up the hem, wrestling the tee shirt up and over his head.

To his eternal credit, Sherlock shows no surprise or shock when he first surveys the ruined landscape of John’s shoulder, instead displaying the intense, laser focus of fascination—which honestly is only very slightly less disconcerting.

“May I…” Sherlock murmurs.

John nods. “Of course.” Revealing it was the difficult part; if there is anyone he trusts with this part of himself, it is Sherlock.

With gentle but sure fingers, Sherlock touches the ragged expanse of white, shiny, erratically topographic scarring, traces the lines of demarcation where the tough webbed tissue gives way to healthy pink flesh.

“It looks worse than I imagined,” he says with his characteristic, not-trying-to-be-rude-but-still straightforwardness that John infinitely prefers over the fake, circumspect politeness that seems the default for just about everyone else in the world.

“I know,” John says. “It was a real mess there, for a good long time. Took all the king’s horses and all the king’s men to save my arm, and even then the infections almost did me in.”

“You have a donor site scar on your left thigh,” Sherlock comments. “But the graft failed.”

John shakes his head. “Second go-round of staph. That one ended up going down to the bone, then after all that failed the graft site hurt like holy hell for a month on top of it all. Whole lot of pain and misery for nothing. I declined to try again.”

“It was a terrible experience,” Sherlock says, plain and direct, honest but not unkind.

“The whole thing was… well, getting shot sucks, as you know, but that was the easiest part, if that tells you anything.”

“You almost died,” Sherlock says, and it comes out almost accusatory in tone.

“I don’t like to…” John trails off, considering, then decides to keep it simple. “Yeah. I did.”

Sherlock presses his lips to the deepest crater at the centre of the scar, and though the flesh itself registers no sensation, the sight of it is astoundingly, dizzyingly erotic, making John’s head swim with an inexplicable, aching desire.

“I would have died too, you know,” Sherlock tells him. “If you had died, before we met. I wouldn’t be alive right now.”

John almosts protests, but it’s not a dramatic proclamation. It’s just the truth.

“But I didn’t,” he says, gently, stroking Sherlock’s sleek, dark hair. “And you didn’t, either. And I’m so very, very glad for that.”

Sherlock nods, dips his head back down, kisses his chest again, tastes the edges of the scar with his tongue, then slips further down, closes his full lips around a pink nipple, sucks experimentally.

“Fuck,” John gasps. “Oh my God.” His fingers clutch at the back of Sherlock’s head, pulling him
close, encouraging him to continue his explorations.

Sherlock teases his nipple gently with his teeth before repeating the maneuver on the other side, licking and sucking at the rosy-brown nub until John is gasping his name and seeing stars. He slowly moves his way down John’s torso, exploring him with his lips and tongue, tasting him, pressing kisses into the softness of John’s belly as his large hands roam restlessly up and down the length of his body.

He slides himself down John’s torso, nestles in between his spread legs, nudges his thighs apart with his hands as he looks up, a bit uncertain.

“Can I?” he murmurs.

“Anything,” John breathes. “Jesus Christ, yes, Sherlock, anything.”

John can’t help the moan that escapes him, his back arching up off the bed as Sherlock’s long fingers wrap around his cock, still confined in the cotton of his boxer briefs. The friction is delicious, maddening, setting off sparking showers of pleasure up and down his spine.

Sherlock strokes him slowly, a bit clumsily but with infinite care and tenderness as he nibbles and kisses the thin, delicate skin of his inner thighs.

The heavy, aching weight in John’s belly is building, pooling low and hot, the vague but unmistakable fullness sitting deep in his pelvis as his arousal builds and builds. He can’t help as his hips thrust upwards against the friction of his hand, seeking even more contact, more pressure, more-

“Please,” he gasps in between the moans he can’t keep from his lips.

Sherlock’s lips move from his inner thighs to press and nuzzle briefly against the crease of his thigh, pressing open-mouthed kisses against the cotton of his briefs, then he’s sucking at the bulging head of his cock right through the fabric, his saliva soaking the cotton, fingers slipping down to cradle the weight of his bollocks, cupping and kneading them gently.

The torture of feeling Sherlock’s soft, hot mouth through a layer of material is terrible and exquisite, and John is torn between never wanting it to end and the desperate need for Sherlock to take mercy on him and touch his bare cock.

Sherlock seems to read his mind, for he raises his head, hooks his fingers into the waistband of John’s pants.

“Yeah,” John breathes, raising his hips off the bed so Sherlock can slide his briefs down and off. His trapped cock springs free from the confines of damp fabric, curving up towards his belly, already a deep dusky red, foreskin fully retracted, the broad head shiny wet with precome.

“Oh,” Sherlock murmurs. “Oh, my.”

He wastes no time, taking John eagerly into his mouth.

The back of John’s head slams into the bed, an involuntary moan torn from his lips as crackling bolts of pure pleasure race up his spinal column to explode in his brain.

“Oh God, oh God, oh fuck. Your mouth, oh God, oh fuck.” John is barely aware of the incoherent muttering spilling from his lips as Sherlock sucks him, hand wrapped around the base of his cock, head bobbing eagerly, cheeks hollowed, spit-shiny lips stretched wide by John’s girth as he sucks.
He’s indescribably beautiful like this, angelic and obscene, and all John can find to say is “Oh, God. Fuck, Sherlock, yes.”

The tension of oncoming climax builds in his pelvis, and John’s hips flex upward involuntarily as he unconsciously seeks to thrust deeper into that lush, wet suction. Although Sherlock’s enthusiasm seems nearly boundless, his practical experience is clearly more limited; as the head of John’s cock hits the back of his throat, Sherlock coughs and sputters involuntarily.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” John says, instantly contrite. He strokes at Sherlock’s hair in concern. “Are you all right?”

Sherlock nods, eyes watering.

“Come back up here, love,” John says gently, barely even noticing the endearment that slips out in the heat of the moment. Sherlock slides back up his body and John kisses him, tasting his own musky tang on Sherlock’s lips. “It’s so good, it’s too good, and I’m about to go off if you keep that up much longer.”

“It was good?” Sherlock murmurs, sounding remarkably shy and bashful.

“Amazing. So amazing,” John replies, peppering his beautiful face with kisses before placing his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders and rolling their bodies over with quick efficiency so Sherlock’s longer frame is now under him, John’s thighs straddling his hips.

John sits back, balancing his weight on his heels as he regards the bounty, the feast that is Sherlock’s body spread out underneath him.

He looks so different now, in some ways, the shorn hair and everyday clothing so very different from what John is used to at home. Yet the essence of him, the angles and curves of his long body, the slant of his cheekbones, the pale green ice of his eyes--these haven’t changed, could never change no matter what continent they find themselves on, or how Sherlock dresses or acts or what kind of community theatre accent he slips into like a new pair of cheap shoes.

And the very centre of who he is, the very Sherlockness of his deepest self, his quicksilver brilliance, his loose limbed grace, his unexpected wry humor, his deeply hidden but very real tenderness--John knows that no matter what becomes of them, even if Sherlock and he somehow live a hundred lifetimes, across a hundred different universes, this central core of Sherlock’s being is so steadfast, so certain and true, that John will always know him by whatever bone-deep internal magnet draws them to each other so inexorably.

I’d been looking for you all my life, and I didn’t even know it.

And just like that John is blinking back hot tears, and Sherlock is looking up at him with undisguised concern, his warm fingertips tracing patterns across his thighs.

“No, I’m fine,” John says, shaking his head and smiling. “It’s fine. It is. I’m just.” He gives a half-laugh, scrubs at his traitorous eyes.

“You sure?” Sherlock asks.

“Absolutely,” John replies. “Everything is perfect.”

He sinks back down, pressing Sherlock’s larger frame into the mattress, kisses the juncture of his neck and shoulder. The odd blue moment passes as John closes his eyes and breathes him in, savoring the complex, indescribably intoxicating aroma of his body as fingertips caress his slim torso,
feeling every ridge of muscle and bone.

“I’ve waited so long to touch you like this,” John murmurs into the damp curve of his neck. “You said I didn’t know, but I do, Sherlock. God, I do.” He slips his fingers under the band of Sherlock’s snug black briefs. “All right?”

“Yes,” Sherlock breathes out. “God, yes.”

John carefully eases the elastic of his briefs over his frankly impressive erection. His prick is congruent with the rest of his build, long and slim; he’s smaller than John, but his testicles are large and heavy, the thin skin of his scrotum stretched tight and shiny to contain them. His pubic hair is wiry and full, fascinatingly unkempt for a creature so routinely fastidious, and John gives in to what he realises is a very, very long-held desire, pressing his nose deep into the furry crease of his groin and breathing him in deep. The musky male scent of him is complex and intoxicating and somehow deeply, profoundly right, and it does unbelievable things to the state of John's brain and body.

Sherlock squirms under his ministrations, exhales shakily. "Your beard," he pants. "It's scratchy."

"I'm sorry," John says apologetically, lifting his head. "I should have shaved-- I'll just go--"

"No," Sherlock replies, clutching rather desperately at the back of John's head. "You misunderstand. I like it. A lot."

"Really?" John replies, amusement tugging his lips into a bit of a smirk.

"Really," Sherlock affirms, underscoring the truth of his words with a none too subtle downwards push to John's head. John takes the hint, lowering his head back down between his thighs, pressing kisses to the pale delicate skin of his inner thighs, tracing the lines of his lean, defined muscles with his tongue, reveling in Sherlock writhing and gasping under his ministrations. Sherlock’s as-yet-ignored cock is a dark dusky red, so hard it's almost flush against his abdomen, bobbing against his concave belly with every shiver of his body, every involuntary flex and push of his hips.


"You need what?" John murmurs, voice low and rough. He nips at a patch of skin, soothes the bite with a kiss. “Tell me.”

“Don’t be a tease,” Sherlock says, and it’s likely meant to be snappish and demanding but it comes out breathy, desperate, pleading.

John doesn’t mean to tease, truly he doesn’t, but Sherlock is so indescribably gorgeous like this, head thrown back, kiss bitten lips red and swollen, his sweat damp body flushed and writhing with need, that John can’t help but draw it out just that little bit longer. He cups his heavy, full bollocks in his hand, kneads them gently, then slips his hand back further, presses an index finger against his perineum. Sherlock moans wantonly, spreading his legs even wider, tilting his hips upward in obvious entreaty.

John takes the hint and moves just that little bit further back, brushes against the tight knot of his entrance. Sherlock makes a desperate, raw sound, pushing his entire body down and against his finger, encouraging John to do it again with just the slightest bit of added pressure.

“Oh God,” Sherlock pants in between gasping moans. “Yes, please. Yes.”

John moves back up Sherlock’s body, gently kisses his puffy, bitten mouth as he takes his cock in hand, stroking him, savoring the silky smooth heat of his flesh.
“What do you want, love?” In the unguarded heat of the moment, the word slips out of John’s mouth unheeded. “Anything. Tell me.”

Sherlock pulls back a bit, gives him a quick, oddly piercing look.

“That’s the second time you’ve called me that,” he says, voice gone a bit cooler, a bit flat.

John looks at him, confused. “What?”

“That… endearment.”

John can’t quite parse the expression on Sherlock’s face. It almost looks like annoyance.

“I’m sorry,” John says, placating, feeling suddenly horribly exposed and self-conscious at the sudden shift of mood. He takes his exploring hand out from between Sherlock’s legs, feeling off-balance and uncertain. “I didn’t know it bothered you. I won’t--”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Sherlock says quickly. “I’d just rather you didn’t if, you know.” His cheeks are colouring now, not with arousal but embarrassment. He looks down, away from John, refusing to meet his eye. “Just… don’t say it if you don’t mean it.”

“If I don’t--” John’s brain catches up with what Sherlock is trying to say. “Oh, God. Sherlock. I--of course I mean it.” He kisses Sherlock’s cheek gently, almost chastely, combs his fingers through the soft dark hair behind his ear. “How can you not know that I--oh, you brilliant daft creature. Of course I mean it.”

“Oh.” Sherlock bites his lip, looks up at him through inky lashes, and the shy hope in his eyes does something indescribable to John’s heart. “You do?”

“God, yes.”

“That’s--that’s good,” Sherlock says “That’s to say--the feeling is--it’s mutual.” He exhales shakily. “I hope you know it’s very mutual.”

“Now I know,” John says, “And I’m glad.” And oh God he’s more than glad. He’s joyous, incandescent. “So I can call you love, then?”

Sherlock nods. “It’s fine. If you like,” he says, aiming for indifference, but there’s a glow to him, a look in his eyes that says it is far more than merely fine.

“Thank you, love,” John says, and kisses him. The kiss is tender, almost chaste for a moment, but soon heat and arousal is washing over them both, their kisses growing wet and messy as they rock into each other, their cocks rubbing together, the friction dry and rough but still blessedly delicious, making both of them moan and grunt softly as their hips roll together.


“I want--I want you,” Sherlock says, voice low and rough, practically stammering with either arousal or self consciousness or perhaps both. “I want to feel you. Inside of me.”

John’s a bit taken aback. “We’re don’t have lube,” he points out. “Or condoms, for that matter.”

“In my jacket,” Sherlock tells him.

John purses his lips in a bit of confusion, but peels himself off of Sherlock and crosses the room, hard cock flushed and bobbing foolishly as he bends to dig into the pockets of Sherlock’s military field
jacket. He finds his quarry, extracting an unopened tube of medical-style lubricant from the depths of the inner breast pocket, extends it towards Sherlock in the palm of his open hand.

“Sherlock,” he says slowly, his eyes narrowing. “While we were investigating the pharmacy. Did you...did you actually shoplift lube?”

Sherlock turns his head towards John, tries to maintain his composure; but before he can answer, his flushed, sweaty face breaks out into a broad grin and he begins to giggle, his slender chest heaving with peals of laughter.

John tries to stay serious for a moment, then realises the ridiculousness of his pose--naked, incredibly erect, holding aloft a tube of KY Jelly--and gives in to the giggles as well, practically doubling over with near-hysterical laughter.

Sherlock is laughing so hard he has tears in his eyes, and John has to collapse on the bed before his knees give out. He flops gracelessly down on the bed next to Sherlock, still giggling as he rolls onto his side and kisses his shoulder. “You’re mad. You’re a mad, larcenous bastard. Optimistic, too, I might add.”

Sherlock turns on his side to face him. “A mad, larcenous, bastard who correctly deduced the probable course of our relationship, is what you mean.”

“Quite so.” John cradles the side of Sherlock’s face in his hand, turns his head to kiss him thoroughly on the mouth. “You were that certain, hm?”

“No,” Sherlock says, more seriously. “I thought there was a chance, but the truth is, you’re right. It was much more hope than certainty. But I’ve never been more glad to be correct, and that is saying something.”

“Considering how much you like to be right, it truly is.” John kisses him once more. “But are you--are you certain? We’ve just fallen into bed, and that’s a pretty big leap to take right away.”

Sherlock kisses John then, passionately, snogs him so thoroughly it takes his breath away, makes his head spin and his slightly flagging cock come back up to full attention. “We may have just gotten here today, but honestly? It’s taken us five years to get to this point. Forget moving too fast---we’ve practically taken a geologic era to get here.” His lips move to John’s neck, tongue lavishing attention on the pulse point jumping under his skin as his hand slips down past his belly to grasp and stroke at his cock. “I’ve thought about this so much, John. Not just today, not just yesterday. For years.” His teeth nibble gently at John’s earlobe, his voice dark and sharp as gravel. “I wanted you before I even understood what I was feeling. I want this. I want you, so much. Please, John. Please fuck me.”

John wants to, Jesus fucking Christ he wants to, but he has to ask. “Have you, before?”

“No,” Sherlock admits. “I’ve never wanted to, before. You’re the first. The first one I ever wanted to.” He cracks one eye open, looks at John. “But you have.”

It’s not really a question, and there’s no point in lying. It’s not as if Sherlock won’t see through him directly, anyway.

“I have,” John says. “Not many times, but yeah. I have.”

“That’s okay,” Sherlock says. “Better that one of us have some general concept of the terrain.”

“I suppose so. But--” John tries to find the words for what he’s feeling. “But I wish--I wish you were the first.”
Sherlock opens both eyes and looks at him. His face goes funny for a second as several different emotions attempt to cross his features at the same time.

“I think,” Sherlock says, and his pale eyes are suspiciously shiny. “I think not being your first isn’t so important, if I get to be your last.”

John kisses him, his own eyes feeling hot and his throat feeling tight. “I can live with that.” A thought occurs to him. “But we still don’t have--”

“I don’t want them,” Sherlock murmurs. “I’m clean, and so are you, and I don’t want anything in between us. All right?”

“Oh, yeah, God. Of course that’s okay. That’s...God, yes, that’s amazing.”

And they’re kissing again, messy and demanding, tongues deep in each other’s mouths, and John’s lips are sore and stinging and his cheeks scraped raw from sandpaper stubble and it is glorious. He drapes his leg over Sherlock’s hip, uses his leg to pull his body close. He looks down between their bodies, watches Sherlock’s long fingers flex and pull as he strokes his length, closes his eyes to let the ripples of pleasure flow through him.

“All right,” John breathes. “Yes, God, fuck, you’re so amazing, but we’re never going to get there if you keep that up.” He closes his own hand around Sherlock’s larger fist, stilling his movement, then takes their joined hands away from his cock, already missing the delicious friction of it. “Ah. Okay.” he places a flat palm on the centre of Sherlock’s torso, over his heart, and pushes gently. “On your back, then, love. Knees up.”

Sherlock complies; John positions himself between his knees, slowly sliding his fingertips down the warm, sweat-damp skin of his torso and back up again, thumbs circling his pebbled oval nipples.

He’s so unbelievably gorgeous like this, spread out underneath John’s hands, but real, somehow, achingly real in a way John has never seen him before this moment. The long, pale body that always seemed so impossibly elegant at a bit of remove is in fact, utterly human and imperfect, this close. His porcelain skin is dotted and creased with several scars, the neat round bullet hole Maria left in him being only the most visible. Several other smaller wounds mark his torso-- an inch long encounter with a serrated steak knife just to the right of his navel, a jagged splotchy chemical burn above his left pelvic crest--and here and there the brown freckles that always seemed somehow incongruous on his almost ethereally moonlit body now seem charmingly humble, each one somehow begging to be kissed.

John does so, taking his time, luxuriating in the taste of him, the scent of his body, the feel of him quivering and sighing under the ministrations of his lips and tongue.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmurs against heated skin, thumb tracing the prominent lines of his collarbone, the long line of his neck, the sharp edge of his cheekbone. Sherlock responds with a pained whimper, pushing his hips upwards, writhing under the weight of John’s body on top of him, his cock flat against his belly, pinned in the space between their bodies. John can feel the sticky wetness of his leaking precome smearing against his skin as Sherlock writhes underneath him, tiny pleading gasps and cries trapped in his throat.

“John,” he gasps out. “Please.”

“I’m gonna make you feel so good,” John murmurs, sliding back down his body, kissing the sharp curve of his hip. “I promise I will.”
He rummages in the tangled bedclothes, finds the lube, flips the cap and slicks the fingers of his left hand, slipping them behind his bollocks, pressing first against his perineum then circling his entrance while his other hand wraps around Sherlock’s prick, bringing it to his mouth. He swirls his tongue around the wet purpling head, licking at the slit, welcoming the bitter salty taste of him as his finger teases against his opening, pressing inward, seeking entrance.

Sherlock throws his head back, stiffens and gives a low strangled cry as John breaches his body for the first time.

“It’s all right,” John murmurs, then licks a broad stripe up the underside of his cock, tracing the prominent vein with his tongue, making Sherlock pant and shiver.

The feel of him inside is indescribable, all clinging heat and tightness, and the idea of sliding his cock into that marvelous lush warmth takes John’s breath away, makes pure arousal burn through his veins, makes a part of his deepest animal brain want nothing more than to push Sherlock’s knees up to his shoulders and take him, plunge himself over and over into the clutching, pulsing heat of his quivering body. But the larger part of him--the much larger part of him-- wants so much more to take care of Sherlock, to make this wonderful for him, to give him the most absolute care and devotion and pleasure he possibly can.

So he takes his time, slowly pressing into his body, opening him with the utmost care as he takes his cock fully into his mouth at the same time, giving him pleasure to ease him past the initial discomfort, the burn and stretch of using his body in this way for the first time. John lavishes attention on his prick, taking the shaft deeply into his throat, sliding his lips all the way to the base before pulling back, bobbing shallowly, lavishing attention to the sensitive crown for a few moments before taking him in all the way again, letting his glans push against the back of his throat. He takes Sherlock close to the brink; sensing the tensing of his muscles and altered breathing of approaching orgasm as he backs off, stilling his movements for a moment.

“Just breathe,” he murmurs. “You’re so good, you’re doing so well.”

Sherlock’s whimper is broken, almost desperate. “John,” he wails. “Oh, God.”

“Shh,” John says, kissing the crest of his pelvis, “It’s all right, love, you’re doing so beautifully.”

When the close moment passes, and Sherlock’s breathing again evens and calms, John resumes his patient ministrations, sliding his finger all the way out of his body before pushing in carefully with two fingers, twisting carefully, pressing upwards, seeking out--

“Fuck,” Sherlock cries out as his hips rise off the bed, his voice higher and reedier than John has ever heard him, “That--that was. Oh, John. Right there.”

John is focused and insistent, pressing and stroking as he takes Sherlock back into his mouth, intent on wringing as much pleasure from his body as humanly possible. Sherlock’s entrance is relaxed and open, welcoming him into his body, his words reduced to incoherent grunts and moans as his muscled thighs flex to push against John’s fingers with every thrust.

“Now,” Sherlock rasps, “Now, please, I can’t--you have to, Oh God, oh my God, I need you now.”

John releases his cock from his mouth with a loud wet slurp, kisses his lower belly as he slides his fingers carefully out of his body. Sherlock shivers and whimpers a bit at the loss of contact as John sits back on his heels, grabbing a stray pillow from against the headboard.

“Shift up a bit,” John murmurs, sliding the pillow under his hips as Sherlock lifts his arse a few
inches up off the bed. John moves up to kiss Sherlock briefly on the lips, caressing his cheek in reassurance.

“You all right?” he asks.

Sherlock nods, gazing up at him, pupils huge and dark in the grey gloom of the overcast half light from the window. John kisses him again, then sits back on his heels and retrieves the lube, slicking himself with more than really necessary out of an abundance of caution. He hooks his left elbow under Sherlock’s knee, brings it over his shoulder, takes himself in hand to line himself up with Sherlock’s loosened, ready entrance.

“Just a little bit to the right,” he mutters. Sherlock complies, but--”No, not your right. My right. Your left.”

“Then you should have said left,” Sherlock huffs.

“I thought it would have been obvious, considering the position of my cock relative to where, you know, I’m trying to put it.”

“You’re the one who’s done this before,” Sherlock points out a bit snippily.

“Which is why I said \textit{my right},” John snaps, keyed up and on edge in so many different ways, and the words come out more annoyed than he intends. Sherlock stares up at him incredulously for several full seconds of silence, before the ridiculousness of having an argument right at this particular and very fraught moment dawns on John.

“I’m sorry,” John says, softer, more contrite. “I’m an arsehole.”

“If that were the case,” Sherlock murmurs acidly, “One would think you would be more talented in trying to find mine.”

John glares at him for a single long moment, and then Sherlock’s mouth quirks up in a grin, and they’re laughing again, laughing so hard they’re almost crying, holding each other and cracking up like two naughty schoolkids caught in a very, very compromising position.

“This is crazy,” John murmurs after the final giggling aftershocks have passed. “What are we doing? This is the craziest thing we’ve ever done, Sherlock.”

Sherlock’s face grows solemn as he holds John’s gaze, his eyes soft and full of love.

“On the contrary,” Sherlock replies in a low, throaty whisper. “I believe this is the most sane we’ve ever been.”

And then Sherlock pulls John’s head down and kisses him, lips and tongue soft and wet as he shifts himself just a little bit to his left, and John’s cock pushes easily into him, slipping into the lush velvet warmth of his body, and it’s \textit{glorious}, it’s fireworks and shooting stars and for a second John almost can’t breathe for the intensity of the sensation.

“Fuck,” he swears, roughly, holding himself carefully still for a moment before pulling out and pushing in just a tiny bit deeper. The sensation is overwhelmingly good, sheathing him in perfect tight slick pulsing heat.

Underneath him, Sherlock has gone entirely still, his breathing shallow, eyes shut tight.

“Okay?” John rasps.
Sherlock nods but he doesn’t open his eyes.

“I don’t want to--”

“You’re not.” Sherlock opens his eyes; his pupils are dilated, a little glassy. “It’s a little--I’ve never felt--but God, John, don’t you dare stop.”

So John doesn’t stop. He pushes in deeper with each roll of his hips, so careful, slow, but he keeps going, he doesn’t stop, and after a few minutes of measured thrusting he feels the moment that Sherlock relaxes underneath him, the tightness around his eyes and mouth smoothing out as the discomfort gives way to deep pleasure. His hands find their way to John’s arse, pulling him in closer, welcoming him even deeper into his body.

“John, please,” Sherlock breathes. “Oh God, please, yes, please fuck me,” and John lets himself go, lets himself give in to the ancient howling instinct in the base of his brain and fucks him, deep and hard, hands gripping Sherlock’s narrow pelvis. He feels the pleasure coil itself at the base of his spine as drives himself into the hot slick channel of his body, over and over, while Sherlock’s slim hard body writhes in ecstasy underneath him.

“So good,” John growls, “So good,” and it is, it’s so good he can feel his orgasm on the horizon, approaching, gathering strength, so he marshals his last shreds of self-control and slows the roll of his pelvis, breathes out through his nose, consciously pulling himself back from the point of no return. He pulls almost the way out, spreads Sherlock’s inner thighs wide with his hands, watches, mesmerised, as he teases at his pink, open rim with the very head of his cock.

“Oh, oh, oh, fuck--” Sherlock is panting and babbling incoherently, his head rolling from side to side as John teases his hole. “More, damn it, more. Please, I need--”

John grabs Sherlock’s right hand, brings it to his mouth, licking the palm, broad messy swipes of his tongue against the rough, salty skin of his palm. “Touch yourself,” he says, and it comes out harsh in his need, more aggressive than he intended, and he almost apologises but Sherlock shivers and moans at his words and then obeys, curling his spit-slick hand around his shaft and stroking himself in long, rough strokes as John pulls all the way out, pauses, and drives back into his body hard, setting a punishing pace, balls bouncing against his perineum with each desperate thrust, as he balances on the knife edge between taking his pleasure and holding on long enough to give Sherlock what he needs to--

“I want to see you come,” he breathes out in between grunting, panting gasps. “Yeah, I want it, I want to see it.”

“I’m so close,” Sherlock cries out, his fist flying up and down his shaft in rough jerks. “I’m so, God, please--”

“Yes, oh fuck, yeah,” John groans. “Just like that, so gorgeous, fuck, come for me--”

Sherlock inhales sharply then cries out, his body going rigid, his muscles of his abdomen tightening, his hips flexing upwards as he comes hard with a shuddering cry. John murmurs soft nonsense words, fucking him steadily through the crest of his climax, feeling his body tighten and pulse deliciously all around him.

John has shared orgasms with men before, once or twice or eleven times, but he has never found himself needing to see the very moment the way now, transfixed by the indescribable beauty of Sherlock’s face in orgasm, his mouth a round O of transcendent pleasure as his body shudders, thick pearly semen spurting over his fist and dripping onto his heaving belly. The act of giving pleasure
like this to someone he loves so intensely is deeply, profoundly affecting, arousing to him in a manner far beyond the mere physical; it’s something spiritual, something transformative on a kind of level John doesn’t even begin to understand.

Overwhelmed by emotion John presses forward to kiss Sherlock, bending him almost double as he smears messy kisses against his mouth, his face, his neck.

“You’re amazing,” he breathes into his sweaty skin. “God, you’re so beautiful, you’re so amazing.”

“Oh God,” Sherlock pants, the aftershocks still shivering through his body. “Oh God, fuck, John, that was--oh, my God, I want you to, now.” Sherlock kisses him, “Please. I want you to come in me. I want to feel it.”

John responds with a deep, ferocious thrust, picking up speed, slamming into Sherlock’s body with a ferocious, singleminded intensity. Everything in his mind and heart and soul narrows down to the friction sheathing his cock, the hottsightslick connection between their bodies, his balls pulled up tight against his body and full to bursting and he’s so close, the tension in his body almost unbearable--

“Fuck me harder,” Sherlock breathes in his ear. “Fuck me, fill me up, please, God, I need it--” and his soft, pleadingly obscene words tip John over the edge into an explosion of roaring silent noise, the blinding pleasure crashing through him, suspending him in a single timeless moment of ecstasy as he pours himself into Sherlock, filling his waiting, willing body with hot wetness.

He’s distantly aware of a rough, keening cry that sounds like someone in pain, and then a moment later discovers he’s the one making it. “Oh fuck,” he gasps in between moans.”Oh my God, oh my God.”

And then it passes, far too quickly, and he and Sherlock clutch at each other, chests heaving as they gasp for oxygen.

John’s hand is pressed against Sherlock’s sweat-soaked back; he can feel the galloping beat of his heart, hammering against the far-too-prominent bones of his slender ribcage as he recovers his breath, comes back to his senses.

Outside, the rain continues to batter steadily against the window.

As the last of the aftershocks fade from his shivering body and his breathing slows, John is struck with the realization that outside the sanctuary of this room, it is merely another weekday midmorning. Not so far away, baristas are making coffee and clerical workers are stuck in boring meetings and van drivers are filling up on petrol like like it was merely another day.

It feels inconceivable, somehow.

“You killed me,” Sherlock mumbles, voice deep and hoarse from exertion, as if he has just run a race across all the rooftops of London. “You killed me with sex, and I’m dead now. Surprisingly, there is an afterlife, which goes against all of my long-held beliefs. Even more surprisingly, the afterlife looks like a Fairfield Suites next to the Philadelphia International Airport, which will definitely surprise most learned theologians.” He tilts his head, considering. “Maybe not the Calvinists. They’re an odd bunch.”

John chuckles indulgently. “Does that make it heaven or hell?” he asks.

Sherlock slides an arm around his belly, presses a kiss to the side of his neck. “Well, you’re in it, so it can’t be entirely awful.”
John chuckles, pulls him close, kisses his sweat-soaked hair. Sherlock sighs and burrows closer.

“I love the fact that you’re a cuddler,” John tells him. “I really do. But you’re also incredibly sticky right now, and you’re getting it _everywhere._”

“You should see one of these rooms under a UV light,” Sherlock replies, picking up John’s tee from the side of the bed and using it to wipe off his messy, come-streaked stomach. “We’ve barely contributed to the vast landscape of—”

“Sherlock.”

“Just pointing out.” He tosses the shirt aside, allows John to pull him back down into bed, twining their arms and legs together and exchanging lazy kisses back and forth.

“Good?” John asks him a few minutes after, his voice quiet and a bit serious.

“Good,” Sherlock affirms, brushing John’s hair and kissing his forehead in a show of tenderness that would have been shocking a day ago or even an hour ago, but somehow now seems perfect and natural and right. “Very, very good. Amazing. And you?”

“Better than I’ve been in a while.” John rests his head on Sherlock’s shoulder. “Tired. A little bit sore. But...peaceful. Which is...yeah. Very good.”

“Mmm,” Sherlock hums consideringly. “Good word choice. Peaceful.”

The two of them fall silent, watching the raindrops drip and slide down the window, savoring this rare moment of sated contentment.

After a few moments Sherlock slips out of bed without a word, ducks into the loo. The toilet flushes, and the water runs, and then he comes back to bed, passing a wet flannel to John before sliding under the tangled sheets, pressing himself against John’s side, pressing a fleeting kiss into his hair.

John cleans himself off perfunctorily, dropping the cloth over the edge of the bed and curling back up against a warm and shockingly comfortable Sherlock.

“I’m hungry,” Sherlock announces, sounding a bit surprised. “I haven’t been hungry since... well, since we’ve been here.”

“What are you hungry for?” John inquires.

“I think... I think I could go for something unquestionably American.”

“Such as?”

“The restaurant next door. I want some loaded potato skins. With sour cream and cheese.”

“I knew sex can change a person, but frankly, love, you’re scaring me here.”

“I just want some horrible fried crap slathered in cheese. What could be more American than that? When in Rome, et cetera.”

“I’m pretty sure Scotland is the capital of horrible fried crap,” John replies.

Sherlock tilts his head and considers. “Strong contender, possibly a tie. The difference is in Scotland, horrible fried food comes with sausages. In America, horrible fried food comes alongside chicken wings.”
“Mmm. Wings,” John murmurs, snuggling down next to Sherlock, tucking his head under his chin, resting his ear against his chest, relishing the steady tick-tock beat of his living heart. “I could eat some wings right now. A lot of wings. And beer. Unfortunately--” he picks up his head, eyes the digital clock next to the bed “--it’s just now past nine in the morning.”

“A nap first, then,” Sherlock declares. “After that, huge plates of horrible fried crap food. Then we’ll figure out our next move.”

Sherlock’s last sentence reminds him of the vast, seemingly insurmountable difficulties the two of them still face, but the impact of his words is distant somehow, like hearing the thudding sounds of bombs detonating from a far distance. He knows the battle is real, he knows it will soon swallow them whole yet again, but right now, warm and sated and at peace, it’s hard to reconcile the harshness of that other, crueler reality with what he feels right now.

“A nap sounds marvellous,” John murmurs in agreement, closing his eyes.

“Only for an hour or so,” Sherlock tells him, stifling a yawn. “We have a lot of work in front of us.”

“An hour,” John agrees, and within moments both of them are drifting into sleep.

Morning and afternoon slip past, and neither one of them wakes until the sliver of daylight from the window has given way to full night, their room dark except for the occasional passing flicker of headlights as a car pulls in or out of the lot beyond their window.

John’s sleep is deep and restful, the sleep of the redeemed, the absolved.

He doesn’t dream.
Philadelphia, Part Three

Chapter Summary

“Don’t patronise me, John.” Sherlock takes a short, vicious drag of his cigarette and tosses it away. “I’m annoyed, yes. I’m annoyed that the obnoxious fat lazy git was foolish and shortsighted enough to get himself killed and leave me behind to pick up the pieces without needed resources. Clearly, I’m annoyed. Frustrated. Pissed off, even. But I’m not a swooning Victorian heroine, despite what you may think, and I am certainly not grieving.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

6. Philadelphia, Part Three

John wakes in the near-dark of early evening.

Sherlock is gone, his side of the bed cold and empty.

The flare of panic that blooms hot in John’s belly is instantaneous, reflexive, his sympathetic nervous system still off-kilter and disorganized from the traumatic events of the previous evening. Even as his gut clenches with it, he knows it is a ridiculous overreaction, with no grounding in realistic thinking.

And yet.

He scrambles for the lamp, fumbles for the switch at the base. When the yellow light floods the room, he sees the note on the bedside table, scrawled on the back of an envelope in Sherlock’s large, messy scrawl.

Back soon--SH

He signed with his initials. As if, John thinks a bit hysterically, someone who’s not Sherlock would be leaving a note next to the bed.

John closes his eyes and counts to ten slowly, attempting to bring his shallow breathing and galloping heart rate back under control. It is an understandable response, to be sure, to the stress and uncertainty of recent events--but it’s not healthy, and it is something he’s got to get under control, especially if the two of them are embarking on a romantic relationship.


As he muzzily contemplates the cheap popcorn-finish ceiling over the bed, just barely visible in the gathering dark, John suddenly has a revelation, one of those odd moments of clarity that sometimes happen when one is caught in the strange netherworld somewhere between sleep and waking.

The physical aspect is brand new, yes, but he sees now that the two of them have been in a romantic relationship for years. An unconsummated one, to be sure, grown tangled and choked with unspoken feelings, constricted and complicated by all they left silent and unexpressed over the years. A complicated, painful, unresolved mess of a relationship, to be sure, but a romantic relationship, all the
same. And now that they’ve expressed what they feel, what they mean to each other...well, it’s got to be a good thing. It’s going to be a relief, a profound one, to be able to speak and move and live with the freedom to be open and honest about their true feelings.

And maybe, just maybe, with those feelings allowed some room to live and breathe, some of the psychic scars they’ve inflicted on each other over all these years can finally begin to heal.

John can’t help the small warm glow of happiness that leaps in his heart, his secretly romantic and sentimental heart, at the thought of he and Sherlock having a chance at a real relationship. But at the same time, following in the wake of that happiness, he can’t help but feel a cold, grey trickle of guilt pooling deep in his belly. How dare he feel happy now, in the midst of all this fear and sorrow? How dare he feel happy, with Mycroft dead and his infant daughter’s fate unknown? Is it selfish, is it thoughtless, is it wrong?

John considers for several long minutes, as headlights sweep past the window, each flash briefly illuminating the generic hotel framed art on the far wall.

No, he finally decides. It is not wrong. It is not selfish. They are stronger together, they always have been, and they need each other, on some visceral, cellular level. That’s always been the case, since the first day they laid eyes on each other, and it’s true now more than ever.

He and Sherlock belong together. John has always known it, down deep inside, known he was settling for a distant second when he married someone else. If Mary hadn’t been a master manipulator, skilled on getting exactly what she wanted from her target, John wonders if they ever would have lasted long enough to make it to the altar.

No, he and Sherlock together sets the universe to rights, and together is the only way they’ll make it through this mess.

However promising these new insights may be, though, it’s going to take some more time for this new understanding to come to fruition, and John needs to take several more deep breaths to get his percolating anxiety fully under control, inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth, just as Ella taught him. When he feels fully back in control, calmer and more centered, he picks up his phone and texts Sherlock.

Where are you?

Running an errand. SH

John is still reading the message when another one pops up directly after.

Please don’t worry. SH

I’m not.

Well, maybe a little. Everything okay?

Just getting some takeaway. Everything is fine. SH

Be back soon.

I will. SH

Feeling somewhat mollified (and if he’s being honest, more than a bit foolish), John places his phone
back on the bedside table and sits up, sheets tangling around his waist. He yawns and stretches, rolling his neck slowly from side to side, feeling the pleasantly aching burn of muscles recently engaged in strenuous amorous activities.

That thought leads John to a long moment of pleasurable reflection, which leads inevitably to a pronounced tingle of pleasure in his southward regions—followed immediately by the far-less-pleasurable realization of how very badly he needs a piss. He rises, stumbles blearily to the loo, empties his bladder, flushes and gulps a handful of warmish tap water before returning to bed.

He considers getting up, getting dressed, maybe just turning the telly on for a bit of background noise. But his sleep debt is still a million miles from being repaid, and even as he’s mulling over these options his body asserts its own needs.

He falls back asleep without even knowing it.

An hour or so later, the sound of the card reader whirring and the click of the opening door rouse John from his light doze.

Sherlock slips quietly into the darkened front room, flicks on the overhead light in the kitchenette area. John hears the rustle of paper bags placed on the dinette table.

John rolls over and opens his eyes and stretches just as Sherlock’s rangy frame appears, backlit in the doorway.

“Hey,” Sherlock says, aiming for casual, but sounding just a bit off-center, as if he’s just a bit uncertain of his reception.

“Hey,” John replies, his voice a gravelly rumble. “Where’d you go?”

“I had a package waiting. More cash, some documents pertaining to Maria’s release from prison.”

“And dinner? Something smells good.”

“Yes, and some beer as well.”

John yawns, rubs his eyes, looks up at Sherlock in the open doorway

“You all right?” he asks.

“Of course I am,” Sherlock responds, just a touch too quickly. He looks about fifteen right now, leaning against the doorframe in John’s nicked jumper and a pair of tatty charity shop jeans. His short dark hair is growing quickly; it’s now long enough for a bit of the natural curl to make an appearance, a few rebellious cowlicks standing on end at his crown. He’s all gangly limbs and mussed hair and uncertainty, not quite able to meet John’s eyes, and John is suddenly reminded of the fact that Sherlock has never done this before, not any of this.

And God, he’s so absolutely stunningly beautiful it takes John’s breath away.

John feels full to bursting with love and tenderness and a little sadness at how Sherlock is still so unsure of this, of them.

It falls to John then, to be the brave one, to be confident and unafraid about how he feels.

He sits up, pats the space next to him on the rumpled bed.

“Come say hello properly?” John asks, the rasp in his dry throat making his voice low and
Sherlock hesitates, then nods, crosses the small room in three steps, taking the jumper off and tossing it over the desk chair before perching carefully the edge of the bed. His back is straight, body tensed as if ready to flee at any moment.

His eyes catch John’s, and the uncertainty there, the barely-concealed fear of rejection--it’s enough to break John’s heart, just a little bit.

“Hey,” John murmurs again, then curls his fingers around the back of Sherlock’s long neck, stroking gently, reassuringly, before tugging his head down to kiss him thoroughly. He can feel the tension in Sherlock’s spine and shoulders melt away as he makes a little sighing sound of relief against John’s mouth as his lips part. Their tongues meet, at first tentative, then growing bolder, more insistent, licking into each others’ mouths as a tender, romantic kiss intensifies into a heated, enthusiastic snog.

John didn’t mean to start something physical--he’s **starving**, dammit, and the delicious aroma of hot fried food is wafting in from the adjoining room--but the lean hard press of Sherlock’s clothed body against his bare skin is too completely intoxicating to resist, and he can’t seem to stop himself from pulling Sherlock down on top of him, their limbs tangling together, hands roaming freely as kisses grow wet and messy and demanding.

Several intensely pleasurable minutes pass before Sherlock breaks away, gasping just a bit for air. He gazes down at John, kiss-bitten lips reddened, pale silvered eyes sparkling with a lively, affectionate warmth.

“So,” Sherlock rumbles in a gravel-lined baritone. “I take it you missed me.”

“Terribly,” John replies, pressing his lips to the pulse point just under Sherlock’s stubbled jaw, tasting the salty tang of his skin. He slides fingertips over the worn denim seat of his jeans, savoring the feel of plush, rounded flesh under his hands. “Truly. I was bereft.”

“I missed you too,” Sherlock admits in a warm, deep whisper, and then they’re kissing again, insatiable as teenagers, hands and mouths everywhere. Sherlock’s warm weight presses him down into the bed, his clothed pelvis rutting insistent against him, rough cotton rubbing against John’s bare erect cock. The friction feels marvelous, a hot itch of building pleasure, and John hasn’t felt this much like a nineteen year old in...well, since he was a nineteen year old.

He’s unbuttoning Sherlock’s jeans, eager to feel him hard and hot in his hand, when he’s unexpectedly distracted by the unmistakable aroma of bacon drifting in from the other room.

Bacon and cheddar cheese, to be absolutely precise.

His brain and penis are completely willing to disregard the prospect of food in favour of other, more pressing needs of the flesh--but his stomach is not so easily dissuaded and rumbles loudly, unapologetically.

“Ignore that,” he murmurs against Sherlock’s shoulder as he unzips his fly.

The second gurgle is even louder than the first.

Sherlock drops his head against John’s shoulder and laughs quietly, a low, rich chuckle. John groans.

“Sorry,” he mutters, embarrassed.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sherlock replies. “You haven’t eaten since yesterday morning. I’m used to
ignoring my hunger. You’re not, and I don’t want your blood sugar to drop into the single digits.”

“It can wait a bit,” John insists, despite his weakening resolve.

“It will get cold,” Sherlock promptly replies. He kisses John one last time before rolling off him and climbing out of bed, zipping up his jeans. “Shagging later. Dinner now.”

“Dinner now,” John says in agreement. “But we’re coming back to this after.”

“Of course,” Sherlock promptly replies, giving him a tiny but unmistakably cheeky grin before heading back into the front room.

John climbs out of bed, pads into the loo for a very perfunctory wash, then pulls on his pants and vest before following.

There are several foam takeout containers stacked on the small dining table, with a six-pack of Yuengling lager sitting alongside. Sherlock is already seated at the table, opened takeaway box of potato skins at his elbow, chewing absently as he pores over a stack of photocopied documents John doesn’t recognise.

John investigates the tower of white clamshell boxes; of course, because Sherlock finds moderation in anything hopelessly dull, there is enough food for at least four ravenous people. In addition to the potato skins Sherlock’s already making quick work of, John discovers chicken wings, mozzarella sticks with marinara sauce, and a carton of unfamiliar, irregular, lumpy fried bits alongside a container of what looks like salad cream, a substance that reminds John of depressing school lunch and he therefore regards with an outsized loathing.

“What are these?” he asks, as he pulls a face.

“Fried macaroni and cheese. With ranch dressing. Julie the hostess recommended them.”

“That’s...amazing,” John says, somewhat impressed. “Or horrifying. I’m not sure which.”

Sherlock glances up from his work, delicately selects a golden brown blob and pops it into his mouth, chews, swallows.

“Both,” he declares. “Definitely both.”

John laughs, shakes his head. He decides to start on the wings instead, attacking them with an shocking absolute lack of etiquette as he settles into the chair opposite Sherlock.

“What’ve you got there?” John asks. He opens a beer, offers it to Sherlock, who accepts it, tilting the mouth of the bottle to his lips without looking up from the document in front of him.

“The legal paperwork pertaining to Maria’s release from Edna Mahan,” he replies, eyes rapidly scanning down the page.

“I thought those documents disappeared mysteriously,”

“They did, at least on this end. However, the beauty of government espionage is while secrecy is a professed virtue, government bureaucracy is frankly inevitable. There’s always a file full of paperwork, somewhere. If you know where to look. Frankly, Mycroft built his entire career upon this fact.”

“And, even without... we still...we have someone who knows where to find it?”
“Of course.” Sherlock filches a mozzarella stick, ignoring the marinara dipping sauce in favor of consuming the fried cheese almost whole. “And according to these documents, Maria was released in the spring of 2006 on a supposed technicality involving an improperly handled appeal motion.”

“You sound skeptical,” John notes around a mouthful of chicken as he opens a beer for himself.

“Obviously. Not so much that the motion filed by her attorney wasn’t legally and technically correct. It is. The attorney of record, David Caldwell, spent a great deal of time and research to get Maria out of prison, and he did a thoroughly competent job. The question to my mind is, where did this attorney come from? Someone invested in getting her off the hook, clearly. But who, and why?” Sherlock pops the remainder of a cheese-covered potato into his mouth, follows it with a swig of beer. “This isn’t some overworked public defender. This a high quality, expensive barrister.” He hands half the stack over to John. “I’d appreciate another set of eyes on these.”


“The technicalities of the case are largely besides the point. Counsel like this is money. As ever, we follow the money, we get closer to the truth. If we discover who felt Maria Kochenko was worthy of this kind of investment, we may find ourselves a very useful leverage point.”

“So we need to know who was footing the bill,” John observes.

“Exactly. Look at correspondence, handwritten notes, marginalia. I don’t suppose Maria’s supporter is seeking to put himself front and center, but something may have slipped in somewhere.”

The pair fall into a companionable silence as they eat and work steadily through the stack of documents, searching for the next link in the chain, the next clue to show them the way forward. John finishes his beer, opens another as he scans the text, not really even knowing what he’s looking for.

Something catches his eye. A name, mentioned several times. He squints, tilts his head.

“The man who was Maria’s contact in Philadelphia, according to the information we got from Dobrev’s office. His name was Lou, yes?”

“Correct.”

John pulls out a sheet of paper, passes it over to Sherlock. “This name comes up over and over. Invoices, phone messages. Lou Andrews. Do you think it could be the same person?”

Sherlock shrugs. “It is a terribly commonplace name. But it’s certainly possible.” He hums for a moment under his breath in contemplation, then rises, crosses the room for his laptop. His fingers click at light speed across the keys.

“Including common spelling variants, there’s fourteen Lou or Louis Andrews in the greater Philadelphia region,” Sherlock murmurs as his fingers dance over the keyboard. “None of them are a particularly good fit, demographically. “ He looks up, stares into space. John polishes off another wing, munches on a stick of celery as he waits.

After a few moments Sherlock shakes his head as if to clear it, gives a short bark of annoyed laughter. “Of course. So obvious. I’m completely overthinking this.”

“How so?”
Sherlock stabs a long index finger into the pile of paper. “The person we need is right in front of us. The attorney of record.”

“David Caldwell.”

“David Caldwell,” Sherlock echoes in agreement. “He’s the key between Maria and whoever got her out of prison.”

“I know that name from somewhere,” John muses. “I’ve seen it, I’m certain, and rather recently—”

Sherlock hums a bit as he types, then turns the laptop so John can see.

“David Caldwell for Re-Election to Camden City Council,” John reads aloud, then nods. “Yes. I’ve seen the signs at street corners, now that I think about it.”

Sherlock turns his laptop back around, pale eyes gone silver in the glow of the LCD screen. The blue light highlights his sharp cheekbones and creased brow, making him even more gaunt and alien than usual as he looks up at John. “He’s hosting a fundraising dinner right now, at a restaurant about thirty minutes away, if traffic is in our favour. If leave we right this second, we can probably catch him on his way out.”

“And just say what?” John asks. “Oh, hello, good luck on the election, and by the way can you tell two complete strangers privileged information from ten years ago, please and thank you?”

Sherlock’s expression hardens, his eyes narrowing. “Do you, at this current moment, have a better plan?” he challenges.

“It just seems awfully...direct, is all I’m saying.”

Sherlock’s eyes are icy with affront. “Still waiting to hear your brilliant alternative.”

John holds Sherlock’s glare for a moment before he rolls his eyes, shrugging a shoulder in acquiescence. “I don’t really have one, as such,” he grudgingly admits.

“Then perhaps you could be so kind as to agree to mine?”

“I suppose,” John finally allows. Though you don’t have to be quite such a dick about it, he thinks, just barely able to keep from saying the words aloud.

“Thank you,” Sherlock says haughtily.

“You’re welcome.” John stretches, swipes at his mouth with a napkin, then looks down at his lack of trousers and bare feet. “Do we need to leave right this second? We’re both a bit...um...unkempt at the moment.”

“It suits our personas.” Sherlock grins, humourless, a bit wolfish at the edges. “Repo men, remember?”

John nods. “Do you really think he might have some answers?”

“This man spent eight months getting her out of prison. He objectively knows her true colours better than anyone else.” Sherlock rises from his chair, goes into the bedroom, emerges carrying John’s crumpled jeans. “And at the very least, it’s another avenue to explore, another chance to move things forward before the moment passes.” He tosses the jeans at John’s head, possibly with just the tiniest bit more force than necessary. “Get dressed so we can go.”
The fundraiser is being held in a squat, stuccoed Greek restaurant on Route 70, just on the other side of Camden proper.

“There’s money here tonight,” Sherlock murmurs into his ear as they survey the mostly-full car park, populated with late-model sedans and SUVs, silver trim and sunroofs aplenty.

The two of them duck down the side alley, hover for a bit around the back kitchen door clearly looking dodgy as all hell and attracting suspicious looks from the restaurant staff as they duck out for their smoke breaks. Before twenty minutes have gone by, however, Sherlock easily befriends a line cook looking for a cigarette, exchanging a twenty dollar bill folded into his palm for a few whispered words in Greek and a folded slip of paper.

“What did he tell you?” John asks when the cook has disappeared back into the steamy depths of the kitchen. “Also, I didn’t know you knew Greek.”

“Summer hols as a kid,” Sherlock replies. “What I learned is the time Caldwell’s town car arrives, and that he has a personal bodyguard. The hired muscle is left-handed, carrying a firearm, and said to be not particularly adept at his line of work.” Sherlock brandishes a grubby slip of paper and gives John a smirk. “Also, I got the cook’s phone number.”

“Give me that,” John snaps. Sherlock rolls his eyes but hands it over. John tears the paper in half, then half again, then grinds the tiny scraps under the heel of his work boot for good measure, mashing them into the wet pavement until the paper dissolves into pulpy shreds.

“Jealous?” Sherlock asks with a tiny smirk and a raised eyebrow.

“Always,” John replies. “Get used to it. How long do we have to wait?”

“Not long,” Sherlock replies. “Twenty minutes at the outside. Let’s not hang about under the streetlights.”

The pair of them settle in to wait, quietly keeping to the shadows near the overflowing and fulsome skip at the edge of the full car park.

“My God, Sherlock,” John mutters under his breath. "What a incredible smell you’ve discovered.”

Sherlock shushes him.

Another ten minutes pass before well-dressed people begin to leave the restaurant, mostly in couples and small groups, climbing into their cars and pulling out of the lot. Almost exactly twenty minutes pass before a black Lincoln Town Car pulls up to the kerb in front of the restaurant.

A bald, heavily muscled man in a cheap black suit emerges from the building, glances each way down the street. True to the cook’s assertions, he misses the pair entirely in his survey of the terrain.

He nods, freshly shaven skull gleaming under the streetlight as he gestures to someone still inside the restaurant.

A tall man in his fifties steps out of the restaurant and begins to descend the steps. He has the frame of a formerly athletic man running to fat in late middle age, dressed in a suit carefully cut to minimise his spreading midsection. He’s in possession of a full head of silvering, carefully coiffed hair, his hairline oddly shaped and low on his forehead.
In short, David Caldwell is in appearance every inch the textbook New Jersey politician.

Sherlock takes advantage of the moment, slipping out of the shadows, John close on his heels.

“Mr Caldwell,” Sherlock says, slipping into his false, flat Floridian drawl.

The man looks up, surprised. The hulking bodyguard steps neatly in front of him, places his hand inside his jacket in an unmistakable gesture. Sherlock shakes his head as he smirks.

“I’ve an attack dog, as well,” Sherlock says, gesturing with a tilt of his head. John steps forward on cue.

“He don’t look too scary,” the bodyguard says dismissively.

“Underestimate him at your peril,” Sherlock replies coolly, as John proves the truth of his words by fixing the much larger man with his flattest, hardest stare.

The four men are silent for a long moment, sizing one another up.

Caldwell stands rooted to the spot, hand still on the car door. His gaze shifts between the three men, brows knitting together in puzzlement, clearly confused as to exactly what is happening in front of his eyes.

“I don’t wish to cause an incident,” Sherlock says, his voice lower, projecting an air of calm and control. “I just want a word with your boss.” He looks directly at the other man. “We’re looking for an old client of yours. Maria Kochenko.”

Caldwell goes very still.

“I haven’t seen her in close to ten years,” he says without looking directly at Sherlock.

“You two need to clear the fuck out of here,” the bodyguard snarls. “Now.”

“Lou Andrews paid the bills, didn’t he?” Sherlock continues, ignoring the guard as if he doesn’t exist. “Why did he spend all that money? Why was she so important? He’s the one I want to talk to. I just need to know where to find him.”

Caldwell straightens, turns to face Sherlock. “You know nothing about Lou Andrews, son, and believe me, you’re better off that way.”

“Why?” Sherlock challenges.

Caldwell shakes his head. “You have no idea what you’re doing, do you? None at all.”

“I know there’s a bigger picture,” Sherlock replies. “I don’t care. All I want is information on Maria.”

“She was my client,” Caldwell says slowly, sneeringly, as if speaking to an idiot. “That’s all privileged communication. And who the hell are you?”

“An interested party.”

Caldwell nods imperceptibly to the burly man at his side; the bodyguard steps forward, grabbing Sherlock’s lapel roughly. John leaps forward, completely willing to take down a man close to twice his size for daring to put his hands on Sherlock.
“John—” Sherlock says, low, at the same Caldwell raises his hand, just slightly, palm out. A show of
civility, and also a gesture to his bodyguard. *That’s enough.* The man abruptly releases Sherlock,
who stumbles back a step before righting himself.

An *interested party* means dick to me, pal,” Caldwell snaps, “so do yourself a favour and take a hike
before someone gets hurt.”

Sherlock smooths his threadbare military jacket as if it were Savile Row’s finest. “If you want to do
this the hard way, we certainly can,” he replies evenly. His voice is serene, unconcerned, as if he
were sipping tea at home rather than being manhandled by a shaved gorilla in a cheap suit.

“The hard way?” Caldwell laughs dismissively. “And what the hell does that mean?”

“I have access to information,” Sherlock says, and John knows he’s completely bluffing but
Sherlock’s demeanour gives nothing away. “I know how you got to where you are, Councilman.”

Caldwell’s face goes dark with anger as he takes a half-step towards Sherlock.

“Are you blackmailing me, you little shit?”

“Not my intent,” Sherlock informs him. “I don’t give a damn about any of that, truly I don’t. I could
care less about the many pies your grubby fingers are currently violating. I just need information on
Maria, and I have the leverage to get it one way or the other. Your choice in how, Mr Caldwell.”

Caldwell smiles, sharklike, all gleaming white teeth and rage. “Show up at my office during business
hours with your so-called leverage, if you really have any. Or a warrant, I don’t care which.
Otherwise, buddy? You can fuck right off.”

And then he’s ducking into the darkened car, the burly guard folding his inflated body and ducking
in after him. The door slams and the car pulls away, leaving Sherlock and John behind on the kerb,
looking at the retreating taillights.

Sherlock’s brow furrows, eyes narrowing in annoyance as he turns on his heel, striding down the
street toward where their car is parked. John follows, trotting a bit to keep up with Sherlock’s
longer-limbed and somewhat aggressive pace.

“Did you learn anything?” John asks. Sherlock doesn’t answer as he pulls out keys, unlocks the car
doors, still deep in thought.

“*Sherlock.*”

Sherlock turns the key in the ignition, starting the engine before turning to face John. “First.
Bodyguard is Ukrainian. Came to America as a preteen, just late enough that he still has a trace of an
accent. Tattoo on his neck tells me he did prison time, yet he carries an illegal firearm. This tells me
obviously Caldwell is crooked as hell, and almost certainly involved with the Ukrainian mob.
Second. Caldwell’s responses confirmed his ties to Lou Andrews. Andrews is involved with Maria’s
activities, and therefore the person who has the answers we’re looking for. Third. That is literally the
worst hair transplant in human history. I’ve seen more natural growth patterns on a Chia Pet.”

John laughs. Sherlock’s serious demeanor softens a bit as he smiles slightly, holds up a hand. “No,
really, that’s relevant. It tells me he’s vain, but cheap, which points to him being very susceptible to
gifts and flattery.”

“No offense, Sherlock, but the man’s a New Jersey politician. Maybe it’s too many gangster movies,
but I think maybe ‘vain’ and ‘cheap’ are printed right there on the tin.”
“You do have a point,” Sherlock concedes.

“And what about Lou Andrews?” John asks. “We still don’t know how to find him.”

“True,” Sherlock replies, shaking a cigarette out of the pack. “But we know he’s the right person to look for, at least.”

Opening the passenger window in anticipation of the lit cigarette, John is struck by another question.

“Do you really have dirt on Caldwell like you said?” he asks, genuinely curious.

“At the moment, no,” Sherlock admits. “But if necessary, it wouldn’t be difficult to obtain at all. He’s likely left a digital trail a mile wide.” He lights his cigarette, puts the car into gear. “In my experience, smug and crooked men like Caldwell always do.”

***

Closing in on 2 a.m, their online search for the right Lou Andrews is proving frustratingly fruitless.

Out of the fourteen possible individuals Sherlock has identified, seven are under the age of thirty-five, three are over eighty, two left the area over a year ago. Of the two remaining individuals, one is anthropology professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a ranger at Nockamixon State Park north of the city.

“A park ranger as a key player in local organised crime?” John sighs, slumping down on the sofa, closing the screen of the laptop resting on his chest. “Not impossible, I suppose.”

“Might be useful,” Sherlock replies. “Think of all the bodies that could be successfully hidden in several hundred acres of forests located relatively near an urban center. Could be a perfect cover.” He shakes his head, his mouth quirking a bit in annoyance. “Statistically, however, quite improbable.” He rises from the straight-backed chair, paces to the window and back again. “There’s something I’m missing. A big something, and I don’t know what it is.”

“We’ve covered all the possible spelling variants,” John replies, and stifles a yawn before continuing. “Maybe it’s a middle name?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer, but gives the slight head tilt and shrug of his shoulders that indicates, I suppose it’s worth a try.

John slides down to fully recline on the short sofa, picks up the fallen throw pillow and wedges it under his head before reclaiming his laptop and opening up another reverse white pages search. “Guess I’ll start with A and work through.”

He makes it almost to the end of the C’s before falling asleep, not even realizing he’s dozing until the soft snick of the front room door opening wakes him. He sits up clumsily, laptop spilling off his torso onto the floor.

The small sitting area is quiet and dark, save for the floor lamp at the end of the couch. The front door is open. Warm, slightly damp spring air flows into the stuffy hotel room, the green scent of spring unmistakable despite the ever-present edge of urban petrochemicals underneath.

He can’t see Sherlock, but the sharp bite of cigarette smoke tells John what he needs to know. He raises himself from the couch with a tiny bit of a groan, his lower back and hip flexors twinging, and makes his way to the open door.
Sherlock is rumpled and visibly annoyed, smoking and pacing the narrow strip of concrete pavement in front of their room. He’s not muttering to himself, not yet, but John can tell he’s close, the agitation almost visibly building within his narrow-shouldered frame.

“What’s wrong?” John asks, voice pitched low, aiming for soothing without being condescending. If there was a degree program in talking down Sherlock Holmes, he’d certainly have been awarded a PhD by now.

Sherlock angrily drags at the cigarette in between his fingers, exhales.

“I just had to look up the definition of an Alford plea,” he says, glaring down at John like this is somehow his fault.

The warm, companionable closeness of just a little while ago suddenly feels like ancient history.

“I...don’t understand what that means,” John confesses.

Sherlock huffs his annoyance. “It’s a form of guilty plea, fundamental to understanding the non-trial plea bargaining that forms a cornerstone of the American justice system.” His eyebrows raise, and he barks out a sharp huff of sardonic laughter. “And apparently I deleted it. I spent two years in Florida immersed in the cogs of Stateside criminal law and I just…” he throws his hands in the air. “I just deleted it.”

“Sherlock.” John takes a half step closer; Sherlock is vibrating like an angry cat, all tensed spine and sharp angles. “That’s your system. You delete things all the time. I don’t… I’m sorry, I really am, but I’m not quite understanding.”

Sherlock takes another sharp drag, exhales twin plumes of smoke into the damp spring night. He glances sideways at John, looks away.

“He wouldn’t have had to delete it,” Sherlock says, half-mumbling, barely audible to John’s ears. “He never had to delete anything.”

It would sound almost petulant to someone who didn’t understand Sherlock the way John did.

This has nothing to do with an Alford plea, whatever that is.

“Oh, Sherlock,” John says quietly.

“He would have figured out exactly where to find her. Days ago.” Sherlock doesn’t sound sad, or lost. He sounds...angry. “I’m fumbling in the dark, John, and we both know it. This is primary school stuff, this should be easy, and I’m stumbling and flailing and flailing all over the place. I don’t know how to put the pieces together in the proper order, I can’t see the patterns and she’s slipping further away every single day because I’m too stupid to figure it out.”

“You’re not stupid, and we’re going to find her,” John says, trying to keep his voice calm, supportive without being overly condescending. “Together. I know we will.”

“He was right about everything,” Sherlock says, voice tight with angry frustration. “He was always right, and he always said I was the stupid one. If I can barely function without him, well then, clearly he was right about that too.”

“Sherlock, that’s just not true.” John steps forward, places a comforting hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. “You’re being far too hard on yourself. It’s a terrible time, you’re feeling lost, you’re grieving--”
Sherlock shrugs off John's hand on his shoulder blade, turns to face him, his lovely face contorted into an angry sneer.

“I'm not grieving,” Sherlock snaps.

“Okay,” John says, placating.

“Don’t patronise me, John.” Sherlock takes a short, vicious drag of his cigarette and tosses it away. “I’m annoyed, yes. I’m annoyed that the obnoxious fat lazy git was foolish and shortsighted enough to get himself killed and leave me behind to pick up the pieces without needed resources. Clearly, I’m annoyed. Frustrated. Pissed off, even. But I’m not a swooning Victorian heroine, despite what you may think, and I am certainly not grieving.”

John has a brief flash to an earlier time, a similar conversation between them, and he knows there’s no point in calling Sherlock out on his ridiculous statements, fueled as they are by emotion and frustration and fear and yes, grief.

“I’m tired,” John says instead. “Too much fried food to digest. Take a break and come to bed with me for a bit?”

Sherlock shakes his head.

“I have work to do,” he says, a familiar note of mulish stubbornness creeping into his voice.

“It’s not a sign of weakness to--”

Sherlock turns his back to John, lights another cigarette.

“I said, I have work.”

This is a tricky bit, here, but John knows that when Sherlock indicates he wants to be left alone, the only advisable course of action is to respect his wishes and leave him alone. For both of their sakes.

He takes a deep, careful breath, then turns and walks back into the hotel room without another word. He flips the security latch to keep the door from closing fully, then pushes it shut to keep out the acrid sting tobacco smoke. And maybe, a little, to erect a physical barrier between himself and Sherlock, to give himself a little space so he doesn’t snap, doesn’t give in to the undeniable desire to go back outside and say something harsh and unkind he will later regret.

Something inside John’s chest feels splintery, jagged, the sharp edges digging into his diaphragm, making it hard to breathe.

He’s not angry, exactly. Well, maybe a little angry. But mostly he feels--sundered, perhaps, is the right word. Torn up. A bit wounded, a bit sad that Sherlock opened this emotional distance between the two of them, right on the heels of their greatest intimacy.

John sighs, pulls off his jeans, straightens the tangled sheets before turning off the side lamp and slipping into bed, finding himself again staring at the ceiling above, now shrouded in darkness except for the narrow rectangle of light from the streetlight outside the window.

As he reflects a bit further, John begins to consider what it must have cost, emotionally, for Sherlock to say those words out loud, to admit to feeling lost, adrift without the older and wiser sibling that had loomed large over him since the day he was born. Viewed from that perspective, it makes sense, how Sherlock reflexively denied overwhelming emotion, pulling back into his shell, retreating to his mind palace to regain a shred of his shattered equilibrium.
John is still wide awake, scattered thoughts churning like flotsam on rough waves, when he hears Sherlock come back into the front room.

A few minutes later, the mattress springs creak and dip as Sherlock joins him, the scent of cigarettes clinging to him as he spoons against John’s curled back. He presses a chaste, contrite kiss to the back of John’s neck, his breath warm against cool skin.

“I’m a frankly terrible choice for a romantic partner,” Sherlock murmurs, and John hears the I’m sorry tucked carefully in between the words spoken aloud.

He finds a large warm hand, brings it up to his lips, kisses the knobby knuckles in silent absolution.

“Absolute rubbish,” John agrees quietly. “But so am I, you know.”

Sherlock gives a mostly-silent chuckle. “Well, that is true.”

“So we can be rubbish together, then.”

Sherlock’s arm around John tightens.

“I suppose that’s one logical answer,” he murmurs into the curve of John’s shoulder.

“Glad that’s settled,” John says quietly, relaxing into Sherlock’s solid, comforting embrace. The sharp-edged thing lodged in his chest loosens its hold, begins to dissolve.

Sherlock takes a breath.

“John, I didn’t mean to--”

John cuts him off. “I know, love. It’s fine. We’re both--” John searches for the right words, fails. Instead he turns his head, finds Sherlock’s mouth with his own, and kisses him. Sherlock tastes terrible from cigarettes and dehydration, and John doesn’t care in the least.

“It’s going to be all right,” John murmurs against his warm, slightly cracked lips. “I believe in you, you know.”

Sherlock sighs, a little, but doesn’t say anything else.

John supposes there’s really not much else to say.

Being together is a gift, a revelation, a miracle--but it doesn’t really change a thing about the godawful mess they’re in, and they both know it.

But Sherlock’s arms are warm and strong, and John soon falls asleep despite his roiling thoughts.

***

John is alone in the bed when morning daylight wakes him, but same as in London, he can sense Sherlock’s remote but still reassuring presence nearby.

He rises, showers, brushes his teeth. For a moment he contemplates his new beard, full-bore ginger streaked with grey. He can’t decide if it makes him look old, dangerous, or both.

He decides he likes it.

He makes his way out to the front room to find Sherlock stretched across the undersized, striped sofa,
bare feet dangling over the arm. His fingers are steepled under his chin, silver eyes remote, pupils fixed and faraway. The bruised smudges of a sleepless night are clearly visible under his eyes. He’s still in last night’s tee and jeans, his hair a tangled mess. His slender rib cage rises and falls minutely; aside from that tiny tell, he may as well be a statue.

“Morning, love,” John says with a practiced nonchalance, bending down to press a kiss to matted hair. Sherlock gives a near-subsonic grunt in response. John pads into the tiny kitchenette, regards the near-empty box of PG Tips, decides he needs something stronger to handle Sherlock’s mercurial mood shifts with aplomb. He returns to the bedroom, pulls on his socks and laces up his boots.

“I’m going across the street to get coffee,” he says as he reenters the sitting area. “You want anything?”

“I think we need to leave,” Sherlock says by way of reply. “It’s not safe here any longer.”

John pauses mid-step. Turns back to look at Sherlock.

“What?”

“Confronting Caldwell directly was an error in judgment,” Sherlock says, a bit stiffer and haughtier than his usual tone. It’s his classic I fucked up tell. “It leaves us far too exposed to remain here.”

“Okay,” John replies amiably. Immediately?

“No, but relatively soon.”

“All right.” Though he’s careful to remain unruffled on the surface, the thought of moving on makes John feel surprisingly out-of-sorts. In some way, this beige, anonymous hotel room that shakes with the roar of every jet overhead has, over the past few days, somewhat come to feel like…not home, of course, but somewhere familiar. Somewhere safe.

John shakes his head. What a ridiculous notion. As long as he’s with Sherlock, home could be a cardboard box. And just might be, he thinks, given some of their past accommodations.

“Then we definitely need coffee,” he declares. “Do you want anything else?”

Sherlock just gives a bare shake of his head, already slipping away to his mind palace, already gone distant again, deep in thought.

John grabs his wallet and leaves the room without another word.

It looks to be a lovely spring day; the sky overhead is already a clear, crisp blue as John quickly and carefully crosses the four-lane highway between the hotel and the sprawling petrol station/convenience store across the street.

John misses London with a fierce homesickness, of course he does, but he’s developed a bit of an odd fondness for Philadelphia, and if there were one thing he would take back home with him it would be Wawa, with its fresh sandwiches and cheap, surprisingly good self-serve coffee. He pours two large cups for himself and Sherlock, adds cream to one and a revolting amount of sugar to the other, and fits them carefully into the paperboard holder. After a moment of thought, he turns to the doughnut case and selects two oversized pastries-- a chocolate eclair and a banana nut muffin--before heading to the register.

“Good morning,” chirps the lad behind the register, hazel eyes crinkling at the corners as he looks at John.
John quirks an eyebrow.

“Looks like you need the caffeine,” the young man says, undeterred, and John realises the kid—all of twenty-four at the outside, is very possibly hitting on him.

_Must be the beard_, he thinks. The idea is amusing, and he can’t help but crack a bit of smile as he forks over a ten, the kid giving him a sunny grin as he returns the change.

His hands full of coffee cups and pastries, smile still on his lips, John shoulders open the glass door, stepping back out into the sunshine. He’s almost past the rows of parked cars when he registers the sharp, unfamiliar male voice behind him.

“Joe! Hey, Joe! Joe Patrick!”

John is completely unused to anyone calling him by the fake name on his passport, and doesn’t even realize the words are directed at him until a large, rather corpulent man in a green tracksuit cuts him off, planting his bulky body directly in John’s path.

“It’s Joe, right?” The man asks, tone falsely bright, almost mockingly so.

John feels the smile drop off his face as adrenaline floods his nervous system.

The man’s skin is leathery from overexposure, his thinning hair slicked back from his high forehead, He’s giving John a wide, fake, toothy grin, revealing either overly white veneers or cheap dentures.

The entire look gives the unmistakable impression, somehow, of a anthropomorphised and very hungry alligator, and John is clearly on the menu.

And he left his sodding gun back in the room.

John glares, shakes his head, tries to dodge away from the taller man, but the alligator is shockingly quick for his size and almost manages to trap John between the wall of the convenience store and a parked car. John is just a bit faster, manages to barely slip past him.

“You hang around with that tall skinny dude. He your boyfriend?” Alligator asks in a braying, mocking voice, openly derisive now, his accent nasal and unpleasant.

John’s anger flares, hot and bright, but he doesn’t respond, hunching his shoulders, focusing instead on evading the larger man.

“He’s got a pretty face, for sure,” Alligator calls after him. “Wouldn’t want anything to happen to it, would you?”

That stops John dead in his tracks. His spine straightens, fury coursing through every nerve. He turns, ready to toss the coffee aside and take down this ugly, arrogant fucker in a flash.

Before he can do anything, however, he catches a flash of movement out of the corner of his right eye, and he feels the sharp burn of a needle sinking into the meat of his deltoid.

_Oh, bloody hell_, he thinks, more annoyed than afraid. _Not this again._

As the drug takes hold John hears himself say, nonsensically, “Don’t fucking eat my eclair.”

Then the coffee tumbles out of his nerveless hands, splashing across the asphalt as the world tilts sideways before dissolving into blackness.
Please forgive the mash note to Wawa. It's basically my favorite store in the whole world.
You know who we've are, tracked us down, and you're not looking to--I don’t know. Eliminate us? Take us out?"

The woman laughs with genuine humour. “Oh heavens, no. In fact, I find myself in need of your assistance.”

“Then why didn’t you just...I don’t know, ask us?"

“I apologise, Doctor Watson--John. May I call you John?"

“Sure, why not? A light kidnapping, some tea, we’re basically best mates now.”

7. Camden, Part Two

After an indeterminate period of time, John cautiously swims up from the blank black depths towards the warm, beckoning light of consciousness.

For a few confusing, disjointed moments he thinks he is six years old again, waking from an unplanned nap on his Nan’s sofa after falling asleep in her car on the way home from shopping.

Then the fragile bubble of dreaming bursts, and in loosely connected flashes John recalls the confrontation in front of the Wawa, the alligator man in the green tracksuit, the glimpse of movement in the corner of his eye, the bite of the needle as it sank into the meat of his shoulder--

And then he remembers.

Oh, fuck. He’s been kidnapped.

Aside from that he has no idea where he is or what’s happening.

He tamps down the spike of adrenaline-fuelled panic that surges through his body, knowing that keeping a calm, clear head is the only advantage he has in this situation.

Eyes still closed, he takes a careful, thorough inventory of the various sensory inputs of his body.

He’s stretched out on a hard, somewhat dusty-smelling sofa, with a small, slightly softer cushion wedged carefully under the back of his head. The flat, brocaded cushions under his back are what brought forth memories of his Nan’s sitting room, uncomfortable furniture and Marmite on toast and black-and-white telly. The current moment, however, is not really the time for leisurely recollections of childhood. He mentally shakes off the brief reverie, proceeds with his inventory of his current situation.

He wiggles his toes experimentally, flexes his shoulders minutely. He doesn’t seem to be bound, nor restrained in any noticeable way, which is a bit surprising considering that’s the usual followup to the whole drugging and kidnapping bit.
He listens, eyes still shut, for any audible clues. There is a low-pitched hum of activity from somewhere nearby, the rumble of a motor, the slam of a door, but the room he currently occupies seems to be entirely silent, no rustles of fabric or soft breathing.

John decides to take the risk and cautiously cracks open one eye, then another.

The room he’s in is surprisingly bright and well-furnished; it appears to be a combined office/sitting room of some sort. In addition to the flowered sofa John is occupying and a coordinating side chair, a good sized, antique-styled dark wood escritoire and matching credenza takes up a fair chunk of the far wall. The desk is not merely decorative; the top is almost entirely taken up by the beige plastic bulk of an outdated computer monitor, with piles of paper stacked alongside.

On top of the credenza sits a baroque, almost overwrought bouquet of fresh flowers, a riotous cacophony of peonies and poppies and roses and trailing ivy.

Curiosity piqued, John tries to turn his head further to observe more of his surroundings, but only succeeds in turning the headache up from threatening to pounding and in sparking a roiling, bilious nausea deep in his belly. He thinks for a brief horrible moment that he may in fact vomit, and can’t stop the soft groan that issues from his throat.

“You’re finally awake.” The voice is low pitched, raspy but still feminine, coming from the doorway at the far end of the room. “Thank goodness. I was starting to worry.”

A soft rustle of fabric and a hint of perfume (not Clair de la Lune, thank God, thank fucking God or he would have thrown up by now for real) washes over John as the woman moves into the room. He tilts his neck upward slightly to look at her, wincing in discomfort, feeling a bit like the Tin Man, with rusty disused hinges where a properly functioning spinal column should be.

The woman is older but not quite yet what could properly be called elderly, possibly a bit past sixty, well-kept and still quite attractive in her own way. Her pale skin is a bit weathered but not yet papery thin, crow’s feet spidering away from the corners of her eyes, a touch of botox obvious in the smoothness of the glabella muscles between her brows. Her light brown hair is short and well-coiffed, in that slightly overly fastidious way women of a certain age seem to gravitate towards, topped by a pair of cheap plastic reading glasses perched atop her head. Her clothing—a coral pink sweater set and khaki trousers—is casual but stylish, clearly expensive. Her earrings are clearly genuine diamond, set in white gold, and a bit too large to be precisely tasteful.

Her blue eyes are sharp as they focus on John’s supine form on the couch. The look she gives him isn’t hard, exactly; but there’s something about her that’s not quite motherly, either.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

John shakes his head. “I’m still a bit…” he begins, then trails off as his belly gives a sudden, ominous lurch. For some reason, an atavistic bone-deep politeness reflex kicks in; despite the fact that this woman, whoever she is, is clearly deeply involved in snatching him off the street in broad fucking daylight, he’s not about to vomit all over someone’s nice furniture if he can possibly help it.

“Stomach,” he croaks.

The woman’s face shifts into a picture of caring concern. “Oh dear. The Versed sometimes does that. Do you think you can you sit up?”

John nods, allows the woman’s cool, slim hands to assist him to a sitting position.

“Ginger tea will help,” she informs him. “I’ll be back in a moment.”
The woman turns away from John and leaves, disappearing through an open door at the far end of the room.

John is left completely alone, at least for a few moments. He vaguely thinks about getting up, making some kind of break for it, but his stomach is still threatening rebellion and tea sounds lovely, so--

He’s still halfheartedly contemplating the notion when the woman returns with two steaming mugs, hands one to John. John accepts the tea, looking up at her with a pointedly raised eyebrow. The brew is a pale straw color; the scent of ginger is sharp, almost piney, the aroma already soothing John’s traitorous insides.

“You could be trying to poison me,” he observes archly, though he’s already mostly discounted the possibility.

The woman chuckles quietly. “If I was going to kill you, Doctor Watson, I would have done it long before now. Sugar?”

“No, thank you.” After a moment’s pause he takes a tentative sip. The peppery taste of the warm ginger tea soothes his rattled stomach almost instantly.


“Of course,” the woman replies as she settles herself into a floral side chair next to the sofa.

John again sips at his tea. With his faculties somewhat restored, he surveys the room with a more precise eye. The furniture is expensive, selected with care, meticulously kept, the upholstered pieces a heavy floral brocade. The walls, however, are rough cinderblock painted a cheap, generic off-white, the flooring beneath his feet a worn blue commercial-grade carpet.

An office, then, he decides. But what kind of office?

Look at the details, a simulacrum of Sherlock’s honeyed voice murmurs in his head. The furniture is expensive, to be sure, but none of the items are genuine antiques. These are mass produced pieces, manufactured somewhere from the mid eighties to early nineties. The figurines on the bookshelf are Lladro, purchased from Neiman Marcus or a similar upscale department store, the type of pieces intended to show wealth as well as a certain bourgeois sensibility. By contrast, consider the painting hung on the far wall—Ukrainian Orthodox iconography, hand-painted, expensive, but certainly out of place with the rest of the decor. Taken as a whole, what you’re looking at is classic, almost stereotypical, New Jersey mid-level organised crime money. This woman, whoever she is, is no one’s kindly grandmother.

Armed with new awareness, John shifts his attention back to his hostess. “I have to say,” he says, as evenly as his traitorous innards will allow, “this is a remarkably civilised kidnapping. The nicest I’ve had so far, and believe me, I’ve had a few.”

“It wasn’t really intended as a kidnapping.”

“Really.”

“More of a unilateral, compulsory...invitation. One could say.”

“One could say,” John echoes archly as he sets his mug down on the table in front of the sofa. “If I haven’t been kidnapped, help me understand what’s going on, then.”

“Certainly.”
“I’m not tied up or restricted in any way.”

“That would be rather rude to a guest, I do think.”

“So there’s really nothing to prevent me from getting up and walking out of here.”

The woman chuckles, shakes her head. “There’s nothing at all, though that would be remarkably foolish on your end, considering I’m the person you’ve been searching for.”

To his credit, John only peers at her in confusion for a few moments before the picture resolves itself. “Oh, of course. You’re Lou Andrews.”

“Louellen Tereschencko Andrews, to be absolutely precise.” She extends a slim, French-manicured hand. “With a mouthful of a maiden name like that, you can probably see why I happily took my late husband’s surname.”

John takes the offered hand, shakes it. “And you’ve called me by name already, so clearly you know who I am.”

Andrews nods. “And I know Sherlock Holmes, as well. I suppose that goes without saying.”

“You know who we are, tracked us down, and you’re not looking to—I don’t know. Eliminate us? Take us out?”

The woman laughs with genuine humour. “Oh heavens, no. In fact, I find myself in need of your assistance.”

“Then why didn’t you just...I don’t know, ask us?”


“Sure, why not? A light kidnapping, some tea, we’re basically best mates now.”

She narrows her eyes with barely-concealed annoyance, but refuses the bait. “Call me Louellen, then,” she replies evenly. “John, I suspected your true identities, but you’ve left a trail of conflicting and frankly confusing accounts in your wake. I needed to make sure, and the most straightforward way of calling Sherlock Holmes out of the woodwork is...well, frankly, you.”

John nods. “That’s pretty much why I’m always getting kidnapped.”

“Stands to reason,” she replies dryly.

John rolls his eyes with a sigh, despite the pain still thudding in his head. “I don’t know why criminal masterminds can’t just invite us round for sandwiches and skip over the whole abduction in broad daylight bit.”

“I’m hardly a mastermind, John, but thank you for the compliment.”

At that moment a loud muffled crash from the front of the building disturbs the quiet of the office. Several voices are heard shouting angrily, followed by a series of heavy thuds.

Louellen doesn’t turn her head, but sets her tea down with precise care.

“You wanted to summon Sherlock Holmes?” John says, his tone sardonic. “Well, you succeeded. And from the sounds of it, he is incredibly pissed off.”
“He really is,” Sherlock replies coolly from the doorway.

John can’t suppress the small, satisfied smirk on his lips at the sight of Sherlock in the doorway, lean and cool despite disheveled hair and a smear of blood along one sharp cheekbone. Belying the heat implied by his words, his eyes are cold, hard glittering chips of marble as he levels the Glock in his hand directly at Louellen’s head.

“Your man at the back door got the worst of my temper,” he continues, voice deliberately casual, almost bored. “He will likely require some stitches and need his right shoulder reset. Probably an emergency dentist, as well, if he has any hope of saving those teeth.”

Out of the corner of his eye, John sees the woman seated next to him has produced a handgun of her own, seemingly out of nowhere, and has it pointed at Sherlock in response.

“Noted,” she replies, her voice gone cold and clipped, nothing like the cordial tones of their earlier conversation.

“Lou Andrews, I presume.”

“Indeed. A pleasure to meet you.”

“I can’t bring myself to say the same.”

“Your Doctor Watson is fine, Mr Holmes. Completely unharmed, as you see.”

“I really am,” John chimes in. “ Couldn’t be better, in fact, so can everyone here dial it back just a notch, please, and put the murder hardware away for the moment?”

The other two occupants of the room don’t respond, eyeing each other coldly over their weapons. The moment spools out longer and longer until John tilts his head, narrows his eyes and glares hard at Sherlock. Sherlock issues a tiniest annoyed huff, but finally gives a fraction of a nod and lowers his Glock. Louellen makes a small, almost noiseless exhale and lowers her silver handgun, thumbing the safety on before slipping it back under the pink and green striped sateen chair cushion from whence it came.

“One tiny change in search parameters, and yet I was all but invisible to you until I showed you exactly where to look,” Louellen observes. “You have a bad habit of failing to acknowledge women as a variable, Mr. Holmes.”

“I am finding myself forced to at least admit that possibility,” Sherlock replies evenly.

“But you put it together in the end, didn’t you?” Louellen asks. “That is, once the loss of your dear John finally prodded you to action.”

Sherlock narrows his eyes even further at the woman as he pulls something crumpled and pale green out of his front jeans pocket, tosses it onto the coffee table in front of the sofa. “A flower arrangement, left at the doorstep of my hotel room an hour after John was taken. It wasn’t much of a deductive leap to discover the the largest wholesale floral distribution company in Southern New Jersey is owned by a woman named Lou Andrews.”

“Did you like the arrangement I sent?” Louellen asks.

“Green carnations and red roses?” Sherlock shakes his head. “Not the most esthetically pleasing combination. Bit garish, to be honest.”
“Wasn’t going for esthetics,” Louellen counters.

“The language of flowers. Yes, I get it. Not exactly a subtle message.”

“Clearly you weren’t going to pick up on subtle,” Louellen sighs.

Sherlock ignores her jibe. “I have to say, this is a very interesting choice of business venture you’ve undertaken. High cash volume on a daily basis. Perishable product, difficult to track accurately, requiring large amounts of storage space and daily transport all over the tri-state region. All in all, a perfect cover for your real operation.”

“Which is what?” John asks.

“Drugs, obviously,” Sherlock answers evenly.

Louellen doesn’t even bother denying the allegation. “The drugs aren’t the point,” she says, coolly unruffled.

“No, of course not,” Sherlock says. “Merely the means to an end. The money is the point, isn’t it? It’s always the money.”

“You have inkling what I’m trying to accomplish here,” Louellen says, her tone turning sharper, more defensive. “I love this city, and I’ve spent the last twenty years trying to save it. It’s a massive undertaking, Mr Holmes. You have no idea. Camden is desperately ill, you have to see that.”

Sherlock cocks his head slightly, his silver gaze piercing. “So you introduce a different kind of cancer to, what, try and cure it?”

“I’m looking at a much bigger picture,” Louellen counters. “New vision, new ways of business, new people in power to put new plans into action. That kind of operation requires cold hard cash, and lots of it. I’m doing what I have to do, nothing more. I won’t apologise for that.”

“A more verbose manner of saying the ends justify the means,” Sherlock replies. “I have heard that refrain so many times, in so many different ways. Dressing it up in justifications never makes it true.”

“I’ve been fighting this fight for twenty years. If you’d seen what I’ve seen, possibly you would feel differently.”

“I believe I’ve seen plenty,” Sherlock counters. “And I’ll never agree with you.”

“Your reputation precedes you, Mr Holmes. You play at being the cold man, but you are truly such a Boy Scout, in the end.”

“I’m really not,” Sherlock counters. “Because while what you’re doing here is criminal and morally wrong on multiple levels, I truly could not care less. I have no interest in dismantling your organization, Ms Andrews.”

“Because that’s not really why you’re here,” Louellen replies. “is it?”

“No,” says Sherlock. “Not at all.”

“Good,” says Louellen. “Because even though I like you two quite a bit, if you were after my business, I wouldn’t let you or your little friend walk out of here alive.”

“Little friend?” sputters John, offended.
Both Sherlock and Louellen ignore him and his indignation completely.

“I don’t give a single damn about your business or your money,” Sherlock states flatly. “All I want is Maria.”

“In that case,” Louellen replies, “Could you please stop stalking about and sit down so we can have a civilised conversation?”

Sherlock gives a curt nod, stowing the Glock in his jacket and perching himself carefully on the furthest edge of the sofa away from John.

The three of them sit, regarding one another in stony silence. A minute passes. Sherlock and Louellen eye each other with chilly suspicion.

John gives an aggrieved sigh. “While this is absolutely delightful, I don’t think I’m really necessary at the moment, so if you’d be so kind as to point me to the loo?”

“Back hallway, door on left,” Louellen replies with flat indifference, never taking her eyes away from Sherlock’s face.

John nods and stands; a passing wave of dizziness makes him feel a bit unsteady on his feet for just a moment. Of course, neither Sherlock nor Louellen pay him the slightest heed.

He crosses the sitting room, makes his way to the small powder room at the end of the hallway. It’s fussy and overdecorated, everything he dislikes, frosted glass wall sconces and flocked velvet wallpaper, another vase of flowers on the back of the toilet tank. There’s a crystal bowl of potpourri on the counter next to the sink, and the weirdly cinnamonish smell makes him a bit queasy all over again.

This whole place is making him feel jumpy and claustrophobic, and that’s even taking the kidnapping out of the equation.

John shakes his head, focuses on the matter at hand, so to speak. He takes a badly-needed piss, flushes, washes his hands, splashes a cupped palmful of water on his face and looks at his reflection in the mirror.

He looks frankly terrible. Hollow eyes, gaunt cheeks behind a salt and pepper beard. Today the growth of beard ages him, makes him look a decade older than forty-two. And to be honest, he doesn’t feel much better on the inside, nauseated, hollowed out, and now a percolating anger bubbling up from somewhere deep underneath.

Sherlock and Louellen are conducting their business like John isn’t even in the room and it makes him feel extraneous, unimportant. Dismissed. This is how these incidents always go. He gets snatched up, dangled as bait for Sherlock Fucking Holmes to show up, and then ignored once His Majesty makes his appearance.

It’s frankly insulting as hell, and John is so over the whole thing he can’t stand it a moment longer.

“Right then,” he murmurs to his reflection, then grabs a neatly folded hand towel and wipes away droplets of water from his cheeks and chin. He deliberately tosses the crumpled flannel in the sink as he leaves the toilet, striding back into the sitting room where neither Sherlock nor Louellen has apparently spoken or moved a muscle since he took his leave.

“I’m done with this now,” he announces, his voice surprisingly loud in the quiet tension of the room.
Both Sherlock and Louellen look up at him with surprise.

“I’m tired of the games and the bullshit posturing,” he says, meaning every word. “I’m tired of being a pawn and a bargaining chip and...and... Jesus, I’m so fucking sick of being kidnapped in broad daylight, and I’ve just, I’m done, alright? So, you.” He points at Louellen. “One question. Are you willing to help up find Maria?”

“Yes,” she says simply.

“Outstanding.” John sits down on the sofa, picks up his mug, drains the last dregs of cold ginger tea and sets it back down. “No more games. Tell us who she is to you, and where we can find her, and we will be out of your hair and on our way.”

Louellen nods, picks up her own mug, takes a sip.

“Back in the eighties,” she says, setting the mug back on the table, “My husband passed away rather...unexpectedly. Or maybe not so unexpectedly, all things considered. Anyway, he left me a bit of money, and I bought my first business. A little corner market. Deli, beer, cigarettes, that sort of thing. The first time I met Maria, she was fourteen year old. I caught her shoplifting soda and chips. She was a defiant little creature, stared me dead in the eyes even though I caught her red handed.

“I suppose, looking back, I saw a bit of myself in her. Ukrainian community, immigrant parents who struggled to stay on the right side of things. I never had children of my own, you see. “

“She was daughter you never had,” John says, a sardonic edge in his voice. Louellen looks down at her hands for a moment, then looks up at him, her posture unapologetic.

“It sounds so sentimental when you put like that, and I’m not a particularly sentimental woman. But, yes, I suppose so. I gave her a little job in the shop at first. I thought some pocket money, some responsibility might help put her on a better path. It wasn’t long, however, until I started to see that she was no ordinary misguided kid. Growing up on the streets in a place like Camden can make you hard, make you cold, sure. But she was something else altogether. She was smart, and sneaky, and remorseless. She had potential for bigger things--"

“Criminal things,” Sherlock interjects.

Louellen shrugs. “I’m a businesswoman, same as anyone else. I have jobs that need doing. And she was...not only was she good at, she totally escaped notice. No one would ever suspect a pretty blonde teenager as an enforcer. She was perfect.”

“And you were quite willing to take advantage of her particular set of skills.”

“I was. But understand something, Mr Holmes. I did--do--care for Maria. Very much. Of course, I know she could never have felt the same. She’s just...She’s not capable of it, of course. More than one person tried to warn me off, but--"

“But she was useful,” Sherlock supplies.

Louellen gazes levelly at Sherlock. “Yes. She was.”

“What kind of work did you have her do?”

“Enforcement, mostly. Mostly threats, some wetwork. She was good at it. Shockingly good, and able to operate without suspicion. I wasn’t surprised when she moved to bigger things. The Russians, the Italians operating out of Philadelphia.”
“Until she got caught.”

“Everyone gets caught,” Louellen replies. “At first. Then the good ones learn how to not get caught.”

“And you helped her get out of her trouble.”

“Of course I did. I cared about her, and I had money and a good lawyer.”

“David Caldwell.” Sherlock quirks an eyebrow. “Excellent investment, that one, by the way.”

“Yes,” Louellen agrees without elaboration.

“And he got her out of Mahan on a technicality.”

“A technicality plus several generous cash payments to the judge involved in her case,” Louellen clarifies. “And the CIA scooped her up right after, so they may have had some pull as well. I honestly don’t know about that.”

“I’m getting an overall impression you weren’t sad to see her leave New Jersey,” Sherlock says.

“I always knew she was destined for bigger things,” Louellen says, then pauses, hesitates a bit. “And I...I loved her, after a fashion, but I knew what she was. They call her The Snake, and like a snake you never knew who she might bite next, or when. I admit, I slept better knowing she was on the other side of the world.”

“Yet when she turned up again, you helped her,” Sherlock said. “She called you, out of the blue after decades, and you helped her.”

“She didn’t call me. Pete Dobrev did. He knew we had a history, and...frankly, he asked me to take her off his hands.”

“Did you know she was pregnant?” John breaks in.

"I never actually saw her, but yes, Petrov told me about Maria’s situation.”

John watches his hands ball into fists; he feels detached from his body, a bit, somewhat removed and above the rage that flows through his veins right now, almost as if he allows himself to feel the rage he might actually implode.

“That situation is my daughter,” he states, his tone icy cold.

“I know,” says Louellen. “At least, I know now. That’s why she went to Pete first, I’d wager. Or rather, his wife. She is--was--a nurse, quite a while back. There have always been whispers about her, about how she helps women, mostly younger ones, in situations like this. Fixing things for ones not as far along, if you catch my meaning, and for the ones past that point....She had connections, ways to find people who want a baby and don’t want to go through the usual channels." She sighs a little, shrugs her shoulders, and to John she somehow she looks a bit older and more tired than just a few minutes before. "Bear in mind, though, I'm making educated guesses. I never actually saw her. I don't think she trusted me enough to confide in me. We spoke on the phone twice, but I didn’t ever see her in person and she never said anything directly to me about...personal matters.”

“You also didn’t ask,” John points out, his tone caustic.

“In my world, John, asking questions is not generally the done thing.”
“So you don’t know what became of the baby?” Sherlock asks.

“I don’t. I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” John asks, the anger buzzing in his brain threatening to gain the upper hand. “Are you really?”

Louellen shakes her head, and behind her cool facade John sees the briefest glimpse of genuine sorrow.

“I am. Truly, I am.” She fixes a cool blue gaze on John. “All I can tell you is, as Mr Holmes so helpfully pointed out, Maria is the closest thing to a daughter to me. She was ill. I was trying to help her. I found her a place to stay, and I was trying to get a doctor who would see her and not ask questions. She was sick and frightened, and when she’s frightened her base instinct is always to go it alone, like an injured creature in the wild. She was sick and getting sicker. I knew she needed a doctor, and I was trying to get her one, but instead of waiting for help she got impulsive and stupid, ran away and hid and robbed a drugstore. Operating on impulse, or just too ill to see things clearly. I don’t know. It was a profound mistake on her part, of course, and as soon as she was thinking more clearly she saw how huge a mistake she had made. She called me then, full of apologies. As usual.”

“So you sent her away.”

“I knew it was only a matter of time before someone came looking for her.” Louellen looks hard at John. “And here you are. I’m seldom wrong about these things, am I?”


“Not too far. I set her up with some contract work a few miles down the road. A new street gang down in Atlantic City. The Boardwalk Angels.”

John raises an eyebrow in sardonic disbelief. “Sounds like a terrible improve theatre troupe, not a street gang.”

Louellen gives him just the barest smirk, shrugs in agreement. “They could have workshopped the name, I’ll admit. But even still, they’ve made a big impact in Atlantic City in just a few months. Ostensibly they have some social justice ideals.” Louellen doesn’t exactly roll her eyes, but the derision is obvious in her voice. “Visions for creating a better life for the working poor of their city. I admire their dedication. But when it comes down to it, they’re dealing in the same products as anyone, trying to carve out a chunk of turf just like anyone else.”

“And they’re willing to deal in what you’re supplying, I would presume,” Sherlock notes.

Louellen nods. “Of course. And when push comes to shove they deal in the wetwork, same as anyone else. They have a use for Maria, I needed to get her out of town for a bit.”

“But after all that, saying she’s like a daughter to you, and you’re giving her up to us without a second thought,” John says. “I don’t understand.”

Louellen doesn’t answer immediately; she looks away, her lips pressed together.

“Because we’re not the only ones,” Sherlock says quietly. “Are we, Ms. Andrews? The two of us are small potatoes in all this, compared to the big guys who want her out of the picture. CIA, FBI, shadow agencies that don’t even have official names. We’re the first ones, though, the pilot fish. If we’ve gotten this close, then the big ones are right behind us. And you can’t risk that. I don’t give a
fig about your business affairs, but the FBI certainly won’t feel the same.”

Louellen looks up and nods, her eyes sad but clear and dry. “Mr. Holmes. I care for Maria. I suppose you could say I love her, even after everything that’s happened. But she’s too erratic now, far too much of a liability. I don’t want to give her up like this but...in the end, you taking her off the radar would be doing me a service.”

“So you’re giving her up to protect your business interests,” Sherlock says.

Louellen shrugs. “Yes,” she says simply.

“That’s rather cold,” Sherlock observes.

“And what is it to you, Mr Holmes?”

Sherlock gives a small shrug, conceding the point. “It’s nothing to me whatsoever.”

“Glad we’ve got that settled,” John interjects. “What I want to know is, what happens now?”

Louellen rises, moves to the ornately carved desk. She opens a drawer, pulls out a cheap plastic burner mobile, crosses the room to hand the phone to Sherlock.

“You’re going to wait for a call,” she tells them. “A gentleman named James will be getting in touch with you shortly.”

Sherlock twiddles the flimsy plastic phone in his fingers as he regards Louellen with a skeptical eye. “And this James will simply, what, hand Maria over on a silver platter if I say please?”

“Oh course not,” Louellen says with more than a trace of exasperation. “Don’t be ridiculous. She’s got valuable skills. This is going to be a negotiation, and you’d better be prepared to offer them something of significant value in exchange.”

“Such as?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea. Not my problem.” She shrugs. “You’re the great Sherlock Holmes, I’m certain you’ll come up with something brilliant.”

Sherlock rises from the couch, stows the phone in the front pocket of his ratty jeans.

“With that, I believe we’ll take our leave,” Sherlock says. “You have a lot of work to do. After all, your product certainly won’t put itself out on the street, will it?”

Louellen regards him with a chilly smile. “No it won’t,” she says, calm and even, refusing to be baited.

John takes the cue, stands as well. “That’s it, then?” he asks, a bit incredulous.

“That’s it,” Louellen replies, settling into the desk chair, sliding her reading glasses onto her nose. “Gentlemen, I have a great deal of work to do, as always, so if you don’t mind--”

With that she turns her back on them in obvious dismissal.

John squints at her abrupt rudeness but says nothing, merely sighing a bit as he follows Sherlock to the hallway at the far end of the room.

He is at the edge of the doorway when Louellen speaks again, her tone softer.
“Doctor Watson. John.”

John turns back around to her. “Yes?”

“I hope you find your daughter,” she says quietly, a edge of something kinder in her voice. “I truly do.”

“Thank you,” John replies, surprised. He tries and fails to think of something else to add, before Sherlock steers him out of the room with a hand pressed lightly to his shoulder blade.

The dark back hallway opens into a sort of break room-slash-locker room, lined with storage lockers on one end and a counter with a coffee maker and microwave on the other. At the far end, Alligator Guy is seated on a folding chair pulled up to a rather rickety-looking card table, his track jacket removed to reveal a dingy white singlet top. He’s holding an ice pack to his shoulder while a tall, slender caramel-coloured man with a blackening eye and dark curly hair stands over him, fussing over his injuries, carefully daubing a cut on the side of his Alligator Guy’s head with a wad of bloodied gauze.

Both men look up as Sherlock and John enter the room, glaring flatly at them as they cross to the exit door at the far end.

John can’t resist pressing his luck; turns he stabs his index finger in Alligator Guy’s general direction. “Told you not to eat my fucking eclair,” he says, hearing the the smug, condescending message in his own tone.

*My pretty boyfriend beat the shit out of you, big guy. Suck it.*

It’s terribly small, he knows it is, not to mention counterproductive to getting out of here in one piece.

He cares not one bit.

Alligator Guy’s lips contort in a truly spectacular fashion as rises halfway from his chair. His companion places a warning hand on his bicep; Alligator hesitates briefly before returning to his seat.

“Afternoon!” Sherlock calls out with sarcastic cheer; the men glower as he gives a cheeky little wave before pushing open the crash-barred exit door with the side of his elbow.

John blinks a bit, eyes adjusting as they step out into the sunlight of an improbably lovely spring afternoon.

The Focus is parked haphazardly on the edge of the lot behind the building, lurching diagonally onto the scraggly grass median.

Sherlock unlocks the car, opens the door and gets behind the wheel without speaking to or acknowledging John in any way.

Before getting in the car, John takes a moment to observe his surroundings. The building they just emerged from is a low, nondescript warehouse on a not-quite rural, relatively quiet two-lane road. Though he can see just the tops of buildings in the distance, this location is quite a bit more rural than anything John has yet encountered in southern New Jersey.

“Where the hell are we?” he asks Sherlock as he slides into the passenger seat.

“Washington Township,” Sherlock mutters around the unlit cigarette already in his mouth. He pulls out his iPhone, taps out a text, then places the mobile on the dash and picks up the cheap blue Bic
lighter. He flicks the lighter, bends his head, and inhales, blowing out a twin stream of blue smoke from his nostrils before he puts the car into gear and pulls out of the lot.

A few minutes later the text alert beeps. Sherlock waits for a red light to pick it up and look at the message, then types out a brief reply before returning the phone to his pocket.

"Dobrev and his wife have apparently left town on a very impromptu vacation," Sherlock informs John coolly, tone devoid of emotion. "I'm having their whereabouts traced, but it will take time."

John sighs through his nose and nods, unsurprised. He doesn't answer. There doesn't seem much to say.

After several more minutes on the narrow two-lane road Sherlock turns left, heading south on the more congested Route 42. Fast food signs and convenience stores line the thoroughfare.

"We need petrol," John points out helpfully. Sherlock doesn’t reply.

John looks over and regards Sherlock’s profile. His full lips are pressed together grimly, his eyes blank and cold. His hands grip the steering wheel tightly, Marlboro smoldering between long fingers. He has barely looked at John, let alone voiced any concern for his well-being.

It’s almost as if...John squints a bit, confused and almost annoyed as he tries to parse the unspoken communication.

"Are you...angry?" he finally asks.

"No," Sherlock says, curtly, and lifts his hand off the wheel to takes another drag off his cigarette. His movements are quick and precise; his fingers do not tremble.

"Really? Because it’s certainly reading that way to me."

Sherlock takes another drag off his cigarette, does not deign to answer.

John feels his blood pressure spike and his stomach tighten. He tells himself what he’s feeling is anger.

"I certainly didn’t mean to inconvenience you by getting fucking abducted--"


John doesn’t have the energy to fight, so he shuts up.

The two of them drive on in icy, strained silence.

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About a half-mile past the roadside sign welcoming them to the hamlet of Williamstown, Sherlock makes a right turn without warning or explanation.

The motel Sherlock pulls up to is an exceedingly modest two-story white concrete building, of a squat, boxy style that somehow puts John in mind of something from East Germany in the mid-eighties.

"Wait here;" Sherlock says and exits the car without another word, leaving the keys in the ignition and the engine running.
John stews in quiet indignation but does as Sherlock says, because what other choice does he have, really?

It’s not fair, though, he thinks. It really, truly isn’t. He’s the one who got kidnapped, get snatched in broad daylight and subjected to...well, to tea with an elderly lady, which isn’t precisely the most traumatic event that ever happened to him. But still.

“But still,” John says aloud to the empty driver's seat. “What gives His Majesty the right to act so pissed off about the whole thing?”

He’s just building up a lovely head of righteous indignation when Sherlock returns, set of old-fashioned hotel keys in hand. He opens the door and settles back into the driver’s seat, putting the car into gear and pulling around to the back of the building. He kills the ignition, gets out of the car, opens the trunk and pulls out their bags.

John thinks about sitting in the car and not leaving until Sherlock deigns to speak to him, but even as he thinks it he realises how ridiculously juvenile that would be. He unbuckles his seat belt and gets out of the car. Sherlock silently hands him his bag and John slings it over his shoulder.

The room is located on the ground floor. The doorframe is dinged and battered, the lock plate scratched and marred. Sherlock jams the key into the lock, shoulders the door open. John follows him into the shade-drawn, darkened room; the unmistakable smell of musty carpet and cheap disinfectant that meets his nostrils is as familiar as an old, slightly disreputable acquaintance from the wrong side of town.

He shuts the door behind them, dropping his bag carelessly to the floor.

“All right, Sherlock,” he begins. “What the hell is--”

Before he can finish the sentence, or even the thought, he is ambushed out of nowhere; in one explosion of movement Sherlock has him pressed against the closed door, engulfing him in a whirlwind of long limbs and nicotine-flavoured mouth, kissing him as if both their lives depended on it.

A small involuntary ‘oof’ of shock and surprise escapes his lips, but as usual his reflexes completely outpace his brain and he’s kissing back, feverishly, the feel of Sherlock’s wet demanding tongue of his mouth sparking the always-banked embers of his longing back into life.

They kiss and kiss, feverish and sloppy, their mouths smearing and sliding against each other, frantic and messy with need. John tangles his hands into dark mussed locks, Sherlock wraps his giant hands around John’s hips to pull him close, close enough that John can feel the tremors running through his spare frame. Everything Sherlock had kept so tightly locked away is bubbling to the surface and John’s anger evaporates as understanding washes over him; he sees now the magnitude of terror and panic Sherlock had blocked out in order to remain under control until now, until this private moment between the two of them, safe and sound behind closed doors.

Sherlock shifts slightly, pressing his wet lips against the edge of John’s jaw, under his ear, breathing hard against the column of his throat, making John whimper just the tiniest bit, involuntarily, turning his head to give him access to the sensitive skin of his throat.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock breathes against his skin, his voice a ragged whisper. “I’m sorry, I never should have let you go out alone, God, I’m so sorry.”

“I’m fine,” John murmurs. “Sherlock, I’m fine. We’re fine. Everything’s all right.”
“I didn’t...When I realised you were gone, I...” He makes a small, desperate noise against John’s throat. “You could have been dead, John.”

“I’m not, though.” John pulls away from Sherlock a bit, takes his face firmly in his two hands, feels the warm wetness of tears under his his palms. “Sherlock. Love. It’s okay. Look at me. It's okay.”

Sherlock looks at him, the pain in his red-rimmed eyes sharp and raw.

“Sixty-seven minutes,” he says. “Until the the flowers showed up, with the message on the card. For over an hour, I didn’t know what to do. My mind was blank, numb with panic. I didn’t do any detective work, John. They had to basically shove the address into my hand and tell me where to show up.” He shakes his head. “I didn’t know what I was walking into, and I, I had to…” he takes a deep, quavering breath. “You have to understand. I was prepared to kill every person in that building if I had to, to get to you.”

“I know,” John says in a soft near-whisper, even though it’s not quite true, he didn’t know, until this moment he hadn’t fully recognised what Sherlock had gone through, pushing away the terror and panic through sheer force of will in order to do what needed to be done, in order to find the cold clarity needed to walk into that building prepared to deal death to anyone who came into his path-- and it was all just for John. To reach him. To save him, if it had come to that.

“But it’s okay now,” John murmurs, running his hands up and down Sherlock’s biceps, peppering kisses across his jaw. “It’s done with, and it’s all okay now.”

Sherlock is shaking now, trembling in his arms. His chest pressed against Sherlock’s hard torso, John can feel his heart hammering wildly underneath thin ribs, a wild bird battering its wings against a cage of unyielding bone.

“I thought I had lost you,” Sherlock rasps, voice low and gravelly with emotional strain.. “I thought I would never... and I can’t...John. I cannot lose you.”

“You won’t,” John breathes, and kisses his mouth, tastes the salt on his lips. “You won’t lose me,” he murmurs against his trembling mouth. “Not ever. All right?”

Sherlock answers by kissing him back, fiercely, cupping his hand around the base of his skull as their mouths grow wet and sloppy with urgent need. Sherlock’s other hand snakes around his waist, holding him protectively; he steps back, pulling John with him, turning them around, using his larger frame to maneuver them the few steps across the small room, until the back of John’s knees hit the edge of the bed. In an unexpectedly assertive gesture, Sherlock grasps the lapels of his jacket, tugging it off his shoulders and peeling it away before placing the palms of his hands flat against his chest and pushing him gently but insistently back onto the bed. John enthusiastically acquiesces, scratchy polyester comforter at his back, pulling Sherlock down to half-sprawling on top of him.

Sherlock straddles John’s hips with his knees, cradles John’s head with both huge hands as they kiss. He’s making tiny, desperate little moaning noises, totally unaware, breathy gasps that set John’s nerves aflame with a burning desire for more, more kissing, more contact, just...God. Just plain more.

“What do you want?” he murmurs into Sherlock’s mouth between shuddering breaths and messy kisses. “Anything. Anything at all.”

“I want you,” Sherlock slurs, low and ragged, the words almost a moan. “Just you. John. Always, always you.”

The weight of Sherlock’s body on top of his, enveloping him, pressing him down into the cheap
mattress—it sparks something new within John, some deep and primal longing, a craving he’s never before experienced before with any other man. He wants Sherlock to touch him, fill him, press him down onto cheap white motel sheets and complete him in the most profoundly intimate way possible.

He wraps his legs around Sherlock’s longer limbs, grasping his round arse with both hands, pulling his sharp pelvis down hard against his own with what he hopes is unmistakable intent.

“You want me?” he purrs into Sherlock’s ear, raspy and low. “Then have me.”
“So we have time. For once in I can’t remember how long, we have time.” He runs his hands up Sherlock’s back and across his shoulders, savouring the lean, hard feel of him under the thin material of his worn tee shirt. “Let’s just see how it goes. No expectations, no pressure. Just…” John drops his voice to a husky, seductive purr. “Tell me what you want. Right now. What do you want, love?”

8. Williamstown

Sherlock breaks away and pulls back a bit, his silver-green eyes searching John’s face with a piercing, questioning look.

He doesn’t say anything, just gazes at John for a moment—a long moment that goes on a bit too long, begins to stretch out awkwardly. John looks up at him, willing his gaze to remain patient and steady and loving despite his hammering heartbeat and burgeoning erection. He feels the undeniable pull to bridge the moment, to fill the silence with words, but instead makes the conscious decision to allow the silence, to give Sherlock the space he needs to process his flailing thoughts.

“Meaning,” Sherlock finally says, then pauses, head tilting as he attempts to parse the statement. “Meaning, that you want me to…”

He blinks once, twice. A third time, and John realises Sherlock is dangerously close to some sort of mental overload.

He slips his right hand around Sherlock’s waist, tugging him down a bit closer as he reaches up with his left, runs reassuring fingers through soft dark hair, relishing the way the very ends are starting to show a bit of messy curl. “I want you to do whatever you feel you’d like to,” John clarifies, careful to keep his tone light, undemanding. “But also, with that being said, I’d very much like you to–I mean, if you want to, I’d–”

John sighs, a short breath of mild annoyance with his ongoing inability to be either suave or articulate. “What I’m saying,” he clarifies, “is that I would very much like you to fuck me.”

Sherlock shakes his head, snapping out of whatever cerebral feedback loop he’d been stuck in.

We are the two most awkward human beings in the world, John thinks with a mental sigh as he watches Sherlock do his best impersonation of a crashing hard drive. The fact that we somehow got this far is, frankly, nothing short of a goddamn miracle.

“Only if that’s something you think you would like,” John amends, feeling the need to backpedal a bit. “If you’d rather not, that’s absolutel–”

Sherlock shakes his head, snapping out of whatever cerebral feedback loop he’d been stuck in.
“Of course that’s something I’d--yes. I mean, of course yes.” Sherlock narrows his eyes a little, eyes John more analytically. “But you haven’t ever done it like that before.”

“There was--” John gives a short, self-conscious chuckle. “There was--an attempt, I suppose you could call it.” He winces a bit and shakes his head at the memory, a hazy recollection of a long-ago dorm room misadventure lubricated only by spit and alcohol. “Not, um, a successful one. But I’m older and wiser now. Well, at least older, and I’m absolutely certain we’d have a better go of it.”

Sherlock tilts his head, gives him an uncertain look.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he says.

The tiniest hint of upward inflection at the end of his statement makes it more of a question, really, or maybe a request for reassurance. John, fortunately, has just enough presence of mind left to know that rolling his eyes in exasperation is absolutely not the thing to do at this moment.

So he doesn’t.

But it’s a challenge.

“You won’t hurt me,” he says, deliberate and patient.

“I might,” Sherlock insists.

“We’re that sure of ourselves, are we?” John says, the fond grin pulling at the corner of his mouth softening the archness of his words as his fingertips rub circles at the small of Sherlock’s back.

Sherlock pouts just a bit, but there’s a ghost of a smile there as well. “Don’t tease, John.”

“You’re right. That wasn’t nice of me.” In a show of only slightly over-exaggerated contriteness, John stretches upwards to kiss Sherlock’s pouting lips, his stubbled cheek, the tip of his erudite nose.

“How about this, then,” he proposes. “All we have on our agenda right this moment is to hurry up and wait for a phone call, right?”

“Correct.”

“So we have time. For once in I can’t remember how long, we have time.” He runs his hands up Sherlock’s back and across his shoulders, savouring the lean, hard feel of him under the thin material of his worn tee shirt. “Let’s just see how it goes. No expectations, no pressure. Just…” John drops his voice to a husky, seductive purr. “Tell me what you want. Right now. What do you want, love?”

Sherlock looks down at him, considering. His hand comes up to press against John’s cheek, warm fingertips gently stroking the bristly hair of John’s bearded jaw. Tender and erotic in equal measure, the sensation sends sparks of arousal across John’s nerves, makes his cock grow fully hard, straining insistently against the fly of his jeans.

“Right now, I want to touch you,” he finally answers, quiet and direct, as his exploring finger traces slowly down John’s neck, all the way to the collar of his plaid shirt. “Is that...okay?”

And the way Sherlock is looking down at him as he says it--John feels like he can’t quite get a full breath, as if the weight of that heated gaze is pressing all the oxygen from his lungs.

“More than okay,” he breathes out, low and rough, and pulls Sherlock’s head down to kiss him.

Sherlock’s lips are soft and eager, his tongue hot and searching as it dips into John’s mouth, licks
against his own. His lean, spare body surges against John’s, slim hips grinding down against him, the surprising solidity of his larger frame pressing him down into the unfamiliar, slightly lumpy mattress.

After a few moments of lovely, heated snogging, Sherlock breaks the kiss and sits back up on his heels, straddling John’s hips, the warm springy flesh of his bum a pleasant weight against John’s very interested groin. He tugs the shirttails out of John’s jeans, undoes the fastenings of his plaid shirt carefully, slowly, focusing on slipping the small white discs out of their buttonholes as if the mysteries of the universe were contained beneath.

“Up,” he murmurs. John raises himself a bit, abdomen flexing with the effort, and with a moment of wiggling and twisting is able to extract his arms from the long sleeves. Wordlessly, he raises his arms in invitation, and Sherlock tugs his plain white cotton tee up and over his head. He tosses both garments carelessly over the side of the bed before refocusing his attention to John’s bare torso, bending his head to press kisses into the line of his collarbone, the rounded, unmarred curve of his right pectoral muscle. He presses his face into the space between John’s arm and chest, breathing in the scent of his body.

“I, uh, I haven’t washed since this morning,” John stumbles over the words self-consciously. “I should probably--”

“No.” Sherlock is, firm and direct, biting off the syllable cleanly. “Shut up. I want you just like this. I want to smell you, taste you, exactly as you are right this moment.” He emphasises each word with a press of his lips, leaving a trail of kisses down John’s torso. “You’re…” his voice grows softer, almost reverent. “You’re absolutely perfect,” he murmurs, tracing his tongue over the line of sparse gold hair that trails down from John’s navel; the sensation is somewhere between arousing and ticklish, making John shiver just a bit.

Sherlock slides off John’s body, gracefully landing on his knees on the floor, between John’s spread legs. Fascinated, John raises himself up on his elbows, watches as Sherlock unties his shoes, takes them off his feet with the precise care reserved for his most delicate experiments. He comes back up to unbuckle John’s belt, then dips his head, presses a kiss to the bit of soft jiggly flesh below his navel before unbuttoning his jeans with nimble fingers.

John helps him, raises his hips so Sherlock can work his jeans and pants down over the curve of his hips and arse. Sherlock tugs them off one leg at a time, tosses them carelessly aside before sliding his fingers reverently up and down along the outsides of John’s bare, muscled thighs, a look of pure, undisguised hunger in his eyes.

The heat of that gaze is almost overwhelming, making John’s erect cock throb visibly with arousal, foreskin fully retracted, the head purpling and wet.

“Your turn now,” John says, his voice raspy and deep. “Take off your clothes, love.”

His tone is gentle, but it’s not a request.

Sherlock nods, rises gracefully to his feet in one smooth motion. He meets John’s eyes, but his pale cheekbones are stained with the faint pink flush of self-consciousness as he kicks off his tattered trainers, pulls his tee shirt over his head.

He’s thinner than John has ever seen him, more so than even two nights earlier. One meal of fried cheese and wings is barely a dent in weeks of poor food and worse sleep; his wiry slenderness, usually overlaid with muscle gained through a careful (though circumspect) regimen of pushups and crunches and planks, is slowly giving way to undeniable frailty. His stomach is concave, his hipbones sharp ridges, his ribs prominent enough to count.
He is still, of course, unspeakably beautiful to John’s eyes. His lips are kiss-bitten and puffy red, his
hair a riot. He looks more than alluring; he looks like an engraved invitation to pure, wanton sin.

John cannot tear his gaze away as Sherlock unbuttons his faded jeans, shimmies them down over his
slim hips. Something in John’s eyes must be so intent as to be unnerving; Sherlock purses his lips,
places his hands on his hips, prim as a schoolteacher despite the bulge of his considerable erection
straining the fabric of his briefs.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asks.

“Because you’re beautiful,” John replies simply, the words spilling from his mouth unplanned,
unexpected, and totally honest.

Sherlock goes still, regards him silently for a moment longer before climbing back onto the bed,
swinging one pale leg over John’s torso to straddle his hips. His wiry forearms come down on either
side of John’s head, trapping him in a cage of long slim limbs.

“So are you,” Sherlock says, quiet and serious. “Utterly and completely.”

John gives a short huff of sardonic laughter. “No, I’m really--”

“No up for debate,” Sherlock informs him, capturing his mouth
in order to end the conversation.

John sighs his acquiescence into the kiss, reaches up to cup one hand around the back of Sherlock’s
neck as his other hand scrabbles at the waistband of Sherlock’s snug boxer briefs. He succeeds in
pulling the elastic halfway down on one side; with Sherlock’s fumbling assistance he manages to
wrestle them most of the way off. Sherlock kicks them away with a careless fling of one ankle before
pressing the entire hot length of his naked body against John’s, their cocks rubbing deliciously
against each other as they kiss and kiss,

making tiny, breathy gasps and moans in each other’s
mouths as they grind against each other in shamelessly open need, their bodies communicating far
more eloquently than mere words could ever hope to express.

Sherlock breaks away, leaving John gasping for breath as he slides wet lips across his jaw, moves
downward to press soft, almost chaste kisses down his bristly neck and across his collarbone. He
moves down his body, places a row of feather-light kisses down his ribcage before his soft wet
tongue darts out, tracing a delicate path down his stomach, dipping inquisitively into his navel as his
large hands cup John’s hips, thumbs pressed into the hollow of his pelvic bones.

The back of John’s head hits the mattress, a bitten-off gasp on his lips, his hips surging upward
involuntarily as Sherlock nips teasingly at the juncture of his thigh and groin. John can’t help but
spread his legs wider in wordless invitation, but Sherlock very deliberately doesn’t take the hint,
instead pressing kisses to the delicate flesh of his inner thigh, deliberately ignoring the very
prominent jut of his aching, leaking cock.

“Bloody tease,” John breathes. He feels Sherlock’s mouth curve into a grin against his skin as he
moves lower, fingertips stroking the curve of his calf as he kisses the rounded knob of each knee,
then bestows one last press of gentle lips to the instep of each foot before raising his head.

He breathes in, hesitates just the merest half a moment before speaking.

“Roll over for me?” he asks, soft and quiet, just a touch of uncertainty colouring the edges of his
voice.

“Yes,” John breathes. “Oh God, yes.”

Sherlock clambers a bit gracelessly off him, giving him room to manoeuvre. John rolls halfway over,
pulls the cheap polyester duvet off the bed with one hand.

“It’s scratchy” he explains, as Sherlock helps him pull the coverlet off the bed, tossing it haphazardly onto the floor. John arranges himself on the sheets, elbows and knees pressed into the mattress, underside of his cock rubbing deliciously against rough cotton, excitement and nervousness a hot heavy knot low in his belly. He closes his eyes, feels the bed creak and dip as Sherlock climbs on and repositions himself between his spread legs.

Whether Sherlock hesitates because of nerves or because he’s deliberately drawing out the delicious torture of this tension, John isn’t entirely certain; the moment spoons out and stretches, tight as a quivering bowstring, and just as John is about to say something, anything at all to break the tension of the moment, he feels the first, feather-light brush of the pads of Sherlock’s thumbs ghosting up the backs of his calves, along the shallow dip between the twinned muscles of gastrocnemius, up behind his knees and back down again, then up, slightly firmer this time.

John sighs, just a small barely audible huff of air, as Sherlock kisses and touches his way up his body. As Sherlock touches him reverently, inch by agonizing inch, John is reminded of anatomy classes, of the engraved plates labeling every bone, every muscle. *Fibula, tibia. Semitendinosus. Biceps femoris.* Sherlock kisses the back of each thigh, his fingers tracing the curve of his pelvis, then he licks at the dip at the small of his back, the very top of the sacroiliac joint, long fingers gently kneading the curves of his arse.

John makes a small noise of surprise at the first wet touch of Sherlock’s tongue to the very top of his cleft. Picks his head up, his spine tensing and curving in surprise.

“Sherlock--” he begins, not even certain where the rest of the sentence is headed. “I didn’t--I haven’t--I wasn’t exactly planning on--”

“I know. I don’t care.” Sherlock pauses, considers. “Is this all right, though?” he asks, curiously, formally polite considering their current respective positions.

“Whatever you want,” John breathes, the words almost a moan. “God. Yes. Anything at all. I mean it.”

“Good,” Sherlock murmurs, his breath warm against the skin of John’s lower back as his gentle fingers spread John apart, revealing his most intimate place--(and the idea of it burns in his mind, the image of Sherlock’s huge hands on him, each encompassing one entire arse cheek, handling his body so very intimately, opening him up so completely, God that alone is enough to almost make him come on the spot)--and he dips his head, pushing his face into his cleft without the slightest hesitation, licking a broad, wet, slow stripe from the base of John’s scrotum to the very tip of his tailbone. He does it again, and again, and frankly it’s strange and a little ticklish and rather cold, and he’s debating mentally how to let Sherlock know that this just doesn’t do it for him, when Sherlock presses a pointed tongue against the knot of his entrance and swirls with a careful focused pressure, rough wetness caressing that sensitive place with an unexpected finesse and--

“Oh, God,” John gasps, somewhere between a moan and a sigh as the exquisite and utterly novel pleasure floods his brain. “Oh God, oh fuck, yes, *do that again.*”

Sherlock does it again, the wet slick rough softness of his tongue perfect against the exquisitely sensitive skin of John’s entrance, inquisitive probing of the tightly furled knot alternating with filthy open-mouthed kisses, his entire mouth working against him as his insistent tongue presses in, pushes ever so slightly deeper, begins to gently coax the tight defensive muscle to yield to his persistent ministrations.
As Sherlock laps and sucks at the tender flesh, John’s back arches involuntarily, his hands fistng and pulling at the sheets, small, breathy, almost mewling moans falling from his lips as shivers of pleasure ripple and course through him, setting every nerve ending on fire. Behind his closed eyes he can visualise the obscene tableau the two of them make, John on all fours as Sherlock devours him shamelessly, feasts upon his arsehole like a starving man at a holiday buffet.

And the very fact that Sherlock is not only amenable to something like this, but so very willing, so shamelessly enthusiastic, his face absolutely buried in the cleft of his arse as he gives John pleasure--It’s completely filthy, and obscene, and perfect, and John moans again into the rough white sheets as the heat between his legs pulses and throbs, stoked with every caress of Sherlock’s eager wet lips and tongue.

Base animal need clouding his brain, John can’t (won’t) stop his body’s responses; his pelvis flexes against the mattress, rutting the underside of his aching, engorged cock against the roughness of the cheap, overlaundered cotton. It’s a welcome frisson of sensation, but nowhere near enough, so he raises up a little higher on his knees, pressing his hips upward, offering himself completely to Sherlock’s voracious mouth while also snaking a hand underneath his own body. John takes hold of himself, the hot palm rough and dry and tight around his throbbing cock, and gives a long, low groan of pleasure.

“Fuck,” he swears roughly, voice already gone hoarse from exertion. He pulls at his cock, but the movement of his hand is constrained by his own position, trapped between his body and the mattress; somehow, though, the denial of it, his inability to satisfy the hot itch of need and really thrust the way his body demands, is even more incredibly arousing, making him whimper and cry out as his hips flex with each press of Sherlock’s untutored but still preternaturally talented tongue, as the streams of saliva cool, dripping down the insides of his thighs.

“I need,” John gasps. “Fuck. I need--”

Sherlock pauses in his ministrations, pulls back a bit, presses sloppy wet kisses over the rounded curve of his right arse cheek.

“What do you need?” he murmurs against John’s warm, humid skin, his breath tickling the tiny hairs there.

After that first, misbegotten experience in university so many years ago, John hasn’t tried penetration of any sort. He hadn’t wanted to, not really, or perhaps rather than that he decided he wouldn’t care for it, declining to examine the deeper assumptions and motivations that might lie behind that dismissal. But here with the right person--with the only person, the only person to ever truly reach him, to truly get past his defensive armour--his nerve endings are alight with a newly discovered need, with the desire to give himself over completely to Sherlock, to receive him into his body, to surrender to the incredible sensations of pressure and stretch and fullness without reservation.

It’s a novel, intoxicating discovery and John is gone on it, drunk on sensation and arousal and need, and the only thought he can form in his lust fogged brain is: more.

“Your fingers,” he says, his voice coming out raspy and rough and more than a bit demanding. “I want you to put them inside of me.”

“Okay,” Sherlock murmurs, and then he’s brushing long fingers up and down the back of his thigh, easing over, dipping into the wet and open space between his cheeks, brushing up and down, teasing for a moment beforepressing inward, not quite enough, just a bit too hesitant to really--

“It’s all right,” John says.
“I don’t want to--”

“You won’t hurt me. I swear. Just, God, please, just--”

Sherlock pushes a little harder, overcoming the resistance of the still-tight muscle; John can’t help the sharp inward gasp of breath at the sudden, stinging stretch as the single finger breaches the puckered knot of his opening, pushes into his body with just a bit more force than he is ready for.

Sherlock goes still, concerned.

“Are you okay?” he asks carefully. “We don’t have to--”

“Yes, I’m fine--I just--” John breathes deep, exhales. “I’m fine. Just--just go slow.”

And Sherlock goes slow, careful, rocking his finger in and out of John’s body so very gently; after a few moments the sting begins to subside, and the feeling of fullness becomes less intrusive, closer to something like--not quite pleasure, but not unpleasant, either.


“I can feel you,” Sherlock murmurs, his voice coloured by something like awe. “I can feel you from the inside. You’re so warm, John. It’s--you’re incredible.”

The hushed, reverent tone of Sherlock’s voice does something to John, makes the push and stretch of his fingers (Sherlock’s inside of me, he thinks, God, his fingers up my arse, touching me, opening me) feel so much closer to pleasurable. John exhales, willing his body to relax, to yield, to allow Sherlock access to him, to all of him, to everything he is.

“You can try a bit more, I think,” he breathes. “Just a little.”

Sherlock does as asked, pushes just a bit deeper before pulling almost all the way out, then pushing back in again, setting up a slow, steady rhythm, gently coaxing him open with a single finger.

The pleasure builds, grows upon itself. John’s hips begin to push and flex in time as Sherlock carefully pushes into him, stroking him from the inside, stretching the tough muscle carefully.

“Is it good?” he murmurs, breath hot against John’s hip.

John exhales, nods.

“Two, now,” he says between panting gasps. “And I need--spit’s not enough. Get the lube.”

He’s being a bit demanding, he knows, but he’s too far gone to soften the words, to ask nicely rather than rudely demanding more--but Sherlock doesn’t object, takes it in stride, stilling the steady movement of his hand before carefully withdrawing his finger. The loss of that unique feeling, that stretched fullness, leaves John feeling open and oddly bereft, the wetness between his legs cooling in the air as Sherlock rises from the bed to rifle through the bag he carelessly dropped by the door just a little earlier.

John turns his head, opens his eyes to watch him; his hand still wrapped around his cock, squeezing tight and thrusting minutely against his own palm as he as he savors the sight of him, his long pale limbs, his slender, yet-untouched prick dusky pink and curving upward out of its nest of dark curly hair, the still-lush curve of his arse as he turns, bending and rummaging for the lube stashed somewhere in his bag.
He finds his quarry and extracts it from the bag, along with an unopened water bottle. He turns back to John, sees him staring. He smiles, just a small private thing, his lips still reddened and shiny from his efforts.

“Hey,” he says, sounding incongruously shy. He tosses the lube on the bed, uncaps the water bottle, and hands it to John, who suddenly discovers he’s very thirsty. He had been a bit too busy to notice before.

John nods, takes it with his free hand, drinks gratefully and what’s left of the water back to Sherlock. He drinks, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and sets the uncapped bottle on the table.

Sherlock bends to kiss him on the mouth, and John faintly tastes himself on his lips, dark and musky and earthy. His smouldering desire flares back to life, bright and hot, low in his belly, and he sighs a little into Sherlock’s mouth.

“You okay?” Sherlock asks him quietly, and the soft tenderness in his voice, the sweetness of it like dark amber honey—it still somehow surprises John a bit, even after everything they’ve been through, after everything they’ve shared.

“Fantastic,” John replies, his own voice still a bit breathy and uneven still.

“You like it, then.”

John can’t help but huff a breath of laughter. “I hope that much is obvious. Do you…?”

But Sherlock merely brushes John’s sweat-damp overgrown fringe out of his eyes. “I love it.” He kisses him again. “You taste amazing.” He drapes the length of his body over John’s back, kisses the ridge of John’s shoulder blade, then presses his mouth reverently to each bump of John’s vertebrae.

He peels himself partially away from John’s damp skin as he pulls himself upright, positions himself between his bent knees, opens the tube of lubricant. John hears the tiny squelching noise as he squeezes the lube onto his fingers, hisses a small intake of breath as Sherlock smears the slippery gel between his cheeks, over his hole. He seems to hesitate a bit, presses his warm damp forehead to John’s shoulder, his fingers still tracing circles around his entrance.

“It’s all right,” John breathes. “You won’t—” he tries, fails to keep that edge of demanding neediness out of his voice—”just, please?”

“Oh okay,” Sherlock says softly, then gives a small chuckle, barely a breath of air against his skin. “Bossy,” he murmurs, and then he’s pressing harder against his loosened opening with two slicked fingers, sliding inside so easily, and John arches his back and gasps a little at the feeling, tight and stretched but not really painful, exactly, just different, and as Sherlock pulls out and pushes back in again, careful, John can feel the potential there, the possibility of the hot strange discomfort shifting over into a deep, pulsing pressure, with just a little--

“Oh god, fuck, fuck yes--” he pants, as Sherlock dips his head, pushes his face back in between his spread thighs, licks around his thrusting fingers, teasing the edge of his stretched-tight rim with a
warm, pointed tongue. It’s messy and untutored but what he lacks in technique he makes up for with unbridled enthusiasm, making John moan and curse and shudder helplessly under the onslaught of his hands and mouth.

“Fuck yes, you’re amazing, God, you fucking filthy creature,” he gasps as he squirms under Sherlock’s intent tongue, the tight burning feeling melting into sensations he hadn’t even really conceived of before this moment. He writhes and curses and sighs as Sherlock gives him pleasure, inside and out, as his fingers thrust wetly into his stretched hole, the squelching sounds of saliva and lube making a counterpoint to the one noisy spring in the well-used bed frame squeaking steadily in rhythm, as he pushes back against Sherlock’s ministrations, his cock hard hot velvet in his hand.

The discomfort is entirely swallowed up by pleasure, the delicious tension in his belly coiling up tighter and tighter; he actually audibly whimpers when Sherlock pulls his head back, kissing and nipping the rounded swell of his buttock, smearing cooling wetness across his heated skin before moving back up to mouth at his neck, his bearded jaw. His fingers slow, then still; he withdraws them carefully, then slots his pelvis tight against him, rocking rhythmically, the underside of his cock rubbing against his loosened still-wet hole, teasing him mercilessly with contact and friction, but nowhere near the push and stretch and slide that he so truly desperately wants. He pushes his arse lewdly back against Sherlock’s hips, panting and whimpering shamelessly with unmet need.

Sherlock moans softly into the damp curve of John’s neck as he rocks against him, cock pressing and sliding in the sticky wetness between his cheeks, tight against the place he really wants to be, a torturous tease not nearly enough for what he needs.

“I want to fuck you,” Sherlock whispers into his ear. There is no studied sultriness or intentional seduction in his midnight-dark voice, only the rough, raw edges of a man stripped bare, reduced to utter bedrock truth. “Please, John. Say I can fuck you.”

“Yes.” John turns his head to meet Sherlock’s mouth with his own, not even properly kissing, their mouths smearing messily against each other at an odd angle. “God, yes please.”

“Like this?” Sherlock asks. “Or--”

“No, on my back,” John says. “I want to see you, I want--”

Sherlock peels himself off John’s back. John rolls over to find Sherlock is watching him, eyes raking him from head to toe, then focusing on his very erect cock with fierce, laser-focused interest.

Pinned as he is under the weight of Sherlock’s gaze, his desire for him a palpable, tangible thing, John can’t help but be a bit of a harlot, savouring the deliciously wanton, exposed feeling. He gives his prick a slow, leisurely tug, savoring the moment of delicious stretch and friction against his cock, then moves his hand lower, cupping and massaging his aching balls as he spreads his legs lasciviously wide for Sherlock, lewdly exposing his slick arsehole and feeling the cool air against the wetness there.

“I want to watch you fuck me,” he says, and some corner of his mind not overwhelmed by lust is goggling at the filthiness of his words and actions, but the rest of him is miles too far gone to care. “You’re so beautiful, God, I want to watch your beautiful body while you fuck me--”

And Sherlock practically attacks him then, kissing him ferociously, tongue hot and insistent in his mouth as he slots himself between John’s thighs, their cocks rubbing against each other as they move together, thrusting in primal, instinctive rhythm, John grabbing handfuls of his perfect round fleshy arse, pulling him in closer with every thrust.
“Put it in me,” John rasps between gasping, panting kisses. “Now, Jesus, Sherlock, please. Just--”

Sherlock nods, pulls away a bit, runs his fingers down John’s torso, spans the curves of his hips with his warm, soft, slightly rough hands. Pauses, hands stilling, and looks down at him. The expression on his face is a study in nuance—tender and caring, and aroused, and more than a little self-conscious.


John knows that snapping at his sexually-inexperienced boyfriend to God, just fuck me already would be incredibly poor form, so he nods, closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, in through his nose and out through his mouth, wrestling his howling, lust-addled monkey brain into a semblance of submission.

He opens his eyes, gives Sherlock a small, hopefully reassuring grin, runs a hand up and down his slender forearm. “Angle is important. Grab a pillow?”

Sherlock complies, and John raises his lower back off the bed. Sherlock understands immediately, shoving the pillow under the small of his back, tilting his hips upward.

“Where did that lube go?”

Sherlock rummages in the twisted sheets, retrieves the plain white crimped tube.

“Okay,” John considers for a minute. “I think my legs over your shoulders would work.”

Sherlock nods, top teeth digging into his lower lip in concentration as he positions their bodies, bringing John’s knees up over his shoulders, slotting their hips together.

“I trust you know what goes where,” John murmurs dryly.

“Not really the moment for snark,” Sherlock says under his breath, his brow furrowing in concentration as he flips the cap on the lube, squeezes out a dollop of the clear gel, and slicks his now significantly less-erect cock.

“Sorry,” John murmurs, gentling his tone. “I’m sorry, love. Here, let me--”

He manages to reach down in between their bodies and take Sherlock’s softening prick in hand, cool and slippery wet with lube, stroking him back to hardness as he pulls his head down, the backs of his thighs burning with the stretch as they kiss.

“You’re doing wonderfully,” John murmurs between kisses. “You’re amazing, you make me feel so good, you do, God, you’re a natural, so good at this--”

Sherlock gives a little laugh against his mouth. “You’re just saying that.”

John shakes his head. “No.” He cups the curve of Sherlock’s arse with his free hand, pulls him in close, and with his other rubs the head of Sherlock’s cock over his relaxed, slightly gaping hole, wet with lube and spit. “Do you feel this?” he whispers into his ear. “I’m so open and wet because of you, because of how good you make me feel.”

Sherlock whimpers, just a little, low in his throat, his cock growing quickly hotter and harder in John’s fist.

“I want you,” John rasps in a low and deliberate purr. “I want you so much, I want you to fuck me with your gorgeous cock, I want you to give it to me, I want to feel it inside of me. Do you want
“Yes,” Sherlock rasps, low and ragged, almost a moan, flexing his hips, pushing his now stiff and pulsing erection into the circle of John’s fist.

He releases his hold on Sherlock’s cock and takes ahold of the sharp crest of one bony hip.

“Just a little push,” John murmurs in encouragement. “Just one little push, sweetheart, and it’s going to feel so good.”

Sherlock nods, takes himself in hand, closes his eyes and presses his hips forward; for a moment, John feels the pressure against his entrance, then Sherlock gives a low, throaty moan as the head of his cock slips past the loosened ring of muscle, sinks in deeper than John’s fully ready for. Even relaxed, wet and prepped, it’s still much more than he’s yet experienced, and the burn and stretch of it makes him draw a sharp breath of surprise.

Sherlock stills his movement, opens his eyes to look down at John with more than a little alarm.

“No, it’s fine,” John reassures him before he can even open his mouth to speak. “I’m just--it’s a bit different, you know?”

“I do know,” Sherlock murmurs. He kisses his mouth, then presses his lips to John’s cheek in a gesture of heart-shattering gentleness. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

“Completely,” John says, reassuringly. “Just--go a little slow, okay--”

Sherlock rocks into him, slowly and carefully, eyes closed and lips pressed tight together in concentration. The burning tight fullness where Sherlock is inside him grows with each push forward; Sherlock is smaller than John but he’s still plenty endowed and it’s so much, so very much it skates up to the edge of overwhelming, his rim stretched tighter than even seems possible--but just when John feels like he can’t possibly take any more, the sharp raw discomfort plateaus and then starts to ease, just a bit.

As Sherlock gives one final, careful push, sheathing himself fully inside John’s body with a low, inelegant grunt, John feels the first flashes of a hot, bright silver pleasure deep inside his pelvis that makes his cock return to full hardness, a dribble of precum spilling out onto his lower belly.

“Oh,” he breathes out, and tilts his hips upward, pushes back, carefully, and is rewarded by sparking shocks of a complex, compelling pain-pleasure. “Oh, God,” he groans, brokenly. “That’s--fuck, that’s it. Oh, God, just like that--”

Sherlock thrusts, just a little, in response to John’s moans and muttered words of encouragement. His breath is ragged, coming in little panting gasps, but he is still tightly in control of his body, hips flexing in small tight circles as he pistons carefully, precisely into John. He’s learning in unbelievable leaps and bounds, his brain and body both in overdrive, shifting and adjusting in response to John’s every movement, every sound, measuring his response to every stimuli, analysing the data given and refining his responses.

Even with the red fog of lust enveloping his brain, John can see now why Sherlock is proving so damn good at this, at fucking, by viewing the physical mechanics of sex, of how their bodies work together, as a both a skill to learn and a puzzle to solve. He’s so bloody good at this already and he’s going to be absolutely brilliant in no time at all, just like he’s brilliant at everything he puts his genius mind to, and John is absolutely blessed, the luckiest bloke in the world to get to hold him and touch him and have him--
John gazes up at Sherlock’s face in rapturous adoration as he moves inside his body, slick flesh against slick flesh, and what he sees there is not some otherworldly, alabaster-skinned, gorgeously remote creature of fantasy, but just the ordinary human being that lives inside that haughty, couture-clad persona that stalks the streets of London. His hair is sweaty and plastered to his head, his cheeks rough with five o’clock shadow, his chin folding upon itself in a remarkably unflattering manner.

He’s perfect, exquisitely unique and absolutely ordinary all at once, and John’s heart swells with a tenderness so deep it’s almost painful.

“No one else will ever know you like this,” he breathes with undisguised wonder.

Sherlock dips his head down and kisses him hard, their mouths crashing together as he begins to move in earnest, his earlier uncertainty fading as instinct and need take over.

“No one,” he rasps in agreement between smeary, rough openmouthed kisses. He cups his hand around the back of John’s neck, presses their foreheads together as he thrusts into him, fills him up, makes their bodies as one. “No one else but you. Just you. Only you. Only you.”

As he breathes the words, gravelly and low, Sherlock’s hips lose their steady rhythm, his thrusts growing erratic. He makes a low, almost pained groan, his control visibly slipping.

“John,” he exhales raggedly. “I’m not going to--I can’t--”

“Yes,” John murmurs in encouragement, “Yes, I want you to--” and the muscles of Sherlock’s back and hips clench tightly and then go still as his orgasm overtakes him. Sherlock cries out, guttural and rough, a wordless noise of primal pleasure as he comes, spilling hot inside the slick passage of John’s body.

As his climax ebbs, Sherlock sags heavily against him, taking in ragged gulps of air as John strokes his back and arms, gentling him through the shivering aftermath. His orgasm leaves him panting and spent, his face pressed against the damp curve of John’s neck; John allows it for a few minutes but soon finds Sherlock shows no sign of moving any time in the near future. John’s current position, folded in half like a human impersonating a hide-a-bed, was greatly enjoyable in the moment of passion but is starting to become more uncomfortable with every passing moment.

“Sherlock. Love. I’m losing feeling in my legs.”

Sherlock grunts out a garbled apology and peels himself off of John, his now-spent cock sliding out with a frankly undignified wet noise. John lowers his nearly-numb legs with a bit of a sigh as Sherlock stretches out alongside him.

Sherlock takes a breath.

“That. Um.” Sherlock buries his face against the side of John’s torso, muffling his words. “I had intended a significantly different outcome. I apologise for the...um. The brevity of the encounter.”

John huffs a slightly strained chuckle, kisses the sweaty almost-curls at the top of his head. “Nothing doing. You managed to last about three minutes longer that I did my first time. Maybe four.”

Sherlock looks unconvinced. “Still,” he mutters.

“It’s the novelty. Next time you’ll last longer. I promise.”

“Believe me, I plan to.” Eyes still closed, Sherlock slides himself down John’s body, traces the crest of one hip with his endlessly curious tongue.
“And what about you?” he murmurs in his huskiest baritone.

“What about me?” John answers, and he means for it to be playful but it comes out a bit strained; his balls are starting to ache, his belly throbbing with need for release, and as if reading his mind (or perhaps his testicles) Sherlock doesn’t waste any more time with teasing him, instead dipping his head without preamble and engulfing the sticky-wet, purpling crown of John’s cock with his mouth. His plush, shiny wet lips slide down the shaft, almost to the base, and back up again to suck almost daintily at the very tip before taking him back down his throat.

At the gorgeous wet heat enveloping his cock, John makes a high-pitched, undignified noise, somewhere between a whimper and a squeal, his hips thrusting upwards involuntarily. After several gasping breaths he manages to raise himself up a bit on his elbows, hands fisting the sheets, to watch Sherlock hard at work, sucking his cock with an intensity that borders on worshipful.

Sherlock looks up at him without pausing, celadon eyes gazing at him as his cock slides between those decadent lips.

“Oh God, your mouth,” John groans. “Your mouth, Jesus fuck, Sherlock, I’ve thought about it so much, I fucking dreamed about fucking that mouth so many times—”

Sherlock plucks one of John’s scrabbling hands off the sheets, places it on the back of his head in unmistakable invitation. John takes the hint and weaves his fingers through damp messy hair. He tugs, not hard but guiding, setting a pace, and Sherlock complies enthusiastically, his lips wet and messy as he sucks, his tongue swirling around the head, flicking against the slit as John arches and pants and fights the urge to just grab his head with both hands and fuck his mouth as hard as possible.

It doesn’t take long before he feels the familiar heaviness deep in his pelvis, the delicious tension winding up tight as he nears his climax, his balls tight and aching for release.

“I’m about to—” he breathes. “I’m so close—”

Sherlock pulls his mouth off with a lewd slurp and immediately wraps his hand around John’s wet cock, stroking him fast and hard as he slips his other hand between his legs, pressing against his sore, wet entrance. John gasps as two of his fingers slip inside, the pressure and stinging pain of it registering as a fierce, razor-sharp burst of perfect, filthy pleasure as fingertips brush across his prostate.

“Please,” John says, begging for something without even knowing what he’s saying. “Please, God, I’m so—I’m so—”

Sherlock dips down, rubs the broad head of John’s cock lewdly, deliberately against his lower lip.

“Come on my mouth,” he says, and those four words are what take him sailing over the edge.

John’s back arches off the bed as he comes with a guttural, animal cry of pleasure, his stretched hole clenching and spasming around Sherlock’s fingers, the pressure against his prostate making him come harder than he ever has before. The wrenching bliss seizes his body, waves of mindless ecstasy making him shudder and cry out as his semen spurts gorgeously across Sherlock’s willing, open mouth, his full lips and waiting tongue.

“Oh god,” John says hoarsely, panting as the shivery ripples of pleasure recede. “Oh god, Oh god, I—” he hisses in brief discomfort as Sherlock slides his fingers out of his sensitive and now very sore arse.
“Sorry,” Sherlock murmurs, kissing the inside of his thigh in contrition.

“S’all right,” John says, slurring his words more than a little, still half drunk on endorphins and oxytocin. “More than all right. God. Brilliant. Amazing --”

Sherlock straightens, sits back on his heels between John’s spread thighs. He’s a vision of debauchery, hair a riot, a splash of come on his swollen lower lip. He dabs primly at the corner of his mouth, and the ridiculous contrast of the proper little gesture, after all of the unspeakably filthy things Sherlock has just done to him with that mouth, makes John’s heart swell with aching love for this ridiculous, brilliant, gorgeous, and apparently sexually voracious creature he has somehow managed to claim as his own.

“-- perfect,” John sighs, heart full of indescribable tenderness. “You’re absolutely fucking perfect. Come here.”

Sherlock grins, looking young, suddenly, and a bit shy; he shimmies up John’s body, nestles in close to his side, throws a slender arm across his middle, shamelessly cuddling. John wraps an arm around his narrow shoulders, presses a kiss to the top of his head.

“So,” Sherlock murmurs. “Adequate?”

“Adequate?!” John exclaims in genuine disbelief. “Sherlock. It’s only our second time together, and you...you...not only were you beyond adequate, you’re apparently some sort of, I don’t know, savant sex genius. Which I guess isn’t surprising, considering how you’re a genius at every damn thing you’ve ever tried.”

Sherlock picks up his head and looks at him sideways through long dark lashes. “Merely a result of careful observation and applying the resulting deductions. Simply put, I pay attention to what you seem to like best, and I just...do those things.”

“You make it sound easy, put like that. But it’s not, and that is what makes you brilliant.”

“Also, I’ve studied your internet history,” Sherlock adds. “Many times over.”

“And that is what makes you a nosy bastard with no respect for normal social boundaries.”

Sherlock gives a huff of soft laughter and drops his head back to John’s chest, clearly not offended in the least.

“Speaking of deductions,” John asks. “Have you deduced which, um, way you prefer it?”

“Whether I prefer bottoming or topping, I’m assuming you mean.”

John feels himself blushing, which is ridiculous, considering what they’d been up to not ten minutes ago. “Yes, that.”

Sherlock contemplates the question for a moment.

“I consider each encounter to be an experiment. Not in the pejorative sense, but in the idea of running multiple trials. You’ve done plenty of lab work, John. Two trials is not nearly enough to draw any kind of accurate conclusions.”

“So how many trials, do you think?” John asks, amused.

“So many.” Sherlock looks up at him and smiles, warm and open, his eyes crinkling at the corners.
“So very many.”

John chuckles, strokes his arm, traces the lines of his deltoid, his bicep. “I absolutely concur.”

The two of them fall silent, warm and relaxed, luxuriating in the moment, in each other.

Sherlock’s weight against him seems to grow heavier, more pliant. He shifts, gives a little sigh.

“Sleepy?” John murmurs.

“A little,” Sherlock admits, which means he must be utterly exhausted. “But I---I hate to break the mood, but I have a lot of work to do. I need to research this Boardwalk Angels gang---”

“God, that name is terrible---”

“I need to learn where they came from, how they rose to prominence so quickly, what I can offer them in exchange for Mary.” Sherlock looks up at him again, and John can see for himself how tired he is, the circles under his eyes inky grey smudges. “I honestly would rather stay here and---”

“Cuddle?”

Sherlock makes a face of annoyed acknowledgment, but it lacks any real malice. “Yes, cuddle.” His expression softens. “In truth, I would much rather. But needs must, and time is passing.”

“We could split the difference,” John counteroffers. “Order some dinner, stay in bed. You don’t need to be dressed to do research on your computer, do you?”

Sherlock briefly considers the proposition.

“I really honestly don’t,” he says by way of agreement.

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John wins the brief, goodnatured tussle over who more desperately needs the loo; “For Christ’s sake, Sherlock, I have come in my beard, and that’s not even the worst of it by half,” is what wins it for him in the end.

John climbs out of the demolished linens; Sherlock magically conjures up a pack of cigarettes, pulling one out and putting it in his mouth as John is rummaging in his bag for his toothbrush.

“Oh, no you are not,” John states flatly without turning back around. “Take that outside.”

“This is not the Ritz-Carlton,” Sherlock protests. “Or even the late, somewhat lamented Fairfield Suites. A single cigarette is not going to make a bit of difference in the overall condition of this structurally unsound rubbish heap.”

“I don’t care. It’s rude and inconsiderate.”

“I am rude and inconsiderate.”


Sherlock sighs in annoyance but tosses the pack down and rises from the bedclothes. He pulls on his jeans before snatching up his cigarettes and crossing the room toward the door.

“Thank you, love,” John says. “Maybe find a Chinese takeaway for us?”
Sherlock answers with a halfhearted glower, but fetches his phone from the desk before exiting the room and shutting the door halfway behind himself.

“Get dumplings,” John calls after him, before going into the bathroom and turning on the shower taps.

He performs the necessary (Oh God, how incredibly necessary) ablutions, then showers thoroughly and carefully and brushes his teeth. He comes back into the room to find Sherlock seated at the desk, already on his laptop, fingers flying over the keyboard.

“Your turn,” John says, crossing the room--walking with a bit more of a wide-legged gait than is usual even for him; he’s already feeling distinctly twinge of discomfort in a very certain place--and pressing a kiss into Sherlock’s messy, matted hair. He makes a face as the aroma of stale smoke and musky sweat rises up to his nose. “Ugh. You’re disgusting.”

“You didn’t think I was disgusting thirty minutes ago,” Sherlock points out with just the barest edge of smugness colouring his tone.

“I was thinking with a completely different part of my anatomy. Now I’ve come to my senses.” John pushes gently at Sherlock’s shoulder. “Go on, now.”

Sherlock closes his laptop, rises from the chair and peels off his hastily pulled-on denims.

“John.”

John is shaking out the sheets, trying to reclaim the wreck they’ve made of the bed. “Yes, love?”

“While I’m in the shower do not, under any circumstances, open that door.”

“I can defend myself perfectly well against Chinese delivery boys, thank you very m--”

“I mean it, John.”

“Fine,” John replies a bit waspishly. “I won’t open the door.”

Sherlock gives him a hard stare.

John sighs and rolls his eyes, then pauses. He reconsiders, viewing Sherlock’s request in light of all they’ve been through.

“I won’t,” he says in a kinder tone. “I promise.”

“Thank you,” Sherlock says as he gathers toiletries from his bag. “Shan’t be long.”

Sherlock proves true to his word. He’s back in the bedroom within ten minutes, scrubbed pink and toweling off his clean wet hair, when a knock sounds on the door. He pulls his jeans back on, turns to his jacket draped over the back of the desk chair.

“Sherlock,” John says warningly as he watches him pull the Glock from the inside pocket of his jacket, shove it into the gap at the back waistband of his jeans. “Do you really think that’s necessary?”

“I’m not taking chances,” Sherlock answers flatly.

“I get that, just...don’t shoot your arse off, please? I really quite enjoy it.”
Sherlock doesn’t answer, instead turning away and plucking his wallet from the top of the bureau before peering through the peephole, then exhaling and finally opening the door a crack.

Turns out the delivery guy is in fact merely a delivery guy; Sherlock pays him in cash, takes the food, locks and bolts the door after him. He brings the bags to the bed, hands them to John, then turns and takes the Glock out of his jeans and places it on top of the bureau.

“Put it away, please,” John says pointedly.

“Yes, mother,” Sherlock grumbles, but he complies, stowing the weapon back in his jacket.

“Now get naked and back into bed,” John tells him. “Right this minute. Doctor’s orders.”

Sherlock grins a bit and does as he’s told, snagging his laptop off the desk before shimmying back under the sheets.

John finds the remote, flicks on the telly, flips through the channels as they eat dumplings and sweet and sour chicken in bed, washed down with cans of Sprite gone lukewarm and a bit flat. It’s full dark outside but still early, just closing in on eight pm, but John is remarkably tired. He supposes getting kidnapped really takes it out of a person.

Sherlock works on his laptop, blue glow reflecting off the pale flesh of his torso, muttering to himself occasionally. John flips through the television channels, finally settling on an old nature documentary. The warm, hushed timbre of David Attenborough’s RP accent is a balm to his system, makes him feel just a little bit more like his old self, like the self he was before Mary, before Mycroft’s death, before leaving 221B one last time, following Sherlock without knowing if they would ever return.

He had been more than a little afraid that self, that life, was lost to him forever. But right here, right now, warm and sated and comfortable, in bed with an undeniably real and naked Sherlock --

(and John’s mind still stutters a little at the reality of it, at the fact that they are together like this, kissing and touching and loving each other, the hugeness of it all still short circuiting his brain if he thinks about it too hard)

-- next to him, he thinks, *Maybe. Just maybe, we can get through this, somehow, and out to the other side, pass through this storm and into the light, into something even better than what we left behind.*

John falls asleep mulling these thoughts, feeling something close to content as Sherlock clicks away on his laptop. In the background, dulcet English tones softly tell tales of the Serengeti plain.

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John wakes to the dim, still grey of a very early morning. He’s warm, too warm, sheets and blanket tangled around his body. Sherlock’s heavy hot weight is pressed against his back; he’s snoring softly into the damp curve of his neck, sleep-sour breath hot against his skin, his morning erection rock hard and undulating gently but insistently into the small of John’s back.

John’s hard, too, achingly so. Partially because he needs a piss, but also because the feel of Sherlock’s naked skin pressed against his own is the most endlessly potent aphrodisiac imaginable, making his cock think it is nineteen again, ready and eager for another round despite what it had gotten up to just a few hours earlier.

John opens one eye, looks down, regards his erect cock with a bemused expression.
Yes, John decides. Definitely ready and eager.

He rolls over onto his other side so he’s facing Sherlock, nuzzles into the scant dark hair on his chest and plants a kiss just above his left nipple. Sherlock shifts, sighs, presses against him, rutting his own impressively hard penis against John’s thigh as he slides a hand between John’s legs, cups his testicles.

“Morning,” Sherlock murmurs, sleep rough and barely awake.

“Morning, love,” John replies, and kisses him on the mouth. Sherlock’s breath is terrible, unbrushed teeth tinged with a leftover trace of old garlic. John could not possibly care less. “You awake?”

“Certain parts, perhaps,” Sherlock purrs softly.

“Shift down a bit, then,” John says, and Sherlock wriggles himself downwards until their erect cocks are pressing together, delicate skin rubbing and sliding with a delicious friction. Far too lazy and sleepy to find the lube, John wets his palm with a few swipes of his tongue and wraps his hand around both of them, making Sherlock buries his face into the curve of John’s neck and shoulder as he makes a sweet, soft sigh of enjoyment.

John strokes them languidly, reveling in the sensation of Sherlock’s hardness rubbing against his own, the saliva on his hand barely more than an additional damp stickiness, giving a rough edge to the sweet, lazy pleasure.

Sherlock grunts into his neck, hips moving in time with John’s strokes.

“That good, love?” John murmurs.

“Yes,” Sherlock breathes, thrusting himself sleepily against the circle of John’s fist. John keeps the pace sweet and unhurried, drawing out the lazy pleasure of it, gazing down to watch their bodies move together, hushed and intimate in the sleepy morning light.

He feels Sherlock’s body tense, feels his cock grow hotter and harder against his own.

“So gorgeous,” he murmurs, watching enraptured as the ripples of sensation play across Sherlock’s face, his eyes closed, his head thrown back as he gives himself over to pleasure. “Come for me, that’s it, so lovely, come for me now--”

And he does, he comes with his head thrown back, lower lip caught between his teeth as he pulses and spills over John’s hand. The sight of is is enough to push John up to the very edge, Sherlock’s seed wet and slick against his cock, and his own climax catches him almost by surprise, the tingling rush of pleasure hot and sudden as he gasps and spills between their bodies.

Their breathing is loud in the early morning stillness of the room as they cuddle and nuzzle at each other, come sticky and drying on hands and bellies and softening cocks.

“Now I really, really need the loo,” John finally mumbles into the front of Sherlock’s shoulder. Neither one makes any attempt to move, though, as sleepy post-morning sex lassitude creeps over them, lulling them back into slumber despite sticky skin and full bladders.

Some indistinct time later, their indolent doze is broken by an unfamiliar chirping ringtone.

It’s coming from the cheap grey flip phone on top of the bureau.
Sherlock stirs, and sighs, just a small, quiet, sad sound.

“I’m sorry,” he says, with palpable regret, and John hears the words he doesn’t say, knows exactly what he’s apologising for. I’m sorry we can’t stay here, in this bubble of sex and cuddling, in this warm, tender mirage of domesticity. I’m sorry we’re not like that. I’m sorry that no matter what, I will always end up dragging you out of bed to chase down chaos and danger and violence. It’s who I am, it is who we are, but...I am sorry.

“It’s all right,” John replies. “It’s time, isn’t it?”

Sherlock opens his eyes and looks at him, and what John sees in those sea-glass eyes is hypnotically complex, a swirl of sorrow and fear and anxiety...but buried somewhere deep underneath it all the flickers the tiny, almost invisible spark of his grim, nihilistic excitement, his longing for the void, his unspoken but always-present compulsion to charge into the valley of darkness and to do battle with the very shadow of death itself.

And it is all right, because John doesn’t hate or resent these confusing, contradictory, destructive urges. He understands them. He shares them. He always has, and he always will.

As if reading John’s thoughts, Sherlock closes his eyes again, nods resignedly.

“Yes,” he says softly. “Yes, I believe it is.”

Chapter End Notes

So many thanks are due to (of course) allonsys_girl for always having great feedback, and also the marvelous thigmotaxis, who was intrepid enough to climb Porn Mountain and make it back down the other side with fantastic spelling, grammar, and phrasing critiques. Both of them made this chapter much better than it would have been otherwise.

EDIT TO ADD: Thanks also to kinklock (ashleigh), who originally came up with the visual of Sherlock dabbing at his lip after truly filthy sexing. Borrowed with permission.

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“Get close to her how?” John asks instead, keeping his tone carefully neutral.

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“In a...professional capacity,” he mutters. “So to speak.”

“Professional. As in...oh, shit. You took a picture to indicate...you mean to put a hit on me.”


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“This is funny?” Sherlock asks archly.

“Well...yes. I mean, the idea of you contracting my estranged assassin wife to take out a hit on me. The whole thing is just...ridiculous, it’s beyond ridiculous and yet. Jesus Christ. It’s not even really out of the ordinary, as far as my life goes, is it?”

9. Atlantic City, Part One

Sherlock climbs out of bed, crossing the small room to pick up the burner phone from the top of the dresser. He hesitates for just the smallest moment before he flips open the cheap clamshell mobile and takes the call.

“Yes,” he says, his tone clipped, dry, all business. “Yes. This is. I need to -- yes, fine.”

He turns, paces restlessly as he listens, seemingly heedless of his utter lack of clothing. John watches him, most of his attention taken up by trying to pick up the thread of the conversation through context clues, but a good twenty percent of his mental processing at the moment is devoted solely to taking full advantage of the opportunity to blatantly ogle Sherlock’s spectacular naked arse at length - - and in motion, no less.

Sherlock listens for several moments, still pacing, then pauses, tilts his head as if in contemplation for a moment before speaking again.

“Yes,” he says again, without any inflection whatsoever. “Agreed.” He ends the call abruptly, tossing the phone back onto the scratched laminate top of the bureau before turning and bending to pick up his bag on the floor next to the desk, unzipping the top to dig through the jumbled contents.

John watches him for a moment, both admiring the flex of the strong muscles in his back and worrying about the too- prominent shadows of his ribs, before bringing his willful, wandering mind
to heel with an audible sigh as he peels himself out of the tangled sheets. He scratches the back of his neck, stretches and yawns as he considers his other pressing bodily needs. A shower is far overdue, and he needs to find clean pants, but --

“First things first,” he mutters to himself, unzipping his own bag perched on the seat of the side chair against the wall nearest the bed. He locates the electric kettle, mugs, and box of tea, takes the kettle into the bathroom and fills it under the bath tap (it won’t fit under the sink spigot) before placing it on the desk.

“That was James, I take it,” he says to Sherlock as he plugs the kettle in.

“It was indeed.” Sherlock digs through his duffel, looking for something passably clean to wear. He pulls out a crumpled tee, regards it with a skeptical eye before bringing it up to his nose for an inquisitive sniff. He makes a face and shakes his head before tossing it back into the duffel and pulling out another, slightly cleaner shirt. “We’ve been summoned.”

“When and where?”

Sherlock moves over to the desk, tosses the shirt aside and opens his laptop. He taps at the keyboard and squints just slightly at the screen.

“All Atlantic City. Four this afternoon. The address James gave me, from what I could gather from the internet, appears to be an unlicensed social club in a residential area. Possibly -- probably -- the Boardwalk Angels headquarters.”

“That name. Jesus.” John places teabags in each mug, then scratches the back of his frowsy, sleep-rumpled head. “Do we have any sugar packets left?”

“If we do, they would be with the tea.”

“None there, but I might have --” John turns away, reaches for his jacket slung across the back of the desk chair and searches the pockets. He finds no sugar but does discover two crumpled, forgotten convenience store cups of half and half that are hopefully still suitable for human consumption.

“Meeting with a known gang leader on his home turf,” he continues as he tears the paper tops off the creamers, checking for freshness with a sniff before pouring one into each cup and adding the boiled water. “Do we have any assurance we’re not going to get shot on sight?”

“None whatsoever,” Sherlock replies, stepping closer to John and slipping a long bare arm around his back in order to snag one of the mugs on the desk. “I’m taking the first shower, if you don’t mind.”

Despite the looming presence of danger on the horizon, or possibly because of it if he’s being honest, the brief press of Sherlock’s naked frame against John’s back is enough to make his cock thicken and twitch in interest -- third time in twelve hours? good Lord -- and he is about to ask if they ought to y’know, save time by showering together, but then Sherlock is already in the bathroom and closing the door before John he can form the question. Upon momentary reflection John recognises that the moment for romance has passed, of course it has. It’s time to work, now, and Sherlock needs clarity of mind, he needs to focus on critical matters at hand without the distraction of…of this new thing they’ve become.

John understands. He does. Intellectually.

It still stings, just a little.
It’s very late in the morning, closing in on noon, when they pack up the car and depart Williamstown in a companionable silence, both men entertain their own thoughts for the moment.

John is pulled out of his reverie when Sherlock turns right off Route 42 into a large strip mall parking lot (and when that so very American phrase flashes in his brain, he summarily decides he’s been in the States for far too long), pulling into an empty space in front of a sprawling Target Supercenter.

“What’s this?” John asks.

“We just need a couple of things,” Sherlock replies vaguely.

“I’ll wait here then.”

“No,” Sherlock says, sharpish, and then looks a bit surprised at his own tone. “I mean. I’d rather if you came in with me.”

John squints at him, momentarily confused, before the clouds part and understanding dawns: Sherlock’s not about to let him out of his sight for a minute if it can possibly be helped.

“Course I will,” he replies, conciliatory, and follows Sherlock into the shop without question.

To John’s surprise, Target more closely resembles Marks and Spencer than the Asda or Tesco clone he expected. He admires the use of flattering full-spectrum lighting and appealing, well-designed displays as he follows Sherlock to the men’s clothing section.

Sherlock stops in front of a rack of hooded sweatshirts and contemplates them silently for a full minute.

“No, too obvious,” is all he says before heading to another nearby display and selecting first a plaid zippered jacket; he then pauses to peruse a clearance-sale end shelf, selecting a grey knit cap bearing some incomprehensible graffiti-inspired brand logo as John hovers uncertainly behind him.

“Put these on,” Sherlock says, thrusting the items into his hands. “And these,” he adds, producing a pair of cheap Ray-Ban knockoffs from a pocket as if by magic.

Several different replies come into John’s mind, including “Not my style, really,” “Why?” And “Good Lord, Sherlock, are you kidding?” but in the end he settles for shrugging and doing as Sherlock says, happening to catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror to the left of the clearance display.

“Oh Christ,” he sighs, put upon and slightly overdramatic. “I look like a pensioner who mugged a member of fucking One Direction.”

“I don’t know who that is,” Sherlock replies, “and I don’t care. Turn three quarters to your right, then walk away from me five steps.”

“I feel like a knob,” John protests, but does as Sherlock asks, albeit with a pointedly martyred, long-suffering sigh.

He turns back around, ready to complain some more, to see Sherlock fiddling surreptitiously with the grey burner phone.

“Something wrong?”
“Thought I heard it. Phantom ringtone phenomenon. Everything is fine.” Sherlock pockets the mobile, not meeting John’s gaze. “Let’s go, we need to be in Atlantic City before four.”

“Please tell me I can take this shit off.”

Now it’s Sherlock’s turn to look put-upon. “Yes, fine, you can take that shit off.”

John takes off the items. “Are we buying these?”

“Yes.”

“What for?”

“Potential disguise.”

“Oh. Fantastic. You do know part of my going to medical school was to avoid ending up a flea-market chav?”

“Your class insecurity is showing, John,” Sherlock remarks, sounding very much the posh, condescending git he’s so very capable of being. John has a sudden, very real impulse to punch him in his patrician nose, but he’s got no desire to tangle with the US legal system at this juncture, so he settles for glaring at the back of his obnoxious neck as they go through the checkout lane and pay for the items.

When they return to the parked car, Sherlock tosses the Target bag carelessly into the back seat and starts the engine.

“What’s all this about then?” John asks, annoyed moment (mostly) past as Sherlock shifts the car into reverse and pulls out of the parking spot.

Sherlock shifts his weight slightly, his body language evasive. “What’s all what about?”

“Come off it, Sherlock. You were taking pictures of me in that council estate getup. Part of your brilliant plan, I take it?”

Sherlock doesn’t insult his intelligence by denying the assertion.

“I’m flattered that you think I have a brilliant plan,” he answers, tone measured. What I have is…” he rocks his head slightly, right to left, a nonverbal communication of ambivalence. “Merely a plan.”

“Something to do with Maria,” John clarifies.

“Obviously.” Sherlock signals and turns onto the main road lights before continuing. “You may need to get close to her without being immediately recognised.”

“Why me and not you?”

“As we’ve discussed before -- you blend, John.”

“Ta for that,” John grumbles, annoyance sparking back into life. “Really.”

“For heaven’s sake,” Sherlock huffs in annoyance. “We’ve been through this. It’s not an insult; it’s both a valuable skill and a useful tool.”

*You’re a useful tool* is on the tip of John’s annoyed tongue, but he manages to bite back the childish retort through sheer force of will.
“Get close to her how?” He asks instead, keeping his tone carefully neutral.

Sherlock has the good grace to look guiltily uncomfortable.

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Sherlock shakes his head, tries to look offended, but can’t keep a fleeting smile off the corner of his mouth.

“I’m glad you’re taking it so well,” Sherlock murmurs dryly after a moment.

The moment of levity passes, and John seriously considers the merits of the plan for a moment. “She won’t fall for it, though. Will she?”

“I don’t know. If she’s still ill and still compromised, perhaps. Or more likely, she may recognise you on sight, and follow through just to take you -- and by extension me -- out of the picture.”

“Which we’re not going to allow.”

“Which we are absolutely not going to allow.”

“Well, that’s...good, right?”

“No, it’s not,” Sherlock replies with an air of resignation, as he picks up the pack of cigarettes, shakes one out, lights it one-handed. “None of it is good. It’s all completely terrible, it we’re being honest. But we’re playing the hand we’re dealt. Do you want coffee?”

They stop at a Starbucks for coffee (black with four sugars for Sherlock, and a grande macchiato with a pain au chocolat alongside for John), then a few miles down the road Sherlock finds the marked on ramp and turns right, merging onto the Atlantic City Expressway a few minutes before two pm.

They make their way down the highway at a hair over 65 miles per hour, the passing scenery rapidly shifting from distinctly rough-edged urban to evergreen woodlands, empty for the most part of houses or people. The sun sinks lower behind them, midday brightness giving way to the more burnished yellow-gold of later afternoon.

“It’s positively wild out here,” John observes. “Wasn’t really expecting that.”

“The Pine Barrens of New Jersey,” Sherlock replies. “Over a million acres of undeveloped forest,
right in the middle of the most urbanised region of North America.”

“I had no idea this existed,” John says.

“Not many do. There’s even a local cryptid legend, dating back to Revolutionary days. The Jersey Devil. Bipedal, horned, with wings and a forked tail. Born of a witch, it emits a bloodcurdling scream and kills livestock in the dead of night.”

John laughs, then looks over at Sherlock. His face is set and serious.

“You don’t actually believe that rot. I know you don’t.”

Sherlock looks at him sideways, raises an eyebrow.

“No,” John says with a disbelieving chuckle and a shake of his head. “No way.”

“One time for a case, Mycroft granted me access to some very interesting...files. Containing evidence of some truly astonishing events. Those files, John. They changed me.”

“Were those particular files called *X-files*, by any chance?”

“I can’t reveal much, of course, but that particular case was in Scotland. Up north, holiday country, mysterious creature sightings in a large, deep lake. Well, not so much a lake... *loch* is the correct term, I believe.”

John purses his lips in mock disapproval. “You’re a sodding liar, Sherlock Holmes.”

Sherlock doesn’t quite laugh, but he huffs a little amused breath, and John can see a spark of mirth in his eyes.

“I would never lie about such important things, John.”

“Of course you do. I’ll just call you Fox Mulder, shall I?”

“Who?” Sherlock asks, and John can’t quite tell if Sherlock is joking or not.

“We watched it together? The show where -- nevermind. Someone on telly almost as smart and handsome as you are, darling.”

Sherlock gives him a sideways glance at John’s arch tone. “You’re mocking me. You oughtn’t. In fact, I’ve been thinking. I may just give up detective work for cryptozoology.”

“Is that so?”

“Indeed it is. Consulting paranormal expert. I’ll need an assistant, of course. If you’re interested.”

The studied, subtle silliness of it all makes John laugh, open and genuine.

“Opportunity of a lifetime,” John replies. “I couldn’t pass that up.”

Sherlock smiles, the crows-feet at the edges of his eyes crinkling in fond, amused pleasure, and the sight of it warms John’s heart.

The silence that follows is easier than before, more companionable. The miles pass, and sooner than expected the piney woods begin to give way to salt marsh, shore birds perched at the edges of shining estuaries winding through reeds, wind turbines dotting the flat beige landscape as the high
rise hotels of Atlantic City emerge on the horizon.

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The hotels lining Pacific Avenue are huge and sparkling, neon-lit and garish even in broad daylight. Just a few blocks away, though, the facade crumbles rapidly, and the squalid edges peek out from under the cracks in the colourful veneer, poverty and neglect obvious in both the buildings and the people lounging in the doorways and loitering on street corners.

John can see how many others might see this streetscape as dangerous; mostly, however, it just makes him feel strangely bereft, hollow and sad somewhere deep in the core of his being.

“Gambling was supposed to save this town,” Sherlock murmurs. “Bring in jobs, bring in money. But the employees come in on buses from across the state, and the money is sent elsewhere as fast as it is made. Classic long con from the politicians and their friends in organised crime.”

“Mafia?”

“Used to be, until the early oughts, but over the past decade Italian organised crime has steadily lost power and influence, not just here but across the entire Northeast. In Atlantic City, a number of smaller gangs are coming in to try and fill that vacuum. It was a mess before, to be sure, but it was a mess with a one strong entity in charge. Now it’s just a bunch of dogs squabbling over a bone. Keep an eye out for Tennessee Avenue.”

After passing the address twice in an attempt to find a near-ish place to park the car, Sherlock acquiesces and finds a spot several streets over. The afternoon is growing chilly; John wishes he had a warmer jacket as the two of them walk against the direction in the win for three blocks, ending up in front of a blank wall of cheap tan stucco at the end of a residential street, the expanse broken only by a grey reinforced steel door set in the centre and two fortress-like barred windows placed high up, just under the soffit.

“Oh Sherlock,” John mutters as they approach the forboding facade. “You take me to the nicest places.”

Sherlock doesn’t waste breath answering, instead going straight for the door handle and pulling hard.

It’s locked, to John’s absolute lack of surprise.

Sherlock considers this development for a moment, eyes narrowed, visibly annoyed at being thwarted in this fashion. He raises a closed fist, knocks on the street door.

The hollow, clanging sound is surprisingly loud on the quiet residential street.

Nothing happens for twenty seconds. Thirty.

Almost a full minute later, with no warning, they hear the buzz and click of an electronic lock being activated.

Sherlock pulls on the handle again. This time it opens easily.

The interior is dark and forbidding, compared to the sunlit pavement.

John takes a deep breath, squares his shoulders, schools his features into stern, focused seriousness and follows Sherlock into the gloom. The door clangs shut behind them, and the sound strikes John
as more than slightly menacing.

Well before his eyes can fully adjust to the dimness, a large, shadowy slab of man appears squarely in front of them as if from nowhere. He holds up a large hand, pushes it towards Sherlock but does not actually touch him.

“No weapons past this point, gentlemen,” the bouncer rumbles.

Now that his eyes are beginning to adapt, John can see the bouncer has a shiny bald head -- the coloured LED lights lining the bar shelves are reflected in its polished gleam -- small thick gold hoop earrings, a black turtleneck and trousers, and a professionally amicable expression.

“We have an appointment,” Sherlock informs the bouncer. “With James Martinez.”

“I know you do. I wouldn’t have let you in otherwise. Still need your weapons.”

Sherlock glances over at John; their eyes meet, unspoken communication passes between them, as loud and clear to each other as spoken words.

A microscopically raised eyebrow, the incline of Sherlock’s head an eighth of an inch towards the door. *If this isn’t okay, John, we can walk away and regroup.*

A minute shake of John’s head, a pursing of lips. *If we refuse to hand over weapons, this could get ugly quickly. Plus, this is our most direct route to Maria, and we’ve wasted far too much time already. Let’s roll the dice here.*

Sherlock closes his eyes for a half second, inclines his chin two or three degrees.: *Agreed. Let’s do this.*

“I’m reaching for my weapon,” Sherlock announces, and slowly reaches into his jacket pocket, pulls out his Glock, hands it over butt-first to the man.

‘Need to pat you down,” the bouncer says. Sherlock merely nods, raising his arms.

The bouncer proceeds to pat Sherlock down, checking thoroughly -- a bit too thoroughly, according to the jealous demon on John’s shoulder -- for weapons.

He finds none, steps back.

“All right,” he says.

“Eh, I’ve had better,”’ Sherlock says with just the barest trace of saucy insolence, and John has to duck his head to hide the involuntary grin on his lips. The bouncer looks at both of them sharply, then dismisses it with a shake of his bald, shiny head.

“Your turn,” the bouncer says and John complies, handing over his gun and submitting to a thorough pat down. The bouncer steps back and nods.

“Follow me, gentlemen.”

Sherlock and John fall into step behind the huge man -- six feet five if he’s an inch -- as he crosses the dim, mostly-empty room, heading toward the lacquered wooden bar that runs along the length of the far wall.

The club has that forlorn, abandoned feel that all watering holes have in the daylight hours; the only light is what filters in from the two high, narrow windows at the front of the building, the blue LEDs
outlining the shelves of liquor, and the incidental glow of of the television above the bar, showing what appears to be some sort of women’s talk show, the guests chattering at each other in rapid, animated Spanish. A petite, attractive olive-skinned woman in a spaghetti strap tank top and shoulder-brushing hoop earrings is watching the program as she distractedly wipes down glassware with a white towel.

“Sonia, lock box, por favor,” the bouncer politely, and from the way Sonia looks up at the man and smiles, with warmth that lights up her brown eyes, John knows with absolute certainty the two of them are either already surreptitiously sleeping together, or will be very, very soon.

(He briefly wonders if he and Sherlock are that obviously smitten with each other, and decides they probably absolutely are, and have been forever, and he shakes his head mentally at their mutual staggering obliviousness.)

“Sure,” Sonia says, bending to pull a black steel box from under the bar with a combination lock set into the front. She flips the dials expertly with her thumb, and flips the lid open, turns the opened box towards the bouncer. He places the guns in the box, closes the lid and rolls the dials with a careless swipe of the side of his hand.

“Thanks, mami,” he murmurs, giving Sonia a smile as warm and private as the one she favoured him with a moment earlier.

She nods, taking back the box and stowing it back under the bar, then turning away without further conversation.

“This way,” the bouncer says to John and Sherlock over his shoulder, and leads them toward the back, past two pool tables, to a door marked “employees only.”

At one of the tables, two bored-looking, clearly unfriendly men stop their pool game to give them a decidedly unimpressed eye. John returns their stares, eyes steady, head held high as he passes.

The bouncer opens the “employees only” door, leads them down a short hallway to a plain, unmarked black door. John notices immediately this door is painted steel, not wood, and secured with a professionally-installed deadbolt.

Serious business is conducted behind a door like this.

The bouncer knocks.

“Come in,” a male voice calls.

The bouncer opens the door just slightly.

“Yo, JayJay. You got guests?” The bouncer’s inflection rises at the end, deferential and questioning.

“Sure thing,” the voice replies. The bouncer opens the door wider and steps back, indicating with a sweep of his hand that Sherlock and John should enter.

So they do, Sherlock in the lead and John behind.

The office is warmer, neater and more brightly lit than the main area of the club. The walls are painted paneling; beneath their feet is a clean, elegant laminated dark woodgrain flooring. A tank of tropical fish -- John would guess maybe fifty gallons, but he knows very little of aquariums -- takes up most of the wall to their right, a black overstuffed sofa against the left. The far wall of the room is dominated by a sixty-inch plasma TV showing a video game currently on pause.
There is a man seated at the end of the couch, holding a PlayStation controller; older, relatively speaking, but not quite as old as John, perhaps mid-thirties. His Caribbean ancestry is obvious in the medium olive tone of his skin and the wavy kink in his black hair, pulled tightly back into a ponytail. The collar of his dark blue dress shirt is open at the throat, displaying a crucifix pendant on a heavy gold chain. The material pulls slightly too tight across an expanding waistline, indicating recent weight gain; his goatee is carefully curated to hide an incipient double chin.

As Sherlock and John enter the room, Blue Shirt puts aside the game controller and picks up the small handgun lying next to him on the black couch, keeping his eyes glued on Sherlock and John.

“We’re cool,” says a younger, slimmer man seated behind a black lacquered desk set diagonally into the corner of the room, his eyes not leaving the laptop in front of him.

Blue Shirt nods but doesn’t put the gun away, cradling it in his lap instead. His intent gaze is fixed on Sherlock and John, not wavering for even a moment.

The man behind the narrow black desk has the undeniable but unmistakable aura of being the one in charge here. He’s young, probably not quite thirty, undeniably handsome with caramel skin and high cheekbones, dark thick hair shaved close on the sides and swept into a carefully shellacked pompadour on top. His gunmetal grey shirt is snug across well-developed pectorals, the shirtsleeves folded carefully back to reveal forearms encircled in tattoos, professional and clearly amateur stick-and-poke work existing side by side.

The man looks up at the pair, expression carefully, blankly neutral as he visually catalogues them carefully from head to toe.

“Sherlock Holmes,” he says, but does not rise or offer his hand. His voice is polite, almost jovial, but the false bonhomie doesn’t reach his cold eyes. “Lou asked me to meet you. You’ve kept me waiting, my man.”

“No, I haven’t,” Sherlock says, his voice flat and dismissive. “Our agreed meeting time was four pm. It is now three fifty-six. You saying that I made you wait is a common negotiating tactic intended to put me on the defensive, giving you the upper hand in this interaction. An obvious, ham-fisted attempt at manipulation, and one I decline to participate in. Thanks anyway.”

The man nods, slowly, looking impressed rather than offended. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Mister Holmes. So far, what they say about you is true.”

“That you’re smart and also a real asshole. And you don’t go anywhere without your little boyfriend trailing in your shadow.”

The man on the couch sniggers, quiet but still audible. John’s blood pressure spikes; he clasps his hands behind his back, forcing himself to stay at parade rest, face impassive, not betraying his desire to smash the arrogance right off the smug prick’s bloated, stupidly goateed face.

“I freely admit to being an unrepentant arsehole,” Sherlock replies. “But I’m not smart, I’m brilliant, thank you very much, and I assure you John Watson lives in nobody’s shadow. So you’re one out of three, which is not terribly impressive overall.”

Martinez leans back. “Brilliant, huh?”

“Indisputably.”
Martinez leans back in his chair, waves a grandiose hand.

“Go on then, London. Impress me.”

Sherlock fixes the man with a penetrating stare for a long moment, then turns away, paces four steps, and pauses briefly before turning to face him again.

“James ‘JayJay’ Martinez is the name you currently go by. You run the Boardwalk Angels street gang; it remains an independent entity at this moment, but you’re protected by shrewdly-negotiated affiliations with the Latin Kings, as well as strong ties to Ukranian organised crime families in Philadelphia and New York.

“The story you’ve spread around says you’re from the rough streets of Baltimore, but that’s not quite true, is it? You were born James Winters. Your mother is a critical care nurse from Puerto Rico, you father is a cardiothoracic surgeon, both employed at Walter Reed Medical Center. You’re telling a partial truth about being from the Baltimore area, more or less, but you didn’t grow up on a North Avenue street corner like you claim. Rather, the not-so-mean suburban streets of Bethesda are what you called home.

“Why do you lie about your upbringing? It's what you do. You’re a compulsive liar, and extraordinarily good at it. You’ve never been caught, though you’ve come close. You’ve managed to skate away into a new town, a new life, every time, just before the noose closes around your neck.

“You’ve hopped across the country, put on and shed identities like old tee shirts. Killer Evans. Jay Morecroft. James Garrideb. And now JayJay Martinez. Today you’re playing at this stylised urban fantasy, a romanticised and frankly stereotyped vision of your Latino heritage..but that’s as much a false identity as the others.

“Because you’re not really a gangster, are you, James? You’re a grifter. ID theft, bank fraud, online credit card rackets. You recently lost a considerable sum in the Bitcoin meltdown, hence the move back into real world crime. You’re educated -- William and Mary College, BA in Economics, 2005 - - and possess true insight into the nexus of money and human psychology. When you learned of the power vacuum that currently exists in Atlantic City organised crime, you immediately saw the potential of it all: the money that goes through this city every day, the vast amount available to be stolen or skimmed or embezzled here.

“You’re on a Robin Hood lark now -- stealing from the rich and crooked to give back to the poor and downtrodden in this sad, garish little town, and making a fortune for yourself while you’re at it -- but that’s not the real you either, is it? That’s not what drives you. What drives you is the rush -- the thrill of of slipping into a new identity, the high of making suckers believe the lies you tell them. That’s the real game for you, isn’t it, Mister Martinez?”

In the course ofSherlock unspooling his deduction, the civil, amicable, slightly amused expression on Martinez’s face has hardened into a slightly terrifying frozen rictus.

“How the fuck do you…” Martinez exhales, hard, his voice tight and pissed off. “Someone ratted me out to you. Had to have.”

“Nope,” Sherlock informs him loftily. “Some of it, I learned through my informal but very high-placed sources. The rest I saw in your manicure, the tattoo on your left wrist, the expensive veneers on your teeth, and the scar over your right eye.” He grins at Martinez, breaking his indifferent demeanor just for a moment, and John knows that grin like he knows the back of his own hand. It’s Sherlock’s grin of pure pleasure at doing what he does best, of being clever, of winning.
John is also becoming very very aware of how unarmed and outnumbered they are, and how many locked doors they are currently behind. The metrics of it all are...not good. To say the very very least.

From behind his desk, Martinez glowers at Sherlock’s glee, dark brown eyes narrowed into slits.

“You just laid out all my secrets, motherfucker,” he spits, cutting his eyes briefly at the man seated on the sofa. The man rises, with surprising speed despite his pudge, and cocks his gun unnecessarily, holding it sideways, point-blank range at Sherlock’s head.

“If you’re so damn brilliant, Holmes,” Martinez continues, “explain to me why I should let you walk out of here alive with my secrets in your head.”

Sherlock jaw snaps shut and he goes very very still, and John suddenly understands that Sherlock has once again, for all his intelligence, let his desire to be clever very much get in the way of the more immediate short term goal of not getting fucking shot.

Which means, getting out of this is going to be entirely up to John.

He finds sight of the gun aimed at Sherlock’s skull is quite motivating, and it takes him less than half a second to decide on a plan of action.

“All heads swivel to focus on him.

“Yes?” Martinez says, annoyed.

John raises a placating hand, takes another step forward.

“There’s something important I’d like to share.”

Martinez looks skeptical and more than a little condescending. “What?”

“First of all,” John begins, then pivots on his left foot, kicks Blue Shirt squarely in the back of the knee with the side of his right. He disarms the larger man easily as he goes down, then elbows him hard in the nose just for fun. Blue Shirt collapses to the ground, inelegant as a sack of hammers.

Gun in right hand, John kneels on Blue Shirt’s back, wrenches his left arm back hard enough to feel the resistance in the man’s elbow, only a few pounds of pressure away from a truly impressive spiral fracture.

Breathing a bit heavily, John points the gun at the man behind the desk and continues. “Mister Martinez is going to put his hands up where we all can see them, well away from that piece under his desktop he’s reaching for.”

Eyeing John warily, the man complies, raising his hands in the air and pushing away from the desk. Sherlock moves forward and retrieves the gun from under the desk, steps back, thumbing off the safety and aiming it carefully at Martinez. His index finger is well away from the trigger, which pleases John.

“Second of all,” John continues, and looks down at the man he is currently kneeling upon. “The thing is, Frank -- you look like a Frank to me. Can I call you Frank?”

“My name is Nestor,” the man on the ground gasps.
“The thing is, Frank, when a person holds a gun sideways like that, you know what that tells a trained military professional? Two things. One, That you learned every single damn thing you know about firearms from shit gangster movies; and two, you’ve never actually fired a handgun in your entire pointless, posturing life. All that put together, Frank, tells me you aren’t a serious man, and let me explain something to you: when it comes to arseholes who point a gun at my boyfriend’s head, I am a very serious fucking man indeed. And right this moment -- ” John twists Frank’s arm up just a fraction of an inch higher against his back, making him emit a pained, high-pitched squeal -- “this very serious man is very seriously considering breaking your ulna in about seven places unless you apologise to Sherlock Holmes right this fucking second.”

“I apologise Mister Holmes, sir, I do,” the man pants, eyes wide and watering with pain. “I’m so sorry, I really am, I apologise -- ”

“I believe that will do,” Sherlock says evenly. John nods and rises; with Sherlock keeping a weapon trained on Martinez, John keeps his newly acquired gun pointed squarely at Nestor, although at the moment the man is moaning, maybe sniffling a little bit as well, and generally not looking like much of a threat to anyone at the moment.

For all the commotion, Martinez looks positively unruffled as he focuses on John as if seeing him for the first time.

“Impresionante,” he murmurs with clear admiration, though John doesn’t understand the words. “Sí, impresionante. Para un pequeñito pato.”

Though Martinez’s tone is one of approval, from the way Sherlock’s expression shifts instantly from a studied, cool blandness to murderous fury informs John something truly insulting was just uttered.

“No se atreva,” Sherlock growls sharply at Martinez, and John can’t help a bit of a double take at the new bit of information that Sherlock speaks Spanish.

To his further surprise, Martinez gives a genuine laugh, spreads his hands in a placating gesture.

“Naw, man, we’re cool, okay? My favorite uncle growing up was a fag. I got nothing against y’all if you can roll. And your little dude? Is one seriously badass little pato.” He shifts his attention over to John. “Much respect, Doctor Watson. I mean that sincerely.”

“All right,” John says calmly, surface blandness concealing the fact that he has very little solid grasp of what’s going on in the current moment. “Thanks, I guess.”

“Anytime,” Martinez replies, remarkably congenial considering the situation.

The man on the floor flops onto his side, groaning and clutching his arm, reminding the others in the room of his presence. Martinez rolls his eyes.

“Nestor, for fuck’s sake, stop whimpering, it ain’t broken.” He returns his attention to Sherlock. “Now, gentlemen, seeing as you have the upper hand, at least for the moment. What can I help you with today?”

“We want to know where to find you newest employee,” Sherlock states without preamble. “The woman you likely know as Maria Kochencko.”

“La Serpiente?” Martinez laughs. “I don’t have the faintest damn idea where to find her. “

“She’s in Atlantic City working for you,” Sherlock points out. “I’d think you’d have some idea of her general whereabouts.”
“Dude, do I look like I have a fucking HR department here? That’s not how this works. I’ve never even seen her in person. That was part of the arrangement. I agreed to take her on as a favor to Lou, but I know she must be compromised or something from how eager Lou was to get rid of her. It’s purely a long-distance relationship. The less I know about Maria Kochencko, the better this goes for me.”

Sherlock tilts his head, studies his face, plainly skeptical.

Martinez spreads his hands wide in supplication. “Believe me, Mister Holmes, I’m not in the habit of lying when a man is pointing my own gun in my face.”

“I suspect you’re in the habit of lying in every circumstance,” Sherlock replies, then studies his face a moment before nodding once. “But it appears this is one of the rare occasions you’re telling the truth.”

“So can you lower the piece? Gesture of goodwill.”

Sherlock shakes his head, his expression rueful and a bit condescending. “Afraid not.”

Martinez sighs. “I don’t have what you want,” he says. “So where do you hope to go from here?”

“Ah, but you do,” Sherlock replies.

“Which is?”

“I wish to contract Maria’s services.”

It is Martinez’s turn to look skeptical. “Gun in my face or no, that kind of wetwork’s gonna cost you, and dearly. Twenty grand, cash.” It is his turn to be condescending has he looks Sherlock up and down, takes in his ratty jeans and faded tee. “You got that kind of chavos, Mister Holmes?”

“No,” Sherlock says crisply. “I’ve got something better.”

James’ well-manicured eyebrows raise in not-very-polite disbelief.

“Try me,” he says, clearly unconvinced.

Sherlock reaches into his jacket pocket with his unoccupied left hand, pulls out a dark grey USB drive.

“Secrets,” he says, tossing the drive into the air and catching it, the very picture of nonchalance. “Every member of City Council, every district attorney, every prosecutor. The chief of police. The mayor. Development contracts, gentrification plans, secret sweetheart deals. Every corner of this town is riddled with crony corruption, and all the information you need to take advantage of it is right here. You want to play Robin Hood, Mister Martinez? With data like this, you would have leverage over every deep pocket and every decision maker in Atlantic City. You could be the king of this sad little sandbox, if you so wished.”

Martinez leans back, crosses his arms. “And that’s all of it, right there?”

The horizontal line between Sherlock’s brows deepen as he gives James the most civil of sneers. “Of course not.” He tosses the drive carelessly onto the black lacquered desktop. “A quarter of the information is currently viewable. A taste, if you will, in order to prove the quality of my product. The rest is encrypted. The public half of a PGP key is on the drive. After I have what I want, I will give you the private key -- which is, of course, only stored right up” -- he taps the left side of his
Martinez picks up the drive, studies it briefly, then shrugs and slots it into the USB port. The room is silent for a few minutes as he scans the first several pages of information, eyes sliding left to right across the screen, assessing, calculating.

“All right,” he says with a nod, closing the laptop and looking up at Sherlock. “You got a deal. Who’s the lucky target?”

Sherlock gestures at John with a tilt of his head. “Him.”

John opens his mouth, though he doesn’t know if it’s to protest or laugh. Sherlock cuts his eyes at him, sharply. John gets the message and stays silent.

Martinez shrugs. “You seem like a happy couple to me, but hey, whatever. Your ass on the line, literally. How will she know who she’s looking for?”

Sherlock stows the gun at the back of his waistband, pulls the burner phone from his front jeans pocket and flips it open. A few key taps later, a ringtone trills from under a handful of papers on Martinez’s desk.

Martinez pushes the papers aside, swipes at the screen, looks up at John.

“This is you?”

“Yes.”

“This is...so not the look for you, compay.”

John shrugs one shoulder. Don’t I know it.

“Okay,” Martinez says. “Whatever. Long as I get paid, this is between y’all, not me. When and where is this transaction to take place?”

“Tonight. I’ll text you a time frame and location before eight pm.”

“That works.”

“Our true names and information will be kept out of the transaction,” Sherlock intones severely.

“Of course,” Martinez replies. “As long as you keep my name--names--out of yours.”

“Of course,” Sherlock says. He removes the clip from Martinez’s gun, pockets it before placing the firearm back on the desktop. “I believe we’re done here.”

“Just one more thing,” John pipes up.

All heads swivel to look at him, surprised, including the still-sniveling Nestor crumpled on the floor.

“Yes, Doctor Watson?” James responds, all politeness.

“This gun.” John gestures with the firearm for emphasis. “Small, lightweight, easy to conceal. I really like it. I think I’d like to keep it. Sherlock, what do you think?”

“Ruger LCP, correct?” Sherlock asks.
“Yes.”

“How much is it worth, retail?”

“Not especially sure. It’s not expensive. No more than three hundred, American, through legitimate
channels.”

Sherlock digs into his jacket pocket, pulls out his wallet, peels off a handful of hundreds and places
them on the desktop next to Martinez’s handgun. “Not that you paid retail, I’m sure, but this should
more than compensate you.”

“And the ankle holster as well,” John adds.

Martinez nods somewhat absently as he counts the banknotes. “Sure, ‘mano. Nestor, give Doctor
Watson what he wants.”

Nestor is recovered enough from his injuries to glare at John as he unstraps the holster from his leg
and hands it over.

“Truly a pleasure doing business,” John says, smiling thinly as he shoves both the small gun and the
holster inelegantly into his inside jacket pocket. “Sherlock, anything else to add?”

“Nothing at all.” Sherlock turns to the door, opens it. “I’ll be in touch.”

Neither of the men bother to bid them adios, but they do allow Sherlock and John leave the office
without impediment, which is plenty enough of a victory to satisfy John.

At the bar Sonia opens up the lockbox, returns their Glocks without eye contact or a word of
conversation.

“Pleasant evening, gentlemen,” the amiable bouncer murmurs, holding the steel door open for them
as they take their leave.

They make their way to the alley where the Focus is parked in silence.

As soon as they’re back in the car, Sherlock pulls out his phone, his real one, not his old phone left
behind in London but the unlocked iPhone he picked up all the way back in Scranton, a million
years in the past but in reality a little less than two weeks ago.

He dials.

“We’re good,” he says by way of greeting. “I sent the photo, metadata and tracking app embedded.
You should be able to --”

Sherlock listens silently to whoever is on the other end of the call, and what he is hearing is
obviously not welcome news, the line between his brows deepening with every passing moment as
his expression grows darker, verging on homicidal.

“No,” he snaps. “No, I do not have to understand a damned thing. We have an agreement in place,
and I don’t --” He closes his eyes, rubs them with shaking fingers. “This has nothing to do with --
you know what? Fine. Forget it. Forget it, and thank you for absolutely bloody fucking nothing.”

He ends the call and just stares at his white knuckles gripping the steering wheel, his breathing
shallow and ragged. For a fleeting moment he looks so enraged John fears he’s going to hit
something, or scream, or smash his phone into the window.
“Are you all right?” John asks, tentative and awkward.

“No,” Sherlock mutters around the filter of an unlit cigarette, and doesn’t elaborate further as he starts the engine and pulls away from the kerb.

He takes a right turn, merging them onto a road taking them past huge, sweeping mirrored towers -- the Borgata and the Yacht Club on the northern end of the strip, according to Apple Maps -- and over a bridge stretched across a wide inlet of calm shining water.

“Where are we going?” John asks when Sherlock’s breathing evens and his visage returns to something slightly less murderous.

“We have a few hours before the arranged rendezvous. Atlantic City is a small town and we need to reduce even the unlikely possibility of Mary spotting us. Plus, I thought maybe you’d like to see the ocean.”

The island on the other side of the bridge is home to a cozy seaside hamlet, a sleepy beach town which is feels light years removed from the gaudy, vulgar neighbor next door. The shadows are lengthening, twilight encroaching as Sherlock pulls into a sparsely populated car park marked “Public Beach Access -- Permit Required”.

“It’s not yet high season,” Sherlock replies to John’s unasked question as he pulls into an empty space and kills the engine. “We’re fine here.”

The walk between the dunes to the beach is longer than John anticipated, and the spring air is growing chilly as evening approaches. Soon however, he begins to hear the sound of crashing surf and smell the scent of salt water in the air, and a few moments later they emerge from between bristly, low-slung scrub pines out onto a wide white beach.

The water stretches to the horizon in an unbroken line. The breakers are rough, foamy knee-high waves crashing into the sand and receding, over and over again in an endless loop. A gibbous moon hangs low and yellow over the eastern horizon. To their right, several miles away, the illuminated hotel towers of Atlantic City are silhouetted against the fading orange and mauve of the evening sky, boxy slabs projecting huge, moving images across their facades like eerie hundred-metre tall silent movies.

The two of them survey the scene quietly for a minute. The breeze ruffling John’s hair is chilly and brisk, leaving the taste of salt lingering on his lips.

“This is beautiful,” John murmurs. “I really didn’t -- I don’t know what I expected, really. But considering what we’ve seen so far, this is... this is lovely.”

“It truly is,” Sherlock says quietly, his tone a little remote and preoccupied as he bends over to take off his trainers and socks. John follows suit before the two of them walk across the beach, cool sand squishing between their bare toes.

Sherlock selects a spot just above the tide line and lowers himself with ridiculous grace, seating himself tailor style on the sand. John joins him, grimacing a little as he sits, a sharp twinge reminding him of last night’s rather...arduous activities. Sherlock looks over at him, his face creasing ever so slightly into a shadow of a genuine grin, understanding dawning as John attempts to gingerly rearrange himself into a more comfortable position.

“Shut up, berk,” John grumbles without heat, waving off the hand Sherlock offers. “This is your fault, remember."
“I couldn’t possibly forget.”

“Don’t you dare sit there and smirk.”

“I’m smirking because I couldn’t possibly forget.”

“Arrogant arse,” John mutters, but there’s a definite fondness in his tone as he arranging his legs primly in front of him, shifting around slightly and finally locating a comfortable position as he leans back on his elbows with a sigh. “Damn good thing it was worth it.”

Sherlock answers with a single low, huffed breath of laughter.

John’s toes are growing chilly; he wiggles them deep into the damp sand. Sherlock does the same, then wraps his long arms around his bent knees and gazes silently out over the ocean.

John replays the events of the afternoon back in his mind, finds himself coming back to a singular question. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Sherlock tilt his head just slightly, anticipating his query.

“Clarify some things for me?” John asks.

“Of course,” Sherlock replies instantly.

John blows out a breath. “Martinez -- or Winters, or whoever he is -- obviously knows the contract is a route for us to get to Maria?”

“Yes.”

“And he knows who we are. He knows we’re looking to take her down, one way or another.”

“Yes.”

“Then why would he agree to the hit, clearly knowing we intend to take out his newly-acquired resource?”

Sherlock scoops up a handful of sand, lets it sift through long fingers. “Two different scenarios strike me as likely. First, that he has made the same assessment as Lou Andrews: that Maria is bound to attract attention from the feds sooner rather than later, and giving her up now gets him out of the line of fire. Or second: he’s working the longer angle, and he’s is betting Maria is going to make it worth his while for him to ensnare us, take us out of the picture one way or the other.”

John nods, completely unsurprised with Sherlock’s assessment. “That would mean we’re walking into a bloody trap.”

“It would.”

“Which do you reckon is more likely?”

“Will you…” Sherlock dips his head, looks at the sand, rather than at John. “Will you think drastically less of me if I tell you I don’t know?”

“You really don’t?”

Sherlock shakes his head, eyes still downcast. “I really don’t. “

“Of course I won’t,” John says. “Sherlock. Of course I won’t.”
“Thank you,” Sherlock says, sincere, voice stripped of all arrogance.

John leans his just slightly against Sherlock, their shoulders and arms pressing together. “So an inventory, then. What do we know, at the moment?”

“No as much as I -- ” Sherlock falls silent for a moment, then takes a deep breath, blows it out, steeling himself. “The picture I took of you. The one I gave to Martinez. The metadata on it is tagged and embedded with micro-footprint tracking spyware. If he gives it to Maria, both of them would be, theoretically, trackable by a larger organization that had the hardware and resources to devote to the task.”

John nods. “So someone larger is backing us up. Who is it, then? Your connections back home, possibly MI6? Or is it the Americans, the Feds, or the CIA?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer immediately, raking his fingers through the sand.

Impulse makes John want to pepper him with more questions; experience tells him the way to get Sherlock to open up is to wait it out, to be patient, rather than badger him to try and draw it out.

“No,” Sherlock finally says, short and simple.

“No?” John echoes, inflection rising in query.

Sherlock looks up, out over the horizon and shakes his head, once. They sit in silence for a considerable time, watching the fat yellow moon rise over the water as evening deepens into night.

John waits.

“I thought we had help coming,” Sherlock finally says. “And as it happens, I was...thoroughly, spectacularly mistaken.”

“I didn’t know -- I don’t -- I’m sorry, Sherlock. I don’t quite follow.”

“The phone call In the car, after we left the club. Previously, I had made a verbal arrangement for backup when we moved in on Maria. When pressed, my connection...reneged on the arrangement.” He scrubs a hand through his short, messy hair, ruffling it into spiky clumps. “I was informed this operation has been deemed a quote, personal vendetta gone off the rails, unquote. Not worth the exposure MI6 would face operating unauthorised on American soil.” He swallows, blows out a breath. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Our deus ex machina is gone, and we live in a different world now. I need to adjust to that reality.”

John doesn’t quite know how to answer, so he says nothing.

The two of them coexist silently for a time, each thinking their own thoughts as the waves crash and recede against the sand.

“I’m sorry, John.” Sherlock’s voice is flat, resigned. “I thought I had an advantage, and I don’t. Not any longer.”

John turns his head, sees the tight set of Sherlock’s lovely jawline as he keeps his head turned away, avoiding John’s gaze.

Rather than answering in words, he slides his hand into the space between their legs, interlaces his fingers with Sherlock’s long thinner ones, made cool by the sand. His expression doesn’t change, but he doesn’t pull away. After a moment he squeezes John’s hand once, a brief, fleeting pressure.
“I don’t know if…” Sherlock continues, then pauses, considers his words. “John. The absolute truth is, all bravado aside, I truly don’t know what we’re getting ourselves into. These are dangerous waters and I’m not willing to risk your safety for some sort of -- ”

“Stop,” John says, cutting him off mid sentence. “Stop this. Stop this nonsense. We’ve come too far to turn back now. Maria is a problem we both created, both of us together, and the mother of my missing child to boot. If you think even for one second I’d let you go face her alone -- ”

“We could die,” Sherlock interjects, voice harsher than he likely intends, deep and rough with anger and frustration. “I’m not at my best right now, you know that. I’m not what I should be and I’ve miscalculated terribly again and I am very possibly leading us right into an ambush and if you follow me in this, John you could die, don’t you see that?”

The silence that descends after this outburst is tense and thick, the only sound between them Sherlock’s harsh, shallow respiration.

John collects his thoughts, decides the best thing to do is to cut this entire conversation off before Sherlock gets himself any more tied up in emotional knots.

“Well,” he says, calm and even. “In that case, let me just say this. If last night was my final one on Earth, I’m just grateful I got to spend it with your tongue up my arse.”

Sherlock’s head turns sharply to look at him, his shocked expression somewhat reminiscent of a prim, scandalised schoolmaster; after a moment he buries his face into his forearm, body curling reflexively forward, narrow shoulders shaking.

For a confused moment John thinks he’s crying, then a wheeze of helpless, shaking laughter erupts from Sherlock’s mouth, loud and braying despite being muffled by his forearm.

It’s contagious and John can’t help but join in, slightly hysterical with the heightened tensions of the moment, their sounds of mirth carried away on the chilly breeze of the empty beach.

As their laughter fades to gasping giggles, John wipes away tears of mirth with his left sleeve, then picks up their intertwined hands and kisses Sherlock’s sandy knuckles, dry and gritty against his lips.

“Together, or not at all,” he says, certain and sincere. “That’s how this goes, Sherlock. Got it?”

Sherlock dips his head for a moment, swallows and exhales once, hard; when he looks up again, his eyes are suspiciously shiny, even in the gathering dusk.

“Together or not at all,” he echoes softly and returns John’s gesture of affection, turning their hands over, bringing his lips to the back of John’s hand. “Got it.”

“Good,” John answers simply. He doesn’t let go of Sherlock’s hand, holding it tight as they watch the crashing surf together. The last of the daylight drains away from the darkened skies, leaving the orange urban glow of Atlantic City on the southern horizon. Overhead, a few stars emerge, one by one.

“Hungry?” Sherlock finally asks. “I’ve heard this part of New Jersey is renowned for the quality of its sandwiches. We passed a local deli that looks very promising, going by the signage and the position of the skips relative to the parking area.”

“Are you offering the condemned man a final meal?”

“Seems the polite thing to do.”
John chuckles, and if it’s a touch forced Sherlock has the grace not to call him on it.

He releases their joined hands and stands, brushing sand off his trousers before extending a hand to help Sherlock up off the ground. Sherlock grabs his shoes and socks, tucks them under his elbow then takes John’s hand, allows himself to be pulled upright. Unfolded to full height, Sherlock gazes down, hair rumpled and tufted, cheeks pink from the chilly breeze, eyes bright and pale even in the dim yellow light of the rising moon.

John cups a stubbled cheekbone in cold fingers, stretches up onto his toes and pecks him once, chastely, on the mouth. Sherlock’s lips are chapped and cold and taste just faintly of salt, and even if he is taking both of them to certain doom John knows that in a hundred lifetimes he could never love anyone more.

“Lead the way, Mister Holmes,” he says, with as reassuring a smile as he can muster. “And as ever, I will gladly follow.”
Atlantic City, Part Two

Chapter Summary

Mary laughs, hollow and bitter, the sneer returning to her face. “So you really think you could raise a child? With *Sherlock*? You and your weirdo gay boyfriend playing house with a baby. Oh, John. That’s just. Good God.” She shakes her head. “She was a mistake, an accident. You have to see that. We gave her life, but it was never meant to be. People like us aren’t cut out for that kind of thing.”

John exhales hard, his rage making his blood pound in his ears.

“I am nothing like you,” he snarls. “You don’t know me. You never did, and you never ever will.”

Chapter Notes

I have completely ignored all realities of Atlantic City layout and geography, so don’t even try to match any of this up with real locations.

10. Atlantic City, Part Two

Leaning his slender frame against a beige satin-stripe wallpaper last fashionable in the mid-Nineties, Sherlock primly sips from a plastic cup of warm Diet Coke as he surveys the terrain before them. His changeable eyes are not quite blue today but rather a pale silvery green, a shade that John’s ever-florid inner monologue compares to the first frost on a tangled hedgerow as Sherlock silently scans the enormous room, taking in everything around them, cataloguing every inch down to the tiniest detail.

For his part John remains resolutely stone-faced, deliberately sagging his shoulders into his best impression of a glowering, disaffected slouch, trying to keep himself from instinctively straightening his spine into parade rest; inwardly, he searches his soul for some shred of calm, some elusive Zen acceptance of whatever fate may have in store tonight for the two of them.

This is the third boardwalk casino Sherlock and John have been in tonight, or maybe the fifth or maybe the ninth. There are no windows. There are no clocks. John knows it’s night outside, but beyond this broadest possible parameter, somehow Time itself ceases to exist in a place such as this.

If Dante’s *Inferno* were to manifest in physical reality, John is absolutely certain some of the levels would resemble nothing so much as here, the quarter slots floor at the Bally’s Atlantic City Hotel and Casino. Greed, sloth, gluttony...any and all of the deadly sins could applicable here, honestly.

*Wrath would qualify as well,* John thinks, because at this very moment the ceaseless sensory input is making him feel positively homicidal.

There are flashing lights and looped, tinny digital tunes playing over and over until it makes John’s
head feel ready to explode. The carpets are patterned in explosions of synthetic colours that appear nowhere on the ROYGBIV spectrum, still retina-searingly bright at the edges but showing definite signs of wear along the well-traveled pathways between the rows of machines. Women and men alike -- all skin tones bleached to different shades of pasty grey by lack of both sleep and sunlight -- sit slumped on vinyl upholstered stools, feeding endless quarters into the shiny clacking and flashing fruit machines. Most of the posher dollar slots are digital machines with video, but back here in the low-rent quarter slots section most of them are still mechanical, wheels of cherries and diamonds and gold bars spinning round and round endlessly as gamblers pull levers compulsively in pursuit of the ever-elusive Big Jackpot.

Occasionally the machines vomit back jangly piles of cascading silver coins into cheap plastic buckets -- just to be fed back into the maw of the machine, a neverending ouroboros of pavlovian stimulus and response.

The minor details may have varied from one location to another, but in the end they all smear into the same deeply disturbing carnival-sideshow waking fever dream. It’s endlessly fascinating and deeply horrifying in equal measure, and this grotty desperate room is where John realises fully that despite enduring war and agonising injury and terrible heartrending grief at other places and other times, he has never, ever in his life wanted to go home so badly as he does right in this very moment.

He’s exhausted, in body and soul, but he pushes on. For his daughter. For Sherlock. For the possibility, however remote, of all of them making it through this alive and unscathed and returning home to the cozy, dusty, desperately-missed rooms of Baker Street.

John feels his throat tighten and his chest constrict with emotion for a moment; he then decides these maudlin thoughts are unproductive at best and a dangerous distraction at worst, and pushes them aside to focus on the current situation. He plucks the cup out of Sherlock’s hand, tips back a mouthful of slightly flat lukewarm cola to moisten his dry mouth, and hands the drink back without comment.

They two of them have been hovering in various corners of the Bally’s slots area for the better part of twenty minutes, John trailing in Sherlock’s wake as he wanders about, seemingly without a particular plan or purpose, dashing off a few quick texts here and there, stopping occasionally to put coins in a machine or flag down a passing waitress for a soft drink. Sherlock doesn’t explain any of his actions aloud, but he doesn’t have to; John knows a thing or two about security surveillance, knows Sherlock’s purposeless ambling is in fact laser targeted in purpose. By assuming the guise of looky-loo tourists, observing but not quite ready to make a full commitment to gambling, they’re attempting to hover under the radar of the omnipresent camera eyes, both the silver globes installed in the ceiling at regular intervals as well as a great many more John knows are present but not immediately visible.

Sherlock is wearing his now-standard uniform of worn tee, jeans and faded green field jacket; John is kitted out in tattered jeans and trainers, along with the abysmal plaid jacket and knit cap they acquired at Target earlier in the day. The hat is snug and too warm, and it makes his head feel damp and itchy, which doesn’t do a thing to alleviate this uneasy, neck-prickling, out-of-place, generally not-good overall feeling.

“Fucking tired of waiting,” he grouses, trying not to fiddle with the overlong sleeves of the ill-fitting jacket.

“Lucky for you, we can only evade the surveillance algorithms for so long,” Sherlock murmurs, not looking up as he fiddles with his phone. “We’ve only got five more minutes, maybe seven if --”

Something at the far end of the room snags at Sherlock’s peripheral vision, makes him look up sharply.
“Ah, at last.” He tugs on John’s arm, gestures with a tilt of his head. “This way.”

John follows Sherlock as he navigates with newly focused purpose, leading them to the row second to last from the back wall of the positively cavernous room. The row is full of gamblers, every machine taken. John doesn’t understand where Sherlock is headed, but just as they near the end of the row an enormously corpulent man sighs, mutters a curse under his breath, and vacates the stool in front of the very last slot machine. Without missing a beat, Sherlock steers him to the freshly vacated seat, indicates that he should sit.

The vinyl upholstery is still unpleasantly warm from the blubbery buttocks of the previous occupant, and John can’t suppress a tiny shudder of revulsion at the sensation as he eases himself onto the stool. Sherlock gives him a single raised eyebrow, but makes no comment at John’s obvious discomfort.

"That man wasted both his evening and his money," he observes instead. "He thought he had it sussed, but this machine is on embargo for a major jackpot until after four am."

“How do you even -- "

“On the other hand, the machine two rows behind us and three to the right is just about to --”

As if on cue, a startling screech of siren goes off somewhere behind them, making John jump in his seat. He and Sherlock turn in unison to see a cavalcade of flashing lights commence, along with a variety of carnival noises as a winning jackpot pours forth an avalanche of jangling metal, the coins cascading onto the carpet at the feet of a tiny, whey-skinned, late-middle-aged woman who frankly looks rather more terrified than happy at this turn of events.

Everyone else around her ignores the commotion entirely, their attention fixated on perpetuating their own compulsive risk-and-reward loops instead.

John turns away from the spectacle, mouth twitching downward in distaste, then glances up at Sherlock with a slightly furrowed brow. “How did you -- ” he begins, then shakes his head. “You know what? Never mind. Just tell me what we’re doing here.”

“This is the designated point.” Sherlock pauses, looking uncomfortable. “For our...appointed rendezvous. With Maria.”

Eyes fixed on the digital payout display in front of him, John is silent for half a beat too long, then exhales, shakes his head.

“Couldn’t be poker or craps or something I actually enjoy,” he grumbles, mostly for something to say, declining to address Sherlock’s statement directly.

“Too much interaction with strangers, would possibly make us distracted and vulnerable. Besides, strategically speaking, this is the most advantageous real estate on the entire floor.” Sherlock gestures with a tilt of his head. “Walls on two sides, limiting her means of egress, and a hallway with an emergency exit immediately to our right. After she identifies you -- or confirms your identity -- she will likely run, and this location will increase the probability of her exiting through the door at the end of that hallway to around eighty percent. Far easier to pursue her if we minimise the variables of her escape route.” Sherlock’s lips purse just slightly, giving his expression a faintly condescending air. “And in point of fact, John, you’re not here to enjoy yourself.”

“Don’t I bloody well know it.” John sighs. “All right, I haven’t done this since my nan took me to the pub. What goes where?”
Out of thin air, Sherlock produces a large plastic cup half-full of silver quarters and presses it into John’s hands. John looks down at it, back up at Sherlock in silent query.

“You put them in the machine and pull the handle,” Sherlock explains with surprising patience. “Or just press the button; the lever is functional, but really only present for the aesthetics.”

John shrugs, plucks a quarter from the cup, drops it into the slot and pulls the for-show handle. The reels spin briefly, then slow and come to a halt one by one. Cherry, diamond, gold bar.

“No skill whatsoever, is there?” John says. “Just...pure chance and stubborn hope and a good deal of idiocy.”

“In a nutshell,” Sherlock, and the way his eyes meet and hold John’s for a moment makes it plain the overly-obvious metaphor isn’t lost on either one of them.

John nods, tries to give to Sherlock a reassuring, we’re in this together grin -- but it doesn’t quite take, the ever-present ball of anxiety heavy and greasy cold in the pit of his stomach, making it hard to smile, to breathe, or even to think.

He knew the situation going in, he did. He does. Still, the reality of it, the truth of the woman that always lurked behind the facade of Mary Morstan Watson, the mortal danger she poses to both of their lives -- all of it somehow feels shockingly, viscerally real in this moment, making John feel unexpectedly vertiginous and ill.

Sherlock’s eyes roam over John’s head, scanning the crowd, but his low voice is warm, intimate, sympathetic. “Are you going to be all right? You look quite pale.”

“I feel pale.” John takes a deep breath, shakes his head. “No. It’s okay. I’m -- It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Sherlock glances down at him, the line between his forehead deepening momentarily in concern as he gives a single brief shake of his head.

“No, it is,” John insists, refuting a point Sherlock hadn’t made aloud. “It is. It will be.” John takes a deep breath. “It’s like a part in a play, right? It’s just a role.”

“Right,” Sherlock murmurs, the reassuring note in his voice not ringing precisely true. “Exactly right.”

“And what about you?” John asks.

“I’m going to --” Sherlock begins, then pauses. “I need to stay out of sight, but I’ll maintain constant visual contact.” Sherlock presses closer to John, and in the small space between their bodies, mostly hidden from view, his strong slender fingers wrap tight around John’s wrist, shockingly strong. “I won’t let anything happen to you,” he says with sudden urgency.

“I know.”

“I promise,” Sherlock says, rough with unspoken feeling.

“I know. I do. It’s all right.” John wants to kiss and hold him so badly that resisting the pull is causing an actual physical ache in his chest. He draws in a fortifying inhale instead, nudges Sherlock in the ribs. “Go now, before she spots you.”

Sherlock nods once and releases his wrist, then turns and slips away within a moment, disappearing completely into the crowd with shocking suddenness. John feels a momentary jarring panic, a single
terrifying wave of fearful abandonment crashing into him hard enough to make his breath catch hard in his chest. He’s shocked by the irrational, almost overpowering need to shout Sherlock’s name, to jump up and run after him like a frightened toddler separated from his mum.

He does not act on the impulse. Instead, he briefly closes his eyes, taking in a deep, calming breath.

*You’re being ridiculous,* John tells himself sternly. *Childish, even. Snap out of it. You were once a goddamn Captain in the British Army so act like one. Pull it together and complete the mission.*

He exhales through his mouth, opens his eyes, and begins to attend to the simple task at hand, methodically plugging quarters into the coin slot and pulling the handle. Most of the spins come up empty, but occasionally the machine emits a cheery little jingle and disburses back a small handful of coins, just often enough to compel a player to keep going, but not quite enough to ever truly beat the house.

The truth of the matter is John likes a wager, likes it probably a little too much if he’s being completely honest with himself. He enjoys horse racing or blackjack or five card draw, understands the strangely compelling thrill of calculating risk, determining the odds, using the unpredictable yet potent alchemy of brains and statistics and good luck to try and beat the house, sometimes even beat it big.

In this endeavour, however? There is no skill, no mental gymnastics, no finesse whatsoever.

Frankly, it’s boring as hell.

John continues to feed quarters into the machine for some indeterminate amount of time -- ten minutes possibly, or thirty, or an hour, his mind a million miles away as he tries to ease his almost unbearable anxiety by attempting to consider their situation like Sherlock, to methodically tease apart every possible scenario and analyse every possible variable, visualise every conceivable outcome. Try as he might, very few of the scenarios he can conceive end well for both of them.

It’s not at all reassuring.

Even in the midst of deep contemplation, John doesn’t miss the tingling sixth sense that makes the short hairs on the back of his neck suddenly prickle and itch with dread certainty.

He knows, he just *knows,* inexplicably yet with every fibre of his being, that Maria is here, and very, very close indeed. Perhaps already far too close. He resists the impulse to immediately lift his head, deliberately keeps his face obscured and chin tucked into his ridiculous jacket as he continues to feed quarters into the fruit machine.

Another thirty seconds pass at a glacial pace.

John pauses in his ministrations to the quarter slot machine and straightens his spine, rolls his neck as if to loosen the kinks in between the vertebrae as his eyes surreptitiously scan the room.

She’s standing to his right, less than ten feet away at four o’clock position, just inside the edge of his peripheral vision.

He resumes plugging quarters into the machine with numb fingers; another minute passes. She takes another two steps towards him, coming more fully into his line of sight.

John can’t risk letting her get any closer. A kind of zen calm descends over him, his heartbeat slowing as he lifts his head, turns to give her his full, undivided attention.
She looks ten years older than the last time John saw her, likely due to illness and rough living. Her skin is rough-textured and heavily made up to hide her poor health, but the drawn pallor of her face is still visible beneath beige foundation. A bright slash of rouge burns high on her cheeks, blue eyes are lined in harsh black liner, her lips are sticky with candy pink gloss. Her hair is covered by a grey and black paisley patterned headscarf, pinned just under her chin and tucked into the collar of a lumpy, knitted grey sweater coat that goes nearly to her knees. She is wearing her usual turned up jeans, and the chunky black boots on her feet look like they may be a size or two too big, perhaps nicked from Jennifer Hallman several days earlier.

A glint of light flashes briefly off of a barely-glimpsed bit of silver metal near her right hand. A huge, jolting bolus of adrenaline dumps into John’s bloodstream, fear spiking in his veins. He pushes it down with aeons of practice, with sheer force of will, with brute force.

John’s gaze flicks upward to her face, and her hard, merciless eyes lock with his.

In this moment, the noise and lights and people around them fade into nothingness.

They could be the only two people in the world.

“Maria,” John says, deliberately using her given name, the only true thing he knows about her. He’s surprised by the even calmness of his voice; it conveys a centred steadiness he certainly does not feel.

She says nothing at all. She doesn’t need to. Her gaze is laser-focused on him as she advances another a step closer, then another; then something else altogether catches her attention unexpectedly, causing her focus to shift away from John’s as she looks over his shoulder. A momentary look of surprise crosses her features, and in the next moment she turns away from John and flees, weaving through the sparse crowds, ducking between the rows whistling and dinging and flashing slot machines.

A flurry of motion, of long limbs and kinetic energy, bursts forth at the corner of John’s vision as Sherlock gives her chase, ducking and weaving through the thicket of surprised and affronted onlookers as he races down the hallway in pursuit, following her as she crashes through the emergency exit door he’d pointed out to John earlier.

John jumps to his feet, knocking over the plastic cup of quarters he’d set down next to the fruit machine, spilling them everywhere, bouncing and jangling across the floor. The woman at the next machine turns in surprise at the commotion.

“A Hey. Hey!” she calls after him, but John is already sprinting away, headed for the hallway Maria fled into, with Sherlock hot on her heels. He crashes through the emergency exit door without hesitation, only to be brought up short when he finds himself in a blank, brightly-lit cinderblock stairwell.

He is alone, with neither Maria nor Sherlock in sight. The plain greyness and sudden echoing silence of the confined space is somehow almost deafening after the brightness and clamour of the casino floor.

Somewhere several stories below a door clangs shut, the hollow sound ringing and echoing up the vertical stairwell to John’s ears.

John pounds down the steps in pursuit, heart pounding, blood pulsing hot in his veins. At the street level, he throws his hip hard against the crash bar of the heavy steel door leading outside, stumbling and barely catching himself as it opens easily and spills him unexpected into the night.
He finds himself in a dark, narrow, rain-damp alley in between the casino buildings. A pool of streetlight and the flicker of passing cars at the right end of the alley directs him to the main road. Without pausing to catch his heaving breath John sprints to the intersection where the alley opens into Pacific Avenue, turning his head left then right, hoping to catch a glimpse of Sherlock.

To his left, just at the edge of his vision, he sees the very bottom edge of Sherlock’s jacket just as he disappears around a corner in pursuit of Maria.

John follows.

He reaches the corner, rounds it. A group of young men are loitering on the sidewalk, five or six young men standing in a loose knot, talking and laughing and smoking cigarettes.

As John sprints past them, one of them steps backward without looking, putting himself into his path, clipping him hard in the shoulder as he passes and sending him sprawling to the pavement, a sharp hot scrape of pain slashing across his right knee.

Memories rise, unbidden, of a long-ago bike messenger knocking him to the tarmac in front of Barts, and John is suddenly certain that again, this mishap is no mere coincidence.

“Yo man, you all right?” Hands help him to his feet. “Took a hell of a fall there, bro.”

“I’m fine,” John gasps, momentarily disoriented and out of breath.

“Aw jeez, I am so sorry,” the man says, voice contrite. And he’s just a boy, really, John sees now, maybe not even out of his teens, bright eyed and courteous and concerned.

Maybe too much so, John thinks.

“So sorry, but man, but you just came flyin’ out of fuckin’ nowhere, like, bam -- ” he claps his hands together to make his point. The kid’s friends nod in agreement, their eyes full of wary-edged concern as they look John up and down with confused trepidation.

John scrambles clumsily to his feet, straightens, shrugs off the assistance offered to him as he shakes his head, trying to clear it. He’s wasted far too much time already, and now he’s lost the trail, lost Sherlock -- It’s almost certainly a trap, John decides, and he’s on the wrong side of it, and he’s lost Sherlock.

Clarity of purpose returns to him with a chill, shocking swiftness.

“Which way did they go?” he snaps.

“Who?” another man in the crowd asks, sounding genuinely confused.

“Tall man in a green flak jacket and jeans,” John snaps breathlessly. “He was chasing a short woman in a headscarf. You would have seen them. Which way did they go?”

The loose group gathered round him seems genuinely confused by this information. Anger surging in his veins, John gives in to an impulse borne mostly of frustration and pulls the Glock, pointing it smoothly at the man who originally knocked him over.

All eyes widening in fear, the group collectively back several steps away from him.

One of the very slightly older and wiser-looking men -- perhaps twenty-two instead of eighteen -- pauses, raises his empty hands and takes a brave and also very foolish half-step forward. “Yo,
“Not your fucking friend,” John spits. “Which way did they go?”

John surveys the group he’s facing, and suddenly sees with stomach-dropping clarity that he’s the one being irrationally aggressive, a crazy old man ranting and waving a gun at a bunch of frightened kids.

He’s acting like a nutter, and acting like a nutter isn’t getting him any closer to catching up to Sherlock and Maria.

“Sorry.” He exhales, lowers the weapon. “I’m really so --”

As soon as he lowers the gun, the group of kids act on a herd instinct of self preservation and make a break for it, sprinting down the street and away from John as fast as their legs will carry them.

His heart hammering and the taste of guilt and embarrassment thick and metallic in his mouth, John shoves the gun roughly into the back of his jeans. There’s a small shop on the opposite street corner, windows papered over with a jumble of signs old and new, a bright yellow awning perched over the doorway.

His injured knee aching and burning in a distant sort of way, John half-walks, half-stumbles across the now-deserted street, and pushes open the door.

The cashier, a young, kind-eyed Sikh in a cobalt blue turban and cheerful paisley short-sleeved buttondown, looks up from the open book on the counter. His brow creases in concern as he takes in John’s heavy breathing, wild eyes, and thoroughly disheveled and disreputable appearance.

“Are you all right, sir?” His eyes flick down to John’s leg. “You’re bleeding.”

John looks down and sees his trouser knee is torn and bloody. With that awareness, the sting of the abrasion flares up, fresh and sharp, but he can still easily put his weight on the leg and summarily decides there’s no permanent damage done.

“It’s fine,” he says shortly. “I’m fine.”

The man looks at him strangely; the sixth sense all urban shopkeepers seem to possess is clearly pinging like mad, but he merely gives a shrugging, resigned nod then turns away, clearly intending give the strange man in his shop the the widest possible berth.

John stands in the crowded aisle of the small shop and wonders what to do next.

_Don’t panic_, John tells himself sternly as he tries to feel -- and look -- just slightly less crazed and desperate. _The most important thing right now is not to panic, to calm down and think clearly, and figure out what Sherlock needs you to do next._

It’s overwarm in this crowded corner shop, and the sweaty discomfort hits John like a humid wave, the back of his neck sticky with sweat, head hot and itchy under the stupid cap. John pulls it off, tosses it absentely onto a nearby shelf, rakes his fingers through clumped, sweat-damp hair then breathes in, slowly and deliberately through his nose. He visualises his diaphragm expanding, the oxygen entering his bloodstream. He holds for a count of three, then breathes it out through his
mouth. Does it again. And again.

The panicky blur at the edges of his vision recedes just a bit, and John discovers he’s desperately thirsty, has been for quite a while. He turns and heads towards the drinks cooler, grabs a bottled water and cracks it open. He takes a long swallow, the cold liquid sweet relief to his parched throat. He downs half the bottle in another two swallows.

With fresh oxygen in his bloodstream and his thirst relieved, he feels just calm enough to be able to collect himself properly. He is still mad with worry and feeling utterly adrift, to be sure, but no longer teetering on the knife edge of absolute mental collapse.

While this is an undeniable improvement in his state of mind, however, John still has no fucking idea what to do next in order to track down Sherlock and Mary. Almost on impulse he pulls his mobile out of his jacket pocket and looks at the dark silent screen. The iPhone was purchased at a strip mall somewhere in northern New Jersey not quite two weeks ago, and while John has used it to text and scour the web for information in the days since, he yet to use it even once for an actual, old-fashioned telephone call.

John could call Sherlock. Should he call Sherlock? It seems banal and bordering on ridiculous to potentially interrupt a dangerous, life-or-death chase with something as mundane as a phone call. No matter how ridiculous it may seem, though it occurs to John that at the moment he is, frankly, out of better ideas.

As he stares down at the phone in his hand, a cacophony of disjointed thoughts swirling around in his head, the mobile rings, the screen lighting up as the standard Apple ringtone trills.

It’s the only number programmed into the phone: Sherlock’s number.

In John’s experience, actual phone calls involving Sherlock are invariably bad mojo, a certain harbinger of terrible doom. His tenuous, hard-won calm dissipates in an instant, the panic again rising up in his throat, threatening to strangle him.

John fights against the claws and teeth of fear, wrestles the beast into submission through sheer bloodyminded force of will. He just doesn’t have the fucking time right now. He slides his thumb across the screen, raises the phone to his ear.

“Hello,” he says, tight and wary.

“Harrah’s parking garage.” The voice is female, a bit singsongy, and instantly recognisable despite the American accent. “Lowest level. Be here in ten minutes or I end him for good this time.”

Despite his hammering pulse and the crushing weight of fear pressing down on his diaphragm, John wills his voice to remain calm and uninflected.

“How do I know you haven’t killed him already?” he demands.

There’s a jumble of rustling noises and snatches of hissed words John can’t quite make out. Then a moment of silence, a sharp intake of breath.

“John.” Sherlock’s voice is steady, but John can hear the edge of suppressed fear lurking just underneath his smooth baritone.

“Sherlock! Jesus, are you all r -- “

“Listen to me. Don’t come here,” Sherlock is speaking quickly now, one word tumbling over
another. “It’s a trap, John, don’t --”

There’s a loud cracking thud as the phone is dropped or thrown, then the unmistakable noise of a closed fist hitting flesh in a solid, vicious blow. The sound feels like physical pain in John’s heart.

“And now it’s eight minutes,” Maria’s voice is deadly cold, even over the phone. “Better be quick, lover.”

The line goes dead.

_The game is on_, John thinks, with some measure of what feels almost like relief. Whatever the final destination may be of this twisted, convoluted path they’ve traveled--after so much waiting, it’s finally happening, come whatever may.

John doesn’t even take a moment to consider Sherlock’s last words; trap or no, he would not, could not ever willingly abandon Sherlock again, no matter the cost.

He turns towards the entrance of the corner shop; his hand is just closing around the smooth, worn metal of the crash bar bisecting the glass door when he notices the strobe of blue and red lights strafing across the greasy, blurred front windows of the shop. A police cruiser is rolling slowly down the street, almost certainly on the lookout for a nearly-elderly bearded nutter in a tartan jacket who brandished a handgun and terrorised at a group of kids who were merely minding their own damn business.

Even in America, even in this seedy dump of a city, that’s clearly beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior.

As he watches the flashing blue and red lights move down the street, John knows now he won’t be leaving here through the front entrance.

He’s on the police radar, now, and there is little he can do on the fly to alter his appearance, except remove the loathed tartan jacket. He shrugs out of the hated garment with no regret and tosses it carelessly aside, then whirls towards the counter and takes a half step towards the cashier.

"Harrah’s parking garage,” he snaps. “Where is it?”

John’s face must be terrifying; the man behind the register shrinks away, shaking his head.

“Get out,” the man manages, his right hand reaching for something hidden under the counter. “Get out, or I’ll --”

John hates doing it, he hates the person time and duress and circumstance have made him into, but necessity again forces his hand yet again, metaphorically as well as very literally. He pulls out his gun in one fluid motion; keeping the muzzle aimed it at the ground and his finger off the trigger is not much of a balm to his conscience.

“Hands where I can see them,” he snaps.

The man complies, eyes wide with fear.

“‘You seem like a pleasant bloke,” John says with true regret, “and I apologise, but I will absolutely use this if I have to. Now, again: Tell me how to get to Harrah’s parking garage, going from the back of this building.”

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Six minutes later -- six minutes that feel like an absolute sodding eternity -- John finds himself facing an unassuming, rather poorly lit pedestrian door, position near the corner of the building, about fifteen yards away from the larger, well-lit automobile entrance.

He tries the handle, finds it unlocked. He pounds down the steps, taking them two at a time despite his burning cramping thigh muscles. He doesn’t pause, doesn’t stop to reconsider or reflect before he flings open the final door at the very bottom of the last flight of steps, gun in hand, not bothering at all with quiet or stealth or subterfuge.

They’re a million miles past that. He’s been invited, after all.

The lowest floor of the garage is two levels underground and chilly, with the chalky scent of poorly-cured concrete heavy in the damp air. The cavernous space is lit irregularly with dreary sodium lights, deep shadows stretching into every irregular corner.

The level is mostly empty, save for a handful of cars barely visible at the far end of the structure and one slightly battered-looking black delivery van parked nearby.

As John’s eyes adjust to the low light, the first thing he sees clearly is Sherlock kneeling on the ground about ten yards away, his back to John, large hands interlaced behind his head. The position of his arms is causing his jacket and shirt to ride up in back, exposing a swath of pale vulnerable skin at the graceful dip of his lower back.

He doesn’t turn or react in any way to the clatter of John’s arrival, and half a moment later John understands why.

Mary -- Maria -- is standing six feet directly in front of Sherlock, the gun in her hand aimed point-blank at his skull. The grey and black paisley scarf over her head has slipped back slightly to reveal flat, inky box-dyed brown hair; her forehead is pale and sheened with perspiration, the pallor of her complexion hinting at her recent ill health. Her entire body is completely still; the only movement is the flick of her eyes upward at John as he walks towards her.

"Maria," John says. His voice is calm, flat, no inflection or tremor whatsoever, and this time it’s not a sham, not a fake. The spike of angry adrenaline surging in his bloodstream calms and centres him, makes his focus sharpen and time slow down.

"John. I’m so glad you could make it to my little party." Her natural accent is American, a bit nasal, vaguely but not definitively Mid-Atlantic, with her rhotic R softened by years of cultivating a British accent. She tilts her head, and for a single second her expression is unnervingly snake-like, true to her nickname. Then she smiles, something falsely bright with far too many teeth, and for the first time John feels a cold pinprick of true fear breaking through his defenses.

"It was an invitation I couldn’t possibly refuse,” he replies, cool and brusque despite his emotions.

"Oh, but don’t act like you’re here because of me,” she replies derisively. She takes three steps forward, presses the muzzle of her gun squarely against Sherlock’s forehead, hard enough to leave a bruise on his pale skin.

John flinches. Sherlock, to his everlasting credit, does not.

"You’re here for him.” She spits out the word, her eyes cold and implacable. “Because it’s always been him, hasn’t it? Even when you put a ring on my finger and called yourself my spouse, it’s always, always been him.” She smiles, a mocking parody of a just-between-us camaraderie. “Tell me, husband. Have you fucked him yet?”
John fights to keep his face stony, but some flicker gives him away.

“Oh you did, didn’t you?” Maria crows. “And how was he? Was he everything you hoped he would be? Did he fulfill every gay fantasy that crossed your dirty little mind, back when you were dutifully giving it to your lawfully wedded wife?”

The flames of his anger fuelled by her cruel mockery, the impulsive words tumble out of John’s mouth before he can think better of them.

“You’re not my wife.”

“Oh, really.”

“The person I married never existed,” John spits. “Not for a single second. It was a lie, a cruel and twisted lie from a cruel and twisted human being. The real you sought me out and manipulated me from the very first minute for your own selfish ends.”

Maria’s eyes narrow, and John knows he shouldn’t be doing this, shouldn’t be goading her like this when she’s got a gun pressed to Sherlock’s skull, but now that the dam has broken he can’t seem to stop -- and it’s a miniscule reassurance, but he knows every second she’s listening to him is another second she’s not putting a bullet in Sherlock’s brain.

“And you knew,” he continues without pausing for breath. “You knew how I felt about him. You knew before I even knew myself. It was part of your calculations, it was part and parcel of your plan, so you don’t have any right to act like some sort of wronged, abandoned spouse. Let me repeat myself so I am crystal clear: You are not my wife, and I am not your husband, so let’s just put that entire fiction to bed for good, shall we?”

He straightens his shoulders and does not break eye contact, staring her down, daring her to challenge the truth of his words.

"Oh, God, fine,” Maria sneers, her scant patience snapping. “Yes. You’re right. I’m not your wife, never was. You’re not my husband, you never were and believe me, I’m damn glad of it, considering how pathetically hung up you’ve always been on Sherlock Fucking Holmes.” She rolls her eyes and gives a melodramatic sigh before fixing her gaze again upon John. “Lovely relationship chat. Really. Now drop your gun, or your precious here gets his brains aired out, just like his brother.”

Even after everything else that’s transpired, John is still somehow shocked by the casual viciousness of her words. His blood flows cold in his veins -- and it’s mostly anger, to be sure, but bubbling up underneath that is a fierce, shockingly sharp thirst for the brutal simplicity of revenge. It’s a shameful need, something borne from the darkest corner of his psyche, but she has a fucking gun to Sherlock’s head, the muzzle pressing into his pale skin hard enough to bruise, so John gives in without a fight, lets slip the worst demons of his nature without a single moment of regret or remorse.

He extends his gun hand, finger on the trigger of the Glock, aiming directly between her eyes.

“What if I can kill you before you pull the trigger?” he growls, low and deadly serious.

“You really think you can?” Mary asks, arch and mocking and completely bloodless.

“I really think I can. Care to help me find out?”

Mary shrugs, with an indifference that seems sincere. “Take your chance, if you wish. However, I have to add, you’re really shockingly unobservant if you didn’t notice the three of us are not here alone. Which changes the game somewhat, don’t you agree?”
With a wave of Mary’s hand, the engine of the black van parked nearby roars to life. The headlights come up, bright halogen spotlighting the tableau: Sherlock’s kneeling frame casting a long shadow across the floor, the harsh blue-white beams illuminating the sharp planes of Mary’s face, making her look even more haggard, bordering on ghoulish.

A moment later James Martinez exits the passenger side of the vehicle, as his bodyguard Nestor and another, slightly shorter and younger man John doesn’t recognise emerge from the sliding side panel door. The driver remains in the van, a dark indistinct shape seated behind the steering wheel.

All three men pull handguns and point them directly at John.

“You knew it was us,” John says to Maria, and it’s of course it’s obvious, so obvious is barely bears saying out loud, but it’s all he can think of in order to buy a few moments to think, to give Sherlock a chance to think, to give both of them a chance to do something, anything that would give them any sliver of a chance of getting out of this alive.

“Of course I did,” she says with a sneer. “How stupid do you think I am? Drop your gun and kick it well away.”

Out of better options, John does as instructed.

Nestor looks at him for a long second, eyes narrowed, then turn towards James, mutters something John can’t hear. James shakes his head just slightly, once.

“Hands behind your head, John, and turn to face me.” Maria tips her chin upwards slightly. “And cut the chit chat, gentlemen, unless you care to share with the class.”

“So what happens now?” John asks. “Why all the theatrics if you just wanted to kill us? Bit anticlimactic, if you ask me.”

“The theatrics are what make it fun,” Sherlock says, breaking his silence, voice cool and even. “And in point of fact, she’s not planning to kill us. Are you, Maria?”

Maria cocks a pencilled eyebrow.

“What makes you say that?” she asks him, genuinely curious.

“Elementary,” Sherlock replies. “If you were, you would have done it by now.”

Maria purses her lips and shrugs. “You got me,” she admits candidly, conceding the point. “But make no mistake, Sherlock. I would dearly love to kill you, and I will do it happily if you force my hand.”

“Then what’s stopping you now?” Sherlock asks, undeterred.

“Money.”

“Money is boring.”

“Easy to say when you didn’t grow up eating ketchup soup at the end of every month, you posh spoiled bastard.” Maria rolls her eyes in condescending exasperation. “You think you’re so smart, but there are a lot of lessons I learned that you never did, and lesson number one is this: money is everything.”

“So you hitched your wagon to James Moriarty,” Sherlock replies. “Because he had the money.”
“Swimming” in it. But he never cared a thing for it, so I did the caring for him, made sure the money kept flowing in. But in the end all his enterprises, all his skill and brains, and it was all so just so he could fund his bizarre fixation. He was brilliant, but God he was dumb. Obsessed and dumb. I didn’t see that until it was too late, and he left me twisting in the wind because he threw his life away over his obsession with you.”

With the way she spits out the last word, her face twisting up in pure loathing, John can see now with shocking clarity how much she truly despises Sherlock, and it makes his blood run cold.

Sherlock doesn’t respond, though, letting her vent, letting her unspool her tale without interruption.

*That’s the frailty of genius, John. It needs an audience.*

John knows that the placid calm of Sherlock’s face is a ruse to buy them time; by allowing her to continue, he’s buying them time and using every moment to analyse every angle, trying to find a solution, a way out of this desperate puzzle.

“So now,” Maria continues, “I need cold hard cash to get back on top and out of this low-level shit, and I know how to make a deal. I found more than a few who want your heads on a platter, but a surprising number of individuals are willing to pay a tidy sum for both of you, the matched set, still breathing and conscious. There’s a disgraced Austrian baron hiding under an assumed name in Argentina. He’s offering seven figures just so he can...” Maria shakes her head, her mouth puckering into a grotesque moue of mocking sympathy. “Well, let’s just say death may be far preferable. But as long as I get paid...well. Too bad, so sad, but needs must and all that.”

“You truly are a psychopath,” Sherlock observes, and he sounds...almost *impressed*. “An absolute marvel of sociopathy.” He tilts his head just slightly, his expression one of mildly horrified fascination. “Privation and want helped shape you, I understand that, but John’s background is equally humble and yet his conscience and moral code are ironbound.” He shakes his head. “Honour one last request from a condemned man, Maria, and tell me. What made you this way?”

“You’ve followed me across two continents and three states. You’ve uncovered my past and my secrets. You’re the man who sees everything, and you still don’t know?”

“No,” Sherlock says, honest and direct. “I don’t.”

Something in Mary’s eyes shifts, almost softening into something like pity. “You want to think I’m broken, that I’m defective, but maybe I’m not the one who’s wired wrong. Look at you, Sherlock. You wanted nothing as much as you wanted to be just like me. You wanted to climb over people and never give a damn and yet you could never quite pull it off. Because you care. You care and you care and you care. And look at you now, on your knees in a parking garage with your life in my hands. So you tell me -- in the end what has caring ever gotten you?”

Sherlock looks up at her, his beautiful eyes clear and coolly defiant.

“It’s gotten me John Watson,” he reminds her, quiet but unbowed. Maria’s eyes flash bright with pure hatred, and for a terrible second John is certain that despite her words she will put a bullet between his eyes, just for spite.

Then the moment passes, thankfully, and her eyes again go blank, her face hardening into bland coldness. “This has been a lovely trip down memory lane, pet, but I know what you’re doing. You’re stalling, the both of you, trying to put me off, and there’s no point.”

“And why is that?” Sherlock asks blandly.
“I know you’re up against the wall and all alone. You’re not the only one with sources inside MI6, darling, and I know for a fact they’ve washed their hands of you. Your brother is dead, and no one is sending the cavalry, not this time. You’ve played your hand and lost, so let’s not get tangled up in idle conversation.” Never taking her eyes off Sherlock and John, she carelessly gestures towards James and his men with the gun in her hand. “Go on, then, boys. Be a love and earn your cut.”

John sees Sherlock’s eyes flicker microscopically to John’s gun, ten feet away on the concrete floor, and he a spike of sick fear runs him through as comprehension dawns about what Sherlock is planning. He sees it all unfold in his mind’s eye; absent a plan, Sherlock is calculating the incredibly low odds on being able to dive for the gun and snatch it up in this scant moment of Mary’s divided attention. John’s nowhere near the head for math as Sherlock, but he knows the odds are terrible, so low Sherlock will almost certainly end up sacrificing himself just to give John a miniscule chance of avoiding the black van that will take them to an undoubtedly nightmarish fate.

You need to buy more time. A few more moments so Sherlock can come up with another idea, something, anything better than dying on a cold concrete floor for absolutely nothing at all.

“What about the baby, Mary?” John asks, loud and harsh, going directly for the strongest, most direct emotional leverage he has in the hopes that maybe, possibly, even a carved-in-stone psychopath holds a single soft spot for the daughter she gave birth to just a handful of days ago.

It works. She flinches, just minutely, but a visible reaction just the same.

“She’s as much mine as yours,” John continues. “She was our child, and you just tossed her aside like a sack of rubbish. Did you kill her? Or did you sell her for cash as well? To some kind of -- ” his voice breaks, his eyes prickling with genuine tears. “Jesus Christ, some kind of trafficking ring, some kind of horrible -- ”

“No!” Maria cries, voice shaking with true emotion. She holds up a hand; the three men advancing on John and Sherlock pause and look at her, confused.

“Then where is she, Mary? Where is our daughter?”

“She has a good home now,” Maria says. “A real home, with good parents, a couple desperate for a child of their own. A librarian and an optometrist, if you can believe it. A house, a dog, a swing set in the back garden. They can give her the life she deserves. A life neither one of us could have ever given her.” Her tone drops lower, huskier, almost as if she were pleading, or maybe asking John for forgiveness. “John. We were never cut out to be proper parents, you and I. You know that, don’t you? You have to know that.”

“I am her proper parent,” John counters, the anger in his veins stronger than his fear, making him almost -- almost -- able to disregard the gun Maria still has aimed at Sherlock’s head. “You gave up the right to call herself your mother when you sold your own child but you had no goddamn right to take my fatherhood away from me. None.”

Mary laughs, hollow and bitter, the sneer returning to her face. “So you really think you could raise a child? With Sherlock? You and your weirdo gay boyfriend playing house with a baby. Oh, John. That’s just. Good God.” She shakes her head. “She was a mistake, an accident. You have to see that. We gave her life, but it was never meant to be. People like us aren’t meant for that kind of thing.”

John exhales hard, his rage making his blood pound in his ears.

“I am nothing like you,” he snarls. “You don’t know me. You never did, and you never ever will.”
“Doesn’t matter anymore,” Mary says flatly, dismissively. “It’s over now. It’s done. Water under the bridge.” John can see her face shutter against the threat of genuine emotion, any true feelings she may possess disappearing back behind the stone mask of dissociative indifference. “All right. Enough of this drama. I’ve wasted too much time on conversation and I don’t...”

She trails off, tilts her head slightly back and looks up at the grey concrete and rebar overhead, brow furrowing as if in query.

Understanding dawns, and John realises what he thought was his heartbeat thudding in his ears is actually a low, concussive sound coming from outside, loud enough to make the entire hollow concrete structure around them vibrate perceptibly.

Helicopters. Several of them, coming in fast and low and from the sound of things, now hovering directly overhead.

“Sounds like hoofbeats, don’t you think?” Sherlock says sardonically, with an undertone of frankly inadvisable smugness. “I believe, Maria, that the cavalry has arrived.”

“Get them in the van,” Maria snaps at James and his men, still standing half-frozen in confusion. “Now.”

John makes a split second calculation in his head.

Martinez knows John has a second gun, and didn’t warn Mary or take it off of him, which has to mean something. He’s playing a third angle, perhaps a fallback plan or longer con, something John doesn’t see.

And the fact is this: the man a grifter, a con man, but not at heart a kidnapper or a killer, and John knows this to be true, knows this slim but real moral high ground is his only shot at leverage. He decides to take a chance; in the end, it’s Atlantic City, and John rolls the dice.

“James,” he says, low and urgent, taking half a step forward and spreading his hands in entreaty. “Don’t get caught up in this. You’ll spend your life in prison if you stay here. You can still get away if you take your men and get out of here right now.”

James shakes his head. “I’ve been played,” he says, voice tight and sharp, the voice of a man backed into a corner. “From all sides, I’ve been played, and I can’t -- ”

But before he can tell John what he cannot do, a single shot sounds, sharp but not exactly loud, the sound echoing and bouncing off the damp concrete walls.

For one shocked split-second, everyone freezes still, trying to parse exactly what just happened.

(Later, John will attempt, many times and without success, to sort out the chain of events in his mind, to pinpoint who panicked and pulled the trigger in this tense moment. He will be almost entirely certain it was Nestor, the man whom he so cheerfully humiliated in front of his boss -- but no matter how many ways he reconstructs the scenario, he will never be entirely sure.)

One stunned moment later John feels the sharp bite of burning pain along the side of his torso, a line of fire blooming and spreading on his left side, just below his ribs. His knees buckle and he staggers forward a step, then another, giving a small strangled gasp of surprise and shock.

James looks at him in confusion for a moment, then his eyes go wide as understanding dawns.

“Oh fuck,” he hisses, then without another word he turns and dives for the van, the other two men
close on his heels.

Mary presses her lips together and rolls her eyes in annoyance for one single second, then without turning her torso she extends her arm to the side and shoots the driver through the windshield, a precise head shot. The man's shadowed form slumps to one side, clearly dead.

In the same moment Sherlock begins to pivot on one knee, shifting his weight just barely to the left as he prepares to dive for the gun on the floor. Mary trains the gun back on him instantaneously without even sparing him a glance.

“Not a fucking chance, pet.”

Sherlock freezes.

Even with the burning pain in his side and the weakness in his buckling legs, John is watching Mary, can see her instantly work out the calculus of the situation in her head. She can hold a gun on Sherlock or she can engage in a shootout with three armed gangsters, but no matter her skill she cannot do both at once.

“James?” Mary calls out, with a tight false cheeriness, completely at odds with the desperate tension of the situation. “Shooting John kind of fucked my plans, and I am fairly well pissed, but you’re a distraction now and I really don’t give a shit about you either way. So here’s the deal: if you and your goons disappear, right now, I’ll probably let you live.”

True to John’s initial assessment, James proves himself far more interested in living to see another day rather than risk his life in violence. After a moment of deliberation, the three men make a break for the nearby exit.

John more-than-half expects Maria to shoot one or all of them in the back as they flee. She keeps her word, however, and does not take them down; the stairwell door crashes open then clangs shut, a loud metallic crash that echoes and reverberates in this large, empty space.

And then they are gone, leaving Maria, John and Sherlock in a final, stark tableau, illuminated by the harsh headlights of the still-running van.

*It was always going to come to this,* John thinks through the red-tinged fog of pain beginning to cloud his mind. He can see that truth now, see it with the raw-edged, bitterly sharp clarity of perfect hindsight, of epiphany come too late. They were set on this path the day Sherlock came back from the dead, the three of them arranging into this final, fearful symmetry, three fixed points in a triangle comprising love and loss and betrayal.

Maria is the villain here, to be sure, but all three of them bear blame for what they’ve become. No one here is innocent, no one will escape unscathed, and John understands now, with a bone deep certainty, that one -- or more -- of them is going to die here tonight.

As he presses his hand instinctively against the raw, burning gouge where the bullet dug a bloody trench into his flesh of his left side, John can’t help but know he’s the current odds-on favourite.

The only thing he can do, now, is whatever he can, whatever he has to in order to keep Sherlock on the right side of that thin red line between life and death.

In the space of the next heartbeat, just the tiniest seed of a plan takes root in his mind.

*Collapse on your right side. Play unconscious. Curl in on yourself, bring your legs in close.*
John staggers forward two steps and topples to the ground. Lands, hard, on his right shoulder, rounding his body into an apostrophe. He lies as still as possible, keeps his breathing rapid and shallow, his eyes half closed.

“NO!” Sherlock howls, a guttural noise of horror torn from his throat.

The fear and pain in that single syllable makes John’s chest ache with an anguish far worse than the pain in his flank.

The stuttering throb of the helicopter blades grows ever louder.

“Don’t move,” Maria snaps. “Don’t fucking move, Sherlock, I swear you make one more move and I put a bullet in his head to finish the job.”

John cracks open one eye to see Sherlock still on his knees before Maria. His pale eyes are desperate, almost pleading, his body almost vibrating with his palpable need to tend to John.

“Why?” Sherlock asks Maria, plaintive and raw, deep voice cracking up an octave on the single syllable. “Why kill either one of us? What’s the point? It’s over. Take that van and run, you might live to see another day. Killing us now achieves nothing.”

“Oh Sherlock,” she sneers, still arrogant, still proud even in the face of defeat. “You still don’t get me at all, do you? I should have killed you properly the first time, I admit, but I didn’t become who I am by leaving a job undone.”

Time slows to a crawl, stuttering frame by frame; John can see Maria’s eyes narrowing to slits as her index finger wraps around the trigger.

Now, John thinks, desperately, willingly his cold and sluggish limbs to move. *Now, do it now, you’re out of time, you have to move NOW* --

He summons every ounce of will in his body, ignoring the howling pain of his injury and moving with a speed he didn’t know was still possible as he reaches down and pulls the Ruger from the holster strapped to his right ankle.

Maria instantly pivots, her arm shifting smoothly to aim her gun at John’s skull.

John’s head swims with the sudden movement and his vision goes blurry at the edges, his entire awareness drawing down to the dark void of the muzzle of the Walther in Maria’s hand and the pitiless void of her eyes behind the trigger.

Her scarf has slipped down the back of her head; in her paint-brown hair, a tiny metal clip keeps her overgrown fringe out of her eyes. The sight conjures a singular memory of that night at the Landmark, of those last moments that she and John were still something close to being in love, those last moments before Sherlock came roaring back from the dead with a pencilled-on moustache and a poorly conceived prank concocted on the fly to mask his uncertainty and pain.

He remembers Mary in her satin dress, a jeweled clip in her short blonde hair, eyes sparkling in the candlelight as her pink mouth laughed, pale skin glowing and lovely, and his bloodthirsty desire for vengeance crumbles and disappears even as he clearly sees what he must do.

*I loved her,* John thinks fleetingly, desperately. *I loved Mary, even though she was a lie, she was never real, but I loved the person I thought was Mary. I did, I truly did and I never wanted it to come to this, I am sorry, I am so sorry* --
John’s usual rock-steady aim trembles just microscopically as he pulls the trigger.

The first shot hits her at the base of her throat, a crimson rose of blood flowering and spreading across the gray and black swirls of her scarf.

The second hits her in her right shoulder, causing her to jerkily stagger backwards one step, then another.

The helicopters are almost unbearably loud now, a near-subsonic pulsing and throbbing in John’s bones as he fires one last time, seeking a clean kill shot.

The third bullet pierces Maria’s skull just above her left eyebrow, exiting rather messily from the back of her head, splattering bone and brain against the wall behind her.

Her back hits the damp grey concrete with a solid thump, and she slides slowly down the wall, her body now merely a marionette with cut strings, finally crumpling into a half-sitting, half-sprawled heap illuminated by harshly unforgiving, almost nightmarish glare of the van headlamps. Her eyes are wide, already going glassy with death; her mouth is curled up into a grotesque caricature of a sardonic grin, as if she simply cannot believe she has come to this undignified end.

The small Ruger in John’s hand suddenly feels like it weighs a hundred pounds. It succumbs to gravity, dropping from nerveless fingers and clattering to the ground. John follows, collapsing onto the hard floor despite his best attempts to stay upright.

“JOHN!” Sherlock screams, scrabbling upright, limbs flailing, almost losing his footing on the damp concrete as he stumbles to John’s side and collapses back onto his knees. “Oh God, oh God, John, tell me you’re not hurt. For God’s sake, tell me you’re not hurt.”

“I’m fine, Sherlock,” John says, trying to sound collected and reassuring. “I am. It just grazed me. It’s nothing, it’s just a -- ”

But as John’s fingers fumble at the hem of his tee shirt, pulling it up to show Sherlock the minor gouge on his flank, he notices there’s a rasping, wheezing quality to his own breath that really shouldn’t be there, and then he realises he can’t inhale properly. He’s gasping shallowly, fighting for every lungful of air.

Sherlock’s kinetically vibrating form goes stone still, and the expression that forms on his face is one John can’t quite name, but it fills him with a bone-deep, queasy dread.

“John,” Sherlock says, and his voice is calm, too calm, deathly calm in the way only a man fighting off panic with every fibre of his being can sound. “John.”

John gathers his last shred of courage and cranes his neck downwards to survey the injury.

The bullet entered the left side of his torso at an oblique angle with a medium to low velocity; there’s a gouge, to be sure, but it terminates in a small dark hole in John’s side, from which blood is pouring freely forth, coating his skin and clothing with shiny, sticky, dark red gore.

Yet John can feel the fabric of his shirt pressed against his back, still warm and dry.

No exit wound.

“Oh,” John says, and the single syllable comes out soft and somehow oddly resigned. “Oh, shit.”

In one fluid motion, Sherlock pulls off his jacket and the unbuttoned chambray shirt he’s wearing
over his grey tee, wadding up the rough blue cotton and pressing it hard into the side of John’s abdomen. The pain roars up, phosphorescent and razor-sharp, making John arch and cry out sharply.

“I’m sorry, John, I have to put pressure on the --”

It’s getting harder for John to think clearly. His mind is fuzzed now, limbs growing cold and heavy.

“No, Sherlock, it’s all right, just listen, I need you to listen.”

“Stop talking,” Sherlock snaps. “You need to conserve your energy.”

“I need you to find her.” He tries to grab onto Sherlock’s tee shirt, to pull him closer, but his hands are uncooperative, his fingers sluggish and numb as they fumble against the fabric. “Promise me you won’t stop until you find her.”

Sherlock shakes his head, his lovely mouth a tight, grim line.

“Shut up,” he rasps, his voice sounding almost almost angry. “Don’t talk like that. We’re going to find her together, all right? Together or not at all, remember. You said that, John, and you’re not a liar. Don’t make yourself a liar.”

“Sherlock, I...” He feels his eyelids growing heavy as the chill numbness wraps around him like damp and heavy cotton wool.

“Shut up. Shut up and don’t -- John, no drifting, okay? Keep your eyes fixed on me.”

John tries to do what Sherlock asks, keeping every shred of his fading focus on Sherlock’s face, his lovely, heartbroken face, on how his mouth is twisting in anguish, his jaw shaking as he tries unsuccessfully to fight back tears, the pain in his clear blue eyes, the unruly curly tufts of roughly-chopped dark hair backlit into a frizzy halo by the light of the van headlamps.

Very distantly, John registers the uptick in background noise as the first handful of agents arrive on scene, boots thudding and voices booming, British and American accents colliding and overlapping in the echoing space.

It’s getting harder and harder to stay awake.

He hates how much he’s hurting Sherlock, oh God he does, but every cell of his body is screaming in alarm now and he understands, instinctively, that he’s running out of time.

“I don’t think this is --, if I -- this isn’t good, okay, and you have to. Please.” John is fighting for each breath now, the icy tremors of shock setting in as his abdomen fills with blood, his diaphragm unable to expand properly. “Please promise me that if I don’t -- if I can’t -- you have to keep going. Promise me you won’t stop until you find her.”

Sherlock doesn’t answer; instead he slides his hand carefully around the back of John’s head, cradling the base of his skull with a heartbreaking tenderness as his other hand presses the wad of blood-soaked cloth against the hole in John’s side.

“Say it,” John gasps. “Please, Sherlock.”

“No,” Sherlock rasps, harsh and desperate as he shakes his head. “I know what you’re really asking me for, John, you’re asking me if it’s okay to die, you’re asking me for permission, and no.”
“Sherl-”

“Goddamn you, no. I am selfish and I am weak and I need you too much, do you hear me?” The tears are sliding down his face now, unchecked. “You do not have my permission, John. You do not have my permission to die.”

There is a swelling wave of tumult and noise behind the two of them, and John senses rather than sees two equipment-laden men come up and kneel down next to his supine form.

“Abdominal aorta,” he gasps. “Almost certainly. Massive hypovolemia, secondary to…”

His fading hearing is playing odd tricks on him, and among the cacophony he almost thinks he hears an incongruously familiar click of high, expensive heels. But can’t be sure, not at all -- the entirety of the scene unfolding feels so far away from him now, as if he’s seeing it from a distance, as if he’s under ten feet of water and drowning, the icy water filling his lungs, stealing his breath.

God, he’s so cold. He’s cold down into his bones, now, so cold that his body shakes with the chill of it, cold all over except for the red hot, burning steel spike of pain lancing his side, penetrating deep into his belly.

He trails off, losing the thought midway through, gazing up at Sherlock in befuddlement. Whatever he had been saying a moment ago seems irrelevant, unimportant.

You have to sleep now, a soothing voice murmurs from somewhere in his own mind. You have to sleep now, sleep to escape the cold and the pain, and it will be all right, you’ll be warm and safe and it won’t hurt anymore. Sherlock will understand, not today, but someday, he’ll understand --

“I love you,” John breathes out, the words a gurgling near-whisper. “I should have said it before, Sherlock, I’m so sorry, God, I love you so much, I’m so sorry -- ”

“You can’t die,” Sherlock says, his deep voice cracking, flayed raw with the superhuman effort of holding his composure for just a few moments longer. “John. You can’t die, please, if you love me stay with me, help is here, please, just stay with me, just--”

John senses rather than sees a blurry, unfocused shadow encroaching from the right.

“No, no, no,” Sherlock says, a helpless, unguarded wail, a desperate entreaty directed at no one, at everyone, at the entirety of creation.

“Mister Holmes,” the woman repeats. “Sherlock. Please. Move aside so the EMTs can help Doctor Watson.”

Her voice is low and and compassionate, yet holds the unmistakable note of authority that demands compliance, and John knows then that the ghost in their machine has come for them at last, Mycroft Holmes transcending the grave to save his little brother from the fire one final time.

Thank you, he thinks, the burst of relief washing over him in a wave, a warm soothing undertow pulling him ever closer to unconsciousness. Thank you, Mycroft, oh God thank you, Sherlock is safe, he’s alive he’s safe and it’s over and now I can --

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs once more, the words barely more than a puff of air across his lips, and with
that John closes his eyes and gives in, regretful yet resigned, to the undeniable pull of the warm and peaceful dark.
The In-Between Place

Chapter Summary

John’s been here once before, years ago, as he lay feverish and delirious in a Camp Bastion hospital bed while septicaemia ravaged his weakened body.

“It’s the In-Between Place,” he says aloud.

“The place between life and death,” Mycroft avers. “A resting point for those who have to make the decision.” He cuts his eyes sideways at John, just slightly. “Not all of us are so fortunate, you realise.”

11. The In-Between Place

John wakes from his unplanned doze with a disoriented start, finding himself seated on a hard, unfamiliar wooden bench and not remembering in the slightest how he ended up there.

It must have been one of those brief but seriously intense naps: he feels blank, dazed, everything around him overly bright and a bit unreal. It takes a moment for him to orient himself to his location: he’s on the platform of a huge London railway station, one he’s been in many times before, bright sunlight pouring in from the vast, arched glass roof of the train shed.

He struggles to make sense of his surroundings; his brain must not yet be fully online, for he cannot really recall why he’s waiting for a train, or even precisely how he got to the railway station. Yet here he undeniably is, seated on an uncomfortable segmented bench, his battered army duffel tucked between his feet, unfocused eyes blankly gazing at the cane in his right hand as he tries to shake off the persistent layer of heavy tiredness that seems to be sticking to him like glue.

The thick, honeyed sunlight of a late spring midmorning pours down through the glass ceiling onto his head and shoulders. It should be too warm to be wearing both a thick woolly jumper and his favourite black jacket, but for some reason John feels...cold. There’s a chill in his belly he can’t
shake, a coldness that seems to emanate from deep inside him somehow, making him shiver a bit despite the warmth of the day.

It’s fine, though, because he’d really prefer to keep his jacket on. He’s glad to be wearing it, he’s missed it, hasn’t even felt like himself because he hasn’t worn his own clothing in weeks—

Wait.

Why on earth hasn’t he worn his own clothing in weeks? That makes no sense at all. What other clothing would he wear?

John has the pervasive feeling that this bit of information is vitally important, and yet he still can’t quite remember, his memories slippery in his fumbling grasp.

It’s so very hard to focus.

John is staring off into the middle distance, still attempting in vain to marshal his fuzzed, jumbled thoughts when he first feels the rhythmic, pulsing thrum of an approaching train. Soon after he hears the train whistle, a high-pitched, quavering noise that sounds surprisingly, and oddly, rather like an insistent, electronic beep.

With a loud chugging rumble of many wheels and the distinctly metallic-acrid smell of diesel, the locomotive pulls slowly into to the platform; the passenger cars are sharp-nosed, silver and sleek, futuristic yet somehow retro, posher and shinier than any train John’s ever seen before. The design reminds John of something he saw once many years ago as a child -- or maybe he dreamed it -- something like a half-remembered illustration from a generation-old forgotten copy of Popular Mechanics, an elegant, Art Deco future of British rail that never came to pass.

This is his train. He holds neither timetable nor ticket in his hand, but still he knows this to be true.

He knows that on this train there will be hot cups of tea poured from silver pots, and crisp vanilla cream biscuits and small savoury pies to go with; and then after, cozy bunks with with spotless white linens and goose down pillows in ironed cases and thick wool blankets that smell faintly of the lavender sachet his Nan once tucked into the various drawers and cupboards of her tiny, tumbledown brick cottage in Farnham. He knows how good the cool sheets will feel against his aching limbs as he stretches out and yawns and closes his eyes, the soft rocking of the train beckoning him softly down into a deep, dreamless eternal sleep.

The promise of rest is a siren song, calling irresistibly to his exhausted soul. John reaches down for the strap of his duffel with his free left hand and slowly rises, his aching limbs sluggish and protesting, almost unwilling to respond.

John leans heavily on his cane as he slings his bag over his shoulder.

The locomotive brakes squeal, a reverberating, tooth-grinding screech filling the air as the train slowly comes to a halt.

Time to go, John thinks to himself.

And then… he hesitates, without quite understanding why.
His feet are weary, his shoulder and his leg and his belly throbbing with hot piercing pain, his eyes aching and gritty with exhaustion. Every cell of his body wants to get on the train.

But his heart and his feet somehow refuse to be persuaded.

This isn’t what I want to do, John thinks, his brow furrowing in consternation at the discovery as his mind tries to parse a jumble of confusing, contradictory thoughts. It’s what I’m supposed to do, but it isn’t what I want to do, and I don’t know why.

Confused and ill at ease, John wishes fervently that he had someone else here with him, for help, for guidance -- hell, just for someone to talk to so he could make sense of the mess in his head.

As if on cue, the conductor steps out of the last car and down onto the platform, cutting a smart figure in her snug grey uniform, abundant red and gold piping at the shoulders, her dark hair tucked up under a matching, narrow-brimmed cap.

“All aboard!” she shouts, her voice clear and sharp, carrying easily above the thrumming hum of the engine.

A few travelers emerge as if out of nowhere, moving slowly; the shape of them is a bit blurry, somehow, their edges not quite fully-defined, giving them an unsettling air of incorporeality, of translucence.

John sees them in his peripheral vision, but he doesn’t turn his head, doesn’t look at them too closely.

(And he certainly doesn’t fleetingly wonder if he looks equally not-quite-real to them as they do to him, and what it all may mean.)

Porters step from the train cars out onto the platform, assisting the travelers carefully up the steps into the train.

John takes a deep breath, hitches his bag higher on his shoulder, grips his cane as if to take a step.

The conductor cups her hands around her glossy, dark red mouth. “Last call for boarding,” she calls out. “All passengers. Last call for boarding.”

She then turns her head and looks at John directly, her gaze piercing, unsettling. An unnerving shiver ripples down his spine at the unspoken question he sees in her eyes.

We’ve come for you. Are you ready?

John hesitates for a moment, then realises he knows the answer. He shakes his head minutely as he mouths the words.

Not yet.

The conductor shrugs, then cocks an eyebrow and taps on her wristwatch sternly, the message plain as day. Time is growing short.

She then pivots sharply on the ball of her foot and steps up and into the train car. The whistle sounds, the engine roars back to life, and the train rolls out of the station, a clackety groaning squeal of metal on metal with a thumpety-bump rhythm.

John sits down, growing more confused and anxious with each passing moment.
“You missed your train,” a posh, slightly condescending male voice murmurs to his right.

John turns, startled, to see a man sitting on his bench, a man he’s certain wasn’t there just a moment ago.

The bespoke-suited man is slender, in that hungry, slightly pinched sort of way that indicates a protracted fight against a tendency to roundness. He’s perhaps five years older than John, his hair dark and gingerish and receding rapidly from his forehead. He is pointy-nosed and thin-lipped, and somehow both intimidating and deeply, perplexingly familiar at the same time.

He doesn’t look up at John, instead gazing intently at the expensive gold pocket watch in his hand. There’s an air of carefully patient expectancy about him, condescending in a way that makes the back of John’s neck prickle with annoyance.

“I can’t see how that’s any of your business,” John replies, his tone deliberately cool and dismissive, a mask to hide his mounting anxiety.

The man shrugs one shoulder and returns the watch to the small front pocket of his waistcoat without answering.

Feeling awkward now and more than a little embarrassed, John doesn’t know what else to do or say, so he sits back down again.

The man ignores him completely.

An entirely empty platform, John thinks, and this rude, poncy bloke has to sit right next to me. Fantastic. Just fantastic.

So John ignores him right back, staring off into the middle distance, right hand unconsciously turning the handle of his cane this way and that as he avoids looking anywhere near the stranger seated next to him.

Time passes, with the kind of indeterminate slowness that feels like the drip-drip-drip of water torture.

After what feels like an age, the posh man gives a tiny barely audible sigh and checks his watch again.

John’s curiosity edges out his annoyance, and he can’t help but ask a question.

“Are you waiting for something?” he asks, peevish.

“Yes,” the man replies shortly, and doesn’t elaborate.

John narrows his eyes. He so dislikes these sorts of games.

“And you’re waiting for…?”

The man exhales through his nose in a show of deliberate, condescending patience before finally deigning to turn and look at John.

“For you to remember,” he replies.

“Remember what?” John asks.

The man raises a sardonic eyebrow. “My point exactly.”
“And you’re not going to tell me directly, I take it.”

“This is all part of a necessary process, John.”

“Forgive me for finding that disingenuous at best.” John looks up and down the length of the quiet train platform. “Can I ask where we are, at least?”

“You could. Or, alternately, you could learn the truth of the matter for yourself. You’re a relatively intelligent man, or so I’ve been told, so use your eyes and really look.”

John looks around, tries to really observe what’s around the two of them. Looks up at the ceiling, at the improbably blue sky framed by the vast field of glass frames, and a chunk of knowledge shakes itself loose from the morass of his tangled thoughts.

“King’s Cross Station,” he says aloud.

“Mmm,” the man murmurs. “So very Harry Potter. Charmingly middlebrow of you, John. What else?”

It’s undoubtedly King’s Cross. John has been here twenty times before, at least, and everything is as he remembers it, but there’s something here that feels strange and off and not right, somehow. John’s brow furrows as he attempts to narrow down what is wrong with his surroundings.

If you can’t find the answer, a soft, deep voice murmurs deep inside his head, reframe the question. It’s not about what you see, is it?

It’s not. It’s about what John doesn’t see.

In the end, it’s blindingly obvious. Aside from the two of them, seated on a frankly uncomfortable bench, there doesn’t seem to be anyone else in the station. Not just no other people visible; there are no overhead announcements, no murmur of distant noises other than those of the train that just left the platform. There is in fact no activity anywhere other than the conversation taking place here, in the midst of a vast, echoing space.

John doubts King’s Cross has ever been this entirely empty before in all of its storied history.

“Where is everyone else?” he wonders.

“Where indeed,” the man replies.

John’s unsettled feeling is trying to blossom into frank anxiety, despite the fuzzy numbness that seems to still want to wrap around his brainstem, lull him into the peaceful sleepy haze that is so accessible, so easy to rest in, gentle and safe --

No. This is important. He fights against the haze, swims against the pull of the tide, refocuses his drifting attention.

“It’s not really a train station, is it,” John says. It’s not a question.

“No. It’s not.”

The trickle of anxiety is swelling into...not a flood, not yet, but definitely a growing stream of jittery, tingling adrenaline lighting up his nerves. It helps to fights off the sleepy, drugged fatigue, though, so John embraces it, allows it to flow through him, sharpen his thoughts and his reflexes.

“Then where the hell are we?” he asks, a definite edge to his tone.
“It’s not the where of the place that’s important, John. It’s the why of it.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t follow. And by the way, how do you know my bloody name?”

“I know it’s difficult, John, but I need you to remember, and quickly. Time works differently here, to be sure, but we still haven’t got forever.”

John looks at the knuckles of his right hand, wrapped tightly around the handle of his cane, and tries to remember.

The cane.

Why does he still have it? He could have sworn he stopped using the cane, after --

After --

Walking with Stamford into the lab at Barts. Pale eyes look up at John, lighting with primal recognition despite never having seen him before.

Here, use mine.

Angelo’s, the candle on the table and then the chase after the cabbie. Laughing, breathless, against the tacky wallpaper in the hallway.

Mrs Hudson! Doctor Watson will take the room upstairs.

Finding meaning in his life at 221b, solving cases and living a chaotic and perfect existence with the most alternately charming and infuriating man who ever existed --

Miles of pale skin under his fingertips, the taste of cigarettes and adrenaline against his mouth, sweating and shivering and gasping in pleasure, heavy limbs twined together in sleep --

Recollection cascades through him like a dam breaking.

John gasps, a harsh intake of breath, and begins to rise reflexively from his seat.

“Sherlock. Oh God. Sherlock.”

A slender but strong hand comes down on his shoulder. “John. Sherlock’s all right. I swear he is.”

John shrugs off the hand, glares at the man next to him.

“If you don’t tell me where he is, I swear to Christ I’ll --”

“John,” the man snaps. “Enough of this. I need you to collect yourself.” His hard-edged voice softens a fraction. “He’s not the one in danger right now. You, and it’s urgent that you gather your wits so we can determine your next course of action.”

John narrows his eyes, holds the man’s gaze without blinking. “And who the hell are you to tell me anything at all?”

“You know who I am,” the man replies, “if you just calm yourself enough to think.”

At the man’s words, another surge of memories cascades through John’s mind.

An abandoned warehouse. A tall, lean figure in a slightly fussy suit, leaning on a poncy umbrella
just for the effect of it.

I’m the closest thing he has to a friend.

A private jet taking flight, returning to British soil not five minutes later. Turmoil and worry and a drug overdose that may or may not have been intentional.

Take care of him. Please.

John feels a familiar swell of annoyed irritation, tinged with a trace of secret admiration and followed by an oddly bittersweet almost-fondness.

“Mycroft,” he says, quieter, edging on melancholy.

“At your service,” Mycroft says with surprising sincerity.

“You’re dead. I remember now. You’re dead.”

Mycroft looks down, sighs, smooths out an imaginary crease in his perfect trousers.

“Undeniably true,” he replies.

The logical conclusion is immediately apparent; John doesn’t even want to think the question, let alone ask it, but he knows he must.

“Am I… oh, fuck. Mycroft. Am I dead?”

“Close to it,” Mycroft says. “Possibly even right next to it, but not dead yet. Not entirely.”

The final puzzle piece clicks into place.

John’s been here once before, years ago, as he lay feverish and delirious in a Camp Bastion hospital bed while septicaemia ravaged his weakened body.

“It’s the In-Between Place,” he says aloud.

“The place between life and death,” Mycroft avers. “A resting point for those who have to make the decision.” He cuts his eyes sideways at John, just slightly. “Not all of us are so fortunate, you realise.”

John hears the rebuke in Mycroft’s tone, chooses to ignore it.

“I don’t feel very damn fortunate,” he replies, hearing the sulky grumble in his own voice.

Mycroft tilts his head, studies him for a moment.

“How do you feel, then?” he asks

John is silent for a moment as he tries to find the right words, but it’s growing more difficult. The moment of adrenaline has ebbed, and the fuzzy exhaustion is flowing in again, filling his limbs and his mind with blank, leaden weight.


“The longer you stay here,” Mycroft tells him, “the more tired you will feel, and the more distant the memories of Before will become. With every passing moment it will be harder to leave. This is why
we need to act, and quickly.”

“That’s not fair,” John observes.

“Death doesn’t play fair. Of all people, John, you should know that.”

John turns his head, looks at Mycroft with a new awareness.

“You’re here to help me fight it. Aren’t you?”

“Something like that,” Mycroft allows.

The final puzzle pieces slide into place, and the light of understanding feels like a palpable thing, a bright force pushing back the dark undertow of that final, irrevocable rest.

“You’re me,” John says. “This is all in my head, and you’re just me talking to myself, making me remember, talking myself into living or dying.”

Mycroft tilts his head slightly as if considering the idea.

“Very possibly,” he allows. “However, the metaphysics of life and death are above even my pay grade, so really, who is to say? Certainly not I.”

“You really could have just told me all this,” John points out. “Didn’t have to play a round of Twenty Questions.”

Mycroft raises one eyebrow, the barest trace of a grin on his lips. “I suppose I just like to play a game, then.”

“You know,” John observes, “You’re as much of a pompous git dead as alive.”

Mycroft’s tiny grin grows into a small but genuine smile. “I’ve a reputation to uphold, after all.”

John shrugs in assent. The moment of camaraderie passes, and both men are silent for a moment, contemplating their respective thoughts. Or, John supposes, they are actually all his own thoughts. It’s all very confusing, to be honest, and he’d really rather not spend any more time contemplating, as Mycroft said, the metaphysics of it all.

Somewhere in the distance, he hears another whistle, higher-pitched and more insistent than he’s heard before, but still yet at some kind of far-off, floaty remove...

“John.”

“Mmm hmm.”

Mycroft pokes him rather rudely in the ribs, and John realises he’d started to drift off again into the warm blankness without even knowing it.

“John,” Mycroft snaps. “Wake up and listen carefully. There is another train coming, and it will take you back to where you came from. But there will only be the one. You have to get on it. There will not be another chance.”

John sighs, closes his eyes.

“I’m so very tired,” he tells Mycroft honestly.
“I know,” Mycroft replies, and there is a thread of kindness running under his blunt tone. “And no one would fault you for wanting to rest. No one.” he looks at the umbrella held loosely in his right hand. “Not even Sherlock. For the rest of his life he will grieve, every day. But he won’t fault you for it.”

Sherlock. Oh, Jesus. In the wake of his body’s overwhelming clamour for rest, John had somehow almost forgotten about Sherlock, and the guilt of that makes him feel terrible inside, nauseated and hollow.

“I don’t want… Mycroft. If I don’t get on that train. If I don’t go back. Will I -- “ he feels a piercing ache under his ribs just from the thought itself, but he has to know. “If I don’t go back, will I ever see Sherlock again?”

“Yes. You will. And to you, it will feel like barely any time has passed. Hardly as long as a single spring morning.”

John’s heart lightens, just a bit.

“To him... however,” Mycroft sighs. “To him, every day will be an lonely eternity spent in pain, until the very day he dies. And he won’t die young, John. He will find your daughter, you know he will. He will do what you asked of him. He find her and keep her and raise her, and he will do a far better job of it than anyone ever thought him capable. He will love her fiercely and raise her well, and she will grow into a fine woman that you will never get the chance to meet. And for her sake and yours he will continue, he will soldier on for decades until he dies in his bed a lonely old man, all out of love for you. He will survive, John. He will endure. But that’s all his life will be, without you. Endured. Not lived.”

Despite his bone-deep exhaustion, despite the temptation of rest, the idea of leaving Sherlock like that, condemning him to live a life of empty aching grief -- it pierces John’s heart, burns off the heavy grey fog surrounding him, renews his memories and purpose.

He remembers Sherlock’s beautiful eyes, spilling over with tears as he knelt next to John, pleaded with him to live.

If you love me, stay with me.

“Sherlock loves me,” John states. It’s in no way a question.

“Desperately."

“And my daughter needs me.”

“Absolutely. They both do. More than you can ever fully realise.”

His chest and belly are beginning to throb with an insistent, burning ache.

“If I decide...” John begins, then pauses, shakes his head a little, already knowing the answer in his heart. “If I go back, how much will it hurt?”

“Terribly,” Mycroft says with a shrug. “But then again, living always does, doesn’t it?”

A pulsing vibration begins to shiver under John’s feet as he hears another piercing wail of the train, louder, much closer this time.

“This is you,” Mycroft murmurs. “This is your one chance.”
John nods.

“Right, then,” he says, and rises, picking up his duffel and slinging it over his left shoulder. John discovers his right hand is empty, and looks around for his cane.

It is nowhere to be found, and John finds he isn’t surprised in the least.

Mycroft stands as well. “You’re going to need this,” he says, handing John a cartoonish oversized paperboard ticket.

As John takes it from him it morphs a small notebook, bound in battered black leather. He runs his thumb over the worn cover, momentarily overcome with emotions he cannot even put a name to.

“Thank you, Mycroft,” John says, his voice rough with grief and gratitude. “Thank you for helping me remember.”

“A privilege to be of service, John.” Mycroft’s voice is equally choked, and he pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a deep breath before continuing. “Give Sherlock my regards, will you?”

He extends his hand. John takes it, Mycroft’s palm feeling shockingly warm and alive against his own.

They shake once, firmly, before John nods and turns away, re-shouldering his bag. Then he hesitates for a moment, looking down at the small tattered notebook.

He turns back to Mycroft.

“I know this isn’t real,” John says. “I know this is all in my head… anoxia, release of DMT from the pineal gland, whatever. But, for what it’s worth, he knows. He knows how much you loved him.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Mycroft says. “And I hope he knows I feel the same.” He gives John a small, sad smile. “Until next time, Doctor Watson.” He pivots on his heel and strides away without looking back, the tap of Italian loafers against concrete loud and echoing in the huge and empty building.

John is still looking at his receding form when the train pulls into the station. It’s a battered grimy thing dating back to the Eighties at least, pulled by a hulk of a locomotive, its screeching squealing brakes in desperate need of tuning.

The doors open with the rough rasp of worn bearings. There is no conductor.

John boards the first passenger car, sits on the first battered metal seat. He is unsurprised to find himself alone.

He thinks of dark unruly hair and full lips trembling and silver eyes full of desperate tears.

He thinks of the tiny helpless child he has yet to meet.

The seat digs hard into his back and side. He doesn’t reconsider his decision for a moment.

A few scant moments later, the heavy doors clang shut and the train pulls away slowly from the platform, swaying a bit from side to side.

The seats in the passenger car are narrow and uncomfortable, the overhead lights flickering briefly and then going out as the train enters a long dark tunnel. In the darkness John feels a discomfort building, an enormous swelling pressure rising, a caldera of some unnameable tension building and building inside him --
The train leaves the tunnel without warning, and the sudden light is blinding as a burst of electricity sizzles through every cell in his body --

“-- sinus rhythm established, okay, we got him back, we got him --”

And the throb in his side explodes into searing agony, and there’s a hard plastic mask over his nose and mouth, and the jolting percussive thump of the helicopter blades is unbearably loud in his ears as Sherlock crouches next to him, holding John’s hand as he rocks himself instinctively back and forth, his breathing harsh and ragged with anguish as he squeezes John’s fingers hard enough to bruise.

Of course, Mycroft was completely correct in his assessment.

Living may be worth it, but it always hurts like hell.
“The thing is,” Figueroa says with a deliberate mildness, “not too many folks around here keep up with what happens in London, but you gotta understand, I got into this line of work because I’m kind of a crime buff. I read, a lot, and as it turns out, I know exactly who you are. I’m a fan, by the way. I’ve read your blog, Doctor Watson, and I know about your longtime association with Mister Sherlock Holmes, and also about your late wife, Mary Morstan, née Maria Kochenko. I know there’s a lot going on here, so why don’t you walk me through all this nice and slow, see if we can make some sense of what happened in that garage last night. Help me see you in a better light, maybe?”

John looks up at him; he keeps his expression level and unblinking, careful not to reveal any hint of his still-turbulent thoughts and feelings.

As instructed, he doesn’t speak.

“Come on, Doctor Watson. John.” He’s annoyed now, but endeavouring not to show it. “Are friends so thick on the ground here you couldn’t use another?”

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder: I am not a doctor, so everything I know about medicine is from my limited firsthand experience, Google, and old episodes of "E.R." What I'm saying is, don't go in expecting medical accuracy. At all. Just know that I did my best and go with it.

I've been messing with this chapter for almost five months. Time to send it out into the world before I drive myself mad looking at it.

Thank you for your wonderful patience and support! xo

12. Camden, Part Three

The human brain preserves its sanity by means of forgetfulness in the wake of trauma.

Later on, John will mercifully recall very little about this helicopter ride, or the bumpy, wind-buffeted landing on the roof of Cooper University Hospital, or the searing pain that consumes him from the inside out, or how he gasps and cries out in anguish, clutching Sherlock’s cool, clammy fingers until the merciful twin angels of morphine and lorazepam intervene and send him tumbling into blessed black unconsciousness.

After that comes the incomparable relief of nothingness, a span of time that simultaneously seems both eternal and momentary.
John has no idea how much time has passed when he is abruptly jolted back into a groggy, blurry semi-awareness by the tremendously unpleasant feeling of something rough and unyielding being pulled out of his throat, the hard material scraping his palate and epiglottis from the inside out. The deeply unpleasant and confusing sensation makes him gag and retch and cough; the involuntary reflexive movements set off a chain reaction of shooting, piercing pain, lancing through his abdomen and chest and spreading through his entire body.

He moans and flails in incoherent terror and confusion; a dark blurry shape looms over him, and a warm and slightly callused hand strokes his arm with gentle care.

“You’re okay,” a familiar voice murmurs in a soft baritone. “They’ve extubated you. It’s uncomfortable, I know, but it’s over now, you’re breathing on your own, you’re doing so well. John. You’re okay. Shh. Go back to sleep now.”

John can’t think, can’t remember, but he knows, instinctively, that he can trust that soothing voice, and he obeys with a single, rasping sigh, sinking back down into slumber. It’s a real sleep, now, still tinged with a narcotic edge but no longer the leaden blankness of heavy sedation.

He dreams, this time, in brief snatches, confusing, disjointed images and sounds that never quite resolve into any kind of linear narrative.

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He next surfaces, briefly, into soft-focused daylight, the steady beep of a heart monitor, and the unpleasantly sibilant sounds of a quiet argument next to his bed, a tangle of voices muttering in harsh, strained near-whispers.

“You’re supposedly a trained physician,” a man’s voice hisses, “yet you’re unable to give a satisfactory answer to even one single question asked of you.”

It’s the familiar voice from before, the one that calmed John when he first struggled into incoherent semi-wakefulness; but whereas the tone was soft and soothing before, it is now snappish and demanding -- and frightened, too, underneath, in that way of people who hide their helplessness and fear under a cloak of aggressive unpleasantness.

“Mister Holmes,” another voice cuts in. The second man’s voice is American, his timbre slightly higher, thinner. He’s placating, verging on wheedling, but also clearly both offended and on the defensive. “I assure you, every member of this health team has the finest education and experience available. Mister Watson’s --”

“Doctor Watson.”

“-- Doctor Watson’s paradoxical reaction to a standard sedation cocktail could not have been anticipated by any --”

“My query is in regards the exact makeup of the drug cocktail in question. This is a fact which should be easy to ascertain from his medical record. Yet you either can’t, or you won’t. So I ask you, Doctor. Which, exactly, is it?”

“Enough of this,” a woman’s voice interjects crisply. “Mister Holmes, I don’t know what you’re hoping to achieve, but berating the medical staff every time they dare to approach Doctor Watson’s bedside is not going to help you get it.”

Her accent is English, almost not quite posh; the tone falls somewhere in between commanding and cajoling, bordering on what John privately thinks of bossy, a word he hasn’t thought of in years, a
word tied inexorably into his mental image of his eternally hectoring older sister...

For a confused moment the thread of time catches and tangles, and John thinks it’s Harriet’s voice in his ears.

*He’s twelve years old, and his teenage sister is at his bedside, consoling their distraught mum and glaring daggers at their grief and guilt-stricken father, as all the while John struggles to wake up from a fractured skull, the result of getting in between Harry and Dad and getting the worse end of a table lamp Dad had snatched up in anger.*

*It was the worst night of his entire life.*

Except, no, that wasn’t the worst night, was it? Because he would live through worse nights, later, in the desolate sands of Helmand, and then the endless dark stretches of pain and loneliness as he burned with fever in Bastion, and then, years after that the most terrible night of all, the night he waited alone in an empty flat, sightless eyes staring at nothing as he waited for his best friend, waited for him even though John knew the truth, knew for a fact he wasn’t coming home ever again.

*No. that’s not quite right either. It’s close, it’s very close, but there’s something more, something he can’t quite remember --*

“Perhaps I need to start with something simpler, then. Let’s begin with this *supposed* medical degree of yours. Did you perhaps buy it in a pound shop, *Doctor*? If so, I assure you, you overpaid.”

“*Sherlock,*” the woman cuts in again, biting the syllables cleanly off, obviously at the far end of her frayed patience. “I said that’s *enough.*”

At that name, some part of John’s deepest self awakens fully, reboots, comes back online and remembers who he is and where is and why; which is to say, he is John Hamish Watson, MD, forty-two years of age, RAMC veteran with a bad shoulder and even worse trust issues, desperately in love with a brilliant and gorgeous complete weirdo, recently reeling from a very ill advised marriage, very recently gutshot in a parking garage in New Jersey, of all goddamn places on Earth, and consequent to all of that pretty much mostly dead and *oh fuck* now everything hurts from his hair to his toenails, doesn’t it just, but on the up side mostly dead is not entirely dead, which means he is a little bit alive, miraculously enough, and--

*Sherlock.* Sherlock here, is at his bedside, has been for days straight, exhausted and frustrated and terribly, terribly afraid.

John desperately needs to let Sherlock know he’s here, he’s alive and awake and *here.* He tries to open his eyes or move his arms, but he’s not yet capable, not really fully awake or in control of his body, and all he can manage in the end is a flicker of his eyelids and a tiny twitch of his left hand.

The steady beep of the monitors does not change. His desperate attempt at communication raises not a blip from the equipment attached to his body, and the world-renowned consulting detective for once fails to notices something of import, distracted by heated conversation at hand.

“*Mister Holmes,*” the second man’s voice repeats; he’s quieter, now, remembering where they are and working hard to contain his anger but still obviously frustrated and offended. “*Sir,* I understand you’re under a great deal of emotional stress, but if you continue to harass and obstruct me and the other members Doctor Watson’s caregiving team, you’ll leave me with no choice but to remove you from this room.”

“*You wouldn’t dare,*” Sherlock hisses, furious.
“Sherlock,” the woman’s voice says again, low and warning. “He would, and he can, and he will, so I advise you to consider your next words very, very carefully. For John’s sake, at least, if not for your own.”

There is silence for a long moment. Then another.

The various beeping noises suddenly seem much louder in the newly quiet room.

“I apologise, Doctor,” Sherlock finally says, clearly unwilling, stiff and formal and transparently insincere. “I am not in my best frame of mind, clearly. As you said. Stress.”

“Apology accepted,” the other man replies, chilly and equally insincere. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other patients as well.”

There are footsteps, and the soft, scraping sounds of a door being opened and then closed.

The woman sighs. “You really could have handled that better, Sherlock.”

“So I am supposed to just stand by while these stupid Americans just, what, finish John off with their terrifying incompetence?”

“That’s not fair, Sherlock. This is one of the best trauma centers on the Eastern Seaboard, and these people are trying their level best to help him, and you know it. How many times do you have to do this before you realise taking out frustrations on the people on your side doesn’t make anything any better?”

Sherlock sucks in a sharp breath through his teeth.

“Evelyn,” he hisses, clearly furious. “Allow me to make this absolutely clear. You may have scooped up Mycroft’s position, but the right to treat me like some kind of willful, obstreperous child? That belonged to my brother alone. And it died right along with him.”

The woman -- Evelyn -- exhales, hard. She is silent for a moment before she speaks again, lower in volume but her tone harsher, verging almost upon bitter.

“I am only going to say this one time, Sherlock, so pay attention. My current position isn’t some kind of a -- a prize, or a gift, or a windfall. I would do anything, do you know that? I would move heaven and earth a hundred times over if I could undo what happened and bring Mycroft back into this world. But I can’t, no matter how desperately I want to. Nor can you, for the record.”

“I never said -- I never meant --”

“Sherlock Holmes, shut your endless, infuriating mouth for once and listen to me. I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t want this, God knows I never wanted this, but be that as it may, It is mine now, and I didn’t want it but I damn well earned it, through blood and sweat and yes, tears that neither you nor anyone one else will ever, ever see. I’ve paid a terrible price for something I never wanted, but it’s mine now, fair and square, and don’t you dare say or even think otherwise, Sherlock. Not ever again. Do you understand me?”

Silence. Then Sherlock gives a heavy, slightly shaky exhale.

“I apologise,” he says, and this time the words are sincere, chastened. “Evelyn. That was unkind. I shouldn’t have --”

“No, you really shouldn’t have.” There’s a rustle as the woman gathers her things. “However, I do
appreciate the apology. At any rate, I have a great deal of work piling up elsewhere. I will send
someone by to check in on you and Doctor Watson later this evening.”

The clicking of heels marks the woman’s departure. The door swishes shut behind her. The various
monitors ding and beep.

A chair creaks. Sherlock sighs, a sound of profound exhaustion.

“Shit,” he murmurs. His voice is barely above a whisper, almost too quiet for John to hear. “That
wasn’t how I wanted to...John. I need you to wake up. I don’t -- I need --”

He sighs again. Something in that soft noise quavers and hitches just a little. “Shit.”

John tries to fight his way to full consciousness. He’s desperate to open his eyes and let Sherlock
know he is alive, he is here and with him, but...he can’t. It’s just beyond him. His tiny spark of
wakefulness is already exhausted. The tides of confusion and exhaustion begin to pull him under, his
sliver of conscious awareness growing watery and muddled.

And who the hell is Evelyn? John wonders, fleetingly, and it’s his last coherent thought before the
blankness rolls in to claim him once more.

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When John awakens again, he’s blurry and hazy and in a lot of pain, to be sure, but he’s markedly
more aware of himself and his surroundings. His sandpaper-dry eyes struggle to focus, and he
attempts to survey his surroundings without yet taking the gamble of turning his head.

It’s evening -- the glass of the narrow window at the far left corner of the room is dark -- and the
single-bed hospital room is lit only by the bedside lamp and the bluish digital glow of the monitor
screens that surround John’s bed. Those screens are attached to a cardiac monitor and PCA pump,
respectively. A variety of equipment stands silent guard at the perimeter of the room, waiting to
spring into action if needed.

On his right, a three-quarters closed curtain partially obscures the entirely-glassed wall, which allows
a chunk of fluorescent light from the hallway beyond to enter the room.

Even to a mushy, barely awake John, that level of medical observation clearly indicates he’s almost
certainly in intensive care.

There is a rather alarming assortment of tubes and drains and leads running to and from John’s body,
including...John inhales, flexes his hips just slightly to confirm his suspicions.

Yep. Definitely a tube there, assisting the natural plumbing, if you will.

So clearly, he’s not in fantastic shape overall -- he’s peeing into a bag, he’s incredibly nauseated, his
mouth is Sahara-dry, his head is pounding, and this is just the immediate first impression of the
situation.

But in the plus column, he’s mostly fully awake now, relatively oriented to his surroundings, and
breathing without a tube in his trachea.

All of this put together means that despite the still not-fully-understood extent of his injuries, he is
almost certainly going to pull through this ordeal more or less intact.

Still caught up in his slow, slightly fuzzed out survey of his surroundings, John belatedly notices a
soft, familiar sussuration of breath, which almost but not quite qualifies as snoring.

He carefully turns his head, wincing at the symphony of pain the small movement produces.

A utilitarian and rather worn fold-out sleeper chair is jammed haphazardly into the machinery-crowded room. Sherlock is curled up on the blue vinyl, his head pillowed on one folded arm as he sleeps, and John knows he must have been out for quite a while for the ever-vigilant Sherlock to fall asleep in such an unguarded, vulnerable manner, as if exhaustion literally knocked him over.

He’s out of ratty jeans and tees and back in his own tailored clothing, slim black trousers and a light grey dress shirt. The recent past still shows, however, in how the shirt is visibly overlarge on his too-thin frame, and in the way his hacked off hair is sticking up in awkward tufted clumps. His lower legs hang off the edge of the folded-out sleeper, socked feet dangling in a way John finds endearing even now, in his compromised mental state.

Sherlock’s slumber is still light for all that; he seems to immediately sense John’s return to the land of the living. He awakens with a start, sitting upright and swinging both feet to the floor, scrubbing his fingers against the back of his head.

He stares at John for a long moment, as if he doesn’t quite believe what he sees with his own eyes.

“John?” he finally says, hesitant, almost uncertain.

“Hey,” John says, his voice a creaky, froggy croak.

“Hey,” Sherlock replies softly, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he gives John a fond, relieved smile. He slides off the sleeper into a kneeling position -- as graceful as ever, even in these trying circumstances -- and leans forward to wrap a hand around John’s forearm, careful to avoid jostling his IV.

The unguarded relief and affection -- no, adoration -- is obvious in every crease of Sherlock’s pale, careworn face. The wave of fierce love and gratitude John feels at the sight of him is huge and overwhelming, and the labile surge of emotion causes John’s dry, blurry eyes to sting with tears. He’s taken with the sudden and urgent need to explain what happened, to tell Sherlock what and who he saw --

“The train station,” he rasps, dry tongue slurring his words; Sherlock’s expression goes from relieved to confused as he tilts his head slightly, trying to parse them

“The train station,” John repeats. “I saw Mycroft there, and told me, he told me -- ”

He’s getting agitated, his breathing rasping and harsh; the beeping of the heart monitor grows faster, more frantic. Sherlock leans forward, brows drawing together in concern.

“John, I -- ” Sherlock shakes his head. “I don’t think --”

“He told me,” John repeats, stubbornly, growing agitated with this feeling of urgency, needing to tell Sherlock something vitally important, but not quite being able to marshal his thoughts in his fuzzy, unfocused state.

“Okay,” Sherlock murmurs, placating. “Okay, John, it’s okay, just, let me get you some water, all right? Here, I don’t want to risk you choking.”

He stands and fiddles with the controls at the side of the bed, raising John’s upper half to a forty-five degree angle before he turns and picks up a small pitcher on the bedside table. He pours water into a
styrofoam cup, adds a lid and a plastic straw, then half- crouches next to the bed and brings the straw to John’s parched lips.

John takes a grateful sip, then another. The lukewarm water feels like nectar of the gods as it trickles down his parched throat.

“T...
Sherlock nudges the call button inside in favour of taking John’s hand in his, careful not to disturb the IV line as he carefully squeezes his fingers. He looks down at their joined hands and frowns slightly, as if trying to figure out just the right thing to say.

“John,” he says softly.

“Yes.”

“You’re here,” Sherlock murmurs, sounding close to overcome. “We’re here. You didn’t die.”

John smiles, just a little, feeling the sting of his cracked and chapped lips.

“I didn’t die,” he agrees.

Sherlock looks up at him, eyes exhausted and rimmed with red. He is so completely vulnerable right now, defenses utterly demolished in this intimate moment, his singular features rendering him both exhaustedly ancient and impossibly young at the same time.

“I really thought,” he begins, haltingly and John sees a single tear shining at the inner corner of his eye. “I really thought...John, you don’t know -- I’ve never been afraid in my life. I was so sure you were going to die, and I couldn’t stop it, I couldn't do anything, and I --”

Sherlock pauses and looks down, wrapping his free hand protectively across his own torso, and he looks about about five seconds away from curling into a ball and rocking back and forth like a frightened child. The sight hurts John’s heart far worse than any mere physical pain.

He squeezes Sherlock’s fingers, once.

“Hey,” John says. “Hey, Sherlock. Look at me, please? I didn’t die, I didn’t die and I’m right here. With you. Okay?”

These few slurred words feel so pathetically inadequate to John, but they seem to be enough to comfort Sherlock. He nods, dashing away the stray tear with the back of his hand. He sniffles a little, then rolls his eyes in embarrassment at his own maudlin turn.

“Oh okay,” he agrees with an only slightly watery grin.

Words seem to fail both of them. They gaze mutely at each other for a long moment, the communication between them silent but honest, all the emotions they can’t quite speak yet obvious in each other’s eyes.

After a long moment Sherlock breaks eye contact, something on the other side of the glassed in wall catching his eye. A fleeting look of concert crosses his features. He dips his head close, close enough that John can smell the faint traces of Altoids and cigarette smoke on his breath.

“John,” he murmurs his ear, sotto voce. “I know you’re not feeling yourself, but I need to tell you something very important, and it can’t wait. Are you listening?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Are you certain?”

“Mmm-hmm. Yeah. Yes.”

The police have made their presence known on this unit, and I’ve seen them make inquiries of your nurse three times in the past four hours. They are going to question you, and soon. I don’t know
exactly when. Not just yet, you’ve just recently awoken, but when they feel you’re fully conscious and alert, they will ask you questions.”

John tilts his head in unspoken query.

“You’re not a suspect, precisely. Evelyn and I were able to bribe a surgery tech to lose your clothes and scrub the GSR off your hands and arms before the police officially took swabs. We’ve put together a cover story leaning heavily on James Martinez, the actions of MI6 and a sprinkle of diplomatic immunity, and we’ve been guaranteed corroboration from the Home Office.”


“Shh. Later. At this moment, it looks like the local authorities are amenable to all of this going away, given sufficient plausible deniability; if you say nothing to them, not a single word to contravene the official story, everything should be fine.” Sherlock gives his hand a small squeeze. “I know it’s a lot to take in right now, I do, but I need to know you understand.”

John nods, squeezes back.

“Are you sure?” Sherlock asks, sinking down and sitting back on his heels, looking up at him with an expression John can’t quite parse.

“I do,” John rasps, lacking the energy to disguise his exhausted, slightly irrational impatience.

“All right, “ Sherlock says, gentler, conciliatory, stroking the inside of John’s arm with his thumb.”Good.”

Just at that moment a large, cheerful, ginger-haired nurse pops into the room without warning or preamble.

“Nice to see you awake, Doctor Watson,” he says, his tone genial yet crisp. “I’m Glenn, and I’m your nurse today. Pleased to meet you.”

“Hello, Glenn,” John replies, instinctive politeness kicking in despite the morphine and exhaustion.

For his part, Sherlock merely glowers at the RN with unalloyed (and likely undeserved) suspicion. John is fairly certain that’s been his default expression the entire time he’s been in hospital. Glenn, however, is clearly a professional, cheerfully ignoring Sherlock’s glare and focusing his attention on John. “Let’s see how you’re doing, shall we?”

He proceeds to poke and prod at John, gently but thoroughly, taking vitals and checking on the array of tubing and wires snaking across and around his prone form. As he works, John finds himself suddenly and brutally exhausted, his minimal energy reserve drained by this brief foray into wakefulness. He drifts back off into sleep without even knowing, well before Glenn the nurse has completed his ministrations.

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Sometime early the next morning, Sherlock’s voice, louder and knife-edged, pulls John out of his sleep.

“Absolutely not,” he snarls in a near-hiss, volume low but tone murderous. “Detective Figueroa can, and will, wait until John wakes up. There’s no need to disturb an injured man’s sleep just to ask a few pointless questions.”
John cracks open one eye.

The narrow window on his left side is a golden rectangle, early morning sunlight brightening the hospital room. The television, perched high in a far corner is on but muted, a pair of American chat hosts bickering silently as the news crawls across the bottom of the screen.

Next to his bed a petite, roundish nurse is standing her ground, hands on ample hips, curly tendrils escaping her tight ponytail as she looks up at Sherlock with a truly impressive unflappability.

“I’m sorry sir,” she replies, patient but firm. “With respect, you don’t give any orders here.”

“Keeping a sick man from resting is unconscionable. Egregious. Bordering on --”

“S’alright,” John mutters. “Sh’lock. It’s -- yeah. I’m awake.”

“You need your rest,” Sherlock begins. “This can absolutely wait until --”

The no-nonsense young nurse breaks in, cutting him off briskly. “Doctor Watson, I’m sorry to bother you, but there’s an detective here, and he has some questions for you.”

“That’s fine,” John tells her. “I’m happy to have a word.” Sherlock inhales with intention, as if about to speak and at length; John quells him with the sternest look he can muster in his compromised state, then turns his head to give the nurse a much milder expression. “I don’t suppose I’m allowed to have tea?” he asks politely.

“It should be fine,” the young woman -- identified by the lanyard around her neck as Tymika -- replies. “I’ll go check. Mister Holmes, come with me please? I’ll show you where you can wait.”

John expects further protest, but although his expression remains baleful Sherlock allows himself to be led out of the room by the much smaller woman. A few minutes later she reappears, gingerly carrying a covered styrofoam cup. Following behind her is a tall, serious-looking man, youngish, maybe thirty. He’s dark haired and handsome despite the tiredness in his brown eyes. His gunmetal suit is cheap, but carefully tailored to look more expensive.

“It’s decaf,” Tymika says, a note of apology in her tone. She places the cup on the bedside tray, along with two packets of sugar, and rolls the tray table over to the bed so John can more easily reach. “And a bit hot, so take care.” She straightens, tugs down the hem of her scrub top, and takes a step back. “And this gentleman is…”

“Detective Brandon Figueroa,” says the young man, thrusting out a hand as he steps forward. His face is narrow and serious, his eyes sharp and intelligent. “I have some questions for you, sir.”

John looks up at him, expression carefully neutral, as he nurse slips out of the room without another word.

The detective cocks his head slightly and waits a beat for John to answer. When he doesn’t, Figueroa shrugs slightly, and drops his hand, affecting an unperturbed air.

“The thing is,” Figueroa says with a deliberate mildness, “not too many folks around here keep up with what happens in London, but you gotta understand, I got into this line of work because I’m kind of a crime buff. I read, a lot, and as it turns out, I know exactly who you are. I’m a fan, by the way. I’ve read your blog, Doctor Watson, and I know about your longtime association with Mister Sherlock Holmes, and also about your late wife, Mary Morstan, née Maria Kochenko. I know there’s a lot going on here, so why don’t you walk me through all this nice and slow, see if we can make some sense of what happened in that garage. Help me see you in a better light, maybe.”
John looks up at him; he keeps his expression level and unblinking, careful not to reveal any hint of his still-turbulent thoughts and feelings.

As instructed, he doesn’t speak.

“Come on, Doctor Watson. John.” He’s annoyed now, but endeavouring not to show it. “Are friends so thick on the ground here you couldn’t use another?”

His words are still in the air when the door opens and a familiar, dark-haired and smartly-suited woman walks into the room as if she owns it.

“I’m his friend,” Anthea announces, her accent crisp and posh as a new hundred pound note. “Evelyn Marsh, Interim Assistant Director of Operations, Secret Intelligence Service.” She doesn’t extend her hand to the Detective. “Under whose authority are you interviewing Doctor Watson?”

“The authority of the Atlantic City Police Department,” Figueroa replies, tone professionally civil but holding an undeniable edge of defensiveness. “Doctor Watson is a potential material witness to a multiple homicide that occurred smack in the middle in my jurisdiction. Under whose authority are you here, keeping me from doing my job?”

“I admire the initiative you’ve shown,” says Anthea/Evelyn, “trying to slip in here at the crack of dawn for minimal pushback. Must have had to get up very early indeed. But you see, I never even went to bed, Detective, and I’m here to ensure, as I’ve repeatedly explained to your superiors, that this interview is not happening.”

“This is a crime committed on American soil. I’m not interested in any other claim of jurisdiction. You have no right to intervene.”

"To the contrary, Detective Figueroa, I have every right. British national John Watson was pursuing a dangerous international criminal under the express directive of the Secret Intelligence Service, and therefore clearly acting under a defined set of international extra-legal protocols which--"

Figueroa manages to convey the impression of rolling his eyes without actually daring to do so. "Spare me the buzzwords and the theatrics, Miss Marsh. This isn’t my first day of school, and I’ve done my homework. There is no record, anywhere, of either John Watson or Sherlock Holmes working for MI6 in any capacity."

Anthea raises a perfectly groomed brow in polite bemusement. “You do understand, Detective, that the word ‘Secret’ is right there on the tin?”

“I understand that I’ll need more than merely your word to go on, Interim Assistant Director.”

Anthea/Evelyn reaches into her tastefully stylish taupe leather tote, removes a sealed manila envelope, and hands it to Figueroa without a word. He unbends the clasp, removes a single sheet of paper. His eyes narrow at first, then widen in near-comic disbelief as he scans the sheet.

“As you can clearly see.” Evelyn smiles thinly, plucking the paperwork from his fingers and returning the sheet to its envelope before slipping it back into her bag. She pauses as if in thought, then pulls out her mobile. “Would you like to speak to him?” She presses a button, turns the screen so Figueroa can see. ‘He’s probably having his breakfast right this moment. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind an Atlantic City detective interrupting his coffee and toasted blueberry muffin.”

Mouth tight with irritation, Figueroa looks over at John. “You certainly have some friends in high
places, Doctor Watson.”

“I certainly seem to,” John replies mildly.

Figueroa straightens his spine, adjusts his cuffs and smooths the lapels of his fifty-dollar suit jacket. “And now he speaks,” he says, sardonic.

“If there’s nothing else,” Anthea/Evelyn replies coolly. It’s not a question. “Have a lovely day, Detective.”

Figueroa narrows his eyes at them both, then turns on his heel and stalks out of the room. John feels certain that if the door didn’t have a self-closing spring hinge he would have slammed it as hard as he could, Intensive Care Unit or no.

John exhales, audibly, reaching for the cup of tea on the rolling tray table. It’s weak and lukewarm, but he’s perpetually dehydrated, it seems, and the faint astringency of the liquid is somehow refreshing in itself.

“Do you really have John Brennan’s number on your speed dial?” he asks.

“I really do,” Anthea/Evelyn affirms, slipping her phone back into her tote. "He might even take the call, though I admit I've not had the courage to try and find out."

John can’t help but smile a little.

“Evelyn Marsh,” he muses aloud, studying her for a moment over the paper rim of his cup. “Is that your real name, then?”

“It is indeed.”

John considers it as he takes another sip of tea.

“Quite suits you,” he decides.

“My parents thought so,” Evelyn replies, favouring him with a small, genuine smile. “But, if you like, I suppose you could still call me Anthea. Bit of a joke, you know. Between friends.”

“We’re friends?” John asks, genuinely surprised.

Evelyn pauses. Thinks for a moment, weighing her words.

“My job -- no, my duty -- is to carry on Mycroft Holmes’ work and legacy. I trusted him implicitly, and he trusted you with what was most precious to him in the world. He considered you a friend, Doctor Watson. Therefore, so do I. And furthermore... I hope you consider me your friend, as well.”

John nods. “Call me John, then?” he offers

“Suits you,” Evelyn rejoins with a smile.

“My parents thought so,” John says, and takes a sip his tea.

Before Evelyn can reply, Sherlock re-enters the room without warning. The anxiety etched upon his features smoothes noticeably as he looks them over.

“The detective just left looking noticeably frustrated,” Sherlock tells them, "while Evelyn is smiling, and John’s conspicuously lacking handcuffs. Can I deduce from all this that we are now in the
“You are indeed,” Evelyn affirms.

Sherlock doesn’t bother to conceal his feelings, sinking down onto the blue recliner, narrow shoulders unwinding as he exhales with relief.

“That’s good. That’s -- yes. Evelyn, I --” Sherlock takes a breath, visibly regroups, regaining a semblance of his usual composure. “Thank you. For everything.”

“It’s nothing,” she says mildly, without rebuke, as if she hadn’t just spent millions of pounds and untold political capital just to get the two of them out of the situation they had so recklessly thrown themselves into. “Ordinarily, I would ask you return the favour by coming back to England on the next available flight, but I know the nature of your unfinished business so I won’t demand it.” She gives them both a moderately withering look. “I would ask you try to mind your p’s and q’s for as long as you remain on American soil. You’re off the hook, but that doesn’t mean you can’t find yourselves right back on it with the wrong moves, and I’ve had to pull every string there is this time around. Do we understand each other?”

Sherlock nods. “Yes,” he says quietly, seeming just a bit like a chastened schoolboy. John knows he must be feeling better, for he’s recovered enough to find it adorable and more than a little hot.

His thoughts go on for a beat too long, and John belatedly realises both Sherlock and Evelyn are looking at him expectantly.

“Yes,” John echoes, feeling a bit embarrassed.

“Thank you,” Evelyn replies. And in return, rest assured I will do all I can to assist you. Just, please, keep yourselves on the right side of the law. Which means…” She reaches once more into her bag and pulls out two battered red passports. “You get to be yourselves again. The fake ones have already been incinerated, because they’re just slightly incredibly illegal.”

Sherlock takes the passports, hands one to John.

When he opens it to see his own name and his own seven-year-old, horrendously unflattering photo, something that had been palpably dislocated deep within his psyche snap back into place, makes it easier to breathe, somehow, despite the seriousness of his injuries.

"Thank you," John says, quiet and sincere.

“You’re very welcome,” Evelyn replies. "I trust you'll repay my hard work by behaving yourselves?" She looks skeptical even as she says the words, and Sherlock gives her a singular look of semi-polite disbelief.

“As much as you are able,” she amends. “I do know you two, after all, and I am by necessity a pragmatist.” She re-shoulders her tote, flicks her hair back over her shoulder with a manicured hand. “And speaking of pragmatic, I must attending to other pressing matters, but I am certain we will be communicating soon.” She looks at John, her expression softening slightly. “Get well quickly, John. You have more work ahead of you.”

John answers with a silent nod, throat tight with a surge of gratitude.

“Good day, gentlemen,” Evelyn says, and takes her leave, the click of her heels rapidly fading as the door closes behind her.
Sherlock sighs, and the relief is evident just in the tenor of his exhalation. John feels oddly...not indifferent, but almost numb, the enormity of it all still too much to process. The narcotics don’t help that feeling either. He can’t think of a single thing to say, so he takes another sip of the weak, cooling tea.

A few minutes later, the resident on duty makes a brief, perfunctory visit, studiously avoiding Sherlock’s narrow-eyed glower as he palpates John’s abdomen and checks his vitals. He takes his leave quickly, with a few mumbled words in his wake which don’t do much of all in the way of explanation or comment, especially to someone of John’s qualifications.

“How many strips have you already torn off that man?” John asks Sherlock after the man’s hasty retreat. “Good Lord. He was jumping at his own shadow.”

“Far fewer than he deserves,” Sherlock replies, coolly dismissive. “Poorest excuse for a doctor I’ve ever had the misfortune to encounter.”

Not inclined to disagree, and knowing that particular doctor will likely never again speak a full sentence in Sherlock’s presence, John makes a mental note to request his own records for review when he’s feeling a bit more up to it. At the present moment, however, the demands of the past twenty minutes have left him feeling pathetically wiped out again, and he’s soon falling back to sleep as Sherlock pokes at his phone and mutters to himself about shoddy American healthcare and the dangerously lax acceptance standards of Caribbean second-tier medical schools.
Camden, Part Four

Chapter Summary

“You all right?” he asks, and John shoots him a disbelieving look in return. Sherlock shakes his head at the obvious answer to his own question. “I mean, above and beyond - -” he flaps one large hand around vaguely -- “all of this.”

“I’m okay,” John replies, and he’s not, not at all, it’s the furthest thing possible from the truth, but he just doesn’t have the energy to deal with the reality of things the moment.

Sherlock gives him a look of unvarnished scepticism.

“No, I am,” John insists, though he can’t deny the lack of conviction in his tone undercuts his words more than a little. “I’m doing a lot better. I mean, I’m fucking exhausted and everything hurts and I’m marinating in my own filth, but if I could just have a shower and an actual meal, I would be doing pretty well. Considering.”

Chapter Notes

After damn close to a year... back to the story! Thank you so very, very much for your eternal patience and support. There's no way I would still be hacking through this jungle without you.

We're gonna see this one through, no matter what.

One more thing, though...

So listen. I am not a doctor, and I do not play one on TV, and I did not sleep at a Holiday Inn last night.

If you are a surgeon or an ICU nurse, please be aware that I know there are many, many inaccuracies. Google and my personal experiences had to fill in the gaps.

13. Camden, Part Four

For another day or so (though it seems like so much longer, it seems like a hermetically-sealed eternity) John fades in and out of awareness. He has periods of lucidity now and again, but mostly he sleeps, long stretches of morphine-laden unconsciousness, wrapped in an opiate cocoon as machinery beeps, and nurses come and go, and the sun rises and sets without notice.

In his more alert periods of wakefulness, John feels like a mechanical toy that’s been pulled apart and carelessly reassembled, important pieces of him forgotten and left behind somewhere. He doesn’t hurt, exactly (except he does, if he focuses for a moment, oh God he does, the morphine doesn’t take away the pain so much as it makes it seem somehow remote and easier to ignore) as much as he feels like he’s been rearranged, chopped up roughly from the inside out.
And he’s not yet prepared to make sense out of any of this, out of these hazy, disjointed thoughts and impressions.

It’s so much easier just to sleep.

Sherlock stays with him, every moment, never seeming to leave John’s side, not even to eat or rest. He’s always there. Sometimes he has book or phone in hand, but no matter the time of day or night he’s right next to John’s bedside every time he wakes, reassuring him, cajoling him into a few sips of water or juice, passing the time by telling him this or that about the happenings of the day or watching a little telly until John again falls asleep.

Many hours pass in this strange, not-quite-real manner.

It’s early the next evening when Doctor Sheldon gives the order to step down John’s maximum morphine dosage on the PCA. John knows it is the correct call, and from a professional perspective he agrees -- but nonetheless he tosses and turns throughout the night, grappling with disjointed dreams and the increased awareness of the gnawing, burning discomfort in his abdomen and side. Sherlock holds his hand, steadfast, murmuring soft words of reassurance. Sometime before dawn, John finally falls into a deeper, healing sleep, broken far too soon when before breakfast the nurse bustles into the room, a six foot slab of ginger haired man dressed in bright teal scrubs.

John vaguely recalls meeting him before.

Sherlock is curled up sideways on the foldout sleeper, thin hospital pillow under his head, phone in hand, scrolling listlessly. He looks up as the door opens, fixes the RN with a brief, blank, chilly gaze before returning his attention to the small screen in front of him.

To his credit, the nurse doesn’t pay Sherlock’s rudeness the slightest bit of mind, focusing instead on the task of checking over John’s vitals.

“Good to see you awake, Doctor Watson,” the nurse -- Glenn, John’s brain suddenly recalls-- chirps with bright cheeriness. “How are we feeling today?”

“Better,” John replies. “Not, you know, fantastic, but definitely better.”

“That’s wonderful!” Glenn exclaims.

“Well,” John replies, noncommittal. “I don’t know I’d go that far.”

“How would your rate your pain level today?” Glenn asks, clipping the pulse oximeter onto John’s right index finger.

“From one to ten? About a six, I suppose. I mean, I got shot and it hurts. But still, I’ve felt worse in my life.”

“Not your first time at the rodeo,” Glenn observes.

"I hope the last," John replies, a bit rueful.

Glenn chuckles briefly before he checks John’s reflexes and his temperature, then wraps the blood pressure cuff around his arm. The machine hums and squeezes, releases. Glenn rips the velcro apart, takes the off the cuff, notes the results.

“Do you feel like you still need the PCA pump?” Glenn asks as he types, eyes on the screen of his laptop.
John shakes his head. “Let’s get rid of all the machinery we can. I’m so tired of all the tubes.”

“I’ll ask Dr. Sheldon about taking you off this afternoon. But for right now... if you want to move things along and you think you’re up to it, the man with the plan says it’s time to get you up and about.”

“Are you certain it’s not too soon?” Sherlock cuts in, dropping his pretense of ignoring the RN. His voice is even, devoid of surface inflection, but there’s still a note of worry that rings through to John loud and clear.

Glenn looks over at Sherlock.

“I’m sure,” Glenn replies, sounding sure of himself. “In fact, it is absolutely crucial to get him up and about as soon as possible. Mobility is essential to a speedy recovery.”

“He was shot barely five days ago,” Sherlock points out.

“Mister Holmes,” Glenn begins, carefully respectful, and by way he says it John knows the man has already seen the wrong side of Sherlock’s formidable temper. “I know it seems very soon. But--”

“I would remind you, he died on the way to the hospital,” Sherlock replies, haughty, iciness overlaid to mask worry. “So I say yes, it seems far too soon.”

“Sherlock,” John cuts in, keeping his voice calm, unworried, treading very carefully on Sherlock’s obvious anxiety. “I know it sounds unwise, but he’s quite right. Lying in bed leads to blood clots and delayed recovery. And before you give me that look, I would remind you that I do know what I’m talking about.”

Sherlock’s face is a thundercloud of annoyed worry, but he doesn’t argue with John. He exhales, tilts his chin upward, shrugs one shoulder just a fraction to indicate his outnumbered, very reluctant agreement.

“I defer to the professionals in the room,” he says by way of concession.

Glenn nods in acknowledgment and turns back to John. “But first things first, of course. We have to...” He gestures vaguely towards John’s sheet-covered pelvic region with a sideways sweep of his hand. “The temporary plumbing, if you will.”


“There’s that dry British stoicism I’ve heard about.” Glenn tilts his head, his mouth turning down in a brief twist of male commiseration. “You’re an MD, and you’ve been laid up before, so I take it you know what to expect.”

John tamps down his reflexive wince, shrugs in resigned acceptance. “Worse things happen at sea and all that, I suppose.”

Sherlock shifts his position on the couch; John glances over and sees the apprehensive discomfort on his face.

“You okay, Sherlock?” John asks.

Sherlock looks unsure, out of his depth. “Should I -- ” he begins, then pauses for a moment. “I mean, do you want -- or --” He gives a small shake of his head and stands. “I should give you some privacy.”
“I’d rather you didn’t,” John tells him, meaning it. “I’d really like you to stay.”

“I’ll be in the way,” Sherlock protests.

“Not if you act like a proper boyfriend and hold my hand,” John replies.

Sherlock’s eyes flick up towards John, then over to the nurse. Apparently, however, the entire staff has surmised the obvious, and Glenn, despite being semi-annoying, earns many points in John’s book by showing no discomfort or even surprise at the use of the word boyfriend.

“That would be a huge help,” the nurse offers. He’s warm and supportive, but he manages to tamp down his relentless cheeriness to a level slightly more appropriate for a discussion about an indwelling catheter removal, and John is grateful for it.

Something in Sherlock’s haughty expression relaxes just a fraction.

“Then of course,” he says. “As long as I won’t be an inconvenience.”

“Not at all,” Glenn says with a grin, pulling on nitrile gloves. “Come join the party, Mister Holmes.”

Sherlock nods, comes over to stand at the side of John’s bed. He carefully wraps his larger hand around John’s, gives him a single, surprisingly gentle squeeze of reassurance.

John squeezes back, takes a deep, fortifying breath. “No time like the present, gentlemen. Let’s have at it.”

***

After the procedure (Glenn is competent, and though it stings like hell it’s over and done in a moment) Sherlock takes a brief leave -- with obvious reluctance -- to pick up a bag of clothes and sundries Mrs Hudson, ever thoughtful, had sent along to the States with Evelyn.

“I promise I’ll be back in under an hour,” Sherlock declares for the third time in the past five minutes, shrugging into his suit jacket.

“It’s fine,” John reassures him. “I’m safe as houses here, and I can’t wait to wear my own clothes.” He considers for a moment, looking over Sherlock’s positively gaunt frame. “And eat something. Please. You’re pale as a sheet of paper and almost as thin.”

Sherlock waves a dismissive hand. “Yes, whatever.”

“Nutrition. Protein. Whole grains. Not a Kit Kat or half a packet of crisps.”

Sherlock huffs in annoyance. “Fine.”

“You don’t need to get in a snit because I want you to eat.”

Sherlock briefly pulls a face. “I’m not in a snit,” he proclaims, then looks again at John, expression more serious. “But really, you’re quite sure you’ll be all right?”

John gives Sherlock what he hopes is his most reassuring smile. “I’m in a building full of medical professionals, and for once no one is actively trying to kidnap, maim, or kill me. I promise I will be fine for an hour.”

Sherlock gives him a look of clear scepticism.
“Sherlock. I swear.”

Sherlock nods, but the worry still lingers in his eyes. He reaches for John’s hand and brushes his thumb briefly across the back of his knuckles, before rising to cross the room and plucking his suit jacket from the hook on the back of the door.

“I won’t be long,” Sherlock says, adjusting his cuffs and straightening the lapels. “Drink some more water while I’m gone.”

John picks up the styrofoam cup and gives Sherlock a mock toast before taking another sip. It’s room-temperature and stale, and he gives a reflexive frown of distaste.

“It’s warm, isn’t it?” Sherlock asks, stalling, clearly reluctant to leave. “I’ll find the nurse and get you some --”

John waves him off. “I’ve got a call button,” he says, knowing he wouldn’t bother the nurse for something as trivial as cold water in a million years. “Really. I’m fine. Please. Go.”

Sherlock hovers awkwardly at the doorway for one more moment, and then he’s gone.

It’s not until the room is quiet that it occurs to John to wonder why Sherlock is back in Gabbana shirts and tailored suits, yet his ever-present Belstaff is nowhere to be seen.

That train of thought is brought up short when Glenn returns a few minutes later, to help John through the herculean effort of pissing on his own for the first time since the shooting.

It’s...not a fun time.

He’s been off his feet for the better part of a week, and the world tips crazily around him as he tries to stand. Glenn, much larger of frame and trained for just this situation, carefully and competently helps John get out of bed and take these first few wobbling steps to the loo, tubes and rolling equipment trailing along behind him.

John finds himself momentarily wishing Sherlock hadn’t left his side, but reconsiders as soon as Glenn lowers him carefully to the toilet. This is incredibly humiliating, and John summarily decides he’s had tolerated enough weakness and pride-demolishing vulnerability in the past few days to last him several lifetimes.

All told, he’s certain that it is far better at this juncture to allow a paid professional to help him navigate this particular task.

Also, it burns like fucking fire, enough to bring tears to his eyes and several gasping oaths to his vocabulary. Glenn hovers silently nearby, just on the other side of the doorframe, ready to jump in if he pitches over or passes out.

After John suffers the humiliation of having the volume of his urine output noted, he vows to remember this kind of helpless vulnerability when he is again on the other side of the equation.

With the mission complete, the nurse again helps John back across the room, but this time he changes their trajectory just slightly en route.

“A change of scenery always helps,” Glenn proclaims, guiding John to the recliner, arranging pillows to support him, and making sure his IV is secure and untangled. “I bet some fresh sheets on the bed and something cold to drink would fix you right up.”
John is beginning to realise Glenn’s indefatigable cheeriness is starting to grate on the edges of frayed nerves, but his recent travel has sapped his meagre energy and left him too woozy and drained to be cross. He nods weakly in the affirmative.

John watches as Glenn tidies the room a bit and changes the bed, humming just a bit under his breath the entire time. He then brings John a fresh cup of ice water, tiny beads of condensation on the foam cup, paper top still on the straw.

“TV on?” he asks before taking his leave.

“Oh, thanks, but no,” John says. “I don’t mind a little peace and quiet.”

“Gotta,” Glenn replies. He positions another pillow behind John’s neck, pulls a blanket from the narrow closet and tucks it around John’s pale bare legs. “Call button’s right here. Your guy coming back soon, I hope?”

“Soonish,” John confirms. “I’ll be fine for a bit.”

“Be back in a little while to check on you.” Glenn gathers up a few last bits of paper, tissues and straw wrappings before he leaves, easing the door shut behind him.

The room is suddenly, dreadfully quiet. John pushes down a strange little spike of panic.

“I’m fine,” he mutters aloud, willing it to be so. He shakes his head at his own foolishness. “Good Lord, Watson.”

In a minute the spike of anxiety dissipates as quickly as it arrived, and soon enough John finds himself again drifting towards sleep.

Sherlock returns not ten minutes later, cool spring air and cigareete smoke still clinging to his clothing. He has an unfamiliar, new-looking garment bag slung over his left shoulder.

“Mmmmf,” John mumbles in greeting, and stretches his neck, tight and cramping from napping in an awkward position. “Hey. Did you eat?”

Sherlock tosses the garment bag onto the bed. “I did,” he replies, and his slightly improved colour informs John that he’s telling the truth. “A turkey sandwich on wholemeal bread, with tired lettuce and a slice of underripe tomato. It was dry. But I ate it dutifully, per your request.”

John huffs in mock annoyance. “It wasn’t a punishment, you drama queen. But thank you. You look better.”

“So do you.”

John laughs a little. “Liar.”

Sherlock shrugs, gives John a half-smile in return. “Relatively speaking, of course. Did you urinate?”

John gives him a look. “Yes.”

“How was it?”

“It was pee. Let’s not discuss it. What’s in the bag?”

Sherlock reaches for the garment bag, pulls it towards him, unzips it. “Some new toiletries, a few things from home. Pants, socks, a couple of tee-shirts.” He holds up a paperback. “A novel Mrs
Hudson thought you might like. And this.” He tosses the book back into the bag, pulls out a light blue envelope, and hands it to John.

John opens it carefully. It’s a get well card from his landlady, her careful, slightly old-fashioned script wishing him a speedy recovery and exhorting him to come home soon. A sudden wave of terrible homesickness washes over him, threatens to bring tears to his eyes. He closes his eyes and exhales, trying to breathe through the tightness in his throat. The wheezy sadness of the small sound doesn’t escape Sherlock. He looks up, dark brows creasing in concern.

“You all right?” he asks, and John shoots him a disbelieving look in return. Sherlock shakes his head at the obvious answer to his own question. “I mean, above and beyond --” he flaps one large hand around vaguely -- “all of this.”

“I’m okay,” John replies, and he’s not, not at all, it’s the furthest thing possible from the truth, but he just doesn’t have the energy to deal with the reality of the situation right now.

Sherlock gives him a look of unvarnished scepticism.

“No, I am,” John insists, though he can’t deny the lack of conviction in his tone undercuts his words more than a little. “I’m doing a lot better. I mean, I’m fucking exhausted and everything hurts and I’m marinating in my own filth, but if I could just have a shower and an actual meal, I would be doing pretty well. Considering.”

“Considering,” Sherlock echoes. He smiles, but his eyes are sad. Then he shakes his head, looks away, changes the subject.

“That infernally chipper nurse said you’ll be cleared to shower after they move you to the step-down unit.” Sherlock rezips the bag, picks it up, and hangs it on then metal hook at the back of the bathroom door. “And I don’t know about solid food. But…” He looks at the untouched water in front of John. “You need to keep hydrating.”

“It’s warm,” John says, knowing full well Glenn just brought it to him, but momentarily and irrationally piqued at being told what to do. “And I’m not thirsty, I’m hungry.”

He knows he sounds whingy and childish, and he cringes a little inside at the petulance in his voice, at his own constant exhaustion and neediness and whipsawing emotions.

“Perhaps I could go find you one of those little cups of juice,” Sherlock offers. “And maybe some fresh ice. I know it’s not food, but you could chew it a little. That’s got count for something.”

John looks up at Sherlock and sees the kindness in his eyes, hears it in his voice, a private reserve of love and caring that only a very, very few people ever get to see. A wave of affection washes over him, petty annoyance evaporating as quickly as it arrived, leaving sheepish embarrassment in its wake.

“I’m sorry,” John says, closing his eyes. “I’m a terrible patient.”

“You are,” Sherlock agrees, but there’s no reproach in his tone. “Doctors always are. It’s all right.”

“I’m being so difficult. And you’re being so nice.”

“I’m not...nice.” Sherlock replies, and even with his eyes shut, John can actually hear the expression on Sherlock’s face -- part amused, part affronted, all affectionate.

“You actually are, though,” John murmurs. Damn it, he’s on the brink of falling asleep again. “Juice
would be lovely. Thank you.”

He’s beginning to drift, only vaguely aware of Sherlock’s large warm hands tugging up the thin blanket and tucking it around his shoulders.

“Don’t pass out on me before I can get your drink,” Sherlock says.

“Mmmm-kay,” John replies, but he knows it’s already too late, he’s falling fast into unconsciousness. He decides tomorrow’s goals should include staying awake for more than thirty-two minutes at a time, but he’s asleep before he can articulate the thought.

***

A little over an hour later, John is awakened by return of Glenn the nurse, accompanied by a shorter, stone-faced male technician in maroon scrubs, his demeanour as somber as Glenn’s is resolutely upbeat.

“Surprise!” Glenn chirps with a smile as he begins to disconnect the PCA pump from John’s IV site. “Doctor Sheldon is so impressed with your progress, he’s kicking you directly down to med-surg, no step down unit.”

“That sounds like good news,” Sherlock observes.

“It’s excellent news.” Glenn beams at the men. “Moving on to the promised land -- hot showers and solid food. Mister Holmes, can you help me get his things gathered up so we can get moving?”

Mollified by good news, Sherlock does as he is asked without snark or complaint.

The trip down to med-surg is quick and uneventful, Glenn and the silent technician piloting John’s bed expertly down the hallways as Sherlock follows, carrying both the garment bag and the hospital-issued plastic bag that contains the everything John had on him the night he was shot (minus two handguns and one ankle holster, John presumes), as well the few random possessions accumulated during his stay so far.

After he’s settled into his new room, Glenn makes another quick check of John's vitals, notes them.

“The unit nurse will be along in no time,” he tells them as he takes his leave. “Very best of luck, gentlemen.”

Sherlock busies himself with stowing the items he’s carried, and John takes the opportunity to survey his new surroundings.

The med-surg unit isn’t quieter than the ICU, precisely speaking, but still gives a far more peaceful impression overall -- fewer nurses and techs, a central desk rather than a series of telemetry stations, a sense of orderly routine rather than a pervasive air of ongoing, low-level anxiety. John’s room is smaller -- clearly once a double room recently cut in half in the trend towards single occupancy -- but is far less cluttered with equipment, making it feel considerably more spacious than his assignment in the ICU. John himself is far less encumbered as well, blessedly freed from the trappings of machinery, save the infusion pump still delivering a steady flow of antibiotics into his bloodstream.

After his mental inventory, John is passing the time by watching Sherlock examine the various and baffling buttons and dials on the telly control when there is a soft knock at the door.

“Come in,” Sherlock calls distractedly, still fixated on the remote.
A shy, slightly chubby, short-haired woman enters the room, carrying a tray containing a dome-lidded plate and varied plastic cups, as well as a steaming teacup.

“Dining Services,” she mumbles, not making eye contact with either of them as she sets the tray on the wheeled lap table and then slips out of the room without saying another word.

John lifts the plastic domed lid and sighs. He’s been disconnected from the PCA pump for not quite an hour, he’s starting to be in a lot of pain, and the sight before him does nothing to improve his mood.

The full-liquid liquid lunch consists of a bowl of what is probably supposed to be chicken soup -- though John feels certain that whatever this liquid is, it has never been within ten miles of an actual bird -- and a plastic cup of orange jelly, with a foil-covered container of apple juice and another cup of weak decaf tea alongside.

“Well,” he sighs, unsurprised but disappointed. “This is disappointing.”

“You aorta as well as your colon were both lacerated,” Sherlock reminds him, somewhat unnecessarily.

“Nicked. Barely.”

“You died.”

“Only kind of.”

Sherlock looks hard at him, almost glaring, his angular face a thundercloud. He clearly doesn’t find any of this amusing.

“I know the minimizing your trauma is a ...thing you do for your own mental health, and I cannot stop you, but it doesn’t change the truth of what you’ve been through.”

John knows everything Sherlock is saying is true, and that knowledge makes him feel uncomfortable and defensive in a way he can’t quite define. “Yes, okay,” he grumbles. “Ta for the reality check.”

“You’re a doctor,” Sherlock continues. “You know could have had a surgical resection of--”

“I get it.” John sighs, takes a softer tone. “I do, Sherlock. Really.” He pokes dispiritedly at the jelly. It wiggles in a manner John finds unpleasant. “I know, okay? I’m not ungrateful. This just…this is shit, okay. We’re stuck in here and everything hurts and…and...”

He stops, vaguely embarrassed, vaguely angry, and not at all sure where he’s going with this.

“I know,” Sherlock finally says, conciliatory. “Stop stabbing at the jelly and eat your soup, please? You need the fluids and sodium.”

“Yuck,” John grumbles, letting his inner six-year-old out, if just for a moment.

“Behave yourself,” Sherlock replies, “and I’m sure you’ll get a nice Dilaudid for dessert.”

***

Sherlock is correct. After the timid girl from Dining Services has whisked away the remains of John’s depressing lunch, the unit nurse -- a woman, middle aged and plainfaced, older than Glenn and thankfully about twelve orders of magnitude less cheerful-- gives him a nice little IV push of Dilaudid, not much, just enough to take the edge off the encroaching pain.
“When you’re up to it, there are towels, a fresh gown, and a hygiene kit in the bathroom,” the nurse--her lanyard says her name is Sophie--informs him. “When you’re ready, let me know and I’ll come in and give you some assistance.”

“I can take care of him,” Sherlock informs her.

“I’d really rather you didn’t do that,” the nurse replies, stone-faced. “We take slips and falls seriously here.”

Sherlock doesn’t reply. John gives Sophie the best “I’m charming and down to earth and not going to be difficult” smile he can manage under the circumstances.

She leaves, looking distinctly unconvinced.

After the nurse is gone, Sherlock puts down the days-old newspaper he’d been halfheartedly pretending to read. He gives John an appraising look.

“What?” John asks. His blood sugar is up, which helps some, but the Dilaudid hasn’t quite kicked in yet and his incision aches and he’s still feeling way more than a little snippy after his pointless and disappointing lunch.

“Shower.” Sherlock tilts his head in query. “What do you think?”

“Are you implying I need one?” John asks archly, knowing full well the answer.

“Nothing as subtle as that. You’re ten miles past merely ripe. You’re pungent. Not to be rude, John, but you stink.”

“Fair enough,” John allows. “Should we call the nurse?”

“She’s clearly overworked,” Sherlock declares. “I can help you perfectly well without having to bother her again.”

There’s a familiar stubbornness edging into Sherlock’s voice, and John recognises that this is somehow important to him. He decides not to argue the point. He’s not particularly worried about defying the nurse. He’s dealt with pissed-off nurses before.

“Plus you’ll feel better,” Sherlock points out. “You should shower now, in this window of opportunity, while that Dilaudid is controlling your pain but not yet knocking you on your arse.”

John knows Sherlock is right. He marshals what remains of his flagging energy.

“Yes,” he agrees. “Fine. Let’s do this.”

Sherlock rises, crosses the small room to the open the garment bag. “Let me get some clean clothes for you and then I’ll help you out of bed.”

Sherlock busies himself with finding the promised clean clothing and taking them into the tiny loo, while John raises himself to sitting upright, carefully unhooks himself from the IV -- a whole lecture from the nurse just in that move, he’s certain -- and oh-so-gingerly swings his legs over the side of the bed.

“Maybe I should get the nurse,” Sherlock says, coming to stand close by John, hovering protectively. He sounds far more doubtful than he did a few minutes earlier. “I don’t want to drop you. Or --”

“We’ll be fine. Just duck down a little and let me --” Sherlock bends his knees, lowering his torso,
and John loops his stronger right arm around Sherlock’s neck. “Okay, now just kind of --”

Sherlock gets the idea and rises carefully, John leaning his full weight on him until his traction-socked feet are on the ground, levering them both upright. John’s muscles are weak from disuse, and his knees buckle dangerously. Sherlock wraps his other arm around John’s waist to keep him from falling, and inadvertently brushes against the incision area on John’s left side. John can’t hold in the gasp of pain.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock says, anxious, “I’m sorry -- I should get the --”

“No, it’s fine, I’m up now, let’s just --”

The two of them take slow, staggering steps to the tiny bathroom. The whole episode brings to John’s mind a pair of unsteady drunks, but with none of the fun and whole lot more agonizing pain. By the time the pair finally make it to the the loo, John’s head is spinning, his incision site on fire.

John grabs onto the sink countertop, knuckles white.

“Don’t hyperventilate,” Sherlock murmurs, his voice deliberate, even. “Deep, slow breaths, now.”

John nods, focuses on breathing properly, steadily, in through his nose and out through his mouth. It takes him several long seconds, but after a minute or so the pain recedes slightly and he’s able to get his bearings and feel a little sturdier on his feet.

He looks up into the mirror. The fluorescent lights make his pallid complexion even greyer. His cheeks are hollow, his beard overgrown and straggly.

He absolutely looks like someone who died in a parking garage less than a week ago.

“Jesus,” he mutters. He looks over his left shoulder and sees Sherlock hovering in the doorway.

“Are you all right?” Sherlock asks, more than a little pale himself.

“I’m okay,” John says, wishing his voice was a bit steadier. “That was harder than I thought, but I’m okay.”

“Would you --” Sherlock pauses, uncertain. “Should I come in and help you?”

“In all honesty?” John chuckles, somewhat wheezily. “If you could start the water that would be lovely, but… I’d rather the first time we shower together to be under more, um, romantic circumstances.”

“Fair enough.” Sherlock steps carefully behind John and turns the taps, tests the running water. He straightens and turns back around, “I’ll just --”

“Socks,” John says. “I can’t reach --”

“Of course,” Sherlock says, and drops to his knees with improbable grace, pulling the nonslip socks off of John’s feet, first one then the other. He rises, drapes them carefully over the towel bar before easing carefully back past John and out the door, and it’s a blessing right now he’s so slender, considering the miniscule dimensions of the room.

“Not too far, okay?” John blurts, a sudden spike of irrational panic rising.

Sherlock leans the doorframe. “Not going anywhere,” he reassures John.
John nods, feeling foolish but relieved. He returns his attention to the countertop in front of him.

To the right of the sink sits the hygiene kit; it contains a toothbrush and travel-size toothpaste, floss and mouthwash, a cheap double-blade razor, and a small black plastic comb. John becomes aware he hasn’t brushed his teeth in… Jesus Christ, has it been nearly a week? With that new realisation it suddenly feels like he’s grown a fur coat over his entire mouth. He applies toothpaste to the brush and sets to work, then bends gingerly to sip a cupped handful of water from the tap.

Just the feel of clean teeth and minty breath is a welcome lift to his mood, and John feels energised enough shrug carefully out of the hospital gown. After draping the soiled fabric over the towel bar, he can’t help but give in to impulse and look down briefly at his battered and sliced torso.

The nurse must have removed the absorbent dressings last night, though he doesn’t really recall it happening. The bullet hole is smaller than one might expect, scabbed over in vivid reddish-black. The neatly stitched incision above, bisecting his left side just under his ribs, is still raised and a little angry. The edges are crusted with dried blood, the surrounding skin stained orange with Betadine.

John looks away quickly. He doesn’t look over at Sherlock. He’s not sure he could bear what he would see reflected in his eyes.

Hanging on to the grab bars, it takes John upwards of half a minute to carefully enter the shower stall. There’s a shower chair. John eyes it with derision.

“I’m not fucking eighty yet, mate,” he growls at the innocent piece of hospital furniture.

“What’s that?” Sherlock calls, sounding concerned.

“Nothing,” John replies, sheepish. He gingerly moves himself into the shower stream, drops of water stinging his battered skin.

There’s a bottle of all-purpose hospital body wash on the built-in shelf. John lathers himself all over, more focused on getting through this without collapsing rather than being meticulous. He then carefully (oh so carefully) raises his arms over his head to quickly scrub suds through his hair before ducking his head under the hot spray and rinsing off.

He doesn’t look down again at his carved up belly.

The weight of the Dilaudid is starting to press down on him, but John lingers under the hot spray for a few moments longer. His knees are turning to jelly underneath him, but the shower feel marvelous, positively healing, and John stretches the moment for as long as he is able.

“Finished?” Sherlock calls, and John startles a bit. He’s definitely starting to space out. Time to get off his feet.

He turns off the tap.

“Finished,” he replies, pushing aside the shower curtain. Sherlock steps back into the bathroom holding an armful of clothing. He deposits it next to the stack of towels on the counter, then plucks the top towel off the pile and hands it to John. As John is drying off, Sherlock picks up another towel and begins to dry John’s hair, carefully blotting the dripping strands. John doesn’t object.

“Here,” Sherlock says, handing him a fresh hospital gown. “I don’t think you can put on a t-shirt yet, but I have pants for you, If you’re tired of having your arse hanging out.”

John laughs a bit. “How did you know?” He shoves his arms inelegantly through the sleeves, allows
Sherlock to snap the snaps and tie the strings and just generally properly arrange things.

“My remarkable powers of observation,” Sherlock murmurs as he picks up a pair of plaid flannel boxers John gratefully recognises as his own. Sherlock again kneels down onto the tile floor, ignoring the rivulets of water that are sure to seep into his trousers. “Grab the bar, other hand on my shoulder.”

“Thought I’d be a senior citizen before you had to help me put on my underwear,” John notes wryly as he follows directions.

“I just couldn’t wait that long.” Sherlock replies. “Okay, right foot up.”

With Sherlock’s assistance and patience, John steps into his pants, and Sherlock helps him pull them up to his hips.

It is an undeniable psychological benefit, John realises, not to have his arse hanging out in the wind. Wearing pants is such a silly, trivial thing, but it makes him feel more like himself again, less like a helpless victim of fate.

Sherlock stands up, knees cracking slightly. John turns to his left, looks at himself in the mirror. Sherlock gives him a questioning look.

“Do you think…” John scratches at his itchy, hairy chin. “I’d really love to get rid of this.”

“Of course,” Sherlock agrees. “But I think you should sit down. You’re looking a little unsteady on your feet.”

John nods, takes hold of Sherlock’s offered arm. Sherlock guides him to sit on the toilet, then turns on the sink tap and stoppers the sink. The basin fills with warm water.

“We don’t have clippers,” John points out. “Or shaving cream, for that matter.”

“I’ve improvised with less,” Sherlock replies before reaching into the shower and retrieving the bottle of body wash. He picks up the razor, the plastic comb, and a fresh towel before positioning himself between John’s knees and lowering himself to the floor, sitting back on his heels. He first quickly combs John’s still-damp hair, then carefully combs through his thick, wiry beard. He leans to his side and reaches over to the sink. He scoops out a cupful of water, mixes it with the liquid soap, and thoroughly lathers John’s face with the mixture.

Sherlock picks up the plastic razor in his right hand. "Hold very still," he murmurs as he takes hold of John’s chin with the fingers of his left hand, and begins to shave off his beard.

It’s slow going; absent a pair of clippers, Sherlock has to rinse off the blade after every few centimetres of progress. Both men are silent, the sound of their breathing loud in the tiny tiled room as Sherlock focuses the entirety of his attention on this tiny, mundane task as if the fate of the entire universe hangs in the balance. His hair has gone spiky and clumpy in the humidity, and he chews unconsciously on his lower lip as he works, drawing the sharp blade across John’s skin, so very careful not to harm him or draw blood.

He’s absolutely beautiful, angelic in his unselfconscious focus on John. Something low in John’s belly stirs as he recalls another time, another place, a few weeks and a lifetime ago.

Sherlock finishes the last bit, around the curve of his chin, wipes the soap away with a damp flannel, leans back and tilts his head this way and that to check his handiwork.
“How do I look?” John asks, jokingly coy.

“You like like you again.” Sherlock’s voice is low and quiet, his eyes soft. He leans forward and kisses John, gentle but just past the boundary of chaste. He pulls back, smiling. “First kiss without the bristles.”

“And how is it?” John asks.

“Different.” Sherlock’s eyes crinkle upwards as he smiles. “Still wonderful.”

“Glad to hear it,” John says. “Are you sure though? Maybe you should check again.”

“Maybe I should,” Sherlock replies. He kisses John again, still careful but more thoroughly this time, tongue flickering out to meet John’s, his large hand coming up to cradle the back of John’s head, and John knows without the shadow of a doubt he would have a raging hard-on by now if he were at all capable of such a thing at the moment.

He isn’t, but he enjoys the sentiment all the same.

Sherlock breaks the kiss, presses his lips to John’s newly-smooth jaw before sitting back on his heels and fixing John with his most serious gaze.

“Promise me you won’t ever die again,” Sherlock says, quiet and low, almost subsonic.

“Sherlock.” John sighs. “Love. You know I can’t--”

“I can’t bear it. I cannot. Promise me.”

“I can’t. Sherlock.”

“Yes, you can.”

“How can I make you a promise I literally can’t keep?” John asks. “And I know you, you’ll hold me to it. I’ll be ninety-five and you’ll be at my bedside, yelling at me for shuffling off the mortal coil.”

John is trying for a bit of levity, but Sherlock’s eyes bore into his, utterly serious.

“Yes,” he says, quiet and sincere. “I will.”

Neither one speaks for a moment, the feeling of the moment suddenly too huge for words.

Their breathing is loud, echoing in the tiled room.

“Well.” John looks for something more eloquent to say and fails. “Okay, then. Yes. I promise.”

Sherlock dips his head, gives John a look from under long lashes. It’s a look that does something indescribable to John’s insides.

“Thank you.” Sherlock kisses him once more, this one a quick peck, no less affectionate for its brevity. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

Sherlock helps John stand up; once on his feet, John turns towards the countertop, checks his reflection over in the mirror. He still looks more or less dreadful, but it’s a modest -- a very modest -- improvement.

The Dilaudid is kicking in hard now, and John’s feet feel heavy as stone. He leans a bit more heavily
against Sherlock, who wraps his arm fractionally tighter around his right hip as he guides John back into bed. John groans a little in relief to be horizontal once again.

“That was an adventure,” he remarks wearily, as Sherlock arranges pillows and blankets.


“Lie down with me,” John asks, half on impulse, unwilling to give up this brief oasis of physical closeness.

“I don’t want to risk… crushing you. And you need to be hooked back up to the IV.”

“A few more minutes won’t hurt, and you can’t be more than twelve stone right now. You couldn’t squish me if you tried.”

Sherlock looks vaguely offended. “I could if I tried.”

“Then don’t try,” John replies.

Sherlock tilts his head, shrugs in assent. “All right. For a minute or two. But first there’s something I need to-- hold on.” Sherlock turns away, crosses the cramped room in three long strides, fiddles with his suit jacket hanging from the hook on the back of the door. He locates his quarry, fishing a plain white envelope from the inner breast pocket. He returns to John’s bedside, toes off his shoes before slipping into the narrow bed next to John with remarkable grace.

“There hasn’t really been a good moment up until now,” Sherlock says by way of explanation. John gives him a querying look; Sherlock offers him the envelope.

John takes it, opens it, extracts the single sheet of paper.

He hadn’t even realised he had been wondering until the moment he wasn’t any longer.

“She’s my child.”

“She is,” Sherlock affirms.

“How did you -- ”

“I got the fetal cell DNA from a blood sample I collected at the house in Camden. And I...” Sherlock’s expression turns somewhat sheepish. “And I already had your genetics on file.”

“Of course you did,” John replies, unsurprised. He folds the sheet of paper back into thirds, returns it to the envelope.

“I didn’t mean to go behind your back,” Sherlock says, speaking quickly, as if he fears John’s anger. “And I wasn’t trying to invade your privacy for no reason. If she was born outside of a medical facility, as we both suspect, it will be important from a legal perspective that paternity is already established.”

“I’m not angry,” John tells him, and it’s the truth. Under his fingers, John feels Sherlock’s shoulders relax.

“But,” he continues, kind but firm. “Sherlock, you know you should have told me. I would have agreed.”

“I know,” Sherlock admits. “I just. You had so much weighing on you, and I didn’t want to add
another worry to your mind.”

“I’m not angry,” John says again, and he’s not, he understands Sherlock’s thought processes inside and out by now, and on top of that, he’s too damn tired and sore to maintain any level of genuine anger. “I understand. Would have rather you had kept me in the loop, but overall what you did was the right decision.”

“Are you relieved?” Sherlock asks.

John considers.

“I didn’t even know I was worried,” John says. “But I knew she wasn’t to be trusted, so it would have come up. It’s good to know she’s mine.” He reaches own for Sherlock’s hand, covers it with his own. “Thank you.”

Sherlock doesn’t answer with words, instead pressing his face into the crook of John’s shoulder in wordless gratitude for John’s forgiveness. They lie together like that for a quiet minute. Sherlock strokes the back of John’s hand with his thumb.

“I would very much like this all to be over,” he murmurs, quiet and sincere.

“Me too,” John replies simply.

Sherlock sighs, a small, resigned sound. “But we’re not finished yet.”

“No,” John says, “Not quite yet.”

They fall quiet again. Sherlock’s warmth and nearness is soothing, and the Dilaudid is hitting him like a ton of bricks. He closes his eyes.

The bed shifts as Sherlock gets up, reaches for the call button.

“I could hook myself back up, you know,” John says, but even as he’s saying it he can hear how his words are starting to slur together, the edges of the world begin to soften.

“I’ve no doubt you could,” Sherlock replies, “but we’ve pushed the limits of the DIY approach, don’t you think?”

John doesn’t have a chance to answer before the nurse comes barreling into the room, clearly annoyed by their antics. She immediately launches into a (well-deserved) lecture about safety, patient transport, and the dangers of showering with an uncapped IV as she checks John over for self-inflicted damage.

Inured to lectures from nurses by years of professional exposure, he falls asleep mid-scolding.

***

When he wakes again, it’s full dark outside, the room lit only by the glow of the wall-mounted television and the fluorescent hallway light creeping in under the door. John finds himself in that strange, post-injury zone where he is still weak, exhausted and slightly loopy on opiates, yet he’s wide awake now, having slept so much over the past few days he’s physically unable to sleep any longer.

The over-bed table is pushed out of the way, against the wall. A cafeteria tray rests upon it, with a dome-covered plate in the center and a tea mug alongside. So he missed dinner, then.
John shrugs inwardly. He’s long past his lifetime limit for room-temperature hospital jelly, no big loss there.

Sherlock is watching telly in the recliner chair, his face drawn with tiredness, pale eyes tinged with dark circles. He’s curled himself up somewhat awkwardly, making himself as small as possible, his arms wrapped around himself against the chill of the hospital air conditioning.

John wonders again about the whereabouts of the Belstaff, but he decides it is best at the moment not to ask.

“The owner’s wife is sleeping with the bar manager, of course,” Sherlock pipes up, his tone suggesting he’s been conducting a one-sided conversation with John’s unconscious form for quite a while.

“Huh?” John mumbles eloquently.

“Her earrings, John. So obvious. You honestly didn’t notice?”

“Dilaudid, Sherlock. Noticing anything is not exactly my strong suit at the moment.”

“They don’t match the rest of her jewelry. They’re amethyst and sterling silver. The design is from Peru, his country of origin. Coincidence is unlikely, which indicates-- Hold on, we’ll take a look.” Sherlock picks up the remote, makes a face, and puts it back down again. “Can’t pause it. Damn.”

“Forgot we weren’t at home?”

“Just momentarily.”

“You’re tired.”

“Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous.” Sherlock cuts himself off with a huge, jaw-cracking yawn, then sighs, shifts his weight.

“Maybe just a little,” he allows.

“You could close your eyes for a minute. I’m not going anywhere.”

Sherlock sighs in annoyance with the limitations of his own body. “Five minutes. Just to rest my eyes.”

“Okay, Grandmother,” John says, teasing gently. “You rest your tired eyes.”

Sherlock yawns, then shifts his weight, rearranging himself.

“You could unfold that thing,” John points out

“I’ll just -- ” Sherlock begins, before giving into another, even longer yawn.

Then...silence. A minute passes, and then another. After that interval, a single, soft snore informs John that Sherlock has fallen asleep, literally mid-sentence.

He turns his head and watches Sherlock sleep, gazes at him in this rarest of unguarded moments, the worry erased from under his eyes and his full mouth open in a slack round O as he slumbers.

In the twilight cocoon of the hospital room, the television providing a background of meaningless chatter, It occurs to John that this is the first solitary, quiet, marginally coherent moment he’s had
since his final, deadly tangle with Maria -- Mary -- *his wife and the mother of his child* --, and in that instant, the veil of drugs and pain and trauma lifts fully, and the weight of it all descends upon him, the images burned into his brain, the memories of that terrible night, and the fear and the sorrow and grief over how it all came to an end.

What he feels is not guilt. Not regret. John knows, with an absolute bedrock certainty, that he did what he had to do to protect both Sherlock and himself, and that they would not both be alive tonight if he hadn’t pulled that trigger.

No, not regret. But remorse? Oh, yes. Remorse, laced with grief, lodged deep in his heart, sharp-edged and black as obsidian.

And as much as he loves Sherlock, as much as he needs him like he needs oxygen, as much as he wants to entrust him with every single emotion in his heart, the good and the bad and every single thing in between, he doesn’t know if he can -- if he should -- share this with him. Sherlock has been through the depths of hell and back, every bit as much as John and more, and it doesn’t seem fair, or right, to ask him to share the weight of this: his complicated, confusing grief for the woman who tore through their lives and left pain and devastation in her wake.

*No*, he decides, resolute. This is his burden, John decides, and right or wrong he can’t -- he won’t -- ask Sherlock to bear this one with him. It’s not a secret, exactly, but it’s something he will bury deep in his own heart, carry the wound with him until the unseen injury someday heals into another rough, jagged scar.

But right now, alone for just a brief moment, the pain is still fresh and razor sharp, and John can’t stop the silent tears that begin to flow as Sherlock sleeps.

John isn’t expecting the tap at the door.

Before he can answer, the handle turns, and he turns his head away, embarrassed, as the nurse from earlier this afternoon -- *Sophie*, his memory supplies -- steps into the room.

“Hello, Sophie,” he says, reflexive politeness kicking in. He tries to sound normal, he does, but his rough, choked voice makes obvious the fact of his tears. He feels caught out and exposed, desperately self-conscious.

He hears her hesitate, clearly aware that she’s inadvertently caught him in a private and vulnerable moment. Then he hears the soft papery sound of tissues pulled from the box, and she gently nudges his shoulder with her hand holding the Kleenex.

He takes them, fumbling, still looking away, unable to make eye contact.

She clears her throat, then speaks softly, barely above a whisper. “I don’t know what… we were told not to say anything to anyone. But.” She takes a breath. “I’m so very sorry for your loss.”

This unexpected kindness from this taciturn woman almost does John in. He swallows hard and nods, not trusting himself to speak.

“I’ll come back in a few minutes,” she says. “And maybe I can bring you a ginger ale?”

Her voice is softer, and so much kinder than he deserves. John swallows down the tears, gives a tiny huff of an self-conscious chuckle.

“Ginger ale is the hospital cure-all, isn’t it?” he replies, swiping at wet eyes with the crumpled tissues in his fist.
“Ginger ale makes everything better,” Sophie agrees. “And if worse comes to worst, it certainly doesn’t do any harm.”

John wipes again at his eyes and balls up the damp tissues in his fist.

“You’re very kind,” he says, meaning it.

Sophie hands him the rest of the tissue box. They are both silent for a long moment.

“It’s a hard world,” she finally says. “It’s a hard old world, isn’t it, but I think -- maybe the best we can do is not let it make us hard, you know?”

John nods again, pressing his lips together and breathing through his nose to keep more tears from spilling out.

“It’s from the painkillers,” she says, letting him off the hook, letting him have his last shred of dignity. “They make people emotional.”

“I suppose,” John replies, not knowing what else to say.

“I’ll be back in a bit with that drink,” she says quietly. Her fingertips brush his shoulder, just briefly, before she turns away and leaving the room, closing the door carefully behind her.

She returns a few minutes later with a fresh styrofoam cup in her hand and a folded blanket tucked under her arm.

“Looking after you has worn him right out,” she murmurs, draping the blanket over Sherlock’s angular frame.

“Thank you,” John says, heartfelt. Sophie nods, and slips out of the room without reply.

Sherlock stirs a bit, but doesn’t wake.

John keeps watch over him, the whole night through, with only his own ghosts and memories for company.

***

The next morning, John’s rapid improvement is rewarded with a return to solid food.

Well. Semi-solid, meaning runny oatmeal and scrambled eggs. Hunger makes him indiscriminate and he inhales it all, gratefully, despite the two foods having disturbing similarities in both taste and texture.

It’s the indisputable high point of his morning, and it goes downhill from there.

John is sick to death of being in this bed, in this room, cut off completely from the outside world that somehow continues to revolve without his input. He resents that.

Sherlock’s bored as well, desperately so, and has been for at least the couple days since he became mostly certain John wasn’t actually going to die. He’s been amazing, he’s been steadfast and kind, but John knows his capacity for that kind of thing isn’t limitless. And they’re damn close to hitting it.

In short, the two men in the small room are restless, snappish, and starting to annoy the crap out of each other due to sheer lack of external stimuli.
They’ve tapered John down to oral pain meds, and Sherlock is resorting to his hated nicotine patches, unable to keep up a pack-a-day habit while staying next to John’s side in hospital. These two facts aren’t helping matters at all.

Sherlock has been flipping manically through the limited channel selection on the television for the better part of an hour, while John tries to read the novel Mrs Hudson sent him.

“Have you got to the bit where the uncle—”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” John says without looking up. He’s already figured most of it out, though. It’s actually not a very good novel. He pretends to read for a few more minutes, just out of a lack of much else to do.

Sherlock tosses the remote aside with a touch more drama than necessary. He sighs loudly, stretches, and rolls his head from side to side, causing it to crack loudly, several times, in a manner John has always loathed.

“Good Lord.” He glares at Sherlock. “Could you not?”

“I’m so sorry, is my skeleton annoying you?”

“Well. Kind of, yes.”

Both men fall silent, but it’s not one of the good silences.

“Sorry,” Sherlock mutters after a time, sulky yet contrite underneath. He drops his eyes. Looks up at through his lashes at John, chastened and just a little pouty. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” John sighs, feeling a little guilty. “I’m sorry too. We’re both out of sorts.”

Sherlock gives him a rueful half-grin. “It’s mostly this dreadful piece of furniture. God, I miss my bed.”

“I miss my chair,” John says quietly.

“I want to go home,” Sherlock says.

“Me too,” John answers.

Sherlock just sighs. There’s not much else to say.

Morning sunlight pours in through the tall, narrow window, illuminating the dust motes dancing within the beam. The two men watch in silence.

***

It takes a little time to transition into a grudgingly peaceful detente. The grumpiness still hangs in the air between them, the weight of it tiresome, to be sure, but not quite unbearable.

John busies himself with the novel, trying to convince himself it’s better than it actually is. He is just starting to buy his own bullshit and get immersed in the narrative, when a timid knock sounds at the door.

Sherlock doesn’t look up from his phone. “Come in,” he calls, disinterested

A young hospital volunteer enters the room, a thin, nervous looking girl of maybe nineteen, pale blue
lab coat voluminous on her narrow frame. She’s holding a large potted plant in her arms, dark green, elegantly drooping long leaves surrounding a creamy calyx rising from the centre of the glossy foliage.

“Can I put this over here?” she asks, gesturing awkwardly at the top of the built-in dresser with one of her elbows.

“Ta, thanks,” John says absently, barely glancing up. The young volunteer slips out of the room without saying a word.

‘Nice of Mrs Hudson, but I’d have thought she’d go for something a bit more colourful,” John muses aloud as he dog-ears the page and sets the novel down on the tray table.

“Why do you think it’s from Mrs Hudson?”

“Well, who else would it be from?” John asks. “Perhaps Greg, I suppose, but he doesn’t seem the tasteful plant type. Maybe balloons, or--

“John.” Sherlock rises, approaches the plant with laser-focused attention. “There’s a pink ribbon on the plant. Why is there a pink ribbon on the plant?”

John shrugs, palms out. “Beats me,” he says, but even as he says it the gears are beginning to turn in his mind

Sherlock plucks the oversized card out from the plastic holder nestled amongst the green leaves, scans it over briefly, then perches on the edge of John’s bed and hands him the cream-coloured envelope.

There is no name written.

John slides his index finger under the lightly gummed flap, extracts another, slightly smaller envelope.

The address is in a plain, unfussy hand; the texture and width of the strokes says cheap black Biro.

Judith Johnson

Room 6

Cooper University Hospital

Camden, NJ 10434-6134

He carefully opens the inner envelope. The card within is a single, unfolded sheet of glossy stock. The picture is of a cartoon stork, holding a pink balloon aloft with a string held in his beak. Over the bird’s head, a banner brightly proclaims Congratulations!

John opens the card. The short message is in the same black ink as the address on the envelope.

-- Best Wishes for a Happy Future!

There is no salutation. There is no signature.

It’s clearly not intended for him. It’s a bit odd, to be sure, they’re usually more careful about this sort of thing, but --
He shakes his head and chuckles. “Nothing doing, Sherlock. It’s just a mistaken delivery. Wrong floor, I bet.”

Sherlock’s brows draw together; he turns to John, extends his hand in nonverbal request. John gives him over the envelope. His eyes scan over the address, then he tilts his head as he reads it over again, more carefully this time. His eyes narrow, his full lips purse together.

“What is it?” John asks.

“This address includes a Plus-4 designation.” Sherlock hands the envelope back to John. “Common in bulk and business mailings, yes, but why include it on a hand-addressed envelope? Especially considering it wasn’t mailed? And I have to confirm, but I’m almost certain…John. “Do you know the ZIP code for Camden?”

“The postal code? ‘Course I don’t.”

Sherlock snatches up his phone from its resting place on the bedside table, swipes and taps with the controlled intensity that means he’s on the brink of a new discovery. He smirks in triumph before handing the phone to John.

“Zero-eight-one-zero-three,” John reads aloud. His mouth turns downward, his lips pressing together as his still-slightly-slow brain attempts to parse the information. “So the address on the envelope is incorrect.”


John frowns. “Why on earth would someone send me a get-well plant with a pink ribbon, someone else’s name, and a fake address?”

“Who, indeed?” Sherlock replies, with that familiar, didactic do-catch-up-John tone.

John catches up.

“Lou Andrews,” he supplies.

“Our old friend Lou Andrews,” Sherlock confirms. “I knew I liked her for a reason. So nice of her to send us something to keep us entertained.”

“It’s a puzzle?” John asks.

“Yes,” Sherlock replies. He looks at John and smiles, his eyes sparkling for the first time in far too long, setting John’s spirits alight. “Bless her elderly criminal heart, it’s a puzzle.”

Works inspired by this one: [Podfic] and your very flesh shall be a great poem by bagofthumbs

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