The Adventure of the Silver Scars

by tangledblue

Summary

“All this does not mean that I’m not still basically pissed off with you. I’m very pissed off, and it will come out now and then.” —His Last Vow

It’s been thirteen months since Mary shot Sherlock and John finds he’s still pissed off about it. Sherlock had thought everything was settled: John and Mary, domestic bliss. But when John turns up at Baker Street with suitcases, the world’s only consulting detective might not be prepared for the consequences. A new case. Some old scores to settle. Certain danger. Concertos, waltzes, and whisky.

Notes

Cover Art by Hamstermoon

Warning: Comments contain spoilers!
Anger Management

John Watson was filling Minnie’s food dish when he was suddenly paralysed by a flash of blinding clarity. Holding a bowl of cat kibble, John realised his marriage was over.

He stared at the silver dish in his hand and thought about how his wife had shot his best friend and how nevertheless he was standing in their kitchen, like an idiot, feeding her obnoxious cats. A wave of disgust coursed through him and he slammed the bowl back on the worktop, oblivious to the yowls of protest coming from near his feet.

It had been ten months since Sherlock shot Magnussen in the head, and thirteen months since Mary shot Sherlock in the chest. And god he’d tried to forgive her. Cooking dinner at her side, watching movies on the couch, pushing his palms into his eyes until he saw white spots he’d tried to forgive her. But he’d given it a year, and each day the concept of ‘domestic bliss’ seemed to move further out of reach. Pretending wasn’t working.

He remembered telling Mary at the Holmes’ house on Christmas day, “You know I’m still basically pissed off with you. I’m very pissed off and it will come out now and then.” Unfortunately, ‘now and then’ had turned out to be more like ‘now and then and again and again and again…’ He had thought it would go away. It hadn’t.

John had lost all of the newlywed weight he’d initially gained and more. And the nightmares had worsened. Some nights he was back in Afghanistan—in the field seeing his troopmates fall beside him. Some nights he was back on the side street of Barts hospital, struggling through restraining hands to get to the body on the pavement. And still, some nights, to his surprise (it had been so long ago), he dreamed of the pool: the bright red of the sniper’s laser sight on Sherlock’s forehead and then the much deeper red that ran from the same point. He remembered the dream well—a recurring nightmare that had started after the confrontation with Moriarty: Sherlock falling into the water and John jumping in after him, but the pool was vast and the vest full of explosives weighed a ton and it was pulling him down and he couldn’t reach Sherlock’s hand and he couldn’t breathe.

But more often lately his dreams found him in Magnussen’s office, watching Mary smirking and pulling the trigger and blood staining Sherlock’s shirt as he fell backward, fell through the floor, fell away where John couldn’t follow him, couldn’t save him...

His unconscious mind cycled through these scenarios almost every night, depriving him of any rest. The dark circles under his eyes and his thinner frame prompted more questions from the nurses at his surgery than he cared to answer. He’d even considered wearing makeup around his eyes to try to avoid them. The moment he’d found himself eyeing Mary’s concealer had not been a high point in his life.

John leaned forward, gripping the edges of the kitchen worktop. He would have left Mary then and there last year. But Sherlock, of all people, had persuaded him to forgive her, manipulating him with his infuriating Sherlogic. ‘Sherlogic’ was John’s not-quite-endearment for Sherlock’s theoretically logical but completely impractical way of reasoning. It worked quite neatly as long as you discounted emotion and human nature in general.

For example, according to Sherlogic it was perfectly all right that Mary had shot Sherlock because she’d also dialled the ambulance. According to Sherlogic, it was forgivable that Mary had shot Sherlock in the chest because she’d also intentionally missed his heart. According to Sherlogic, shooting someone was a valid way to avoid a confrontation with your husband.
Sherlock’s words to Mary echoed in his mind: *One precisely calculated shot to incapacitate me in the hope that it would buy you more time to negotiate my silence.*

John’s gaze was locked on a kitchen window he wasn’t seeing. That’s right, much more convenient for Mary to shoot Sherlock than to tell John the truth.

How could he have fallen for such nonsense? In what alternate universe did Mary’s distaste for being honest with her husband justify her shooting Sherlock through the chest? Sherlock-world. Apparently Mary-world too. *You two should have got married,* John recalled his own bitter words from the night everything fell apart.

But in truth Sherlock and Mary weren’t that similar. Sure, Sherlock could reason the same warped logic that had led to Mary’s decision to shoot him, but in practice, if the situation had been reversed, John knew without a doubt that Sherlock would never have shot Mary. He would never harm someone John loved. Especially not over something so petty as trying to avoid getting caught in a lie. Because despite being self-involved, Sherlock was not *selfish* in the same way Mary was.

Mary had been prepared to kill his best friend just to have her own way. And then, to add insult to injury, if Sherlock hadn’t survived (which he almost hadn’t), she’d been prepared to pretend to grieve with him. To imitate the comfort and support she’d given him the first time he’d had to cope with Sherlock’s death. She would have put her arms around him, let him cry on her shoulder… Sherlock’s murderer: tricking him, acting out grief for his benefit, and getting away with it. Every. Single. Day.

John put his elbows on the kitchen worktop and his head in his hands. This wasn’t the first time he’d been caught off-guard by these thoughts. They ambushed him unexpectedly, time and time again, and now he recognised the automatic sensations of disgust and hatred coursing through his body. He’d survived the last year mainly by blocking out these thoughts, working double shifts at the surgery, spending more time at the gym than he had since university—he’d even joined an amateur rugby team just to get out of the house on Saturday afternoons—but they always caught up with him. And each time his barriers broke down and the flood of arguments, the knowledge of injustice, washed over him he’d had a blow-out row with Mary.

“Tell me again why you shot him?” John asked on one of those nights. One of those dreaded, poisonous nights when the thoughts seeped past his defences, tainting his blood until he shook with barely controlled rage.

“I’ve told you so many times! I thought I would lose you if he told you about me! I wanted-”

“Remind me, Mary, why it is that what you want is so bloody important? You didn’t want to deal with the consequences of your lies, and Sherlock deserved to die for that?”

“I didn’t kill him! I knew he’d be all right-”

“IF YOU LIE TO ME ONE MORE TIME SO HELP ME GOD!”

Mary flinched, so John had done his best to adjust his voice from explosive to seething. “I know how stupid you think I am; trust me, I know. But I am actually a doctor. A doctor! Wow! For someone as stupid as you think I am, I did somehow manage to pass medical school and gain a decent reputation for being good at what I do.”

She lowered her eyes.
“I was a surgeon, in a war, Mary. I know bullet wounds. I had one myself. Or did you forget? You missed his heart by less than an inch—that’s still a fatal shot nine times out of ten. He was fucking flatlining. I have no idea what brought him back; he should have been dead. So if you lie to me now, there will be nothing left of this fucked up marriage to salvage. Admit you knew it was more likely he’d die than live.”

“I knew there was a good chance the shot would kill him,” she’d said quietly, keeping her eyes down. “But I hoped—”

“Right. You hoped he would survive your attempted murder. Where’s your medal?”

“John—”

“I’m not squeamish about guns. I know sometimes there are good reasons to use them. But shooting my best friend to avoid talking to me—to avoid telling me the truth—”

“John, please—”

“What? Is there something else you want, Mary? Since we know that what you want is all that matters—”

John’s replaying of the argument was cut off by a vicious swipe of claws across his shin, which thankfully was protected by denim. The other cat, Bonkers, had appeared and when John looked down at the kitchen floor he saw both cats glaring up at him. A flash of hatred shocked through him. He didn’t like cats. He’d never liked these cats and they’d never liked him. But he’d put up with them because they were Mary’s; because he’d loved her. Now he briefly fantasized chucking Bonkers out the window like a discus.

He took a deep breath and reminded himself that the cats, hateful as they were, were innocent in the matter. So he settled for dumping the cat food on their heads, grabbing a throw pillow from the adjoining living room, and squeezing the life out of it instead.

John had always had a hot temper. Sherlock, Mary, his therapist, Harry, pin machines… They all knew that a row with him usually resulted in collateral damage. He’d never hit anyone he cared about (unless Sherlock hit him first, or unless Sherlock pretended to be dead for two years), but there were enough wounded coffee tables and tea mugs to testify that his anger was not something to be trifled with.

But the past was nothing compared to now. He’d never been more furious than he had been this past year. And he also knew, with a conviction that made him squeeze the pillow harder, that his anger had never, never been more justified.

She had killed Sherlock. His best friend. But no, not his best friend. Sherlock was so much more. He was everything. The hero of his stories. Sherlock had given him a reason to live at a time John was sure he had none. He’d cured his limp and turned his world upside down within a day. The man who’d saved him. The man who he devoted all his time and energy to protecting in return. And she—the woman he’d chosen to love—she’d killed him—

“I didn’t kill him!” He heard Mary’s voice in his head from another of their never-ending arguments.

“His heart stopped, Mary. He was dead!”

“But only for six minutes!”

“What is the minimum amount of time a person has to be dead for his
Once these arguments came back he couldn’t stop them. John squeezed the pillow tighter, bracing himself for the next memory being swept at him in the flood.

“How good a shot are you?” Sherlock asked in the corridor behind the Leinster Gardens façade.

“How badly do you want to find out?” Mary responded, blasé, cocking her gun, ready to kill him again. So fucking smug… John didn’t notice the sounds of ripping fabric.

“I want to know how good you are,” Sherlock said. “Go on. Show me. The doctor’s wife must be a little bit bored by now.”

John was jolted out of his revere this time by the realisation that he’d actually torn the pillow in half. He blinked at it, anger slowly draining.

No matter how many times he replayed the arguments, voluntarily or involuntarily, the conclusion was always the same: According to ‘Sherlogic,’ Mary had only done what she’d strategically needed to do at the time. According to non-crazy-people logic, his wife had chosen to murder his best friend rather than accept any consequences for her lies.

And John had tried, for a year and one month, to make himself believe in Sherlock’s warped reasoning—that Mary could be forgiven. He’d tried to convince himself he could love the woman he married, who’d turned out to not to be the woman he married at all. How much easier would everything be if he could forgive her? But his unconscious mind, his heart, and his body were rejecting it.

He looked down at the two pieces of destroyed pillow in his hands, and at Bonkers and Minnie, playing around his feet with the little puffs of cotton that had fallen to the floor.

“Yeah,” John said out loud, “that’s it. I’m done.”

* Mary walked in the door that afternoon with her arms full of groceries. She took one look at John’s face and knew her marriage was over. She placed the bags on the kitchen worktop and tried to compose herself. She’d known this was coming. She’d optimistically, desperately hoped it wouldn’t, but here it was. John was standing motionless in the living room, staring at her, looking grimmer than she’d ever seen him, yet resolute.

She stepped forward to take what she knew would be her last chance. “He lied to you too, you know. He allowed you to believe he was dead for years without bothering to contact you. He’s just as manipulative and deceitful.”

“Yes, he hurt me.”

“And you forgave him,” Mary pressed on. “Why can you forgive him, but not me?”

John dropped his eyes only for a moment, and when he looked up she could see clearly the pain in his expression mixing with his determination. He was so readable. So charmingly open. So unlike herself and the people of her world—the world she’d chosen to leave, the world she’d wanted nothing to do with anymore. She braced herself for his answer, and he spoke with measured words.

“Because he hurt me, Mary. Maybe I could forgive you for lying to me. I could forgive you for hurting me. But you hurt him. And I can’t forgive you for that.”
Mary’s eyes welled up with tears. She’d been expecting this for so long, but now that it was happening she felt defenceless, shattered.

God, if she’d just shot Sherlock directly in the heart none of this would be happening. If Sherlock hadn’t survived… And he shouldn’t have. A moment of weakness had prevented the direct kill shot, but still he really shouldn’t have survived. Anyone with even marginally less strength would have died. He himself had been at death’s door, actually flatlining for six minutes before he had somehow managed to fight his way back. How? Why? It wasn’t fair. A few more minutes and it wouldn’t have been possible. A few more minutes and the doctors would have stopped trying. A few more minutes and right now John would still be in love with her. She would be the doting wife, comforting her husband. And he would have adored her for it, the way he did when they first started dating.

She bit her lip, more furious with herself than she’d ever been. She had miscalculated. When she’d turned from Magnussen and shot Sherlock she had placed a bet that if it came down to it, John would choose her over Sherlock. And a year later, standing in the kitchen and looking into John’s icy, dark blue eyes, she lost that bet.
Trouble

Sherlock Holmes was in trouble. And not the fun kind either. He paced the living room of 221B Baker Street with his hands clasped behind his back, occasionally throwing dirty looks at his laptop. Normally he liked trouble, sought it out even. It thrilled him to push his luck to the last, relying on the speed of his calculations under pressure... or sometimes relying on John to intervene and shoot someone.

He smirked; it came in all sorts of handy to have an ex-soldier with lingering homicidal tendencies living with him.

Oh right.

John hadn't lived with him since his 'suicide' and he kept forgetting. Why should he use valuable storage space in his mind palace for such disagreeable information? Agitated, he raked his hand through his hair.

No, this was not the fun kind of trouble. This was the most banal sort of trouble he’d been in in a long time. He glared at his laptop screen, which glared angry red letters back at him. ‘Your card has not been accepted. Please contact your bank for further information.’

He stopped pacing and looked around the flat. Things had undeniably gone downhill since John left. For one thing, there had always been space on the tables and worktops for his microscopes, or his petri dishes, or anything really. Now there was not. His laptop was balanced precariously on a stack of old newspapers and a few odd files. This was John’s fault, obviously.

When John left he'd taken all of the magic with him. Now when Sherlock dropped his coat on the floor it stayed there. Now when he put dishes in the sink they were still there the next day. It was horrible. Where there had always been an assortment of food and body parts in the fridge, now there were only body parts. Sherlock’s jaw clenched as he looked around at what even he considered to be a mess.

Magical John selfishly taking all of his magic with him, callously insensible to the consequences it would have on others…

It had crossed his mind some time ago that he might starve to death if Mrs. Hudson didn't regularly bring up tea and biscuits. This point seemed to have occurred to Mrs. Hudson as well, since tea and biscuits had gradually morphed into tea and roast beef sandwiches, or tea and soup, or tea and pasta. Tea and pasta. That was Mrs. Hudson for you. He rarely ate much of it, but at least he appreciated the option when he wasn’t too busy being annoyed by the landlady’s interruptions.

At the moment, the most pressing consequence of John having absconded with all the magic was Sherlock's bank account. He wasn’t sure if his card hadn’t been accepted due to lack of funds or some other problem, but it was all so tedious he was loath to be bothered with it. He hadn’t logged into his bank account for years. Bank accounts were boring; keeping track of finances was insufferable. His mind was of such superior quality it could only be occupied with the most complex puzzles humankind had to offer. He couldn’t be concerned with anything as dull as money.

John had taken care of their finances when they’d lived together. John had, apparently—Sherlock hadn’t paid much attention—handled the payments from their clients and deposited them (presumably) fairly into their respective bank accounts. Sherlock would have assumed John had been ripping him off for years (and rightly so, if one couldn’t be bothered to monitor one’s accounts one
perhaps deserved a bit of ripping off) if Sherlock hadn’t known John to be so incorrigibly Upright and Moral. Shame about that. Inflexibility is limiting, after all.

No, this card problem more likely had to do with Sherlock’s inability to recall collecting payment from any of his clients recently—he had just as much difficulty remembering trifling facts as he did unpleasant ones—and if John had done it the cheques must be somewhere in one of these piles that were taking up his worktop space. The thought of rifling through all the papers in 221B to find some old cheques was appalling enough that Sherlock shuddered.

Fortunately, this was not the first time he’d lived without John. Having met the doctor at the age of twenty-seven, he’d had a few years before John to find strategies for living independently. He knew what he had to do; he just didn’t want to do it.

Flipping his dressing gown back as dramatically as one can manoeuvre a dressing gown, Sherlock sat down in front of his laptop and retried the purchase, this time using Mycroft’s credit card information. It worked.

Sherlock always took the precaution of obtaining and memorizing—through fantastically furtive methods, of course—Mycroft’s cards each time he got new ones.

Mycroft, Sherlock had discovered later, had known what he was up to from the start, having recognised the connection between the expiration dates on his cards and Sherlock’s ‘impromptu’ visits. What had they always said about coincidence? *The universe is rarely so lazy.* But for some reason, despite knowing Sherlock’s motive, Mycroft continued to allow him to invent new ways to pickpocket his wallet. Perhaps Mycroft’s passivity about this was a manifestation of Caring about his brother’s financial situation.

Sherlock’s phone buzzed against the stack of books it was balanced on.

*Financial trouble, little brother? M*

Or perhaps Mycroft was just delighted to maintain such a direct system for keeping tabs on him.

*No, decided I’d have a Christmas present. SH*

*It’s October. M*

*Early Christmas present. SH*

*Indeed. Will be auditing your accounts shortly. M*

*Merry Christmas. M*

Sherlock chucked his phone into the couch. He knew the price for using Mycroft’s money was his brother’s prying, but he needed these chemicals. London had been dismally quiet since the obscure “Did you miss me?” message almost a year ago. There had been a handful of cases interesting enough since then to keep him sane (see Blog, Dr. Watson), but that message… It had saved his life, pulling him back from what would have been a suicide mission, and initially it had been so promising. The promise of intrigue, thrill, a distraction, a *challenge*… “Did you miss me?” Did he? The Magnussen/Morstan case had been fascinating and nearly fatal enough hold his attention. But now… *Do you miss me?* The answer to that question, he imagined, was complicated enough to keep London’s best psychologist busy for a year. But he could say definitively he missed the distraction. Silence hung heavily in the empty flat. He’d never needed to be distracted more than he did now.

He lived for the game. And when it was on, *really* on, he needed nothing else. Neither food nor rest
nor any of those restraints that chain mortals to the drudgery of their daily lives. When the game was
on he broke unbreakable cyphers, bent steel, stripped the universe to its chemical contents, ran as
though he weren’t bound to Earth…

And without the game… In the past there had been drugs. An exhilarating rotation of cocaine and
heroin. Up and down, round and round, a beautifully destructive carousel: blurring sensations and
blissful numbness. It had been dizzying, the risk and the rush, never enough and then suddenly too
much all at once. And then the decision to stop. A grinding halt. And now there were only nicotine
patches, an empty flat, and silence.

_Distract me, challenge me, kill me; just don’t let there be silence._

At least when John had been there… But John hadn’t been there for years.

There was nothing to do but wait. _Did you miss me? _He knew something was coming; whatever or
whoever it was was just taking a criminally long time about it. Worthless criminals. Were they trying
to torture him? The problem with having accumulated so many dangerously insane enemies was that
there would always be someone only too gleeful for the opportunity to torture him.

Using Mycroft’s money, knowingly attracting his brother’s attention, forced him to acknowledge
how desperate he was. He needed the chemicals he’d just purchased. Without drugs and without
anything else to distract his attention, research was all he had to keep his brain from self-destructing
with boredom.

Sherlock glared to his left at the skull perched on his stack of _Textile Science_ journals.

“Why is it all so dull?” he demanded of it. “Human bodies are wondrously complex, but humans are
idiots. Mindless work, mindless eating, mindless television…” He pulled his feet up onto the chair,
hugging his knees to his chest. "Dull, dull... The average person is nowhere near as intelligent as his
circulatory system. It's pathetic."

The skull stared at him silently.

"And dull. Excruciatingly dull."

Silence, silence.

People often assumed Sherlock liked silence just because he told them to shut up all the time. But, as
usual, they were wrong. Although he despised people’s insipid blathering, he didn’t like silence.
More often than not he needed sound to think. Sherlock did his best thinking while playing the
violin, or talking to John. He liked to talk. After all, people who have remarkable things to say
should talk more often than other people. (It’s just as that rabbit from that children’s film had said, “If
you can’t say anything interesting, don’t say anything at all.” Sherlock firmly believed the world
would be a better place if more people followed this advice, even if it had been said by a talking
rabbit.)

Sherlock very often had interesting and important things to say and he needed to say them out loud.
He used to talk to the skull, which regarded him eyelessly now.

A memory from his and John’s first case together sprang to his mind.

He’d been explaining something urgent and imperative (as usual) when John had asked, “But why
are you telling all of this to _me_?”

“Mrs. Hudson took my skull.”
“So I’m basically filling in for your skull,” John had responded, incredulous.

“Relax, you’re doing fine.”

How things had changed. Sherlock steepled his fingers as he often did unconsciously when thinking. The skull now was not doing a fine job filling in for John.

“Life post-goldfish is even more disappointing than I’d anticipated,” Sherlock grumbled to it. “There should be a warning label. Goldfish can be dangerous. Some goldfish… Maybe just one…” Sherlock was muttering incoherently. “But there’s nothing to be done about it… Don’t look like that.” Sherlock faced the skull away from him. It never used to be so judgmental.

This wasn’t working. He needed John’s responses to centre his thought processes. And for some inconvenient reason, only John’s. All other voices were grating to his ears: either too high or too loud or too nasally or too fast or too slow or too mumbling or too stupid. Vile people and their witless cadences, ugly and full of the ignorant sort of arrogance people effuse whenever they speak about things they don’t understand, which is always. But not John.

When John had walked into the lab the day they met Sherlock had immediately been struck by John’s voice. Different from my day… Here use mine… Somehow it was not as horrible as the cacophony of mouth noises he had to endure whenever he was forced to interact with people. In fact, John’s voice, with its soft tone and unassuming quality, his accent neither vulgar nor pretentious, words neither hurried nor drawling, was even borderlining on pleasant.

His voice was one of several factors Sherlock used in deciding, within a matter of seconds, that John would be the ideal flatmate, and then later an ideal assistant. (Sherlock had also quite liked that John was left-handed but shot a gun with his right: Interesting.) Only John would do. He remembered how off his game he’d been when he brought Molly along on a case. It hadn’t worked.

And now even the skull wasn’t good enough anymore.

With considerable effort Sherlock dragged his attention back to his laptop. Using Mycroft’s money to buy the chemicals had solved this particular problem, but Mycroft—or more accurately Mycroft’s minions—would be examining his accounts at any moment, and he expected he would be in for a lecture. Sometimes he wished Mycroft were more old-fashioned. Sherlock could tolerate most traditional forms of torture better than he could withstand a lecture about responsibility from his brother.

Sherlock also knew that Mycroft would offer him money. He wouldn’t take it, because accepting money from his brother—as opposed to stealing it—would mean submission. Mycroft would use the money as a contract, requiring Sherlock to comply with his every request. Sherlock, for his part, would rather spend an evening of quiet conversation with Anderson than sell his freedom to Mycroft. And since both of these options were only slightly better than suicide—real suicide, elaborately staged fake suicides were excellent fun—he needed a better idea.

Sherlock jumped to his feet and resumed pacing the room. He took a crooked path, as the items scattered about the floor made a straight one impossible.

He kicked a pair of handcuffs aside and stepped over a teacup. He was annoyed by the flat’s illogical ability to be oppressively cluttered and yet feel empty at the same time. It was too quiet. He went to the windowsill and unlatched his violin case. The beautiful Stradivarius was easily the most valuable item in the flat.

Automatic actions: Tighten and rosin bow, attach shoulder rest, tune by ear for perfect pitch.
He decided on Sibelius’s violin concerto. It was a good night for the minor key.

He began to play from memory. He knew some songs so well he could put his hands on autopilot, muscle memory freeing his mind to consider any problem undistracted. The piece was complex, the bowing fast and complicated, but he’d repeated it so often in youth the notes came to him instinctively.

He walked around the living room as he played, lost in thought, only vaguely aware of the crunch of tennis racket strings underfoot now and then.

Sherlock had been… well, the way he was… for thirty-two years. Discounting a partial lobotomy, it just wasn’t possible that he could become the sort of person who waited in line at the bank to deposit a cheque, or paid bills, or worried about credit card debt.

He could, of course, hire someone to take care of these things for him. But then he would probably have to pay that person. One can’t pay a person to fix his financial problems if one has such financial problems that he needs to pay a person to fix them. Sherlock furrowed his brow. This was not his kind of puzzle.

What would John say? John would know what to do, and the obvious option of texting him to simply ask hadn’t escaped him. But Sherlock had promised himself after John’s wedding that he wasn’t going to bother him with these sorts of ex-flatmate problems (e.g. where are the towels? Is it possible to fold a fitted sheet? Are there significant consequences for not doing so correctly? How does the heat work? etc.). He wasn’t going to interrupt John’s new married life with such trivial problems that he himself found too boring to properly consider. So asking John was out of the question.

Sherlock heard footsteps on the stairs beneath the sound of his violin. Mrs. Hudson again. Sherlock couldn’t think of enough variations in the English language to tell her to go away. He’d tried using some phrases from other languages, but those proved to be even less effective.

When Sherlock calculated her to be on the top stair he stopped his bow and yelled, “MRS. HUDSON, IF YOU TRY TO BRING ONE MORE CUP OF TEA IN HERE TONIGHT I WILL THROW IT OUT THE WINDOW.” The footsteps stopped, hesitating. “I’LL CONSIDER THROWING YOU OUT AFTER IT,” he added for good measure.

He resumed playing. He couldn’t be interrupted right now, especially not by Mrs. Hudson’s prattling. He needed to think about John. He needed to focus. What would John say?

And then Sherlock knew with certainty that if John were there, he would have said, “If I promise I don’t have any tea, can I come in?”

Because he was there, standing in the doorway with a duffel bag across his shoulder and a suitcase at his side, and that’s what he did say.
John was standing in the doorway with luggage; it didn’t require Holmes-level deduction skills to work out what had happened.

But how serious was the separation? The presence of two suitcases—overstuffed, which contrasted with Sherlock’s knowledge of John to be a light packer—negated any impulsive, storm-out scenario. Time and effort had been spent packing. Sherlock didn’t need to open the bags to know they’d been packed with military fastidiousness: shirts folded crisply and pants rolled tightly to maximise space. John clearly meant to avoid having to go back to Mary’s for as long as possible. Very serious.

Sherlock stood stock-still in the living room facing the doorway. In the number of seconds it took him to understand the gravity of the situation he felt the earth shift under him. New results from an old experiment. Fascinating. Unexpected. Everything he’d been prepared for, the arrangements he’d personally influenced, had switched completely and without warning.

Or perhaps not entirely without warning. Sherlock, considering his specific skillset, would have been hard-pressed not to notice John’s weight loss, his stress levels, his exhaustion from sleepless nights over the past year and especially in the last few months. The signs of an unhappy marriage were all there. Sherlock had just preferred not to officially file them, because John was supposed to be with Mary. There had been a wedding. He’d said goodbye to his flatmate and embraced Mr. and Mrs. Watson. He’d known it was for the best, and all evidence to the contrary had been ignored. Yet here John was, standing in the doorway with suitcases and looking at Sherlock and being entirely unignorable.

Sherlock stood with his arms at his sides, violin and bow dangling from either hand, quite speechless.

*  

From his position in the doorway it seemed clear to John that Sherlock was not going to respond anytime soon. Taking advantage of his friend’s paralysis he said, “Ok, I’ll just come in then.”

John grinned despite his exhaustion. He was rarely able to surprise Sherlock and he had to appreciate the moment. He dropped his bags beside his armchair and flopped down into the seat. He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair and looked curiously up at Sherlock. “Are you all right?”

Sherlock blinked, refocusing on John. He sucked in a breath and said, “Fine, erm… Yes, I’m fine. Erm… Something to drink? Tea?”

John quirked his eyebrow. “You were dead set against tea a minute ago.”

“That was more about Mrs. Hudson, less about tea.”

“I’d have something stronger, if you’ve got it.”

“Whisky and soda?”

“Is it possible you have soda here?”

“Highly improbable.”

“Whisky neat’s fine.”
“Right.”

John watched as Sherlock set the violin down on a stack of papers and wandered off behind him into the kitchen. He looked around the room and felt a pang of distress at the thought of all the cleaning he’d have to do. But beneath the haphazard hills of books and papers and dishes, it was still 221B.

John gripped the arms of the chair, his chair. Sherlock had moved it away after the wedding, and then moved it back after Mary shot him. Sherlock had convinced John to forgive Mary, but the chair had stayed. Was it an invitation for him to come back? A sign that Sherlock knew he would come back? John dismissed that train of thought. There was no understanding Sherlock’s motives until he explained them. No use guessing.

John looked around the room and registered its welcome familiarities. The yellow smiley face spray painted over the wallpaper, the bullet holes in the wall, the bison skull (still wearing the old set of headphones John had clapped over its ‘ears’ after they’d broken), Sherlock’s music stand, the harpoon, Sherlock’s coat thrown carelessly over the couch… The closeness of the room, with its clashing wallpaper and mismatched furniture, seemed a world away from the understated colour coordination and open space of the Kensington terraced house he’d just left. John let out a breath he had never even remembered Lestrade’s first name it was really quite… nice.

More composed now, Sherlock sat down across from John and regarded him thoughtfully. John knew better than to expect Sherlock to ask why he was there or what had happened. That Sherlock already knew most of the things that happened to John, by reading them on his clothes or face, was an understood part of being Sherlock’s friend.

“I suppose,” Sherlock said, “that you’ve made up your mind about this, and I won’t be able to persuade you otherwise?”

“That’s right,” John said. He looked hard back at Sherlock. He had made the decision to leave Mary painstakingly, not impulsively, and he was not going to be manipulated out of it. Not this time.

“She made you happy,” Sherlock said, his voice just detectably softer. “I observed it plainly.”

John sighed. It had been a long day and he wasn’t in the mood to talk about it. But considering he’d just barged in on Sherlock in the middle of the night, he figured he owed him an explanation.

“That was before,” John said, looking at his whisky. The honey brown colour provided a soothing contrast to the sharp scrutiny of Sherlock’s eyes.

Those incredibly distinctive eyes were as exceptional and enigmatic as their owner. Arresting verdigris tinged with darker green in some areas, greyer blue in others, and spots of bright gold flecked throughout. As a doctor John recognised this as partial heterochromia iridis, a not entirely uncommon condition which causes multicoloured irises. But as a person who was often on the receiving end of Sherlock’s renowned Piercing Stare it was difficult not to be mystified by the colours. The irises seemed to have changed every time he looked at them, like something in a dream that can’t be held by memory; something fluid and shifting. It was frustrating. Several times John had
even missed part of what Sherlock was lecturing (or shouting) about due to his suspicion that Sherlock’s eyes had changed again.

But there was always the flaw. In Sherlock’s kaleidoscopic eyes only the flaw remained constant. In his right iris, just above the pupil, was a single dot of dark brown amid the bright sky colours. Beautiful and flawed. John would say Sherlock’s eyes were a perfect reflection of his mind, but that was the sort of writerly romanticism Sherlock so often scoffed at while reading his blog.

Nevertheless, despite Sherlock’s distaste for the finer sophistications of literary art, his body insisted on being an excellent metaphor for his disdain of the ordinary. His porcelain pale skin, his shock of black, loosely curled hair, his height, his slender frame, those bloody cheekbones… Everything about his appearance was striking; poetic, John would even say just to watch Sherlock scowl. And of course he couldn’t have just one eye colour; he had to have five, that poncey git.

So John continued to avoid Sherlock’s searching gaze as he explained, “I haven’t been happy with her since… For a long time.”

Sherlock had his elbows on the arms of his chair and his fingers intertwined. He didn’t speak, so John continued. “Things didn’t get better,” he said. “I thought things would get better but they didn’t.” John finally lifted his eyes and met Sherlock’s. He needed Sherlock to understand this, and not to argue with him. “I don’t want to—I can’t—live like that anymore. It’s over. So, if you’ve got used to having the flat to yourself I can rent my own place, but either way it’s done, and I’m not going back.”

“No,” Sherlock said abruptly, sitting up in his chair.

John gave Sherlock an exasperated look. If Sherlock was intent on burying him under an avalanche of arguments about why he was wrong and why he needed to patch things up with Mary, he could at least wait until morning.

But to John’s surprise Sherlock continued in a rush of words, “No, I haven’t got used to living here alone. Everything’s a mess, there’s no room for my microscopes, the fridge is only suitable for cannibals, and my debit card doesn’t work when you’re not here.”

John made an effort not to laugh. Instead said sceptically, “So what I’m hearing is you need a maid. And possibly an accountant.”

Sherlock sighed dramatically and flopped backward in his chair, tilting his head back. “And…” he said slowly. John waited. “And my skull’s become boring.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes,” Sherlock addressed the ceiling. “Its conversational skills have declined alarmingly. I’d say Alzheimer’s if it weren’t already dead.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that,” John said. “It was a good friend of yours.”

Sherlock sat up again. “Stay,” he said, possibly more forcefully than he meant to, because he cleared his throat and tried again. “Erm, please stay.” He looked hard at John, who shifted under the intensity of his stare.

“All right,” John said, taken aback by Sherlock’s sudden sincerity. “So it’s settled then. I’ll move back in.” John finished the last swallow of whisky and set the glass down. He checked his watch; it was past eleven already. “I’ll just go unpack.” He stood up, and slung the duffel bag over his shoulder.
“John,” Sherlock said from his chair.

John turned back.

“You know what I didn’t like about Mary?”

“What was that?”

“When she shot me in the chest.”

John gave a short laugh. “Yeah, in the end I didn’t like that either.”

Sherlock grinned, “Welcome back.”

* 

It was well after midnight and Sherlock was pacing the living room again. One problem solved another arises. Of course he was glad John was back; he hadn’t wanted him to leave in the first place. But it was more complicated now. When Sherlock had left London, and John had found Mary, he had reasoned that Mary was what John needed. She was John’s chance for at least half a normal life. True, she’d turned out to be a former assassin, but total normalcy had never been John’s cup of tea anyway.

Sherlock had figured that as a successfully (at least for the most part) retired assassin, Mary would be able to balance him. John would continue to work on cases with Sherlock, and the rest of the time Mary would do the mundane things with John that Sherlock couldn’t—like going to the cinema, and cooking dinners, and seeing people in social situations. Sex too, he supposed, due to his own aversion to it and John’s rather frequent yelling about not being gay.

So Sherlock had accepted the marriage as necessary, although he didn’t like it. He didn’t like it because it meant that John wouldn’t be around all the time to talk to him and to wear jumpers and drink tea and make him laugh about things it never would have occurred to him to laugh about. In his entire life he’d never found anyone’s company tolerable, let alone desirable, until John. But he knew he couldn’t keep him. He had nothing to offer John besides cases and crime and danger, and while this had always been enough for him, he knew John needed more.

As a goldfish, despite being a highly superior—if not the most superior—goldfish, John would want to do goldfish things sometimes. Sherlock couldn’t ask John to forever forego pub nights in favour of crouching in dark alleyways, trade movies for morgues, and love for labs.

He couldn’t ask him… But what if John chose it without being asked? He was here now, wasn’t he? Was it possible… Could it be that John had decided that he, Sherlock Holmes—a high-functioning sociopath who cared for John more than anything in his own disordered and necessarily limited way—was enough after all?

But no… What about when John eventually tired of Sherlock’s exhausting, morbid work, and then finally of Sherlock himself? Mary had been John’s best life raft. She had been John’s way out, his way back to a safe, normal life where people didn’t kidnap him and strap bombs to him, or stick needles in his neck and try to burn him alive. But now John had cut the life raft loose.

As self-absorbed as he might be, he was not oblivious to the fact that John sacrificed a lot for him. So regardless of his own feelings about giving up the only person he’d ever truly cared for, he had promised himself he wouldn’t wreck the marriage, and indeed vowed to John that he’d do everything in his power to support it. This was why he’d convinced John to forgive Mary after she’d shot him (though he hadn’t been as keen on her himself after that). And why he’d ignored the signs of the
declining marriage afterward. He couldn’t acknowledge being such a consistently destructive force in
John’s life.

But despite everything, here John was anyway. For John to leave Mary—for him to have known the
potential for a different life and still to choose to come back to Baker Street—on his own volition,
actually despite Sherlock’s efforts, was exactly what Sherlock hadn’t dared to hope for.

And yet… Sherlock stopped pacing and leaned back against the doorjamb between the living room
and kitchen. He folded his arms and looked down at the floor, black hair falling into his eyes
(remember to get haircut) …And yet, just because he was happy about it didn’t mean John would be.
It was another thing in John’s life wrecked and Sherlock had no idea what to do about it.

*

John and Sherlock were sitting on the curb outside of St. Barts hospital and John was only vaguely
aware he was dreaming.

“There are exactly twelve different types of perfume with the same ash quality,” Sherlock was
saying. “That’s why I can always tell.”

John suddenly saw that blood was running down the side of Sherlock’s face and his hair was wet
with it. He hadn’t noticed before.

“Criminals are so obvious these days,” Sherlock continued. “All you have to do is check the fibres in
their socks. That’s what the police never get. It’s the socks.”

“Sherlock,” John said, and Sherlock stopped and turned to look at him. Bright eyes, brighter than
anything else around them. Blood ran down his neck staining his white shirt. “God, why do you
wear such expensive shirts all the time? It’s not practical in your line of work. Look this one is
ruined, just like all the others—”

“I don’t care about my shirts.”

“Well, I do.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re nice and you don’t even try to take care of them.”

“Would it make you happy if I tried to take better care of them?”

“Yes,” John said firmly. “It would.”

Sherlock shrugged. ”Then I’ll try.”

“And what about this?” John asked touching Sherlock’s face, smearing some of the blood there.
“You can’t go to Molly’s party looking like that.”

“I always look like this.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes I do.”

“You do not.”
“I do.”

A pause.

“So, you’ll have to go without me.” Sherlock said, looking out across the empty lot.

John shook his head. No. “But we already bought cake.”

“It doesn’t matter!” Sherlock suddenly turned and grabbed the lapels of John’s jacket and his eyes turned grey. “It went out the window with the glasses and the flowers.” John looked around and it was true. Shards and stems of shattered champagne glasses gleamed on the pavement around them. And flower petals, purple and yellow, were falling around them, settling lightly over the pieces of broken glass.

He reached out to take one of the petals but Sherlock caught his hand before he could touch it.

“Don’t,” he said. “It’s still sharp.”

John looked down at their hands in surprise. Sherlock didn’t let go.

“What are we going to do about this mess?” John asked, looking around.

But Sherlock wasn’t paying attention. A phone had materialised in the hand that wasn’t gripping John’s. “Excellent!” he shouted looking at the screen. And he started laughing.

He was laughing so genuinely that John couldn’t help laughing too.

“What is it?” John finally gasped.

“Text from Lestrade.” Sherlock’s eyes flashed. “Murder socks.”
The morning had started off well enough, waking up in Emily’s bed, getting up gently so as not to wake her, slipping into the kitchen to start the kettle, then one text from Sherlock and all thoughts of coffee evaporated.

He’d been living with Sherlock for just over a year (had it really only been a year since he met the detective who had turned his life around so completely?) and at this point he felt an almost physical response to these texts. A pull. The text said ‘urgent.’ Of course he knew with Sherlock that ‘urgent’ could range from ‘can I borrow your phone?’ to ‘there’s a man in our flat with a gun to my head’ and that there was absolutely no way to find out where on the spectrum the particular ‘emergency’ fell until he arrived. John looked back at the text and knew he wouldn’t be able to ignore it.

“Emily,” he whispered, sitting down on the edge of her bed.

She stirred from sleep and saw him fully dressed, coat in hand. “You’re leaving?”

“I’m really sorry, but I have to—”

“It’s Saturday. You promised we’d spend the day together.”

“I know, but—”

“You promised we’d spend last weekend together. You promised you’d call me last week. You promise a lot of things, John.”

“I know, it’s just—”

“Leave then,” she said with as much venom as one can manage first thing in the morning. “And don’t bother coming back. I mean it.”

It really did nothing to improve his mood when he arrived back at Baker Street to find Sherlock in the shower.

In agitation he shouted through the door, “Well? You said it was urgent!”

“Right,” came Sherlock’s voice, muffled by the water. “Out in a minute.”

Fuming, John went to sit in his chair. He grabbed the morning’s newspaper and read impatiently. More than a few minutes later Sherlock was walking into the living room, overdressed in a smart suit as usual, and towelling off his hair.

John stood and crossed his arms over his chest. “Well?”

Sherlock tossed the towel onto the couch. His curls, which had been wanting cutting for a while now, stuck out alarmingly and John stifled a grin. He forgot for a second that he was angry with his flatmate, who looked at the moment like a big, wet, formally dressed sheepdog. But it really was only a second because Sherlock plucked a rolled measuring tape off the table and held it out toward him.

“I need you to hold this end.”

John froze. Sherlock, however, wasted no time in grasping John’s upper arms and walking him backward to a specific spot by the door. He placed the end of the tape measure into his hand, and
tugged lightly to check that John, momentarily catatonic, had a grip on it.

As Sherlock moved away, unrolling the tape, John finally choked out, “Emily broke up with me for this.”

“Why would she do that?” Sherlock asked, preoccupied by typing the measurement into his phone.

John glared. “Oh I don’t know, why would someone dump a boyfriend if he leaves her in bed to go help his mad flatmate measure the living room? It was probably just a whim.”

“You would do better,” Sherlock said, moving several inches to his left, and scrutinising the new measurement, “to date girls who aren’t so flighty.”

“And on the day the pot called the kettle black,” John mumbled.

“What was that?”

“There had better be some damn crucial information you’re getting from these measurements,” John said louder, watching Sherlock walk over the coffee table to stand on the other side of the room.

“Crucial, yes crucial,” Sherlock muttered dismissively, using his phone again to record the numbers. “Keep your arm still.”

John raised his eyes to the ceiling and let out a breath. Patience, patience. He waited while Sherlock darted around the room with his end of the tape. Finally, Sherlock dropped it and jumped across to his laptop. John re-rolled the tape and had just enough time to place it back on the table when Sherlock shouted, “YES! That’s it!”

He typed furiously for a few moments and John went back to his armchair.

“Those idiots!” Sherlock sneered.

“Solved another one for Scotland Yard then?” John asked, waiting for what he hoped would be a satisfactory explanation for the abrupt end to his latest relationship. “Another threat to the citizens of London to be eliminated?”

“Should have been eliminated,” Sherlock corrected. “If the case hadn’t been handled by a bunch of incompetent amateurs.” He shut his laptop and re-buttoned his suit jacket as he stood. “It seems the standards for Scotland Yard were even lower than they are today, if that’s possible. I suppose in those days virtually anyone could walk in and say, ‘Good morrow old chaps, by-the-by I fancy I’ll be a detective today!’”

John, who’d got lost at ‘should have been,’ was rather taken aback by Sherlock’s sudden impression of god knows what era he was going for.

“What on earth are you on about?” John asked, marvelling at his raving flatmate. And then more forcefully, “And what do you mean ‘should have been’?”

“The infamous Frederick Davis case, 1902. Triple homicide: wife and children. He was acquitted due to lack of evidence. Apparently the inspectors handling the case were about eight years old; at least that seems to be the only probable explanation for such shoddy detective work.”

John said slowly, controlling his voice, “Do you mean that you called me away from Emily’s this morning to hold a tape measure for you in order to solve a case from 1902?”
“Yes, that’s right,” Sherlock said dropping down into his chair across from John. “When London’s present criminals are being especially boring I like to revisit ones from the past.”

John must have looked noticeably pained because Sherlock added, “The importance of history to my work cannot be overestimated. Crimes are rarely original. If I know the antecedent case then I can solve the repeat that much faster.”

“Do you actually have any idea what the word ‘urgent’ means?”

Sherlock looked at him suspiciously. “It means, ‘requiring immediate action or attention.’ Why do you ask?”

John had no words.

*

That evening Sherlock was sulking. The satisfaction of proving the ruling on the Davis case wrong had, like all of Sherlock’s previous successes, been short-lived.


John knew he should ignore it. He knew from experience that any words at this point would provoke an attack. However, he really wasn’t in a pacifying mood. The break up with Emily was still fresh from the morning, and the reason she’d dumped him was petulantly stomping around the flat trying to make John as miserable as he was. So a fight had sounded pretty good right about then.

“My father used to say ‘only boring people get bored,’” John hazarded, kamikaze style.

Sherlock didn’t miss a beat. “Your father was an idiot.”

“Oh, really?” John shot back, standing up from his chair to let his anger radiate further.

Sherlock stopped pacing. His eyes locked with John’s across the living room and John pushed forward recklessly.

“Or maybe my father was right. You have that massive intellect and you can’t think of anything to do with your time? Why don’t you go out and win the Nobel Prize, or break the boundaries of human knowledge with string theory? I don’t know; why don’t you invent a bloody cure for cancer? There must be a better use of your talents than lying around here and whinging at me all the time. … You total prat,” he added for emphasis.

Sherlock’s response was amused. “John, while as usual your opinion of me is very flattering, you forget that though I may be godlike in many ways, I am not actually omnipotent. My mind’s capacity, while still much greater than yours, is in fact limited. I only use that capacity for information which is actually important. Yes, actually important, don’t give me that look.”

John raised his eyes to the ceiling. On the one hand he wasn’t aware of giving Sherlock any look, but on the other hand his mad flatmate had just blatantly deemed cancer research unimportant.

Sherlock continued, “I decided a long time ago that I would be the best detective in the world. I know nothing of string theory or cancer research, and if I learned it I’d have to delete things that I need in order to be the world’s best detective. So the answer is no.”

“Oh, Sherlock,” John sarcastically repented, shrugging his shoulders and lifting his hands. “Forget my suggestions then. I’m just saying that even people with average intelligence find ways to entertain
themselves. Since yours is slightly above average”—Sherlock made a strangled noise—“I figured you’d be able to think of something—”

Sherlock crossed the room in a few strides and stopped directly in front of John, towering over him and glaring. Sherlock, John had understood from the day they’d met, had little concept of personal space and often stood inappropriately close for an Englishman. But John, used to this, met Sherlock’s gaze easily and held his ground.

“The average mind is far more simply placated than mine,” Sherlock said, voice dangerously low. “Of course it’s easier for normal people to entertain themselves; they’re like children.”

“So you wouldn’t be interested in a children’s game like Cluedo then?” John said, delighted in having seized this opportunity. “Since it’s much too infantile for a mind like yours.”

Sherlock hesitated, crossing his arms over his chest. “You said you’d never play it with me again.”

“I might be willing to reconsider.”

John felt distinctly satisfied as Sherlock crossed to the game cupboard. There may be only one consulting detective in the world, but he was fairly certain there was also only one person who could handle him.

And only a little while later, as he watched Sherlock’s eyes flicking over the game board with almost as much concentration as he gave a real crime scene, John smiled down at his cards, all thoughts of Emily absent from his mind.
John waded back to consciousness after the deepest sleep he’d had in months. He pried his eyes open and slowly registered his surroundings. Green walls, dark wood… He rolled onto his back. Ceiling fan… water damage… Not his and Mary’s bedroom… Not Kensington… Baker Street. John exhaled remembering yesterday’s events. There was no more Mary.

No more Mary, John repeated. He tried to gauge how this made him feel. Relieved? Depressed? Angry? Liberated? He couldn’t tell. Maybe it was too early in the morning. He dragged his watch off the night table and blinked at it. 11:14. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept so late. 11:14, Sunday, October eighteenth. Day One of New Life. Again he waited for an appropriate emotional response: Optimistic? Miserable? His emotions department sent him back a large question mark, and nothing else. He resolved to check back later.

After brushing his teeth in a kind of dazed, overslept way in the half bath across from his bedroom, he made his way down the stairs and found the flat empty. He checked his phone, no messages. He didn’t have the energy to guess where Sherlock had gone or what he was up to. He decided a shower would clear the fog from his mind. He had only just finished dressing afterward, and was putting the kettle on, when Mrs. Hudson burst through the door.

Years ago, when they’d first moved in, John had tried to impress upon her the importance of privacy. But each time she would nod emphatically and insist that she quite agreed, and then continue to walk in and out of 221B unannounced. John had given up after some time, simply glad to have his bedroom on the second floor.

“Oh John!” Mrs. Hudson cried, walking up to him and clutching both of his hands in hers. “Sherlock told me you’ve moved back. I’m so sorry to hear you and Mary have separated!”

“Well,” John gave her hands an apologetic squeeze before extracting them from his own and stepping back, “it’s for the best…”

“But you were so happy! It was such a beautiful wedding,” Mrs. Hudson said tearfully. “What happened? Do you want to talk about it? You can tell me everything. You must want to talk to someone about it.”

John did not want to talk about it, but he also knew that Mrs. Hudson wouldn’t rest until she’d wrung it out of him and then properly consoled him. So John sighed and said, “I killed her cats.”

Mrs. Hudson looked at him, blank with shock.

“I was angry,” John said by way of explanation.

“John!” Mrs. Hudson breathed. “That temper of yours! You really ought to see someone about it. My friend Rose goes in for anger management groups; I could ask her for the information if you want. She’s been going every week since she ran her husband down with the car. He’s all right now, thank god, but—”

“Mrs. Hudson,” John cut in.

“Yes, dear?”

“You talked to Sherlock this morning?”
“I met him on the stairs on his way out. He was in a hurry as usual.”

“Did he say where he was going?”

“I believe he said Switzerland.”

“Switzerland?”

“Probably some new case,” she shrugged.

“Right,” John said flatly.

“If you’d like I can sit with you a while.”

“No, no,” John said quickly. “It’s fine. I have a lot to do here.” He gestured to the disaster zone currently substituting for a living room.

“Well, I suppose I’d better leave you to it,” Mrs. Hudson said reluctantly. “Don’t worry about Mary,” she added. “She’ll come round. But in the meantime I’m glad to have you back. Especially if you can do something about this mess.”

John sat down heavily in his armchair after she’d gone.

“Hi John, I’ve got this new case in Switzerland, would you like to come with me?” John said to the empty seat across from him.

“Why yes, Sherlock, that’s just the thing I need right now. It’ll be a great distraction from my impending divorce.” John glared at the empty chair. “It’s so kind of you to not completely forget about me at a time like this.”

He knew he could text Sherlock, but if Sherlock couldn’t be bothered to let him know he was leaving, then John was not going to bother texting him to ask when he’d be back.

John looked at the daunting mess around him and decided, *fuck it*. Sherlock was not going to ponce off to Switzerland and expect John to spend the time cleaning the flat while he was away. On the other hand, the mess was grating enough on John’s military sense of cleanliness that he knew he wouldn’t be able to ignore it. Solution? Simple enough; he’d hire a cleaning service with Sherlock’s money.

John logged into Sherlock’s bank account, as he’d regularly done when they’d lived together, and checked the situation. Not good. He’d have to find all the cheques Sherlock had acquired, and clearly not deposited, in the past year and a half.

The sun was setting by the time he’d found enough cheques to assume there might be only one or two still missing. Considering he’d turned the place upside down looking, he was satisfied with his results. He’d found multiple cheques being used as bookmarks, some among the piles of newspapers, two between the couch cushions, one under the rug, one in the spice cabinet, and one stuck beneath a bag of fingers in the crisper in the fridge. The amount written on the cheque from the spice cabinet made John’s eyebrows shoot up under his hair. Sherlock must have put it in the cabinet for safekeeping. With the parsley and thyme. John shook his head. Sherlock was absolutely hopeless.

*  

The next morning John deposited all the cheques before work. And after work, as he was walking out through the large, clear doors at the entrance to the hospital, he was hailed by Mycroft’s pretty
“Get in,” the woman whose name was not Anthea said, opening the door of the limousine.

“Oh, I’ve missed this,” John sneered, but ducked into the back anyway.

She didn’t respond.

John looked out the tinted window at the passing streets and allowed himself to acknowledge that his remark may not have been entirely sarcastic. Underneath his principal annoyance at being shanghaied, he found the smallest amount of pleasure in the familiarity of the situation. This was life at Baker Street; it wouldn’t be complete without routine kidnappings by Mycroft’s lackeys.

Mycroft, he was told as he stepped out of the limo in front of the Diogenes Club, was waiting for him in a private room. John quietly made his way there. Once he’d safely closed the door behind him he turned toward Mycroft Holmes, who was sitting in an armchair reading a newspaper, one leg crossed over the other. Hair: immaculately combed. Suit: expensive.

“So, is this something that couldn’t have been resolved with a phone call? Or have you just missed me?” John asked. He remained standing with his arms folded.

“I’m aware this attitude of yours is merely compensation for the fact that you have no power in this dynamic,” Mycroft said, folding the newspaper and placing it on the side table. “But can we skip it this time, in favour of discussing something more important?”

John glowered. “Ok, how about Britain’s oil interests in the Middle East? How’s that going?”

Mycroft sighed audibly. “So we’re not skipping it then.” He pulled a manila envelope out from underneath the newspaper on the table and held it out toward John. “Kindly have a look at this.”

John uncrossed his arms reluctantly. He walked over to Mycroft, took the envelope, and dropped down into the chair across from him.

“His name is Carl Reeves,” Mycroft said as John drew out the photograph and criminal record. The guy was big, six-three according to the mugshot, and bulky, a typical strong-arm type. His head was shaved and he had a tattoo on his neck of playing cards: Two aces, diamonds and spades.

“He’s an assassin,” Mycroft was saying. “He had a successful career being paid to kill various criminals and gang leaders by various criminals and gang leaders.”


“He was arrested ten years ago in connection with a case Sherlock was able to assist Scotland Yard with. Reeves wasn’t the man they were looking for, more like a smaller fish caught in the net with the larger one. He was sentenced to life in prison but it appears an interested party has been able to negotiate parole for him.”

“An interested party?” John asked, looking up from the photograph.

“I’m not at liberty to divulge names or details. I’ll just say that a certain organisation with some political influence has a job they want him for.”

“And what, he’s the only hitman in England?”
“He’s the best.”

John wondered if Mary would have been put out to hear this. He looked at the picture of Reeves again. The man didn’t look particularly stealthy or clever. He looked like a bouncer.

“This job he’s supposed to do; is it to ‘rub out’ Sherlock?”

Mycroft’s lips twitched to something more grimace than grin. “This conversation will be less unpleasant if you dispense with Hollywood gangster terminology. No. According to our information his target will be a prominent drug dealer who’s in town for a few weeks.”

“And you’re worried he’s going to whack Sherlock”—Mycroft closed his eyes—“as a side-errand while he’s out. A nice revenge treat for himself after ten years in prison with only Sherlock to thank for it.”

“Precisely.”

“You’ve warned Sherlock about this?”

“I sent him a text.”

“And I’m here then,” John said, tossing the documents onto the coffee table in front of him, “because you really did miss me.”

Mycroft looked up sharply and said, “You’re here because we both know that while Sherlock is meticulous about his cases he tends to be neglectful if not downright oblivious when it comes to his own health and safety.”

John lowered his eyes.

“So, you will memorise this photograph,” Mycroft continued sternly, “and you will be vigilant until I tell you otherwise. Now that you’re back at Baker Street you’re in a better position to watch for him.”

John didn’t bother wondering how Mycroft already knew he’d moved back. He searched Mycroft’s expression for any judgment about his marriage having gone up in flames, but Mycroft’s grey eyes were as icy and stoic as ever. There was probably no one he knew who cared less about his relationship with Mary than Mycroft Holmes. It was refreshing.

“Yeah, all right,” John said, taking the envelope and standing.

“He’ll be released tomorrow.”

“Well, Sherlock’s in Switzerland at the moment, so there’s no danger there.” John turned to leave.

“One more thing.”

John turned back and Mycroft looked at him hard. “If you find Carl Reeves within shooting distance of Sherlock… shoot him. You have permission from the British government to shoot to kill.”

John raised his eyebrows, startled. “What if he hasn’t got a weapon?”

“If he comes near Sherlock it won’t be by coincidence,” Mycroft said evenly.

John held Mycroft’s freezing gaze.
“It might not happen. But in any case you should know that Reeves has murdered almost a hundred people, both criminal and innocent, and would continue to do so. He’s not a person to trouble one’s conscience over.”

John nodded grimly to show Mycroft he understood.

As he walked back through the stuffy, silent Diogenes Club John thought about how satisfying it would be to bring in an air horn and shock those white toupees right off.
Ireland

When John arrived home from his meeting with Mycroft he tripped over an ice skate and fell forward into a stack of *Condensed Matter Physics* journals. The journals toppled into a pile of *Guns and Ammo* magazines, and it was as they all slid down around him that John decided to take a holiday.

He felt overwhelmed by the mess in the flat, and he hadn’t had a break from his routine at the surgery in ages. He and Mary hadn’t even taken a honeymoon. They’d tentatively planned it for the winter following their wedding, but then Mary had turned out to be an assassin and shot Sherlock, and booking a Caribbean bungalow had somehow become less appealing than it had originally been.

But now, he could take a week off. Why not? He would go somewhere with nice scenery to gain some perspective. He needed a reminder that the world was still a beautiful place—that the timeless perfection of nature endured unaffected by such petty human quibbles as failed marriages and assassins and difficult friendships. Yes, a holiday would do him a lot of good. And it certainly wouldn’t hurt to throw Sherlock for a loop for once, by being the one to disappear wordlessly. The thought of giving Sherlock a taste of his own medicine was not the primary reason for John’s decision, but it really didn’t deter him either.

So John set about calling his colleagues, asking them to cover his appointments while he was away. They were more than happy to oblige, considering John had spent the past year picking up as many of their unwanted shifts as he could in favour of spending the time at home.

His schedule cleared for the week, he booked a room at a quaint inn in Ireland close to the internationally renowned Cliffs of Moher. He’d never been, and figured that with October being the off-season for tourism he’d be able to enjoy the views undisturbed by swarms of vacationing families.

The last thing to be done was to arrange the cleaning for while he was away. He paid for a day’s service with Sherlock’s money, and went downstairs to have a cup of tea with Mrs. Hudson. She promised to oversee the cleaning (partly to keep an eye on Sherlock’s expensive equipment, but also to prevent anyone from opening the fridge and inadvertently buying themselves years’ worth of therapy). He left strict instructions with Mrs. Hudson that all newspapers and journals should be recycled (they were all online in the archives. Sherlock didn’t need to keep everything in hard copy like a bloody hoarder from the 19th century), anything broken should be tossed, the floors and kitchen should be scrubbed spotless, and absolutely everything should be dusted.

Mrs. Hudson’s eyes widened anxiously at this last order. “Oh, but Sherlock won’t like that at all!”

“No, but Sherlock won’t like that at all!”

She grinned conspiratorially. “It really is wonderful to have you back, John.”

* 

The next evening John was in Ireland, standing on a path at the edge of the famous, western-facing Cliffs of Moher looking out at the most spectacular sunset he may have ever seen. The stunning view accomplished everything he’d hoped it would. London and liars seemed far away and unimportant as he watched the sun sink into the water and light the clouds like fire. There were bigger, more incomprehensible things in the world than any of his current problems. He allowed this understanding to wash over him, and he felt at peace.
John had taken to running along the cliffs each day on the virtually empty paths. He hadn’t run in a long time, but he was in better shape now, thanks to weekly training with the rugby team and the extra time spent at the gym avoiding Mary. Because of this, and because his army training had taught him to ignore physical fatigue, he’d been able to run five miles on his first day out.

The physical exertion combined with the breath-taking scenery gave John a natural high which worked wonders on his nerves. He’d been so achingly stressed in the final weeks with Mary; now he felt the tension leaving his body. He imagined his negative feelings falling away from him as he ran, and he came back to the hotel each day feeling lighter than ever. He used to run to keep in training, back in his university rugby days, and he liked the feeling of getting back to it.

It was late in the afternoon on the third day of John’s holiday when he was coming back along the cliffs, having finally slowed to a walk. The day was cool and clear and the sun, low in the sky, cast long shadows.

He thought about Sherlock as he walked the half-mile back toward the car park. He wondered if Sherlock had returned from Switzerland yet, and tried to imagine his reaction upon finding the flat sparkling clean and himself missing. He’d be furious about the flat, of course, and it wouldn’t take him long to discover where John had gone. Being flatmates with the world’s only consulting detective meant little opportunity for secrecy.

John knew Sherlock wouldn’t be bothered by his absence, considering he’d apparently already forgotten John had moved back in, having left the next morning without a word. John guessed he could stay in Ireland for a month and return to find Sherlock surprised to discover he’d been away at all.

But that was Sherlock’s way. Other people moved around him like shadows, only coming into sharp focus when they figured centrally in a case. They immediately faded back into grey background when their relevance to his work ceased.

John was satisfied with his decision to leave. Things had changed since they’d been flatmates the first time around, and he was determined to prove that despite having left Mary, Sherlock would not be the only thing in his life now. He was not a shadow on the periphery of Sherlock’s awareness waiting to be called into focus. He was an independent person, capable of doing and enjoying things that had nothing at all to do with Sherlock. And if Sherlock thought John was so enamoured with him that he’d just be sitting on the front step of 221B waiting for him to come home—

John’s train of thought was instantly derailed as he came upon the visitor centre and saw Sherlock sitting on the steps.

The visitor centre was closed, and Sherlock had been sitting on the steps for about half an hour. He’d been browsing through international news sites on his phone looking for murders and possible connections between them. Serial killers were his favourite challenges and he was always hoping to come across one. But unfortunately the news that day was as dull as ever, so Sherlock had downloaded a Sudoku app out of curiosity. He proceeded to obliterate it by completing all of the levels within minutes. He had just decided Sudoku was not at all worth the hype when he spotted John coming up the path. He put his phone away and waited for John to reach him.

When John stopped in front of him, Sherlock opened his mouth to speak, but was momentarily taken aback by what he saw.
John was wearing trainers, dark grey jogging bottoms and a navy hoodie, which was unzipped, revealing a white Barts t-shirt underneath. The circles under his eyes had been erased by several nights of good rest, and his blond hair was glowing bright in the low sunlight. In a flash Sherlock saw him as he must have looked ten years ago, a university student in rugby training wear, before Afghanistan, before him, and before Mary.

“Sherlock?” John asked incredulously. “What are you doing here?”

“It was absurdly easy to find you,” Sherlock drawled, regaining his nonchalance. “It’s almost as if you weren’t even trying to make it interesting for me.”

John pinched the bridge of his nose: a signal Sherlock had learned meant John was irritated with him.

“I wasn’t trying to make it interesting for you. This is my holiday, Sherlock, not a puzzle for you to solve. Believe it or not, some things have nothing to do with you at all.”

John’s flush from his run deepened and Sherlock deduced he hadn't planned on saying that last sentence, and possibly regretted it. Interesting.

“If it wasn’t meant to be a puzzle for me, why didn’t you tell me you were leaving?” Sherlock asked, looking up at John from his seat on the stairs.

John shrugged. “I didn’t think it was important. How was Switzerland, by the way?”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “You’re angry.”

“No, I’m not angry,” John said, crossing his arms over his chest.

He was angry. Even if Sherlock wasn’t an observational genius, he knew John too well to miss the signals. What had changed? He’d seen John's expression from a distance when John had first spotted him. John had smiled; he'd been pleased to see him, as Sherlock had predicted he would be. What had happened in the past minute to change his mood? Though he knew psychology to be one of the more inexact sciences, he estimated that John’s change of emotion might have something to do with Switzerland.

Sherlock sighed as if such explanations were physically painful for him. “You were asleep when I left and I knew if I woke you you’d want to come with me. I knew Mrs. Hudson would fill you in later.”

“So?”

“…So what?”

“So what if I had wanted to come with you? I always come with you on cases.”

Sherlock shook his head. “You couldn’t have come this time. It was a matter involving the Credit Suisse Bank and the client insisted upon the strictest confidentiality.”

“Right,” John said, deflating. “I get it.”

“What?” Sherlock asked, again not following the change of mood.

“You don’t trust me,” John said simply, shrugging his shoulders.

Sherlock’s eyes widened and he propelled himself off the steps so that he was standing in front of John, glaring into his eyes. John had blue eyes. Dark, deep blue eyes, constant and steady as the
ocean with just as much potential for storm.

“That’s not true,” Sherlock said, unblinking.

“It is true.” John held his ground. “You told me yourself.”

Sherlock took a few seconds to scan his record of conversations with John. He concluded with certainty, “I never said that.”

John looked annoyed, and when he spoke his tone confirmed Sherlock’s appraisal. “Your suicide holiday? Remember? You came back to London and told me the only reason I had to spend two years thinking you were dead was because you thought I’d say something ‘indiscreet.’”

Sherlock’s mouth parted in surprise. He had not anticipated this turn in the conversation. Although it was hardly a pleasant topic, Sherlock couldn't help feeling a twinge of pleasure at receiving further evidence that John was one of the few people he knew well who could continually surprise him.

John continued, “It wasn’t a great moment for me when you told me that out of everyone you know, including twenty-five homeless people, I’m the one you trust the least. It took me a while to get used to the idea, but I got it. I get it.”

Sherlock flinched inwardly but kept his face impassive. There was no one better at suppressing emotion. With twenty-three years of practice it came to him naturally; no thought, no effort required.

“I do trust you,” Sherlock said, his voice deep with a sincerity he didn’t consciously have to summon. It was the truth, but he knew John wouldn't believe him. Not this time.

John scoffed, “I suffered for two years because you didn’t even trust me enough not to go running to the press to tell them the suicide was fake—or whatever it was you imagined I’d do if you contacted me. If you couldn’t trust me with a secret like ‘don’t tell people I’m alive,’ then I wouldn’t expect you to trust me with much of anything.”

Sherlock may have been an Olympic champion at concealing emotions, but John was not. Open, helplessly readable John's every emotion moved across his face in a regular parade of thoughts and feelings. John was looking away but Sherlock saw the pain in his expression plainly.


“No, sorry, look, just forget it,” John said, backing away. “I’m going for a walk, we can talk later.”

“You just came back from a walk,” Sherlock had to state for the sake of logic.

“I’ll take another one then,” John said, already walking away.

Sherlock stood still for a moment. It was annoying that John was still angry about the suicide hoax. He thought they had settled that a long time ago. Sherlock had tricked John into forgiving him in a bomb Tube car, hadn’t he? So why had John continued to think about it? He wasn’t supposed to continue to think about it.

Because the truth was, Sherlock had lied. And he had really hoped he’d never have to explain his actual reason for allowing John to think he was dead.

At the time, he’d counted on John’s anger to distract him from the weakness of his explanation for why he hadn’t contacted him: ‘I thought you’d say something indiscreet.’ A pathetically weak
excuse considering Sherlock trusted John with his life; of course he would have trusted him with a secret about his fake death. But he’d taken the risk, and it had worked. John’s anger had been blinding, and he hadn’t questioned Sherlock further about it.

But now John was walking away from him, believing Sherlock didn’t trust him at all, and that wouldn’t do. Sherlock quickly ran through the options in his mind and realised the truth was going to be the only workable solution. And John really wasn’t going to like it.

* 

John walked briskly down the path. The wind had picked up and it felt good against his face. He regretted his outburst. If he was going to confront Sherlock about trust issues he’d wanted to do it when he was better prepared. He’d said all the wrong things and he just needed a moment alone to think about how to handle the situation.

Unfortunately for this plan, John heard fast footsteps coming up behind him and he’d barely had a moment to groan inwardly before a hand was on his upper arm arresting his movement and spinning him around.

“I put considerable effort into persuading my client to allow you to work with me in Switzerland, but he wouldn’t have it and in the end the case was too interesting to pass up,” Sherlock insisted.

“Right, fine,” John said and Sherlock’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

The two of them presented quite a picture, standing alone on a path at the edge of the cliffs, John in his jogging bottoms and Sherlock in his dramatic Belstaff coat, glaring daggers at each other.

“It’s true,” Sherlock said in that deep, inimitable voice. It resonated to John’s core; it always had. Sherlock tightened his grip on John’s arm. John knew the warning signs, but he didn’t care. He’d given Sherlock the option to avoid the argument. As far as John was concerned, by following him Sherlock waived any right to blame him for whatever happened next. He briefly wondered if either of them would survive whatever was about to happen next.

“You don’t need to lie to placate me,” John shot back, jerking his arm out of Sherlock’s grasp. “They’re your cases; you decide how to handle them. It’s nothing.”

“What I said just now is true.” Sherlock’s low voice was barely a step from a growl. “I did want you to come with me. The other thing wasn’t true.”

“What other thing?”

“When I came back to London and I said I didn’t contact you because I thought you’d say something indiscreet.”

John felt his heart pound in his chest and it was a moment before he responded. “What?”

Sherlock gritted his teeth. “I won’t repeat it.”

“No, I think you damn well better repeat that, Sherlock,” John said, voice shaking. “Now, again, WHAT?”

“I LIED,” Sherlock raised his voice. “There was a different reason why I didn’t contact you.”

“And what,” John ground out the words, “reason was that?”
“It was an experiment,” Sherlock said with abrupt dismissiveness.

“An experiment,” John repeated, making an effort to control his voice.

“Yes. I needed you to believe the suicide in the beginning because it was the only way anyone else would believe it. I had to be dead to disappear. And your—your grief was what made it convincing. It’s true I could have contacted you later, after a few months perhaps. I didn’t because I couldn’t pass up the perfect opportunity for the experiment that presented itself. If you continued to believe I was dead I could observe how you would do without me,” Sherlock explained coolly.

“How I’d do without you,” John echoed, horrified.


“Like a RAT in a CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT,” John shouted. “Just like Dartmoor, right? You wanted to torture me and watch how I’d do?”

Sherlock ignored him. “My hypothesis was that you’d be better off without me—I mean obviously you’d be devastated at first, but, you know, better off in the long run, and I had to know—”

“YOUR HYPOTHESIS?” The rising wind ripped the words from John’s mouth.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Are you really going to repeat everything I say? Because this could be a much shorter exchange if—”

“You fucking bastard,” John seethed, launching forward and seizing the lapels of Sherlock’s coat.

Sherlock grabbed fistfuls of John’s hoodie in return and shook him once hard. “Did you hear what I said? I did it for you, you idiot,” he said, eyes flashing.

“Go ahead and wait for me to thank you,” John snarled.

“You don’t understand anything—”

“I understand you’re a fucking prick—”

“Then why don’t you leave?” Sherlock hissed, close enough John could feel the warmth of his breath on his face. “Or am I the closest thing you have to feeling important?”

And, in a déjà vu moment from a restaurant two years ago, John lunged at Sherlock, sending them both crashing to the ground.
The Cliffs

Sherlock fell backward into the grass on the cliff-side of the path and John landed on top of him, hands at his collar. Sherlock, having trained in boxing and judo, had extensive experience with hand-to-hand fighting and lighting fast reflexes. The second they hit the ground he rolled, flipping them over so that John lay on his back beneath him. John, however, had earned a reputation among his army regiment as the soldier to beat in the extracurricular wrestling matches. He was used to wrestling people taller than him, and instinctually he knew what to do.

Sherlock’s grip was loose and John was able to spin around underneath him so that he was on his stomach. Before Sherlock could put enough pressure on him, John pulled his knees under him, and pushed up and back against Sherlock, throwing him off and standing.

John turned just in time to see Sherlock leap to his feet. He rushed at Sherlock but the detective was already whipping off his coat. He threw it in John’s face and used his momentary blindness to dive into his waist, tackling him to the ground. Apparently following John’s lead, because John hadn’t hit him, Sherlock didn’t hit John either, but instead braced his forearm across John’s collarbone, pinning him there.

“Dirty trick, Sherlock,” John hissed.

“It worked.” Sherlock’s eyes were blazing.

This time he was lying fully spread over John, using his weight to prevent him from turning. But John wasn’t ready to give up yet. He wound one leg around Sherlock’s to bind it and found traction with his other shoe to use as a pivot point. (He was better dressed than Sherlock for an impromptu wrestling match. But on the other hand the detective rarely fought in anything less than ‘business casual,’ so the point was probably moot.) He grabbed Sherlock’s shoulder and with a surge of strength flipped them over.

On top of a coatless Sherlock now he grabbed the lapels of his suit jacket (perfectly tailored, as usual, though John was not in the mood to appreciate it). He lifted Sherlock’s shoulders up and shoved him back, hard, into the ground. In return Sherlock grabbed a fistful of John’s t-shirt and pulled him roughly sideways.

They went on for some time, each evaded manoeuvre only fuelling the frustration and desperate need to pin the other, to win.

John heard his own breath rough and heavy in his ears and was gratified to hear Sherlock panting from the effort as well. It seemed that John Watson, who would never hold a candle to Sherlock’s intellect, was a decent match for him physically.

They rolled over and over again, slamming each other into the ground, until finally Sherlock got John in a chokehold.

Sherlock was lying on his side, arm wrapped around John’s neck from behind. He grunted trying to control John’s flailing, which slowed after a moment, and Sherlock was alarmed when John suddenly went limp in his arms.

Sherlock instantly released his grip and John seized the opportunity, grabbing Sherlock’s right wrist with his left hand, kicking off the ground, flipping over, and straddling the stunned detective’s waist. No mistakes this time. Still holding Sherlock’s right wrist, he was able to pin the arm to the ground.
He caught Sherlock’s left forearm with his right hand and held it in firmly place. Sherlock glared at him viciously and John saw the colours in his eyes burn.

“Dirty trick, John,” he spat.

“It worked,” John returned.

Sherlock squirmed ineffectively, and John knew he’d won. He’d pinned army guys much bigger than him with this same hold and he knew it would work as well on his flatmate. Sherlock seemed to realise this and stopped struggling.

Breathing heavily, eyes locked together, neither one moved.

John tightened his grip on Sherlock’s wrist. His right wrist. That goddamn wrist. The one he reached for over and over in his dreams. The one he’d held on the street in front of Barts with his left hand, head spinning from shock and the realisation he couldn’t breathe, waiting for a pulse that never came…

Now the wrist was throbbing with the rapid beating of Sherlock’s heart; so full of life and energy he could feel it fluttering wildly against his palm. John sucked in a sharp breath at experiencing the sensation his brain had only simulated in dreaming—willing a heartbeat into veins that had been devastatingly still.

And then he remembered why there had been no pulse. Sherlock had cut it off himself to trick him. His anger flared. His hold, which had slackened slightly in surprise at the force of Sherlock’s pulse, retightened to a death grip. His dominant hand crushing Sherlock’s dominant wrist.

If it hurt, Sherlock gave no indication. He remained motionless and John watched as his eyes cooled and his breathing evened. The wind lifted his black curls back from forehead. He finally broke their eye contact by turning his head to the side.

“No, look at me,” John commanded, voice low.

Sherlock turned his head back but his gaze travelled above John’s head to the sky.

“Look at me,” John repeated, steady.

Sherlock blinked and when he opened his eyes they locked on John’s. John’s breath caught in his chest. Being the sole focus of Sherlock’s attention, on the few occasions it happened, was an unnerving experience. (Even when he had Sherlock on his back, immobilised in the grass, that incomparable bastard still managed to be intimidating.) To have all of Sherlock’s intellectual power concentrated on him at once—that magnificent mind, ceaselessly analysing and calculating at a dizzying pace—was a crushing sensation. But John persisted. He had Sherlock’s attention and he was going to use it.

* 

“No, look at me,” John commanded, voice low.

Sherlock snapped his head back to give John one of his severest glares, but stopped. The adrenaline from the fight subsiding, he’d regained enough peripheral awareness to notice his surroundings again. They had moved a considerable distance from the path and were now quite close to the edge of the cliff. (They would have been worryingly close if anyone’s mother had been there to worry about it.)
John’s head was bent over his and he was looking intensely into Sherlock’s face. He was still using a significant amount of pressure to hold him in place, though Sherlock had stopped resisting a while ago. John’s back was to the edge of the cliff, and behind him the sun was sinking into the water, leaving the sky scorched in its wake. It lit John’s hair, burning it red-gold.

“Look at me,” John repeated, steady.

Sherlock’s focus flicked from red to dark blue as it centred sharply on John’s eyes. They sparked with an electricity that Sherlock could almost feel running through John’s body where it was pressing heavily into him—heat in energy—and through his hands that were gripping Sherlock’s arms hard enough to bruise.

Sherlock remained still, eyes locked on John’s.

“You want to do experiments on me? Hm? You want to manipulate my life according to what you think is best for me?”

Sherlock guessed it was a rhetorical question and stayed silent. For a moment there was nothing but the sound of the wind rising off the cliffs and the sea below.

“You thought I’d do better without you?” John was not finished with rhetorical questions. "Find a nice wife and settle down to a nice quiet life. You become just a good pub story?"

The waves tumbled and crashed and Sherlock wondered if John was aware of how hard he was actually gripping his wrist.

“God, is that what you think of me? Is that what you think I want? In all this time have you not figured it out?”

Sherlock waited, curious.

“Do you really not know that I’m bloody insane?” John hissed. “I don’t want a normal life, Sherlock. What I want is to follow you straight up to the gates of Hell and die fighting whatever meets us there.”

Sherlock felt a wave of endorphins rush through his body. It was exactly what he’d needed to hear—what he’d wanted to be true but couldn’t believe was. John had proven his courage and tenacity time and time again, but somehow Sherlock had never quite believed it was possible he could have found someone who would—or not would but wanted to— But John was here, saying it now, the intensity of his stare boring into Sherlock’s eyes. And he knew it was true the same way he knew John. He wanted to smile. Because he felt the same. Exactly the same. They were two soldiers with an intolerance for peacetime; they were meaningless, purposeless, without the war.

In hindsight it was obvious. He’d been stupid, stupid. The experiment had been arranged under the assumption that its subject was sane. A colossal waste of time. Had Sherlock actually convinced himself that without his influence John would simply turn around and find happiness in a kind of average, married, domestic lifestyle? He’d let John go and he’d found an assassin.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock said, and he truly was. “I should have told you I was alive.” He really should have.

An average (read: substantially more boring) person probably would have proven his hypothesis correct, but god, how many times was he going to underestimate the man who currently had him pinned on his back in the grass? Sherlock could feel the tension in John’s muscles at the points where their bodies were in contact. John Watson. The blond-haired, blue-eyed doctor who’d looked
Sherlock’s demons in the eyes and eliminated them with a steady hand. There was no question about John’s place. It was at his side.

*Fuck*, Sherlock thought, even closing his eyes at the profundity of his mistake. John should have smashed his head into the ground a long time ago. It would have saved them the agony of a two-year experiment that Sherlock thought they both needed but realised now they never did.

Those two years had been nearly unbearable. As much as he knew it had hurt John, it hadn’t been any picnic for Sherlock either.

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The experiment was simple. John had to believe Sherlock was dead in requirement with the plan to defeat Moriarty. Sherlock would merely allow John to continue to think so. His hypothesis was that given enough time John would get over his infatuation with Sherlock’s work and crime-fighting lifestyle in favour of settling down to a quieter life. Because didn't Sherlock believe the worst about people, and didn't he like to push them toward it? Don’t we all do our best to fulfil our own pessimistic prophesies?

Of course he knew John liked danger, had needed it even, but how long could that possibly last? With a few years’ hiatus—without Sherlock monopolising his time—John would be able to clearly assess his other options. By the time Sherlock arrived back in London (assuming he wasn’t killed in action) John would have stabilised enough in his new life to make an informed decision about how much time he wanted to devote to Sherlock and his work and his danger. With enough distance and the option for a different life, surely John wouldn’t choose Sherlock. (Would he?)

The experiment was necessary, he believed, because John was too close to him. Sherlock had never been a constant presence in anyone’s life before. Based on his peers’ reaction to his presence for even short durations he concluded that prolonged exposure to him must be significantly detrimental. And he needed to know. He wanted evidence—measurements, exact numbers—that could tell him how adverse his presence in John’s life had been, and how much John’s life would be improved without it.

He thought of requesting regular reports from Mycroft on John’s progress, but then decided against it. He found the thought of reading that John was getting along effortlessly without him turned his stomach equally as the thought of reading that John was miserable. It would be best if he didn’t know. Because in either case he might not be able to stop himself from turning up in London to shake John by the shoulders. And that would ruin the whole experiment.

His work was brutal; the two years spent sabotaging Moriarty’s network were a torturous test of his physical endurance, which added strain to his mental stamina. And not having John with him only made things that much worse. He wasn’t lying when he returned and told John, “I’ve nearly been in contact so many times.”

Oddly, the temptation to contact John was strongest when Sherlock was cold. Huddled in an alleyway in Helsinki waiting for his target, eavesdropping on a fire escape in Moscow for hours waiting for one pertinent piece of information, tracking terrorists in Syria through freezing desert nights… In those coldest hours he went back to Baker Street in his mind palace. He opened the door and it was warm and John was there, moving around the kitchen in one of his jumpers, usually making tea.

Each time Sherlock entered it was clear that the warmth was emanating from John rather than the radiator, a mind palace defect perhaps, but the closer he moved toward John the warmer he felt, until he was standing directly in front of him and John would look up and the glow of his hair under the
kitchen light and the brightness of his expression were enough to illuminate even the darkest places Sherlock found himself during those two years.

Sometimes he started text messages. Because just the possibility of reaching across the void to the one pinpoint of light glowing so faintly and so far away in London—the potential for even an electronic connection—was enough to send a thrill down his spine and through to his fingertips. But he couldn’t. He needed to know if his hypothesis was correct.

So his instructions to Mycroft were tell him nothing of John barring serious illness or injury. Funny to think that if John had only come down with pneumonia, or gotten non-fatally stabbed, Sherlock would have been at his side as fast as he could get to an airport. Mission paused. Experiment cancelled. But John didn’t do either and Sherlock deleted all of the half-written messages he typed into his phone.

* 

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock said with unaffected expression. John felt the deep register of his voice resonate in his chest. “I should have told you I was alive.”

The sincerity in Sherlock’s artless words had an immediate impact on John. He felt his anger evaporating and the tension leaving his muscles. But still he hesitated. He was well acquainted with Sherlock’s talent as an actor. He searched his face for clues that the detective was pretending. But John knew that when Sherlock was acting it was usually in order to fake emotion: sympathy and smiles in exchange for information, distress in exchange for forgiveness, tears to sell a ruse. Sherlock’s total lack of emotional expression now suggested sincerity. No ticking bombs, no desperate overtures, just Sherlock on his back in the grass waiting for John’s response.

Of course John was aware of the probability that Sherlock was simply telling him what he wanted to hear so that John would let him up, but then John also knew he had to trust him. Nothing would work between them if he didn’t trust Sherlock. So, despite the number of times Sherlock had lied to him, tricked him, drugged him, etc. he knew that one more time, as always, he would have to accept Sherlock’s words unquestioningly. He had to believe in the core of himself, which was forever believing in Sherlock Holmes.

He wasn’t kidding about being insane: a March hare who needed his mad hatter.

John released his grip, and perhaps surprisingly Sherlock did not shove him off the cliff, or even shove him off his body, but instead remained unmoving on the ground as John rolled off of him and collapsed into an exhausted heap in the grass.

After a moment Sherlock sat up. His curls were hopelessly tousled.

“I didn’t—” Sherlock paused. “I wasn’t aware of the extent to which you would be affected by my absence.”

John looked at the sky. He hadn’t thought they would talk about this again. He’d forgiven Sherlock when he thought they were going to die and then when they hadn’t he’d done his best to put it behind him. But it had occurred to him—just a moment ago when they were doing their best to throttle each other—that a bit more discussion on the subject might be in order.

John shut his eyes and for an instant saw the inverted scattering of sunset light on the inside of his eyelids. Sherlock ‘wasn’t aware of the extent to which he would be affected by his absence?’ Hadn’t Sherlock considered how he would have felt if their situations had been reversed? He guessed not. The world’s only consulting detective was not known for his ability to empathise.
From where he was lying in the grass John turned his head to the side to give Sherlock a hard look, but it softened when he saw that the detective had drawn his knees to his chest and looped his arms around them. The posture, which John had often seen Sherlock adopt while thinking, was endearingly childlike for a tall man wearing an expensive suit.

He wasn’t aware of the extent to which John would be affected… Was it true then? Did Sherlock really not know? Was it possible he really didn’t realise…

“You really didn’t realise…? You didn’t…?” John trailed off as he became aware he was speaking out loud. He turned his head back to the sky.

“What?” Sherlock asked.

“I suppose you also weren’t aware that the way you did it… would have additional…” He couldn’t believe he was saying this. As soon as Sherlock had shown up in London he’d determined never to speak of it, never to think of it again. “Never mind,” he said abruptly.

But it was too late. Sherlock was officially curious. “Say it.”

John crossed his arms over his chest, angry with himself for having unconsciously started down this path. “It doesn’t matter. It’s stupid. You didn’t commit suicide; you didn’t die. It’s irrelevant now.”

“Say it,” Sherlock repeated. John knew better than anyone there was no deterring a curious consulting detective.

John groaned and sat up. He looked at Sherlock directly and said, “The way you did it, the way you ‘committed suicide,’ you made it seem like it was my fault.”

Sherlock furrowed his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

John gave a short laugh. “You really didn’t even consider it. It would have been such an inconsequential detail in your plan.”

Sherlock was clearly not enjoying being unaware of what John was talking about. John could have exploited this rare moment—holding information Sherlock didn’t have—as Sherlock would have done, but he was John, and he didn’t.

* 

John was looking at Sherlock earnestly as he said, “You called me. You called me from the roof of the building. People who are determined to kill themselves don’t call someone. They write a note, maybe, because a note is concrete. It’s final. A note can’t argue with you. The people who call someone when they’re about to commit suicide are usually people who don’t really want to do it; they want someone to talk them out of it.”

A cold feeling was seeping into Sherlock’s stomach as he realised where John was going with this.

John swallowed and looked away. “I thought you called me,” he said, directing his words out over the cliffs, “because you didn’t want to die, and you thought I could give you a good enough reason to live.”

The cold crept up and tightened across Sherlock’s chest. Of course that’s what it must have seemed like to John. He and Mycroft had structured it that way, hadn’t they? The plan had been for Sherlock to jump off the roof and the world (and John) would believe he did it because he felt worthless—his detective skills faked, the world against him, no reason to live. Newspaper headlines: Suicide of Fake
“I couldn’t,” John continued, still not looking at Sherlock. “I saw you on the roof and I froze. I couldn’t… You told me you were a fake and I tried to argue with you. That was one argument in our whole bloody time together that I needed to win, that I could have won… But you were on the roof and I couldn’t think… I said everything wrong. There wasn’t enough time. And you—” John looked over and for a moment there was an emotion in his eyes Sherlock didn’t recognise, but he blinked and it was gone. John looked away and shrugged. “And you jumped.”

The cold clenched around Sherlock’s heart and he looked down at the grass. Anywhere but John’s face would do at the moment.

“I hated myself for two years for not being able to save you.” He heard John take a breath. “I couldn’t stop thinking that the phone call was you asking me to do the same thing you had done for me…”

Sherlock snapped his head up. They had never discussed what John’s own situation had been in the weeks before they’d met. Sherlock had read it, of course: PTSD-related depression, increasing severity of suicidal thoughts. He’d read it along with all of the other information he’d initially catalogued about John, but he didn’t mention it—not when he relayed his deductions about him or any time later.

But of course John would see Sherlock’s call from the rooftop of Barts as a mirror of his own distress when they’d met in the lab. Except Sherlock had saved John and John hadn’t saved Sherlock. He couldn’t have. There was nothing he could have said. There was nothing he could have done. It was rigged. Sherlock was always going to jump. He was always going to die. John’s part in it had only been for show. But he hadn’t known that. In a flash of clarity Sherlock understood: In John’s mind Sherlock had been a good enough reason for him to live, but he hadn’t been a good enough reason for Sherlock to live.

Sherlock’s throat felt dry. Possibilities for sentences were sluggish about forming in his mind. Despicable emotions. They clouded his mind when he most needed to think clearly. What could he say? He hadn’t known any of this until now. He didn’t see things from other people’s perspectives. He’d never learned to because he’d never been interested. No one else’s perspective was as enlightened or interesting as his own, so why bother? But now, the consequence was looking at him vulnerably, with that familiar, open expression, explaining pain, the pain he’d caused.

“I suppose you have no idea how many nights I laid awake trying to think of what I should have said to you in that two-minute phone call,” John said. “How many arguments I put together… carefully constructed sentences, perfected word choice… Which words would have saved you? In what order?”

“John—” Sherlock started having absolutely no words to follow.

But John spoke immediately, “No, it doesn’t matter. That’s the point. That’s why I didn’t want to—was never going to say anything. Because it’s all so unbelievably stupid. You were never going to kill yourself.” John shook his head. “You didn’t need me to tell you anything. And now that I know I’m glad I didn’t say more, because I would have looked that much stupider.”

John looked away and something occurred to Sherlock.

“I wasn’t laughing at you,” he said, knowing this was the unquestioned answer John needed to hear. John looked back at him, waiting. A step in the right direction but it wasn’t enough. He’d already
apologised. Apologising again wouldn’t have any further effect. He needed to give John something in return for what he’d told him. It was the only way.

“I wasn’t laughing at you,” Sherlock repeated. “That phone call,” he said looking at John’s chest because it was easier than looking at his eyes, “it wasn’t just part of the trick. It was the only way I could say goodbye. I knew the mission I’d accepted would take years, and I didn’t know if I’d come back.” Sherlock cleared his throat. “It was—the phone call was—for me, the very least enjoyable part of the plan.” The hardest part. He hoped John would be able to infer the words he couldn’t make himself say. It was a real goodbye. His tears were for the sniper’s benefit, he’d been prepared to tell anyone who asked. No one had asked.

He risked a glance upward but John’s expression, for once, was unreadable.

“The mission was practically unmanageable, even for me,” Sherlock continued. “I didn’t want you worrying or waiting for me. I had hoped the results of my—I realise now—misguided experiment would include you finding a more pleasant way to spend those years than I did.”

There was a silence and Sherlock listened to the waves lapping at the cliffs below. The sky was a brilliant array of warm colours but nothing was more interesting than the person sitting in front of him, sitting cross-legged with an unzipped hoodie hanging loosely off of one shoulder and his hands slowly worrying some blades of grass he’d unconsciously ripped from the ground. He was looking out over the cliffs and Sherlock watched the profile of his face. John’s face had such soft features, his rounded nose and kind eyes; nothing sharp, nothing dramatic. Women probably liked him for his honest, youthfully handsome face. He seemed built to inspire trust, and Sherlock had done everything in his power to shatter it. Now he waited, one more time, as always, for his friend’s forgiveness.

“So we’ll add it to the list of your failed experiments then,” John said finally, and when he looked over Sherlock was startled to see what looked like mirth in his eyes. How could one human being, with such specific and sturdy shoulders and knees and hands, be so complicated? Wasn’t John just swearing furiously at him and knocking him to the ground? Wasn’t he just vulnerable, admitting how broken he’d been? Could he really be amused now? Sherlock had a much better understanding of corpses than he did of people.

Or perhaps it was just further evidence that John was indeed mad. Sherlock leapt to his feet and held out his hand. John took it, allowing Sherlock to help him to his feet.

“It’s true,” Sherlock said when they were facing each other, “you are a bit mad.”

John tilted his head down as he often did when he smiled. He chuckled and said, “You’re just getting this now? What other kind of person would spend time helping you pick an upset jar of eyeballs off the kitchen floor?”

“You must be absolutely raving,” Sherlock agreed with a quirk of his eyebrow. He turned to walk back toward where his coat had been tossed in the course of their skirmish. “Especially since you seem to be under the impression that I have enough failed experiments to comprise a list.”

“Right,” John said, following just behind him, “your experiments always go swimmingly. Like the time you turned the living room radioactive. Great leap of progress for science on that one.”

Sherlock swung his coat on over his shoulders. “That was one time.” He remembered the text he’d sent to John that evening: Stay at pub few more hours. Living room slightly radioactive. SH

“You do know that I let you win the fight just now,” Sherlock opted to change the subject as he
started back toward the path.

“Sure,” Jon said in a cavalier tone that Sherlock did not at all care for.

Sherlock bristled. “If we were boxing I would’ve beat you faster than you can string two thoughts together.”

“So you admit I beat you,” John said.

“I admit nothing. I’m just commenting that boxing is my preferred method of fighting.”

“Duly noted.”

They reached the car park and it occurred to Sherlock to mention, “Someone ransacked the flat while we were away.”

John stopped walking. “What?”

“It’s been scrubbed within an inch of its life,” Sherlock lamented. “It’s horrible. Absolutely no dust left. Not one speck.”

Sherlock looked back and John smiled as he resumed walking.

They drove off just as the last hues of colour were fading from the sky.
Nightmare

They stopped at a pub on the way back to the inn for food (for John although, amused, John watched Sherlock absently eat most of the chips off his plate while they talked). They stayed late, Sherlock filling him in on the details of the Switzerland case. And in the end when he revealed, with a flourish of surprisingly adept comedic timing, that it was in fact the butler who did it, John burst out laughing. He laughed genuinely enough that he was able to catch one of Sherlock’s rare, self-conscious smiles: hint of colour at his cheeks, eyes lowered bashfully.

John knew that before they’d met no one had ever considered Sherlock funny. Sarcastic, sure, but incapable of any joking, light-hearted humour. He knew this because the first few times John had laughed at something Sherlock said, his face had gone blank with surprise before eventually smiling sheepishly himself. Since then Sherlock had endeavoured to make other jokes with varying levels of success. Timing and audience were still an issue (John recalled with a shiver the, “Well, Mrs. Higgins if your husband had kept his head in the situation I’d be able to solve the problem much faster,” comment in reference to the recently decapitated Mr. Higgins, whose head inconveniently had not been present at the crime scene), but Sherlock had undoubtedly improved. John couldn’t help feeling a warm fondness for the consulting detective who, icy by default, nevertheless appeared to be pleased with himself if he could make John laugh.

John’s good humour lasted until they arrived back at the inn and he discovered Sherlock’s accommodation plan for the night.

“What do you mean you’re staying in my room tonight? It’s tiny. There’s only one bed!” John said, standing in the lobby, scandalised.

“You chose an inn that has a total of six rooms, all of which are full. What did you expect?”

“I expected to be staying here by myself. I expected a nice, peaceful holiday,” John said as Sherlock walked away from him toward the stairs.

Sherlock pulled a key from his pocket as they reached the door to the room. “Relax, I had them bring up a spare bed.”

He opened the door and John saw his relatively small room reduced by half with a portable bed crammed in.

“It’s small,” John said, eyeing it sceptically.

“Exactly, I also thought that you should take it.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” John backpedalled quickly.

“It’s logical. You’re shorter, so you can have the shorter bed.”

“I’m only a few inches shorter than you,” John muttered. The man thought he was a giant (no doubt a consequence of his ego). But in fact the detective was just six feet tall. People meeting him for the first time remarked that he was shorter than they expected, and John had not failed to notice that Sherlock was shorter than his brother. (He would remind the detective of this if he ever wanted a rematch of their fight today.)

John crossed his arms. ”How about this logic? This is my room, that’s my bed, and you are not supposed to be here.”
“Or, how about this?” Sherlock asked, swiftly removing his shoes, hopping onto John’s bed and sitting cross-legged—coat and all—on top of the freshly made bedclothes. “I’m here first.”

John had the briefest glimpse of what it must have been like to be Mycroft, and felt a sudden, bizarre pang of sympathy for the man.

“All right, Sherlock, I don’t care,” John said, feeling resignation sweep through him as he suddenly became aware of how tired he was.

“I knew you’d see the indisputable quality of my reasoning,” Sherlock said distractedly. He was looking around at the room. “God hotels are dismal places. You couldn’t have found one where they do more than pretend to hoover?” He wrinkled his nose at the carpet in an altogether spoilt fashion.

“This coming from the man who grows mould experiments in the kitchen sink,” John said, grabbing a clean t-shirt and his pyjama trousers.

“That is for the progress of science,” Sherlock replied. “There is nothing scientifically productive about poor hoovering.”

John shook his head. “Right, I’m having a shower.” But Sherlock probably didn’t hear him. He was already leaning over the side of the bed and pulling his laptop from his bag, probably to check the news for new murders.

The hot water felt wonderful as John washed away the dirt and sweat from the afternoon, pieces of grass sliding down the drain as he rinsed the shampoo from his hair. Rubbing soap across his body he felt the spots on his arms where Sherlock had gripped him during their fight, and the spot on his hip where he’d hit the ground. There was no doubt he would have bruises tomorrow.

When John finally lay down on the spare bed it was not as terrible as he’d imagined. He stretched his aching muscles. Sherlock rose from the bigger bed and paused. “You’re not going to take my bed while I’m gone?”

“No, Sherlock,” John muttered sleepily. “I’m not going to take my bed while you’re gone.”

Sherlock seemed satisfied by this, because he disappeared into the bathroom. Exhaustion hit John like a wave, and soon he was drifting toward sleep, lulled by the sound of the water from the shower.

He was briefly roused back to consciousness when Sherlock re-entered the room.

“John?” Sherlock said quietly from next bed.

“Hm?” he responded, half asleep.

“I know Hell doesn’t exist, but, erm, what you said before… It was—or, I wanted to…”

Eyes still closed John smiled. Sherlock’s fumbling was reserved only for attempts at sentiment.

“You’re welcome,” John said, saving Sherlock the trouble, and fell fast asleep.

* 

It was close to three-thirty in the morning when Sherlock’s eyes flew open. He had dozed off sitting up in bed with the laptop balanced on his legs. He estimated, considering the screensaver and battery level, that he’d been asleep for about an hour.

But he was awake now. Why? Sound. Movement. What was it? Rustle of sheets. John.
Sherlock shut the glaring screen and allowed his eyes to adjust to the dark. He sat up straighter to see John’s bed.

John had kicked the sheets off of his legs, lying on his back, upper body twisted in them. He moved again, violently tossing to his right, and flipping onto his back again.

Sherlock recognised it immediately. He’d known about John’s nightmares from the moment they’d met in the lab at Barts. He’d observed it. Tired, under-eye circles plus psychosomatic limp plus PTSD equals nightmares. But he’d cleared those up along with the limp. There had been no nightmares at Baker Street.

Not until after the pool.

Semtex, snipers. The first nightmare had been the next night after the confrontation with Moriarty. But Sherlock didn’t understand it. After Moriarty left John had been fine…

“I guess this means you didn’t get the milk, then?” John asked as they swung open the doors of the school pool and stepped out into the car park. Moriarty and his snipers were long gone. There was no sign he had been there at all.

Sherlock laughed and stopped and turned to face John. The cool night air intensified the heady rush coursing through him: endorphins flooding in the wake of adrenaline. God, he had almost shot the explosive vest, taking the building and everyone down in one rhapsodic wave of destruction. What fun. John’s flushed face mirrored Sherlock’s own high, and he wondered how he’d ever been satisfied doing this alone.

“No, I didn’t do that, no,” he admitted through a grin.

“It’s never going to be as simple as milk with you, is it?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Milk is boring.”

“That’s true.” John said, smiling. He turned his head to look at a point across the car park that Sherlock couldn’t see.

“Forgive me?” Sherlock asked, stuffing his hands into the front pockets of his trousers and posing two questions at once.

John was still looking away, preoccupied. “Always,” he said lightly.

Always? Sherlock didn’t know whether John meant it as a description: ‘I’m always forgiving you when you turn our kitchen into a biohazard, when you steal my laptop, and when you get us into a hostage situation in lieu of grocery shopping,’ or as a promise: ‘I will always forgive you,’ which caused him to feel a brief tightening in his chest. He didn’t have time to decide, because in the next moment John looked back at Sherlock, focusing brightly on his face and saying in a clearer, more present voice, “So what’s open at this hour?”

Sherlock blinked to refocus. “There’s a Chinese a few blocks from here…”

From Semtex to Szechuan in less than an hour. John was fine. Better than fine. He was running with the danger that kept his limp away and his hands steady.

So why was it that the next night, after John had gone to bed and Sherlock was awake doing
research, he heard John yell out from his bedroom upstairs?

Without thinking Sherlock dropped the soil sample he’d been holding and sprinted up the stairs. Thoughts of Moriarty and snipers flashed in his mind as he banged open the door to John’s bedroom.

John was in his bed, propped up on his elbows, breathing hard.

“Are you all right?” Sherlock demanded, palpable urgency in his voice. He scanned the room quickly. No sign of intrusion. Where was the bloody light switch? He fumbled for it against the wall, but stopped when John moved, sitting up fully into the light slanting through his bedroom window, running his hands through his hair.

“Yeah, I’m fine. It was just…” He exhaled heavily. The moon cast enough light for Sherlock to see traces of perspiration around his temples, lines of tension in his face. Nightmare. He let his hand drop away from the light switch.

Light, he knew, was supposed to scare away the monsters of the subconscious, but somehow he felt that John wouldn’t want light. Glaring, exposing, unforgiving light forcing the moment into reality. In the dark the scene could exist somewhere between waking and sleeping; a liminal space where words and actions have softer consequences.

“Nightmare,” John said curtly. He flicked his eyes up at Sherlock for a fraction of a second before looking back down at his sheets. Embarrassed. “Sorry if I woke you.”

“I was up.”

John nodded and looked toward the window. He was clearly still shaken. Sherlock hesitated, uncertain how to proceed. He could be callous, would be if it were anyone else. Can we reserve the shouting for real danger? He examined his flatmate. John’s breathing was still slightly rapid, though returning to normal. His hair was sticking out in odd places from the pillow, fair enough to look almost silver in the pale light. Callous wasn’t an option.

He looked at John’s chest. He was wearing a t-shirt, The Who, one of John’s favourites, faded and worn. He remembered the vest that had been strapped there last night. He remembered his own hands shaking as he undid the fastenings. He couldn’t pull it off fast enough. He’d actually yanked John’s shoulder hard enough to hurt as he ripped off the coat.

And what could he say now? John, what are you afraid of?

“Do you want to watch me use a density gradient column to compare soil samples?”

John looked over at him and smiled ruefully. “No, thanks, Sherlock. I’m fine. Have to get some sleep before my shift…”

Back downstairs Sherlock stretched out on the couch, soil research abandoned for the moment. It was the first nightmare, as far as Sherlock could deduce (and that was pretty far) that John had had since moving to Baker Street. John’s nightmares had been placeholders for the real danger John needed to keep him steady. At Baker Street there was no need for nightmares.

But the pool… What had it been about the pool? Something had affected him differently. Had John been afraid of Moriarty? Clearly not; he’d grabbed him at the first opportunity. If your sniper pulls that trigger, Mr. Moriarty, we both go up. The corner of Sherlock’s mouth twitched at the memory. John wasn’t afraid of Moriarty. So what was it?

In the following three weeks John had six more nightmares. He didn’t always shout out loud like the
first time, but Sherlock, awake most nights working or neglecting sleep as a general habit, had
listened carefully for sounds of movement—distress—and crept up the stairs each time he heard it.

John kept his door ajar and it was easy to push it open. From his position in the doorway he could
see John tossing and turning, muttering incoherently, hands working, jaw clenching. But Sherlock
never woke him. He knew John would be embarrassed, like the first night. So instead Sherlock
waited, watching, muscles tensed, standing by in case… In case what? He didn’t know. But he
stayed anyway, ducking back away from the door if John woke up or eventually turning away after
John stilled and his breathing steadied.

What was he seeing? Was it the pool every time? Or had the experience been triggering? An opening
of gates that allowed memories of the war to come flooding back into his unconscious mind. John,
what are you afraid of?

In the fourth week the nightmares subsided and they didn’t return. Even after The Woman’s case
there were no nightmares of American agents with guns at his neck, and after Baskerville there were
no nightmares of gigantic hounds in secret labs. John wasn’t afraid of dying. That wasn’t it.

When Sherlock returned to London after his ‘suicide,’ the first thing he noticed was John’s ridiculous
moustache. The second thing he noticed was that John was tired. Purple under his eyes like bruises.
Nightmares or insomnia? Either way he estimated the cause was withdrawal. By being unable to
work with Sherlock, John had been deprived of regular exposure to danger. Cold turkey. Memories
of the war creeping back without better threats to replace them. I’m sorry, John.

“Nightmares,” Mary said simply when he caught her alone. “I thought you’d know—you lived with
him.”

“Did he tell you what they’re about?”

She shrugged. “You know, the war. He said he’s had them ever since they sent him back to
London.”

Interesting. Besides the few weeks following the pool there had been no nightmares when John lived
at Baker Street. Why had he lied?

She looked at him curiously then. “He never mentioned them to you?”

“No,” Sherlock said, already turning away.

It was an abrupt end to the interview, but then he had never been interested in talking to Mary for
longer than what was necessary.

* 

Sherlock found himself standing at the side of John’s bed. He didn’t remember getting to his feet or
crossing the small hotel room. Automatic actions. No conscious thought required. In his sleep John
turned onto his left side, facing him, and Sherlock tensed. He could see the tightness in John’s jaw,
his closed eyes squeezing shut harder as if he could prevent himself from seeing what was not
visible. John, what are you afraid of?

Sherlock clenched and flexed his hands looking down at the first person he’d ever been able to call a
friend. John. Intriguingly complex John. He had liked him from the moment he’d set eyes on him.
John’s voice, his moderate dress (masculine but neat, casual but coordinated), his good physical
condition (minus the psychosomatic limp), the fact that he was left-handed (Sherlock liked the
deviance from the ordinary, along with the idea that John lived in a mirrored world), etc. Sherlock
had been surprised—he’d assumed he would never meet a person he approved of so readily.

But then John was a man comprised of contradictions, and Sherlock couldn’t resist contradictions. The man who walked into the lab that day was a left-handed doctor who’d learned to shoot with his right. A soldier and a doctor: a killer and a healer. A man who limped from a shoulder wound: a backward trauma that caused him to literally ache for the war, an outward manifestation mirroring Sherlock’s own internal damage. Of course he’d known the cure.

Sherlock realised his own jaw had tightened in imitation of his sleeping friend and though he consciously relaxed it, his concern increased. He’d been able to cure John’s nightmares the first time, but not the second. When Sherlock returned to London, and John resumed working with him, he assumed the nightmares would subside like they had before. But they hadn’t.

John rolled onto his back and spoke incoherently. Although Sherlock couldn’t make out any individual words, the distress in his voice was cutting. Sherlock started to reach out, but pulled his hand back. If he woke him, John would be embarrassed and upset and Sherlock wouldn’t know what to say.

He ran his eyes over John’s sleeping form. Fascinating. A soldier who regularly faced murderers unflinching, yet was wrecked by the shadows of his mind. An enigma: the real danger invigorating, the unreal debilitating.

He'd never met anyone like John before—there was no one like John—and not in his wildest dreams had he imagined he would ever meet someone he liked so much. John groaned and rolled and Sherlock’s muscles tensed. He felt helpless, paralysed. He couldn’t move forward and he wouldn’t move back. How could he save John from his own mind?

He wished he could open John’s head—precise incisions, careful parting of the skull, delicate handling of the soft brain tissue: John’s brain. Why are you doing this to John? he'd ask it with his forceps and dissecting probe. But gently. The brain that tortured John at night was the same one that chose his jumpers in the morning. The same one that knew how to make risotto with peas and could fire kill shots through a window. The same one that teased Sherlock about his coat and his cheekbones and made them giggle at crime scenes. It was the same brain that had chosen to come back to Baker Street.

John groaned again. Perhaps it was his proximity to John now (he’d always maintained his distance in the doorway when observing previous nightmares), or perhaps it was a composite result of how much they had been through together since the pool, but Sherlock realised he wouldn’t be able to watch this time. It was imaginary pain, but real suffering. And Sherlock couldn’t watch John suffer.

He considered his options. What had Mary done when John’s nightmares woke her? (Of course they would have woken her; John’s nightmares were violent and they shared the same bed.) Probably something like putting her arms around him, cooing comfort, stroking his hair and soothing. Sherlock frowned. This course of action was fraught with problems, the foremost being that Holmeses do not coo, under any circumstances. Plus, John would wake up yelling about not being gay again, and the commotion would probably cause the neurotic old lady in the next room (yes, he knew all about her: the science of deduction) to bang on their door, ironically shouting at them for making a disturbance. So that was out.

John’s breathing quickened and he shook his head from side to side: no.

Settling on a decision, he tore himself away from John’s side and slipped back into his bed, prepared to feign sleep in an instant.
Then Sherlock Holmes threw a pillow at Dr. Watson’s head and directly pretended he hadn’t.
The Game Is On

John peeled his eyes open, brain rebelling at being dragged from sleep so early. Noise. Veritable racket. Danger? Battle? He rolled to his left and groaned. No, Sherlock. He replayed the events of yesterday: Sherlock appearing in Ireland, the fight on the cliffs, sharing the hotel room...

John watched in resignation as the mad detective rushed around the room, banging drawers open and shut, and then in dismay as he realised the things Sherlock was haphazardly tossing from the wardrobe were his.

“Sherlock,” John croaked, voice scratchy from sleep as he sat up. “What are you doing? What time is it?”

“It’s six, and we’re leaving,” Sherlock replied. He was already dressed, hair done (curls arranged fashionably messy), and he had his hands full of John’s shirts.

“Oi!” John said as Sherlock stuffed them into John’s suitcase. “Shirts have to be folded.”

“Not these shirts,” Sherlock said from the wardrobe, grabbing the last gingham button-up by the sleeve. He jammed the hapless shirt into the suitcase after the others. John’s military sensibilities cried out in distress, but he took a deep breath.

“Ok,” he said slowly. Patience. Always patience with Sherlock. “Is there a reason you’re awake at six o’clock in the morning and attacking my things? Or does this one get chalked up to ‘general insanity’ too?”

“Your incomprehension of something does not make it insane,” Sherlock said, coming to stand in front of him. “Are you planning to sit there all day?”

John glared. “Yes. I wrote it in my calendar: ‘Saturday: sit.’”

“Nope.” Sherlock grabbed John’s forearm and he was caught off-guard enough to allow Sherlock to pull him to his feet. As soon as he was standing Sherlock turned on his heel and disappeared into the bathroom. He heard the sound of water from the tap.

Sherlock called back, “Normally I’d agree there isn’t anything better to do than sit.” He reappeared holding John’s toothbrush and John saw with amazement that he’d put toothpaste on it. “But not today. Today, John, we have a case!” Sherlock thrust the toothbrush at John’s (left) hand, and John took it, shoving Sherlock away.

“All right, all right, Jesus,” he said, making his way to the bathroom. “You know, I—” The door slammed and Sherlock was gone. John sighed and looked at his reflection. Six a.m. One should never look at one’s reflection at six a.m.

But as John brushed his teeth his irritation gave way to anticipation. A case. Their first case together since he’d left Mary. Of course he’d been working with Sherlock while he was with Mary, but he knew it would be different this time. No constant phone calls to check in, no leaving early to be home for dinner and no guilt if he missed dinner. No games half-played only to be interrupted by dull reality. He’d be playing full-time again, and now there was no one to drag him back. He remembered Mycroft’s words from the night they met: “When you walk with Sherlock Holmes you see the battlefield.” John grinned and thought, Well, here we go again... Once more unto the breach.

John had just finished dressing when Sherlock strode back into the room saying, “The taxi will be
“I suppose I’m not getting the money back I paid for tonight,” John muttered half to himself as he put on his watch.

“Taken care of,” Sherlock said, shrugging on his coat and pulling his scarf around his neck.

“Really?” John raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, the woman at reception sympathised deeply with Waffles’ untimely death.” Sherlock grabbed John’s jacket and held it up.

“Waffles?” John asked, hardly daring himself to guess. He turned and put his arms into his black coat. Sherlock did this so often when he was in a hurry—helping John into his coat—that John almost didn’t notice it anymore.

Sherlock clapped the jacket onto John’s shoulders and said, “Yes, our pet corgi.”

John was glad he hadn’t tried to guess. He turned around and Sherlock must have seen the mixture of confusion and concern on his face because he rolled his eyes and said, “Oh come on, you must have noticed the board behind the front desk?” John continued to look at him blankly and Sherlock explained, with the longsuffering air of one doomed to be forever explaining, “It’s covered in pictures of corgis. The receptionist owns two herself. It was an elementary deduction that she’d be understanding about the necessity of an early departure owing to a corgi-related crisis.”

“And you named our imaginary dog ‘Waffles’?” If he ever thought he had reached a point where Sherlock could no longer surprise him, he was proven wrong time and time again.

Sherlock stuffed his hands into his coat pockets. “You don’t like the name?”

“No, it’s… fine,” John said in surprise.

“Good.” Sherlock suddenly turned his head, listening. “Taxi,” he said, though John had heard nothing. “Let’s go, John. The game is on!”

John couldn’t help smiling as he followed Sherlock quickly out the door and down the stairs. Actually he liked the name Waffles for a corgi. It was fittingly absurd. He liked dogs as much as he hated cats, but knew he would never dream of bringing another living thing into 221B. John grimaced at the thought of the experiments Sherlock wouldn’t be able to resist. Poor Waffles. His death was probably for the best, John decided as he ducked into the cab beside Sherlock.

* 

Greg Lestrade checked his watch. Eleven-thirty. He was standing in an alley with a few police officers and a dead body. The body had been found much earlier, around five o’clock in the morning by a group of young people stumbling home from a night of clubbing. Lestrade, unfortunate enough to be on call at the time, had been summoned to the scene.

Upon initial inspection the murder appeared to be a mugging. Victim was male, early thirties, dressed in a smart suit. He’d been stabbed in his left side; blood soaked through his shirt and suit jacket, staining the pavement where he lay sprawled on his side. Wallet and phone not found on the body, evidently stolen.

The victim was young and in good shape. Maybe the poor sod had even tried to fight—coming home drunk from the bar, being held at knifepoint, just enough alcohol to convince him to play the
hero… The story was fairly straightforward. In other words, not a situation in which he would normally text Sherlock.

To his own surprise, what had made him text Sherlock was the man’s socks. One black and one navy blue. Five years ago Lestrade wouldn’t have even noticed this detail, or if he had he wouldn’t have assigned any meaning to it. A man rushing to get ready for work on a Friday morning accidentally grabs two different socks. Mystery solved. But now… Maybe he’d been working with Sherlock for too long, or maybe because it had been five-thirty in the morning, but something about the mismatched socks struck him as ominous: wrong by more than just a fashion mishap.

He’d used his phone to take a picture of the full body, and then one of the man’s socks. He texted both pictures to Sherlock writing, *Stab wound and mismatched socks. Have a look?* Sherlock, who apparently never slept, had texted him back within minutes: *In Ireland. Be there at 11:15. Do not disturb crime scene. SH*

Lestrade had grinned at the confirmation. So he’d been right. The socks must be important if Sherlock was willing to fly in from Ireland for it.

He checked his watch again. Eleven thirty-five. Sherlock bloody Holmes had better be there in the next five minutes. He’d had one a hell of a time convincing his superiors to let him leave a body in the street for five hours. They’d blocked off the alley and put up a tent, which had the double benefit of protecting the scene as well as hiding the body from view of the main street.

There. Cab. It pulled up and Sherlock sprang out of the car, unbuttoned coat flowing dramatically out behind him. Lestrade rolled his eyes. The man may as well cut the pretence and buy himself a superhero cape. John got out of the cab next, paying the driver and negotiating placement of suitcases. So John had been in Ireland too. He supposed Sherlock wouldn’t go anywhere without John if he had a choice. The two of them had been inseparable ever since the ‘Study in Pink’ case when he’d first met John.

“I see you’ve let the police stampede through here,” Sherlock said brusquely, dropping to the ground and whipping out his magnifying glass to scrutinise the pavement.

“Hello to you too.” Lestrade crossed his arms over his chest indignantly.

Sherlock either ignored him or didn’t hear him. Probably both. Sherlock had perfected ignoring people to the point that he was actually able to block them from his sensory awareness. Lestrade retaliated by glaring at the top of his head. He immensely disliked that Sherlock never seemed to remember they were *his* crime scenes, and that he was only there by invitation. Unfortunately Lestrade knew he was going to get absolutely nowhere on his own with only a pair of mismatched socks to go on, so he set about steeling himself against everything that was *Sherlock*.

“All right, Greg?” John asked, coming to stand next to him.

“All right, Greg?” John asked, coming to stand next to him.

“Good to see you, John.” He nodded. John was smiling, clearly in a good mood. Lestrade was glad to see it. He’d seen less of John since the wedding, but each time they met John had seemed… Depressed? No, that wasn’t it. Tired? More like *worn*. It was nice to see him looking cheerful now, the lines of tension in his face smoothed away.

John Watson was the only person Lestrade knew who could actually feel *more* relaxed in Sherlock’s presence. Lestrade thought in wonder, *How can you spend so much time with Sherlock Holmes and not want to throw him off a building?* Then he remembered with a start that Sherlock had, in fact, thrown himself off a building, and it hadn’t gone over well with John. At all.
The two of them watched Sherlock for a while. After walking back and forth across the alley at what would have appeared to be a leisurely stroll to anyone who didn’t know him, Sherlock finally bent down to examine the victim. Lestrade checked his watch again. Sherlock was agonisingly slow about this process. He knew he couldn’t complain—he knew he couldn’t do half as well in even double the time—but all the same, he couldn’t help rocking back on his heels impatiently as Sherlock took what seemed like ages to examine the body, and probably every spore floating around it.

He looked over at John and saw him gazing at Sherlock with rapt attention. Lestrade bit his lip in agitation. Maybe John was secretly a Zen master, skilfully trained in the art of patience. He furtively glanced sideways again to recheck John’s expression: still captivated. On the other hand maybe John wasn’t so much enlightened but simply mad as a March hare. For all he knew John was currently mistaking Sherlock for a football match. He shook his head and decided that waking up at five was not good for his reasoning processes.

He rolled his shoulders to stretch them and sighed. As always in these situations Lestrade wished he had something more useful he could at least appear to be doing, rather than helplessly waiting on Sherlock’s every whim. As the years went by it had become more and more tempting to just throw in the towel and bring a book to the crime scenes. But he hadn’t given up yet. Each time he allowed Sherlock free reign of an area, he crossed his arms and managed to maintain his dignity by snapping at Sherlock to hurry up and barking orders at everyone else.

Sherlock was the better detective; of course Lestrade knew that. He’d have to be as thick as Sherlock assumed he was not to understand that. That’s why he continued to call him in. At the end of the day catching the murderer was more important than pride. He just had to grit his teeth through the investigation and count backward in his head to keep himself from kicking the world’s most brilliant detective square in the arse.

*  

It’s a moving experience to watch Sherlock Holmes at a crime scene. It doesn’t matter how many times he’s done it before, John is never bored. It’s like watching a performance. Flawless. Art heightened to precision. And Sherlock is elegant. He walks slowly, seemingly casual, but John knows it’s controlled. Carefully controlled. Because Sherlock’s energy is electric and John can feel the hum of it in the air. The detective’s bright eyes sweep the scene, reading invisible information. He’s completely engaged; he’s fascinating.


Sherlock tilts his head when he stands over the body. He’s motionless but John sees his wiry muscles are tensed, restraining his own relentless momentum. He can see it in the angle of his shoulders, the line of his neck. Slowly, slowly, Sherlock circles the body. The appraisal in his eyes is predatory. Merciless. The victim is not human. It’s a corpse, and he’s stripping it—tearing it to scrutable pieces with his eyes.

He sinks to his knees. Graceful, always graceful. (He must have spent hours walking round with books balanced on his head when he was a child. It’s the only explanation.) His long, delicate fingers move nimbly over the body, never fumbling; undoing buttons, turning up sleeves—a smirk: a theory of his confirmed—turning down the collar, pulling shirt free from trousers. He hikes up the shirt to inspect the stab wound. A wider smirk, he knows what’s happened here.
“John.”

*

John. It was always ‘John’ and never ‘Lestrade,’ despite the fact that Lestrade would be the one filing the paperwork on this.

Lestrade followed John as he moved to stand next to Sherlock.

“So?” Lestrade asked, standing over his (regrettably) only consulting detective, who was still crouched next to the body. “What’ve you got?”

“Many things. Most importantly that this man did not die from a stab wound.”

“Well, he’s done a very good impression of it,” John said, nodding in approval.

Sherlock looked up at the doctor and Lestrade caught a smile on the detective’s face before he turned his head back toward the body.

“You’re saying the stabbing didn’t kill him.” Lestrade was always hyperaware of how clueless he sounded next to Sherlock. How could John stand it all the time?

“It’s obvious,” Sherlock said, because it was his favourite thing to say. “Just look at the wound.” He lifted the man’s shirt and gestured to the mark as though it were sufficient explanation.

“And?” Lestrade had to ask. “What about it?” Sherlock never explained anything without constant prompting.

“Look at the bruising around the puncture! He was clearly stabbed postmortem.”

“Clearly,” Lestrade muttered sarcastically.

“And here,” Sherlock shifted, grabbing the man’s arm where he’d rolled back the sleeve. “Look at the wrist. More postmortem bruising. On both wrists.”

In holding up the victim’s arm Sherlock’s coat sleeve had slipped down and Lestrade was surprised to see some angry bruising around the detective’s own wrist. Sherlock noticed his sightline and glanced involuntarily at John before tugging his sleeve back up. Odd. Maybe John wasn’t as patient with Sherlock as Lestrade thought.

“And his shoes,” Sherlock continued, moving down toward the man’s leg. He slipped a shoe off and indicated the back heel. Look at the scuffing pattern, very specific, both heels. Combined with the bruising on the wrists I’d say it was fairly obvious his body was dragged.”

“Incredible,” John said, shaking his head.

Sherlock didn’t appear to acknowledge the comment except for his eyes—they blinked a few times rapidly and Lestrade knew he’d heard it.

“He died somewhere else,” Sherlock concluded, jumping to his feet in an outright age-defying manner. (No man over thirty should be able to hold a crouched position for that long and then leap to his feet as lithely as a child.) “He was dragged here and then stabbed in order to make it look like a mugging. The position of the body was the first clue.”

Lestrade and John looked at him blankly.
“He’s lying wound-side-down!” Sherlock said indicating the victim’s position with a sweep of his hand. Receiving no affirmation of understanding he continued with feigned reluctance. Emphasis on ‘feigned.’ Lestrade, of all people, knew exactly how well Sherlock loved this: showing off, launching into intricate explanations that made every other person in the room feel like a right muppet. Lestrade wondered how many people, apart from himself, regularly imagined strangling Sherlock with that damned scarf.

“Look, corpses don’t bleed do they?” Sherlock said, diving into the explanation. “It’s difficult to fake a stabbing on a dead body. But not impossible. If you’re in time—and judging by the amount of blood I’d say they can’t have been more than thirty minutes after his heart stopped—you can drain the blood using gravity. They stabbed him on the left side and then positioned him on his left to allow the blood to drain from the puncture, making the amount of blood loss convincing despite the heart having stopped sometime earlier.”

“Amazing,” John said, looking at Sherlock with plain admiration.

Sherlock’s eyes swept John’s face and lingered for a moment, his expression briefly a mixture of several things, before he turned his head away.

Lestrade often saw Sherlock look at John like that. He wondered, not for the first time, if John knew and chose to pretend he didn’t, or if he honestly didn’t know that Sherlock was completely, hopelessly in love with him.
“And why would someone stab him if he was already dead?” Lestrade asked, doing his best to pry more information from the consulting detective who did far more smug withholding than helpful consulting. Lack of competition. That was the problem. The world (namely Scotland Yard) was suffering from an acute shortage of consulting detectives.

“The answer to that question is the reason I like this case already. Normally people endeavour to make murders look like accidents—”

“Yes, that’s what normal people do,” John cut in.

Sherlock went on, “Who would go out of their way to make a death look like murder?”

“You’re absolutely certain he died before he was stabbed?”

Sherlock sighed. “Contrary to what I’m sure the staff at Barts believe, I don’t spend time beating corpses just for the fun of it. I know postmortem bruising.”

John snickered, “Not just for the fun of it, no.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and Lestrade raised his eyebrows. Really, what had gotten into John today? He was concerningly chipper.

“Give me the victim’s name and address,” Sherlock said. “Need to have a look at his flat.”

“You can’t tell me any more about what happened here?” Lestrade asked, irked by Sherlock’s demanding tone. “How did he die if it wasn’t the stab wound?”

“Can’t say without further data. Need the autopsy report at the very least. Send it to me as soon as you get it along with photos of the body.”

“Come on, you must have a theory,” Lestrade pushed his luck.

Sherlock glared. “I’ve told you before. It’s a capital mistake to theorise before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgment.”

Lestrade sighed. No luck. But to be fair, Sherlock had already given him more in a few minutes than his entire forensic team had all day.

“Gallagher!” he called to one of the two police officers who were in conversation by the barricade tape. “Get Mr. Holmes here the file on Rodgers,” he said as the officer approached.

The dead man’s name was David Rodgers. Lestrade had spent the day back at the office acquiring the necessary information, making an extra copy of the file for Sherlock. The upper circles of Scotland Yard had been more than a little displeased to discover his cooperation with Sherlock in the past, but rather than terminate his working relationship with the consulting detective, he’d gone to considerable lengths to ensure they didn’t find out about it again. Donovan and Anderson, shocked to the core after Sherlock’s suicide (even despite it turning out to be fake), would not be running to any Chief Superintendents again anytime soon.

The officer returned and handed the file to Lestrade. He made to give it to Sherlock, who held out his hand, but stopped. “Let’s be quick about this one, all right?”
“Fine,” Sherlock said, reaching for the file. Lestrade jerked it back. He needed to make his point clear.

“No one back at headquarters is going to believe this is anything more than a routine mugging until you prove otherwise, and no one is going to be happy about a prolonged investigation on a routine mugging.”

“Well,” Sherlock said in his best drawl, “you know I live to make people happy.”

He snatched the file and Lestrade let him take it.

Lestrade watched Sherlock and John walk away. Sherlock handed John the file, then lifted the barricade tape so John could duck under it. Lestrade shook his head. There was one person on the planet for whom Sherlock was (unconsciously? consciously?) considerate, and that person seemed to be entirely oblivious.

He rubbed the back of his neck. It was very difficult to feel sorry for Sherlock Holmes, but sometimes… Sometimes, when Sherlock stood too close to John, when his eyes lingered just a fraction of a second too long, when Mary called and he turned his head away, when he caught John’s sleeve to show him something…

Granted ‘hopelessly in love’ would look different on Sherlock Holmes—Sociopathic Mad Scientist—than it would on anyone else. To the average observer Sherlock’s behaviour toward John wouldn’t appear much different than it was with anyone else, merely that he allowed John to remain in his company for far longer than he would anyone else. However, to Lestrade the evidence was overwhelming.

Sherlock may have a low opinion of his detective abilities, but Lestrade hadn’t gotten to the rank of Detective Inspector at Scotland Yard by accident. His observation skills, while admittedly lacking in comparison with Sherlock’s, were much sharper than the average person’s. And what he saw when he watched Sherlock and John together was nothing short of incredible. Despite Sherlock’s expertise in concealing, burying, locking away, tamping down with a shovel, or whatever it was he did to his emotions, they somehow managed to shine through, like the faintest filter of light through the smallest of cracks, when John was close by.

Lestrade saw it in the way Sherlock—a veritable expert in blocking people from his sensory awareness—inclined his head, even just a fraction, whenever John spoke. He saw it in the way Sherlock watched John—gaze unsettlingly intense, causing whoever was on forensics to throw uncomfortable glances at each other. He saw it in Sherlock’s face whenever John complimented him. John was not the first person to tell Sherlock he was a genius, but he was the first person Sherlock had ever responded to with more than an eye roll. He heard it, internalised it, savoured it. Sherlock Holmes, who’d never given anybody the time of day, wanted John Watson’s approval.

For anyone else these details wouldn’t amount to much, but in the case of Sherlock Holmes it was ample evidence that the world’s only consulting detective was downright smitten.

Not to mention Sherlock’s unconscious expressions in those rare moments when he forgot himself and his guard dropped. When John knelt down to examine a body, when he was telling Sherlock information he’d found, when he laughed, Sherlock looked at John like John was his whole world. He probably wasn’t aware he was doing it, probably wouldn’t intellectually understand what it meant to look at someone like they were your whole world, but Lestrade was forty years old; he’d been around enough to know the expression when he saw it.

But even if John wasn’t capable of reciprocating, and even if Sherlock didn’t recognise his own
feelings (Lestrade knew the cold logician considered himself above feelings, just as he did everything else), Lestrade could say without hesitation that John Watson had been, by far, the best thing that could have happened to the self-destructive genius he’d met all those years ago. John grounded him, stabilised him, humanised him, made him smile (not smirk). And Lestrade was glad to see it. As obnoxious as the consulting detective was, he truly did care about him. Certainly more than he’d ever admit to Sherlock’s smug face.

Because Lestrade had realised early on that the price for Sherlock’s talents was an inability to make human connections. And as much as he envied Sherlock’s skill, he knew he would never choose to pay that price. Sherlock swanned around like it was nothing to him, and Lestrade would have believed it if it hadn’t been for that night—the night he’d seen the evidence. The evidence that the cost of being the perfect detective—tightly wound cogs and gears, spinning out deductions as accurately as a calculator, mechanical reasoning, no place for emotion—had devastating consequences, even for someone as strong as Sherlock.

Lestrade watched Sherlock and John get into a cab and drive off.

Another murder, another investigation. He knew beyond doubt that Sherlock never would have made it this far if it wasn’t for John. John had not only saved Sherlock’s life, he’d also given Sherlock something to live for.

Lestrade remembered the junkie kid he’d met all those years ago: wild and haunted, an unmistakable aura of death around him. Lestrade would have guessed the unfortunate boy wouldn’t make it to twenty-five. And how old was Sherlock now? Thirty-two?

Had it really been ten years ago that he’d first met Sherlock Holmes?

*

Lestrade was sitting at his desk when a twenty-two-year-old, skinny, strung-out uni kid burst through his office door. He was tall with dark, curly hair and alarmingly pale skin. The boy clearly had no personal skills. He strode in without introduction, imperiously shouting some mad theory about a case Lestrade had just closed the day before, accusing him of having been wrong. Hyper-intense, manic, almost frightening; he was visibly high on cocaine—nervous agitation, hands shaking—Lestrade had dismissed him as a raving mental case. He hadn’t even gotten his name.

But a few weeks later the boy showed up again, and then again some time later. His name was Sherlock Holmes, Lestrade learned, and of course no one listened to him. He sounded insane and he looked like an addict. He was in those days. They even arrested him one night for making a scene at the Yard. He’d slept in a cell overnight and gone home only slightly subdued the next day.

It was more than six months before Lestrade finally caved.

He’d been getting nowhere on a murder investigation, and was feeling particularly hopeless about it when Sherlock walked through the door telling him the name of the murderer and the time and address where he would find him. With no other leads to go on Lestrade decided he may as well go off on a wild goose chase as sit banging his head against the desk in his office. He was amazed when the boy’s advice turned out not only to be sound, but entirely brilliant.

The first year of their cooperation was rough, however. It was more than against policy for Lestrade to consult with an amateur detective and in the beginning he’d genuinely tried not to do it. He pushed Sherlock away time and time again, even having him thrown from the building on a few of the more memorable occasions.
Nevertheless, when he did let Sherlock in on a case, the boy’s methods proved to be awe-inspiringly flawless. Lestrade couldn’t help contacting him more and more often. He shrugged off any guilt he might have felt about it, figuring the trial of actually cooperating with the condescending, caustic, twenty-two-year-old was punishment enough for breaking policy.

Things went along smoothly (read: gratingly) enough for a few years until suddenly there seemed to be a crime drought in London. For more than half a year Lestrade’s work was trivial enough that he didn’t contact Sherlock at all. So finally, when there was a really nasty murder, he was surprised at receiving no response to his text. Sherlock was usually so (unsettlingly) enthusiastic about murders he responded within minutes. After receiving no response to three messages in a span of three hours he decided it was time to call round to Sherlock’s flat.

At the time Sherlock was living in the sort of dismal, dingy building that people choose when they allocate more money to drugs than rent. Lestrade found he was anxious when he rang the bell, and when there was no response his anxiety increased to panic. He couldn’t say why; of course it was possible Sherlock was simply out for the night, but looking back he thought it might have been detective’s intuition. It’s much easier for the average person to ignore warning signs when they haven’t seen the worst that can happen, and seen it happen so many times.

One of Sherlock’s neighbours, high out of his mind, hadn’t minded (or possibly noticed) when Lestrade followed him into the building. He sprinted up the stairs. He pounded on the battered door of Sherlock’s flat and then had little trouble breaking open the rusty lock. He knew he’d have a difficult time explaining this if Sherlock was only out at the supermarket, but Lestrade walked further into the flat and Sherlock wasn’t out.

He lying on the floor, on his side, thank god—he must have known to roll himself while he was still conscious. Vomit on the floor, on his jogging bottoms, his t-shirt soaked through with sweat. Overdose. Lestrade was dialling the ambulance as he fell to his knees to check the boy’s vital signs. The pulse was faint but blessedly present.

Lestrade almost choked in disbelief. Here was the same man who strode arrogantly around crime scenes, intimidatingly imperious; it was easy to forget he was only twenty-five years old when he was commanding police officers or berating a forensics team. Now, crumpled on the floor, he looked even five years younger—black hair hanging in his eyes, his body curled into itself—he was skinnier than Lestrade had ever seen him. For a man who stood six feet tall it was heartbreakingly easy to lift him in his arms. The paramedics were going to be too slow. He’d meet them down on the street.

*  

Uncoincidentally this was the same night he met Mycroft Holmes.

In the waiting room at the hospital, Lestrade stood as the doctor approached. Relief flooded through him when she explained they had been able to stabilise Sherlock’s condition. “We’ll have to notify the next of kin,” she was saying. “Can you tell us who that might be?”

Lestrade realised with some surprise that he had no idea who the detective’s family were, or if he had any family at all. Sherlock had never seemed quite… human enough to have a family. He found himself distinctly incapable of picturing Sherlock sitting at a dinner table being asked to pass the potatoes.

He opened his mouth to respond that he had no idea when a voice behind him said, “Present.”

“Mycroft Holmes,” Mycroft Holmes said, stepping forward to shake the doctor’s then Lestrade’s hand. Lestrade took one look and estimated that the man’s suit might cost more than his car. “You
must be Detective Inspector Lestrade. Please accept my apology for the trouble my little brother has caused you tonight.”

“Well, of course it was no trouble—” Lestrade started.

“Nevertheless,” Mycroft cut him off, “he’s made a rather bad habit out of inconveniencing people.” He frowned checking his Rolex and Lestrade knew he was referring to himself. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to come here again tomorrow afternoon. Let’s say one o’clock? I have a few words to say to Sherlock when he comes round. I’d be very much obliged if you were present to hear them too.”

More than a little perplexed, Lestrade agreed.

“Excellent,” Mycroft said with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “If you don’t mind I’ll just have a word with the doctor about Sherlock’s treatment.”

“Right.” Lestrade knew this was a polite request for him to leave. He started to turn away but stopped. “Has Sherlock ever…” he trailed off for a moment. “Is this the first time this has happened?”

Lestrade thought he saw something flash behind Mycroft’s eyes, but then they were empty as he said, “I had hoped we were beyond this particular brand of Sherlock’s nonsense, but I see now it was an overestimation. Good evening, Detective Inspector.”

Lestrade left the hospital feeling numb. Sherlock had overdosed on heroin and that was his brother’s reaction? No wonder Sherlock was… the way he was. With an older brother like that, Sherlock seemed overflowing with affection by comparison.

*

One o’clock found Lestrade standing by Sherlock’s bedside and feeling rather like a child being reprimanded. Sherlock was awake, sitting up in the hospital bed, looking worse for the wear, and doing his best to focus on the ceiling instead of his brother.

Mycroft Holmes seemed less terrifying now in the daylight than he had been late the night before, but still not someone to be trifled with. Just the fact that Sherlock was allowing this man to scold him, uninterrupted, for such a length of time was shocking enough to keep Lestrade quiet.

“So, Sherlock,” Mycroft continued his speech, “since you have proven yourself incapable of living independently, without supervision, we must implement a new system. These are your options.”

Sherlock quirked a brow and Lestrade surmised that ‘options’ were not typically part of the elder Holmes’ plans.

“You will either find a flatmate of whom I approve, or cameras will be installed.”

“Cameras,” Sherlock said immediately.

“Cameras which you will not tamper with,” Mycroft clarified, clearly having anticipated Sherlock’s answer, “under pain of my assigning you a flatmate. And you can be certain I’ll choose one who won’t allow for your… antics,” Mycroft finished, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Keep your minions, Mycroft. You can’t control me.”

Mycroft sighed. “Oh Sherlock, such drama. Has it even crossed your mind that I have your best interests at heart?”
“Don't be ridiculous, Mycroft; I would never accuse you of having a heart.”

Mycroft smirked with cold eyes. “The respect is mutual, brother dearest.” His voice went dangerously quiet as he added, “Although my test results weren’t the problem, were they? I wasn’t the one who upset Mummy.”

A moment passed and Lestrade felt that the glare connecting their eyes could eviscerate anything that dared pass between them. Intensely uncomfortable, he coughed to snap them out of it. It worked. The brothers slanted their eyes sideways toward him, and Mycroft continued, voice resuming its previous languid quality.

“Further to our agreement,” he said, “Detective Inspector Lestrade will cease to provide you with any information about his investigations”—the elder Holmes shot Lestrade a look that nearly made him jump—“should you continue to use illegal substances.”

Lestrade wanted to object to this on the grounds that he was a grown man who would do what he liked. However, something about Mycroft’s demeanour, his ability to subdue Sherlock, and his umbrella, prevented Lestrade from protesting. There was also the fact, Lestrade had realised last night, that no one had contacted Mycroft about Sherlock’s overdose. He’d appeared at the hospital before anyone had even discovered his connection to the boy in room thirty-four. Lestrade firmly decided against crossing him.

He looked over and saw Sherlock’s eyes smouldering. Mycroft merely tilted his head back and met his brother’s gaze coolly. Fire and ice, those two.

“My best wishes for a quick recovery,” Mycroft said with a smile that did nothing to warm his freezing eyes. And with a swing of his umbrella, he was gone.

“What the hell was that?” Lestrade asked, dumbfounded.

“That,” Sherlock flopped back against the pillows, the confrontation evidently having drained what little energy he had, “was my brother.”

Sherlock looked sideways out of the corner of his eye to take in Lestrade’s expression. “Don’t worry about the cameras,” he said. “I won’t have any trouble fixing those. Technology is lost on the older generation.”

“It’s not the cameras I’m worried about,” Lestrade said, crossing his arms.

Sherlock turned his head fully this time when he said, “Based on the timing of the texts you sent me yesterday I deduced it was you who… brought me here last night.”

Lestrade coughed and said, “Yeah, well…”

“Thank you.” Sherlock looked up at him.

Lestrade shrugged. “There aren’t any other consulting detectives. If we lost you then who would we have to annoy us at crime scenes?”

Sherlock smiled and Lestrade wondered if it was the first real smile—not smirk—that he’d seen on the boy before.

“So, that was your brother,” Lestrade said, still a bit bemused.

Sherlock caught his eye. “Oh come on. Don’t tell me you’re surprised.”
Lestrade wished he could say his relationship with Sherlock had warmed after the incident at the hospital, but really it hadn’t. The only noticeable difference afterward was that Sherlock plainly preferred to work with him, being almost completely intolerable if he had to assist another DI. Lestrade would have preferred a card. Because in the following year the conceited amateur seemed to appear at his shoulder to correct him every time he made a mistake.

Lestrade was aware that this was probably Sherlock’s way of showing his gratitude, so he gritted his teeth and learned to count backward as a healthier alternative to shoving Sherlock into the Thames.
“Let’s hear it then,” John said when they were settled into the cab.

“What?”

“Your theory. I know you only told Lestrade off about theorising to piss him off.”

Sherlock had his elbow propped against the car door and his fist in front of his mouth, thinking. He smiled around his glove.

“Poison,” he said. “Whoever stabbed him did it to distract the police from the real cause of death. No other visible wounds on the body suggests poison.”

John frowned. “There wasn’t any evidence of vomit or asphyxiation. Judging just from initial appearance I would have guessed circulatory shock, which the stabbing would have explained nicely.”

“Severe blood-loss is only one cause of shock,” Sherlock said dismissively. “The victim didn’t lose any blood before he died. I’m certain. But bacteria or chemicals could induce it. The autopsy will show us if there’s a foreign substance in his blood.” Sherlock leaned back in the seat and drummed his hands on his knees impatiently. “Give me the details from his file.”

John pulled the sheets from the envelope and read out the relevant information. David Rodgers, thirty-five years old, lawyer: successful enough to afford a flat close to the park in Knightsbridge (the direction their cab was currently headed), unmarried, no children, no history of medical problems, no criminal record, nothing remarkable in his background that would make him a target for murder.

“Why are we going to his flat now?” John asked when he’d finished reading.

Sherlock was looking away again, preoccupied, and John knew better than to interrupt his thought process. It wasn’t until they stepped out of the cab onto a wide avenue just a few blocks from the park that Sherlock asked, “Did you say something?”

John grinned. Sometimes Sherlock reminded him of a printer. If you send a request to a printer while it’s busy, the request waits in queue and is processed only after the previous task is complete. Sherlock, he knew, would not be too keen on this metaphor, which was why he’d kept it out of his blog so far. A supercomputer, maybe, but a printer… probably not.

“I asked you about ten minutes ago why we’re here.”

“Because of his socks,” Sherlock said, his bright eyes already running across the posh flats in front of them.

John was hit by a strong sense of déjà vu. He couldn’t place it though. “His socks?”

Sherlock was walking around to the right side of the building and John followed him. When he came to a stop they were standing in an alley that separated their victim’s building from the one next door. They were reconstructed historical flats: Only four storeys high. Sherlock was scanning it from the base up. He replied distractedly, “One black and one navy.”

“And that’s important because…”
“Because it means someone else dressed him.”

John thought about this. “Or it means he’s a person, and people—normal people who don’t have any detail-awareness superpowers—sometimes mistake navy socks for black ones. Especially blokes.” John was thinking about the number of occasions he’d done this himself. He resisted the urge to lift his trouser legs to check if he’d done it today.

“Your socks are the same colour,” Sherlock said, glancing at John before turning to look up at the roof of the building.

“I know,” John said peevishly. Sherlock’s ability to read his mind, or at least deduce his thoughts from the slightest changes in his expression, was unnerving. “So why don’t you think it was a mistake?”

Sherlock evidently found something of interest at the top of the building because his eyes sparked and he grinned. He looked back at John.

“Did you see the way he was dressed? His suit wasn’t just nice; it was fashionable. Extremely so. New Zegna from the autumn collection.”

“Well you would know,” John muttered.

“A man who puts on a suit like that in the morning does not carelessly grab two mismatched socks. My theory is that he died at home. His killers dressed him in the same clothes he’d worn to work to make it appear as if he’d never gone home—straight from work to the bar on a Friday night—before dropping the body off in the centre. But they grabbed one wrong sock, and that will prove to be their fatal mistake.”

John shook his head. Unbelievable.

Sherlock pointed to the suite on the top floor at the end of the building; large windows faced the avenue, the alley and the street behind. “That’s his flat there,” he said. He clapped his hands and whirled around to face John. “Ok,” he said. “I need you to shout at me.”

“What?”

“Come on, John! You did it so well yesterday. You can use some of those words you say when you talk to your rugby friends.”

John felt a smile tugging the corners of his mouth. It never ceased to amaze him how seamlessly the detective could switch from genius to batty. "And what words are those?"

"Words like, ‘wanker’ and ‘dickhead’ and ‘twat.’"

John laughed out loud. The words sounded absurd coming from his fastidiously correct friend. He’d never heard Sherlock progress beyond the mildest language, including ‘damn,’ the very occasional ‘bloody,’ and one unforgettable ‘arsehole,’ uttered at his wedding of all places.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, Sherlock, I am not going to stand here between these posh flats yelling the word ‘twat.’”

“It’s important.”

Right, John thought. The underhanded detective had a way of making ‘humiliate John’ an important part of his plans. “Sorry, I’m not going to explain to the police why I was standing in the street
shouting obscenities in front of all the mums walking their children to the park. ‘My mad flatmate told me to’ is not going to hold up in court.”

Sherlock sighed, “Fine.”

John lifted his eyebrows. “Really?”

“We can do it this way...” Sherlock was muttering to himself in a way John didn’t particularly like as he walked to where someone had stacked a set of unwanted chairs by the skip and bins behind him.

Sherlock lifted one of the chairs and tested its weight in his arm. John watched him warily as he walked around in front of him. “What are you doing? Sher—”

Sherlock used his considerable strength to whip the chair directly at him. John managed to leap back just in time, and a loud BANG reverberated through the alley as the chair slammed into the metal skip.

“Jesus motherfucking—” John had only just got started when Sherlock grabbed his arm and pulled him around the side of the building.

“Got one!” Sherlock said, eyes shining as he looked over at John from their positions flattened against the wall. “Twitch of the curtain. I don’t think she saw us though.”

“Wh-what? Who are you talking about?”

“Little old lady.” Sherlock grinned, thin fingers still circled around John’s arm. “I told you before, they’re better than security cameras. Had to find out if one lives in the building with a view of the victim’s flat.”

“Sherlock what the HELL? You nearly just impaled me with a chair!”

“I know your reflexes,” Sherlock said. He was still staring at him and suddenly John felt the heat of his gaze. The detective’s eyes had an intensity that burned if you looked at them for too long. Sherlock’s left hand was still gripping John’s right forearm, and John was struck by déjà vu again. This time he recalled it. He and Sherlock were pressed up against a wall, their non-dominant hands cuffed together—Sherlock’s left and his right—and Sherlock’s eyes blazing even brighter than they were now.

John remembered that night vividly: Sherlock vaulting over an iron gate and almost dislocating his arm as the handcuff chain yanked it up. He’d had to reach through the railing to grab the lapel of his flatmate’s coat, pulling him hard back up against the gate, forcing him to face him through the bars and holding him there—an attempt to stop the unstoppable force that was Sherlock. Inescapably close he’d felt the detective’s energy radiating off of him like heat, and his eyes burning with it. The fever of the chase pulsed through Sherlock’s veins and John only ever had to look at him and he could feel it rising in his own blood. He remembered that night, running with Sherlock, the cops just around the corner. The rush had been exhilarating. Just the two of them against the world (close to literally at that point, with Sherlock’s name slandered and the police after them). But then, that had also been the night before—

John gave his head a slight shake to clear the memory as Sherlock dropped his arm.

“So you just wanted to make enough noise to scare an old lady?” John asked, bringing himself back to the present and realising Sherlock had made him yell at him after all. He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. Getting John to swear at him was right up there next to the science of deduction on the list of Sherlock’s talents.
“To find,” Sherlock corrected, already walking back up the alley. “They can’t resist a row in the street—Knew I’d get one. I have a question she’ll be able to answer.”

“Why do you do that?” John asked, following him to the entrance of the building next door to their victim’s.

“What?”

“Talk as though you already know something you haven’t found out yet.”

“Balance of probability.”

“You mean you guess.”

“I never guess.”

John was on the verge of protesting, but in the spirit of letting sleeping detectives lie he kept his mouth shut. One chair thrown at his head was enough for one day.

Sherlock pressed the appropriate buzzer. He looked directly into a hidden camera John would never have noticed, and John watched his face shift to ‘all charm’ when the old woman answered (manipulative bastard). He introduced them as Detective Inspectors Lestrade and Wilkins. A flash of Lestrade’s badge sealed the deal.

“Nicked his badge again?” John remarked as they walked through the front door.

“At this point he has no one to blame but himself,” Sherlock said, leading the way. “For a DI it’s embarrassingly easy to steal from him.”

When Mrs. Bennis answered the door Sherlock went straight to her living room windows, leaving John to deal with the niceties of accepting an offer of tea and thanking her for granting them an interview. She looked to be in her early seventies, primly dressed, with thick prescription glasses which made her eyes look very large.

“There was a horrible noise in the alley just a moment ago,” she said, bringing a tray with cups and saucers back from the kitchen.

“Bunch of teenagers. We saw them run the other way. I don’t think they’ll be back.” Sometimes John surprised himself by how much smoother he’d got at lying. But he supposed he’d had plenty of time to learn from the best.

“Mrs. Bennis, I need to ask you a few questions about last night.” John almost upset his tea as he heard Sherlock’s deep, clear voice directly behind his chair. He hadn’t heard him approach, stealthy blighter.

“About last night?” Mrs. Bennis looked up quizzically.

“Yes, the flat across the way”—Sherlock pointed out the window indicating their victim’s flat—“Were they moving furniture recently?”

Mrs. Bennis blinked her large eyes behind her glasses. “Why, yes they were.”

John would have wondered where Sherlock was going with this, but he was far too experienced to bother. Sherlock’s mind was a thousand paces ahead of his and anyone else’s; he’d have to wait until whenever Sherlock felt like cluing him in.
“Are you going to write them up for it?” she asked.

“Why would we do that?” Sherlock’s tone meant he already knew the answer.

“Well, it was after midnight!” she said indignantly. “It must be against public ordinances to be lowering an armoire out of your window in the middle of the night.” John twisted around in his chair in time to see Sherlock’s lips twitch to a half-smile before it dropped. “I could tell they were trying to be quiet about it,” she continued, “but it’s noisy business loading furniture onto a moving van. I can’t imagine why they couldn’t wait until a proper hour.”

“Did you see if there was a name on the van?” Sherlock asked.

“Yes, I remember the name because I felt it was ironic: ‘Neighbourly Movers.’ I thought it wasn’t very ‘neighbourly’ to be making a racket at midnight. Are you going to fine the people who live there?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, typing on his phone. “I just need to make a call.”

Sherlock stepped away into the adjoining dining room. John could just make out parts of his sentences: “Incident last night”—“Neighbourly Movers”—“recent hires.” Evidently he was giving Lestrade orders; nothing new there.

Mrs. Bennis smiled at John fondly. “It’s nice to see the police taking a real interest in our little troubles. And such gentlemen! London would be much better for it if all officers were as lovely as the two of you.”

John returned her smile and said, “Well, we’re here to serve the public.” It wasn’t entirely untrue, though John knew Sherlock’s civil service was less intentional than it was simply lucky for Londoners that what amused Sherlock also happened to be good for public safety.

“Your partner is absolutely gorgeous,” Mrs. Bennis said, blinking at him over her tea.

“Sorry?” John startled at the abrupt change of subject.

“He’s beautiful,” she said matter-of-factly.

John felt heat rushing to his face. His brain prepared to send out the standard ‘We’re not—’ response when he remembered they had told her they were from Scotland Yard. ‘Partner’ was probably a reference their police status. John relaxed a little and was able to consider her statement more neutrally.

Of course he was aware that Sherlock resembled the men in GQ magazine more closely than he resembled ordinary people. And he knew Sherlock made girls like Molly trip over their own feet. (John had gotten some very interesting requests for photographs on his blog from the—he was almost certain—entirely female Sherlock Holmes fan club.) But ‘beautiful’ was an odd word to use for a man. Although, John figured, if there were any man to use the more feminine adjective for, the one swanning around in his unignorably tight shirts, with his high cheekbones, pale skin, and dark eyelashes— John silenced the part of his brain attempting to point out the speed and ease with which he’d just listed Sherlock’s more attractive features. He’d spent the majority of the last five years in Sherlock’s company; Straight doesn’t mean blind, he reminded himself sternly.

John gave a short laugh and said, “It’s all part of the strategy. He’s the eye candy—distracts the criminals into muddling up their alibis.”

Mrs. Bennis’s eyes were very large behind her glasses. “Does that really work?”
“Oh, he’s very good at it,” John said, warming to the subject. “He can be very distracting. Some
would say irritatingly so.”

Mrs. Bennis looked to the dining room where Sherlock was pacing back and forth across the
doorway. “I don’t know how you manage to keep a man like that,” she mused.

John coughed and his face flushed again. So, not ‘police partners’ then. What the hell was it with
every single person they’d ever met? What was it about the two of them together that made everyone
and his mother (and grandmother apparently) think they were together? For god’s sake, you would
think they tumbled through doors groping each other by the way people reacted.

Mrs. Bennis must have noticed his discomfort because she quickly added, “Oh no, I didn’t mean any
slight against you. Of course you’re a very handsome man yourself, but I can just tell...” Her focus
softened as she gazed off toward the dining room again. “A man like that is difficult. Complicated.
You’ll have to fight for him. But he’s worth it.” She looked back at John and gave him a knowing
smile. “Men like that always are.”

“I…” John managed before Sherlock re-entered the room.

John stood abruptly. He cleared his throat and said, “Thank you very much for your time and for the
tea, Mrs. Bennis.” He turned toward Sherlock. “Got everything?” he asked, making it a rhetorical
question. He punctuated it by moving toward the door.

“Yes, everything’s sorted,” Sherlock said, eyes moving quickly between John and their host, reading
John’s agitation and probably trying to deduce what had been said.

John mentally pulled him toward the door. (If Sherlock could read his mind, John decided he might
as well use it to his advantage.) Sherlock didn’t resist, and only paused to say, “Thank you, Mrs.
Bennis, you’ve been most helpful,” before following John out of the flat.

When they were back on the street John stopped and said, “Ok, so what’s the deal with the
furniture?”

Sherlock stopped as well and took a step back toward him. “Tell me, John, after you’ve killed
someone what’s your most pressing problem?”

“An existential struggle with morality?”

Sherlock continued to look at him.

“Getting rid of the body,” John amended reluctantly.

“Correct. So, how are you going to get a body out of a posh flat like that, past the CCTV cameras
and Mrs. Bennis’s twitching curtains? You can’t just drag it down the stairs in a bag.”

“I would think not.”

“So, how about shut in a large armoire, out the window, and onto a moving van?”

“And that’s the first thing you thought of?”

“It was one possibility that occurred to me. Confirmed when I saw that,” Sherlock replied, pointing
to the roof just above the dead man’s alley-facing window. John looked up and saw a large hook
secured there.
“Hooks like that are used, most recognisably in Amsterdam, for moving furniture in and out of flats that don’t have lifts and are too narrow to carry large objects up and down stairs,” Sherlock explained. “Our killers probably thought it would be a quieter method of getting the body out of the building in the middle of the night.”

“But that hook could have been there for years; maybe the last tenants used it—”

“No, it’s new. Very new. That metal hasn’t even seen rain.”

“And you knew it would be an armoire because…”

Sherlock shrugged. “It’s the easiest piece of furniture to fit a body into without having to chop it up first.”

John shook his head, smiling at the ground. Only Sherlock could be endearingly blithe when discussing chopping up bodies.

He lifted his eyes and regarded Sherlock’s face in amazement. “Just by noticing that hook you could see the whole scene: The men stuffing the body into an armoire and lowering it out the window onto a moving van. You only needed to talk to the Bennis lady for confirmation.”

Sherlock looked at John curiously. “That’s right. Once the body was in the van they could drive it to the centre, drag it into an alley, stab it, and arrange the whole thing to look like a mugging.”

John met Sherlock’s eyes. “Extraordinary.”

Sherlock dropped his gaze and his dark eyelashes stood out in contrast against his pale cheekbones.
“The poison interests me,” Sherlock was saying. They were walking toward Hyde Park to catch a cab home from the victim’s neighbourhood. “Whoever murdered David Rodgers didn’t want the police to find it, hence the stabbing. Such an obvious cause of death wouldn’t require an autopsy. Might have worked if they were dealing with the usual idiot circus at Scotland Yard. There’s something about that poison they don’t want the police to see.”

They turned a corner, taking what was presumably a shortcut through an alley. Sherlock had every street and alley of London mapped out in his mind. John had learned never to question the directions when Sherlock was leading the way (which was always).

“Do you think this could somehow be connected to Moriarty?”

“The thought had occurred,” Sherlock said. “Anything out of the ordinary could signal his next move.”

"I thought you said he was dead."

"He probably is."

"Probably? You said, 'no question' before."

"There's no question that he's probably dead."

John huffed in frustration. “You said you saw him shoot his brains out the back of his head."

“I did,” Sherlock shrugged. “But then you also saw me jump off a building and hit the ground.”

John flinched and Sherlock stepped toward him. “Sorry,” he said using the same concerned puppy-eyes he’d used in Dartmoor when John figured out Sherlock had tried to drug him. No wonder Sherlock was so successful at manipulation; anyone who could manage puppy-eyes like that—

“The point is it hardly matters if he's dead or alive,” Sherlock continued. “He would have arranged his plans to be carried out by someone within his circle. If he didn't come back from the roof that day his plans would still go forward.”

“So this murder, you think it could be the work of Moriarty, or one of his men?”

“It’s intricate and odd enough to make it a possibility.”

John took a deep breath. “Ok,” he said, “so we’ll just have to be more careful.”

“Oh, careful. Dull.”

“Sherlock, you spent two years tearing apart everything he worked to build.” John crossed his arms. “If he’s back, or if one of his psychotic followers has taken over, I imagine he’ll have a thing or two he wants to say to you, and he’ll probably want to say it with the sharp end of a knife, not a fruit basket.”

Sherlock laughed. “Maybe a fruit basket stuck through with knives. That seems their style.”
John grinned in spite of himself. He resumed walking and Sherlock followed. John looked over at his friend who had regained his meditative expression. It turned to a scowl as he said, “It’s unacceptable to have to wait until Monday for the autopsy results. Lestrade said he won’t be able to push it through without proof of urgency. It’s preposterous that they expect me to catch criminals while they keep me waiting around…”

And Sherlock’s voice quieted to a blur of background noise as John caught the slightest movement out of the corner of his right eye. His awareness zeroed in with military acuity. A man. Dark clothes, almost impossible to see in the shadow of the building. It was his arm that moved. Just his arm moving toward his jacket. It was years of training and experience that alerted John to such soft, soundless movement. His eyes shot to the man’s neck. He needed visual confirmation. The head turned, looking into the jacket where his arm was reaching and there they were: Two aces, diamonds and spades. Carl Reeves.

John’s senses automatically re-geared to focus on two priorities. One: protect Sherlock. Two: neutralise target. In the span of a second, John did two things at once. With his left hand, he grabbed Sherlock (who had been walking slightly in front on John’s left side) and pulled him hard behind him, hard enough that he was vaguely aware of Sherlock falling to the ground. At the same time, he reached his right hand around to the back of his jeans, pulled out his gun, and shot. He heard two gun shots and knew Reeves had fired at the same time.

He only waited an instant to see Reeves fall from the fire escape (confirming he’d hit his target and there was no danger of a third shot) before whirling around to check Sherlock. The panic that had seized him when he heard the other shot dissipated when he saw Sherlock looking up at him, startled, before leaping to his feet, clearly unharmed. John had pulled Sherlock aside in time; Reeves had missed his mark.

Sherlock grabbed John’s arms. “Are you hurt?” he asked, eyes running fast over John’s body. He’d heard the second shot as well. “Your arm,” he murmured, whipping off his glove to gingerly twist John’s upper left arm.

John looked down and was surprised to see a small gash in his skin through the ripped fabric of his sleeve where the bullet had grazed him. He hadn’t felt it at all. “It’s fine,” he said quickly, looking up at Sherlock who was surprisingly pale for someone who was almost regularly shot at. “Come on, let’s check him,” John said, starting to turn. Sherlock let him go reluctantly.

Reeves was lying on the pavement with a bullet hole in his head.

“Good shot,” Sherlock offered.

“Thanks,” John said, tucking his gun into his jacket. He knelt down and checked for a pulse: none. He furtively moved the man’s arm, checking for a squash ball (just a nervous habit he’d picked up): none.

“How did I not see him?” Sherlock asked plaintively.

“You weren’t looking for him,” John said, standing.

“And you were?”

“Yeah, I was,” John said, looking at Sherlock seriously. “One of us has to mind whether you live or die, and since you can’t be bothered I guess that’s my job.”

Sherlock had the decency to look sheepish. “Mycroft sent me his picture; I didn’t delete it, I was
distracted by the case…” Sherlock rubbed the back of his neck. “Thank you,” he said, looking at John uncertainly.

John’s expression softened. “I suppose I don’t mind reminding you why you keep me around every once in a while.” He started to walk. Someone would have heard the shots; he’d be surprised if the police weren’t already on their way. As good as Mycroft was at cover-up he’d still rather not be standing over the dead body when the public arrived.

Sherlock followed, putting on an air of grave sincerity. “One never needs reminding why one needs one’s blogger.”

John’s mouth quirked to a half smile as he pulled out his phone and found Mycroft’s name in his contacts.

“Now, if you could write as well as you shoot…”

John shot Sherlock a warning look. As usual it went unheeded.

“At least let me install a cliché counter on your blog.”

“Remember I mentioned a while ago I was thinking of changing the blog’s title? How about The Incredible Tosser: London’s Most Annoying Detective?” John put his phone to his ear.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

“John,” Mycroft answered abruptly, had probably been expecting the call.

Sherlock muttered, “I’m only saying it wouldn’t hurt to treat the spellcheck function with a little more deference.”

“Reeves is down,” John said to Mycroft, glaring at his soon-to-be ex-flatmate, who adopted an innocent expression. “Your brother lives to irritate us all another day.”

Sherlock smirked.

“You’re certain he’s dead?” Mycroft asked.

“Confirmed”—he glanced at Sherlock—“I guess he chose the wrong target.”

He was glad Sherlock had been on his left, and that he was able to reach for Sherlock with his left hand. He could shoot with either hand better than most marksmen, but he’d received more training with his right and preferred it in a crisis.

“Indeed,” was Mycroft’s response. “It’ll be taken care of.” The line went silent and John frowned. Of course he hadn’t expected a pat on the back from the elder Holmes, but sometimes, even after all these years, he was still taken aback by Mycroft’s coldness.

“If you expect nothing from Mycroft, you’ll never be disappointed,” Sherlock said, reading John’s thoughts again. He raised his arm and a taxi pulled to a stop in front of them.

“221B, Baker Street,” Sherlock said to the driver when John shut the door behind them. He turned to John. “You’ve thought about that blog title before. You didn’t just come up with it now.”

“I have others.”
“I’ll bet.”

A pause.

“The Adventures of a Pompous—”

“Finish that sentence and consider your toothbrush donated to science.”

Silence.

*

John Watson was being impossible.

“Come on, Sherlock,” he said, knocking his hands away, “lay off; I told you I’ll do that myself later.”

Sherlock, holding the bottle of disinfectant, thought it would be useful to remind John of the rate at which bacteria multiply.

“I know,” he said tetchily. “I’m a doctor, remember? There’s nothing catastrophic bacteria can do just in the time it takes me to type up these notes.”

“Considering your average typing speed I wouldn’t be surprised if your whole arm had gone septic by the time you finished.”

John sighed in defeat. ‘Persistence’ was one of Sherlock’s many fine attributes, and John seemed to have learned early on that his quality of life was much improved when he allowed Sherlock to have his way.

John shut his laptop and stood from where he’d been sitting in his chair. He unbuttoned the light blue shirt that now had a tear in the sleeve. He was wearing a white t-shirt underneath. The bottom edge of his left sleeve had absorbed some of the blood from where the bullet grazed his arm.

“This way,” Sherlock said, walking toward the kitchen.

John followed, grumbling, “I can do this myself; I don’t need you to—”

Sherlock put his hand on John’s arm, below the wound, and tugged him sharply toward the sink. John glared, and Sherlock took the opportunity to start cleaning the cut.

John, he knew, would attribute this behaviour to guilt—Sherlock being the indirect cause of the injury. It wouldn’t be the first time John was wrong.

Sherlock understood that whenever John went home to Mary after their rougher fieldwork, Mary would tend to any injuries John might have sustained. Whatever else she was, she was also a nurse. Sherlock didn’t want John to miss anything from his life with Mary. While he hadn’t influenced John’s decision to come back to Baker Street, it didn’t mean he couldn’t influence whether or not John stayed. He wasn’t unbiased in the matter.

And just because John was a doctor didn’t guarantee he would take care of himself properly. He probably wouldn’t even have looked at the cut until later that night. Idiot.

Sherlock felt John’s eyes on his fingers as he disinfected the cut and wrapped gauze around it. It was deeper than it had originally looked through the tear in John’s sleeve. John murmured some instructions about fastening the gauze and put his hand to it when Sherlock finished and stepped
“Thanks,” he said, not meeting Sherlock’s eyes. Odd.

“John,” Sherlock started. His voice was probably lower, or coarser than he meant it to be because John’s gaze snapped upward with questioning eyes.

Sherlock hesitated. He’d been glib before, in the alley when John had shot the assassin and had almost been shot in return. Glibness was his natural response to situations that had the potential to become Emotional, but this time he felt he’d got it wrong. No one would ever mistake Sherlock for a tactful communicator, but somehow mocking John’s blog had dropped even below his own standards for expressing the sickening panic he’d experienced when he heard the second shot, before he knew John was all right, and the amazement he’d felt at once again witnessing John’s reflexes and shooting.

In all fairness John’s amateur writing—with his overly romanticised perspective of their cases and his questionable use of punctuation—was an easy target for mockery, and by all means Sherlock would continue to do it. But that wasn’t what he’d meant to say. Not then, anyway.

He’d said he needed his blogger, and he meant it. But what he hadn’t told John, and what he hadn’t said again today, was how unlikely and unbelievably efficient it was to have a blogger, doctor, soldier, and best friend condensed into one person. But ‘efficient’ wasn’t the right word. Of course it was efficient to have four such valuable abilities combined into one rather pleasing person who walked around 221B in striped jumpers making risottos with peas and things, but it was more than ‘efficient.’ Advantageous? Yes, but also not enough…

‘Invaluable’ was closer. Because if something happened to John, the way it had almost happened today… Sherlock’s eyes flicked down at the bandage and he found he didn’t have the words to finish the thought. If something happened to John… Usually entirely eloquent, Sherlock had discovered soon after meeting him that for some reason ‘John’ was one of the only topics for which the words seemed to vanish even as he reached for them.

But it didn’t matter, Sherlock decided. All of these fumbling and inexact words wouldn’t mean anything. They would probably just make John uncomfortable, and Sherlock didn’t know what the rules were anymore. Did John’s choice not only to leave his wife, but to come back to Baker Street constitute a shift in their relationship? Was John going to want to talk about Feelings now that he didn’t have Mary as an emotional support? Sherlock doubted it. (He hoped not.) He imagined that one of the perks of leaving a woman would be the cessation of the necessity for emotional blabbering. If that was the case, and as it occurred to him he became convinced it was, Sherlock wasn’t going to disappoint him. John didn’t want to hear about his invaluableness.

In the beat of the few seconds Sherlock paused, John’s neck had flushed red and Sherlock realised how intensely he must have been staring. He blinked a few times to rectify the situation and said, “I need to go to the lab tonight.”

John didn’t respond, probably thrown by the contrast between the intensity of Sherlock’s hesitation and the innocuousness of his statement.

“I left a project half-finished before I left for Switzerland and Anita’s threatened to throw out my cultures if I leave them there another night.” Sherlock had a complicated relationship with the Barts cleaning lady.

“Yeah, ok,” John said. “I, erm, yeah, run.”
“What?”

The flush at John’s neck deepened and he cleared his throat. “Me, I meant. Er, running.” He shook his head, closing his eyes as if to focus on getting the words out in the right order. “I meant, I think I’ll go for a run.”

“Are you all right?” Sherlock asked, eyes flicking again to the bandage and wondering if his friend hadn’t broken.

“Yeah fine,” John said. He turned away and walked toward the living room. “It’s just… adrenaline. You know how it is, killing people…” Sherlock quirked an eyebrow at his delightful killer/doctor. “Extra energy. Think I’ll run it off.”

Sherlock heard the squeak of the stairs as John went up to his bedroom. He supposed killing people and going for a jog wasn’t an altogether alarming combination of behaviour, but nevertheless he thought about it and concluded that he would still like John even if he went mad.

*

His flatmate was gone by the time John came back from his run. When he undressed for a shower he felt almost a pang of regret as he undid the gauze Sherlock had wrapped earlier. He smiled as he remembered the detective’s careful concentration as he followed John’s directions. As flippant as Sherlock had been in the alley after the shooting, the gentleness of his touch as he cleaned the cut suggested the concern that had been missing from his words. It had been… nice.

After the shower John redressed the cut and pulled on pyjama bottoms and one of his more comfortable long-sleeved shirts, resolving not to go anywhere for the rest of the evening. It had been a long twenty-four hours beginning with tackling Sherlock in Ireland and ending with shooting an assassin through the head. But standing in the empty living room he suddenly felt uncertain about what to do. He realised he’d been unconsciously looking forward to a night in with his flatmate. Thanks to both Switzerland and Ireland they hadn’t actually spent any time together at Baker Street since he’d left Mary’s house, and he found he was eager to fall back into the old routine he hadn’t yet acknowledged how much he'd missed.

Of course he enjoyed being out on a case as much as Sherlock did, but whenever he had missed Sherlock—when he thought Sherlock was dead or while his marriage was unravelling—it was the memories of their quieter nights in that came back to him the most frequently.

Sherlock had a surprising affinity for children’s games. (John had been floored the first time Sherlock had walked into the living room, stopped in front of his chair, clasped his hands behind his back, and asked, “Do you want to play Battleship with me?”) Sherlock typically preferred strategy-based games like draughts or chess or Sequence, but on occasion would suggest something sillier like Operation (John was pleased to play at least one game at which he could regularly beat Sherlock) or even Go Fish. Sherlock had no interest in resource/money accumulation games, refusing to play Monopoly and being decidedly uncooperative on the night John and Mike Stamford had tried to explain Settlers of Catan to him. (They needed a third player and John had mistakenly thought Sherlock might like it.)

"I don't want wheat, wheat is boring," he'd said.

"Ok, I'll trade you wheat for wood," John replied patiently.

"If there was anything more boring than wheat it would certainly be wood."
"Brick?"

"Is this a joke?"

And of course there was always Cluedo.

But often the appeal of evenings at 221B was just sharing the space. Out of all the hair-raising, life-threatening, bizarre and incredible events they had been though, interestingly the clearest memories—in his years away from Baker Street, the memories that came back to him with the strongest sensory power—were an array of seemingly banal moments from the 221B living room: Watching Sherlock’s intense concentration on a microscope from over the top of a medical journal; Sherlock leaning over his shoulder to look at something he’d found on his laptop; Sherlock proudly announcing a pleasing experiment result or flinging a disappointing one out the window; Sherlock berating the telly; Sherlock laughing out loud at his comments about certain members of the media or Scotland Yard; finding new places to hide Sherlock’s cigarettes; Sherlock’s stunned expression when, after whining on for an hour, John threw a packet of biscuits at his head.

John never thought he would feel so at ease living with such a difficult personality. He’d been shocked to recognise how well he and Sherlock got on. There was a calm comfort (which paradoxically included blowtorches and the occasional appearance of murderers) in 221B that he’d missed sorely since his falling out with Mary or, perhaps more accurately, since the night he’d returned to an empty flat after Sherlock had jumped off the roof of Barts.

But John supposed something like ‘Our First Night Back as Flatmates’ would fall under the ‘sentimental’ category, and therefore wasn’t something Sherlock was likely to acknowledge. So he set about typing up the rest of the notes from their newest case, ordering a takeaway, and then hooking his laptop up to the telly to watch some old Flying Circus episodes. The absurdity and general silliness of the Monty Python series was a welcome familiarity and pleasant contrast to the relentless drama of his real life.

He couldn’t believe how much had happened since Sherlock arrived in Ireland the day before. Being around Sherlock was a consistently stressful, dangerous, exhausting experience, and he thought—as the clock read midnight and he felt his eyes getting heavy and he shifted to a more horizontal position on the couch—that he wouldn’t trade it for anything.

* *

When Sherlock walked back into the flat around four-thirty in the morning he was surprised to see John sleeping on the couch.

Sherlock had almost forgotten what it was like to come home to a flat that wasn’t empty. He regarded John, who was curled on the couch wearing a long-sleeved shirt and pyjama bottoms. He took a step closer and John stirred.

“Sherlock,” he said with his eyes closed, pulling himself up to a sitting position. He blinked, attempting to focus through the haze of sleep. He looked dazed—the kind of confusion that results from being jerked directly out of REM. “Are you leaving?”

“Just got home,” Sherlock said, tilting his head to the side. John seemed to still be half-asleep.

“You should stay,” John mumbled, standing unsteadily and walking toward him.

Before Sherlock could respond John’s hands were on his scarf, pulling it free from his neck. His fingers tugged at the buttons of Sherlock’s coat as he endeavoured to pull it off. Sherlock stood
motionless as John dropped his scarf and coat to the floor.

“Don't leave,” he said, gazing disoriented at the floor. With mussed hair and soft shirt he looked like the warmth and comfort of sleep.

“I’m not going to leave,” Sherlock said, entranced by his flatmate’s unordinary behaviour.

“Ok,” John mumbled, walking off toward the stairs. “Ok.”

Sherlock watched John half-sleepwalk (fully sleepwalk?) up to his bedroom and remained standing in the living room after he’d gone.

He'd been right before. If John went mad he really would still like him.

Chapter End Notes

Just want to drop in to thank you for reading! All of your wonderful comments and kudos are validating the frankly shocking number of hours spent on this thing. Really they are (don't say it) truly (don't-) invaluable. :)
When John arrived downstairs the next morning he went to check Sherlock’s bedroom. He had a vague memory of his flatmate coming home last night, but he’d been so out of it he wasn’t sure if it had been a dream. He’d spoken to him, hadn’t he? Maybe not. He couldn’t remember.

Mycroft was right when he said Sherlock would never knowingly close his bedroom door without the direct orders of his mother. John didn’t think he’d ever seen Sherlock’s door closed except the time Janine had been in his bedroom. He mentally shook away that bizarre image.

Taking advantage of this open-door policy, John quietly peered into the room. Sherlock was there, asleep, sprawled on his stomach with the duvet hitting just the middle of his bare back, strikingly pale against the green sheets.

Information acquired John retreated to the living room. Sherlock would probably sleep for a while. When Sherlock did sleep, and on the rare occasions he slept in his bed (as opposed to kipping on the couch), he slept late. Sherlock was simultaneously the fastest, most energetic man he’d ever met and the laziest: His endlessly enigmatic flatmate.

So John busied himself with his first opportunity to re-establish his old Baker Street Sunday routine: laundry, tea, and newspaper, Tesco (Sherlock’s favourite biscuits, not Mary’s), and a stroll through Regent’s Park which concluded at the dry cleaner’s. Picking up Sherlock’s dry cleaning was not something he’d ever intended to do, but he’d found, to his horror, that Sherlock had a habit of dropping off his clothes, forgetting to go back, and simply buying new ones. That kind of waste (especially of really nice clothes, not to mention the exorbitant cost of such a practice) had been enough to make John grit his teeth and go himself.

The people at the dry cleaning service considered him the world’s best boyfriend and he’d given up trying to correct them. The clothes were clearly not his size and he had no other way to explain regularly picking up another man’s laundry. No one would understand the ‘my flatmate is a spoilt prat who, while being the world’s most genius detective, is actually incapable of managing basic adult tasks’ explanation.

As he’d expected, there was a considerable backlog of Sherlock’s clothes to be picked up. They were delighted to see him when he walked in.

“We thought something terrible might have happened,” the woman smiled.

“Well he died and I got married but we’re both better now, thanks.

“No, nothing terrible”—John returned the smile—“You’ll be seeing more of me.” He took the armful of bags and was glad the place was just around the corner from 221B. Sherlock and his damned fancy, dry-clean-only clothes. In John’s opinion it was totally unnecessary for a person who works primarily in his living room to wear such formal outfits, but then Sherlock had always been a public school toff so what else could he expect?

When he arrived home, it was close to five o’clock and Sherlock was up. Or not ‘up,’ but awake at least. He was lying on the couch, wearing his wine-coloured dressing gown over pyjama trousers and t-shirt, reading an article from a medical journal he was holding above his head.

“I don’t know what the hell you’ve been wearing when all of your bloody clothes have been at the dry cleaners,” John said by way of greeting.
Sherlock didn’t look away from the article. “Clothes. Boring.”

“No, not boring. Heavy,” John corrected, heaving the bags up and dropping them down on top of his flatmate.

Sherlock groaned as the weight hit him and glared up at John. “Was that necessary?”

“Actually, yes. If I put them anywhere else they’ll stay there for weeks.”

Sherlock sighed dramatically. He tossed the journal onto the coffee table and sat up. He took the bags with a scowl and went off to put them in his closet. John smirked. He looked over at the article Sherlock had been reading; it was about circulatory shock.

“Considering Scotland Yard is determined to bungle their own investigation by throwing a wrench in my process—slowing everything to a grinding halt by making me wait until Monday for an autopsy that could just as easily be done at the weekend if it weren’t for some arbitrary social constructs about ‘days of rest’ designed to indulge laziness and curtail productivity—I thought I’d do some background reading in the meantime.”

Sherlock had reappeared at John’s shoulder, and noticing his gaze had petulantly crossed his arms to deliver his anti-weekend tirade.

“Find anything interesting?” John asked evenly, careful not to further aggravate the world’s moodiest detective.

“No. There’s nothing further to be found without the autopsy results.”

“What about the movers? The guys who put the body in the armoire? Did Lestrade find them?”

“He says he’s working on it. God knows what that means.”

“You didn’t want to find them yourself?”

“Busywork. They’re just going to say they were hired to do it—pawns in the game. I’ll be interested again when they have a lead on who hired them. I can’t do the job of every single officer at Scotland Yard.” He sneered, “Well I could, but it would be insufferably boring.”

“And lying on the couch is working out much better for you.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. “If one is going to go mad with boredom it’s preferable to do it in one’s own living room.”

“Right,” John said, backing out into the open space of the room from where Sherlock had him trapped between the couch and the coffee table, “if you do go mad, any chance it could not involve duct tape this time?”

John was referring to Sherlock’s last serious bout of boredom when they’d lived together. It had resulted in an experiment involving the effectiveness of duct tape to gather particles (hair, fibres, dirt, dust, etc.) for forensic evidence. John had come home to find many things wrapped up in the tape, not the least of which being his laptop, all of his socks, and the couch.

Sherlock gave John a look that suggested he was being unsympathetic. John avoided it by ducking into the kitchen to make tea.

Sherlock followed him. “The point of a mad person is that he’s lost the use of his logical faculties. I
can’t very well remember not to use duct tape if I’ve gone mad.”

“I have full faith in your logical faculties,” John said, turning on the tap.

There was a silence as John filled the kettle with water and then switched it on to boil.

“So what are we doing tonight?” Sherlock asked in a more casual tone, apparently willing to leave off the drama of his impending psychotic break for a bit. “If I have to wait until tomorrow to continue my work I’d rather take my mind off it tonight.”

“Oh,” John said a little awkwardly, half turning from where he’d been watching the kettle. “I was going to meet Mike and the Barts group at the pub tonight.”

Sherlock leaned against the kitchen doorjamb. “I fail to see how chatting with a bunch of unattractive, half-braindead people who don’t really like you can be considered an enjoyable night out.”

John shook his head. He didn’t need the reminder of how Sherlock felt about his friends, and how, allegedly, his friends felt about him. For his birthday one year the detective had given him a study he’d written called “An Examination of Hatred in Close Proximity,” based, he was assured, entirely on John’s friends’ body language. Instead of getting upset about a birthday present that boiled down to ‘Scientific Proof All of Your Friends Hate You,’ John had found it funny, and even laughed out loud while reading it. It was accurate, of course it was; it was based on Sherlock’s observations. But somehow he hardly minded. His friends were fun for a lark—a few beers once a month, sure, but he wasn’t particularly crazy about any of them either.

While John might seem like Mr. Sociable next to Sherlock (Ivan the Terrible would seem like Mr. Sociable next to Sherlock), the truth was he’d always been a bit of a loner. He accepted the people he was thrown together with, but never made the effort to gain new friendships or found the motivation to maintain established ones. This was partly the reason he’d come back from Afghanistan with no one to call.

Sherlock was the first friend he’d ever had that he not only cared about keeping, but had found himself utterly destroyed at his loss. It had taken him two years to not even remotely get over losing Sherlock.

He looked at his friend now, in his dressing gown and bare feet, not nearly as tall or intimidating as he seemed when prowling the streets of London in that coat. But still, he was Sherlock Holmes. A unique kind of potential energy radiated around him. John would feel it if he were blindfolded. And even slouched against the kitchen doorframe in his pyjamas, no one could mistake those sinewy muscles, that aristocratic delicacy of bone structure and air of entitled superiority, those bright eyes flecked with such an unlikely array of colours, reflecting a mind as dazzling as the universe.

They were fixed on him now and John realised he was waiting for a response. Only Sherlock would genuinely inquire why he’d made a plan to see his friends. John sighed and turned to pull two mugs down from the cupboard. “Because, Sherlock, that’s what goldfish do.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened and John grinned. “That's right, I know all about your and Mycroft’s term for ordinary people. And I can tell you it’s a very popular pastime for goldfish to meet together in pubs every once in a while.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “If you insist on being average there’s nothing I can do to help you.”

“I don’t insist on being average. I am average.” He dropped the tea bags into the mugs as if to
punctuate this point. “I don’t know what you were expecting having me back here, but I’m still a goldfish, and I won’t be any less boring than I was the last time.”

Sherlock’s eyes darkened slightly. “Suit yourself then,” he said, turning away from the kitchen and flopping back down on the couch.

John looked down at the mugs and suddenly did not feel like making tea for Sherlock. But on the other hand he’d already prepared everything and to not give Sherlock a cup now would appear to be a passive-aggressive move, which could add hostility to what had been a very mild (for Sherlock) exchange of words. So John settled for simply giving the contentious scientist one sugar rather than the two he preferred.

Sherlock didn’t deserve two sugars with that attitude anyway.

*

John had gone upstairs to change his shirt or whatever goldfish do in preparation for a ‘pub night,’ and Sherlock grabbed his violin. The frustration of being kept from his work by bureaucratic nonsense was compounded by the discovery that he wouldn’t even have John to distract him from it. He needed an outlet. Since John and Mrs. Hudson had been very clear that target practice (involving John’s gun and the living room wall) was not a viable option, he figured the violin would have to do.

As he tuned the instrument and prepared the bow he ran over the brief exchange he’d had with John in the kitchen a moment ago. He’d been less than amused when John called himself ‘average’ and ‘boring.’ John may be a goldfish, but he was his goldfish. And though their meeting had been coincidental, he hadn’t agreed to live with the army doctor arbitrarily. Sherlock would never have chosen to live with an ‘average’ and ‘boring’ person. He would never have chosen to live anyone at all (regardless of any amount of umbrella-waving on Mycroft’s part). But John had walked through the door and Sherlock understood immediately that John wasn’t ‘anyone.’ Of course he was ordinary in the standard non-genius sense of the word, but he was different. Better. The most superior of any goldfish Sherlock had ever encountered. And suddenly, inexplicably, there was space and time in Sherlock’s life where there had been none before. Space for another person walking at his side or moving around his kitchen. Time to slow down a bit and wait for John to catch up; time to explain, and even time to laugh when John’s responses surprised him—something his skull had never been able to do.

But if John was determined to be self-deprecating this evening Sherlock wasn’t going to indulge it by arguing with him. He supposed he could have asked John to stay in tonight, but he didn’t want to deprive John of his required goldfish time. Perhaps if John didn’t get enough goldfish time he might want to leave. Sherlock didn’t want John to leave.

He put the violin to his shoulder and paused, deciding what to play.

In the first month after they had moved into 221B together John admitted he knew next to nothing about orchestra music. He knew the major composers by name, but not much else. Even as he heard it Sherlock’s mind was putting together an experiment. By playing a variety of songs from different composers and observing John’s body language he could discover John’s subconscious taste in music.

John was mostly passive when he played Sarasate and Paganini, hardly looking up from what he was doing. He shifted and sighed or even got up to make tea when he played Vivaldi. He mentioned the songs sounded familiar when he played Tchaikovsky (of course anyone would recognise the songs from *The Nutcracker* or *Swan Lake*). He smiled when Sherlock played Mozart, and closed his eyes listening to Brahms and Schumann. He put his reading down completely for Bach.
Sherlock was thrilled the results of the experiment suggested John’s preference mirrored his own. He was a little concerned that his love for the German composers might influence the quality with which he played their songs, but he’d been careful from the start to play each piece with as much devotion as possible in order to maintain the integrity of the experiment.

Although he was glad to have revealed a hidden penchant for German classical music in John, he had flatly refused to play Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* when he discovered the only reason John was excitedly asking for it was because it had been in some war film he liked. But John finally wore him down, using the sort of puppy-eyes that shouldn’t be allowed to hold any influence over the great classical pieces of music history. He played the required “Ride” section of the opera and John clapped and shouted, “Yeah that was brilliant!”

"Genius,” Sherlock had corrected him with a rather stern look. Music should be evaluated on its own terms, not whether it had been hijacked for some action film.

However, it wasn’t until the first time he played Mendelssohn that Sherlock got a truly significant result. John had been sitting in his chair, working on his laptop when Sherlock began to play. In only a minute John had closed his laptop, propped his elbow on the arm of the chair and rested his chin on his fist. He watched Sherlock without seeing him, spellbound by the notes. When Sherlock finished the awareness seemed to come back into his eyes and he asked, “What was that?”

Sherlock blinked in surprise. It was the first time John had ever inquired about the title or composer of a piece. “It’s from *Lieder ohne Worte—Songs Without Words.* By Felix Mendelssohn.”

“IT’s nice,” he said. “Really nice.”

And Sherlock found that whenever he revisited Mendelssohn John was similarly affected. He asked who it was each time and laughed when Sherlock gave the same response. “I guess he must be my favourite then.”

Sherlock had played many pieces for John from the *Songs Without Words* volumes. However, he hadn’t played what was arguably Mendelssohn’s most famous piece, and one that was specifically written for the violin: his Concerto in E Minor. It was powerful. Arresting. Beautiful. And he hadn’t played it for John yet. He didn’t know why. He knew it well enough; it had just never felt like the right time.

As Sherlock hesitated, violin on his shoulder, looking out the window, deciding what to play, Mendelssohn came back to his mind. Well, why not? John was leaving; he could at least practice it for some better time. He heard John’s footsteps on the stairs behind him and John saying, “Off out.”

Sherlock waved his bow once over his shoulder in acknowledgment. And he began to play.

Often when Sherlock played he focused on the precision of a piece rather than the emotion of it: perfect bowing, complete accuracy of dynamics, flawless vibrato, etc. But today he needed to work through frustration. He needed sound to crowd out the infinite tangents of thoughts his mind could tear through—all futile and utterly maddening without the possibility of action.

He closed his eyes and narrowed his focus to the feel of the strings under his fingers, the weight of the bow, and the clear ringing of the notes as they flowed and ebbed together, allowing himself to be at once grounded in the sensations of his instrument and lost in the force of its music.

*  

Throwing on his jacket, John stopped on the landing as achingly beautiful notes floated through the
door and wrapped themselves around him. He stayed for a minute, listening, and then he quietly pushed the door back open. He could see Sherlock still facing away toward the window—graceful movement of sharp shoulder blades.

He meant to turn and walk away; he was late already. But something about the song… He hadn’t heard this one before. And the way Sherlock was playing… There was a weight to it, an insistence, as though it were crying out to be heard. Was it possible to play a song so that it demanded attention more than another song? John didn’t know anything about the violin, but he felt himself pulled forward and he stepped back into the doorway soundlessly, not wanting to interrupt, not wanting Sherlock to stop playing.

The notes rang out with such clear passion John wondered that anyone, even himself, could ever have thought this man unfeeling. Raw emotion poured from the violin now and John could feel it washing over him.

Sherlock turned from the window as he played and John tensed, feeling as though he were intruding on something private. But Sherlock’s eyes were closed. He almost never played with his eyes closed. It occurred to John that Sherlock was feeling the music this time instead of seeing it, and the result was incredible. He couldn’t help thinking that such a performance was being wasted on him, who was hopelessly ignorant about such things—that Sherlock should be on a stage being judged by international experts, who would no doubt be impressed. But just because John couldn’t evaluate his technique didn’t mean he couldn’t appreciate the intensity of the sound enveloping him. The drama of the melody captivated him: its urgency and its insistence and its melancholy.

It took a while and some effort for John to tear his eyes away from Sherlock long enough to take out his phone to send a text.

Sorry, can’t make it tonight. Sherlock. J.

John knew the guys would understand. This was only the latest of many similar texts he’d sent over the years. When apologising for breaking off plans John only had to type the word ‘Sherlock’ to be excused.

‘Sherlock’ held various meanings for his friends: anything from ‘we’re on a case,’ to ‘a lab rat escaped in the flat’ (the recapture of Seven had required their combined effort and ended in a probationary period regarding Sherlock’s permission to bring home laboratory animals). One of the more memorable times it had meant, ‘he’s melted the lock and we’re actually stuck in here.’ (“I hope you didn’t have plans to go out this evening,” Sherlock had said coolly from his chair after John had bounded down the stairs from his bedroom and grabbed his jacket.)

John slid his phone back into his pocket and returned his attention to Sherlock. He marvelled at the dexterity with which his fingers flew across the strings, never hesitating, never faltering, even when at times the notes came in flurries at seemingly impossible speeds. Sherlock had the hands of an artist—pale, slender fingers with a delicacy that was entirely missing from John’s own hands, which were thick and rough and sturdy. John supposed it wasn’t surprising that Sherlock controlled the violin with the same agility he used to pick locks or handle fragile vials of dangerous chemicals.

The depth of Sherlock’s skill and the extent of his genius—whether it was deduction or chemistry or code breaking or acting or fighting or speaking foreign languages or playing the violin—never ceased to amaze John. Sherlock had talent woven through him like a silver lining and so often it shone brighter than anything else around him.

It wasn’t seldom John wondered how it was possible that this man, who was so wholly extraordinary, had chosen him, of all people. It’s true he could put up with Sherlock’s moods better
than most, but he certainly hadn’t been Sherlock’s only option. Molly, for example, had always been an option. And now that Sherlock was internet-famous he had fan clubs worth of options. But he’d never shown the slightest inclination toward anyone else.

*Why me?* It was the biggest mystery in John’s life, and the only one he knew he couldn’t ask Sherlock to solve.

John leaned against the doorframe and watched the world’s only consulting detective fill the room with heart-rending music that sang of love: the longing and passion of desire, the devastation of loss, and the elation of fulfilment. He couldn’t believe that someone who had never been in love—someone who self-purportedly didn’t have the time or interest for love—could so adeptly reach the heart of a piece of music and bear it so openly.

Sherlock was standing in profile now: eyes still shut, only the occasional flutter of eyelashes or twitch of the mouth when the emotion of the piece shifted.

In his life John had learned that some moments were worth experiencing more than others. He could drink beer in a pub with people who didn’t really like him another time.

*The finale of the song was a furious whirlwind of ecstatic notes and Sherlock tore through it as though he could tear it apart. When he hit the final note of the concerto he let it ring through the stillness of the room before opening his eyes and lowering his bow.*

“Beautiful,” came an amazed voice from the door.

Sherlock started, almost dropping the bow, when he saw John in the doorway.

“I thought you’d left.” He turned to busy himself with putting away the instrument.

“I changed my mind,” John said, walking further into the room, stopping just short of where Sherlock was standing.

“Sherlock, that was—that was amazing. I’ve never seen—what was that?”

Sherlock looked up from where he was loosening his bow. John’s face was full of wonder—the same expression Sherlock had seen for the first time on their first case, and the one he continued to see even after years of working together. He had wondered when John would get bored, when he’d cease to be impressed. It hadn’t happened. And now after more than five years of knowing each other John was still standing in front of him looking at him like—like *that*. Sherlock hastily redirected his attention back down to the violin case.

“Mendelssohn, Concerto in E Minor,” he said, sliding the bow in place and closing the lid.

“It was beautiful,” John said.

Sherlock shrugged. “It’s a well-written piece.”

“Yeah, but, I mean, you played it…” John trailed off, apparently looking for the words. “*You were…*” Sherlock waited, but John just ducked his head and smiled ruefully. “Look, what do you think about a stir fry tonight?” he asked, shrugging off his coat and walking toward the door to hang it up.

“You’re—you’re staying then?”
“Yeah, I’ll see those guys some other time.”

“John——”

John turned from where he was walking into the kitchen and Sherlock realised there was no concrete formation of words present in his mind to produce a following sentence. He regrouped quickly.

“Is it, erm, is it the one with that rice…?”

John grinned. “Jasmine rice, yeah I bought it today.”

“Ok.” Pause. “Good.” Pause. Sherlock felt like he should say more. “I like that one.”

“I know,” John called back from the kitchen. “I remember.”
A Favour

“John.”

John let go of the spoon he was using to stir his coffee, round and round the cup, creating a small whirlpool. Harry was looking at him sternly. As though he were the one that deserved lecturing for his behaviour. He leaned back in his chair; the cheap metal scraped against the floor of the cafe. He watched his sister’s expression soften from reproving to concerned. He didn’t know which was worse.

“I’m sorry about your marriage,” she said.

She didn’t know what she was talking about. That wasn’t her fault though. He hadn’t told her anything. It was her fault though. If she hadn’t been such a rubbish older sister he might have told her more.

John shrugged. “Well, the wedding wasn’t important enough to attend; I don’t know why the divorce should matter.”

He’d just wanted the name of her divorce lawyer. The one she used when she ended things with Clara. He had called her up thinking she would give him the name, maybe some brief condolences, but nothing exceeding a few minutes. Then they could both go back to their separate worlds where the other only existed for a day at Christmas, and sometimes not even then.

She had asked where he was staying. He told her he’d moved back to Baker Street. There had been a silence on her end of the phone.

Harriet was five years older. The age gap was too big when they were young. From the day they brought him home his parents had made her the babysitter. Watch Johnny, Harry. He interrupted her life—took the spotlight and gave her responsibilities when she’d had none. Watch Johnny, Harry. And she had resented him for it. She was sixteen when he was eleven, and she was made to stay home every Saturday night so his parents could go out. And that was even before their mum died, and their father had needed help with everything. John understood. But at the time it hurt. She was cruel, making no secret of the fact that he was nothing more than a burden. And John, recognising her lack of love for him from an early age, had been as difficult and nasty back toward her as possible. The damage was too deep, too long-lasting to be repaired just because they were adults now with better perspective.

He was shocked when she wouldn’t agree to give him the information unless he met her for coffee. She had something to say to him. John was on the verge of telling her he’d have no trouble finding a divorce lawyer elsewhere when she said, “John, please. I think it’s important.”

Harry dropped her eyes to her coffee, but she took the comment about his wedding in stride. “I won’t play at anything by saying, ‘I know I wasn’t the best older sister’ or some bollocks like that. I was anyone’s worst nightmare of an older sister and you were a piece of shit little brother.”

John scoffed, “Is that what you came here to tell me?”

“No.” She looked at him hard. “I want to tell you it’s ok if you love him.”

John blanched, caught completely off guard. But he recovered quickly. “Really?” he laughed humourlessly. “Are you giving me permission to be gay? I’m not, by the way, but thanks. I’ll remember it the next time I feel like picking up a bloke on my way home. I’ll think, ‘This is ok
because Harry says I’m allowed.’”

She regarded him silently. Normally she would rise to the bait, call him a twatface and storm off. But this time she was quiet. She let the silence go on until John felt uncomfortable and even slightly embarrassed by his outburst. He crossed his arms and sank back into his chair. He supposed they had taught her this strategy at her AA meetings.

“I have something I want to say to you, and I want you to listen. Even if you completely disagree with it I want you to listen, and not say a word until I’m done speaking.”

“Why should I do that?”

“Because I don’t do bollocks like graduations and funerals and weddings, and I know I’m better out of your life than in it, but believe it or not I do care about you.”

John rolled his eyes. No, she didn’t do any of those things. She didn’t even attend their father’s funeral, let alone help organise it.

“I said ‘believe it or not,’” she snapped. “I don’t care whether you believe it. It’s true.”

Touching. It was probably a good thing she hadn’t come to the wedding. What with Sherlock and a murderer and the bride being an undercover assassin, the last thing that wedding needed was Harry Watson.

“My life is a mess, you know that. I haven’t had anything I could give anyone in a long time. So, please, do me a favour and just let me say this. I want to feel like I’ve done something right for you, for once.”

John cleared his throat. He knew it must have been as unpleasant for her to come here as it had been for him. “Fine.”

“Promise you won’t say a word.”

“Fine.”

She took a breath. “If you loved him, it wouldn’t mean you’re gay.”

John lifted his eyebrows sceptically. A man loving another man was the definition of gay, the last he’d checked.

“We live in a revolutionary time for sexuality.”

Oh god. There must be a wasp nest he could step on, or something better he could do than listen to his lesbian sister give him a lecture about sexuality.

“People are finally getting it through their thick heads that the world is not divided into ‘gay’ and ‘straight.’ Those words are just labels, and they don’t work nearly as well as people think. If you loved him, it wouldn’t mean you were wrong in dating women all your life. It wouldn’t mean you’ve been gay the whole time and didn’t know it or some stupid shit. All it would mean is that you fell in love with someone else. Just because your type tends to be female doesn’t mean you’re incapable of being attracted to a man.”

John’s eyes flashed up at her. He opened his mouth to protest, but bit it back, remembering his promise.
“It has nothing to do with ‘turning gay,’” she continued, anticipating his argument. “If you were attracted to him, it wouldn’t mean you suddenly like men when you never have. It would only mean you like him.”

John let his eyes fall back to his cup.

“Sexuality is a scale, and no one is one hundred percent directly on either endpoint. Not me, and not even you, with all of your girlfriends. Everyone has the potential to fall in love with someone of either gender. It’s less likely for someone closer to one side of the spectrum, but it’s not impossible.”

Unbidden, a memory of Irene Adler in the abandoned Battersea power station appeared in his mind.

_Are you jealous?_

_We’re not a couple._

_Yes you are…_

_Who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes, but – for the record – if anyone out there still cares, I’m not actually gay._

_Well, I am. Look at us both._

Irene Adler was gay. She was living with a woman when they met her; she liked women. But she’d fallen in love with Sherlock. And she had assumed that John, straight, had done the same. She was gay and he was straight, but _look at them both_. Weren’t they both living and breathing for Sherlock at that point? And this is what Harry was saying. They hadn’t spoken in a year, and yet here she was now, telling him the same thing Irene Adler had told him years before.

“It’s not impossible,” Harry repeated, bringing John’s attention back. “Look, you can bugger off and forget I said anything if you’re positive you could never love him. But I’ve read your blog, John, and the way you write about him, the way you describe him—I just don’t want you to be a dickhead and automatically rule out the possibility just because you believe ‘straight’ is some kind of authoritative, prison cell of a concept. I have friends from all points on the spectrum, and I’ve had friends who’ve made themselves miserable over these stupid labels. Stupid words. I thought I could save you both time and pain by telling you what it takes a lot of dumb twats years to figure out: Don’t let a word prevent you from doing whatever the hell you want. You shouldn’t give a fuck about what label it would fall under, or what anyone else would think. You’re a free adult. Why should you care if some random wankers can’t categorise you into their simplistic little thought boxes? You don’t owe anyone anything, and it’s none of anyone’s goddamn business what you do in your own flat.”

John raised his eyebrows at her increasing vehemence and she checked the rise in her voice, taking a breath. Clearly she had strong opinions on the subject. She’d been living the controversy herself since she was fifteen.

When she continued her voice was more even. “It’s hard enough to find happiness in this hellscape,” she said, glaring out the window facing the main street behind him. “Don’t make yourself an obstacle in the way of yours. Life is too short.”

John opened his mouth but Harry cut him off. “Just think about it.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“If it’s the sex you’re worried about, I hear a lot of straight couples specifically choose to do it that way, so the idea shouldn’t be too foreign to get used to.”
It had been the wrong time to take a sip of his coffee. John choked. “Jesus Christ, Harry!”

She gave him a wry grin. “Do you hate me?”

He smiled in spite of himself. “Yeah, definitely.”

* 

“Oh this poison!” Sherlock couldn’t help saying out loud for the second time. “Absolutely delightful.” He reached for another blood film and readjusted his microscope.

“You know it’s fine,” John said from where he was finishing his dinner at the kitchen table, “if you say that when it’s just the two of us here. But I hope you haven’t forgotten our discussion about not calling things that kill people ‘delightful.’ At least not in front of sane people.”

Sherlock was not really listening. David Rodgers’ autopsy results had come in and he’d spent the morning at the lab analysing the victim’s blood. He’d found poison, as predicted. (Of course Rodgers hadn’t died from the stab wound, it would take Anderson-level blundering not to have seen that.) But what kind of poison? He was England’s unofficial expert on poisons, and this was not something he’d seen before. It was something new.

“It’s genius—virtually undetectable by standard autopsy,” Sherlock said to himself and by proxy to John. “I was only able to find it because I was looking for it.”

John cleared his plate and came to stand behind Sherlock’s chair. “How does it work then?” he asked.

Sherlock could feel him leaning slightly over his shoulder to look at his notes. The familiar smell of wool and toast mingling with the unique, warm scent of John’s skin enveloped him. Sherlock had an unusually sharp sense of smell and a remarkable scent memory. It allowed him not only to pick up but to differentiate with unerring accuracy between barely lingering traces of perfumes, tobaccos, and even deodorants. Considering this and the fact that there was no one he spent more time in physical proximity with, John’s scent was as familiar to him as his childhood bedroom, as instantly recognisable as the smell of blood, formaldehyde, propane—It was different though, because it was softer than any chemical or perfume and certainly more agreeable. But despite its subtlety Sherlock could pick it out of a crowded place and know John was there even before seeing him. He found it unexpectedly… nice, even comforting in a way no other human’s was. John’s scent was an integral component of 221B, and the flat had never smelled right when he wasn’t living there.

“It suffocates the body from the inside,” Sherlock explained, straightening in the chair as he realised he had unconsciously leaned back. “It lowers the victim’s blood pressure to dangerous levels which eventually results in—”

”Hypoperfusion,” John cut in. “The organs don’t receive enough oxygen, the body goes into shock and shuts down.”

Sherlock grinned into the microscope. He had many reasons to be grateful that John was a doctor and not an accountant.

“But a person would notice if his blood pressure dropped that low,” John added. “Why wasn’t Rodgers checked into a hospital when he died?”

“Because the poison increases its effects exponentially. It starts slow, just a few basic symptoms of hypotension, which almost any otherwise healthy adult would ignore. It increases in very small increments. The victim doesn’t notice. And then BAM”—Sherlock slapped his hand down on the
“Please don’t enjoy this so much.”

Sherlock smirked. He leaned back again, speaking to the wall opposite but feeling John’s presence behind him all the time. “As far as poisons go this one is rather brilliant. The murderer distances himself from his victim by a matter of weeks and there’s no poison found in the autopsy. He gets away clean.”

“How did you know what to look for?”

Sherlock turned to give John a scathing look. “I am arguably the best chemist in England and I specialise in poisons. I had an idea what to look for.”

“Modest as always,” John muttered, walking over to his chair and dropping down into it.

“Modesty is a waste of energy. It accomplishes little more than to cloud facts with half-truths.”

“Can I quote you on that?” John asked, opening his laptop.

Sherlock returned his attention to his notes.

“So the question is,” John said after a minute, “who invented it?”

“That is indeed the question,” Sherlock murmured.

“You think it was Moriarty.”

A pause.

“Such an assumption would be purely guesswork at this point. Best not to make assumptions with insufficient data.”

“What about the scars? Do you think the scars are connected to how he was poisoned?”

Sherlock had scrutinised the corpse Molly wheeled out for him that morning: David Rodgers—the corpse from the alley, but unclothed this time, allowing him to do a more thorough examination than he had been able to do on the street. He’d texted the photos on to John at his surgery. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about the body—thirty-five years old, fit, a regular runner judging by his muscle tone—except his thighs. On the otherwise unmarked, un-tattooed, unblemished skin, thin silver scars latticed the man’s inner thighs. In a word: Odd.

Sherlock turned in his chair to face John. "Either directly or indirectly, yes. The pattern of scarring is too unusual. It would be a considerable coincidence if it was entirely unrelated to his murder."

"You’re sure they weren’t self-inflicted? I’ve seen scarring like this before. The location is right for it, upper-thighs makes it easy to hide—"

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “How old were the patients?”
“Well, typically fourteen or fifteen years old but—”

“No. He’s a successful lawyer in his mid-thirties with no history of anxiety or depression. I searched his flat this afternoon. There’s nothing there to suggest hidden angst.” Sherlock scoffed the last two words.

“So what’s your idea then?” John returned with an edge in his voice that Sherlock felt prickling the back of his neck. He narrowed his eyes.

"I can tell you the cuts were made by different knives at different times. I can tell you the width and make of the blades. However, I need more data to form a viable theory as to the circumstances in which they were received."

"In other words, you don’t know."

"There are many unknowns in this universe,” Sherlock snapped, “including how you manage function on a daily basis with such a miniscule store of knowledge in your brain.”

John lapsed into silence and Sherlock was able to return his attention to his work. But after just five minutes he was looking into the microscope when he felt John’s presence close at his side. He looked up and John was standing over him with his arms crossed.

“Why did they stab him then?” John was nothing if not tenacious. "If an autopsy wouldn’t find the poison, why bother trying to hide it by making it look like a stabbing?"

“The poison is new," Sherlock said, tilting his head to admire John's ability to look defiant in a wool-knit jumper. "My theory is they’re testing it and they don’t want anyone looking too closely before they’ve had a chance to get it right. A stabbing rules out the need for an autopsy completely and they think they’re safe.”

“Weren’t counting on you though.” John smiled tentatively.

John was like a soldier in Kevlar: His ability to withstand Sherlock’s outbursts must be medal-worthy.

Sherlock felt himself smiling in return. "Perhaps not."

If the poisoner wasn’t counting on him investigating it was a strike against the Moriarty theory. However, if he knew Moriarty, and he was fairly sure he did (at least better than anyone else), this murder could also be a message for him. A clever poison saying, ‘let the game begin (again).’ Sherlock allowed himself a moment to appreciate the circumstance: competing with a dead man. He had to hand it to him, the mad genius had truly taken 'never say die' to a new level.

“Why did they choose him though?” John asked, looking at the picture of Rodgers.


“When?”

“According to these results he received the poison just over two weeks ago. I would estimate sometime between the seventh and the tenth of October.”

“Ok,” John said, returning to his laptop to type the note. “And how about the movers who stuffed the body into the armoire? Any more info on them?”
“Two men, brothers, late-twenties. Lestrade’s holding them until the trial. He’s got enough evidence to strap them with a long sentence. Said he offered to reduce it for the name of the man who hired them, but they won’t talk.”

“Well, that’s a dead end then.”

“Hardly. It tells us the person they’re working for has power and influence. These men would choose years in prison over the consequence of revealing his name.”

“Sounds like Moriarty again.”

“Could be. Or someone close to him.”

“Are there any of those people left? I thought you destroyed his network.”

“Abroad, yes, but in London…” Sherlock rolled his shoulders to stretch them and stood. He turned around and leaned back against the table. “His closest agents were—still are—well protected. Moriarty would have known that his death was a possible outcome of our confrontation. Clearly, as he showed with vivid performance, it was an outcome he was not entirely averse to. Of course he would have prepared his closest operatives with instructions to carry out should he not return. We know he must have had powerful allies here in London, but there’s no evidence connecting anyone to him.”

John was looking at Sherlock with raised eyebrows. “So this could be it then. This case. It could lead us straight to Moriarty, or at least one of his top players.”

Sherlock was silent as John voiced what he’d deduced almost from the very beginning.

“Might run into bit of trouble then,” John said, giving Sherlock a half-smile.

Sherlock returned it. “Might do. If I promise you danger will you come?”

“I would come with you to catch Moriarty and his gang even if all it involved were days’ worth of paperwork.”

It occurred to Sherlock that John was the only person who ever made smiles want to break out across his face. He attempted to stifle one now as he said, “John, your courage is truly impressive.”

“Yoo-hoo!” came Mrs. Hudson’s voice through the door barely a moment before she opened it. She was carrying a large plate of biscuits covered by cling film. “Hello, boys,” she said looking back and forth between them. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“How could you possibly be interrupting anything?” Sherlock wanted to know. “Our time is entirely occupied by trivia. We do nothing but wait in anticipation for your intrusions.”

“Oh Sherlock, you get bored of everything. When are you going to get bored of sarcasm?”

“As soon as it stops suiting my purposes so nicely,” Sherlock said, moving from where he was leaning on the table to drop down into his chair across from John. “I would ask you to have a seat, but you’re clearly just on your way out.”

“Oh, no thank you dear, I’m just on my way out. I only wanted to pop in to drop off some biscuits,” she said, walking to the kitchen and placing them on the worktop. “Homemade; I thought you might like them.”
“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson, that’s very kind of you,” John said with his unerring ability to be tactful when he felt the situation called for it. Sherlock didn’t know where he found the energy.

“Why don’t you get right to it and tell us what favour you need,” Sherlock chimed in. “I’m sure I’ll say no directly, but I believe John will require time to work out some kind of polite wording for a refusal.”

John shot him a glare. Sherlock took it in stride. If he had an unmarked corpse for every glare John threw at him he would be a happy detective.

“Now that’s not fair, Sherlock, how did you know I was going to ask you for a favour?” Mrs. Hudson looked put out.

“Homemade.”

“What?”

“You said the biscuits were homemade. You often make biscuits but you don’t bother to say you made them because it’s obvious. Specifically mentioning that they’re homemade now is your subconscious way of emphasising that you put time and effort into something for us, which suggests we owe you something in return. Such as,” he drawled for flourish, “a favour.”

“Well,” Mrs. Hudson said indignantly, “as a matter of fact I did want to ask a favour.”

“Shocking,” Sherlock said, rolling his eyes at John.

“Sherlock,” John said in his best warning tone before looking back up at their landlady. “What can we do for you?”

“Well”—she shifted her weight on her feet, suddenly nervous—“I was wondering…” She hesitated. Perhaps this was going to be more interesting than he’d thought. “Well,” she said more firmly this time, “it’s just that my charity, you know the one I help out with from time to time?” She received blank looks from both Sherlock and John but continued bravely. “There’s a ball on Thursday to raise money. The man I’ve been seeing—”

“The bank clerk who’s been divorced twice, has two children, three grandchildren, asthma, and a secret obsession with Star Trek?”

“Oh Sherlock you make everything so difficult”—she took a deep breath—“Yes, that’s him. We planned to go together, but just this morning his daughter called with some kind of scheduling emergency and now he has to look after his grandchildren on Thursday.”

Sherlock sighed heavily, “And you want me to accompany you to the ball.”

“Actually,” she said hesitantly, “I was hoping John might come with me.”

John looked up in surprise. Sherlock gave a short laugh, “John? But he’s rubbish at dancing.”

“Hey!”

“Oh come on, what do you want me to say? That you’re a natural? Move over Nijinsky, John Watson’s taking the stage?” He knew John wouldn’t get the reference to the legendary male ballet dancer, just as he never got any of John’s pop culture references. Sherlock had managed to keep his love of dance a secret so far. He’d told Janine as a necessary confidence to ensure her affection, which he’d needed to exploit later. The only other possible giveaway had been when he’d taught
John to waltz for his wedding. But then it seemed John had put his knowledge of the steps down to his public school upbringing and hadn’t enquired further.

John cleared his throat. “Erm, he’s right, actually,” he said to Mrs. Hudson. “I barely managed my wedding dance, and if I did it was only because he taught me—”

“It’s not about being a good dancer!” Mrs. Hudson assured him. “I just need someone to escort me. And I thought I’d have better luck asking you than Mr. Sulky over here.”

John laughed and Sherlock glowered.

“Might have to remember that one for my blog,” John said mirthfully. “Scotland Yard baffled, calls in Mr. Sulky.”

Mrs. Hudson and John were both giggling and Sherlock stood to let his glower radiate further. “There’s a lack of school children present for such childish humour,” Sherlock said sulkily.

“I’m sorry, love,” Mrs. Hudson said, regaining her composure. “It’s just that I thought you’d have no interest in something like a charity ball. But of course if you’d like to come…” She trailed off as if she couldn’t imagine him saying he would, that the sentence wasn’t even worth finishing. He’d kept his secret well.

“I’d be happy to take you,” John said, standing as though he were accepting a mission. “After everything you’ve done for us I’d be glad to return the favour. As long as I don’t have to dance.”

Mrs. Hudson grinned from ear to ear. “Oh, wonderful! John, thank you.” She took his hand and pressed it affectionately. “You certainly won’t have to dance. Just being as handsome and charming as you are will be more than enough.”

John looked down uncomfortably.

“I’m afraid it’s a rather posh affair. Black tie, you know how these things are,” she looked worriedly at John as though he might back out.

“No problem,” he said. “I’ll find something.”

“Perfect!” she smiled. “Well, I’d best be off then—”

“I’ll go,” Sherlock said, crossing his arms and half-sitting on the arm of his chair.

They both turned to look at him. “What’s that, dear?” Mrs. Hudson asked him.

“I’ll go. I’ll dance. I can dance.” Goldfish need goldfish-level explanations. ”I’m good at it.”

“Really?” It was John asking.

“Really.”

“Oh, well—well that’s lovely!” Mrs. Hudson trilled. “Thank you, Sherlock.”

“In that case you won’t need me,” John said, a note of relief in his voice.

“Oh, erm, I’d still be glad if you came…” She cast a concerned glance over at Sherlock. “Actually, John, can I have a word? Sherlock, I’m thrilled you’ll be my dance partner. I’ll look forward to Thursday.”
John directed a puzzled expression at Sherlock before following Mrs. Hudson out into the hallway.

The door shut and in a flash Sherlock was pressed up against it.

“You know how he is,” Mrs. Hudson was saying. “Would you mind—would it be all right if you still plan to come? You know how Sherlock forgets about these things. You could come in case he has to run off at the last minute, or you know, in case he doesn’t.”

“What do you mean?” John asked.

“It’s just—well, he’s Sherlock. I can’t have him offending everyone there. The ladies on the board are—let’s just say their sense of humour isn’t as good as mine.” Her voice picked up its insistence. “He’s better when he’s with you, John. At the very least you could stop him from causing a scandal by announcing who’s sleeping with whose husband—”

“I’m not his caretaker.” Sherlock could hear the slight bristle in John’s voice. “And I can’t say I’m all that bothered about the secrets of a bunch of humourless adulterers.”

Sherlock grinned.

“I know, I know…”

A pause.

“I’ll go.”

“Really? Will you?”

“But only to prevent him from shouting weirdly specific criticism at the musicians.”

Sherlock recalled the reference to John’s wedding. However, he maintained there was nothing ‘weird’ about preventing a violinist from butchering a Mozart classic. One would expect a so-called professional to recognise the difference between forte, mezzo-forte, and fortissimo, and that he should be reprimanded upon his failure to do so.

“I’m not going to spend the whole night trying to stop Sherlock from being Sherlock,” John continued.

“Fine, fine, fine,” Mrs. Hudson replied hastily. “It’ll be worth it anyway to see the looks on their faces when I show up with the two of you. You’ll be the handsomest men there. By a long shot,” she added.

Sherlock could practically hear John’s embarrassed silence through the door before Mrs. Hudson continued, “Do you think Sherlock knows how lucky it is for him that he’s so pretty?”

“Right,” John said abruptly, “we’ll both be there, so don’t you worry. See you soon, Mrs. Hudson.”

Sherlock sprang away from the door and just managed to grab the closest slide from the table when the door reopened. He pretended to study it disinterestedly as John walked back into the room.

“I guess I’m going as well then.” Out of the corner of his eye Sherlock could see him flexing his hands the way he did when he was anxious.

“Fine,” Sherlock muttered, not looking up.

“You know,” John said, “I think we have an abnormal relationship with our landlady.”
Sherlock didn’t respond. He didn’t know anything about normal relationships.
A Client

When John awoke he immediately sensed something was wrong. He turned his head and bolted upright.

"Jesus, Sherlock, what are you doing here? What time is it?"

"It's six."

John groaned, "Why?"

"The hour invariably comes after five and before seven. There's nothing to be done about it."

John looked up at his impossible flatmate. He had his blue dressing gown thrown over pyjama trousers and t-shirt. Strikingly thin, as usual, but never frail; there was visible strength in the sinewy muscles just outlined by the thin fabric. His hair was mussed from sleep. So he'd only just woken as well.

"No," John said, unamused. "I mean why are you in my bedroom, and why am I not asleep?" His alarm was set for seven. He had to be at the surgery at eight. He was owed another hour of sleep.

"Mrs. Hudson woke me up," Sherlock said tetchily. "I'm paying it forward."

"Thank you." John glared.

"We have a client."

"Really? Now?"

"In our living room."

"And you're up here?"

Sherlock crossed his arms. "I thought you liked to be included in these little projects."

"Ok, ok." John tossed the blankets back. He stumbled out of bed and Sherlock caught his elbow with quick reflexes. Their eyes met for a moment before Sherlock hastily dropped his hand and stepped back.

"God, it's too early," John mumbled. "I'll just brush my teeth. Be down in a minute."

The girl was sitting in the hard wooden chair with one leg crossed over her knee, bouncing her foot up and down nervously as John walked into the living room. Sherlock was slouched in his chair, jaw resting on his fist, looking his usual amount of displeased about having anyone in the flat. The girl stood to shake John's hand.

"Hello, I'm Hannah, sorry to wake you, nice to meet you."

John smiled at her politely and she blushed. She was pretty, he noticed. Probably in her late twenties, small and slight (even with her heeled pumps she was still an inch shorter than him) with just enough curve to her breasts and hips. She had a nice face—undistinctive, but the kind that becomes prettier the longer you look. She returned his smile. She was cute, openly nervous about meeting them. Nothing like Mary. Even her long, naturally chestnut coloured hair provided a pleasing contrast to Mary's bleached blonde.
"Have a seat." Sherlock's cold tone sliced through the warmth of their visitor's demeanour. John realised with surprise that her eyes hadn't left him, had hardly even glanced toward his normally unignorable flatmate since he'd entered the room. John was so used to watching clients ogle Sherlock that having her admiring gaze directed toward him put him a bit off balance. Not that he discounted his own appeal with women (in fact he'd had a fair bit of success not only in London but across three continents over the course of his life). However, he also had to acknowledge that in his considerable number of past relationships, he'd never actually been standing next to Sherlock when he met any of his girlfriends. Was she not aware there was a tall, dark, and reportedly gorgeous detective in the room with them now? Maybe it was because Sherlock was in his pyjamas... But then Sherlock looked better in his pyjamas than most men did in a tux. Tosser.

She sat and smoothed her skirt with anxious fingers as John took his seat.

"I see you're a fan of John's blog," Sherlock said casually.

"Oh, well," she blushed again, glancing at John, "yes, I—" was all she could say before Sherlock spoke again.

"So tell us, Hannah, do you have us up at six on trumped up claims as an excuse to meet your favourite blogger and take a 'selfie' in our flat, or is it possible you've actually brought us something interesting?"

"Sherlock," John snapped the warning as the girl's expression changed to horror.

"No! I don't want—I didn't mean—I'm so sorry to wake you! It's just—I didn't want to wait and I thought I'd come before work—"

"Let's hear it then. And pray make it good. It's too early for boring."

John glared at his entirely unmanageable detective. He supposed he wasn't treating her any more abominably than any other client, but she was sweet, and John's more gentlemanly principles objected to Sherlock handling her as roughly as any other bloke that walked through their door.

She scrambled for her purse under Sherlock's icy stare, and John took comfort in knowing that if she was indeed a regular reader of his blog, at least she couldn't be caught off guard by Sherlock's behaviour.

"I work at—" she started.

"A funeral home," Sherlock finished for her. "Easy. I could do this one blindfolded."

John snorted, "Oh come on. She reads the blog; she knows what you can do. You don't have to show off—"

"Your hands smell like latex."

*Why do I bother?*

"They always will, no matter how many times you wash them—typically the curse of the medical or scientific research professions, but you don't work in either. A dentist, perhaps, but dental work is too mundane for you, the girl who obsessively reads John's blog and not for its literary merit."

John swung his leg up and accidentally kicked Sherlock in the ankle as he crossed it over his knee. Sherlock hardly shot him a glance before zeroing back in on his subject.
"You're not tired enough to be a nurse and not smart enough to be a doctor. Definitely not smart enough for research. Add in the highly specific scents of formaldehyde and methanol—I can smell traces of them in your hair—and the conclusion is quite simple. You're an embalmer, and if you want to completely get rid of that smell you'll need a stronger shampoo than whatever herbal mint rubbish you're currently using."

There was a silence and John, who'd been staring at Sherlock, reminded himself to blink. The deductions went fast and John often found himself transfixed. It was genius, truly amazing and Sherlock had done it based only on his sense of smell.

Tearing his eyes from his flatmate he looked back at Hannah and couldn't help feeling surprised. An embalmer. He never would have guessed. But then he’d known from the beginning that the science of deduction was never going to be his forte (despite Sherlock’s continued attempts to get him to try it).

"That's right!" Hannah smiled, apparently willing to ignore that half of what Sherlock said was rather insulting. She had frozen with her purse on her lap and was gazing at the detective. She seemed to have forgotten what she was doing as she witnessed, John assumed, her favourite character in action. But receiving no reciprocal smile she quickly resumed digging in her purse. She pulled out her phone.

"I was working on a body earlier this month and I noticed some strange scarring on his legs."

John's eyes shot to Sherlock, who merely steepled his fingers together. He would play this close to his chest, John knew. He wouldn't let her know the possible importance of her information.

"I didn't think anything of it until yesterday," she continued. "We got another body in with almost the same pattern of scarring, also on his thighs." She handed her phone to Sherlock. He held it up, swiping through to see the photos. He passed the phone to John.

There were pictures of three corpses labelled A, B, and C. Bodies A and C were men with scars remarkably similar to Rodgers': thin silver lines of varying lengths and angles crisscrossing the upper inner thighs on both legs. Body B was a woman with no visible scars.

"A and B died in a car crash on Monday, October eleventh. They were a couple and the families chose to do a joint funeral; I worked on them both. C died on Sunday. There was a break-in at his flat and he was shot, maybe you heard about it."

"Wasn't that the one about the toy collection?" John asked. "I remember reading something—"

"Neil Parker had a collection of original edition action figures valued at over ten thousand pounds. Supposedly word got out and amateur burglar Stanley Howard broke into his flat. He was surprised, however, to find Parker at home when he was expected to be out. In a panic Howard shot Parker five times in the chest."

He was like BBC News if BBC News were a bad-tempered flatmate who stole your chips off your plate and occasionally burned the curtains.

"We got Parker's body in yesterday," Hannah said, "and I just—I thought it was odd to see the scars again. Especially since they weren't related to the cause of death in either case. I've prepped a lot of bodies and I've seen some weird stuff, but never twice, and in two separate cases, on two unconnected people..."

She waited for a response. Receiving none she went on. "It's true I read Dr. Watson's blog." Her
blush faintly reappeared. "I couldn't help thinking this was something you might be interested in..."

John handed the phone back to her. He wanted to tell her she was right, that she'd done well, but he knew without question to follow Sherlock's lead. The detective sat silently gazing at her over the tips of his fingers.

Her next sentences were a rush of words. "It's probably nothing. You're right, I just thought it was—I don't know—I've probably spent too much time on the blog and I thought—I'm so sorry for waking you up and then wasting your time, I'm sure it'll be best if I just leave—"

"Sit," Sherlock said.

In surprise she dropped back into the chair from where she'd started to rise.

"I'll take the case," he said.

"Really?"

"We'll have to dig up the bodies," Sherlock said to John.

"Oh, but we just—" Hannah started.

"Send a text to Lestrade and tell him we'll need a warrant for the exhumation of all three graves."

"Three?" John asked.

"The girlfriend who died in the car accident. She doesn't have scars but I want to check her blood too."

"Oh, I've got it," she said brightly, digging into her purse again and pulling out an envelope. "All three bodies." She read his blog; of course she'd come prepared. The dubious legality of such a transaction was something John ignored with practised ease. To operate strictly within legal limits would defeat the purpose of a consulting detective altogether.

She handed the envelope to John. "I wrote my phone number and email on the back of the envelope in case you want to contact me—I mean, in case you need any more information."

John smiled at her fumbling. Definitely cute.

"Thank you for your time," she said to Sherlock.

"Our time is only as valuable as the cases that occupy it," Sherlock said, standing and giving her a tight, fake smile. "Whether it's wasted or not remains to be seen."

"We'll be in touch if we need anything more," John said, flicking his eyes back at Sherlock as he walked her to the door. He stepped forward, shaking her hand.

"I really love your blog," she breathed. "You tell the stories so well."

"Thank you"—John grinned at the compliment—"I'm glad you like it."

"But really we are busy." John almost jumped. He had no idea when Sherlock had appeared at his shoulder. "Crimes to solve, you know murderers don't wait for idle chatter." Sherlock stepped between them to pull open the door.
"Of course," Hannah said, readjusting her purse on her shoulder. "Erm, good luck with everything. Bye then," she said giving John a final glance around Sherlock before exiting the flat.

Sherlock swung the door shut behind her.

"Yes!" he shouted, leaping into the air. "Oh, yes!" he said again, striding across the room and pushing his hand back through his hair. "John, do you understand what this means?" He turned on his heel and swept directly back up to John, gripping his shoulders. His eyes were filled with the excited, mirthful energy he rarely allowed others to see but that John knew so well: a sinister kind of cheerfulness. The colours in his eyes shone, lit by an internal electricity. John loved that look. It was radiant, like catching a sunrise if sunrises were unpredictable and that much more spectacular for it.

"John!" Sherlock gave his shoulders a shake, snapping his attention back to centre. "This is an unprecedented stroke of luck!" He snatched the envelope from John's hand and ripped it open, tearing the girl's information down the middle. His eyes skimmed rapidly across the pages. "Yes, yes, everything is here. Excellent. This morning we had an isolated incident and now we have a pattern! Rodgers isn’t the first cadaver with these scars; he’s the third."

John rested his hands on his hips. "You could have been nicer to her, considering she just cracked this case wide open for you."

Sherlock’s bright eyes sliced toward him over the edge of the paper. "There are many things I could do. Just as there are many things you could do." He returned his attention to the documents. "At the moment, you could be helping me research these people instead of whinging about some overly-decorous airhead who earns a living doing makeup for corpses."

John lifted his eyebrows. The unsolicited opinions of Sherlock Holmes on the women in his life would make for colourful reading.

He chose not to rise to the bait this time. "Or," he said, "I could get ready for work, which is actually what I need to be doing."

"I don't see why," Sherlock muttered, sitting down in his chair and shuffling the papers to read the next page, unconsciously pulling one knee to his chest.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Did you just say you don't know why I go to work?"

Sherlock lowered the papers and tossed his head back dramatically. "Yes, that's what I said. Why do you go to work?"

"Are you serious?" John asked, suddenly hearing his heartbeat in his ears.

"Yes I'm serious." Sherlock jumped back up from the chair. His eyes flashed: a surge in current that switched shining to burning. "Your work at the surgery is dull and beneath your capabilities. 'Yes, Mrs. Higgins you may take two paracetamols for your headache,' " Sherlock sneered. '"No, Mr. Jones the freckle on your arm is not cancer,' 'Let's have a look at your colon, Mr. Davies.'"

John felt his temper rising dangerously. "Do you know why I choose to work as a GP instead of a surgeon? Because of you, you self-important snob. I choose to do less demanding work with better hours so that I'm more available to you."
"But why bother at all? You could make enough money from our work alone. Why are you wasting your time checking people's ears when you could be doing much more interesting and important things with me?"

John’s adrenaline kicked into gear; his heart sped up and he tried to keep his words under control. "Because, Sherlock, I am a doctor. That's what I do. I am John Watson, Doctor of Medicine. I am not John Watson, Sherlock's PA."

"You're my blogger."

"I'm a doctor."

"You're both."

"And I need the other half! I went to school for years to study medicine. It's my skill. God, Sherlock, I won't throw away everything I am just because I met you. I left Mary. My work at the surgery is all I have that's independent from you."

Sometimes it seemed like Sherlock’s pale eyes could really cut his skin. "So you work at the surgery to get away from me."

"Not everything is about you!" John's exasperation was peaking. "That's my point! My work at the surgery is mine."

"You're being ridiculous. You don't have to do work you don't enjoy just to prove your independence. People won't think any less—"

"I DON'T CARE WHAT PEOPLE THINK," John shouted. "This is not about you or them. This is about me. I'm a doctor and I'm good at it and not everything in my life can revolve around you."

John stormed up the stairs to his bedroom. A short while later, when he came down again, fully dressed, Sherlock was sitting with his back to him working at his laptop. John didn't say a word as he grabbed his jacket and opened the door, and Sherlock didn't turn around.
John snatched a protein bar from the shelf in his office, the only lunch he'd have time for today between the crush of patients. Apparently flu season was early in London this year. He was just tearing open the wrapper when his phone buzzed against his desk.

**Interview 4:30 Paddington Gloucester Terrace and Chilworth St. SH**

John shook his head in disbelief before tossing the phone back on the desk. What to do when your deluded flatmate thinks he can have a row with you in the morning and order you around in the afternoon. Sherlock could do an interview by himself today. Sherlock could bugger off today.

John took a bite of the bar. He rolled his shoulders, stretched his neck, and something caught his eye. From where his jacket was hanging on the back of the door he could see a piece of white paper sticking out of the inner pocket. He hadn't noticed it before. Wondering whose vital lab results he’d forgotten to submit he crossed the room and plucked it out.

He blinked at it. Not lab results. It was the torn envelope with the girl’s—Hannah's—number on the back.

*  

Sherlock stood at the corner of Gloucester Terrace and Chilworth Street. He'd arranged an interview with a woman named Kathleen Bauer. She was a close friend of the woman who died in the car crash: Body B (probably more commonly known as Amy Elliot). He shifted in the cold as he waited, eyes fixed on the flats across the street without seeing them.

The client who had dropped the information into his lap this morning had been surprisingly convenient. Too convenient to be accepted at face value, of course. The moment she mentioned the scars he’d surreptitiously sent a text to one of his homeless network who worked the Baker Street underground station and was never far off. He was waiting for the girl on the street when she left and a text confirmed he’d followed her directly to the funeral home where she worked, no deviation. Only partly satisfied Sherlock had done a quick search while John was upstairs getting dressed. It revealed Hannah Walsh had been a member of Facebook since 2008 (not a new identity) and a subscriber to John’s blog since 2010 (not a new interest).

He wasn’t surprised. He didn’t give her enough credit to be able to act well enough to fool him—not an easy feat. So far only Moriarty and The Woman had been able to do it. No, she was genuine, everything from her stammering to her blushes—annoying but harmless. If she was working for someone she was doing it unwittingly. It wouldn’t take more than a gentle hand to help her connect the dots, even make her think she’d come up with the idea to go to Sherlock on her own. It wouldn’t be the first time a bad Samaritan had pointed him in the right direction. And if that was the case, so be it. The right direction was the right direction, regardless of who revealed the path. If someone with less than honorable intentions was waiting for him further down the road, he would meet him there.

And there was still the possibility of coincidence. Though it rankled, he couldn’t completely rule it out. If men were dropping dead around London with scars on their thighs it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that two of them could end up in the same funeral home. Whatever the truth turned out to be, their morning client was an innocuous component.

He checked his phone and stuffed his hands into his pockets, exhaling a cloud of cold air. 4:35. No response from the doctor whose shift had ended at four. The cab ride from his surgery was twenty
minutes in current traffic. He tried to analyse the probability of whether John would show up, but the numbers were unclear in his head. Frustrating. He could deduce whether a complete stranger would buy earrings or a necklace for his mother, yet still be uncertain about John, of all people. Words and numbers blurred around John in his mind. Irritating.

Sherlock flexed his fingers in his pockets, suddenly craving a cigarette the way he hadn't in a while. In truth the only thing preventing him from smoking one now was the fact that he didn't have one. Sometimes the simplest solutions are the most effective.

4:40. Perhaps there had never been a reason to believe he'd come. Perhaps he could go to hell.

Sherlock began walking up the block toward the Bauer woman's house. There was the sound of an engine. A car door slammed.

"Sherlock!"

He turned.

John was paying the cab driver. Brown brogues, jeans (he'd changed from his work trousers. He never wore them if he didn't have to), grey jumper under unzipped black coat. His sandy blond hair stood out in contrast against the grey and black of his clothes, the grey and black of London.

"Sorry I'm late," John said, walking up to where Sherlock was standing still. "Here, take this." He brusquely shoved a small brown paper sleeve into Sherlock's hand, not meeting his eyes.

More than a little curious he opened it and pulled out one of the last things he could have expected John to hand him on the street in a brown paper bag.

It was a cookie.

Sherlock looked up at John, who seemed to be having trouble maintaining eye contact. "I assume you haven't eaten today," he said. He was right. "And I know you didn't eat yesterday."

Sherlock blinked down at the cookie in amazement. It wasn't just any cookie either. It was exactly the same kind as the one Sherlock had stolen from John more than half a year ago. They had been reviewing case notes at a café. John had bought a cookie with his coffee and when he stepped out to take a call from Mary Sherlock had decided he'd try a piece. It tasted good. Really good. By the time John returned to the table the cookie had vanished completely. Sherlock had shrugged as though the mystery were beyond his abilities.

Did John remember the moment? Of course he must; it couldn't be a coincidence. A thought struck Sherlock and his eyes perused John's face in attempt to confirm it. Did John record information about him the same way he did about John? One thing he'd eaten voluntarily and John had remembered it all this time. Was John quietly cataloguing his food preferences? And using the information to manipulate him into eating more, as John, ever the good doctor, was always insisting he do?

Sherlock's mind raced through memories from when they'd lived together. John making late night runs to the twenty-four-hour fish and chips place near their flat, nudging the chips toward Sherlock until he was absently picking at them while he worked. John's curious habit of leaving out plates of fruit and vegetables. Were they all for him? Did he eat them? He supposed he did, a bit, sometimes. Was all the tossed, uneaten food worth whatever nutrients Sherlock might glean on the occasions he picked up a slice of apple or cucumber? John would be no poster boy for sustainability.

Sherlock almost laughed out loud. He'd had no idea. Sherlock Holmes—the detective of detail, the master of minutia—he actually hadn't noticed. He never bothered paying attention to what he ate.
Food was at the bottom of his list of interests along with golf and poetry. He closed his eyes and saw clearly the meals he ate reappearing on their table and the meals he didn't failing to do so. *I like that one,* Sherlock had said the other night about the stir fry. *I know,* John replied. *I remember.* Oh, John was good. Better than good. He was surely the consulting doctor of manipulative healthcare.

"Did you call her?" Sherlock asked, finding as he said it that his brain had been following two tracks of thought simultaneously.

John, who had been looking at the houses on the block, whipped his head around, surprised by the question. "No," he said finally, "I didn’t."

Sherlock held his gaze until John shifted uncomfortably, crossing his arms and looking away across the street again. He glanced back and met Sherlock’s eyes briefly as he said, “She’s not my type.”

The slight linger in his look told Sherlock he was remembering the scene from the living room a year ago. After they’d cornered Mary behind the façade at Leinster Gardens and before Sherlock had collapsed onto the paramedics’ stretcher. *You are abnormally attracted to dangerous situations and people.*

Of course John’s craving for dangerous situations would spill over into a desire for dangerous people. Sherlock had seen both on his initial read of Dr. Watson.

“We don’t know a thing about each other,” John had said in the lab that day. And how sure Sherlock had been then that he already knew everything—his deductions speaking for themselves. But then John had shot a rogue cabbie and Sherlock learned there was more. At every turn there was more. How was it possible? Sherlock needed less than a minute to learn all that was worth knowing about a person, and he’d lived with John for a year and a half. He knew his scent, his posture, his gait, every expression, every one of his laughs. He could identify him in the dark by his breathing. He could draw every detail of the contours of his face from memory. (John’s face had aged only subtly in the five years since they’d met. Sherlock suspected John would always look young for his age. The boyish quality that correctly suggested a mischievous personality wouldn’t fade.)

Sherlock knew every fleck in John’s uncommonly dark blue irises. John’s voice was as familiar as his own. There was no one he knew more thoroughly, more completely, than John Watson. And yet he must not know him nearly so well. Because John was one of the very few people (a short list that mostly included criminally insane serial killers) who could continue to surprise him, impress him, be worthy of his attention.

Sherlock looked down at the cookie in his hand. He took a bite and it was just as good as he remembered it. Cinnamon, sugar, vanilla, soft, sweet.

*

Kathleen Bauer was an eye-roll worthy woman to be sure. Black faux-leather shoes. Trousers and blouse from the sales racks, read: low-paid office job. Yet the flat (unshared) was far nicer than any single, low-paid Londoner could hope to afford. Family money then. But clearly not for clothes. She would have an independent streak that stopped at London real estate. Mid-thirties, symmetrical facial features (at least moderately attractive), figure neither heavy nor thin but one forever swaying one way or the other—an anxious stress-eater on a permanent diet, read: shaky self-discipline and constant personal dissatisfaction. However, her straight posture and defiant expression suggested a veneer of blunt confidence, a typical defence mechanism for the self-critical.

“Oh my, aren’t you handsome!” she said to Sherlock upon opening her door.
“This is John Watson,” Sherlock replied. “He’s my partner.”

“Yeah, I work with him,” John reiterated, shaking her hand.

She grinned at them. “Come in, come in!” she said, turning around and clomping in her heels across the living room floor. “Have a seat”—she continued into the kitchen—“I’ll just bring the tea.”

Sherlock’s eyes swept the Ikea-laden room as he and John sat on a fading green couch. Sherlock checked off the deductions in his mind. *Single, serial dater, twin, good relationship with brother, strained with mother, many friends (few close), high libido*… He looked down at the couch. John touched his wrist and his eyes flicked up. The warning in John’s expression told Sherlock he must have been making a face.

“There we are,” Bauer said as she set the tea tray down on the coffee table. She sat down in a matching green armchair across from them. For John’s sake Sherlock made a half-effort restrain a grimace as he was forced to read, through scratches in the fabric, the various explicit scenes that had occurred there. His skill in deduction was one he wished he could at least occasionally turn off.

“You said you wanted to talk about Amy?” she asked, picking up a cup.

“Amy Elliott died in a car crash earlier this month when her body was flung through the windscreen of Brandon Riley’s car. Riley also died on impact,” Sherlock stated.

“He’s direct isn’t he?” Bauer said to John, who merely twitched his mouth to a half-smile. She looked back at Sherlock and said, “Well, I think it’s good to be assertive.” She licked her lips unconsciously and he was aware of John rolling his eyes next to him. If John had changed his mind about the necessity of playing polite, perhaps he would be able to properly cringe at the couch now.

“Are you investigating her death?” she continued. “Is that typical for car accidents?”

“We’re looking into a few details,” John said. “We need to be certain we have the record straight for her file.”

Sherlock smirked. The art of bollockspeak was not lost on John. “Tell us what you remember about the last time you saw Amy.”

“It was the Friday night before she died, October ninth. We were out celebrating a friend’s promotion. I had driven her since she doesn’t live far from me.”

“Didn’t,” Sherlock corrected. John nudged him with his knee and Sherlock wished his capricious flatmate-assistant would make up his mind about whether or not they had to be polite.

“Didn’t,” she repeated, face dropping a bit. “We’d gone from the restaurant to a bar and it was quite late when I got a call from my brother.”

“How late?”

“I don’t know, maybe one o’clock? He said he’d had too much to drink and wanted a ride home. So I took Amy with me and we went to pick him and his mate up from some strip club or whatever ridiculous place.”

“No, you remember the address?”

“No exactly. But I remember the name. It was called Monroe’s. Do you want me to write it down?”
“Not necessary.”

“Anyway, I spent the ride home arguing with Tony—my brother—about whether he wasn’t a dickhead, and Amy spent the ride home snogging his mate Brandon in the back seat. Both of them were pissed, so I figured it was nothing. But Amy told me she got a call from Brandon the next day asking her out on a date. It was just on Monday night—I guess they were driving back from dinner when some arsehole drunk driver ran them off the road. A Monday night! The report said it wasn’t even past ten…” She trailed off, scoffing in disgust. “Well,” she gave them a tight-lipped smile, “fate can be a bitch.”

“There’s no such thing as fate,” Sherlock said.

John cleared his throat. “He means he’s sorry for your loss.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“That’s all right.” She waved her hand dismissively. “How about your girlfriend, Mr. Holmes, does she believe in fate?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Really?” She arched her eyebrow at him.

“How well did you know your brother’s mate, Brandon?” John cut in. Sherlock looked over suspiciously. That had been his next question.

“Not very well. They’d been mates for a few years; I’d seen him around once or twice.”

“Are you aware that Brandon had an unusual pattern of scarring on his thighs?” Sherlock asked quickly, lest John try to steal another in his line of questioning.

She ruffled her hair a bit and said, “I don’t know what you’re accusing me of, but I can tell you I’ve never seen Brandon’s legs without trousers on.”

“Sounds like you know exactly what he’s accusing you of,” John muttered under his breath. Only Sherlock was close enough to hear it.

“Does your brother have scars on his inner thighs?” Sherlock continued.

Bauer raised her eyebrows. “In what situation, Mr. Holmes, would you imagine I’ve seen my brother’s inner thighs recently?” Her eyes automatically dropped to Sherlock’s thighs.

Sherlock felt John stiffen slightly next to him, sitting up a bit straighter, imperceptible to anyone who didn’t know his posture so well, but Sherlock could read the shift in tension along his shoulders and back.

“Perhaps he mentioned an injury?”

She wasn’t listening. “You’re quite tall,” she grinned at Sherlock, reaching out to touch his knee. He jerked it back.

“Would you just answer the question please?” John snapped.

Bauer’s face darkened. She returned John’s glare and said acerbically, “No. My brother never mentioned any injury involving his thighs. What kind of question is that? What does it have to do with Amy’s death? Who the hell are you anyway? Do you even work for the police?”
“No,” Sherlock said with a grin, rising from the couch. John followed his lead. “We don’t.”

She stood. “Get the hell out of here! I’m calling the police right now, you freaks!”

John chuckled after she had slammed the door and they stopped back out on the street. “I’m just imagining the reaction the police are going to have when she rings up to say two people named Sherlock Holmes and John Watson were asking her weird questions.” John looked at Sherlock. “What?”

Sherlock was regarding him thoughtfully. “You’re not usually the one who gets us thrown out of flats.”

“Oh, come on,” he said. “She was horrible!”

Sherlock quirked a brow at him.

“Well excuse me for trying to intervene before she jumped you,” he muttered.

Sherlock smirked. “Was that you being chivalrous?”

“Shut up. I did it for my own sake. I wasn’t about to sit there and watch a grope-fest.”

Sherlock smirked harder. “Very noble of you to defend my honour.”

John set his jaw. “One more word, Sherlock, and I’ll shove you and your honour right back in that house and lock the door. There’ll be nothing left but the soles of your shoes by tomorrow morning.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

“Oh, do you want a rematch? On account of your losing the last time?”

“You cheated.”

“All’s fair in love and war.”

“If you could keep the clichés confined to your blog…”

They had walked a few blocks out onto a main road and Sherlock raised his hand to signal a cab.

“Where are we going?” John asked him.

“Home. Need a new strategy now that your bit of gallantry has put a ticking clock on our investigation.”

“Fine, you know what? Next time I’ll just toss her a bottle of lube and walk out.”

Sherlock cringed. “Was that necessary?”

“What do you mean a ‘ticking clock’?”

A cab pulled up to the kerb.

“We’ve got to talk to her brother before she does,” Sherlock said, swinging open the door.
“What are we doing?” John asked.

They were sitting at the table in the living room. Sherlock had slid very low in his chair, long legs stretched out beneath the table. He’d been staring at Tony Bauer’s Facebook page intensely for some time.

“Brainstorming,” he said without moving his eyes from the screen.

“Brainstorming…?”

“How we can get him to take off his trousers for us.” He intertwined his fingers and squinted at the page.

“Right.” John looked at the nutter he’d agreed to live with. “Erm, why?”

Sherlock exhaled in a longsuffering way. “We have no reason to believe our three victims are the only people with these scars. They’re only the ones who’ve died.”

“Oh right,” John said, blinking at the thought which should have been obvious but of course never was. Not unless you were Sherlock Holmes. “God knows how many have scars but haven’t died.”

“Or haven’t died yet. Already sent out an alert to the morgues. We’ll hear about it if another one turns up with the same pattern. But in the meantime…”

“You want to check Bauer.”

John was hoping for more of an explanation, but Sherlock merely hummed his agreement, tilting his head as he slipped off on another train of thought.

John looked at their latest target’s cover photo. It had been taken at a wedding, and it showed the groomsman with their arms slung over each other’s shoulders, some laughing some looking at the camera. John almost felt sorry for the guy. They didn’t even have a plan yet, but he was fairly certain that of all the possible solutions to this particular dilemma, zero of them were going to involve a pleasant evening for Tony Bauer.

“People don’t normally take off their trousers in front of two strange men,” John commented, feeling the need to point out the crux of their problem.

“No.”

“And the probability he’ll just answer the door in his pants…”

“Is negligible enough to discount.”

“Tell him the truth? We’re private investigators and we believe thigh-scars are somehow linked to murders, and ask him to show us his legs.” It wasn’t until John finished speaking that he heard the full stupidity of his statement. Sherlock looked up from where he was slouched and the look was reprimand enough.

John sighed. “Interview the girlfriend?”

“He’s single.”
“Ex-girlfriend?”

“We need current information. Besides, he lives close by and he’s home tonight.”

“How do you know that?”

Sherlock reached out and languidly tapped the keyboard. The tab switched to Twitter. Bauer’s latest tweet informed anyone who cared to know that he would be spending the evening in, binge-watching telly. Sherlock unconsciously wrinkled his nose in distaste as he reread it, and John felt a small smile tug the corner of his mouth.

It didn’t happen often, but occasionally John caught a window into Sherlock’s thought process. The detective had very few tells, but in all their time spent together John had learned to read a few of them. This one, he knew, was an expression of Sherlock’s annoyance at social media. He felt people broadcasting their locations and activities around the clock made his job too easy. In the past when John had retorted that he didn’t have to use it, the look he’d received had been sharp enough to slice his head off. He’d been informed, in no uncertain terms, that not to use readily available information just for the sake of not using it would be negligent and contemptible and moronic and whatever else John didn’t know because he’d already put in his earphones.

“Do we have to see his legs?” John tried. “Can’t we just question him about Riley’s scars and get him to tell us what we need to know?” If Tony Bauer was close mates with one of their victims, Brandon Riley, there was a good chance he’d know something about it.

“The location of the scars has been chosen with concealment as the priority. He’ll deny having scars, whether he has them or not, just as he’ll deny knowledge of Riley’s scars whether he knows of them or not.”

“We could get a warrant—”

“No time.” Sherlock cut his eyes sideways towards John. “Not that I wouldn’t like to see you ask Lestrade to get us a warrant for this particular purpose.”

John snorted, thinking of Lestrade’s reaction. “Fine,” he said, “I give up. Just tell me your brilliant plan and we can get on with it.”

Sherlock shrugged.

“What, no plan?” John lifted his eyebrows. “Sherlock Holmes can trace a locked-room, delayed-action stabbing to a wedding photographer, but he can’t get a man out of his trousers?”

Sherlock pushed his chair back and stood. “It’s not exactly a required skill for detective work.” He began to pace the room.

“Until now.”

Sherlock threw a glare at him.

“Could be a skill that comes up in personal life,” John offered, voice slightly tentative as he saw a rare opportunity to question Sherlock further about said mysterious personal life.

“In your personal life how many men have you gotten out of their trousers?”

“What?” John asked, startled. “What makes you think I’ve done that?”
Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “What makes you think I have?”

I don’t know what to think about you,” John muttered.

Possibly Sherlock didn’t hear it. “We’re running out of time,” he said. “His sister could call him any minute and mention us. She might have done it already.”

John was silent, watching Sherlock pace. He’d thrown his suit jacket over the edge of the couch and was wearing one of his tight, button-up shirts. It was impossible not to notice the narrow length of his torso and where his belt rested low on his hips.

John wondered whether he would be able to get him to eat dinner tonight. He’d just decided he’d probably have the same chance of getting Sherlock to eat a teacup when he spoke again.

“How do you get women to take off their trousers then?”

“What?”

“I assume you’ve done it before.”

John scoffed, “Yeah, once or twice—”

“The basic principle must be the same.”

“Why are you asking me, Mr. Shag-a-Lot Homes?” John returned, referring to one of the many headlines that had come out in the tabloids the week Janine had taken her story to the press.

Sherlock stopped pacing. “I know you don’t like it when I call you an ‘idiot,’ but when you freely display a thought process at the level of tabloid-readers you make it difficult for me to give you any credit otherwise.”

“I didn’t believe the tabloids,” John snapped. “But Janine looked pretty comfortable sleeping in your bed when I found her there in her knickers, so I assumed—”

“Then you couldn’t possibly be wrong, considering your record for your incisive and percipient assumptions.”

“Do you mean…” John faltered. “Did you not… Have you not…”

Sherlock glared at him.

John swallowed. Was this it? Was he finally getting an answer to what had been one of the most mysterious facets of Sherlock Holmes? John knew that in some ways it was none of his business, but in other ways he was fantastically fucking curious.

Ever since the bizarre, half-miscommunicated conversation that first night at Angelo’s, John had been trying to piece together the mystery that was Sherlock Holmes’ sexual history. And he had to say, after years of careful attention and collection of various clues, he’d done a right lousy job of it.

The detective was an enigma far too difficult for John to solve. He claimed to view his body merely as ‘transport,’ and displayed annoyance about having to attend to any of its needs—food and sleep being the most pressing John had to fight for in order to prevent Sherlock from collapsing (as he’d done on one or two occasions before John had gotten better at surreptitiously monitoring both). Yet there was no one who could attest to the time and money Sherlock spent on his appearance better than John. For all he seemed to neglect his body, he spent an inordinate amount of time maintaining
its attractiveness. Their bathroom was filled with expensive shampoos and soaps and styling products. One look at his wardrobe would be enough to know the skew of its fashion to comfort ratio.

From the infamous Angelo’s conversation he had gathered that Sherlock was gay, but not interested in dating (girlfriends were ‘not his area,’ but he simply said ‘no’ when John asked if he had a boyfriend). But after living with him for some time John had changed his opinion to believe his flatmate was more likely asexual. His antisocial dislike of all people, regardless of gender, combined with his contempt for sentimental emotion seemed to preclude the possibility for any kind of romantic interest. Perhaps his meticulous attention to his appearance was only part of his sardonic streak—to make himself as attractive as possible while knowing he would never return the interest.

And then Irene Adler had thrown him for a loop. Sherlock had reacted differently to her. Although nothing had come of it (as far as John knew), he had begun to wonder if it wasn’t that the world’s only consulting detective was asexual, but that there was no one good enough for him. No one clever enough, attractive enough, and challenging enough had crossed his path. Perhaps Irene had come the closest, but she was dead, and John doubted anyone could come as close again.

And then he’d found Janine in Sherlock’s bedroom wearing nothing but a shirt and her knickers. It had made no sense at all—not remotely fitting with any of his theories—until it became clear that the entire relationship was a ruse to break in to her boss’s office. Sherlogic at its coldest.

But still when the headlines came out in the tabloids John had been stunned enough at catching sight of them on the news rack that he’d halted in the street, causing the man walking behind him to slam into his back. He supposed Sherlock had been sleeping with Janine (although he didn’t miss the fact that the morning he’d found her in Sherlock’s bedroom Sherlock couldn’t have actually slept with her that night. He’d evidently preferred to kip at the crack house where John had found him earlier). After all, Sherlock was dating her—undercover for a case, but still he’d wrapped his arms around her and kissed her thoroughly enough. It wasn’t a stretch to assume he’d done everything else necessary to play the role of ‘boyfriend’ convincingly. John knew better than to believe the tabloids. The ‘Seven Times a Week’/’He Made Me Wear the Hat’ headlines would be Janine getting some kind of backhanded revenge for the way Sherlock had played her, but there was no reason to believe it wasn’t simply exaggeration rather than complete fabrication.

However, his brother had called him a virgin, in more or less terms. And Mycroft would know, wouldn’t he? Sherlock could read a person’s sexual history in a glance, and John had seen first-hand that Mycroft’s skill in deduction was at least as good, if not better than his younger brother’s (John remembered Mycroft even correcting Sherlock’s observations once or twice). Assuming Mycroft was right, would Sherlock really have sex for the first time with Janine for the case? John supposed he would. There was nothing he had known Sherlock not to do for a case, including drugs, murder, faking his own death, proposing, etc.

Sherlock was sentimental about nothing, and John supposed his virginity wouldn’t be an exception. On the other hand, while the detective was a first rate actor, John knew there were some things that couldn’t be acted. If he was as contemptuous of physical affection as he seemed, and if he was as disinterested in Janine as he proved to be while barely sparing her unconscious, injured figure a glance as he swept past her into Magnussen’s office…

Well, Sherlock hadn’t said a word about it. And of course John didn’t ask. But Sherlock was glaring at him now. Did that mean—had he not slept with Janine at all? Had he never slept with anyone, ever? Was this the one thing Sherlock Holmes wouldn’t do for a case?

“I thought—” John started.
But Sherlock was ready for it. “I always know what you think; it’s rarely interesting and usually to do with tea.”

It was an opportune moment to return Sherlock’s glare. “So you can take Mr. Bauer out to dinner,” John offered rather uncharitably. “Possibly several times over the course of a few weeks and spend a lot of money on good wine. Then you might be able to get him to take his trousers off for you.”

“Is that humour?” Sherlock snapped, resuming his pacing.

“I suppose you wouldn’t recognise it,” John returned.

“I might if it were done properly.”

John crossed his arms and tried not to sulk. “I was simply—”

“Yes, yes, you are always ‘simply.’ Everything is simple with you, isn’t it? It must be so bright and clear inside that simple head of yours. A cloud drifts past, birds sing, a butterfly flutters by…”

“What?” John gaped at the raving detective.

Sherlock stopped in his tracks. “That’s it!” he cried. “Yes, John! You must be the great inspirer of true genius.”

John goggled at his mad hatter flatmate as he darted across the room.

“Simplicity!” Sherlock yelled, disappearing into his bedroom. When he arrived back in the living room he was carrying a black duffel bag. “While rarely useful in my work, it should never be entirely overlooked. John, you are the very reminder of simplicity.”

Not at all convinced it was a compliment, John stood and glowered at the detective. Then something occurred to him. “Oh god, you’re not really going to take him to dinner tonight, are you?”

Sherlock didn’t respond. He’d opened the bag on the couch and was rummaging through it.

John balked. “Sherlock,” he said, stepping over to where the detective was standing with his back to him. “Look, you’re a very, er, attractive man, but you can’t expect—I mean, you don’t think—”

Sherlock spun around and seemed surprised to see him there. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“I was talking to you,” John growled.

“What about?” he asked, returning his attention to where he was securing something into a smaller shoulder bag.

John sighed, “The odds on the horses at the Royal Ascot this year.”

“That’s very random of you, John,” Sherlock said, turning around. “You need to keep your head in the game.” He shoved the bag into John’s arms.

“What’s this?”

“Camera,” Sherlock said, throwing on his suit jacket and buttoning it. “Let’s go.” He walked toward the door and swung his coat on.

“I suppose this means you have a better plan than the dinner date?”
Sherlock was already holding out John’s coat when he got to the door. John turned and put his arms through the sleeves, shrugging it up around his shoulders. He slung the camera bag on over it.

“Obviously,” Sherlock said and rushed down the stairs. John shook his head, unable to suppress a grin as he locked the door behind them.

* 

“Hello!” Sherlock said brightly when Tony Bauer opened his door. “I’m Sherlock; this is John. We’re friends of Kathleen.”

“Oh, er, hi,” Tony said, looking confused. He was, unfortunately, fully clothed, wearing jogging bottoms and a hoodie.

“We were in the neighbourhood and Kathleen asked us to drop off your work badge,” Sherlock said, drawing a white ID card out of his pocket. John looked at it in amazement. He must have nicked it from Kathleen’s living room.

“Oh, great! Thanks,” he said, clearly relieved to get it back. “She said she wouldn’t be able to get it round till Friday.”

“She also said she left something of hers here… John works in her office, so he can return it to her tomorrow. But what was it? John do you remember?”

John raised his eyebrows at Sherlock. “Well I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t there when she said it.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Sherlock mimed thinking.

“Well, come in,” Tony said, opening the door wider. “I’ll have a quick look round and maybe I can find it.”

He disappeared into his living room and Sherlock smirked at John before walking in. John wondered if geniuses came in any other variety than smug.

They stood in the centre of Tony’s living room. There was an open beer on the side table next to the couch and *Game of Thrones* was flashing mutely on the telly. John was intensely curious about how Sherlock was going to get them from here to a view of Tony’s bare legs. But Sherlock had been silent during the cab ride, which John knew meant he would (once again) have to find out in real time.

“Quick.” Sherlock said, voice low, “what’s the name of the series on the telly?”

“*Game of Thrones,*” John said, bemused.

Tony arrived back a moment later carrying a purple jumper. “This is probably what she’s looking for. Left it here last week.”

John reached out for it. “Thanks, I can get it back to her tomorrow.”

“Is that *Game of Thrones* you’re watching?” Sherlock asked, pointing to the telly.

Tony looked over at the screen and Sherlock moved in a flash. He stepped closer to John and dropped his hand to John’s hip. John froze as Sherlock moved his hand up underneath his coat and layers until he felt the heat of it against the skin on his lower back.

“Yeah,” he heard Tony saying. “It’s from the last series; I’m not caught up yet…”
Sherlock dipped his hand down and John felt the weight of his gun being lifted from the back of his jeans. His eyes fell shut. *Oh bloody Jesus.*
“That was your plan? Seriously?”

They were walking quickly down the street away from Tony Bauer’s flat. The night air was cold on John’s face. Sherlock tossed him his gun back. The safety was still on. Tony hadn’t known that though.

“It was the quickest, most efficient way to get the information we needed,” Sherlock said.

_Sherlogic at its finest_, John thought: The quickest, most efficient, most sociopathic way to get what they needed. John took a deep breath. He should have seen it coming. What other solution could Sherlock Holmes possibly come up with for this particular dilemma? It was fast, effective, cold, and utterly lacking in empathy.

John would have felt worse about it, but at the same time he knew he would’ve had to back out a long time ago if Sherlock’s morally or at least legally questionable methods bothered him on more than just a surface level. Sherlock’s plans worked, and this one was no exception. Now they had another body—a living one this time—with scars on his thighs.

“You know, just for future reference, pulling a gun and ordering someone to take their trousers down does tend to _traumatise_ people a bit,” John said, figuring he could at least remind Sherlock there was such thing as a moral compass, even if neither of them found much cause to use it.

“He’ll be fine,” Sherlock replied dismissively. “He’ll have worse happen than getting a picture taken of his legs.”

“Worse,” John agreed, “but probably not weirder.”

They turned a corner and John leaned back against the side of a building. He shook his head. “That was ridiculous.”

“Perhaps a bit,” Sherlock conceded, familiar mischievous gleam in his eyes. He took a step forward, blocking John up against the wall. It was closer than anyone else would have stood, but that was Sherlock.

In spite of everything he found himself chuckling. “We literally scared the trousers off him.”

Sherlock laughed. It was one of his real laughs, deep and appreciative. A rewarding sound for those who could get him to do it. John wondered if there was anyone else on that list with him.

“I told him to keep his pants on,” Sherlock said and John laughed harder, which seemed to make Sherlock laugh harder too. He felt lightheaded, and suddenly appreciated the supportive wall at his back.

After a moment John breathed, “We should not be laughing about this.” He raised his eyes to the sky to try to calm himself.

A scattering of stars was just visible through the city’s light pollution. He looked back at Sherlock and saw the detective had followed his gaze up. John smiled at him while he couldn’t see. Sherlock had called the stars beautiful once. Actually they were the only natural, non-criminal, and non-chemical thing John had ever heard him call beautiful. He suddenly felt an urge to stuff Sherlock into a train and take him out to the middle of a field far away in the country, to make him look up at the
stars there, to point out the few constellations he knew (the ones Sherlock had probably deleted), and convince the scientist that he could keep a few things in his mind that weren’t practical, but only beautiful.

It was a moment before John realised Sherlock was looking back at him.

“What?” Sherlock asked. His eyes were as black as his hair in the low glow of the streetlight.

_I love this. This night-world of alleys and streetlights and guns and you looking like_— Was there a word to describe Sherlock Holmes standing on a corner in slanted streetlight? Both ‘hero’ and ‘villain’ vied for the spot but neither fit. He looked like something from out of John’s dream, was what it was. One of those dreams when John had woken up in Mary’s bed panting, as though he’d been running through London with Sherlock all night, the detective’s face lingering before him as the sunlight of reality swept the dream away. The scene was breathtaking in its own right—it always had been, each night-time hunt when John glanced over at the detective and saw the play of gold light and shadow across Sherlock’s features—something he’d spent two years thinking he’d lost forever. It was here, now, overwhelmingly close, almost painfully real, and John found the words blurring in his mind as he took in the heat of Sherlock’s eyes on him and the arrogant authority of his stance.

“Nothing,” he managed eventually. “I just don’t think we’ll be getting a Christmas card from the Bauers this year.”

Sherlock grinned. “So he’ll have a story to tell. I’m sure we did him a favour. This may be the one decent story he has in the whole of his unremarkably dull life.”

John sighed, shutting his eyes. “And I know who he’ll tell it to first,” he said, pushing himself off the wall.

* 

“What the bloody hell, Sherlock?”

Greg Lestrade was standing in their living room and he was not at all happy. Sherlock was pinning pictures to the wall, looking very annoyed about being interrupted. John was sitting at the table with his cheek resting on his fist, content to be a witness rather than a participant in this particular conversation.

“The construction of that question doesn’t allow for a logical answer,” Sherlock muttered, tacking the reports on the corpses next to their photos.

“Ok,” Lestrade said, clearly working to control his voice, “is there a reason you _pulled a gun_ on Mr.”—he checked his phone for the name—“Tony Bauer tonight?”

“What do you think, Lestrade?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.”

“Shocking.”

Lestrade put his hands on his hips. “You can either tell me here, now, why you were harassing Tony and Kathleen Bauer tonight, or we can go to Scotland Yard and you can tell another officer who won’t have my talent for being patient with you.”

“Yes, there’s a reason!” Sherlock snarled, whipping around to face the DI. “There’s always a reason! I do not do actions without reasons. Frankly it’s astounding that you don’t know this yet. Really,
Lestrade, how long does it take you to learn anything? You must’ve spent ten years in secondary school. Miss and Mr. Bauer are involved in my murder investigation. If they have a problem with that, they can file a complaint with themselves, because it’s their own fault for living their inane, stupid lives in a way that has put them directly in the way of my murder investigation.”

John sniggered and Lestrade shot him a withering look. “By your murder investigation, I assume you mean mine? The Rodgers case.”

“Oh yes, your case. By the way if you’d like to contribute to it in any way at all you can get one of your more diplomatic officers to convince Mr. Bauer to give me a blood sample.”

“Why? What does Tony Bauer’s blood have to do with the Rodgers case? And what about his accusation that you ordered him to pull down his trousers in order to take a picture of his—”

“Thighs,” Sherlock said with an eye roll. “Thigh scars.” He gestured to the pictures he’d finished putting up. “Did you know your victim, David Rodgers, has a strange pattern of scarring all across his thighs? No? Did you know that there have been two other corpses this month with the same kind of scarring? Did you know Tony Bauer also has scars on his thighs?”

Sherlock looked hard at Lestrade. “God, it’s physically painful to watch you connect the dots. Rodgers was killed by a slow-acting poison. The stabbing was a cover-up, as I said. I have a feeling we’ll find poison in the other two bodies as well,” Sherlock said, tapping the pictures of Neil Parker and Brandon Riley. He turned back to the inspector. “If Bauer has scars on his legs he might have poison in his veins. We need a blood sample, and sooner rather than later. You know,” Sherlock added glibly, “in case he’s dying.”

“So that explains the request this morning for an exhumation warrant on three completely unrelated graves,” Lestrade said, walking closer to look at the pictures of the bodies. “You think these people were poisoned too.”

“Bingo,” Sherlock said without enthusiasm.

“Anderson and Donovan bet you were high.”

“Really. And what was your bet?”

“Well, they owe me money now.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” Sherlock said flatly.

“What about her?” Lestrade pointed to the one female body on the wall. “Amy Elliot?” he asked, reading her name. “You want to dig her up too? Doesn’t look like she has scars—”

“She doesn’t, but I want an autopsy anyway. Need to know all the variables we’re dealing with.”

“Ok, we’ll get you Bauer’s blood sample, and three grave exhumations—Jesus…” He trailed off probably thinking of the paperwork ahead.

“Good,” Sherlock replied. “Then I suggest you get on with that and let me continue with my work, which incidentally involves handing you perpetrators with enough evidence to convict them, all wrapped up with a nice bow on top.”

Lestrade put his hand to his forehead. “Look, no one down at Scotland Yard appreciates your assistance more than I do—”
Sherlock raised an eyebrow and it probably occurred to all of them just how literal that statement was.

“But I can’t have you going off on your own like this without at least giving me a heads-up. I can’t keep fielding nine-nine-nine calls from people shouting about Sherlock Holmes! You need to figure out how to conduct an investigation without harassing your witnesses.”

“I need the freedom to work.”

“And I’m doing the best I can!” Lestrade snapped. He took a breath and continued more calmly. “I do trust you to get the job done, you know I do. But if you’re going to be pulling guns on people and getting emergency services called on you, then I’m going to have to keep showing up here.”

Sherlock glared. “Why? I’m smarter than you and your team combined. If you trust me why can’t you just assume I have spectacularly brilliant reasons for everything I do?”

Lestrade sighed, “Because, Sherlock, you are so nearly mad I’m afraid one day you’re going to go round the bend and I won’t notice.”

Sherlock blinked at him.

“That’s right,” Lestrade continued, “it’s my waking nightmare that one of these days you’re going to show up at Scotland Yard with a bunch of old ladies claiming some kind of criminal knitting network conspiracy, and the worst part is I’m going to believe you until the men in white coats show up to drag you off.”

Sherlock looked over at John, who shrugged.

“And that will be a very embarrassing day for me professionally, so you have to understand why I’m taking precautions.”

“Why are you talking about me going insane as though it’s both impending and inevitable?”

“I’d say ‘likely,’ more than inevitable,” Lestrade amended.

“Look,” John cut in, “if you want the cases solved you have to let Sherlock do it his way. The risk you run that he might turn up with a pineapple rather than your perpetrator is the price you pay for his talent.”


Lestrade dropped John’s gaze. “I know; I know…” He looked back up at Sherlock. “Fine, do what you need to do. But just know that every nine-nine-nine call with your name on it means a conversation with me. You want to see less of me you find a better way to conduct your interviews.”

The DI turned toward the door and stopped just before reaching it. “And you,” he said, looking back at John. “Not that I know anything about you owning an illegal firearm—for the record I don’t—but next time you could ask him a few more questions before you let him borrow it.”

“Have you met Sherlock?” John asked. Lestrade narrowed his eyes. “Then what would make you think I let him?”

Lestrade shook his head muttering something about a ‘consulting liability’ as he left the flat.

“I am misunderstood,” Sherlock announced, flopping onto his back on the couch.
John smiled fondly at his flatmate-detective. He was dramatic, but he wasn’t wrong.
Sherlock was sunk in his chair, arms dangling over the armrests, eyes closed, legs stretched out in front of him. John’s footsteps on the stairs brought him up from his dense network of thoughts.

“Is it a two-patch problem then?” he heard John ask.

Sherlock pried his eyes open and looked from one arm to the other. He was vaguely surprised to see a patch on each arm. “Nope,” he said languidly, “forgot about the other one.”

John shook his head like his flatmate was hopeless as he carried groceries to the kitchen table.

“Any new developments?” he called back.

Lestrade had come through with the promised grave exhumations. Sherlock had been at the morgue all day overseeing the autopsies and testing blood samples.

“If you’re interested in the fate of Mr. Tony Bauer I can tell you he’s safe for the time being. His blood sample tested negative. No poison.”

“Huh,” John said. Sherlock watched as he opened the fridge and moved the new blood packets to the apparently less objectionable space on the fridge door.

“You may also be interested to know that the girl who died in the car crash—Amy Elliot—has traces of the poison in her blood.”

“Really?” John said when he’d finished unloading the food and walked back into the living room. “But she didn’t have scars.”

“Bauer has scars but no poison, and Elliot has poison but no scars.”

“And what do you make of that?” John asked, the perplexity in his voice indicating he was unable to make anything of it himself.

“Ideas, ideas,” Sherlock responded listlessly. “Theories… possibilities…”

“So what’s your best one?”

“The Woman.”

“What?” It was one word but Sherlock could hear the edge in it.

He lifted his head and furrowed his eyebrows at his suddenly tense flatmate. “The Woman, surely you remember.”

“Irene Adler?”

“That’s the one,” Sherlock said, dropping his head back.

“You think she’s somehow… involved in this?” John asked incredulously.

“No,” Sherlock replied, “I know she isn’t.”

“Then why are you mentioning her?”
In one of his mood swings Sherlock snapped from lethargy to energy as he leapt out of his chair. He walked to the wall where he’d pinned the pictures of the corpses. John followed him. This was his favourite part. In his mind he had a tangled web of theories. As he spoke them aloud they smoothed out neatly into a logical progression.

“David Rodgers: Death by poison. Dragged to an alley and stabbed postmortem as a cover-up. Neil Parker: Death by poison. Shot in his own flat postmortem and burglary staged as a cover-up. But these two…” He tapped the pictures of Brandon Riley and Amy Elliot. “They break the pattern in more ways than one. They died only days after receiving the poison. The poison was allowed to run its course in the other cases, killing the victims in about two weeks’ time. Why were these two killed prematurely?”

“Maybe the car accident was really an accident?”

“Are you suggesting it’s a coincidence?”

“You think it’s a stupid suggestion.”

“Quite.”

“Well, don’t mind me then,” John said, glaring.

Sherlock knew how to handle it. “I rarely do,” he said, pushing forward into John’s space and earning a flutter of his eyelashes which broke the glare. John looked up at him with renewed attention and Sherlock continued, “The better theory is this: Amy Elliot’s poisoning was a mistake. She wasn’t part of the plan. An unexpected casualty.”

John crossed his arms, listening. Sherlock liked the way John listened. It was much better than the way anyone else listened.

“There wasn’t meant to be a connection between any of the victims. I think Elliot received the poison accidentally, and the murderer—or murderers—preferred to get rid of both her and Riley rather than risk a couple exhibiting the same symptoms or dying of the same poison.”

Sherlock turned away and with a few strides he was back at his chair, dropping swiftly down into it.

“Besides the two of them there’s no apparent connection among the victims.” Sherlock leaned forward, balancing his elbows on his knees and steepling his fingers together. “Their deaths all look like isolated incidents, and whoever killed them wanted to keep it that way. But there must be something that links them. In order for all four men, if we include Bauer, to receive such similar scars they must have seen the same person, or people. However, my research shows they had no mutual work, family, or friends. What else connects complete strangers?”

John shrugged. “Maybe some kind of services, like a mutual doctor or dentist… hair stylist, I don’t know…”

“Excellent, John! I thought of those possibilities myself. They are, of course, incorrect.”

“What then?” John sat down in his chair across from Sherlock. His tone suggested he did not appreciate that his answer could have been correct in an alternate universe.

“Each of the men has a large number of these small scars, and each scar was made at a different time. Unless they were repeatedly being threatened—which is highly unlikely considering the background checks Lestrade ran on them—we have to assume they were electing to have these cuts made.”
“Why would someone elect to have their skin cut?”

“Why indeed.”

Sherlock watched John’s face as he struggled to put the pieces together. Come on, John. I mentioned The Woman already. Put it together…

“Oh,” John said finally, “you think it’s a sex thing, like what Irene Adler did.”

Sherlock grinned.

“Some kind of BDSM stuff,” John mused.

“What’s ‘BDSM’?”

“Never mind. That’s a bit rough though isn’t it? Cutting people during sex?”

“The cuts were light, thin, which is why the scars are that silver colour. And the location makes them easy to hide.”

“So you think there’s a woman like Adler out there who you can pay to play Guantanamo Bay with you.”

Sherlock held the armrests and jumped up onto his chair, sitting back on his heels. “Probably not one woman. The men who were poisoned were randomly chosen; that much is clear. There’s nothing to connect them and there’s nothing in their history that would make them targets. I would bet there are multiple women who provide the same service, but one of them one night had poison. Like Russian roulette. She had three appointments on one specific night, and those are them,” Sherlock gestured to the pictures of the dead bodies on the wall. “Bauer was lucky. He must have seen someone else.”

“Which explains why he has scars but no poison.” Sherlock liked watching the moment John twigged. His blogger was just as eager as he was to find the puzzle pieces that fit together. And though it always happened for him a bit later than it did for Sherlock, he still enjoyed seeing the energy thrum though him at the moment of comprehension.

“But why would this woman poison random men?” John asked. “You think she’s a serial killer?”

Sherlock sprang from his crouched position on the chair, striding over to his laptop. He sat down at the living room table and flipped up the screen.

“I think the dead men were guinea pigs. Randomly selected test subjects. I told you before the drug is new: they’re testing it. I think the woman who administered the poison is merely a pawn in a much larger game. We have to find the king.”

“So where do you want to start?”

A few strokes at the keyboard revealed the website he was looking for. Sherlock spun his laptop around so John could see the page for Monroe’s Gentlemen’s Club. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Riley and Bauer were at a strip club the Friday night before he died, do you?”

* 

“Hang on,” John said several hours later. They were both on their laptops, John in his chair reading an article about a new drug for narcolepsy, and Sherlock continuing his research at the table. “I asked you if you thought Irene Adler was somehow involved in the murders and you said you know she
isn’t.”

Sherlock looked up at him, laptop screen illuminating his features.

“How do you know she isn’t?” John asked.

Sherlock returned his attention to the laptop, clicking and scrolling. “Because she’s in Berlin, and too smart to get herself wrapped up in any more English scandals after what happened last time,” he said with a smirk.

Berlin. Sherlock thought she was still alive.

Suddenly feeling restless and too hot, John shut his laptop and stood up from his chair. He’d almost forgotten about the lie. The story Mycroft invented and John had relayed: A witness protection program in America…

He remembered the rainy afternoon years ago.

*

Mycroft’s presence at Speedy’s was odd to say the least. He’d given John the file as he stepped out to take a call and John hadn’t decided whether he would tell Sherlock the truth or the lie even as he reached the top of the stairs.

Of course Sherlock knew immediately that he had something important to say, apparently just by the sound of his footsteps on the stairs, since the consulting detective hadn’t even glanced up from his microscope before proclaiming John had news to tell him.

John hesitated, unsure, almost deciding on the truth, but then Sherlock looked up at him. John fumbled with his words. Sherlock stood and walked around the table, still looking at him like that. He was too close, and then he took a step closer. The smell of that expensive shampoo combined with the unique scent of his skin—something like the cold metal of lab tables and the electricity of adrenaline—it was as heady and overwhelming as it always was whenever Sherlock got too close and John chose the lie.

By the time Sherlock stepped back, and John’s scattered thoughts were able to reorder themselves, he regretted what he’d said. He even got as far toward telling the truth as, “Actually—” before Sherlock interrupted him, asking for her phone.

It was the fact that he still wanted her phone, even after John told him it had been wiped clean that prevented John from trying again to tell Sherlock she was dead. Because it was sentiment. The phone was empty; the only possible reason Sherlock could want it was sentiment.

Downstairs Mycroft had suggested Irene Adler might have been the one woman who mattered to the detective and John had dismissed it: “He doesn’t feel things like that.”

Now he realised he might have been wrong, because Sherlock reached out his hand for the phone and said, “Please.” The effect of the word was to deprive John of any choice in the matter. Sherlock pocketed the phone and remained immersed in studying whatever was under the microscope that day.

John lingered in the doorway, eyes transfixed on the scientist in the kitchen.

He never told him the truth.
John flexed his hands and took a deep breath. He hadn’t been able to say it at the time. But he owed it to Sherlock to say it now. He walked over to where Sherlock was sitting and cleared his throat.

“Actually, she’s not in Berlin.”

Sherlock sat back in his chair and folded his arms. “Oh?” he asked, looking up at John through his fringe.

“Right,” John cleared his throat again, “she’s, well, actually… she’s—she’s dead.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, she is. Mycroft told me after the, er, the whole… I meant to tell you, but—” John stopped.

“But what?” Sherlock leaned forward. He was looking at him in a way that kept making John look at the carpet.

John shook his head. “I don’t want to upset you but I thought you should know.”

Sherlock leaned back again and scoffed, “There’s scarcely reason to be upset about a person living in Berlin. Granted it’s a dreary sort of place but it’s hardly cause for alarm.”

John looked at Sherlock with concern. He knew the first stage of grieving was denial, but at the moment Sherlock had the sort of energy in his eyes that always gave John pause.

“Sherlock, she’s not in Berlin; she’s dead. Terrorists got to her in Pakistan. Mycroft said he was absolutely certain.”

Sherlock squinted at him in a way John knew he used to affect keen interest. “Really. And what else did my dear brother say?” His eyes gleamed as he waited for an answer.

“He said he was thorough. They checked the details; it was definitely her. He said it would take you to fool him….” John trailed off as it dawned on him.

Sherlock grinned.

John’s mouth fell open. “You, you didn’t—”

Sherlock raised his eyebrows.

“Sherlock, you flew to Pakistan? You saved her?”

“Never trust a beheading; you never know whose head you’re missing.”

John gave a short, humourless laugh. “I’m going to have a hard time believing anyone is dead after this.”

Sherlock pointed to the skull on the mantelpiece. “He’s dead.”

John scowled. “Thank you.”

Sherlock jumped up from the chair and walked over to the wall where he’d pinned the pictures of the corpses with all of their information. He clasped his hands behind his back as he studied the layout.
Recovering himself a bit John realised he was not ready to drop the conversation.

“But, why?” he asked. “I mean, obviously it’s good to save people; I’m not saying you shouldn’t have saved her—” he checked his rambling. He took a breath. “I didn’t know you cared about her so much.” John let his eyes hover on Sherlock’s back, hoping for an answer to the unasked question.

Sherlock didn’t turn around. “A mind like hers would be a terrible thing to waste,” he said.

Not really an answer.

John stuffed his restless hands in his pockets. “Have you been in touch with her?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know she’s in Berlin?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Twitter. Different name, different identity, same profession, definitely her.”

John rocked back on his heels to get a look at the ceiling. “You knew. All this time you knew I was lying.”

Sherlock did turn now. “Did you think I didn’t?”

He walked the few paces back toward John until he was standing directly in front of him, aggressively close. The master of deduction moved his eyes slowly down his face and the length of his body before dragging them back up again. John swallowed reflexively and fought the urge to step back. It was moments like these, when Sherlock focused on him, that he felt the detective could see right through him. In some ways John knew he could. When Sherlock finally spoke his voice was low, the deep pitch that would have held John in place even if he'd wanted to back away.

“I can read your thoughts before you’ve even entered the flat by your tread on the stairs. Do you think I don’t know when you lie?”

John locked his eyes on Sherlock’s. “I will lie to you when I want to.”

There was a flash of something in Sherlock’s eyes and he grinned. “Good,” he said. He dropped John’s gaze and John was surprised to see him hesitate for a moment. He looked back up at John for a second before turning away.

“Berlin isn’t far,” John couldn’t let the point go unremarked. “It’s not far at all.”

Sherlock walked back to the pictures on the wall.

“Why haven’t you contacted her?”

He yanked one of the crime reports off the wall. “Why would I want to contact her?” He sat down again at the table.

“Well, you went to the trouble to infiltrate a terrorist organisation for her. I wouldn’t think meeting her for coffee would be right out. Or, you know… dinner…”

Sherlock threw a glance at him before looking back at his laptop. He began typing and John knew he shouldn’t, but the question had been nagging him for years. He hated himself a bit for needing to know. But he did. He needed to know, and he wouldn’t get an opportunity like this again. He decided to throw caution to the wind, and simply hope it wouldn’t get blown back in his face.
“Why don’t you want to see her?”

Sherlock’s eyes didn’t leave the screen. “Why didn’t you tell me she was dead?”

John dropped his head and bit his lip. Right. He went to the kitchen to make tea.
Impressively Accurate

When John opened the door to the flat he was not surprised to find Sherlock with his violin at his shoulder. He’d heard the music from the street as it drifted through the open window. He was quite taken aback, however, to see his flatmate dressed to the nines in a strikingly smart tux with his hair even more precisely arranged than usual.

John gaped at him. “Wha—Why are you dressed like that?”

The detective seemed built for formal dress—a point which clearly hadn’t escaped him, due to the extreme ‘pyjamas or suits’ dichotomy of his wardrobe. His long legs and lean figure were precisely what suits were designed for, and it showed. But this tuxedo was something else entirely.

John paused looking at the fashionably slim trousers and the sleek cut of the jacket. He’d seen this suit once before.

*

“When’s Sherlock tonight? I thought you would be at his place,” Mary said, standing in the doorway of their bedroom.

John looked up and saw her mouth pressed to a thin line.

“I’m not always at his place,” he said, chafing at the insinuation. “I haven’t seen him in weeks.”

Mary remained silent, sliding the pendant on her necklace back and forth on the chain.

“He’s out tonight anyway,” John said, returning his attention to the gym bag he was packing.

“Mycroft basically blackmailed him into going to some function.”

“You’re avoiding me,” Mary said.

John hung his head. He was not in the mood for this conversation. He hadn’t been in the mood for it for almost a year now.

“I’m not—”

“You are. Sherlock’s off tonight and you still have to leave the house.”

“I don’t have to leave. I want to go to the gym.”

“Then stay in tonight, if you’re not avoiding me. Eat dinner here for once.”

John met her eyes and knew that while it wasn’t an ultimatum, if he refused it would be another fissure in the glass. Fragile glass that had been shattered and haphazardly stuck back together—there were pieces missing and pieces that no longer fit together. The result was a poor, precarious imitation of what was once smooth and solid.

John didn’t want to stay in tonight, but he had chosen to stay married to her. He could have left her back when everything had gone to hell. But he didn’t. And he was grudgingly aware that it wasn’t fair to have chosen the marriage and then to neglect it. He either had to divorce her or at least try to make an effort.

Dinner was an unremarkable affair. They made the typical small talk about work. They’d met when
they were working at the same surgery several years ago. But now (thankfully) they were at different locations. They smiled a bit, exchanging stories about patients.

As they cleared off their dinner plates and Mary asked hesitantly if he would like to watch a movie with her John saw a glint of hope. Under the constant cloud cover of their relationship he could sometimes see these infrequent flashes of light. As though it were possible that one day the sky could clear.

Unfortunately, more often than not, these moments came coupled with a reminder of why they were in the situation to begin with: a mental picture of Sherlock the way he’d been in Magnussen’s office when John had rushed into the room, not realising the full extent of what had happened until he pushed his friend’s jacket back and saw the blood, gasping for breath as he reached for his phone, *oh my god,* dizzy the way blood never made him, the fury flooding upwards as he demanded, “*Who shot him?*” And just like that the light blinked out, so easily enveloped back by the thick clouds.

He gave Mary a thin smile. “Sure.” He sat on the couch with her, let her pick the film, and wondered which of these days he would have to give up on a hopeless situation.

It was around ten o’clock and they were halfway through the film when the doorbell rang. Mary looked questioningly at John, who shrugged. Standing, he muttered, “I’ll see who it is.”

John opened the door and took an involuntary step backward when he saw his ex-flatmate on the steps, a taxi idling behind him on the street. John hadn’t seen him in weeks; if he’d forgotten even a bit how arresting was the appearance of Sherlock Holmes, he was duly reminded now. The consulting detective was sharply dressed in an exquisite tux, thick black curls styled to perfection, standing on the doorstep with his hands in his pockets.

“Sherlock! What are you doing here?” John asked, stepping out and shutting the door behind him. “You look, erm—” John was not at all sure why he had started that sentence, or where it was going. Fortunately he didn’t have to finish it.

Sherlock cut in, “Yes, Mycroft seems to think it necessary I put my torture-resistance training into practice every now and then, lest I forget it.”

“You—what?” There were clouds covering the moon and Sherlock’s ivory skin was striking against his dark hair, against the dark night.

“I have spent the past four hours *socialising* with the majority of the English landed gentry.”

John grinned, folding his arms and leaning against the doorjamb. “Sounds dreadful.”

“I managed to evade all passive-aggressive tactics to prevent me from leaving.”

John shook his head in feigned admiration. “Lesser men have been trapped at parties for much longer.”

Sherlock grinned. “How about chips? There’s nothing worthwhile in this neighbourhood; we’ll have to get out of here.”

“Is it possible Sherlock Holmes is hungry?”

Sherlock scowled. “They had only miniatures of food at the party, and the fat people were guarding it.”

John tried not to laugh. “Shame,” he said.
“So, fish and chips? Or cake”—Sherlock put on his most benevolent air—“you can choose.”

John stepped off the wall toward his friend, but he stopped. He looked back at the house. “I can’t.”

Sherlock followed his gaze toward the lighted upstairs window. When he looked down again his eyes pierced through John’s. “Are you sure?”

John’s eyes flicked over his ex-flatmate. He wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure about anything. He wanted to leave the steps and go off into the London night. With Sherlock there was no telling what could happen any time you walked out the door. He wanted to get his gun and jump into the cab and go wherever Sherlock would take him, even if it was just for chips, or cake (damn it John was awfully fond of mad detectives who showed up at his door in tuxes offering him the choice between chips or cake). But he felt tied to the door by his responsibilities and it made him resent them doubly.

Sherlock was standing in front of him looking a world apart from the ordinary. One of the beautiful people—his intelligence a palpable energy, the potential for danger woven through his genes.

Why did it have to be tonight? After the conversation he’d had with Mary earlier, he couldn’t. He had chosen to try to repair something. Maybe one day. He hoped one day…

John swallowed. “Yes, I’m sure. Maybe another time.”

Something flickered in Sherlock’s eyes. “Suit yourself.”

John fought an impulse to reach out and grab him as he turned back down the steps. He watched him duck into the waiting cab and drive away.

Fuck, John thought.

*

Sherlock blinked at him and John felt a cold wave wash through him. “Oh god, the ball,” he said, bringing his hand to his forehead. “For Mrs. Hudson I completely forgot.”

“It begins in an hour and a half,” Sherlock said. “You have plenty of time.” He plucked at the violin strings absently as if deciding what to play next.

It had been a longer than usual day at the surgery and when John checked his watch it confirmed the time was already six o’clock.

“Look, erm,” John said. “I don’t think I’ll go.”

Sherlock plucked more strings.

“Can you just, er, tell Mrs. Hudson I’m ill or something?”

“The doctor is ill,” Sherlock said, “how concerning.”

John sighed, “I couldn’t go if I wanted to. I meant to pick up something to wear this week but it slipped my mind.”

“Hm,” Sherlock said, moving over to his music stand.

“She doesn’t need both of us to go,” John said, aware that he was now probably talking more to his guilty conscience than to Sherlock. “As long as you’re going I’m sure she won’t mind if I skip it.”
“Stay here if you like,” Sherlock said, shuffling around the music sheets until he’d found what he was looking for, “but proper attire is no excuse.”

“Sherlock, I told you, I don’t have—”

“You do.”

“What are you—”

“Upstairs,” Sherlock indicated John’s bedroom with a tilt of his head.

Sherlock began to play, and with no small amount of trepidation John made his way upstairs.

*  

Sherlock wasn’t halfway through the sonata when John came clomping back into the living room.

“What is this?” he asked, holding up the three-piece suit by the hanger.

Sherlock lowered his violin. “Do you want me to make a joke by saying it’s something other than a tuxedo?”

“No,” John said slowly, “I want you to explain why it’s in my bedroom.”

“It’s a penguin,” Sherlock said a bit belatedly, but the setup for a joke had been there and he didn’t want it to go to waste entirely.

John gave him an exasperated look. “Sherlock, this material is nice, really nice. It must cost at least as much as my wedding suit, and I know how much I spent on that. I mean, thank you, but I can’t accept it. No way. It’s too expensive. I won’t wear it.”

“I didn’t pay for it,” Sherlock said.

“What?”

Sherlock shrugged. “You did.”

“What?”

Sherlock sighed. Goldfish level: “Where is your credit card?”

“In my wallet.”

“Did you use it today?”

John thought for a moment. “Well, no—”

“Then how do you know it’s there?”

John grabbed his wallet out of his back pocket and flipped it open. His card was gone.

“You stole my credit card!”

“Excellent deduction. I would congratulate you on solving the case, except I’d say you lose rather a lot of points for not noticing there was a case in the first place.”

“Why did you do that?”
“Because, John, you are tediously predictable and I knew that you wouldn’t wear it if anyone else bought it for you.”

“You can’t just use my credit card to buy something like this. I can’t afford it!”

“You can,” Sherlock returned. “Consider it your ‘I No Longer Have Mortgage Payments’ gift to yourself.”

John shook his head. “I’m returning it.”

“Afraid that won’t be possible.”

John closed his eyes. “Why?”

“Because the receipt has gone missing. And they won’t accept it back without it.”

John gave him a hard look. “Gone missing, has it?”

“Indeed.”

“Sherlock—” John said in a tone Sherlock didn’t like to hear his name in.

“Every man should own at least one good tux. Just try it on before you make any decisions.”

John exhaled, “Fine, I give up.”

Sherlock watched his flatmate walk agitatedly back up the stairs and wondered if it was just John who got upset about having nice things or if it was a more widespread phenomenon.

* 

By the time John got out of the shower it was still only six thirty. He looked at the receipt-less tux on his bed. Sherlock Holmes was nothing if not manipulative.

However, since it was here… He supposed it wouldn’t hurt to try it on. Above all else he was curious to see what Sherlock would have chosen for him.

John did the last button and looked at himself in the full length mirror on the door of his wardrobe.

He straightened his shoulders. Turned a bit. And faced forward again.

If Sherlock hadn’t thrown out the receipt, John would have shredded it. It was, by far, the most flattering thing he’d ever worn. It fit him somehow even better than his wedding suit. The cut was slimmer and the material exquisite. It had obviously been tailored exactly to his measurements.

He smiled in disbelief. Sherlock knew his measurements. John had never told him. He’d gone up and down in weight in the last two years, but the suit was precise. John supposed that’s what you get when you live with a snobbishly fashionable consulting detective.

And what you get—John turned sideways in the mirror—is really not bad. Not bad at all.

* 

Sherlock was playing again when John re-entered the living room. He coughed in attempt to swallow his pride. He was going to wear the suit tonight, and any other occasion that could possibly warrant it.
Sherlock stopped and turned around. John had the satisfaction of watching the detective’s eyebrows leap up beneath his fringe before his face resumed its trademark nonchalance.

Sherlock cleared his throat. “The size seems to be accurate.”

“Impressively accurate.”

Sherlock smirked, “You can have that written on my next gravestone.”

John grinned. “The first one was a bit plain.”

Sherlock briefly returned the smile before looking back to his music.

John checked his watch. They were to meet Mrs. Hudson downstairs in twenty minutes. “Do you want a drink?”

“Sure.”

John went to the kitchen and took down two tumblers. He didn’t bother asking what Sherlock wanted. The official drink of 221B was Scotch and soda.

Sherlock was marking some notes on his sheet music when John returned with the drinks. He handed one to his flatmate and sat down in his chair. Sherlock joined him a moment later, sitting across from him.

“I’ve arranged a meeting for us with a prostitute.”

John swallowed too quickly and the whisky burned the back of his throat. “A prostitute.”

Sherlock waited.

“Oh, the prostitute you think poisoned Rodgers, Parker and Riley.”

“One that works for the same... establishment. I have good reason to believe the woman who killed the men is dead too.”

John raised his eyebrows. “Why do you think she’s dead?”

“I spent the day undercover. I talked to people. She hasn’t shown up for work. And if our killer really did use her to poison them, there might be good reason to do away with her afterward.”

“So we’re meeting with a random prostitute who works at the same club.”

“The fact of her working at the same club precludes randomness.”

“I assume she thinks the appointment is for sex,” John said glumly.

Sherlock furrowed his eyebrows. “She wouldn’t be likely to agree if I told her it was for a criminal investigation, would she.”

“Well, this should be interesting.” John took a drink. “You sure you want me to come? It seems a bit awkward—”

“It will be imperative that you do.”

John thought the information that his role would be ‘imperative’ for an appointment with a prostitute
did not bode well. “Where are we meeting her?” he asked warily.

“Monroe’s. Tomorrow night. Ten o’clock.”

“I’m not going to have sex with her.”

For John it was stating the obvious, but with Sherlock you could never be sure. He would do anything himself for a case. Actually, John remembered suddenly, anything except this. If Sherlock tried to convince him to have sex with the prostitute for the case, then John wouldn’t hesitate to remind him that he hadn’t even had sex with his girlfriend for a case.

“You shouldn’t have to.”

“Shouldn’t?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “You won’t have to.”

“Do you know how incredible it is that I’m even considering trusting you?”

“I am perfectly trustworthy.”

“You spend ninety-percent of your time deceiving people.”

“Nonsense.”

“You’re lying right now.”

“You’ve lost your sheep.”

John gave an incredulous laugh. “What?”

Sherlock frowned. “You know the phrase. ‘Lost your sheep.’ It means you’ve gone mad.”

“I have never heard that phrase before. That’s definitely not a phrase.”

“It is. It comes from the old days when a shepherd would be in such trouble if he lost his sheep that he could lose his wits.”

John laughed. “Really.”

“Yes, really,” Sherlock said defensively.

John shook his head. That was the problem with logic. You could have a perfectly logical explanation for something and still be completely wrong. But for Sherlock logic functioned so accurately in his work that the (in some ways, surprisingly naïve) detective hadn’t quite learned how it can fall apart in life.

But he decided he would let this one go. When dealing with Sherlock Holmes, John had learned to pick his battles. Because if he hadn’t, well, he would have lost his sheep a long time ago.
Waltzes and Whisky

It turned out that John's landlady, who had expressly promised he wouldn't have to dance, was as underhanded and manipulative as her mad scientist tenant.

"John, this is Mrs. Avery," she said almost as soon as they entered the ballroom.

"Pleased to meet you," John said, taking the hand of a woman who looked to be about the same age as Mrs. Hudson.

"Oh my, what a dashing young man," Mrs. Avery said, smiling at him.

"I told Mrs. Avery you might be kind enough to accompany her for a dance," his lying, conniving landlady beamed.

But John was too much the English gentlemen to say no. As he walked out onto the dance floor he silently cursed Mrs. Hudson with as many Sherlockian social catastrophes as could be pulled off in a single night.

The couples took their places on the floor, and John desperately ran through everything Sherlock had taught him when he'd been preparing for his wedding. The song would be a waltz, Mrs. Avery kindly informed him. He knew he could manage all right if he could just remember the steps.

"I want to apologise in advance, Mrs. Avery," John said. "I think I've fallen down a set of stairs more gracefully than I dance."

Mrs. Avery laughed. "Not to worry, dear, it's all in good fun."

John took a deep breath and the music began.

* From his position on the dance floor Sherlock watched John closely over Mrs. Hudson's shoulder. He was doing all right, only occasionally fumbling the steps. He had the same stiff posture as he'd had during his wedding dance. Sherlock had tried to explain to him that half the success of the dance is appearing confident and relaxed. John currently looked like someone had a gun to his head. Actually it was a bad metaphor because John was much more relaxed when someone had a gun to his head.

No, John your left foot…

* "No, John your left foot," Sherlock said.

They were standing in the living room, furniture cleared aside for the purpose of the dance lesson. John had stormed into the flat earlier that evening. "Well, that's it, I'm not getting married."

He still had a key to 221B. Mrs. Hudson had never asked for it back when they thought Sherlock was dead. Sherlock had never asked for it back afterward.

Sherlock looked up from his laptop, startled. "What?"
"My fiancée is insisting we do a waltz for the first dance."

Sherlock snorted. "Were you hoping for a quickstep?"

John glared. "Sherlock, this is serious. It's going to be humiliating when I step all over her feet."

"So, you're not getting married then?" Sherlock confirmed.

"Nope," John said, crossing his arms and dropping into his chair. "Better to just call the whole thing off, I think."

"Hmm," Sherlock said, returning his attention to his laptop. "Shame."

Several minutes went by.

"You don't—" John started. "You don't know how to waltz, do you?"

"Nope." Sherlock kept his eyes on the screen in front of him.

"Ugh," John said with his usual eloquence, "this is a nightmare."

"Why?" Sherlock wanted to know. "You said you're not getting married."

John sighed, "No, I am, but we could set the record for the world's shortest marriage if Mary dumps me at the reception for being shit at dancing."

"How likely is that to happen?"

John looked at Sherlock strangely. "I was joking. I don't really think she'll dump me over it. The whole thing would just be a lot less painful if I knew what I was doing."

"Fine," Sherlock said, standing up. He gripped the table he'd been sitting at and pushed it up against the wall.

"What are you doing?" John asked.

"I'm going to teach you how to waltz."

"I thought you said you didn't know how."

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "I know the basic steps. I thought everyone did."

John scoffed. "Yeah, maybe everyone who went to public school…" He trailed off looking up at Sherlock, who was standing directly above him. "What?"

"The chair will be easier to move without you in it."

"Oh." He got up. "You're really going to—"

"Yes."

"Ok then."

"It's bloody complicated!" John huffed when he'd been corrected, yet again, about starting with his left foot.

"It's not complicated," Sherlock said. He'd taken off his suit jacket and unbuttoned the top of his
shirt. John was considerably more awful at this than he had anticipated.

John, in turn, had removed his jumper, his long-sleeved button-up, and was now down to a black t-shirt.

Sherlock moved from where he'd been watching John to stand beside him. "Watch my feet," he said. "Do what I do."

Sherlock demonstrated the steps slowly, aware of John clumsily mimicking his movements beside him. Sherlock played the music and they continued. When John seemed to get the hang of it Sherlock stepped away. He folded his arms and watched the doctor move through the steps.

"You need to look like you're enjoying it," Sherlock critiqued, "not like you're getting a tetanus jab."

"I feel like a right idiot," John muttered, still moving through the steps.

"You look a bit like an idiot," Sherlock agreed.

John stopped. "You can't call your student an idiot. What kind of instructor are you?"

"The kind that is a detective, and not a dance instructor." He paused the music.

John clenched and unclenched his hands. "Sorry, it's not your fault I'm complete rubbish at this pissing stupid fucking bollocks arsehole dance."

Sherlock was looking at his friend with raised eyebrows. "I wasn't aware a dance could be an arsehole."

John crossed his arms sulkily. "This one is."

"You'll look better when you relax. It's better to look relaxed and make mistakes than it is to be accurate with the steps but look like you're watching one of Mrs. Hudson's YouTube videos."

Actually, John's expression while he danced was remarkably similar to the one he had worn the night Sherlock had been bored enough to google 'Martha Hudson,' and shown John the resulting clips of her former exotic dancing days.

Sherlock moved to stand in front of John and took a step closer. He took John's left hand with his right.

John stepped backward. "What are you doing?"

"Believe it or not, waltzing is a two-person activity."

"Yeah, but—" Sherlock noticed a slight flush around his neck. "I just need to know the steps. I don't need to practice with a partner, do I?"

Sherlock did not restrain the eye roll. "Dancing is not two independent sets of steps mashed together. You'll have to lead her."

John dropped his head. "Bugger." He looked back up and met Sherlock's eyes. He straightened his shoulders. "Ok," he said, "tell me where to put my hands." Sherlock felt a grin tug the corner of his mouth. Soldiers fear no waltz positions.

Sherlock played the music and stepped forward. He took John's right hand and placed it on his back. He rested his left hand on John's shoulder. With his right hand he clasped John's left and raised it out
"How close... should we be standing?" John asked. There was just a thin gap between them.

"This is fine for a beginner's waltz."

"Is it different at different levels?"

"A professional can lead with his hips."

John cleared his throat. "Well, we don't, er—"

"We are not professionals."

"No, no, that's not, erm, we're not—"

"Relax," Sherlock said.

"I am relaxed." John squirmed.

"You are not relaxed. You're squirming."

"Well why aren't we moving?"

"We're not moving until you get used to the position and relax."

John stilled and took a deep breath. His eyes flicked up and locked on Sherlock's. Sherlock's muscles tensed but he willed them to ease. He was role modelling, after all.

"We'll wait until the beat comes around... One, two, three... No, your left foot. Again. One, two, three..."

John moved better with a partner. Apparently a sense of responsibility for another person's movements was motivating for him. John had a strong, innate sense of responsibility for those around him. The mark of a good soldier.

John's dominant streak, which mostly lay dormant during their work together (asserting itself only when necessary—a few memorable occasions), but which Sherlock had observed in his interactions with women and sometimes in their own domestic life when they'd lived together ("Sherlock, you will put your dishes in the dishwasher, or I will put your mould cultures in the dishwasher"), was activated by being placed in the leading position. Instinctually he used the hand on Sherlock's back to gently pull him forward and push him back in a way Sherlock didn't have to instruct him to do.

He stepped wrong several times, swearing under his breath, and Sherlock corrected him when he tried to pull with his left arm. But Sherlock had put the song on repeat, and they continued until John was making fewer and fewer mistakes.

John had relaxed considerably from when they started. Sherlock could feel the tension easing in the muscles across his back. John was not overtly muscular, although in the t-shirt his muscles were noticeably defined. He'd known John was strong—he'd certainly received enough evidence the night John knocked him over in a restaurant. The doctor was in good shape, and he could feel the strength in the grip on his back and the sturdiness of his shoulders.

Sherlock had had the advantage of living with John, when he'd walked around the flat in t-shirts and pyjama trousers, but for others it would be hard to tell the state of John's figure under the nearly comical number of layers he wore. T-shirts under button-ups under jumpers under coats—a Victorian
lady in January could hardly wear more clothing. He hadn't seen John wearing just one shirt in a while and it was… agreeable to know he was still in good form.

When they had made it through the set of steps multiple times in a row without error, Sherlock decided it was time.

"Look up," he said to his dance partner who hadn't stopped watching their feet since they'd begun.

"Do I have to?"

"Yes."

Sherlock felt John's grip tighten on his back as if to stabilise himself. He raised his eyes and looked directly into Sherlock's. Deep, dark blue. John was looking at him intensely, as if holding Sherlock's gaze hard enough would prevent him from looking down. When they returned to the first position he let go of John's hand and stepped back.

"That's, er— "Sherlock pushed his hand back through his hair— "that's good. Erm, for future reference you don't have to look directly into your partner's eyes. You can, erm, look out at the dancefloor… Technically you should look left, over your partner's shoulder, to, erm, avoid collisions…"

John was looking at him oddly. Sherlock was aware he was babbling, but somehow that didn't stop him.

"But I suppose you and Mary will be dancing just the two of you so, erm… collisions won't be… er…"


"Yes, that's it. So you can probably go ahead and look at her. You can make eye contact like, erm —" He gestured at the air between them.

"Are we done then?" John asked. Sherlock was surprised to hear a trace of disappointment in his voice. "I think I was just getting the hang of it."

Sherlock raised his eyebrows. "You—did you want to carry on?"

"Erm, sure, I mean, if you don't mind…"

"No, that's all right."

John stepped forward to fill the space Sherlock had made when he'd stepped back. He took Sherlock's right hand with his left and he wrapped his right hand around to Sherlock's back. The spot was warm from where John's hand had been before, and he felt the heat of his palm again through the thin material of his shirt. The music was still playing and Sherlock counted, "One, two, three."

John stepped forward with his left foot and they moved through the paces. John, either not understanding Sherlock's incoherent ramblings or disregarding them, looked directly into his eyes again. Sherlock was better prepared this time and he held his gaze firmly.

John kept his feet moving in the right steps. Eventually he broke the eye contact by dropping his eyes lower—not to their feet, he was being good about that—but just to the level of Sherlock's mouth. And then to his neck.
John fumbled, stepping forward and pulling Sherlock toward him when he should have been pushing him back. They collided and John stopped.

"Sorry," he murmured.

Sherlock waited, wondering why he hadn't let him go. The scent of John's hair was laced with honey and Sherlock remembered this was his favourite of John's shampoos (the better ones he'd convinced John to buy after tossing out the cheap ones that do more damage than good, back when he'd lived at Baker Street).

Sherlock kept his left hand on John's shoulder, but moved his right to John's hip, meaning to push him back into the correct position. John's left hand reflexively gripped Sherlock's arm as if to push it away, but he didn't. His eyes shot to Sherlock's and neither of them heard the door opening.

They both, however, heard Mrs. Hudson exclaim, "Good heavens!"

They dropped their hands as fast as if they had been burned. John spun around and walked a few paces away. Sherlock stopped the music.

"My goodness, I'm so sorry to interrupt!" his abhorrent landlady prattled.

"He's teaching me to waltz," John said hastily. "For my wedding."

She grinned. "You look like you're getting on well."

John raised his hand to his forehead.

Sherlock leaned back against the window. "Mrs. Hudson, if you insist on burdening us with your presence you may as well tell us what tiresome reason you have for being in our flat."

Sherlock realised his error as soon as he said it. It wasn't 'our' flat; John didn't live there anymore. Neither John nor Mrs. Hudson seemed to notice.

"Oh, Sherlock, I'm sorry, love, how was I to know you two would be up here… waltzing?" she gave him a sly wink. "I wouldn't have come up at all, but, John, Mary's phoned me."

John looked up, startled.

"She says she hasn't been able to reach you."

John walked over to his neglected phone on the kitchen table. Evidently it had been on silent.

"She was worried, so I told her I'd come up to check if you were here…" she trailed off. "Should I not tell her you're here?" she asked conspiratorially.

"No, Mrs. Hudson," John said with audible strain in his voice. "I'll give her a call. Thanks."

Mrs. Hudson walked to the door, but she turned on her heel.

"John, don't marry her."

Sherlock and John both snapped their heads toward her in surprise.

"What?" John asked, dumbfounded.

"Oh, love, you know how much I care about you. I'll support you in whatever you choose. But
just… think about it. You still have time. I know you boys don't think much of my history, but I've learned a thing or two in my years and I can tell you it's better to change your mind now than later.”

Sherlock had never wanted Mrs. Hudson to shut up less. Weddings were despicable, melodramatic displays of sentiment—wholly repugnant social constructs designed to cultivate embarrassing and frankly pathetic levels of emotion. If John could be reasoned out of such an appalling affair Sherlock would not hesitate to shake the hand of the person who did it. John didn't need to marry Mary. He didn't need to live with Mary either. He could live here, at Baker Street, like they had before.

"Mrs. Hudson, what are you—?" John started.

"Just think about it, dear. Be certain. That's all I'll say on the subject. If you choose to marry her you'll have nothing but my warmest wishes and total support."

She left the flat and John turned to Sherlock. "What do you think that was about?"

Sherlock was pulling the table back out from the wall. That was enough dancing for one night.

He shrugged. "She wants you to reconsider your marriage."

"Why would I reconsider my marriage?"

Sherlock sat down in front of his laptop. "No reason at all."

*

Mrs. Avery was terribly polite about John's mistakes.

"Don't worry, dear, you just need a little more practice," she said when the dance finished and John apologised again.

"The next should be a quickstep," she continued.

John shook his head, "I can't, er—"

She chuckled. "This really isn't for you, is it?"

John smiled in relief at her understanding. "No," he said, "it's really not."

"Well, that's all right, thank you for the dance. I think I see my nephew over there. Perhaps he'll be my next hostage." She winked at him.

John had no trouble finding his way to the bar. He had just paid for the whisky when the next dance started. He had a good view of the floor from the stool at the raised bar. He picked out Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson from among the crowd of dancers and almost choked on his drink.

Sherlock Holmes was a bloody brilliant dancer. He glided across the floor as gracefully as—well, as he did everything else. John had never met anyone so agile and poised. It was only logical that he would be an exceptional dancer. Sherlock's body was made for dancing like it was made for expensive suits.

Mrs. Hudson also seemed to be one of the better dancers on the floor. John supposed it wasn't entirely surprising, considering she had been a professional dancer in the past. He cringed as certain YouTube clips took their cue to pop up uninvited in his mind.

The quickstep turned out to be just as fast and formidable as the name suggested. John watched the
complicated footwork of the dancers in awe. When the consulting detective and his landlady moved past the edge of the floor John watched as they successfully executed a complex set of steps before he swept her off again.

It occurred to John that Sherlock had lied a few years ago when he'd asked him if he knew how to waltz. First he'd said 'no' before admitting that he knew the basics. Now it was obvious that he'd known much more than the basics. John had been suspicious at the time—the detective had given him oddly specific instructions and critiques, and the ease with which Sherlock had been able to dance the steps opposite the lead suggested he knew more than he was letting on. At the time John attributed it to his wealthy upbringing and just being a ponce generally. But now he could see differently. Sherlock loved to dance. And he was damn good at it.

John continued to sip his whisky. He watched Sherlock: his posture, his movement. He remembered that evening at Baker Street. Sherlock had been a shockingly good teacher. Shocking because the discretion required to teach ran counter to his personality. John wondered if he could remember a time when Sherlock had been as patient as he was taking him through the steps that night.

Sherlock was a many-faceted being, John marvelled. Whenever you felt sure you knew him he showed you another side of his capabilities, possibilities. He was, in other words, fascinating. But John had always known that. He'd known it from the moment they met in the lab and the young scientist with the dark hair and flecked eyes had sent his head spinning. He'd been captivated enough to move in with him, to write a blog about him.

John watched Sherlock guide his partner across the floor as fluidly as if there were no one else present. As if the steps were as natural as walking. Mesmerising. The consulting detective was a violinist. The violinist was a chemist. The chemist was a dancer. Incredible.

John finished the whisky and ordered another.

* * *

The cab ride home was a giddy affair. Mrs. Hudson was overjoyed to have her boys back together in 221B, and she was in the highest of spirits in the wake of the ball. Sherlock had turned out to be a spectacular dancer; she had received compliments on their dancing all night. The evening couldn't have been more of a success. She sat backward in the cab gleefully watching the doctor and the detective struggling on the seat across from her.

"Sherlock, stop leaning on me. Mrs. Hudson, Sherlock won't stay on his side."

Sherlock was sitting next to the window and John was practically draped over him in a slump.

Mrs. Hudson giggled and Sherlock shot her a glare.

The two of them had found John at the bar, later in the night, chatting with Gail Perry's son over a few too many drinks.

"Hullo!" John had slurred upon their arrival. "This is Nathan," he gestured at the equally intoxicated young man sitting next to him. "Nathan, these are my…" He broke off laughing.

"I'm Sherlock," Sherlock had said, offering his hand stiffly to the tall, auburn-haired gentleman, who shook it warmly.

Mrs. Hudson already knew Nathan Perry. He was a sportswriter for the BBC, a fact Gail wasn't letting anyone forget. He was younger than John, the same age as Sherlock, if she remembered correctly. He greeted her cheerfully.
"We are both better at drinking than dancing," John announced.

"And we're not that good at drinking," Nathan snorted.

They dissolved into giggles.

"I think it's time we went home," Sherlock said sternly.

Mrs. Hudson didn't miss the way he stepped forward, territorially placing himself slightly in front of John. She sighed inwardly. It was funny how in some ways young men were all the same, even Sherlock. He didn't seem to be aware of the unconscious shift in his stance. But Nathan stood up, body probably instinctually reading what his mind was too busy with alcohol to notice.

"John, I think they're better at drinking than we are," Nathan said, swayingly observing their stability.

"Yes," Sherlock said, impatience clear. "We're so good at drinking we haven't drunk anything."

John laughed into his glass.

Nathan nodded. "That is good."

John had stood up from the stool, catching Sherlock's arm to steady himself. Mrs. Hudson had smiled at how readily the two of them depended on each other, leaned on each other…

"I am not leaning on you. You are leaning on me," Sherlock insisted. He twisted in the cab seat, putting his hands on John's shoulders and sitting him up straight.


Mrs. Hudson giggled again and Sherlock slatted his eyes at her, as though his current position as a pillow were her fault. But when he looked back at John his expression softened.

"D'you mind?" John muttered sleepily.

Sherlock hesitated, an expression briefly flickering over his face that Mrs. Hudson had only ever seen on him when he looked at John. "I don't mind."

Mrs. Hudson's heart melted.
John unstuck his tongue from the roof of his mouth and peeled his eyes open. His head throbbed in protest at the influx of light and it was more than a few moments before he understood that he was in Sherlock Holmes’ bed.

It might have been an ideal moment to panic, but his aching brain refused to make any such effort. For the moment the best he’d be able to do was to take stock of the situation. He slowly slid the sheets back and grimaced. He was wearing just his boxers.

He dropped his head back down on the pillow and breathed a long exhale. He closed his eyes and willed the memories from last night to come back to him. He’d been drunk, there was no arguing with the dizziness and sticky dry mouth of a hangover, but he hoped not drunk enough to have blacked out entirely. Today was Friday, he remembered. No shift at the surgery, thank god. He rubbed his hands across his eyes as though it could stimulate thought. What happened last night?

There was the ball. Sherlock was dancing. He was at the bar. He met Nathan and they decided it would be a good idea to drink every time they heard someone say something pretentious. The way home was a blur. Getting back into the flat was a blur. He didn’t remember saying goodnight to Mrs. Hudson.

He concentrated hard. The flat. Last night. How did he end up here? He got a flash of an image. Stairs. And then… Yes, that was it. He’d fallen on the stairs leading up to the flat. He confirmed the memory by touching the bruise on his leg. The resultant dull pain brought back the memory in full.

“Nope,” he had said to Sherlock, shaking his head at the stairs leading to his bedroom. Falling on the first flight had not made him keen on a second. “Stairs can’t be just all the time.”

What had Sherlock’s expression been? Had he rolled his eyes? Been irritated? No, John didn’t think so. He’d been amused, hadn’t he? Trying to stifle a smile—

But why hadn’t he gone to the couch? Whose idea was it—

“Couch,” John had announced definitively, shrugging off his suit jacket and starting to work at the buttons of his waistcoat.

“I’m going to work for a while”—there it was—“you can sleep in my bedroom.”

“Stuck,” John replied. Having got the waistcoat off he’d moved on to the considerably smaller buttons of his shirt. Upon failing to get them he had attempted to pull the shirt over his head.

He remembered this part clearly. Sherlock crossed the room swiftly and grabbed his arms to prevent him from tearing the shirt. With deft fingers he’d undone John’s shirt in an instant.

John had stood blinking at his flatmate through the haze of intoxication. “You’d think you were undoing men’s shirts all the time,” he mumbled.

“I am,” Sherlock said. “I wear them.”

Smartarse, John thought. What had happened next? Had he just simply walked into Sherlock’s bedroom? No he’d been confused…

“Ok, g’night,” John had said, aiming for the couch.
“No,” Sherlock said, catching his wrist. “This way.” He’d pulled him, John remembered.

“Why?” John asked, obediently following his favourite detective down the hallway.

“Because I will have the light on in the living room and I will be working. You’ll sleep better here.”

He guided John into the room by his wrist and let him go. But that wasn’t the end of it. John remembered he had sat down on the bed, undoing his shoes.

“It’s nice,” he said.

“What?” Sherlock asked.

“You.”

Sherlock waited.

“You, dancing.”

The detective leaned against the doorframe.

“You are a professional dancer.”

“I’m an amateur dancer.”

“Psssh,” John laughed, “like you’re an amateur detective.”

John was sliding off his belt. He pulled down his trousers.

John cringed at the memory. Couldn’t he have waited until Sherlock left the room?

“They’re right you know,” John had said, apparently just sitting on the edge of the bed in his boxers at this point.

“Who?”

“Everyone.”

“What are they right about?”

“You’re very pretty.”

And John had chosen that moment—as opposed to a much more convenient two minutes prior—to lie down on the bed and pass out.

John covered his face with both hands. He was never going to hear the end of it.

*

When John had got the flat to stop spinning enough to walk to the living room, he found Sherlock stretched out on the couch, laptop balanced on his thighs. John wondered if he’d slept on the couch or if he’d slept at all. He felt guilty about having taken his flatmate’s bed, but on the other hand Sherlock probably wouldn’t have used it anyway.

The detective’s eyes ran over him, reading him, John knew, in that piercingly analytical way of his and John was suddenly hyperaware that he was still wearing only his boxers. The only clothes he had in Sherlock’s room were the ones from last night, and in his current state he truly couldn’t be
arsed to get them on again. Sherlock would just have to cope with his boxers. They were nice boxers, anyway. John’s head swam and he wished his unbelievably intense flatmate would stop looking at him like—

“Good afternoon, John!” Sherlock said, expression snapping from scrutinising to cheery in an instant.

John slatted his eyes at his suddenly chipper flatmate. He did not like that tone on Sherlock one bit.

“Tell me, I couldn’t decide”—Sherlock shut his laptop and jumped up on couch—“do you think I’m prettier in the red or the blue?” he asked, holding up two of his dressing gowns.

John held the edge of the wall. He couldn’t be expected to maintain his balance if the flat was going to tilt and wobble so. “I think you’re a twatting tosspot.”

“Pretty though, right?” Sherlock jumped to the floor. “Where are you going?”

John walked into the bathroom as determinedly as his hangover would allow. He grabbed Sherlock’s shampoo and conditioner. He marched up to the conceited ball of ego in his living room and shoved the products in his face.

“Look at these!” John said. “Look at them!”

Sherlock gave him a bewildered look. “Is there a reason you’re brandishing shampoo at me?”

“Forty pounds each! I looked them up. And god knows how much the rest of the products in there cost.”

“You know nothing of the daily struggle that is curly hair,” Sherlock said, taking his phone out of his pocket as it buzzed.

“That’s not the point.”

“Are you making a point?” he asked as he checked the message.

“You know you’re pretty, you toff.” Sherlock blinked up from his phone at that. “It’s an obvious fact. Everyone knows it, including you. So don’t act like what I said last night is any kind of revelation.”

“You’re a very nasty hungover person,” Sherlock said, flopping down onto the couch sulkily.

“My head hurts,” John frowned.

“By the way, if you’re planning to be naked all day I should warn you Mrs. Hudson’s threatened to come up with tea in an hour.”

“I’m not naked,” John said, feeling his face get hot.

Sherlock shrugged. “Suit yourself. Just remember our dear landlady has recently learned how to use the camera function on her phone.”

John stalked off to the bathroom and as he brushed his teeth he wondered if there was anyone else living with such a difficult detective. He wondered if there was a support group for people living with difficult detectives.
“By making the necessary inquiries I discovered that there was one woman who had appointments with all three of our dead men on Friday, October ninth. Her name is Karina. More likely was Karina,” Sherlock explained as their cab wound through the London streets toward the strip club. “The woman we’re meeting tonight is Alexa. Probably not her real name. She’s worked at Monroe’s for a few years so she should have the information we need.”

“And what information is that?”

“We need to know who owns the club. If this place is what I think it is the person on the books won’t be the real owner.”

“What do you think it is?”

“A front. For most patrons Monroe’s is just a strip club. For those who know better it’s a brothel. I would guess they sell drugs too. The two usually go hand in hand.”

“Right.”

“And we need anything she can tell us about Karina.”

“How are we going to question her while pretending we’re only there for sex? I suppose she won’t be interested in an interrogator/witness roleplay.” John chuckled at absurdity of the idea and Sherlock gave him a sideways glance.

“Another apt demonstration, John, of why we let me handle the planning.”

John wondered if Sherlock would be as patronising with his scarf wrapped and tied around his face. He clasped his hands together to prevent them from trying it. “So what’s my role then?”

“You’re going to distract her while I have a look around.”

John looked at him. “You aren’t serious.”

Sherlock furrowed his eyebrows. “Yes I am.”

“And how do you suppose I’m going to distract a prostitute? Hm? I don’t suppose they have Scrabble there, do you?”

“John—”

“No, Sherlock, I told you I won’t have sex with her. I won’t—”

“I don’t want you to have sex with her,” Sherlock snapped. “But you can act like you’re interested. Keep her attention, you know the drill.”

“Right,” John sighed and turned to look out the window. Because we have a drill for interrogating prostitutes undercover.

* 

As an alleged ‘front’ for prostitution and drug dealing, John had imagined Monroe’s to be a dingy, seedy place that would practically spell out crime. The place the cab pulled up to, however, was decidedly upmarket, with a valet option at the door.

“This is not what I was expecting,” John said as they stepped out of the cab.
“Weren’t you?” Sherlock asked. “What do the dead men have in common?”

“Scars on their thighs.”

“Yes, and?”

John shrugged.

“Money.”

John wondered if he was underdressed in his jeans and shirt, but a glance around revealed other men in the same attire. However, Sherlock, with a dark purple designer shirt visible beneath suit jacket, was (for once) not overdressed either. There were a considerable number of men in suits as well—straight from the office to the bar on a Friday night.

The heavy thudding of some kind of dubstep or drum and bass or whatever the kids were calling it these days preceded their entry into the building.

John handed over cash for the cover charges. As a rule, his bloody incompetent flatmate never had cash. He often wondered if Sherlock had ever used a cash machine, and even more often wondered how the man managed to simply survive on a day-to-day basis.

The club was an enormous space, darkly lit and alternatingly illuminated by neon lights. A sleek, modern bar stretched almost the length of the place. Dotting the area were circular platforms featuring silver poles. They served as miniature stages for the strippers, who, topless, were performing their routines to their respective audiences: a ring of chairs around each stage filled with hollering, note-waving revellers.

The time was almost ten, and the club was in full swing. It was crowded. The majority of the patrons were men, although John spotted a few women here and there, and one particularly conspicuous group of women surrounding a platform, shrieking and cheering.

He felt a tug on his sleeve and he followed Sherlock over to a stage where there were two empty seats.

They dropped into the seats and Sherlock leaned over, “Act interested,” he said close to his ear, probably forgetting that John was the sort of goldfish who would not have to be instructed to ‘act interested’ in a topless dancer. “We need to look no different than these brainless idiots across from us.”

John smirked at the detective’s usual amount of tact. No one stood a chance. With Sherlock you were stupid long before you even had the chance to open your mouth and incriminate yourself.

He watched in fascination as Sherlock faced the stripper with an expression that would have looked mildly interested to anyone else. But John could see he’d gone away. To his mind palace, he supposed, hopefully to run over the plan for their impending encounter.

John kept his eyes moving between the stripper and the detective. He had to appreciate the exceptional circumstance of being at a strip club with Sherlock Holmes. Even a Sherlock who was not remotely paying attention was an extraordinarily out-of-place figure at a pole-dancing performance.

John had been to a few strip clubs in his day. A stag party here, a drunken night there, but he’d never warmed to them. Confusing feminist questions aside, he didn’t like the atmosphere: A bunch of leering men, some clearly aroused… Strip clubs weren’t John’s scene.
There were ten other men in the chairs around the platform. Some were cheering and clapping and talking animatedly amongst each other. A few sat sipping drinks, an unpleasantly predatory look on their faces as they watched the woman gyrating in front of them.

The beat throbbed on and he watched the woman display impressive strength, pulling herself up and down the pole. She was fit, to be sure. It wasn’t difficult to see why she would have success in showing off her body. His eyes flicked sideways again, a repetition John found he couldn't help. Sherlock in the seat next to him was surreal, eyes fixed blankly on the woman in front of them, colour shadows playing across his face warm and cold. John wondered where he was in his mind palace. Even after all the years it was still incredible to John that the detective could leave the conscious world like this, shut out all sensory input and turn his gaze inward. The mental control was truly amazing and John wondered, not for the first time, what it must be like in Sherlock's mind palace. He would give anything to see it. Because the rooms must be filled not only with enough stores of science and crime information to rival the British Library, but also treasures of Sherlock’s memories and imagination. If he could have even just an hour to explore the corridors and doorways of that unfathomable mind—

The stripper dropped to her hands and knees on the platform. Cheers followed her as she crawled around and John couldn’t help grinning when he saw who she had chosen to favour with her attention.

John cleared his throat, nudging his friend.

Sherlock’s eyes snapped back into focus and John savoured the look of surprise on his face when he realised the woman he’d been absently watching was directly in front of him on all fours. She turned around, shaking her arse for him.

“John…”

John laughed. “She wants money,” he said over the music.

“What?”

“Give her money and she’ll move on.”

John took out his wallet and handed him a fiver. Five pounds was nothing. He would have paid considerably more to watch Sherlock do this.

“Can’t you—?”

“Just do it,” John said.

Sherlock Holmes straightened his jacket, leaned up, and tucked the note into the band of the stripper’s thong. The people around the stage whistled and clapped and she moved on to the next group.

John gave Sherlock what he hoped was his best obnoxious grin and Sherlock in turn told him to shut up.

A server appeared behind them. “Mr. Taylor?” she asked.

Sherlock turned around. “Yes?”

“If you and Mr. Bradley will just follow me for your appointment.”
Sherlock stood and John followed.

“Taylor?” John muttered to Sherlock as they crossed the crowded floor, knowing he wouldn’t be heard over the music.

“I have a random name generator,” Sherlock explained, tapping his phone. “Tonight I’m Matthew Taylor and you’re Sean Bradley.”

“When were you planning on telling me this?”

“Right now.”

Impeccable timing, as always.

“Don’t they think it’s weird that there are two of us for one ‘appointment’?”

Sherlock smirked, “I don’t know much about the world of prostitution, but I’m sure they’ve seen weirder.”

The server led them round a wall in the back. She entered a security code at a door and they followed her through and up a large, sweeping flight of steps.

In contrast to the ultramodern club, the upstairs décor seemed an attempt to mimic the style of an old Parisian brothel. Chandeliers lined the hallway ceiling and ornate doorways led off to, what John assumed, were the bedrooms.

“How much did you pay for this?” John asked under his breath.

“Enough,” Sherlock responded.

He wondered how such a place could exist without the police knowing about it. Maybe they did know about it. But John didn’t have time to speculate about the level of corruption at Scotland Yard. They stopped at one of the doors.

“May I take your drink orders?” their guide asked.

“Vodka martini with lemon,” Sherlock replied, adding a bit of the James Bond touch to being undercover. Actually, John doubted if Sherlock knew who James Bond was. John looked at his friend suspiciously. He must know.

“Scotch, neat,” John said. He knew it would probably be better to order something he hadn’t been consuming excessively the night before, but his hangover had been his fault, not the whisky’s. Scotch was by far his favourite drink and he wasn’t about to let one bad morning ruin their relationship.

The server tapped on the door and a woman opened it.

John had never met a woman who worked as a prostitute. If he had any ideas about how she might look based on the Hollywood version of street hookers he was mistaken. She was young, beautiful. Long, thick, undulating dark hair fell around her waist. Her makeup was subtle on delicate features, full lips, dark eyes; John wouldn’t think she’d have any trouble getting work with a modelling agency, but he supposed her reasons for her profession were her own. Alexa, he presumed. She was wearing a small silk dressing gown, barely long enough to cover the necessary parts. Stilettos had her height between his and Sherlock’s. Her long, tan legs were bare—
Sherlock nudged him and John realised he must have been gaping.

“Come in,” she said, opening the door wider and stepping back. “Have a seat.” She had a subtle accent John couldn’t place.

It was a large, luxurious room. The bed was certainly big enough for three people, and if there were any force on Earth that could erase that last observation from his mind he would’ve happily paid for it.

They sat in the two wooden, cushioned chairs she indicated.

“So, how shall we start?” she asked, moving to stand in front of them. She undid the silk belt around her waist and the dressing gown fell open. John swallowed, dragging his eyes up from her lingerie to her face. “How about a private dance?”

She picked up a small remote from the side table.

“I thought we might get to know each other a bit first,” Sherlock said, eyes boring through her. John knew he was ascertaining as many deductions about her as possible. The detective leaned back in his chair, crossing one leg over the other. “Tell us something about you.”

She smirked, meeting his gaze unwaveringly, seeming to appraise him in turn.

There was a tap at the door and the server set down their respective drinks on the table between the chairs. When the door had clicked shut again she tossed off the dressing gown entirely and cast her gaze down as if to indicate her own figure.

“I think you know enough about me. Now, you may drink your drinks, and I’ll give you a little dance.”

It was enough to shut Sherlock up. She hit ‘play’ and a sultry song with deep bass flooded from unseen speakers.

She swayed, moving her hips slowly to the rhythm. John was more than happy to see Scotch again, the disagreements of the morning forgotten entirely.

“Now,” she said, moving closer to Sherlock. She put one foot on the edge of his chair and he had to tilt his head back to see her face. “What do you want to talk about?”

Sherlock hesitated.

“No?” she asked. Her smile showed her teeth. She backed off of Sherlock’s chair and moved toward John’s.

She stood over him, straddling his chair. John kept his gaze firm, looking up at her face. She dipped down, rolling her hips with the music, giving him a lap dance. John took a deep breath. She was beautiful and he gathered he should probably look like he was into it for the sake of ‘distracting her’ or whatever the hell it was Sherlock had said he was supposed to be doing. But perhaps it was because they were on a case, or maybe it was just the inescapable unreality of strippers and prostitutes in general, but John found it more difficult to look like he was enjoying it than he might have thought. There were two talented actors in the room and he wasn’t one of them.

He placed his hands on her waist and he turned his head to look at Sherlock thinking, Well…? Plan? But Sherlock was watching them with a blank expression. Calculating, John hoped.
She stopped moving and sat down in John’s lap, facing him.

“*You’re both very attractive,*” she purred, lifting her hands and running them through John’s hair. “*Such a shame that you’re cops.*"
John blinked hard, doing his best not provide her with any visible reaction.

“Relax,” Sherlock said evenly, “she’s going to help us.”

“Such confidence.” Alexa stood up and moved over to give Sherlock his share of the lap dance. “What makes you so sure?”

“Several things,” Sherlock said, stroking his hands up her back. John tried to keep his mouth shut as he goggled at the detective and the prostitute. “First of all you arranged these chairs, which are normally on the other side of the room—I can tell from the impressions in the carpet—so that from the camera’s angle the bedpost is blocking my face and you’re mostly blocking my partner’s when you move in front of him.” She spun around so her back was to him, almost sitting in Sherlock’s lap but continuing to move to the music. “Second, you wouldn’t speak until you turned on the music. It’s loud enough to cover the audio. The camera won’t pick up anything intelligible from our voices.”

John was staring at Sherlock in amazement.

“Clever cop,” she said, raising herself up off of his lap.

“How do you know we’re cops?” John asked a bit defiantly.

She gave him a sultry smile. “My job requires the ability to read people as much as yours.” She moved back over to his chair. “Our clients are a certain type of men, and neither of you are it. You”—she grasped John’s knees and pulling them apart and moving to stand between them—“you’re the type who looks for the wires in the theatre. You don’t trust, and it’s no good if you know it’s fake.” John kept his eyes on her face as she reached for his shirt. She unbuttoned it, taking unbidden, the memory of how fast Sherlock had done it the night before sprang to his mind.

“And you,” she said, looking over at the detective, “well, you don’t belong here at all, do you?”

Sherlock didn’t respond. She finished unbuttoning John’s shirt and spread it open.

“And you’re not, erm, bothered at all, if we are with the police?” John asked, doing his best to stay focused. He glanced over and saw one of Sherlock’s many bored expressions, the one which meant already knew the answer. It was probably a good thing there was a bedpost blocking his face.

“Why should I be? The police do not trouble us about our work or our papers. My boss sees to that. No, you are here for a different reason.”

“You know why we’re here.” Sherlock’s voice drifted lazily from beside John. “You wouldn’t have let us through the doorway if you weren’t going to tell us what we need to know. So let’s be quick.”

John was surprised to pain flash across her face before she replaced it with what was probably her standard-issue sexy smirk.

“I loved Karina. She was like my sister. We came here to England together. I assume you’re here about her.”

Sherlock gave a curt nod.
“I don’t know what happened.” She stepped from John’s chair to stand in front of them. “But I believe she was killed.” She removed her bra, and John was forced to notice, despite the inappropriateness in the context of the conversation, that she had nice—he cleared his throat—very nice breasts.

She turned around and bent over, fingers grazing the floor. “One night, two weeks ago, she didn’t come home.” She raised herself slowly. “She always comes home. I haven’t seen her since.”

“Why would someone want to kill her?”

“There is no reason.” She knelt down in front of Sherlock, pushing her hands up his thighs and spreading his legs. “She was an angel. It’s true some clients become angry, or jealous, but we have good security.”

Sherlock’s face was blank. “Who owns the club?”

“Mr. Moran. Sebastian Moran. We are forbidden to tell anyone this, but I will tell you.”

“What do you know about him?”

“I’ve met him only once. He is not often here. He owns many businesses in London.”

“The kind of businesses that sell kitchen appliances or the kind that sell drugs?”

She grinned and stood up. “Both. He is a powerful man.”

“Did Karina know him?”

She walked over to a set of drawers at the side of the room. “She met him only once, like me. He was polite, professional. It’s not so bad to work here.” She pulled open a drawer. “We are well paid, there’s good security, our clients are screened for their health.” She turned and John saw she was holding a long knife in her hand.

“This was Karina’s specialty,” she said, moving across to John’s chair. She dragged the knife gently down his chest where she’d opened his shirt.

Right, he thought, to each their own angel.

“But I know how to use it too.” She raised an eyebrow suggestively. “Many of the girls here can; it’s very popular now.”

“Do you know any of these men?” Sherlock asked quickly, holding his phone down under the table where they’d placed their empty drink glasses. He swiped through the pictures of David Rodgers, Neil Parker, Brandon Riley, and Tony Bauer. John knew the pictures would be necessary for Alexa to recognise them if the men didn’t use their real names for ‘appointments.’

“Yes,” she said. The skip of her eyes toward the phone had barely been visible. John couldn’t help feeling like he was in one of those dreams where you’re on stage in the middle of a play and you’re the only one who doesn’t know the lines. She flicked aside half of his shirt with the knife and teased him with the blade. Perhaps Lestrade had a point. There had to be a better way they could conduct interviews.

“Except the last one they were some of Karina’s regular clients,” she said. “I saw that last one once. He liked the knife too.” She rested the blade against John’s inner thigh. His military training had taught him not to squirm, and he didn’t.
“Tony Bauer,” Sherlock clarified. “Are you aware that all of them, except Mr. Bauer, have died very recently? They were poisoned.”

She paused and John knew she was trying to keep her face still in front of the camera.

“I did not know.”

“We believe the poison was administered on the night of Friday, October ninth.”

“We were both working that night,” she said. “But Karina did not kill them. She would never do that. I knew her better than anyone.”

“It’s probable she didn’t know she was doing it.” Sherlock reached out and took hold of her wrist; he touched the blade in her hand. “The knives could have been coated in the poison without her knowing.”


She turned on her heel and went back to the drawers.

“She was unlucky,” Sherlock said. “It seems likely that she was chosen randomly for an experiment to test the poison. They might have killed her after to cover up the evidence.”

She set the knife down and picked up, John was surprised to see, a tube of lip gloss. She applied it slowly, set it down, and walked back.

“Who could be so evil?”

John knew from Sherlock’s expression who he was thinking of.

“We’ll find him,” Sherlock said.

She nodded. “I’m very sorry, gentlemen, but the time is up. If we continue any longer without sex it will look suspicious.”

John wondered which security guards got the job of watching the women have sex all night.

He looked over at the detective and was dismayed to see The Look on his face. The ‘we both know what’s going on here’ look. It was John's more diplomatic (and shorter) name for the ‘I’m very annoying (with my designer shoes and my poncey, curly hair), and I’m about to get us both into really deep shit’ look.

Alexa stood in front of John’s chair and reached out her hand. He took it uncertainly and allowed her to pull him to his feet. She gave him a coy smile before stepping forward.

“We don’t, erm, we don’t actually want—” John whispered.

“No?” Her lips were almost brushing his. “Perhaps I can change your mind.”

She kissed him. He froze as she wrapped her arms around him beneath his unbuttoned shirt and deepened the kiss. Knowing he had to play his role for the camera he placed his hands on her waist and kissed her back.

He was just beginning to wonder if anyone here (especially a certain mad scientist who insisted on getting him into scrapes) had any kind of plan at all, when she was suddenly jerked out of his arms. John’s eyes flew open, shocked to see Sherlock roughly forcing her back. He shook her and John
automatically stepped forward to intervene. Sherlock brushed him off, shaking her again. He raised his hand to hit her and John nearly yelled out when he heard her say quietly, “Find the bastard who hurt my Karina. Kill him.”

The door burst open and two security guards rushed in. John’s arm was forced around behind his back and he was pushed forward, Sherlock in the same predicament at his side. They were taken swiftly down the corridor, down the back stairs and held in front of a back door. A third guard arrived with their coats.

“Blacklisted, you understand?” the guard said roughly. “Come here again and you won’t be walking when you leave.”

They were shoved out the door into an alley, their coats thrown out after them. Sherlock, dexterous tosser, caught his before it hit the ground. John’s landed just a centimetre from a puddle. It had been raining all night and John felt the drops falling lightly on his shoulders. Fortunately it was a warm evening for October. He picked up his coat and went to re-button his shirt, but Sherlock grabbed his arm.

“We have to get out of the camera’s range,” he muttered, steering him around the corner.

Sherlock let him go when they were a safe distance away and John went back to work on his buttons. He was feeling a bit numb, which was odd considering he’d only had one drink. He attributed it to the hangover that was probably still lurking beneath his consciousness.

He laughed, giddy from the excitement of the night. Going undercover to meet a prostitute, getting thrown out of a brothel—his nights with Sherlock... Well, he was never bored.

“Shame about being blacklisted,” John said, doing up the last of the buttons. “They had a good Scotch.”

Sherlock grinned. “I can tell you the brand, if you want to know.”

John looked up. “Really?”

Sherlock folded his arms. “I glanced at the bar on the way in.”

“And you read and remembered all of the alcohols on the shelf.”

“It’s hardly one of the more impressive of my accomplishments.”

John threw his coat on. “You’re really incredible, you know?”

Sherlock glanced away and there was a pause.

“Were you really going to hit her?” John asked, a bit awkwardly.

“I correctly estimated how tight the security would be,” was apparently a sufficient answer.

“Well, I guess that was one way to get out of there,” John said, rubbing his arm where the guard had gripped it.

Sherlock shrugged. “The other was to receive the… services we paid for. I assumed this way would be preferable to you as well.”

John smiled. “Preferable, yeah.” It was the understatement of the century.
Sherlock started walking and John followed. It was a twisting labyrinth of alleys but unsurprisingly Sherlock seemed to know where he was going. The rain was falling a bit more heavily now, nothing an Englishman wasn’t used to, but tonight his skin seemed hypersensitive, and he could feel the drops on his neck and face with an unusual awareness.

“She’s smart. She knew what I was going to do,” Sherlock mused as they walked. “I didn’t expect her to kiss you though. She added a bit of drama to the scene.”

“Actors are always dramatic,” John muttered.

“You didn’t seem to mind,” Sherlock said offhandedly.

John shook his head, thinking of the cameras and the security guards and the money paid. “That’s not how I want to be kissed.”

He looked over and was surprised to see Sherlock glance at him with what almost looked like uncertainty. But it was gone from his face almost as soon as he’d seen it.

“Wh—” John didn’t get to finish the word.

Without warning the detective turned and shoved him hard up against the building lining the narrow alley. The stones dug into his back where Sherlock was pressing his shoulders into the wall. John’s left hand instinctively flew up to grasp Sherlock’s right wrist, to pull it off, but he didn’t get that far.

What the hell are you—? The question died on his lips as the detective’s burning eyes raked over him. John barely had time to breathe before Sherlock kissed him. Hard.
He tasted sharp, like vodka and like lemon. He stepped forward, pushing John harder into the wall, forcing his head to tilt up and his jaw to open. Sherlock dragged his tongue along the side of John’s, and John’s head swam with the sensory overload. The scent of his skin—that expensive soap, lemongrass: earthy with a hint of spice like ginger—the alcohol on his tongue, the pressure of his lips, the strength in the grip on his shoulders, the rain sliding down his neck—

But before John could recover from the shock-induced paralysis, before his thinking had caught up enough for it to occur to him to shove the detective back, just as soon as it had begun it was over. Sherlock stepped back, regarding John carefully. And John, as much to his surprise as anyone’s, sank to the ground, sitting down hard on the street.

“Are you all right?” Sherlock crouched in front of him and scrutinised his face with concern.

“Dizzy,” John breathed. His head was spinning. His skin was burning. If he didn’t know better he would say it was—

“It’s the drug.” Sherlock said, looking into his eyes. He jumped up from his crouched position and moved to sit on a crate next to him.

“What? What drug?”

Sherlock was digging in his pocket and when John looked up again he was holding out the small container he’d seen in Alexa’s room.

John blinked at it. “You stole her lipstick?”

“It’s drugged.”

“Oh really,” John said, not overly glad to know he’d been drugged.

“You’ll be fine. If my theory is correct it’s just a mood-elevating drug, like the kind found in nightclubs but probably milder. I would imagine the prostitutes use it to ensure their clients get the most for their money.”

Leaning back against the wall, John absorbed the information with the rain.

“I’ve seen this before,” Sherlock said, studying the container. “Women who use lip gloss to drug people. They wear a protective lining on their lips to ensure they don’t receive the effects of the drug themselves. Or possibly it’s triggered by a reaction with alcohol. Did it feel like she had some kind of lining on her lips?”

The spinning in John’s head was being replaced by a floating sensation. “Yeah, wait, no; what?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and checked his watch. “Full effects of the drug kicking in now. Good to know.” He stood up from the crate and held out his hand.

“Sherlock,” John said, blinking up at him. His heightened skin sensitivity was making the rain feel very interesting. “What was—What was *that*?”
Sherlock lowered his hand. "What?"

John gestured to the wall behind him and Sherlock's eyes followed. He went still, undoubtedly replaying the kiss, the same flashing images (hands, eyes, lips, tongue) that were searing John's mind.

"Why did you do that?" John demanded.

"Amy Elliot."

"What?" If John were drugged, the least Sherlock could do was to not speak in non sequiturs.

"Come with me"—Sherlock offered John his hand again—"I'll explain when I have the complete results."

_Complete results._ John wasn't sure he wanted to know what that meant. Not that it mattered. Figuring out what Sherlock was on about before he explained was an impossible task even when sober. In his current state John might as well try to figure out the logic behind Sherlock’s sock index, for all the success he was going to have. (He’d puzzled over it in the past, and had a vague horror that it might have as much to do with thread count as it did with colour and style.)

With some resignation John took the detective’s (for once ungloved) hand, feeling the warmth of his skin tingle up his arm. When he got to his feet he felt incredibly light. His skin was humming, nerves seeming to respond in double to any contact. As a doctor, John did not condone the use of recreational drugs; however, he had to admit that the current sensation was not unpleasant. His hand felt cold when Sherlock let it go.

The rain picked up and was coming down heavily by the time they reached a main road where they could catch a cab.

John couldn’t help laughing. It felt good. Really good. He took off his coat and he let the thick drops soak through his shirt. When he glanced over he saw Sherlock watching him.

"If I have to be high," John said, turning his face up to the sky, "I might as well enjoy it.

Sherlock held out his hand to catch the raindrops. "Interesting."

"What?"

"My theory. Correct as usual."

"Don’t you get tired of being right all the time?"

"Nope." Sherlock shrugged off his own coat. He smiled back at John and John laughed. It was a delightfully absurd night.

They were both drenched by the time a cab pulled over.

* 

The door to the flat swung open and its residents clambered in, laughing.

"That cabbie thinks we’re nutters," John breathed.

"You didn’t have to tell him about your favourite raindrops."

"There are different kinds of rain," John insisted. "Some are better than others. And what about you?"
Telling him to hurry because there’s special lip gloss to be examined?”

“Also true.”

“He probably thinks we’re high.”

“We are high,” Sherlock grinned. He walked to the table in the living room, opened his laptop and set about connecting his microscope to it. He switched on one of his chemical analysis devices. Sherlock had so much lab equipment at the flat; John was fairly sure most of it was stolen. Or at least permanently borrowed.

“I suppose you’re high now too?” John asked, coming to stand next to him.

“Yep,” Sherlock said.

John reached over and cupped his chin. Sherlock jumped at the touch, but he allowed John to turn his head so that he was looking up into his eyes.

“Jesus,” John said, examining his pupils, “you are high.” He let go of Sherlock’s face and felt a lingering burn on his fingers from the contact. Some drug. No wonder sex workers found it useful.

“What were you doing? Eating the lip stuff in the cab?”

“No”—Sherlock pulled the tube from his pocket and smeared a sample onto a slide—“I was kissing you.”

John felt his face get hot. He noted with interest the feel of his capillaries dilating.

“Right, and by the way, remind me, you were doing that because…”

“Of Amy Elliot.”

“You know I feel like we’ve been here before.”

Sherlock adjusted the microscope. “Thought experiment: Let’s say our dead men were poisoned not by the knife that gave them the scars, but by Karina’s lip gloss.”

John froze.

Sherlock looked up. “No, it’s not in this lip gloss”—he held up the container—“it’s half empty. We’d have a lot more dead bodies by now if it were poisoned.”

John relaxed as his live-in scientist placed another sample into the chemical analysis device for processing.

“Let’s assume all of the prostitutes at Monroe’s use this lip gloss, which is mixed with”—he glanced over the results of the analysis—“what looks like a variation on the newly popular five-methoxy-di isopropyl tryptamine.”

“Oh god, which one is that?” John put his hand to his brow trying to remember the most recent seminar he’d attended for GPs about the latest club drugs in London.

“I believe its enthusiasts have termed it, ‘Foxy Methoxy,’” Sherlock drawled, the last two words the vocal equivalent of an eye roll. “A fad drug—it’s main selling point is the enhancement of tactile sensations. It’s quite prevalent at the moment; you could get it from Billy if you wanted.”

“But that’s not what’s in here.” John pointed to the lip gloss container.
“No. Far too many possible side-effects and risk factors. Monroe’s doesn’t want its clients coming back with health complaints. What’s in here”—Sherlock tapped the tube against his palm—“is a variation on the same concept. The pharmacology has been manipulated to make the drug milder, and much safer. There’s an expert chemist somewhere in the works…” Sherlock trailed off, thinking.

“So all the girls working at Monroe’s are using this drugged lip gloss?”

“Let’s assume.”

“Interesting business technique,” John muttered. If the drug enhanced sensory awareness, the clients would leave feeling like they’ve never had better sex. But the dose would be small enough that combined with the effects of natural sexual stimulation and alcohol the clients might not realise they had been exposed to a drug. Sober sex comparatively feels dull, and they keep coming back.

Sherlock smirked down into his microscope. “Interesting business technique’ might be the best euphemism for illicitly drugging people I’ve heard in a while.” John scuffed his shoe on the rug, torn between pleasure at the compliment and concern that his morally bankrupt flatmate was rubbing off on him.

“Now,” Sherlock continued, “say one night someone replaces Karina’s lip gloss without her knowledge. Same container, same lip gloss, different drug. Not a harmless mood-elevator but a deadly, slow-acting poison. Whoever she kisses that night gets a death sentence about two weeks out.”

John listened as the pieces fell into place.

“The lip gloss is then switched back at the end of the night to ensure only the pre-chosen guinea pigs are subjected to the drug. But what if someone else was exposed to the drug accidentally? Our killer had carefully planned his victims. He couldn’t abide a disruption.”

“Someone else?”

Sherlock leapt up from the chair and was at the wall of photographs in a few strides. He pointed to the pictures as he said their names.

“Kathleen Bauer told us that on Friday, October ninth, she brought her friend, Amy Elliot, to Monroe’s to pick up her brother, Tony, and his friend, Brandon Riley. Brandon had got the drug that night and Tony hadn’t.”

“And Brandon kissed Amy right away,” John said, catching on. *Amy spent the ride home snogging his mate Brandon in the back seat*, Kathleen had said. “Wow; that’s incredible. How do you do that?”

Sherlock’s eyes met John’s for an instant before he continued. “As soon as I saw the lip gloss in Alexa’s room the idea occurred to me. But it hinged on whether or not the drug could be transmitted via secondary contact. I figured the poison would be a much higher concentration than the drug, which”—he checked the results of the chemical analysis—“is true. So, if the regular drug could be transferred through a secondary kiss in the correct timespan, then the poison must also have been.”

John crossed his arms. “So in order to test your hypothesis you shoved me up against a wall and kissed me.”

“I didn’t think you’d volunteer for the task.”

“So better to not tell me about it and hold me in place.”
Sherlock shrugged.

“Was the tongue necessary?” John felt his capillaries again.

“Transmission through saliva, yes,” Sherlock said without looking up. He added offhandedly, "I didn't know it would make you fall over."

John gaped. "I didn't fall over. I sat down because I was dizzy from being drugged."

But Sherlock had stopped listening. His eyes were skimming over his new data.

“I can’t believe I can no longer say I’ve never kissed a man,” John said with some astonishment, half to himself.

“That’s what you can’t believe about tonight?” Sherlock said, looking up from the screen. He did not like his work overshadowed.

John looked back at him.

The detective relented, “Technically I kissed you, if it helps for your record keeping.”

John considered. “I’m not sure it does.”

“The men who died were chosen for the experiment because they were single,” Sherlock continued, evidently eager to get back to his successful unravelling of the mystery. “The killer didn’t plan on Brandon kissing someone directly after walking out of the club.”

“It is a bit slutty,” John agreed.

“What?”

“To walk out of a ‘date’ with a prostitute and immediately start kissing a woman you just met?”

“The subjective ‘sluttiness,’ or whatever you want to call it, is immaterial. The fact is that Amy received the poison through the kiss. There was meant to be no connection between the victims. The two of them then had to be gotten rid of. So, what’s a good way to kill two people and make it look like an accident?”

“Car crash,” John said. It was a grim topic but his head felt light and comfortable—could a head feel comfortable? He shook it and the room swam pleasantly.

“The whole operation was clearly orchestrated by powerful people with resources. They were able to arrange a stabbing, a burglary, and have a car run off the road. The only problem was that Parker’s body was sent to the same funeral home as Riley and Elliot’s. The killer couldn’t have foreseen the coincidence. Or that the embalmer would be a fan of your blog and put the two together.”

John grinned. “My blog is important.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes but John noticed he was smiling. “Yes, John, it is.”

“So what now?”

“Now we have a name: Sebastian Moran.”

“Have you heard of him?”
“No. Which probably means we’re on the right track.”

“Are we going after him tonight?”

Sherlock frowned. “Tonight? No, I’ll have to go to Scotland Yard tomorrow to do research.”

“Then that means you’re done doing genius things tonight?”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “I am never done doing genius things. But I suppose the motive and method of murder for all four of our victims is satisfactory for one night’s work. Just proving myself right, as usual.”

“Yes, you’re brilliant. Now take off your shirt.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows jumped up. “What?”

John was already undoing the buttons on his. The wet material had suddenly become sticky and heavy and uncomfortable against his skin. “As a doctor I can’t allow you to sit there in a soaking wet shirt all night.”

Sherlock looked ready to protest but then seemed to reconsider, probably also realising the unpleasantness of wet fabric against the drug-induced sensitivity of his skin.

John had gotten his shirt off and he tossed it carelessly over the arm of his chair.

Sherlock peeled off his own and dropped down onto the couch to unlace his shoes. Something caught John’s attention and he walked to stand in front of Sherlock, who looked up at him with questioning eyes.

“How—?” John asked hesitantly, eyes flicking down to the scar on Sherlock’s chest. He hadn’t actually seen his flatmate with his shirt off since—since the incident.

Sherlock straightened up and leaned back. John rested his knee on the edge of the couch and braced himself on the back of it. He looked closely at the scar. The surgeons had done a good job; the ring where the bullet entered his chest had healed as nicely as one can hope a bullet wound to heal. Very unlike his own, which had been done rushed at a field surgery, leaving a jagged, uneven gash on his shoulder.

John reached to touch the scar, but his eyes darted to Sherlock’s face for confirmation. Sherlock was simply watching him. He didn’t say no. John lightly brushed over the spot on his chest. After just over a year the scar had flattened and faded. The ring was silvery white now. He remembered when it had been gushing red. He remembered Sherlock on his back, on the floor of Magnussen’s office—he blinked hard to shut out the image, but he couldn’t help the surge of hatred toward his ex-wife that coursed through him. It was smooth, youthful, unblemished skin torn open, ripped apart. It had healed well but it would never heal entirely. A beautiful body forever marred by Mary, of all people. She had been the one with the gun; the one in control. She didn’t have to shoot him. There was no one forcing her. There was no good reason— But she did, he circled the scar with his finger, she did.

Sherlock must have read the anger in his face because he said softly, “It’s not bad. You have one too.”

He put his palm over the scar on John’s left shoulder. John felt the heat of his hand burn into his skin. He’d forgotten he was also shirtless, and was suddenly very aware of what their position would look like if anyone were to walk in. Thankfully it was too late for Mrs. Hudson to come up—she would have been in bed hours ago.
“And now this,” Sherlock said, sliding his hand down from John's shoulder to his upper arm where Carl Reeves’ bullet had grazed him.

John’s eyes glanced down over Sherlock, sitting on the couch beneath him, skin still damp from his wet shirt, and John wondered, not for the first time, if there wasn’t some part of him that could be attracted to his flatmate. He would be lying if he said there hadn’t been the occasional dream… The memory of pulling Sherlock up against the bars of the railing (one hand handcuffed to the mad detective and the other gripping the lapel of his coat) somehow morphing so that when Sherlock ducked his head, looking at him through the metal rails and through thick lashes, instead of turning his head John pulled Sherlock harder into the bars, into a bruising kiss…

Other dreams were not based in memory, just vivid impressions: Sherlock’s pale skin under his hands, Sherlock’s lean, slender body beneath him, pale eyes watching him in amazement as John used his hands, his mouth, to teach the world’s most genius detective about pleasure. John woke up in a sweat, with no small amount of alarm, on the mornings after those dreams. But he dismissed them. Dreams were insanity. His subconscious was confusing the amount of time he spent with his flatmate and the depth of their friendship for something more.

John’s hand skimmed from the scar lightly across his chest and he heard Sherlock’s breath hitch. The effect of the drug, he knew, would intensify the touch. Sherlock’s chest was smooth, virtually hairless. John didn’t think he had ever seen Sherlock with facial hair either. The detective was meticulous about shaving and also (John had been amused to note) just not very good at growing facial hair.

The smooth skin was undeniably appealing, but effeminacy had nothing to do with it. Sherlock's presence was unquestionably masculine: there was no mistaking his sharp angles, his lean muscles, the way he wore a suit, and his disdain for all things sentimental. His cold, harsh energy was nearly a direct opposite of the warm and pliant femininity John had experienced in the past. And yet Sherlock was more unlike a ‘man’ in the stereotypical image John thought of when he thought of ‘men’—hairy, coarse, and rough—than any other man he knew. John knew he could never be attracted to a ‘man’ in the conventional sense, but Sherlock was uniquely beautiful. Flawless, alabaster skin, exquisite bone structure, delicate features, large, dazzling eyes, lips not thin but full and surprisingly soft… The kiss from the alleyway flashed in his mind and John swallowed. That kiss had been like nothing on Earth and John found he didn’t have the nerve to consider what might have happened if Sherlock hadn’t pulled back so abruptly, or whether John had wanted him not to.

Sherlock was as strong as any man, stronger even, sure, but he was graceful; he was antisocial, but fashionable and cultured; genius, but entirely impractical; domineering, but helpless in so many ways… John remembered the flutter of fondness in his chest the first time Sherlock had called him from the hallway: “John! What’s it doing?” he had asked blinking with large eyes at their washing machine. John had to reset the machine to clear all of the buttons Sherlock had pushed. He remembered Harry’s words to him at the café not so long ago. Perhaps she had had a point…

John mentally shook the thought from his head. Even if Harry was right, even if Irene Adler had been right, even if everyone they had ever encountered was right, and he was in some way attracted to Sherlock Holmes, it didn’t matter. His flatmate certainly wasn’t interested in him like that (possibly wasn’t interested in anyone like that), and it would be a waste of energy to convince himself otherwise. Besides, he wasn’t ready himself for what it would mean if—if…

He snapped his attention back to what he was doing, which, unfortunately, was touching Sherlock’s bare chest. Sherlock ran his thumb over John’s old wound, and John realised the ever-curious detective must be just as interested in John’s scar as John was in his. John knew Sherlock had seen it from time to time when they had lived together, but never—John didn’t recollect—inspected it.
closely or touched it. John knew his own scar well enough by now. An ugly red marring that he had accepted would never fade, tracing out to white and silver around the edges.

Scars. As a surgeon John knew something about scars. Making the mark; breaking the skin. *I'm sorry this will never be whole again,* he had learned quickly to forget about thinking. The surgeries were too important; the scars were necessary. *What was necessary about this?* he thought, tracing the circle on the chest in front of him.

It occurred to John that he and Sherlock had always been connected by scars. His own wound had brought him back to London and prevented him from being able to live anywhere but 221B, Baker Street. And now Sherlock’s had brought him back again.

“You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for this,” Sherlock said, voice low, reading his mind the way he always could.

“I’m sorry,” John said. It was his fault. He should have seen through Mary immediately. The years living with Sherlock had taught him nothing. He was an idiot.

“I’m not.”

John abandoned the scar and leaned up, braced on the back of the couch, hovering above Sherlock and looking down hard into his eyes. The detective’s eyes were scintillating: evidence of the ceaseless whirlwind of thoughts behind them, the constant burning energy that animated him, propelled him, allowed him to rush the air from a room merely by stepping in.

“I chose the wrong person.” He hated himself for it.

“Perhaps the boring teacher wasn’t so bad after all.”

John grinned in surprise at the turn. He gave a short laugh in disbelief and Sherlock grinned back at him. John pushed himself up and walked off toward the stairs. “I’m going to get clothes,” he said, because it sounded like the best idea at the moment.

When he came back down wearing a faded t-shirt and a pair of jogging bottoms, which felt extra cozy compared to the wet denim he’d traded for them, he found Sherlock sitting back at the table. He was wearing silk pyjama bottoms now and a silk t-shirt (ponce) and turning the lip gloss over in his hands.

“It’s a nice feeling, isn’t it?”

John assumed he was referring to the drug. “Erm, yeah, I would say so.”

Sherlock looked up at him. “Want to do some more?”

“Oh come on,” John said. “Are you serious?”

“Look at the chemical composition!” Sherlock said, waving at his laptop. John leaned in to look at it. “You’re a doctor; you can see it’s harmless. It’s a good high with no side effects, come on.”

To be fair, Sherlock was right. The chemicals that made up the drug were relatively harmless. But still; John looked at his ex-addict friend who was looking back at him with wide eyes. God he would be in an entirely different place in his life if he had ever been able to say no to those eyes. He was glad he wasn’t.

“Yeah, all right.”
Sherlock smiled broadly and John wished there were more things besides murder and drugs that could get him to smile that way.

Chapter End Notes

[Lipgloss](#) by [khorazir](#)
"Sherlock, you're cheating."

"I am not."

"You completely skipped the Peanut Brittle House!"

"I did not."

"You did; you went straight from the Liquorice Castle to the Lollipop Woods."

Sherlock burst into giggles and John couldn't help laughing with him. It was much later in the night and they were both high out of their minds. And playing Candyland.

"Let's play a game," Sherlock had insisted, standing, swaying on his feet. John knew the feeling. The room was tilting in all sorts of warm and comfortable ways. John was sitting cross-legged on the living room floor. He'd never appreciated how lovely the rug was.

"Fine. But don't come back here with Risk or some bollocks. Pick something appropriate for our… current mental… functioning…” Words were so funny. John's face hurt from laughing. They'd been laughing all night. Mood-elevator drugs were good for mood elevating.

And then Sherlock had come back with Candyland and they'd both lost it entirely, John keeling over onto his side and Sherlock brushing tears from his eyes.

It hadn't prevented them from playing though.

"I have the Princess Lolly card," Sherlock eventually breathed.

"You don't; I saw you draw it. It's just a red."

"Don't look at my cards!"

"Let me see it!"

"No!"

"Give me that!"

The ensuing struggle was halfhearted to say the most. Laughter is not conducive to muscle tension, and the drug only intensified the pudding feeling. *Yes*, John told his inner operation theatre full of colleagues, *pudding feeling* is the official terminology.

He grabbed Sherlock's arms in attempt to reach the card and Sherlock fell backward bonelessly. John scattered the board pieces as he fell down with him. The sensory combination of hot skin and cool silk was particularly delightful and John was perhaps slower in rolling off of him than he had to be. Confounded sex drug.

They were lying on their backs side by side on the living room rug.
"What happened?" John asked when his giggling subsided. "I started out the night as an undercover agent watching topless strippers. Now I'm wearing lip gloss and playing Candyland."

"Does one activity negate the other?"

"I would have thought so." John had a lovely sensation of sinking and floating at the same time.

"You know what your stripper name would be?" John asked, edge of eagerness in his voice.

"Don't say it."

"Shercock," John snickered.

"Very original."

"All right, how about Pil-lock? Or Bol-lock—"

"Oh shut up."

John sniggered at his own terrible jokes and when he turned his head sideways he could see Sherlock smiling as well. Maybe the joke wasn't that bad. Maybe the drug was that good.

"Your first name doesn't need adjusting," Sherlock commented.

"Shut up."

"John Twatson."

"Very original."

"Fine. Watbum."

"Watbum?" John demanded, startled into peals of laughter. Sherlock laughed with him and John hoped they weren't loud enough to wake up Mrs. Hudson. God, what time was it? It must be past three o'clock in the morning.

"I may have to update your profile on your blog…" Sherlock grinned, moving to sit up. John grasped his upper arm, yanking him back down to the floor.

"Do it and you'll be Pillock Holmes in the next five posts." He was failing miserably to sound stern. His sides hurt from laughing. His cheeks hurt from smiling.

"I don't know how you expect anyone to take you seriously as an author," Sherlock grumbled, though his tone was inescapably good-natured.

"First and foremost by not using 'John Watbum' as a pen name."

The mention of the name set them off snickering again, and it was only by deep inhales and slow exhales through his nose that John managed to calm himself.

"God, I feel like I'm twelve," John said, blinking away tears.

"What? Why?"

"I don't know, staying up all night, playing games, making up dirty names…" He looked over at his flatmate's profile. "Didn't you do that when you were twelve?"

"We're going to have to get off the floor eventually," John lamented.

"Comfortable here."

John knew what he meant. It was as if there was a pleasant pressure securing him to the rug. He lifted his arms and let the intensified gravity drag them down.

"Yeah, ten minutes." The room was pressing in on him, warm, as though it were tucking him in. Nice living room.

He heard his flatmate hum in agreement from somewhere beside him.

He closed his eyes. Just ten minutes.

*

John woke up on his right side with a dull pain aching through it. The living room floor was not nearly as comfortable as the drug had made it seem. The rug was thin, very thin, and the wood floorboards were pressing into his hip and shoulder with bruising force. His left shoulder was stiff. His back was cold—no blanket. But he supposed he didn't really need one, what with his peacefully sleeping, heat-generating flatmate curled into his front. No, a blanket wasn't necessary when he had —

John's eyes snapped open. Hot embarrassment shocked through him as the situation crystallised from soft, dream-infused nonsense to tactile reality. Cuddling. Sherlock Holmes. His brain scrambled to make sense of the inflow of stimuli.

Sherlock was lying on his left side, facing him though lower, lips at John's clavicle, nose almost brushing the underside of his jaw. John had his arm draped over Sherlock's back and—he shut his eyes in mortification—the world's only consulting detective's knee caught between his thighs.

The amygdala of John's brain submitted a motion to panic, but his prefrontal cortex vetoed it. Sherlock was still asleep. His steady breathing, hot and humid against the skin at the base of John's throat, told him that much. But fucking hell, how had they ended up like this? Granted he had been used to sleeping with another person for the majority of the past three years and he supposed he might have the unconscious muscle memory to cuddle up to a body next to him, but Sherlock? He would have imagined a porcupine would be cuddlier. He would have imagined Sherlock, who—according to all evidence thus and lately presented—had never slept with anybody, would have been startled awake at the first touch and shoved him back. But Sherlock was nothing if not unpredictable. He could defy expectations in his sleep. Literally.

John breathed slowly in an effort to calm himself and was surprised to find Sherlock's scent—something he'd been unaware of in sleep and too shocked to notice until now—was doing just that: quieting the frantic buzz of oh no's and not good's circling his mind. The detective's curls were just centimetres under his nose. The delicious almond scent of that expensive shampoo (worth every damn penny, John didn't care what he'd said before) lined with the heady fragrance that could only be described as Sherlock, was drifting off the body in his arms in gentle waves of comforting familiarity. It was everything he associated with 221B: the freedom he'd found from the pathetic little post-Afghanistan flat that would have killed him, and now the freedom from a marriage that would have done the same.

John froze as Sherlock moved, shifting his hips closer, knee sliding further between his legs. He
rested his hand on John's waist and John swallowed hard. But Sherlock settled and resumed the same pattern of steady breathing. Relief uncoiled the muscles that had tensed, prepared to spring back in an instant.

But the scientist was sleeping soundly, and when John had relaxed enough to assure himself Sherlock was not about to leap up and chuck the flat-listings page at his face, he tilted his head carefully to see Sherlock's hand on the dip of his waist (as though he didn't believe the sensory input that was telling him it was true) and saw slender fingers digging into his t-shirt there, clutching the material.

If the situation hadn't been so alarming the detail would have been sweet, almost childlike: needy, possessive the way children are. Don't take it from me. Really it was sweet. He had never seen the detective in a more unaffected and trusting position. Don't take it from me. Funny that Sherlock should be holding onto him like that. In his dreams it was always the other way around. John desperately trying to hold onto Sherlock as they pulled him away, placed him on a stretcher… Sherlock had never lost John. He'd always been here, whenever Sherlock needed him. But John supposed it was just a reflex. He might hold sheets or a pillow in his own bed.

John fought the urge stretch his aching shoulder. Judging by the faint light at the windows it must still be very early. They couldn't have been sleeping for more than a few hours. (Unsurprising, considering the hard wood floor provided all the comfort of a hard wood floor.) He knew Sherlock could—certainly would—wake up any minute. But god, he was exhausted. Sherlock must be shattered. John doubted whether his insomniac flatmate had slept at all the previous two nights.

John's eyes were heavy and Sherlock's warmth, his slow and steady breathing, was lulling him back to sleep. But what to do about the current flatmate tangle situation? John knew if he moved at all Sherlock would wake. He assumed this was not a desirable outcome, considering his knowledge of consulting detectives not to be the cuddliest sort.

John closed his eyes. His legs were warm where they were folded with Sherlock's. Body heat was radiating in the gap between their chests. Sherlock's breath was warm on his skin. Well, John didn't mind. If Sherlock was finally sleeping John was not going to wake him. He didn't seem uncomfortable. And anyway, Sherlock is the decider, he decided, feeling the discomfort of the floor fading away. He can decide what to do about… about whether or not he wants to… to wake himself up or not… when he wakes up… yes, good plan, Watson.

* 

Sherlock had spent the last few hours in the study of his mind palace, as he usually did on the nights when he slept. Sherlock had lucid dreams; he'd had them since he was young. From the moment he fell asleep to the moment he woke he was aware he was dreaming. He could control his own words and actions almost as precisely as he could while conscious. And although he could control what others said and did too (this had afforded him many entertaining nights winning at chess while Mycroft wore a hat adorned with fruit), he typically allowed the people he met in his mind palace to speak freely; witnesses from his cases, suspects, murderers—he let them do and say what they would, and he was often able to obtain a clue, glean a detail from their speech or actions he had missed during the day.

He'd been reviewing the Rodgers case, which could now more accurately be called the Moran case. There was an entire bookcase in his study dedicated to Moriarty, and tonight he created a new shelf on it labelled 'Moran.' He had spent the last few hours sifting through his information on Moriarty looking for references to Moran, Monroe's, any connections. He found a few hints, some possibilities. He had no doubt he would tie him in with Moriarty soon enough.
Sitting at his desk he felt a dull pain in his left hip and shoulder and knew he must be sleeping on his left side on the floor. His legs were warm and his chest was warm; perhaps John had thrown a blanket over him. He stood up from the desk. He'd done enough work for the time being; he might as well wake up.

But as he passed through the corridor in the main building of the palace he paused at John's door. He looked at his watch and estimated the number of hours he'd been sleeping. Factoring in the lack of sleep from the previous two nights he grudgingly supposed he could allow his body a bit more time to rest. He opened the door.

John's 'room' was more like a flat within the palace. There was a separate room for his office, which was divided in half—one side of the room dedicated to all of the information about John's training and career as a doctor, and the other side dedicated to his military career. Certificates, awards, medals, diplomas, and photographs decorated the walls. Sherlock could come here anytime he needed anything specific about John's professional career.

The bedroom was about John's personal life. There were bookshelves full of his memories—stories he had told Sherlock and stories he hadn't, the ones Sherlock had deduced. A few photographs of his childhood dotted the shelves; not so many as to be cluttered, but the ones that stood out in his memory from the time—early on when John had first moved in—he'd stolen a photo album from a box of his things in an effort to obtain more information about his new flatmate.

There was John, about five years old, on the beach in Brighton smiling shyly at the camera, parents kneeling on either side of him. John, about ten years old sitting in the grass in a rugby kit, looking up at the camera, the picture taken before he was told to smile. John, about fifteen in a white t-shirt on the front steps of his old house, leaning against the railing, glaring at the camera, etc.

There was a wardrobe for John's jumpers and jeans and shoes, and a closet. The closet was for Feelings. The ones that had made him decide to live with John, that had surprised everyone who knew him, that Moriarty had exploited. But Sherlock didn't like Feelings, and the closet was padlocked to ensure they wouldn't muddle up the mind palace.

There were few situations strong enough to break the lock. For example, if someone were to strap John in Semtex, or put him in a fire. Or if he were to have to say goodbye to John, knowing there was a possibility he would never see him again. In those times the lock snapped open and the Feelings flooded out, drowning every other aspect of his mind palace. It was dangerous; water damage was no trivial matter and it took an annoying amount of effort to dry everything out again and re-bolt the door shut. Feelings were truly a hassle. That door had to stay locked.

Although… he walked over to check the lock. It had gotten rusty lately. Since John had left Mary and come back to Baker Street it wasn't as strong. He would have to put in a new one. He made a note to replace it at his earliest convenience.

When he turned around he found John asleep in the middle of the bedroom floor. He assumed it was because he knew in reality John was sleeping on the floor in the living room, but there was no need for this version to be sleeping on the floor as well. He had a perfectly good, queen-sized bed just a few feet away. Sherlock knelt down and put his hand on John's shoulder. John's eyes fluttered open.

"Sherlock?"

"You should move to the bed."

John stretched, creating a gap between his t-shirt and the top of his pyjama bottoms. "Lie down," he said.
"Why?"

John grinned, looking up at him from where he was lying on his back. "You never tell me why when you ask me to do things."

"I don't have to."

"I know."

Curious, Sherlock laid down on his back next to John.

"Good," John said, "now come here."

John had rolled onto his right side and Sherlock rolled to his left so they were facing each other. John moved closer and put his left arm around him. He was warm; Sherlock could feel his body heat. He slid lower, and tucked his face into the base of John's throat. John tightened his hold, and as though it were natural, a repeated action and not a new one, Sherlock slipped his knee between John's thighs. Warmth; muscles generate heat.

John sighed and Sherlock felt his chest rise and fall. "I'm going to have to leave soon," he murmured.


"I don't want to, but I'm not like you"—he lifted his arm and ran his hand through Sherlock's hair, pushing it back from his face—"I can't control these things like you can."

This was his mind; he didn't want John to say things like that. What was making him say that? "Don't leave." He reached out and found John's waist, fingers bunching in the material there. "Whatever it is I'll fix it."

"I know." John stopped stroking his hair and gently held his chin. He tipped Sherlock's head back so that he was looking into his eyes. "I trust you."

John let go and put his arm back around him and Sherlock buried his face in John's t-shirt. He shifted closer, more heat, more warmth. Don't go.

Sherlock's eyes flew open. The room was cold. His body was warm. No blanket. Doctor. He was in the exact position he'd been in a moment ago in his mind: tangled up in John. He was instantly surrounded by his scent, absent from the dream but thick around him now. John: his soap, wool, toast and tea, and something colder too, like gunmetal, like risk. That cool, thrilling undertone beneath all of the warmth and comfort was the reason John wasn't boring—John's layers, his contradictions.

But why were they lying like this? His dream had been a mimicry of what was physically happening, but obviously it wasn't accurate. John hadn't spoken to him, hadn't told him to move closer. Sherlock supposed the automatic attraction toward body heat was responsible. The living room was cold and draughty. They must have unconsciously drifted toward each other.

He could hear John's breathing; he watched the subtle movement of his ribs. John Watson: steady, a constant in his life, or at least he would have been if Sherlock had let him. But in the dream John had said he'd have to leave. Why? What was there in his mind palace that would trigger those words? There must be something about John—some new development his unconscious had picked up but his conscious mind hadn't registered yet. Perhaps something emotional; probably something emotional. Emotions were typically the only thing he missed. He would have to look into it.
For the meantime, it was necessary to get out of the current compromising position before John woke up yelling about not being gay and possibly blaming Sherlock for sleep-hugging.

But interestingly Sherlock's brain refused to go forward. John said he would leave. Sherlock hadn't liked it at all. But he would leave, eventually, wouldn't he? Mary was out of the picture now, but surely it was only a matter of time until the new girlfriend arrived. And the day he would move out to live with her.

When Sherlock had come back to London John was already living with Mary, already proposing to her. This time he would have to watch from the beginning. The new relationship, the increase in time spent together, John leaving in slow motion, day by day, slipping away. He shut his eyes. Perhaps he could convince John to join the clergy—take a vow of celibacy. Sherlock supposed he was not the ideal candidate for clergy recruitment.

He sighed into John's t-shirt. He couldn't think about this now. It was a future bridge to be crossed (or demolished with dynamite) when he came to it. There were more pressing matters at hand. Moran for one. And to deal with them, first they would have to get off the floor. He cast about for ideas, careful not to move while John's regular breathing told him he was still asleep.

Eventually he settled on a workable tactic, but still it was more than a few moments before he put it into effect.

*

John was jolted roughly awake as Sherlock leapt to his feet, untangling them in one fluid motion.

"The game is on, John! I have an idea! There's information to be collected, people to be tracked down. Not a moment to lose!"

His mad flatmate had already slammed the bathroom door shut by the time John sat up.

"Ow," John said to the newly empty living room. His neck hurt like hell. His shoulder was stiff. He didn't remotely understand how Sherlock could spend the night on the floor and still jump up as agilely as a child. It wasn't fair. How could a thirty-two-year-old man spend his days crawling around the pavement on his knees and never feel the aches and pains of age?

The bathroom door reopened and Sherlock's bedroom door slammed shut.

_Sprightly rotter_, John thought uncharitably. But in his defence he was sore and exhausted from sleeping on the floor all night and—

Hang on. He had almost forgotten. The _way_ they'd been sleeping. Had Sherlock…? Blimey, he hadn't even _noticed_, had he? He'd gone from fast asleep to striding off in an instant. There were no in-between moments with Sherlock. It was just as well, John supposed, because if he had noticed the row might have ended with him looking for a new flat.

Sherlock reappeared in the living room fully dressed. John gaped at him, still sitting on the floor. Was Sherlock Superman? Could he have lived with him this long and not known?

"I'm off to do research," Sherlock said, walking toward the door and grabbing his coat.

"You don't, erm, want me to come with you?"

"Not necessary. All research today. All boring. Well, for you anyway." And with a sweep of his coat he was gone.
For the hell of it, John tried to jump up as quickly as Sherlock had. His newly vertical position was accompanied by a rush of dizziness and he grabbed the back of his chair to steady himself. Drugs and sleep deprivation were not a good combination. Fun though, he had to admit, casting his mind back over the previous night.

*The Adventures of Pillock Homes and Dr. Watbum.* John snickered, dismayed to find it was still funny in the absence of any mind-altering substances. He truly felt he didn't deserve the number thirty-four as an age marker.

He looked over at the recently flung shuts door and cleared his throat. "All right, Sherlock, I'll stay here then." He could at least have the pretence of normal communication if the real thing were impossible.

"Do you want breakfast before you leave? No? All right. I have rugby practice this afternoon."

John wandered into the kitchen for a glass of water.

"What time will you be home? I'll see you when I get back from practice then, or whenever you bloody happen to come back through the door, whether it's in two hours or two weeks. Have a nice day!"

John smiled to himself, wondering when he had become such a total nutter. It was probably the day he'd agreed to move in with Sherlock Holmes.

He looked at the time. It was only seven o'clock; his practice wasn't until the afternoon. He could do with a few more hours of sleep.

When John finally dropped down heavily into his bed he was forced to notice that his sheets were not nearly as warm as a detective.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year and happy Abominable Bride watching! If the next chapter's not up on Monday you may assume I've fallen into a Victorian Homles-and-Watson induced swoon, and will be out of commission (probably babbling about needing a blond-haired, blue-eyed army doctor) for the foreseeable future.
Hello, everyone! As you know, this story deals quite heavily with BBC canon and in the wake of a new episode it seems I was unable to resist weaving it in already. (I meant to give it at least another update, but it just dropped in so nicely!) The reference is only a few lines of dialogue from the episode pulled out of context. I wouldn't call it a spoiler, but feel free lob pitchforks if you read and disagree. There will be continued TAB references in the following chapters, so if you haven't seen it I hope you'll be able to watch it soon and continue on here with me!

Also, while I have you in the clutches of an obnoxiously long author's note I'd like to THANK YOU all so much for reading, for your kudos, and your wonderful comments. They're like rays of light in my email inbox, shining through all the spam I'm too lazy to unsubscribe from.

Someone who was not John was in their flat. The door—left slightly ajar—said as much, and one whiff of Claire-de-la-lune on the stairs was enough to solve the mystery.

“Mary Morstan,” Sherlock said, emphasising her last name.

She was sitting in John’s chair. Mrs. Hudson had let her in. He would have to have a word with Mrs. Hudson.

“Sherlock.” She stood up to face him.

“John’s playing rugby; he should be home shortly.” He stepped around her, dropping into his chair and pulling his laptop onto his knees.

“I know. I came early to talk to you.”

Sherlock glanced up at her before looking back at his screen. “Really.”

“You know he was better off with me.”

“Do I?”

“It’s going to kill him, living here. You’re going to kill him.”

“Going just by body count, of the two of us I’d say you were the more likely to kill someone.”

“I’m retired. You are still dragging him into gunfights.”

Sherlock did a swift analysis of her face to determine whether she knew about the incident with Carl Reeves. He concluded she didn’t, that she was talking generally.

“You’re going to get him killed and you know it. If you really cared about him you wouldn’t allow
him to stay with you.”

Sherlock swung the laptop shut and stood up, using his height to his advantage.

“Or,” he said, voice low, warning, “I wouldn’t treat him like a child. We don’t allow John to do things, Mary. He makes his own choices.” Sherlock had learned this in Ireland, and he’d had the bruises to prove it.

“And that’s just fine for you then, if he chooses death?” There was audible strain in her voice. “You won’t cry at his funeral because it was his choice?”

“John’s addiction to a lifestyle that involves a certain level of danger began long before he met me,” Sherlock said acerbically. “England has a pressing need for surgeons. They’re reputable, high-paid positions. John chose the army instead. What does that tell you?”

“That doesn’t mean you have to encourage—”

“If he wasn’t with me now he’d be finding some other way to get shot at,” Sherlock snapped. “At least when he’s with me I know I can die doing my best to protect him.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Sherlock,” she said, severe eyes unblinking. “Because if he gets hurt, and you’re not dead first, know that I’ll kill you fast after.”

“Oh, I believe you, Mary,” Sherlock sneered. “I know for a fact you wouldn’t hesitate to kill me without any provocation at all.”

They were doing their best to eviscerate each other with their eyes when John walked in. He cleared his throat. He was wearing jogging bottoms over his rugby shorts and a hoodie under his coat, gym bag slung over his shoulder.

Sherlock turned from Mary and dropped down into his chair. Mary took a deep breath and looked toward John.

“Hi,” she said uncertainly.

“Hi.” John’s eyes slid from her face. “What are you, erm—why are you…”

Mary straightened her posture. “I have the papers. They sent them to the house.” She drew an envelope out of her purse.

Ah, the divorce papers. Interesting.

John flexed his hands, walking over and dropping his gym bag on the floor.

“You just—you just need to sign them.” She pulled the packet out from the envelope and offered it to him. He took it, walking to the table and lifting the pen Sherlock had been using to make notes.

Mary watched motionlessly as John glanced through the documents. He scratched his signature at the bottom of various pages. He walked back to her, holding out the packet.

She took it, blinking back tears. “I’m so sorry, John.”

John drew in a long breath. “Yeah, me too.”

“Please take care of yourself. If you ever need anything…”
John nodded. “Take care, Mary.”

Her breath shuddered as she tucked the envelope back into her purse. She turned, rubbing the tears out from under her eyes as she walked toward the door.

John watched her until the door clicked shut. He turned on his heel and walked into the bathroom. Sherlock heard the shower run a moment later.

* * *

If John had been worried Sherlock might Say Something about the incident that afternoon, he needn’t have been. Sherlock had been silent, working on his laptop until the evening and John was grateful for the quiet. He was editing his notes on their current case, wondering how he was going to fictionalise the method Sherlock had used to confirm the way Amy Elliot had received the poison, when Sherlock announced, “We’re going to a cemetery tonight.”

John looked up. Field work. Perfect. Anything to take his mind off of his newly official divorce.

It was after eleven when they got into the cab.

“It’s imperative we aren’t seen,” Sherlock said. “Moran can’t know we have this information, that we’re this close on his trail.”

“Right. What are we doing?”

“Here.” Sherlock handed him a mask. It was a skeleton face with fabric that would cover his whole head. “Put this on.”

“Erm…”

“CCTV,” was apparently enough of an explanation.

But weren’t skeleton masks suspicious and weird and more likely to draw attention—oh, John remembered, tonight is Halloween. He had completely forgotten—and he had the work party tomorrow night. He groaned inwardly. He’d promised Sandra, his colleague at the surgery, that he would go. Time moves differently when you’re with Sherlock Holmes. It was easy to forget which month it was, let alone which day.

They secured their masks before exiting the cab.

Sherlock walked briskly and John kept pace. There were a few groups of people out, dressed in costume, laughing and shouting; it was late enough for the partiers to be reasonably drunk. In a block John could see the cemetery. It was lit only by the light of the streetlamps and surrounded by a chain-link fence. After hours. It would certainly be closed. They walked along the fence for another block.

“Few more metres…” Sherlock murmured from behind the mask, “and the camera range ends… here.”

Sherlock stopped short and swung himself up onto the fence. He scaled it swiftly, climbed over, and dropped down on the other side. John didn’t need to be told to follow. Sherlock pulled a small torch from his pocket and they began to wander among the graves.

“What are we looking for?”

“Karina.”
John raised his eyebrows, not that Sherlock could see his expression under the mask.

“My research this morning was productive. Sebastian Moran: ex-military, currently one of London’s leading psychologists. He has an expensive practice near Trafalgar Square.”

*Why is it always the crazy ones who are the psychologists?* John wondered.

Their footsteps were muted on the soft, grassy path between the row of graves. The glow of lamplights from the street tinged the dark around them, but John kept his eyes on the brighter cut of light from the torch as it slid across the gravestones, illuminating each in turn.

“In addition to Monroe’s, Moran owns several other businesses in London,” Sherlock continued. “His name isn’t on any of the official documentation but I found repetitions. If you’re not interested in running an establishment by the books you need an agreement with your book keepers. The real estate agents and lawyers that can be paid to alter a few names and numbers are valuable assets for the white collar criminal and good tracing makers for me. Moran used the same people to set up several of his businesses, which evidence suggests operate dually as fronts for the more lucrative drug trade.”

“What kind of businesses?” John asked, maintaining partial awareness of the names moving past.

“The usual: Restaurants, second-hand shops… Also a flower shop”—John took a beat to appreciate the thought of evil florists—“and a toy shop.”

“Sad for the kid who accidentally gets the teddy bear full of crack rather than fluff,” John mused.

The skeleton face turned toward him. “These people are professionals, John. By all accounts they’ve been operating for years undetected. Such an amateur mistake is not likely.”

John considered pointing out that he’d been joking, but decided to let it go. The point of a joke is not to have to explain that it’s a joke.

“But most importantly,” Sherlock was saying, “Moran also owns a funeral home.”

Sherlock paused expectantly.

“Ok…” John said.

Sherlock gave up waiting. “And the funeral home owns *this* cemetery. It’s very convenient to own a cemetery when you have a body to get rid of. The best place to hide a tree is in a forest.”

John remembered Sherlock had said that once before. They were looking for spray paint among graffiti. It was a long time ago. The Chinese smuggling gang. They had been through hell that night, and so much more since then.

They walked on, statues and monuments looming over the graves of whom John assumed were the wealthier departed. It was a large cemetery, and John was just understanding how long it could take to check each grave when Sherlock stopped short, causing John to walk into his side.


Sherlock took out his phone and snapped a picture.

“They used her real name? That’s a bit ballsy isn’t it?”

“Exactly the amount of arrogant we can expect from someone who never gets caught. It’s a common
Ukrainian name; why shouldn’t he use it? The brilliant part is, if anyone were looking for her they would never think to look in a cemetery. Murderers don’t buy plots and bury their victims.”

“This one does.”

“Well, he’s special, isn’t he?”

“So this is it then,” John said, the amazement in his voice travelling through the mask. “You solved it. With her body here, in a cemetery you can prove Moran has connections to, you have enough evidence for a warrant for his arrest. Once they dig up her body the rest will be paperwork.” John blinked in astonishment. “Is this the end of the road?”

“We have our net drawn around him, but it’s—” Sherlock stopped. “Did you hear that?”

“What?”

Sherlock held up his hand. “Listen.”

John heard the rattle of the fence. Laughter.

“Someone’s coming.” Sherlock grabbed John’s arm and pulled him around behind the back of a monument.

They looked around the edges and could see a group of costumed people half walking, half stumbling directly toward them.

_Halloween_, John thought, _perfect night to be working a cemetery._

Sherlock jerked him back and spun him around. He pressed him back up against the stone and yanked his sleeve, pulling him down. John sat on his heels and Sherlock crouched in front of him, bracing himself against the monument on either side of John’s shoulders.

“Does it matter if they see us?” John asked, keeping his voice low. He didn’t have to whisper. Sherlock was so close, practically on top of him. “They’re just a bunch of drunk teenagers, and we have masks.”

“We can’t take any risks. Not when we’re this close to winning. They could be working for Moran.”

John wanted to scoff at this, but then again, he supposed if anyone had a right to be paranoid it was Sherlock Holmes. When Sherlock thought there were microphones and cameras in their flat, there usually were.

The detective raised himself up a bit, peered around the edge of the stone, and sank back down.

“They’re sitting directly opposite Karina’s grave. It can’t be a coincidence.”

Sitting. Sitting and drinking from the sound of it. They could be here a while, and John was not keen on staring at the weird skeleton skull hovering just inches from his face. He started to pull off his own mask and when Sherlock didn’t stop him he assumed it was ok. Then he took hold of the fabric at Sherlock’s neck and pulled it up, gently pushing it back off of the detective’s face.

Dark eyes regarded him curiously for a moment. Sherlock shifted his weight, leaning into him, and John could feel a brush of his curls against his cheek. Almond. The scent brought him back to the morning and the living room floor.

“It really could be a coincidence though,” John said, doing his best to ignore the deluge of sensory
memories, warm skin and the soft press of limbs, threatening to derail his focus. He was feeling lightheaded from the crouched position and possibly from inhaling the scent of Sherlock’s hair too deeply. God, what was wrong with him? He was stone cold sober this time. No excuses for being weird, Watson.

“What?” Sherlock murmured low in his ear.

John shut his eyes. That voice. Unmistakable. Inimitable. The rich baritone as beautiful as every other part of the detective. Deep and smooth; the perfect English accent. The man could narrate bloody nature documentaries if he wanted to. John remembered the terror that had stricken him when he thought he was forgetting the sound of it in the years Sherlock was gone.

He opened his eyes. But Sherlock was here, now, pressed so close to him John could feel his breathing. And this time he wouldn’t let him go. Sherlock would always be there to talk to him, tearing the universe apart in deductions with that voice, telling him to send a text to Lestrade in that voice. Because he had to be. He was, by far, the most important thing that had ever destructively crashed into John’s life and John was not going to lose him again. He couldn’t. If Sherlock dropped dead tomorrow they would have to pry John off of his body because he would never believe it again.

He navigated Sherlock’s phone as easily as his own and prepared to type whatever Sherlock would tell him.

* * *

When a strategically timed police officer arrived and scattered the midnight cemetery revellers, Sherlock waited a moment until the area was clear. He started to stand but John caught his arm.

“Wait,” John murmured.

“What?”

“Don’t you want to check the grass for wires? Every gravestone could have a hidden camera.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, John, it would be impossible to wire the entire cemetery. It would be too obvious. People would—” John was grinning widely and Sherlock stopped. “That was a joke, wasn’t it.”

“Not one of my best, I’ll admit.”

“Moran easily could have paid them to sit by a specific gravestone all night. I’m not paranoid. Paranoid people wear aluminium foil hats, and I have yet to do any such thing.”

“I’m waiting on the edge of my seat.”

Sherlock couldn’t help grinning. “If you’d like to join the wager over at Scotland Yard as to which
of us will go mad first, I’m sure Inspector Dimmock will let you in on it.”

Sherlock stood and John looked up at him.

“Seriously?”

“I’ve got you down for March, three years from now.” Sherlock smiled in earnest as he held out his hand.

“Well, that’s optimistic.” He took Sherlock’s hand and stumbled forward when he stood up. Sherlock caught him at the upper-arms.

“What do you mean ‘optimistic’?” he asked, holding John in place. “Don’t accuse me of optimism.”

“Sorry, but three years is a bit optimistic. No one could live a month at Baker Street without losing his sheep.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows shot up. “There! You see? I told you it was a phrase.”

John laughed, shaking his head, and when he looked back at Sherlock there was an emotion in his eyes that Sherlock found was immobilising his legs. He was vaguely aware that he hadn’t let John go, but suddenly he didn’t want to. The paralysis in his legs seemed to be spreading through his upper body as it occurred to him that this is exactly what he had wanted. Ever since he’d jumped off the roof of Barts he’d been waiting for this.

He was back, and now John was back too—with the divorce papers signed he was officially back—and it would be just the two of them again like it had been before he died, before Mary… Just the two of them against the rest of the world. This—this moment—was everything he had thought about: out in London in the night, hot on the trail, new evidence, case nearly solved, John at his side, laughing, god he had missed the way John laughed, no need for John to leave to go ‘home’ because home was Baker Street, nothing to take John’s attention away from The Game, away from him—And he had all of it now, here, tonight; this is what he wanted. So it was with no small amount of horror that Sherlock realised it wasn’t enough.

He was stunned by the feeling. He wanted—needed—more. John was looking at him, dark blue eyes beneath blond fringe. He was here, truly present the way he hadn’t been when he was dividing his time to be with Mary. There was nothing between them now and yet he wasn’t close enough.

Sherlock shut his eyes as he felt, within his mind palace, the lock break. The door to the Feelings Closet swung open and a rush of memories flooded through his mind like water.

John sitting next to him in a cab, head turned to look at him, eyes filled with amazement; John giggling, We can’t giggle, it’s a crime scene; John walking through the flat in t-shirts and pyjama bottoms; John strapped in Semtex; John’s jumpers and his smiles; the growly noises John made when he was irritated; John holding his gaze, standing his ground, not backing down when Sherlock pushed him; John pulling rank at Dartmoor; John pulling him roughly up against the bars of a gate, handcuff digging into his wrist; John standing at his grave: Stop it, just stop this; John sitting alone at a table, his first sight of him after two years; getting to John through fire; Course, of course you’re my best friend; John, waltzing, hand on his back; John, drunk, hand on his knee: I don’t mind; the weight of John’s body, pinning him to the ground on the cliffs; John standing in the living room wearing the tuxedo; You’re very pretty—

“Sherlock? Are you all right?”

John wearing only his boxers—his toned muscles; kissing John: the taste of whisky, the smell of
wool and rain; waking up tangled in John, the heat of his body—

All of these instances had been manageable individually. He had locked each one away in what had been an airtight stronghold, but now… There was a rushing noise in his head; his mind palace was flooding; he couldn’t think… John’s clear eyes were watching him inquisitively, waiting.

_Damn it, Holmes, you are flesh and blood. You have feelings. You must have… impulses._ John. An echo in his mind.

The impulse pounded in his chest with the quickening beat of his heart. He stepped forward.

_He’s right, you know._ Voices like memory.

_So what if he’s right; he’s always right; it’s boring._

Sandy hair catching glints of faded streetlight. An impulse to move his hand to John’s jaw. He strained against it, fingers clenching where they were locked on John’s arms. Didn’t he want to observe John’s reaction if he tipped his head back? Didn’t he want to know what kind of noise John might make if he bit his lip? Didn’t he want to trigger the same visceral part of John that switched on like a light at the right provocation? The part that would growl low, pushing Sherlock backward, tasting him in flashes of teeth and tongue—

John’s eyes were skimming over his face, trying to read him.

Didn’t he want—hadn’t he always wanted…?

_Fuck._

Mobility sprang back into his muscles and Sherlock shoved John backward. He whirled around, taking off across the cemetery. He didn’t look back.

* 

John stumbled, catching his heel on a raised grave marker and falling backward onto the grave.

He leaned up on his elbows and had just enough time to see Sherlock jump down from the fence onto the pavement. He went off down a side street, disappearing around the corner.

_Ow,_ was his first thought. And then, _What the buggering hell was that?_
Chapter Notes

**Chapter Warning:** Really real TAB spoilers this time. A Johnlock argument of events. In other words, all the spoilers.

Sorry for the slight delay with this one. It took longer than anticipated to integrate the new material.* So much subtext, so little time.

*And it would have taken much longer if it weren't for the amazing Ariane DeVere and the mind-blowing fact that she has already completed The Abominable Bride transcript in her typically flawless way.

Sherlock walked quickly through the streets, destination only on the periphery of his consciousness. He knew the city well enough that he could put the part of his brain concerned with directions on autopilot. The night air was cold on his face; he tried to let the sensation ground him while the chaos of his thoughts blurred the edges of reality.

When the Feelings Closet broke open it had flooded his mind palace, waves of exiled memories shuddering the very foundation of it, impulses ripping through and upending the meticulous organisation of his mind.

He needed damage control. His mind palace hadn’t been in such a state of disarray since… Not since…

Through the confusion a vision of that afternoon surfaced. The same turmoil—the rushing thoughts slick like poison in his head. But he’d known how to handle it then. He’d known how to hush the storm even as it surged through him…

*

““The car will be at Baker Street to pick you up in one hour. Be prepared. It may be a private jet, but that doesn’t mean anyone is eager to wait on your whims.” Mycroft’s tone was no less patronising over the phone than it was in person.

““Yes, god forbid I inconvenience anyone as I depart for my suicide mission.””

““Don’t be dramatic, little brother. You chose your fate when you pulled the trigger. This is the best I could do for you.””

Sherlock scoffed, “A death sentence. That’s you doing your best? You’re slipping, Mycroft.”

“No, Sherlock. Between years in prison and six months in the field we both know which is the kinder option for you.”

Sherlock turned away from the living room window, ducking his head as Mycroft’s voice went dangerously soft. “You remember what happened last time?”

Sherlock’s head snapped up.
“You almost didn’t survive the week—”

“Go to Hell, Mycroft.”

“After you, brother mine.”

The line went dead and Sherlock tossed the phone onto the table. He picked up a thin, sleek wooden box, feeling the Pavlovian response resonating in his nerves as his fingers brushed over the surface: anticipation. He didn’t need to open the lid—didn’t need to see silver needles or a glass syringe for the tremors to sweep through him. Addiction never cured, only dormant, roused now just by the touch of wood.

**Be prepared.** Of course he would be prepared. He’d begun preparing from the moment his delightful older brother had given him his sentence. A roundup of chemicals: pills and powders and liquid. He could experiment now, try all sorts of new combinations; why not? One of the more interesting features of a death sentence is that from the moment you receive it, the concept of ‘risk’ becomes redundant. There is no gamble with life and death when the ending has already been written.

When Sherlock finally sank the needle beneath his skin with practiced skill—the prick of pain like a welcome home—it had nothing to do with fear. He cared nothing about the mission he’d been sent to die on, and Mycroft was right (for all of his brother’s infuriating ways of existing, he was right). It was infinitely preferable to die on the field than it was to rot in a prison cell. Sherlock knew himself well enough to know he wouldn’t survive a prolonged jail sentence; the torture of boredom without the relief of The Work, and the drugs low quality and hard to come by—his brain would tear itself to pieces. It would break him. He would be unrecognisable by the end of it, and no matter how quickly Mycroft managed to negotiate parole, there would be nothing left of him worth salvaging.

No, he belonged on the battlefield and he was content to die there. He wasn’t afraid. The needle in his vein now wasn’t about where he was going. It was about who he was leaving behind. Any consideration of *that* and the padlocks on his Feelings Closet snapped like twigs, the pain swirling in sickening torrents through his head. Fortunately there were chemical solutions to such problems, and this time Sherlock had no problem indulging in them.

The rush was pleasurable enough to make his head tip back and his eyes flutter shut.

He supposed it was a bit ironic, thoughts of John causing him to reach for his syringe. Because just short of Mycroft there was no one who would disapprove more. He could almost see John’s tight lips, the tension in his jaw, expression a mixture of a doctor’s disdain and a friend’s concern.

In the past John’s presence had been enough to stave off any lingering temptation the idea of synthetic supplements might offer. He didn’t need chemicals when he had his blogger, through the cases and in between. But things were different since he’d come back to London from his previous mission. John didn’t live here anymore. And now—now there wasn’t any question about what was necessary. Because he knew what it meant to say goodbye to John. He’d done it once before. And he wouldn’t—he couldn’t do it again. At least not sober.

They didn’t notice.

It might have been a while, but the control required to mimic his sober posture, to keep his hands still and his eyes alert, was something he’d learned long ago and never forgotten.

He blamed the drugs for the sentiment involved in going to John’s blog, to the story of when they met, after take-off.
The overdose was not sudden. Sherlock could feel it coming in like the tide, waves pulling at him stronger and stronger until they warped his mind palace, flashes of hallucinations disrupting what would have been linear thought. A call from Mycroft—Moriarty’s message—and Sherlock closed his eyes and let the waves drag him under.

*

The streets of London slid by under his feet as he unconsciously navigated their twists and turns, breath clouding in the night air, oblivious to all passers-by in a kind of walking meditation. His head was buzzing with the memory of John pressed against him behind the cemetery monument, the memory of that alleyway kiss, John’s mouth warm beneath his...

Images and impressions, everything he had banished from his conscious mind was being swept at him in the flood. It was all he could do to catch bits and pieces of each thought.

_The brain without a heart; the calculating machine. I write all of that, Holmes, and the readers lap it up, but I do not believe it._

It had been easy to slam the memory of the overdose shut in his Feelings Closet after the fact. Moriarty was back. Not necessarily alive, but the challenge was finally a puzzle good enough for Sherlock to focus on, and the bizarre inconsistencies in the drug-addled dream remained safely locked away, unacknowledged and unconsidered. Until now. The memory snagged and his hyperactive mind tore through its details with relentless fury, desperate for more information on what John was doing to him—on these waves of impulses.

The nineteenth century dream was connected to the incident in the cemetery tonight. He knew it was connected, somehow, but the chaos in his mind left him grasping at sense in a storm of discordant thoughts.

Emilia Ricoletti: An old case filed somewhere in the archives of his mind’s library. The woman who shot herself through the head and continued on to commit various murders. In his altered state of mind he’d been convinced that if he could solve Ricoletti’s case then he could solve Moriarty’s. It made perfect sense.

It made no sense, of course. It was all wrong. Loose stitches warning signs for the unravelling of a false narrative. Why was John questioning him about his sexuality? What did that have to do with either Ricoletti or Moriarty?

It wasn’t John. It was his mind’s words in John’s voice, posing possibilities... The women he’d admired: Lady Carmichael and Irene Adler.

But his answer was always the same, in dreaming or in waking.

_The fairer sex is your department, Watson, not mine._

_Girlfriend, no, not really my area._

But what did his sexual history, or lack thereof, have to do with any of it? Why had his mind fixated on it in the midst of a (hypothetical) case?

_You’re in deep, Sherlock. Deeper than you ever intended to be._

Too deep, yes; too close to his core: a dark, shadowy depth where primal thoughts lurked—dangerous thoughts his conscious mind had nothing to do with. That the _case_ had nothing to do with _
Moriarty—his brain’s representation of its own weaknesses—with the gun on his tongue, sinking down, lower, until he was looking up at Sherlock, barrel of the gun in his mouth… Even Sherlock didn’t need a Viennese analyst to read the meaning in that image.

His mind palace was many things, but it was not subtle. The Moriarty in his mind had been quite explicit about embodying his flaws: the crack in the lens, the virus in the hard drive. The confrontation, then, in the living room of 221B, had been a confrontation not with the man who was Jim Moriarty, but with one of his own fears. When the Feelings Closet was secured shut he was able to write it off as his fear of ignorance (how can you still be alive?). But now, with the floodgates down between his conscious and subconscious mind, he could see it for what it was. Nearly all of Moriarty’s words and actions were either implicitly or explicitly sexual. A confrontation with a weakness that had nothing to do with Ricoletti or Moriarty but in fact had everything to do with John.

Too deep, Sherlock. Way too deep.

How many times since then had he encountered John in his mind palace, in a dream, only to witness John place his gun in his mouth, sinking to his knees in front of Sherlock, resting its length on his tongue?

Each time Sherlock was jolted awake at the sight, sweat prickling his temples, his unmistakable sexual arousal seeming wildly inappropriate in the face of what he’d interpreted as a threat to John. The first time, he pinned an explanation about mistranslated concern for his flatmate’s safety on the dream before shoving it in the closet and promptly forgetting it. He repeated the action each time the dream recurred. But here it was now, resurfaced and swept out at him: John on his knees, pink tongue against thick metal.

God, he’d been stupid. The dream, the overdose—he’d missed everything of importance.

He’d only seen it for what it was on the surface: a misguided exploration of a case from the past, loosely linked to the possibility of Moriarty’s reappearance. Now he knew what it really had been. It had been a warning. A precursor to exactly what had happened with John in the cemetery tonight.

The case had never been important.

You don’t care about any of it.

He’d been fooled by his own brain’s red herring, even while it tried to hint the deception to him. Even the contemplation of Moriarty’s death had only been a piece of what his mind was doing.

Is this silly enough for you yet? It doesn’t make sense, Sherlock.

It was about John. Obvious.

The case had two features of interest: Ricoletti’s unsolved suicide and Moriarty’s return, of course. But upon closer inspection there was a third, far more interesting feature, and that was John Watson. He was the conductor of the whole mad escapade, the focal point around which all sides of the dream turned.

John: His companion, his Boswell, his closest friend (against absolutely no competition whatsoever), his challenge (I can break every bone in your body while naming them), his conscience (Dear god above, you will hold yourself to a higher standard), his protector, his saviour, his break in what had been an impenetrable wall of emotional and sexual disinterest (Why are you
talking like this?), his crack in the lens—

The dream had been his devastated mind’s attempt to make sense of the flood of feelings surrounding John it had to contend with even as the plane left the ground, left England, left John standing on the tarmac with Mary, his abominable bride.

*Doesn’t this remind you of another case?*

The Ricoletti case had reminded him of Moriarty’s own death of course, but that had been the point from the beginning. In fact it did remind him of *another* case. Emilia Ricoletti was not the first gun-wielding bride Sherlock had encountered. Wasn’t she based off of another, more formidable, more real precedent? (Succedent? It didn’t matter; the chronology was nonsense.)

*There’s nothing new under the sun.*

A flash of a memory from his previous mind-palace-crisis: Mary, veil draped over her face and shoulders, gun held steady—

*What was it?*

Mary, in her wedding dress, stopping his heart—

*What was that case? Do you remember?*

Pain searing through his chest. *I'll take the case.*

He'd done it for John. He’d shot Magnussen to ensure Mary’s safety to protect John’s marriage. He’d done his part, upheld his vow. He’d convinced himself it was for the best. There was no need for him in a dynamic designed for two people, not three. But in the end he didn’t want to go. And he’d only had the drugs in his system to dull the pain of being torn from the one person he’d never wanted to leave.

*The Abominable Bride.* Watson’s silly title, but really his own, for the fantasy his subconscious had created to rebel against what he’d very recently done: He’d lost John by saving his marriage. By protecting his abominable bride. *Abominable:* causing moral revulsion. She’d lied to John from the beginning, and shot Sherlock to maintain the lie.

He’d steeled himself to let John go, but as soon as the drugs loosened his control his mind threw the truth at him hard. He'd made a mistake. It wasn't right. It wasn’t right to leave. To leave John with Mary. The overdose was his brain screaming it at him.

The dream had shown him everything. His subconscious fears…

*Why are you so determined to be alone?*

The words he couldn’t say then so obvious now: *I don’t want to be alone, John. I hate that you left.*

His subconscious desires…

*You are flesh and blood. You must have impulses.*

*It's on the tip of my tongue.*

And he’d ignored it all. Until tonight.

The lock had broken again tonight and with a sinking sense of dread it occurred to him that he might
not be able to do it anymore. There was too much piling up. Apart from family, there had never been anyone present in Sherlock’s life long enough to acquire such massive amounts of information about, and certainly no one to collect so many Feelings about. He had never tested his limits before, and grimly he was aware that he must be reaching them now.

He had always thought it would be enough—that he would be satisfied if he and John could just live together and work together, coexisting in the kind of odd balance that worked for them, the deep-seated friendship that kept them so strongly bonded together. But tonight he had discovered it wasn’t. The scent of John, the weight of him, his warmth, his sturdy presence… His flatmate’s physicality was becoming impossible to ignore the way he used to.

And wasn’t it possible… The way John looked at him, the way he touched him… Sherlock stamped the thought down before it could go any further. Even if it were possible that John could want to be with him in that way (despite the doctor’s peculiar hobby of announcing his heterosexuality at every opportunity), first, regardless of what he was now acutely aware that he wanted, romantic entanglements had never been an option for him. He couldn’t have his mind palace flooding with Feelings for John all the time. They hadn’t even kissed tonight and still his mind was a disaster zone. It was out of the question; he wouldn’t be able to think clearly; he wouldn’t be able to work; he could lose important documents in floodwaters. He needed to get the mess in his head cleaned up as soon as possible if he wanted his cognitive functioning back on full power.

Second, he knew he wouldn’t be able to devote the time and emotion necessary to please a sexual partner. He assumed that would mean hurting John, and he wouldn’t do that either.

Sherlock halted in his tracks. Dazed vision sharpened into focus as he dragged himself from the rushing torrent of his thoughts back into reality. His legs had taken him exactly where he needed to go.

He turned from the door and allowed himself a moment to sink into the wall. John. He hadn’t come to any solution. There was a reason he kept these Feelings locked away. They were too dangerous. His brain was a delicate instrument, finely tuned to excel at its craft above and beyond all limits of expectation. He'd made the choice to sacrifice the emotion that would clutter it, slow it down, long ago.

But he wouldn’t send John away. That was out of the question. The two-year separation had turned out to be an abysmally bad idea and he wouldn’t put either of them through it again.

There was nothing for it. Sherlock would simply have to be stronger than his emotions, as he had always been. He knew now, beyond doubt, that he wanted more from John than just friendship, but he was also a master of concealment and deception. He could do it. His attraction to his flatmate was his problem, and he would deal with it himself. He wouldn’t have his relationship with John ruined over an inability to overcome a mental weakness. He could steel his mind over, double the reinforcements. A locked Feelings Closet could become a sealed Feelings Vault.

He breathed deeply, closing his eyes and willing the flood to dissipate, now that it had done its damage. The waves of Feelings seeped down through the floors of his mind palace, back into the depths of his subconscious. There was shocking disorder in the aftermath, but Sherlock could deal with that later. He could function well enough for the time being, now that the storm had cleared.

He straightened his posture, as if the lift of his shoulders could force any lingering emotion to fall away.

He tapped on the door and by the time it opened his face had resumed its usual mask.
“All right, Shezza?”

“Billy, I need information.”

*

It was evening already when Sherlock was finally walking home. He had spent a fruitless night and day following up leads on abandoned warehouses that could be suitable for storing large shipments of narcotics. He supposed it was a slim chance that the drug deal Mycroft had mentioned in connection with Carl Reeves would involve Moran, or involve him directly even if it involved his gang, but it was worth investigating. Especially when you were avoiding your flatmate (and therefore your flat).

John had texted him, of course. *Are you ok?*

Sherlock had responded laconically. *Busy. Have leads. SH*

*Be careful.*

It was the last message John sent him. No nagging questions, no insisting on being included. John’s reticence and his patience were two reasons why he preferred John’s company over anyone else’s. John didn’t mind silent cab rides, hours of silence in the midst of pressing cases. He allowed Sherlock to let him in on his own time.

As Sherlock ascended the stairs to the flat he wondered if he should tell John about looking for the drugs, the possibility of getting what he knew would be a necessary second charge to pin on Moran. As he reached the door he decided he wouldn’t. Until Sherlock had gotten his mind palace completely back in order it would be preferable for the two of them to spend the least amount of time together as possible. He could finish this case on his own.

Sherlock opened the door and there was a soldier standing in the living room.

He was dressed in full military fatigues: desert combat boots, camouflage trousers, cream t-shirt under open camouflage jacket, dog tags glinting silver at his chest. He wasn’t wearing a helmet, and his blond hair was a bit longer now than regulations would approve. His dark blue eyes glanced up from where he was loading the magazine into his gun. Trained, confident hands slipped it into place.

“Hi,” John said.

‘Bad timing’ seemed like a laughable understatement.
“Find what you wanted?” John asked as Sherlock took off his coat.

Sherlock snapped his head back towards him. “What?”

“The leads? You said you had leads.”

His flatmate blinked at him. “No, nothing. Waste of time. Why, erm, why are you…” he gestured at John’s attire.

“Halloween party,” John said, placing his gun in the holster on his belt. He’d just finished removing the bullets from the magazine. He didn’t have time to buy a fake gun for his ‘costume,’ so he’d compromised by emptying the bullets from his real one. Everyone would assume it was fake—few people could tell the difference—and the gun wouldn’t be loaded if anyone asked to see it. “For the surgery; promised I’d go.”

Sherlock was looking at him oddly, hovering around the door.

John frowned. “Are you ok?”

The detective scrubbed his hand over his face. His skin was even paler than usual. When was the last time he’d eaten? With a sinking feeling like cold lead John realised that in the chaos of the ball, the strip club, the cemetery, he had forgotten to make Sherlock eat. *Jesus Christ*, the last time he ate might have been more than three days ago.

Without thinking John crossed the room and grabbed Sherlock’s slender wrist. Seemingly stunned, Sherlock followed as John guided him to the couch. John pushed him down onto it and found his pen light on the table.

John leaned over him, dog tags dangling in the space between them, and Sherlock looked up at his face with a kind of muted curiosity. John held the detective’s chin. His forehead was cool, no fever, too pale though. Pupils dilated. Hardly daring to push his luck with how docile his flatmate was being, he circled Sherlock’s wrist with his hand, fingers resting on his pulse point. Heart rate elevated. God, he could faint.

“You have to eat something,” John said.

“I don’t—”

“Now.”

John turned on his heel and walked toward the kitchen. “I’ll make you toast.”

When he re-entered the living room he was surprised to find Sherlock still sitting on the couch, though he’d crossed his arms sullenly. He must be feeling faint if he hadn’t jumped up demanding to be left alone by now. John reprimanded himself sharply for forgetting to make him eat. It was one of his most important self-appointed jobs.

He held out the plate of toast to Sherlock, who merely glowered at it before glowering at him.

“Don’t make me force feed you.”

Sherlock looked at him defiantly.
“I’ve already proven I can pin you down,” John said. “I can do it again if I have to.”

“That would be very ambitious of you,” Sherlock said, huffily pulling the plate out of John’s hand. “Are all soldiers so annoyingly adamant about toast?”

John couldn’t help smiling fondly at the obstinate detective. “Only some. I hear the Paras have strong opinions about sandwiches.”

“You’re an obnoxious person,” Sherlock said, though he took a bite of the toast.

“I’m going to make you pasta,” John said, going back to the kitchen.


“Plain pasta will be good; it won’t shock your system after fasting for a week.”

“It hasn’t been a week,” Sherlock mumbled.

“Maybe just a bit of olive oil—” John froze. He had turned around to find Sherlock standing directly behind him, eyes none the less piercing for his lacking nutrition.

“John, leave.”

“Wh-what?”

“Go to whatever asinine event you were going to.”

“Forget it; I’m not going to leave you here when you’re on the verge of a collapse.”

“I’m not on the verge of anything. I’m fine.”

“You’re not.”

“I know what I can handle,” Sherlock snapped.

“You have no idea,” John growled.

Sherlock grabbed the lapels of John’s jacket to forcibly remove him from the kitchen. John reacted instantly, spinning them around and slamming Sherlock back against the wall. Sherlock leaned his head back; bright verdigris slatted at him through black lashes, and John did his best to keep his expression firm in the face of such ridiculously pleasing aesthetics.

“I could give you a note on your bedside manner,” Sherlock said, deep voice purring in his chest.

John heard his own words rough by comparison. “Not a doctor right now, Sherlock. Soldier. I’m not letting you go until you agree to eat something.”

For a moment Sherlock searched his face. Finally he said, “If you leave, I promise I’ll make pasta.”

“What’s it to you if I go or stay?”

“I won’t have you sitting in all night watching me like a concerned nanny.”

John hesitated. “You would really make pasta?” It was difficult to believe, but on the other hand Sherlock seemed to be all right, and he wasn’t eager to disappoint his colleagues. Again.

Sherlock glared. “It’s pasta, not a soufflé. I think I can manage.”
“And eat it? You have to eat it. You can’t just throw it at the ceiling or something.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Yes, I will eat it.”

“And no running off,” John said. “It’s incredible you haven’t already fainted; I don’t want to get a phone call saying you’re passed out in a gutter somewhere.”

“I will stay here; I will eat pasta. Any other unreasonable demands you want to make while you’re at it?”

“Some tea would probably be good for—”

Sherlock shoved John back.

“Fine.” John straightened his uniform jacket. “I’ll go.” He walked toward the door. “Food and rest tonight; that’s an order.”

*

From the window Sherlock watched John get into a cab and drive off. He dropped the curtain back into place and pulled out his phone. He still had three more locations on his list that could be used to store a large shipment of drugs, and he fully intended to check them all.

He swung on his coat and reached for the door, but he hesitated. He walked back to the coffee table and picked up a piece of toast. He chewed it, impatiently observing how long the process of chewing can take. He picked up the next piece.

Orders from a doctor were one thing. Orders from an army doctor, in uniform, were quite another.

*

It was an hour into the party and John couldn’t shake a nagging sense of unease in the back of his mind. He was listening to one of his colleagues—an orthopaedic surgeon dressed as a radiologist (doctor humour, he supposed)—drone on about her garden when it struck him.

“Sorry, I have to make a call.” John ducked out of the room and leaned up against the hallway wall, searching for Mrs. Hudson in his contacts.

He knew what it was, that sense of uneasiness. It was a memory. The memory of the last time Sherlock had agreed to do what John asked too quickly.

“Er, milk, we need milk,” John had said half to himself as he was on his way out. Where had he been going? Probably to see one of his old girlfriends…

“I’ll get some,” Sherlock had replied casually.

“Really?” John stared in disbelief.

“Really.” Sherlock wasn’t looking at him.

“And some beans then?” John had hardly dared to ask.

“Mnhmm,” Sherlock had agreed.

Extraordinarily abnormal behaviour for his shop-allergic flatmate. It was a red flag that John had missed. He should have known. Sherlock was going to get Moriarty, not milk.
And then tonight: “I will stay in. I will make pasta. I will eat it.”

Right. Sherlock was going to stay in and eat pasta tonight the same way he’d gone to the shop for milk all of those years ago. John couldn’t believe he’d fallen for it again.

“Hello?” Mrs. Hudson answered the phone.

“Mrs. Hudson I need you to go upstairs and check if Sherlock is in the flat. It’s important.”

“Sure, I’ll just be a moment.”

The moment seemed eternal.

“No, dear, he’s not here.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. Got to run.”

John sucked in a deep breath. The MIA status was nothing unusual for his intractable flatmate. However, it was more common for Sherlock to disappear without a word than it was for him to bother lying. The fact that he’d lied meant there was something he was hiding. The thought made his stomach want to roll over in protest. Because John’s past experience with Sherlock lying to him—it tended to end spectacularly badly. Semtex and swimming pools and rooftop phone calls.

But John couldn’t think about that now. He needed to focus. How could he find Sherlock? He could be anywhere in London. Calling him wouldn’t help; if Sherlock had lied before, then he wouldn’t tell him where he was now. His only hope would be if Sherlock had talked to someone—if someone else would know where he’d gone.

He called Molly.

“Have you heard from Sherlock today? Did you see him last night?”

“No, I haven’t seen him in a while. Is everything all—”

“Yes, it’s fine, sorry to bother you, thank you.”

John hung up. Damn it. He could call Lestrade, but he doubted Sherlock would involve the DI in something he wouldn’t even tell John about. Mycroft, definitely not. He knew it wouldn’t prevent him from calling them both in about five minutes if he couldn’t think of anything else.

Billy. He could call Billy.

“Yeah, that’s right, I saw Shezza last night, innit. Oh, and then again, earlier today.”

“Do you have any idea where he might be right now? It’s really important.”

“Yeah sure. He was looking for drug dealers.”

John’s heart slammed into his rib cage.

“Gave him a list of places,” Billy continued. “Told me today he didn’t find what he needed though. He only had three places left on the list so I doubt he’s going to find what he wants. I told him you can’t be too picky. You got to take what you can get, innit? There’s plenty of quality stuff around—”

“Do you remember where those three places were?”
“Sure, I’ve got a photographic memory haven’t I. I’ll text them to you.”

“Thanks, Billy,” John kept his voice cordial though he would have liked to bash the junkie’s face into a concrete wall for being such a lousy enabler. But right now the information was more important. He would have to threaten Billy with more than a sprain some other time.

“All right, no worries.”

He hung up.

Drugs, Jesus Christ, why now? What had happened last night at the cemetery to make him tear off like that? To make him look for drugs again? As angry as he was with Billy, a small perhaps more rational part of him knew that if Sherlock had made up his mind he would get what he wanted, regardless of whether Billy helped him or not.

The text came through. A quick search told him the first place on the list was also the closest to Baker Street. Sherlock would probably start there.

He babbled something about a family emergency to whoever was closest as he bolted out the door.

*God fucking damn it, Sherlock,* he thought, knowing he would never forgive himself if he was too late.

* 

Sherlock snapped the chain across the warehouse door with the pair of bolt cutters he’d brought for the purpose. He pushed on the door and it gave only slightly. He put his shoulder into it and the rusty hinges swung open.

He stood in the dark for just a second before dim lights flickered, illuminating the enormous space. He blinked rapidly, eyes adjusting to the light. There was a group of men standing just a few metres off. They all turned to look at him.

It was hard to say who was more surprised to see the other, Sherlock Holmes or Sebastian Moran.
Moran

Sherlock turned back to look at the door he had just come through. He was neither gratified nor surprised to see a sniper, gun drawn and ready, now filling the opening.

*Found it,* Sherlock thought wryly as he lifted his hands, walking toward Moran and the others. There was a loud hum of an industrial sized air conditioner: climate control for optimal drug storage.

He recognised Moran from the search he’d done. One of England’s leading psychologists, exclusive therapy clinic, patient roster blocked. The waiting list was a year long to get a timeslot to see him, and the fee was astronomical.

He was older than Moriarty, closer to forty, sharp suit: Hugo Boss if Sherlock was not mistaken (he was never mistaken about suits). As Sherlock walked closer the deductions about his new opponent scrolled through his head.


Moriarty’s ideal employee. Moran had evidently proven himself worthy of controlling England’s drug trade in the master’s absence.

The psychologist’s light blue eyes told Sherlock he was quite surprised to see him, although not entirely displeased. Two lackeys flanked him on either side. They were younger, just in their mid-twenties, wearing suits that were smart but not designer: smaller fish, lower on Moriarty’s ladder. The two of them had a very similar look, though Sherlock observed they were not brothers (the distribution of dominant and recessive traits made the possibility very unlikely).

They were there with Moran to buy, Sherlock deduced, reading the situation. The two men standing opposite were closer to Moran’s age, one with light grey hair and the other with a brown beard and moustache. They were there to sell. There was more information, the standard stream of data accompanying all people (Russian, grey hair studied in France, brown beard had a dentist appointment yesterday—) but Sherlock did his best to ignore it. He needed to focus on Moran. Excess information would only serve to distract.

“Sebastian Moran,” Sherlock said, reaching out his hand. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Sherlock Holmes”—Moran shook his hand; firm grip, powerful negotiator—“I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Only psychotic ravings, I’m sure,” Sherlock said with a smile.

Moran grinned like ice. “Search him.”

His lackeys pulled out the bolt cutters but found nothing else of consequence.

“What’s this?” the grey-haired man asked. His gaze was bold but the shift of his weight communicated nervousness. “The agreement was for the five of us, no one else.”
“I believe Mr. Holmes is just as surprised to see us as we are to see him,” Moran explained placidly.

“I don’t have to be surprised,” Sherlock objected. If he was going to be outnumbered he could at least be insolent about it.

“Yes, I’m sure you planned to walk in on our meeting without backup and unarmed.”

Sherlock cleared his throat. “It wouldn’t be one of my better plans, no.”

He had only meant to be doing reconnaissance work tonight. He knew drugs were being stored for mass distribution. The plan had been to find the supply and connect it back through Moran by piecing together an information trail. The plan had not, admittedly, been to find Moran simply standing in the middle of it. The encounter went against the balance of probability. His timing was really was off tonight.

Moran looked toward Russians. “My apologies for the interruption. I assure you it will be dealt with appropriately.”

“I don’t like this,” the bearded man said in Russian.

“There’s nothing we can do now. The money is due tomorrow. We have to go through with it,” the grey-haired man replied, also in Russian.

Sherlock wondered if Moran spoke Russian. From his lack of attention he didn’t seem to. He was whispering something to the lackey on his left, who stepped behind Sherlock and snapped his wrists into handcuffs.

“Have a seat, Mr. Holmes,” Moran said lightly, as though they were standing in the waiting room of his clinic. “I’ll be with you in a moment.”

The men disappeared through one of the various doors leading off of the warehouse’s main space, and the lackey who remained behind brought over a chair. Sherlock knew there was no use trying to fight. The sniper at the door was still in position, and when he looked up he could just see the outline of two more snipers in the shadows of the rafters. He wondered if the Russians had noticed them. They probably hadn’t. People never notice anything.

Carl Reeves—formerly an assassin, currently dead thanks to one John Watson—had been hired, presumably by Moran, to eliminate a “prominent drug dealer,” as Mycroft had put it when he’d texted him the assassin’s picture. If Sherlock was correct in putting the pieces together, then his might not be the only murder on the evening’s agenda.

“What’s your name then?” Sherlock asked his new guard.

“John,” he said. “John Watson.”

Sherlock kept his face blank, but his eyes burned through the man in front of him.

“Moran told you to say that.” God, he was dealing with a psychologist. He hated psychologists.

The lackey shrugged. “It could be my name. It’s a very ordinary name.”

He smirked and Sherlock glared at him. He was English, born and raised in London judging by his accent, tall with thin, pale features, and a pointed nose. Like the other lackey who had followed Moran, there was a public school air about his look and affect. Sherlock would know.
“How about Tweedledum? It suits you better.” Sherlock hadn’t deleted everything from his childhood.

The boy forced him roughly down into the chair and used a zip-tie to lock the handcuffs to the back of it. He stepped back when he was finished.

“You forgot my legs,” Sherlock was courteous enough to point out.

He shrugged. “If you stand up, they’ll shoot you.”

There was a pause and the rattle and hum of the air conditioner echoed through the space.

“So, Tweedledum, it seems we’ve got some time to kill. Why don’t you tell me about Moriarty? His message made it sound like he had some sort of diabolical scheme prepared. But it’s been ages! What’s taking so long?”

Silence.

Sherlock frowned. “Unless we all missed it. Perhaps there was something more important on the news that day. New photoset of the royal babies or something. That would be embarrassing.”

Silence.

“Come on, what’s he up to? Don’t they tell you these things? Or is ‘lackey’ status not high enough for any real information?”

Silence.

It was a shame Tweedledum had already aligned himself with Moran. Sherlock rather liked his conversational skills.

Sherlock’s phone was in his pocket. There was no chance of being able to get to it while his hands were bound behind the back of the chair. No possibility to contact John. Well, he said he would finish this case alone, and now it looked like he was going to. They had enough evidence to arrest Moran for Karina’s death. The drugs would have been a nice bonus, but barring any deus ex machina level intervention, they were going to complete the trade tonight and get away with it.

Perhaps Lestrade would be able to trace the drug deal back through Sherlock’s murder. He very much doubted it. Moran would clean up his tracks well. Like the other poison-deaths they had been investigating, his murder would be staged to look like something else. They would arrange it to look like a junkie shot him while he was trespassing through boarded up warehouses. Lestrade wouldn’t be bright enough to figure it out. And John…

“Is this the end of the road?” John had asked last night.

*No, John, this is the end of the road. Here. Now.*

He had always known he would die on a case. He’d been prepared for it, waited for it for a long time. One wrong step. He knew that was all it would take, to be just once in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was too easy. He should have been dead already, but John had always interfered.

Well, this time John wasn’t here. The doctor was safe, miles away at some goldfish party.

Sherlock felt a constriction in his chest. Perhaps he was not as indifferent to his own death as he had once been. John had changed that. John had given him something to look forward to besides the
oblivion of drugs when the cases were solved. John had given him a reason to live entirely apart from The Work.

It was cold. The air conditioner was loud.

John.

I didn’t know, Sherlock silently apologised to his flatmate, doctor, soldier. It wasn’t suicide; it was bad timing. He’d been rash about checking the locations. If he’d known the drug deal was happening tonight—now—he would have made a plan. He would have involved John. Danger wasn’t nearly as enjoyable without John. And dying wouldn’t be any fun at all if it meant leaving him again—if it meant he couldn’t say goodbye.

A door creaked and the four men walked back into the main space. Sherlock watched as Moran and Tweedledee shook hands with the two Russians, and then as the snipers in the rafters shot both of the Russians through the backs of their heads.

The Englishmen stepped lightly over the bodies as they approached Sherlock.

“My apologies for the mess,” Moran said. “I’m afraid they reneged on our previous contract and, well, you know, business is business.”

“I wanted to give you my compliments on your poison.” Sherlock tilted his head back to meet Moran’s pale eyes. “The one you used on Rodgers, Parker and Riley. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Moran looked pleased. “Thank you. It’s a fine compliment coming from an accomplished chemist such as yourself. Chemistry is a hobby of mine; I might have gone into the field, but psychology has always had my heart.”

“Tell me about Moriarty.”

“Delightful chap”—Moran took a thin black box out of his jacket pocket—“Genius man.”

“Is or was?”

“Ah, the million dollar question.” Moran opened the case and Sherlock saw the glint of a syringe.

“Aren’t you going to answer it?”

“I thought you were there. On the roof that day.”

“I was there. He blew his brains out the back of his head.”

“And you’re asking me what then? To tell you a ghost story? Really, Mr. Holmes, I could have sworn someone told me you were clever.”

“Just because he’s dead doesn’t mean he won’t make the next move.”

Moran gave him a small smile. “Quite true, quite true.”

Tweedledee held up a vial of liquid and Moran carefully filled the syringe. Tweedledum ripped open Sherlock’s shirt.

Sherlock looked down at the torn shirt. “Was that necessary?”
“Loads of evil to do,” Tweedledee said.

“No time for buttons,” Tweedledum said.

Sherlock could not believe he was going to die surrounded by these guys. On the other hand, if he had to guess who Moriarty would choose to be part of his London gang… Insanity loves company.

“You could at least tell me what he has planned,” Sherlock grumbled. “The hero is entitled to a revelation of all the secret plots before he dies. Hollywood says so.”

Tweedledum was tapping Sherlock’s chest here and there, looking for a good vein.

“Fancy yourself a hero, Mr. Holmes?” Moran asked.

“I suppose it’s a dismal sign of the times if anyone wants to call me that. But I don’t strap people to chairs and stick them with syringes.”

“Ah, but that’s not out of any moral feeling, is it.” Moran’s voice was soft. It wasn’t a question. “You would do all that and more for a case, wouldn’t you. Even kill a man. Shoot him right through the head.” Moran raised two fingers to his forehead, mimicking the shot.

Sherlock held his gaze. “I’m not a hero.”

“No, no, of course not”—Moran handed the syringe to Tweedledum—“You can’t be.”

Sherlock held himself defiantly still as the syringe was pushed into the vein just below his collar bone.

Moran leaned in closer. “Because the hero, Mr. Holmes, is not supposed to die.”

*

John sat in the back of the cab, rocking back and forth, doing his best not to jump out of his skin. It was the longest cab ride he’d taken since the last time Sherlock pushed him away and he’d had to get a cab back to him. *Alone is what I have, alone protects me.*

“Could you please go faster?” John asked for the second time.

“I can go as fast as the traffic goes.” The driver’s tone was dripping with condescension. He glanced in the rear-view mirror, taking in John’s uniform. “What are you, late for the war?”

“Yeah,” John bit back, “I told them to go ahead and start without me.”

John glared out the window, half considering whether it wouldn’t be faster to get out and run.

It was ridiculous. The fear was nameless. There was no concrete reason to believe Sherlock was in any danger at all. It was only the memory. If Sherlock had pushed him away, told him to go to his party, there was a good reason for it. Of course by ‘good’ reason John meant ‘very, very bad, underhanded, idiotic plan to get into loads of trouble’ reason.

John breathed. Billy said Sherlock was looking for drugs. It didn’t necessarily mean he was looking for drugs to get high, he reminded himself forcefully. It could be related to the case. Moran was involved in drug dealing. He could be investigating the drug ring connected to Moran. *But then why did he lie?*

“Look, can’t you just—”
“What?” the driver snapped. “Can’t I just what? Use my mental bloody superpowers to clear the streets?”

“Forget it.” John gritted his teeth.

“Jesus, you people are all the same. You have an emergency and suddenly London traffic is my fault. Your bad time management is not my problem, you know.”

This was not a good time. “Hey, just shut up.”

“Oh, all right, now you’ve done it. I was going to push the button that turns this cab into a hovercraft but now you can forget it.”

John rubbed his hands over his face. Of all the goddamn cab drivers to get tonight. This guy had better hope Sherlock was alive. John did not have the best track record with cabbies.

* 

Sherlock sucked in a sharp breath as he felt the liquid burn through his veins.

“It’s heroin,” he gasped, acutely familiar with the sensation. “That’s more than I’d normally take but unless you’ve laced it with something it’s not enough to kill me.”

Moran shook his head. “You misunderstand. I wouldn’t kill you by overdose; far too messy. This is a sample of our product for you, on the house. I know what a connoisseur you are, and I believe we have a particularly fine supply this season.”

It was good. Sherlock could feel the quality of it, nerves singing out in pleasure as the drug swept waves of numbing bliss throughout his body. Actually, if he had to die, he supposed dying high would be significantly preferable to dying sober. Perhaps he should thank them.

Tweedledee fetched another chair and Moran sat down in front of Sherlock.

“So,” Moran continued, “while we wait for that to fully kick in perhaps I can explain my dilemma to you.”

“Explain away,” Sherlock said, trying not to enjoy the rush too much. “I’ve got the rest of my life to listen.”

Moran’s eyes roved across Sherlock’s face. “You are an intriguing specimen. I would love to get you in my office for an hour—pick your brain…” He trailed off for a moment with an entranced expression.

“You, the man who defies all categories—even inventing your own profession to avoid being labelled anything ordinary—you find yourself irresistibly attracted to the system you reject. What’s more categorised, labelled, more controlled than a soldier?”

Sherlock’s gaze hardened even as he felt his muscles melting soft.

“You like John’s uniforms, don’t you?” Moran’s eyes gleamed. “You like that he’s a doctor. You’re as impressed by the white coat as you are by the camouflage. You admire John because he succeeded in the system where you never could. Uniforms, honorary signs of achievement, belonging—he belongs where you never did. You survive only by operating outside of it.” His voice softened. “It would have killed you. But you’ve always been attracted to things that would kill you,
haven’t you. Your self-destructive addictions.”

“Genius, Boss,” Tweedledee said.

“Inspired, Boss,” Tweedledum said.

“You’re a self-satisfied moron, Boss,” Sherlock said.

Moran waved his hand dismissively. “Thank you, thank you.”

Psychology, Sherlock groaned internally. He was certain this was the only way he would ever spend time listening to a psychologist: drugged and handcuffed to a chair.

More than a little irked, Sherlock reminded him, “Unless the problem was whether to prattle prosaically or babble senselessly, I didn’t hear a dilemma in any of that.”

“Oh, yes! My dilemma. Well, the thing is, you’re early Mr. Holmes. I had a much better surprise planned for you, but it’s not ready yet. This little chance encounter has rather thrown a wrench in the whole thing.”

“Trust me when I say I’m just as disappointed about it as you are.” It was a strange sensation, to be physically so relaxed while mentally knowing death was imminent.

“You see, if we kill you tonight you’ll miss out on the whole surprise.”

“We put a lot of effort into it,” Tweedledum added.

“We worked everything out so nicely,” Tweedledee pouted.

“Yes, it will be quite upsetting if you miss it,” Moran agreed. “But, on the other hand, the end goal is to kill you, of course. We have strict orders about that.”

“We promised,” Tweedledee nodded.

“Oaths, you know,” Tweedledee said.

“Orders from Moriarty?” Sherlock asked, noting grimly that his words were beginning to slur.

“Yes, of course,” Moran replied.

“People tend to find giving orders difficult after they die.” His eyelids were heavy. He fought to keep them open.

“You’ve accomplished a great many things since you died.” Moran’s pointed out. “But as I was saying, I think you’ll agree that for the sake of practicality it would be much more expedient to kill you now, while we have you here.”

“It does seem to be convenient,” Sherlock had to admit, vision blurring at the edges as he took in the snipers along with his current predicament.

“But boring,” Tweedledee objected.

“Unsatisfyingly unpoetic,” Tweedledum agreed.

Sherlock hung his head. If he thought poetry was a fate worse than death, then a poetic death must be unthinkable. His thoughts were clouding. He was losing clarity. It was with considerable effort
that he raised his head up again.

“You could tell me more of your psychology,” Sherlock offered. “I’m sure I won’t last long.”

Moran chose to ignore him. “Moriarty liked stories. He liked drama. He liked you too, you know. He had a very specific plan for you. We don’t want him to be displeased.”

Sherlock tried to summon the strength to be annoyed. He couldn’t feel the metal of the handcuffs on his wrists anymore. He couldn’t feel the chair beneath him anymore.

“Ok,” Moran said, standing up. “Here’s my decision. We’ll let fate decide. We know you have a penchant for miraculous escapes, so we’ll see if you can pull one out of your hat tonight.”

“No hat,” Sherlock muttered.

“The hat is metaphorical,” Tweedledum explained.

“You need a metaphorical hat,” Tweedledee advised.

“Thank you.”

Sherlock could see why Moriarty liked them. The consulting criminal had always been living in some nightmarish version of Wonderland. An obsession with fairy tales—his twisted mind.

Moran walked out of the building and returned a moment later accompanied by what looked like a bodybuilder.

“Here’s the deal, Mr. Holmes. I’m a very busy man. Loads of evil to do.” He winked at Sherlock. “I’m going to take my associates and my snipers now. But I will leave you with one of my bodyguards here.”

Sherlock looked up at the man. “Pleased to make your acquaintance,” he slurred, trying to blink his vision clear.

The bodyguard crossed his arms over his chest, flexing his muscles.

“He has been instructed to kill you,” Moran explained. “You may fight to determine your own fate—for tonight at least.”

“The odds on the outcome seem to be skewed to one side,” Sherlock felt the need to point out.

“We’ll cut you loose,” Moran assured him. “It’ll be a fair fight. No weapons.”

“He’ll need three times the dose of heroin you gave me.” It was a rough estimate, but Sherlock could size people pretty well.

Moran laughed. “We’re hoping you’ll live to get our surprise. But don’t worry if you don’t. It’s a win-win situation for us. Good luck, Mr. Holmes.”

He swept out.

In a matter of seconds his handcuffs were opened, several unseen doors clanged shut, and suddenly he was alone with the bodyguard, who was standing between him and the door he’d originally come through.

There were multiple other doors in the building but he wagered they would be locked. Also, he was
not optimistic about his ability to outrun anybody in his current state. Running wasn’t an option; fighting didn’t seem to be one either. His muscles were practically useless at this point. He briefly wondered if he should just allow the man to kill him and save some dignity in the process. But he supposed John would never forgive him for that.

His only choice then was to duck the man—get around him fast enough to get to the door. The road wasn’t far off; there was a slim chance he could make it, flag down a car... Sherlock scoffed inwardly. Even considering this possibility seemed stupidly optimistic, pathetically naïve.

He didn’t have a second to reach for his phone (to text John and Mycroft his coordinates) before the man lunged at him. Sherlock ducked, twisting at the same time to switch their positions. The bodyguard grabbed his collar and he bonelessly shrugged off his coat. It gave him just enough time. He reached the door, throwing himself against it. It opened an inch and then jammed against a chain. Someone had fastened a new chain on the door. Perhaps Moran wasn’t as enthusiastic about him living to see his surprise after all.

The bodyguard was on him in an instant, knocking him down flat on his back, heavy hands at his throat. The drug in his system didn’t allow Sherlock to make any kind of effective resistance. He struggled weakly.

He had spent a significant amount of time musing about the way he would finally be killed. Gunshot was the most likely. And it had nearly happened that way, thanks to Mary Morstan. Poison would be fitting, considering it was his passion. But strangulation? Sherlock supposed he would have to take it.

He felt his airway cut off. He had roughly fifteen seconds left of consciousness. Two minutes until death. He wouldn’t have minded nearly so much if it wasn’t for that persistent problem of desperately wanting to continue to live a life that had John in it.

*John.*

*John, I miss you.*

*John.*

*John, I’m sorry.*
“Stay here,” John barked as he flung open the cab door. “Keep the meter running I don’t care.” He ran toward the warehouse the GPS on his phone was indicating.

The first door he came upon was slightly open, but a padlocked chain barred it. He glanced down. There was a cut chain lying in the dirt. Had Sherlock cut the it? Had someone re-chained the door shut? With burning veins John stepped back and scanned the building.

Window. Ledge. By stepping on an empty crate he was able to pull himself up onto it. Kneeling on the ledge he looked into the dimly lit space. He could see a large man crouched on the floor, and beneath him—**Sherlock**.

John grabbed his gun and his blood ran cold as he remembered emptying the bullets. But there was no time to waste on frustration or regret. Every second was vital now, and it took him less than one to form an alternate plan. He flipped the gun in his hand and smashed the window with the pistol. Glass rained down around him as he leapt into the warehouse. The thick soles of his desert combat boots hit the concrete floor and he crouched low to absorb the impact—army drills had made the action automatic, faster than memory.

Startled at the noise, the attacker let go of Sherlock—first priority accomplished—and spun around. But John was already running toward him; he had momentum. He collided with the man twice his size, simultaneously kicking his leg behind the attacker’s and shoving his weight to the side, tripping him backward. The man fell, grabbing at John. John went down with him, rolling at the same time to avoid getting caught. He snapped to his feet as the man was pulling himself up. Perfect position. He whipped the man across the temple with his pistol. It was a killing blow and John hadn’t given it a second thought.

Sherlock was coughing, gasping, struggling to sit up, and John was at his side in an instant. He knelt to prop Sherlock up, allowing him to lean against him to support his weight. John ran his hands over Sherlock’s neck, thumbs brushing over his hyoid and trachea, fingers pushing gently into his cervical vertebrae. He breathed in relief at feeling nothing broken, but remained grimly aware of the serious bruises that would already be forming fast beneath porcelain skin.

John switched his gaze to Sherlock’s face and was startled to see the detective looking at him with plain, unreserved amazement. He was breathing heavily, eyes fixed on John’s. John felt himself involuntarily draw in a breath. Sherlock’s pupils were contracted to pinpoints, irises blown wide; the kaleidoscope colours in his eyes were dazzling, beautiful to the point of distraction and it took John longer than he would have liked to realise his pupils shouldn’t be contracted in the dim lighting. John held the side of Sherlock’s face with no small amount of concern.

“What did you take?” There was a sharpness in his voice that seemed to get Sherlock’s unfocused gaze to clear momentarily.

“It’s—” Sherlock winced and shook his head dismissively. “How did you—” his voice was as rough as gravel. He succumbed to a fit of coughing and John braced him, tightening his grip around his flatmate’s back. The coughing subsided but John remained tensed until he felt the detective breathing steadily again.

“Billy,” John answered the unfinished question. “Got the list from him. Sherlock, I need to know what you’ve taken.”
Lethargically, with none of his usual exactness of movement, Sherlock produced his phone from his pocket. He typed and John’s phone chimed.

*Heroin. Not my fault.*

John looked at him sceptically.

Sherlock rolled his eyes and John thought Sherlock must be the only person drugged with heroin who could still manage exasperation. He gestured limply out at the space of the warehouse, and for the first time John looked around.

Until now his awareness had been narrowed to the attacker and then to Sherlock. Now he noticed the two chairs a few paces off and the handcuffs that had been dropped behind one of them. And further toward the back of the space were two bundles of black mass that looked disconcertingly like dead bodies.

“Did you do that?”

Sherlock shook his head.

John looked back over at them, but Sherlock recaptured his attention by tugging his sleeve. He pointed to a spot below his collar bone. John squinted at it and saw the mark where the needle had pierced the vein. His torn shirt; the injection done in a convenient location if Sherlock had had his hands cuffed behind his back… John may not be able to read a crime scene like a consulting detective, he may have next to no clue what had happened here tonight, but the evidence was enough to know Sherlock wasn’t lying. The drugs weren’t his fault.

“How much?” John asked quickly. “We need to get you to a hospital—”

Sherlock tightened his grip on John’s sleeve and shook his head as determinedly as his sluggish movements would allow. He reached for his phone and after a moment of typing John’s phone chimed again.

*No OD. Fine. No hospital. No.*

John would have raised an eyebrow at such a marked lack of the detective’s usual eloquence, but actually it was impressively clear for someone battling the all-consuming haze of heroin. He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. Sherlock was high-functioning in every sense of the word.

Sherlock’s gaze roamed down over John’s neck and paused where John’s identification tags were hanging in the space between them, flashing in the low ceiling lights. He lifted his hand and caught at them. He leaned his weight more fully back against John and he felt the chain tug against his neck as Sherlock turned them over and over.

John watched him, waiting for the surge of anger toward the irreverent detective who’d lied to him, gone off and gotten himself drugged and nearly killed *again*, but strangely it never came. This was Sherlock. Uncontrollable. And more importantly this was life with Sherlock. Unstable. Ever since that first night he’d understood this was how it was going to be. Sherlock was going to be constantly getting himself into scrapes—because he was the most idiotic genius in the world and he had danger written in his DNA—and John would be spending his life trying to save him, and Sherlock was never, *never* going to make it easy. Yet he’d chosen all of it without hesitation and never looked back.

John had no idea why Sherlock had lied to him tonight, but he knew the detective well enough to know he would have some kind of ridiculous, Sherlogical reason for it. John would do his best to get
it out of him tomorrow, and scold him thoroughly for it, but tonight…

Sherlock glanced up at him through black eyelashes. God he was beautiful. John wished like hell people would stop trying to break him.

Almost unconsciously John pushed Sherlock’s fringe, messy from the struggle, back from his eyes. He should be angry, he knew any sane person would be, but he sighed and when he spoke all that came out was, “I knew you weren’t going to make pasta, you git.” He blamed it on the endorphins flooding in the wake of adrenaline. Sherlock was alive. When he’d seen him through the window he’d thought—

Sherlock smiled feebly. “You believed—” his voice scraped and he coughed.

“Don’t talk,” John reprimanded.

Sherlock gave him a frustrated glance.

John would have asked what other result Sherlock had expected from having a man the size of an elephant crushing his larynx, but Sherlock was already typing again. John checked his phone.

You believed it for a bit.

John’s grin vanished. “Almost a bit too long.”

Knew you would come.

John scoffed, “No you didn’t.”

Hoped you would.

John ran his eyes over the detective, his flatmate, Sherlock, the most important person in the universe. He had gone back to John’s dog tags and John felt like something was breaking inside of him as he watched Sherlock play with them, feeling his trust in the weight of his body as he allowed John to fully support him.

He was going to have to summon a lot of self-discipline if he was going to remember to be mad at the infernal detective tomorrow.

Gently he untangled Sherlock’s hands from the chain. “Can you stand?”

Sherlock nodded and John helped him to his feet. He grabbed Sherlock’s coat from where it lay on the floor and held it up while Sherlock put his arms through it. Sherlock swayed trying to step forward and John caught him around the waist, allowing him to brace himself on his shoulders.

The cab driver, leaning out the window, did not look overly pleased to see them when they reached the road.

“No blood or vomit in my cab,” he warned, eyeing them as though they had come from some kind of warehouse rave party. “Or any other bodily fluids,” he added for good measure.

“Oh, sod off,” John said, opening the door with his free hand.

He moved to guide Sherlock into the car, and was surprised to feel some resistance. He looked back and saw Sherlock’s eyes flicking over him. A moment later he felt the detective’s hand in his hair, fingers pushing back through it. Out of the corner of his eye John saw sparks and glints of light falling down around him. Glass, he realised. There was glass in his hair from the shattered window.
Sherlock ran both of his hands through again John’s eyes involuntarily fell shut.

“Thanks,” he murmured when Sherlock seemed satisfied and stepped back.

“Cor, this is going to be the most bloody expensive fare I’ve had in ages,” the driver said gleefully. “You better be able to pay all this.”

“Don’t get your knickers up your arse; I’ll pay it,” John said, easing Sherlock into the cab. “221B, Baker Street.”

* 

If Sherlock was often catlike in the agility of his movements, his indolent lounging and languid stretching, then Sherlock on heroin was doubly so. The moment John sat down in the cab and swung the door shut Sherlock stretched out.

“Sherlock!” John objected. “No, you can’t—oof—Sherlock, you are too long for—ow—would you just—”

The resultant position had Sherlock reclined across the back seat of the cab, head on John’s chest, and feet up against the opposite door.

“Well, I hope you’re comfortable,” John muttered. It was the ride home from Irene Adler’s house all over again. A drugged Sherlock was apparently one who needed his space, and, like a cat, was content to ignore whatever bodies were already occupying said space.

John lifted Sherlock’s head gently and moved his tags around over his shoulder. There was nowhere for John to put his left arm besides across Sherlock. Sherlock hadn’t buttoned his coat, so John did his best to pull it around him to keep his bare chest from being exposed beneath his torn shirt. Then he reluctantly rested his arm over his flatmate’s waist. He decided he could defend himself against the imaginary crowd accusing him of groping his drugged flatmate by saying he was acting as a seatbelt. At least this way he could prevent Sherlock from rolling off the seat if the cabbie hit the brakes. And Sherlock didn’t complain. He must have been comfortable, because in a matter of a few minutes he seemed to have drifted off, whether to sleep or a heroin-induced stupor John couldn’t say. He felt his concern tightening his jaw and he consciously unclenched his teeth.

Sherlock had been functioning and reacting well enough that John was willing to take him home, but he was going to watch his symptoms closely. At the first sign of deterioration they were going straight to a hospital.

John reached for his phone, shifting only slightly, trying not to wake the person sleeping on him. He needed to call Lestrade. There were three bodies in that warehouse—two who looked like they’d been shot and the one he’d killed. He could leave out that last detail though. Best case scenario Sherlock could cover for him; worst case scenario it was self-defense.

He held the phone up over Sherlock, scrolling through his contacts for Lestrade when he felt Sherlock’s hand on his arm. He looked down. Sherlock’s eyes were still closed.

“Don’t bother,” his voice cracked around the words.

“I need to tell Lestrade—”

“It’s all gone,” he whispered. “Clean.”

John blinked down at him. Sherlock must have met Moran tonight. He figured only Moran, possibly
acting through Moriarty, could clean out a warehouse full of bodies and drugs that fast.

John lowered the phone and Sherlock’s hand slid down his arm, landing partly over the phone and partly over John’s hand. John waited but Sherlock didn’t move it, perhaps to prevent him from trying to call again. Perhaps he had fallen back to sleep.

It was funny—John looked at their hands, his turned up, holding the phone, Sherlock’s hand covering it—if the phone wasn’t between them Sherlock would be holding his hand.

John turned his attention out the window. For someone so averse to intimacy (and people in general), Sherlock really didn’t mind being touched. Or at least being touched by John. It was one of the many mistakes he had made in understanding Sherlock over the years, and lately he was being corrected about it quite often. Of course he and Sherlock had been in close spaces before, but these days they seemed to end up in contact more than ever. Maybe he was being overly sensitive, but it was hard not to think about it now with the detective was sprawled over him. And wasn’t it just the other morning they had woken up quite literally in each other’s arms?

Harry’s advice was lurking in the back of his mind. At the moment, the back of his mind was the only place it was allowed.

John let his eyes move over Sherlock’s sleeping form. He had almost lost him again tonight. If there really was, or could be, something between them he would have to consider it sooner rather than later.

Soon, he decided. He would think about it soon. But not tonight. For now he was content just to have Sherlock here, so close to him, on top of him even (prat), bruised but breathing, drugged but very much warm and alive.

John slowly moved his hand out from under Sherlock’s. He tucked his phone away and wrapped his arm back around him. He looked out the window at the streets of the city they both loved, the city that tried to kill them on a regular basis, giving them the danger they needed to survive.

The most he could do now was to get Sherlock to bed and try to force feed him pasta tomorrow, depending on his ability to swallow. He sighed, reflexively tightening his hold around Sherlock’s waist. Caring for a consulting detective was much more difficult than anyone would believe.

* 

John guided Sherlock up the stairs to their flat and down the hallway to his bedroom. He was walking all right, but in a kind of half-asleep, half-drug-induced-trance. John pulled off Sherlock’s top layers—coat, jacket, ripped shirt—and he dropped heavily onto the bed. Sherlock pulled weakly at his belt but gave up when his numb fingers wouldn’t work the way he wanted them to. John gritted his teeth, silenced his accusatory mind-crowd, and undid his flatmate’s belt, sliding it off of him. He moved down to the shoes, unlacing them and pulling them off. Sherlock immediately curled onto his side and John pulled the blanket up over him, his hand lingering on his shoulder.

“I need to go out for a minute,” he said, voice low. Sherlock’s eyes were closed. He didn’t respond. “I’ll get Mrs. Hudson to sit in the living room if you need anything. I’ll be right back. Ok? Sherlock?”

Sherlock nodded curtly and rolled over to his other side.

Out in the living room John quickly scribbled Sherlock a prescription for oxycodone. He was not at all enthusiastic about giving his ex-addict (currently high) flatmate prescription-strength painkillers,
but he knew that as soon as the heroin wore off his neck was going to hurt like hell. He would need these, there was no question.

He took Sherlock’s ID from his wallet. There was a twenty-four hour pharmacy a few blocks away. He cast a glance back at Sherlock’s bedroom. He would be back soon.

* 

“He’s fine, dear,” Mrs. Hudson assured him when he returned with the prescription. “I looked in on him earlier and he’s sleeping quietly.” She shook her head. “The scrapes he gets himself into. You know I think it’s for the best that his mother knows nothing about it. I can’t imagine…” She trailed off for a moment and then gave him a warm smile. “He’s so lucky to have you, John.”

He gave her a half smile back. “Thanks, Mrs. Hudson,” he mumbled, gaze already sliding toward Sherlock’s door.

John set the bag down on the table when she left. He had come up with a plan on the walk home: Dealing with addicts 101. He wouldn’t tell Sherlock he had the pills in order to be sure that if Sherlock woke up needing something he wouldn’t exaggerate his symptoms just to get the narcotics.

John moved quietly into Sherlock’s bedroom. He was sleeping exactly the way he’d left him, on his side with his back turned toward the door. John put his hand on his shoulder.

“Sherlock?” The detective rolled onto his back. “I’ll be in the living room tonight if you need me.”

John waited, half expecting the same response he’d gotten the last time. Why would I need you? But Sherlock was quiet.

“Send me a text though”—John placed Sherlock’s phone on the bedside table—“Don’t strain your voice.”

John turned to leave but Sherlock caught his wrist.

“Stay.” Sherlock’s voice was soft, broken by the night’s events. His eyes were still closed.

Confused, John started, “What? Here? But—”

“Please.”

John blinked at the word, hesitating. Could Sherlock really be asking him to stay… to sleep here? On the one hand, if he did, he supposed it would be easier for Sherlock to wake him if he was in pain or if he needed something. On the other hand, sleeping in Sherlock’s bed… with Sherlock in it… John tossed aside the thought. Sherlock had been drugged, injured, and almost killed tonight, and now he was asking John to stay with him—whether for comfort (John couldn’t imagine) or convenience (more likely), or whatever reason, it didn’t matter. If Sherlock needed him here, he would be here.

He did wish they had a lilo though.

He looked back toward the living room. He would have liked to at least change into his pyjama trousers first, but Sherlock didn’t seem interested in letting go of his arm. John sighed inwardly. In truth he was exhausted, and flopping down into bed—any bed—didn’t seem like such a bad idea.

He walked around to the other side of the bed, shrugging off his jacket and pulling the dog tags over his head. He sat down on the edge of the bed, undoing his boots, slightly amazed to think the night had started off as innocuously as dressing up to go to a work party. But that was life with Sherlock.
Never bored.

He pulled down his trousers wondering fleetingly if this were one of those Bit Not Good things, but responded to himself indignantly that he was not going to sleep in military trousers. He kept his t-shirt on in compensation, and was glad he was wearing boxers tonight rather than the more revealing briefs.

He slid into the bed and looked with concern at his sleeping flatmate. It was a good idea after all, John thought, closing his eyes. He wanted to be close to Sherlock tonight if he woke up in pain. And, at the very least, it was better for his neck than sleeping on the couch, which had been John’s original plan.

He was thinking Sherlock often had good ideas as sank into sleep.

*

John was awakened around three o’clock in the morning by Sherlock’s tossing and turning. John sat up, blinking away sleep and looking over at his flatmate. He was awake, breathing heavily. He tossed onto his right side, but John put his hand on his shoulder, easing him on to his back.

John knelt over him. He felt his forehead, checked his eyes. In the soft mixture of street and moon light John could see Sherlock’s pupils dilated to the correct level in the dark. The heroin had worn off. His eyes ran down to the detective’s neck. Sherlock swallowed and winced. John knew the pain must be considerable if the detective wasn’t able to ignore the complaints of his transport the way he usually did.

John reached to feel his neck, to check the extent of the swelling, but with quick reflexes Sherlock caught his hand, giving him a hard look. Severe pain confirmed.

“I’ll get you something for it.” John’s voice was rough from sleep.

He walked to the kitchen feeling dizzy, the remnants of sleep still pressing heavily around him. He filled a glass of water and carried it to the living room. He tipped two pills into his hand: start strong and reduce with recovery.

“Take these,” John said, handing Sherlock the pills and water. “Oxycodone.”

John knew Sherlock wouldn’t need an explanation. He would know the drugs by name. He took them and handed the glass back.

John went around to his side of the bed—he cringed a bit at the slip in thought—around to the left side of the bed and Sherlock lay back. John got into bed but didn’t lie down. He moved next to Sherlock, leaning on his hip and using his right arm to support himself. He tentatively reached his left hand out. Sherlock watched him but he didn’t stop his hand this time.

Very gently John ran his hand over the injured area. The swelling was consistent with the injury—nothing to be alarmed about. Again he confirmed there was nothing broken, but definitely some deep tissue bruising.

He dropped his hand and bit his lip. Shirtless, Sherlock’s pale skin looked vulnerable in the dark. John traced his eyes down over the damaged neck, the syringe puncture at his collar bone, the bullet wound in his chest—He was surprised when he felt Sherlock’s hand on his left shoulder. John was wearing his t-shirt but Sherlock was touching the exact spot where his own bullet wound was.

The detective’s expression was blank, but John knew Sherlock was reading his mind and correcting
him, the same way he’d done on the couch just a few nights ago: *We’re both damaged. This is how we live. I don’t care about any of these marks and neither should you.*

John almost smiled. Sherlock could correct him even when he wasn’t speaking.

Sherlock lifted his hand from John’s shoulder to his face, brushing his thumb over a scratch on his cheek he’d gotten from the window. John shut his eyes. When he opened them again he saw Sherlock looking up at him questioningly and suddenly it was all too much.

It was the angle that was the problem.

This was the angle he looked at lovers from. Never friends. Never patients. In all his life he had never seen anyone but a lover looking up at him from this close angle; and never anyone looking anything like Sherlock Holmes. His mind reeled, struggling to interpret the situation.

There had never been a good category in his mind for Sherlock. ‘Best friend’ had to do simply because there was nothing else to describe it. But after the age of twelve John had never had a ‘best friend.’ Friends were people like Stamford, or his rugby mates: people to see on occasion, to laugh with over beers. Bizarrely, despite his heterosexuality and their complete lack of physical intimacy, Sherlock had always been more like a lover than anything else. Their cohabitation, their attunement to each other’s rhythms, their jokes, their bickering and their fights, their practically shared finances, their mutual need for each other, the fierce protectiveness and loyalty Sherlock inspired in him, the electricity between them—it was nothing like a friend. Even ‘best friend’ fell short of whatever their connection was.

They had met when John was twenty-nine, far too late to make a ‘best friend’—at least for someone like him, someone who didn’t have close friends. And the relationship hadn’t developed over time. It had been immediate, urgent—*like falling for someone, like lust.* It was intense beyond anything John had ever experienced.

And they hadn’t known each other long enough—a little over a year—for John to have been as utterly destroyed as he was when Sherlock died. How could someone he had never known for twenty-nine years have woven himself so entirely throughout him in such a short time? To the point that John felt himself torn in half when Sherlock was gone? Sherlock was brilliant, unique, unearthly in many ways but it was more than that. His loss had paralysed John completely. It had blown him apart, leaving him an empty shell of himself for years—longer than he’d even known the detective. Losing friends hurt, John knew that, he’d lost friends in the war, sometimes it hurt irreparably but this wasn’t like that. *It was like losing—*

But no, John couldn’t be sure of anything, because Sherlock was different. Like him, Sherlock didn’t have friends or best friends either. John had no frame of reference, there was nothing to compare him to; there was nothing like Sherlock. But the lines of friendship and *more* were blurring, had always been blurred. With Sherlock it had always been *more* the same way it never had been.

John’s head was spinning; the situation was surreal. His brain was automatically sending him signals to interpret the angle—Sherlock beneath him on the bed, Sherlock’s hand on his face—in the only way it knew how. He wasn’t quick enough now, here, at three o’clock in the morning in Sherlock’s bed, to come up with an alternate story, a rationalisation. Beginnings of ‘doctor/patient’ or ‘concerned flatmate’ related nonsense fell apart even as they formed.

He knew this angle. He had been in this position before, strictly with women, but he was here now, and Sherlock was brushing his thumb across the cut on his cheek, and his eyes were asking him a question, and suddenly John understood. Sherlock didn’t know what he was doing. It was something beyond the reaches of his vast knowledge. Sherlock couldn’t do this, but John could.
He leaned down, sliding his hip down to lower himself. His eyes swept Sherlock’s face, beautiful in the half-dark. Lightly, he pressed his lips to Sherlock’s. They were soft, partly open, perfect. John shut his eyes and kissed him again, wanting the firm pressure to answer Sherlock’s question.

*Yes, Sherlock, it’s ok. I wouldn’t mind if he’d killed me tonight, not if I could protect you. Yes, Sherlock, I’ll save you every time, if I can. I’ll mend you every time, if you’ll let me. I’ll forgive you every time, if you ask. Yes, Sherlock, I’ll stay.*

John pulled back a fraction. Sherlock had closed his eyes and when they opened again there was a warmth in them that hooked and pulled beneath John’s chest, an aching almost-pain. Was it possible Sherlock Holmes’ eyes could look like that? Was it possible that he, John Watson, could be the cause of such an effect? He took a deep breath. It was difficult to believe there existed such a beautiful, challenging, fascinating, thoroughly unmanageable creature as Sherlock. And almost impossible to believe that he was here, now, beneath him, looking up at him like—John swallowed.

He slid his hand through Sherlock’s curls, soft and thick. He knew many men, and probably a few women, who would be jealous of hair like this.

“Try to sleep,” John said, keeping his voice low.

He ran his hand through Sherlock’s hair again and the detective’s eyes fell shut. John continued in steady stokes until Sherlock’s breathing slowed and evened—an unorthodox addition to his repertoire of patient care, but he supposed he had thrown out treating Sherlock like a patient the moment he’d kissed him, or rather the moment he’d climbed into bed with him. (House calls, maybe. Bed calls, never. At least not until now.)

John turned over, body humming with exhaustion from the long night. As he fell asleep it only vaguely occurred to him that he *might* have just done something immensely problematic, if not colossally stupid.
Surprise

Sherlock sat cross-legged on top of a bookcase in the library of his mind palace. He looked down dismally at the water flowing past the top shelf. The books in his library were mostly waterproof; they had experienced ‘feelings flooding’ before, but never to this extent. He couldn’t know there wouldn’t be any lasting damage.

He raked his hand through his hair trying not to remember how John’s hand had felt there, pushing back through until he was falling asleep. It was a surprisingly sedating motion. Sherlock hadn’t remembered. No one had touched him like that since he was very young. He was astonished to find it worked just as well on adults. John must have known that. There were probably a lot of things John knew that Sherlock didn’t about—

Sherlock swallowed, shutting his eyes. Ah yes, the reason his desk was currently underwater in his study and there were rapids in the hallways. John. The inopportune, heart-quickening aesthetics of John in the dark of the room, the soft glow of streetlamps, the sturdy lines of torso beneath light t-shirt, the smooth planes of his face.

John had kissed him. Once, lightly, chastely, and then again more firmly, intentionally, but pulling back soon after—not insisting, not asking for anything. The kiss had been brief, like a statement. An affirmation. But it had been tender too—a gentleness Sherlock didn’t expect to be directed toward him. John was often rough with him, pushing back harder whenever Sherlock pushed him. But Sherlock hadn’t pushed him this time.

It wasn’t out of pity, Sherlock knew that much. John had started to look at him that way—a doctor’s concerned eyes on his neck—but Sherlock had stopped it in its tracks. He’d flattened his palm over John’s shoulder, reminding him of his own wounds. Sherlock was not one to be pitied and John knew that. He had understood when Sherlock touched his shoulder, touched the cut on his cheek. They were both damaged. John understood. And that’s when he’d kissed him.

But what did it mean? Was it a spontaneous, impulsive display of affection, never to be repeated? Did Sherlock want it to be repeated?

Glumly he watched the 1891 Crime Annals float by. He looked upstream and squinted at what looked like a plastic tube, vertical in the water, moving toward him.

Oh dear god, not now, was all he had time to think before Moriarty’s head surfaced.

The consulting criminal removed the snorkel piece of the mask from his mouth. He grinned. “Come on in, Sherlock. The water’s fine.”

“I suppose,” Sherlock drawled, “there’s no point in simply telling you to go away.”

Moriarty rolled his eyes behind the bulky goggles. “It’s your mind palace.” He grabbed hold of the bookcase across from Sherlock’s and pulled himself up onto it. Water cascaded from his Westwood suit as he twisted, sitting on the edge to face Sherlock, shiny black shoes dangling in the water. He pulled the goggles up onto his forehead. “If you want me gone, make me disappear.”

Sherlock shut his eyes and tried to focus. Make him disappear, make him disappear…

When he opened his eyes, Moriarty frowned at him. “Oh, that’s right,” he said in mock revelation, “you can’t, can you.” He dropped his eyes, shaking his head and smiling almost ruefully. “A glitch in the system; you can’t control it. That is rather the point.”
Sherlock scowled. “Are you aware it’s traditional for people to become less annoying once they’re deceased?”

“Traditional. You and I have never really gone in for that,” Moriarty said a bit distractedly as he cast his gaze around the library. He whistled. “Wow, what a mess!” His eyes snapped back to Sherlock and they were shining with glee. “This is fabulous, is it not? To think I ever bothered aiming guns at John Watson.” He giggled. “All I had to do was let him kiss you!” He clapped his hands together. “Just look at this!” He spread them wide. “The chaos, the wreckage! I couldn’t have caused this much damage even if I’d tortured you.” He dragged his eyes over Sherlock at the word ‘torture’ as though he might like to have at him now.

“Anytime you’re finished,” Sherlock said in a clipped tone, “you may remove yourself from my Nilsen shelf.”

Moriarty ignored him. “A headful of water is no good for solving crimes. But it is perfect for goldfish.” His eyes gleamed. “Do you think John will still like you if you can’t solve crimes anymore?”

“What do you want?” Sherlock snapped.

“No, no, no, it’s not that. You always were so slow. What do you want, Sherlock? That’s what you meant. That’s what this is all about. You’re weak, Sherlock Holmes. You want him.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes.

“Oh god, you’re not going to deny it, are you? Do you want to pretend you weren’t already half hard when he shoved you down on the couch in that soldier uniform of his?” Moriarty’s eyes flicked down, lingering on Sherlock’s trousers as though he could undo them. “What about his gun?” Sherlock felt his eyebrows raise as Moriarty produced John’s pistol from his suit jacket. Moriarty looked at it in a mock impression of lust. “Don’t you just… want to lick it?” He touched his tongue just above the trigger and dragged it slowly up the shaft. “I suppose you could pretend you don’t,” he said, gazing at the tip of the gun, “but it would be so boring.”

Sherlock’s glare burned, but he didn’t reply.

“Good,” Moriarty grinned with sharp teeth. “There’s a good lad.” He tossed John’s gun over the water and Sherlock caught it, blinking down at the familiar weapon. Dangerous. Familiar and dangerous, just like John—

“Biographers!” Moriarty blew out an exaggerated breath, jerking him out of his revere. “They’re just adorable, aren’t they? Following you around with those puppy eyes, all admiration and ardour…” Moriarty looked faintly disgusted. He replaced the expression with a smirk. “I’m sure even Samuel Johnson couldn’t look at his without a certain amount of affection.”

“Your prattling will be much more tolerable when you’re doing it under water,” Sherlock rejoined.

“Is that a threat?” Moriarty furrowed his eyebrows. “Erm, look, Sherlock. I know your mind palace has gone aquatic and all that, but do I really need to remind you that it’s largely ineffective to threaten dead people?”

“Be dead then. Just don’t be here.”

“Oh, WAKE UP!” Moriarty shouted loud enough to startle Sherlock’s eyes wider. “You moron, I’m here because you need me here. You need to face me because otherwise you’d have to face yourself. And we both know you can’t handle that. You’re an idiot, Sherlock. You’re drowning in your own
mind and you still need me to distract you from it.”

“From what?”

“From everything,” Moriarty snarled. “You know I used to think we were similar. I used to think you were on my level. But look at you now. You want. You need. You’re pathetic. Is this all it takes to defeat the great Sherlock Holmes? Something as ordinary, as base as sex? In the end are you really so obvious?”

An echo. Sherlock felt pain in his jaw and realised he’d been clenching his teeth, apparently hard enough to be clenching them in the real world, outside of his mind palace.

“I thought you were stronger than this”—Moriarty dropped his head—“I thought you were smarter. How disappointing for you. How disappointing for everyone who thought you were better.”

“I am human,” Sherlock said through his teeth. He hated to admit it, even in his own head. “Everyone knows that.”

“You’re BORING. And everyone’s going to find out. You’ve done an excellent job pretending to be above it all, really you have. But in the end they’re all going to know the truth.”

“I don’t care what anyone thinks. I never have.”

Moriarty smiled softly. “But we both know that’s not quite true.” He bit his lip and sighed. “There are certain people whose opinion you could live or die on… Certain people who could break you.”

He shifted his expression into something like pity. “Oh, Sherlock, you’re in deep. Waterfalls worth of Feelings deep. John saved you the last time, but he can’t save you now. Because, if you think about it, this is really all his fault.” Moriarty looked delighted as something occurred to him. “You know you should hate him for this, for what he’s done to you. He’s pulling you down when you could be—”

“Enough.”

Moriarty fell silent, watching Sherlock with interest.

He kept his words deadly even. “Take a swim, Moriarty.”

The consulting criminal pouted. “All right, all right,” he drew the syllables out with his reluctance. “But think about it, Sherlock. You can’t continue like this”—he slid the goggles back on—“you know you can’t.” He put the snorkel in his mouth and pushed himself off the bookcase into the water.

He dove down. When he resurfaced he tossed up a sodden book and Sherlock caught it. It was his documentation on the Scowrers, one of his more fascinating researches into nineteenth century organised crime in America. He opened it and stared at the running ink, the blurred words nearly erased.

“He’d better be the best shag in England at the price you’re paying for him!” Moriarty called out, flashing his teeth in a wicked grin before replacing the mouthpiece.

As Sherlock watched Moriarty snorkel away he almost envied ordinary people who must have inane dreams about flying or being late for their school exams or whatever. Almost.

Dully he was aware of movement on the other side of his consciousness. The bed dipping: John getting up. Footsteps: John leaving.
He lay back on top of the bookcase, holding the wet book to his chest. He could wake up now, but he didn’t want to.

*

At the surgery John was doing his best to keep himself as busy as possible to avoid remembering that he’d kissed his (inescapably male) flatmate last night. While it was true Sherlock hadn’t kicked him out of bed for it, it was also true that Sherlock had been drugged and injured and in retrospect it probably hadn’t been the best time to kiss him.

John walked into the wrong room and the nurse there gave him a strange look. He needed to focus. He had another patient to see. He couldn’t think about what he’d done or the likelihood that when he got home Sherlock would give him another awkward speech about being married to his work and, trying at his best ‘polite’ tone, ask John to find a new flat. That would be the worst of it, if Sherlock affected some kind of detached attempt at ‘polite’ with him. They were so far beyond that first night at Angelo’s. If Sherlock pulled anything like that again John might finish the job the attacker had started in the warehouse last night.

Except none of it was Sherlock’s fault, he scoffed inwardly at himself. It was his own fault for kissing Sherlock while his sanity had apparently gone on a fifteen minute break. He’d lost the plot: the plot in which he was a heterosexual male living with an asexual (or whatever) male and they did not kiss each other. Except when Sherlock needed to test a method of drug transmission for a case. Then apparently it was all right.

But hadn’t Sherlock been the one who’d asked John to stay with him last night? John argued to himself (a bit manically). What had Sherlock been playing at, asking him to sleep in his bed? Was it possible that he’d wanted— And what if he did? Was John ready for that? For what that would mean? John felt his heart rate increase. He had started this, and he really wished he’d at least given it a thought or two or a thousand first. He should have considered what Harry had said, whether he could—

John swallowed hard. Dreams of it, fleeting and opaque, had haunted his subconscious since the day they’d met and the gorgeous scientist in the lab had made his head swim, a phenomenon that had only allowed him to be half-interested in the women he’d dated while Sherlock was still alive: vibrant and demanding and overwhelming, absorbing John so completely there had never been room for anyone else. And now, conscious of it in the way he’d never been, the way he’d never allowed himself to be, the desire slammed into him hard enough to make his chest ache. Oh god, Harry was right. All his life he’d only ever been interested in women, and then he’d met Sherlock: Improbably beautiful, magnetic, exceptional, and more importantly, the exception. The exception to everything. Even just the thought of Sherlock’s skin beneath his hands, the heady taste of his mouth, of Sherlock lying back and letting him— John cut off the train of thought abruptly, first because he was at work, and second because Sherlock wasn’t like that.

His untouchable flatmate had never been sexually interested in anyone before. Why should he be interested in John now? Irene Adler had come the closest, and she had been, well, sexy to say the least. John was not sexy. He supposed he was good looking in his own ordinary way—at least women seemed to find him attractive—but Sherlock?

Although… Didn’t John catch Sherlock watching him sometimes, in a mirror or out of the corner of his eye? John had dismissed it as part of the mad scientist’s relentlessly observational manner, but what if— John realised he’d never seen Sherlock watch anyone else that way. He ignored everyone else unless they were part of a case.

And he couldn’t shake the memory of the detective’s eyes when John had pulled back from the
kiss… Had he imagined it? It was three o’clock in the morning. He had just given Sherlock two pills of oxycodone. The softness in his eyes John wasn’t even certain he was remembering correctly could have been the effect of the drugs more than anything else. But what if—

He put his hand to his forehead—stop, stop. Sherlock always had reasons for his actions. Whatever they had been for asking John to stay last night, he was sure they didn’t involve a sudden romantic desire that had been entirely absent from the previous five years of their relationship. (Had it? Shut up.)

John had not meant to choose that moment, of all moments, to suddenly decide consulting detectives were for kissing rather than biographing. And now there would be consequences. It would all depend on Sherlock’s behaviour when he got home. John had debated waking him up in the morning, eventually deciding it would be best for both of them to have the day off—a little time to sort themselves before any commentary on last night’s events would have to take place. Maybe, if John was really lucky, Sherlock wouldn’t say anything at all, and they could pretend it never happened.

He paused in front of the correct door this time. The last patient of the day. He would have to go home afterwards. He took a deep breath. He had forgiven Sherlock for so many things; he hoped Sherlock could forgive him for this.

*

Sherlock was more than a little irritated by the time he heard John’s footsteps on the stairs signalling his return from work. Mrs. Hudson had been buzzing around their flat all day like an annoying and silly bee. Tidying, cooking, making tea, fussing over his neck injury, sitting, talking, incessantly talking, and absolutely refusing to go away.

“For the last time I am fine, Mrs. Hudson!” It was maddening to speak words and have them go so entirely unheard, despite speaking loudly, clearly, and even in the correct language.

John opened the door to the flat.

“John!” Sherlock barked. “Get her out of this flat at once!”

“Ah, good to hear you’ve got your voice back.” John gave him a small smile. Nervous. Probably thinking about last night. A sensory memory of John’s lips on his flashed in Sherlock’s mind and he turned away, focusing instead on their impossible landlady.

“You see? Now John is here. You may hand over the babysitting relay baton,” Sherlock smouldered.

“It was lovely to spend the day with you, Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson beamed. “Let’s do it again sometime, shall we?”

“Next time I may just let the strangler kill me,” Sherlock grumbled.

“Now, now, Sherlock, let’s not pretend you didn’t enjoy our game of Boggle,” Mrs. Hudson sang from the kitchen.

Sherlock grunted in response. Leave it to her to point out the one pleasant part of a nightmarish day. The old landlady was surprisingly good at Boggle. He would have to invent an excuse to get her to play it with him again.

“John, here are the pills,” she said, popping a plastic bag out of some kind of snapping compartment in the dishwasher.
So that’s where they were. He had searched the entire flat looking for them. Sherlock was in the kitchen in a flash, inspecting the dishwasher door. The cunning woman had known he wouldn’t find it there. Sherlock examined the compartment; he hadn’t known it existed, let alone that it opened. What was it for? Soap? Bleach? A very small dish?

“I got him to eat breakfast, but no luck with lunch,” Mrs. Hudson was saying. “And I gave him a pill at four, so don’t let him tell you otherwise.”

“If you will stop referring to me as a child who is not present,” Sherlock interjected petulantly.

“Great, thanks,” John said, taking bag of pills.

“It was my pleasure.”

Mrs. Hudson left the flat and Sherlock dropped down into his chair. He had a message on his phone from Lestrade: *Bloody hell. Well done.*

The day hadn’t been a total waste. Sherlock had compiled the evidence trail connecting Rodgers, Parker, Riley and Elliot tracing all the way back through Monroe’s, Karina, and right up to Moran: a connect-the-dots simple enough to execute even with a soggy mind palace (drained since the morning but still quite damp). He’d then sent off the information to Lestrade. He would have liked to include the drug deal and murders from last night, but he wouldn’t complain about it. John would just put on that song again about not always being able to get what you want and Sherlock hated that. It was an irritating concept.

Sherlock looked up at John, who was hovering between the kitchen and living room.

“Lestrade,” Sherlock said, indicating his phone. “Sent him the completed Rodgers case. All wrapped up nice and pretty with a paper trail even he can follow. He really should be paying me more.”

“He doesn’t pay you at all.”

“My point.”

John grinned for a moment and then ducked his head. He cleared his throat.

Sherlock did not want to talk about the previous night. He did not want to explain why he’d asked John to stay in his room. He did not want to have to talk to John about finding a new flat. Because he’d thought about it all day, in the back of his mind, and the unavoidable conclusion was that Moriarty was right.

It didn’t matter what Sherlock wanted. He couldn’t stand back and watch his mind palace—his life’s work—be destroyed by tidal waves of sentiment. He couldn’t lose everything he was, everything he had built himself to be—he couldn’t lose it all to intoxicating floods of desire. He couldn’t be Sherlock Holmes without clarity of mind.

And yet… He might theoretically know that asking John to leave was the only logical solution, but with John standing in front of him—the body and form that was everything that made 221B home—he knew he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Not now, and possibly not ever. Perhaps they could go on for the rest of their lives without another incident occurring, and Sherlock could keep his mind palace intact and John in his flat too. Wasn’t it possible? He knew there was some expression about eating cake that might apply here but he had deleted it.

John stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. Sherlock smirked inwardly at his own attempt at optimism. No, it wasn’t possible. Because he knew now that if John touched him his
skin would burn. If John put his hands in his hair and his lips on his mouth he wouldn’t stop him. He had learned last night that all it took now was a caution-inhibiting drug to ask John to sleep in his bed. What would happen the next time there was alcohol or drugs? The two came up rather often in his work. He might not be able to stop himself from… And he would lose everything.

But still Sherlock’s mind oscillated. John wasn’t necessarily going to touch him again and Sherlock could avoid judgement-debilitating drugs for the time being. He could put off separating them as long as possible. Maybe forever, if John never touched him again. And he could continue to ignore what he now realised had been a subconscious desire to rip off John’s clothes and examine him: observe the varying shades of his skin, test the tone of his muscles, touch him and watch his reactions, record his movements, noises, discover the variance in his responses to different kinds of stimulation, not to mention the thrill of the risk in finding out what would happen to him if he allowed John to take him apart...

He shoved the thought aside. He could ignore the impulse. It was harder now that he was aware of it, but as long as John didn’t touch him again, he could do it. He had mastered the art of ignoring. People, things, thoughts, feelings, he could ignore them all.

So, no, they wouldn’t talk about it. They wouldn’t have any conversation that would lead to the inevitable conclusion that John would have to leave. Not if Sherlock could help it.

John had finally opened his mouth to say something, looking horribly uncomfortable about it, when Sherlock cut him off.

“Moriarty is dead. No question.”

John lifted his eyebrows at the redirection. “Oh,” he said. “Well, that’s… good.”

“It’s almost irrelevant. He’s put plans into action that remain unhindered by his death.”

“I take it you met Moran last night?” Sherlock watched John’s posture relaxing as he realised they were not going to discuss the bedroom events of the previous night.

“With appropriate pomp and circumstance.”

John’s face hardened. “Did you know—”

“No,” Sherlock said firmly, needing John to believe him because it was true. “I was looking for his supply, not him. If I had thought there was any real probability of encountering him I wouldn’t have gone alone, and especially not unarmed. It was”—Sherlock wrinkled his nose in distaste—“a coincidence.”

Sherlock observed John tighten his grip on the doorjamb where he was leaning between the living room and kitchen and close his eyes, just for a moment, almost a longer blink, as he took in the words and judged them accordingly. When he glanced up again he said simply, “I believe you.”

Sherlock lifted his chin to meet John’s eyes. “Good. You’d be wrong if you didn’t.”

John scoffed in the sort of half-amusement Sherlock had come to associate with what John considered to be abnormal social behaviour, and Sherlock reaffirmed his decision that John couldn’t leave. It was an anomaly in the universe that such a thing as a John Watson existed, and Sherlock would never give up anything so valuable or rare.

Impulse: to go to him, to press his lips to the lingering half-smile there and feel his friend tense in alarm before relaxing into him. No: risk of encroaching on sentiment; mind palace still unstable.
Solution: annoy John instead.

“I can’t believe you told Mrs. Hudson to babysit me all day,” Sherlock complained, jumping out of his chair and pacing around to stand opposite John. “I suppose you don’t have any idea how aggravating that was.”

John crossed his arms, instantly on the defensive. “You nearly died last night; I wasn’t going to leave you here alone.”

“Why not? In case the dead man comes back to finish me off?” Sherlock sneered.

“At the very minimum because you can’t be trusted with opioids.” Sherlock threw a glare at him but John ignored it with practiced ease. “And what if your neck had gotten worse today? Real damage could have been done to your throat—”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “It wouldn’t have gotten worse.”

“Seriously, Sherlock? Do you really think you’re invincible?”

He smirked. “I’d say I’ve done fairly well so far.”

“You almost died last night!” John raised his voice sharply.

“‘Almost’ being the key word.”

John’s eyes flashed. “You are flesh and blood. You bruise and you break just like the rest of us. Look at your neck for Christ’s sake!”

Sherlock was aware of the angry storm clouds of bruises circling his neck. He narrowed his eyes. “I’m fine. It’s just transport.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that your brain won’t actually work without its transport?”

“More things have occurred to me this afternoon than will to you in your lifetime.”

“Oh, brilliant, yeah, nice one.” John pushed past him, pacing the space between their chairs. Sherlock watched him, feeling his control of the exchange slipping as confusion trickled through his mind. As with most injuries on pale skin, the bruises made it look worse than it was. As a doctor, John should know that. He’d meant to irritate him about Mrs. Hudson. The intensity of this reaction was… unexpected.

Sherlock squinted at him. “Why are you upset? It’s a few bruises; I’ve had worse.”

“God, for someone who spends all of his time around corpses you don’t seem to get how easy it is to die. Even after last night—”

Sherlock glared. “I know.”


Sherlock stared at him, almost gaping as the understanding hit him. John was describing not one moment from years ago, but an image he’d seen over and over again. One he’d seen even recently. John’s nightmares. After the pool—it wasn’t about Moriarty or a Semtex vest. It was the closest Sherlock had come to dying since they’d met. The sniper’s light. Moriarty was the first of Sherlock’s
opponents John believed was truly capable of killing him. And then after his fake suicide—

The nightmares were about *him*. The solider who met mortal danger with clear eyes and a steady hand was afraid of one thing: Sherlock’s death.

He blinked in amazement. Shouldn’t he have known? Because wasn’t the reverse true for him? Wasn’t John’s death his own greatest fear?

John took a deep breath and put his hand to his forehead. “God damn it, Sherlock! I lost you once, so you can forgive me if I’m overcautious this time.”

“You didn’t lose me.”

“I *did*, Sherlock, you were gone—” John sat down hard in his chair.

Odd. It had looked more like falling than sitting. Sherlock watched as John ducked his head down, holding it just above his knees. Sherlock’s eyes widened. It felt as though the blood in his veins was slowing, running cold.

Dizzy. John was dizzy, *again*.

A slew of memories from the past week seeped from his subconscious to his conscious mind: John, leaning back against the wall on the street for support, lightheaded; John, stumbling out of his bed in the morning, off balance; John leaning against the building outside the strip club, dizzy; John standing up quickly after crouching in the cemetery, stumbling again, off balance; John, now, dizzy, almost falling backward…

Low blood pressure. The poison. Moran’s poison. The one he had spent the past week studying and hadn’t noticed the symptoms being displayed in his own flat.

The words Sherlock had said to John exactly one week ago replayed in his mind. *Brilliant! The poison increases its effects exponentially. It starts slow, just a few basic symptoms of hypotension, which almost any otherwise healthy adult would ignore. It increases in very small increments. The victim doesn’t notice. And then BAM!*

Sherlock’s mouth went dry. The white noise of the flat faded to a ringing silence in his ears. How. *When.* The answer presented itself immediately: Carl Reeves. Carl Reeves was the connection. He had been hired by Moran. The bullet that grazed John’s arm, the bullet that had been meant for Sherlock, it had been soaked in the poison.

John had had poison in his veins for nine days and Sherlock hadn’t noticed.

His phone chimed. Numbly he looked down at it. The number was blocked and the message was short.

*Surprise! :D*
His phone rang. Again blocked number. He swiped to answer it and slowly raised the phone to his ear.

“Sherlock!” Moran’s voice was pleased. “Congratulations on winning the match last night, with a little help from your friend of course. How is Dr. Watson?”

Sherlock’s eyes flashed toward his flatmate. Dizzy spell evidently passed, John was sitting up now, looking at Sherlock with concern.

Sherlock didn’t speak. He couldn’t.

“I thought so. Took you ages to figure it out. I’m shocked. I heard you were some sort of master of observation. But John’s had the poison for—what is it?—nine days now? And you didn’t notice? Really, I thought you cared about him more than that. But perhaps you don’t.”

Sherlock felt his fingers clench the chair’s arm. It was true; he hadn’t noticed. The information was there, subconsciously recorded; his mind had tried to warn him in the dream just a few days ago, lying on the living room floor, holding onto John: *I’m going to have to leave soon.* But the data hadn’t made it through to his conscious awareness. He’d been distracted by the flooding. His emotions for John had made him miss the facts. The feelings had drowned out what was important: namely, the fact that John had—what he had confirmed himself to be—an irreversible poison running in his veins, killing him slowly.

Nine days. Sherlock’s heart must have stopped, falling deadly still as the numbers clicked by in his head. Parker had died nine days after receiving the poison. Rodgers had died in fourteen. John could have up to five more days, or he could die tonight.

“The bullet was meant for you,” Moran continued. “We thought it would be fitting for the poison expert to die of a poison he couldn’t remedy. The final failed challenge. But it’s a rather pretty twist of fate that John took it for you. Moriarty couldn’t have been more pleased. This way, you get to watch the one person you”—he paused suggestively—“live with, die before we kill you. A psychological death followed by the physical one. It’s perfect because I think we both know that the psychological death is far, far worse.”

There was glee in Moran’s voice. Sherlock couldn’t move.

“We have a bet going that you’ll kill yourself—finish what you started up on the roof of Barts. I think you will. Because you’ll have to watch John die knowing you weren’t smart enough to save him. I think that’s worth killing yourself over, don’t you?”

There wasn’t enough air. His body was numb. His ears were ringing with the sound of Moran’s voice and the deafening silence in the room. John was talking, asking him something. Sherlock couldn’t hear it. The silence was too loud.

“We’ll kill you anyway, if you don’t kill yourself. But I think you will. Actually, if you’re as self-centred as they say you are, you might even kill yourself before John dies so you don’t have to see it. I’m sure it would make John very, very sad, but as we’ve established, you don’t seem to care much about what happens to John.”

“What’s he saying, Boss?” Sherlock heard a voice in the background.
“Is he surprised, Boss?” the other voice wanted to know.

“Ask him to send us a reaction selfie,” the first voice said.

Sherlock hung up the phone.

“Sherlock,” John’s voice broke through. “What’s wrong? Who was that? Sherlock?”

He stood up slowly. He couldn’t feel the floor beneath him. There was no air in the room. How was he breathing? He must have forgotten how to breathe. The point seemed unimportant. He walked into the kitchen in a trance. He took two small knives from the wooden block—short, steel blades—placing one in his pocket and the other behind his back.

Then he was in the living room again, in front of John. John was talking.

“This is getting a bit scary. Just say something. Who was that on the phone? Was it Moran? Moriarty? Not dead? Is he back?”

“Give me your right hand.” Sherlock’s voice sounded strange to his ears.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

Sherlock stared at him blankly. John gave up and held out his right hand. Sherlock grasped it firmly, aware of John’s eyes darting to his face. He took the knife from behind his back and slashed it quickly, shallowly, across John’s palm.

“Shit!” John yelled, jumping back as blood pooled in his hand. “What the motherfuck—”

Sherlock had already grabbed a clean vial from the table. He pressed it to John’s hand, allowing the blood to run into it, waiting for the correct amount.

“You know, it’s great when you do the whole ‘waiting until the last moment to fill me in’ thing, but if you’re going to be cutting at me with knives and collecting my blood like a mad—”

John stopped abruptly as Sherlock flipped the other knife from his pocket and cut his own, left, hand and filled a second vial.

The method wasn’t ideal, but there was no time. No time for tourniquets and careful venipuncture. Even if he wanted to do it here, the gauge of his hypodermic needles was better suited for injections than extractions, and John would insist on going to the lab to have it done properly and there wasn’t time.

He labelled the vial of his own blood with shaking hands. John had moved off somewhere, which was why when Sherlock finally looked up he was startled to see John standing so close to him.

John grabbed Sherlock’s left hand and before he could pull it back ran a disinfectant cloth over the cut. It stung. The doctor wrapped Sherlock’s hand in gauze and Sherlock wished he were dead.

Moran was right. He was self-centred. If he were dead he wouldn’t have to witness this: John taking care of him, not yet knowing he was dying and that Sherlock had allowed it to happen—these last precious moments of light before the swiftly encroaching shadow.

Into the woods again. Into the dark. Like with Moriarty, when it had ended with a fall, and he was dead for two years. Like with Magnussen, when Mary killed him, and he was dead for six minutes. He wished it would be as simple as dying again, but this was different.
This was about John.

* 

It had finally happened. Sherlock Holmes had snapped.

Gone round the bend, off his trolley, away with the fairies. He had certainly gone anyway—dashing out the door and slamming it behind him, but not before slicing John’s hand and his own with knives, collecting their blood samples like a deranged serial killer.

John had barely finished dressing Sherlock’s hand before the detective grabbed his arm, stepping close to him—too close, especially too close considering what happened last night—looking at him with an expression that made John’s breath catch. Because it looked like goodbye, and John wasn’t sure if Sherlock was going to kiss him or cut his throat.

In the end he did neither. He looked like he was about to say something, but he didn’t. Without a word he had turned on his heel and run out the door, forgetting his coat and scarf on the hook.

Further evidence: Sherlock must be off his rocker if he could forget the beloved coat and scarf on a cold night. John had watched him jump into a cab from the window, briefly wondering whether he should call Lestrade to warn him that the mad detective had really gone mental this time and was loose in London with kitchen knives.

John went back to the window now, running his fingers over the dressing he’d just finished on his own hand. He knew his flatmate’s erratic behaviour was a direct result of that phone call. He suppressed a shiver. Sherlock’s expression—colour drained from his face, eyes unblinking, shallow breathing.

Could it have been Moriarty on the phone? Sherlock had said he was dead; no question. Maybe it had only been Moran. But what could he have said to make him react like that? John had seen Sherlock talk to Moriarty before. The consulting detective was invariably snide and detached in the face of criminal masterminds. But this time he hadn’t said anything at all. And his expression… Could it really have been fear?

John crossed from the window to sit down in his chair. He would have to think like Sherlock if he was going to figure this one out.

Assuming Sherlock hadn’t spontaneously gone violently insane (still not a possibility to entirely rule out), there was a logical reason why he needed samples of their blood. He would be testing them for something. Had Moran injected Sherlock with more than just heroin last night? John felt his throat constrict, suddenly aware of the effort involved in both breathing and swallowing.

That must be it, mustn’t it? The poison from the Rodgers case; it was Moran’s poison. It would stand to reason that if he caught Sherlock he would want to poison him, to ensure his death in case Sherlock escaped the man that had been sent to kill him last night. Moran had called him just now to inform him of it. Sherlock had gone to the lab to test his blood, and he would use John’s as the control.

Oh god. John breathed hard through his nose. In, out, trying not to hyperventilate. If Sherlock was poisoned… But no… Something was off. Sherlock’s expression… But of course he would look like that if Moran had just told him the poison Sherlock had himself declared to be ‘genius’ and ‘unbeatable’ was running in his own veins… John held his head in his hands. Dizzy. He couldn’t breathe. Irreversible poison in Sherlock’s blood—no antidote—the idea ripped through him like jagged metal. It hurt. No, no, no…
Dizzy, John tried to keep his thoughts from spiralling. What was it about Sherlock’s expression that was bothering him? It was panic. John had seen it on Sherlock before but never when Sherlock’s own death was imminent—not in the times he had faced Moriarty and never when a gun was pointed in his face. No, Sherlock didn’t look like that when confronted with death. But he had seen Sherlock look like that somewhere before… When was it? John grasped for the memory.

And then he knew. He had seen that expression on Sherlock’s face only twice before today. The first time he’d been standing beside a swimming pool. The second time he’d been on his back in the grass, on Guy Fawkes Night.

John breathed. Sherlock wasn’t poisoned. He was.

* 

“Billy,” Sherlock barked into his phone in the back of the cab. “Meet me at the lab. Now. Bring an eight ball of coke. At least.”

It was a long time since he’d had any cocaine, but he remembered the frankly dazzling speed at which his brain could work when stimulated with the drug. If nicotine was good for brainwork then cocaine was truly excellent. Short-term brainwork, of course. Sherlock also remembered the rather unpleasant crashes coming down from the high, but that was no matter now. He was not going to rest until he found an antidote. It could take days and he would need the drug to keep him going. But no, he didn’t have days. John could be dead tomorrow—Sherlock’s eyes slammed shut as the thought seared his brain.

In an instant he was able to clear the mess in mind palace. All damage repaired, everything put back into place: pristine. He could do it now because it was important now. He needed his brain in top form. He’d studied this poison and determined it to be irreversible. It was an impossible task and he would have to do it. There was no alternative. He would do it, because John would not die. Sherlock was the best goddamn chemist in England and the unrivalled bloody expert on poisons. He could do this. He had to.

He thought grimly that Moriarty and Moran had really outdone themselves this time. John’s death would paralyse him, they knew that, but they’d taken it even one step further. Because if John died of poison, not only Sherlock’s area of expertise but his point of pride— He couldn’t imagine a more decisive way to destroy him. He agreed with Moran wholeheartedly on this one: If John died of a poison Sherlock couldn’t save him from, he would not need to be told twice to jump off a building. No landing gear this time. No tricks. He would be more than happy to meet the pavement.

Sherlock breathed deeply through his nose as he realigned his concentration. He couldn’t think about endings now. They were only distraction. Now he needed to focus on the problem. The problem and the method.

He picked up his phone again.

“Molly, I need your help. Meet me in the lab. Ten minutes.”

* 

John leaned back in his chair, exhaling slowly. The predominant feeling was relief. So he was dying, and not Sherlock. It wasn’t ideal, but it was infinitely better than the other way around. Because he wouldn’t do that again. He couldn’t. It wasn’t an option. It would shatter him completely, again, but this time there wouldn’t be pieces large enough to put back together—a consequence of repeated breaking. No, it was better this way.
He’d always expected to die on a case with Sherlock. He had chosen his death when he’d chosen Sherlock. It was a simple matter of statistics. They had too many cases with too many ways to die. Too many people trying to kill them. There’s a limited amount of time you can spend on a battlefield before a bullet catches you. John knew it better than anyone. Eventually it would happen. And he didn’t mind. If he had to choose between dying slowly of cancer or failing organs when he was eighty or dying on the street protecting Sherlock before he turned forty, he would always choose the latter. Death was senseless if it was going to be done wasting away in a hospital bed. He wanted his death to have meaning, and the meaning he’d chosen—the best meaning the world had to offer—was dying for Sherlock Holmes.

He touched his left upper arm, tracing the cut where Carl Reeves’ bullet had grazed him through his sleeve. That, he assumed, was how the poison had gotten into his system. The bullet had been aimed for Sherlock. And John had taken it for him. Perfect.

It wasn’t that he wanted to die—not at all. It turned his stomach to think of all the cases he would miss out on. Sherlock would have to go alone. Or replace him (his stomach flipped over entirely). He wanted to stay at 221B, of course. Stay with Sherlock. Maybe find out if there was something between them. Or, if not, settle back into their friendship. He would miss Sherlock’s voice, his laugh, his smirks and his smiles, his laziness and his energy, watching him work, watching him think, his eyes… John swallowed. No, he didn’t want to die. But if he had to, he was glad it had happened like this: taking a bullet for Sherlock. He would do it again in a heartbeat if anyone gave him the choice.

After all, John thought he must have the better end of the deal. As he knew from past experience, it’s much easier to die than to watch someone die. Or at least it is when that someone is a (the) person you need. A person you would spend whatever wretched remaining years you had suffocating without.

Sherlock, he supposed, had gone to the lab to try to find an antidote. Perhaps he would succeed. Perhaps he didn’t have to die. But hadn’t Sherlock said himself the poison’s progress was unstoppable? He knew Sherlock would do everything he could, but if there was no solution then there was no solution. He had to be prepared for that. Because Sherlock had studied the poison carefully, and of all people he was the last one to declare something ‘perfect’ if it had even the smallest flaw. And to Sherlock this poison had been perfect.

But it would be ok, he thought, staring absently at their chaotic wallpaper. Sherlock didn’t need John the way John needed Sherlock. The detective had his work, and John knew that as long as he had that he didn’t need much else. Sherlock would be all right without him. He would do better, certainly, than John had done when Sherlock was dead. Mrs. Hudson would take care of him. Mycroft would watch over him. The consulting detective would be unhappy for a while (perhaps, if John flattered himself, even quite a long while—certainly longer than when Irene Adler had died, he hoped), but he would be ok, and that’s what mattered.

As for himself, John had known within twenty-four hours of meeting him that Sherlock was someone he’d live for, kill for, and die for. Not everyone is lucky enough to find someone like that. And John counted himself lucky. He’d chosen to live for Sherlock at a point when he’d had nothing worth living for. He’d killed for Sherlock when he needed to, and now he could die for him as well. It was nothing more than the fulfilment of the original design.

Still he wasn’t thrilled about it. John let his gaze travel over the living room, thinking that he didn’t understand the concept of heaven. How could you be happy anywhere if your consulting detective isn’t there with you? To play the violin or burn holes through your tables; to play Cluedo with you or to wake you up in the middle of the night with questions about cirrhosis; to help you on with your coat or follow you around the flat complaining about everything; to push you out into the night after
murderers, running at your side?

John sincerely hoped there wasn’t any kind of afterlife, because he knew that if even the smallest piece of him went on he wouldn’t feel anything but pain for missing Sherlock.
Sherlock didn’t come home that night, or the next, and eventually John got tired of waiting around to die.

He was sitting in his chair, idly flipping his phone around in his hand. Apart from the increasing number of dizzy spells he wasn’t experiencing any debilitating symptoms yet. He had worked the past two days at the surgery as though nothing was wrong. He didn’t see why not; when the poison triggered the shock-inducing reaction it would happen suddenly. There was nothing preventing him from functioning normally until that time, and god only knew he wasn’t going to spend the days sitting in an empty flat waiting to keel over.

It was ironic working at a surgery full of equipment and medications and knowing none of it could help him. He’d poured over Sherlock’s notes on the poison that first day, and though they were mostly haphazard chicken scratch, he’d been able to decipher them well enough to understand the basic pathophysiology.

Slowed heart rate, excessive vasodilation (widening of the blood vessels), loss of elasticity in red blood cells causing them to clump together and move sluggishly, not delivering oxygen fast enough. Fairly straightforward precursors to shock, the potentially fatal panicking and eventual failure of the body’s circulatory system.

The clever part, he supposed, was that the chemicals in the poison rendered the body unresponsive to vasoactive drugs: his blood vessels wouldn’t respond to vasopressors (the medications that would constrict his blood vessels and help raise his blood pressure) and his heart wouldn’t respond to inotropes (the medications that would support the strength of his heart rate). Like triggering a bizarre kind of stasis in his vascular system, the poison had made it resistant to interference via any conventional methods.

The conclusion, John had grimly realised, was that Sherlock had to invent a medication to reverse a reaction from an entirely new drug on which there was no research, no data, and no information available. And he had to do it in the time it took the demand for oxygen in John’s body to outweigh the supply, which could happen any moment. The slowing of the circulatory processes was gradual but the onset of shock would be sudden. Lack of oxygen. Loss of consciousness. Nothing to stop the progress of deterioration and total shut down. The impossibility of the situation was almost laughable.

So John had gone about his day seeing patients. He’d handed out the usual diagnoses and prescriptions and encouraging smiles: “You’ll be fine.”

He leaned back in his chair, hating the quiet stillness of the flat. He rechecked his latest texts from Molly.

He’s all right. Still working. Even madder than usual if possible.

Are YOU all right? He won’t tell me what’s going on but I know it has to do with you.

John had thought about going down to Barts several times already. The chemistry was more than beyond his abilities, but that was usually the case during the many long hours they’d spent holed up
in the lab, and still he’d been able to keep himself busy with menial tasks, just content to radiate companionship if nothing else.

But this time was different. John was a human time bomb with no visible clock. His presence in the lab would cause additional stress, and without being able to contribute to the science in any meaningful way he would only be a distraction.

He typed a response.

*I’m fine. I know food is out of the question but make sure he drinks something occasionally.*

His phone lit up just a minute later.

*I know. I’m on it.*

He smiled ruefully. It was comforting to know that Sherlock had such secure pillars of support in place. Between Molly, Mrs. Hudson, Lestrade, and Mycroft, he would be taken care of. He would be ok.

John stood up restlessly. If he was going to die he wanted to do something worthwhile with the time he had left. Before he could think better of it he sent a text to Mycroft.

*If Sebastian Moran were convicted, could they hold him? JW*

Surprisingly he received a response just a few minutes later.

*Not for long. He is well connected. M*

John didn’t bother wondering why Mycroft hadn’t asked for the reason he wanted to know. With Mycroft it was always safe to assume he already knew.

John leaned on the back of his chair, staring at the message, thinking. Moran had had Sherlock in his grasp the other night at the warehouse. But he hadn’t killed him. Why? Was it possible they had let him go so he could try to save John? Some kind of test? John scoffed inwardly, it was more likely to ensure Sherlock would witness John’s death. That sounded more like Moriarty. Sick mind games.

But once John was dead there would be nothing to prevent Moran from killing Sherlock too. Lestrade might be able to send him to jail, but Mycroft had just confirmed jail wouldn’t hold him. He’d be back on the street soon enough, and he’d go after Sherlock.

John stuffed his phone in his pocket and went to the living room table. He flipped open his laptop. There was something he could do before he died after all.

He couldn’t kill Moriarty; Moriarty was already dead. It had taken Sherlock Holmes to kill him, and it would take Sherlock Holmes to stop the aftershock too—the waves rippling through England that the consulting criminal had put in motion before he died.

But who was Moran? He was Moriarty’s second in command; clever, sure, but in the end just a man. He knew it wouldn’t solve all of Sherlock’s problems, but it would strike a lasting blow against the opposition: the forces trying to hurt Sherlock, the ones John wouldn’t be able to protect him from anymore.

Killing Moran would be the least he could do for Sherlock before he died.

*
Molly Hooper had just crossed the line from concerned to terrified.

She’d been working with Sherlock night and day, not fully understanding the project but following Sherlock’s orders obediently: prepping chemicals, running tests, recording reactions, only going home in the early hours of the morning to get some sleep.

Sherlock often worked all night, but this was now the third day in a row and he hadn’t gone home, hadn’t slept, hadn’t rested since he’d started.

She’d gotten next to nothing out of him about what they were doing. She knew they were working with John’s blood. Considering the tests they were running on lab rats she also knew it had something to do with vasoconstriction. None of it made any sense. But even the slightest inquiry on her part was rebuffed by a demand for silence, and she’d given up trying to ask.

Molly knew Sherlock appreciated her help, but he was working like a bat out of hell and she understood that any politeness or display of gratitude (normally a struggle for him) would be beyond his ability at this point. So she gritted her teeth and did what she was told, making excuses for missing work and only going home to sleep for a few hours at a time. Each time she arrived back at the lab it was as though Sherlock hadn’t noticed she’d gone. There was no greeting, and often he was already halfway through a sentence as she walked in the door.

Billy drifted in and out, sticking around for a while to help weigh and measure chemicals. He was surprisingly handy in the lab—Molly knew he had a background in making drugs—and he was actually a better than fair chemist. This, though, was out of his league. It was out of Molly’s league. She expected it would be out of anyone’s league if it were at the limit of Sherlock’s.

It wasn’t until the second day that she realised Sherlock had been intermittently snorting cocaine from the start, and that Billy had been slipping it to him on each of his visits. The only thing that kept her from slapping him across the face and dialling Lestrade immediately was the vague understanding that all of this was somehow connected to John. Based on Sherlock’s manic behaviour, the fact that John hadn’t appeared once in the lab, and despite John’s text claiming he was fine, Molly knew there was something wrong. It was only the thought that John could be in danger that made her hold her tongue.

But it didn’t prevent her from following Billy out into the corridor the next time he appeared, cornering him against the door and demanding to know why he was giving Sherlock drugs.

“He asked for them, innit.”

“You don’t have to give them to him!” she seethed.

“Right, you try not doing something he tells you to; let me know how that goes.”

Molly backed down. She knew what he meant. She felt powerless. She could refuse to help Sherlock unless he threw away the drugs, but she knew that would only mean Sherlock would tell her to go to hell and continue on his own. From what it looked like, John’s life could be at stake. If Sherlock needed to use cocaine to save him, then Molly knew this was the one circumstance in which they’d all have to let it slide.

So she continued to work at his side, trying her best to stop calculating the exact amount of cocaine Sherlock was ingesting and to simply appreciate the fact that they were in a hospital, and help would be just around the corner if he overdosed.

All had gone relatively smoothly—excluding a few outbursts: failed tests that required her to shield
the equipment with her body in order to keep him from smashing it—until now.

It was around six o’clock in the evening of the third day and Sherlock had been working silently, racing around the room with bloodshot eyes and hair standing up wildly: the very portrait of a mad scientist. He hadn’t spoken for hours and when he did Molly had to do a double take.

“What?” she asked.

“Dej mi další podložní sklíčko,” Sherlock snapped, repeating what he’d said the first time.

Molly stared at him. He was speaking a different language. “Sherlock, I can’t understand you.”

“Co je sakra s tebou? Neumíš anglicky?” They seemed like questions. She didn’t know what he was asking. The frustration in his tone was sharp.

“What? What language is that?”

“Jsi natvrdlá? Podej mi to podělané sklíčko!” he yelled.

Molly felt panic rising in her chest. “Stop it! I don’t know what you’re saying!”

“Tak odejdi, pokud chceš dělat hloupou!” Sherlock strode over to where she was standing and knocked her hand out of the way.

He snatched the vial of blood and a microscope slide, swiftly using the dropper to create another film. His hands were shaking. He grabbed another vial with one of his latest solutions and she scampered out of his way as he swept over to the microscope.

Molly watched him with wide eyes. He was mad, absolutely mad. He wasn’t speaking English anymore. He was swaying on his feet. He could collapse any minute.

This had gone too far. Sherlock wasn’t going to be any use to John at all if he overdosed. She needed help. She needed to call someone. John was the first person that came to mind, but she looked over at Sherlock and supposed now might not be the best time to bring John in, especially if he was—well, she didn’t know. Who else could she call? Sherlock would only demand more drugs from Billy, and Lestrade would probably tackle him into handcuffs.

But wait, Sherlock had a brother, didn’t he? An older brother. She had met him once. He’d looked… important. He must be able to help.

In Sherlock’s feverishly distracted state it was almost too easy to pinch his phone.

* *

John walked casually into the lobby of the office building just a few blocks from Trafalgar Square. It had been easy enough to look up Moran’s office, and a quick call to his secretary confirmed the time of his last appointment.

He walked straight to the lifts and pressed the button for the parking garage. Besides the button for the lobby it was the only one that didn’t require a keycard to make the lift work: a trick he’d learned from Sherlock.

He walked slowly through the first row of cars, observing where the cameras were just out of the corner of his eye. He wove through the row and stepped behind a pillar. A blind spot. There was no camera facing his direction. He could get Moran as he came through the door. He checked his watch.
Seven o’clock. Moran’s last appointment would just be ending. He was proud of himself for having gotten so far without the genius of deduction at his side, though he wished Sherlock were with him anyway.

The plan was almost absurdly simple. But then, John knew better than most how simple it really was to kill a man. Especially if you happened not to be concerned with the consequences.

There would be no mind games. He wasn’t Sherlock and Moran was no Moriarty. While a consulting detective and a consulting criminal might die a thousand deaths, he and Moran could each die once. They were two ordinary men. One real death each. The fate of all ordinary people.

He leaned back against the pillar, hand on his gun against the small of his back. He was dizzy now. He hoped the spell would clear in time to get a good shot at Moran. He only needed one good shot.

* 

“Sherlock?” Sherlock’s brother inquired when Molly rang him from the detective’s phone. “This is a surprise.” His voice was soft and smooth and somehow terrifying at the same time.

She was crouched in an empty room down the corridor so Sherlock wouldn’t hear her. The precaution was probably unnecessary. She didn’t think he had noticed she’d left.

“Oh, erm, hello, my name is Molly Hooper. I work with Sherlock, er, sometimes. I work in the morgue at Barts.”

“Consider the surprise compounded,” he said dryly. “What can I do for you, Miss Hooper?”

“Well, it’s Sherlock. He’s, erm, here at the lab. Actually he’s been here for three days now and I think he’s in trouble.”

“What makes you think that?”

“He hasn’t left the lab since Monday and he’s done a shocking amount of cocaine.”

“Really.” The taut strain in the word might have had pain beneath it, but Molly would be embellishing if she said so. It was only one word.

“It’s because of John, er, Dr. Watson—I should have said. Sherlock won’t tell me what's happened, but he's trying to invent a new drug.”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“He’s stopped speaking English!” she said desperately. “I think he’s going to overdose.”

“What language?”

“What?”

“What language is my brother speaking?”

“I have no idea! I didn’t recognise it at all—”

“In that case I believe I know. Thank you for your call, Miss Hooper. I’ll look into the matter.”

The call ended and Molly stared at the phone. Did that mean he would help? Or what?
Fortunately it was late enough that most of the building’s workers had already left. One or two stragglers walked through the parking garage and John pretended to be texting if they passed him.

Finally he heard the door to the lifts open and when he looked around the pillar it was Moran walking into the garage. He was certain. He’d memorised his picture from the web page. He was alone. Perfect.

John stepped to the side of the pillar, in plain view of Moran but careful to keep in the camera’s blind spot. He supposed it didn’t matter much if the security got a visual of him, since he would most likely be dead in a few days. But still, he didn’t want to leave Sherlock with a mess to clean up.

John cocked the gun and Moran looked up. He smiled, a look of recognition crossing his face. He opened his mouth and John shot him through the forehead before he could say his name.

Quickly John shot the cameras blocking his path to the doors. He moved swiftly, stepping over Moran’s body and punching the button for the lift. It was empty when it arrived and he hit the button for the lobby.

The receptionists had gone home, and the entrance was deserted. His footsteps echoed on the marble floor as he walked out the same way he’d come in.

* 

“I’ve got it,” Sherlock said slowly, staring at the results on the screen in front of him as they blurred in and out of focus. “I’ve solved it,” he said louder. “This is it!” he shouted. “I’ve got it!”

He leaped up from his stool, knocking it backward. It clattered to the floor and Molly jumped away, skittering around to the other side of the worktop.

“It’s the antidote! It works! Come here and look at this!” he jabbed his finger at the screen. Molly didn’t move. “What the hell is wrong with you?” Sherlock yelled at her. “I told you I’ve solved it!”

“Congratulations.”

Sherlock snapped his head up. Mycroft was standing in the doorway.

Molly edged across the room.

“Where are you going?” Sherlock demanded. She didn’t respond. She slid out the door behind Mycroft.

“She can’t understand you, Sherlock. Are you really not aware that we’re speaking Czech now?”

Sherlock blinked at his brother, the room was swimming before him, circles and pricks of light dotted his vision. “It doesn’t matter. Look, I need this antidote made immediately. Can you do it? John will die. Mycroft, I need your help.”

If Mycroft was surprised by the unusual request for assistance, he didn’t show it. He stepped behind the worktop, surveying seventy-two hours’ worth of crazed calculations.

“Get the formula in a legible format and send the instructions to this address,” Mycroft said, holding up his phone.

Sherlock had never typed faster.
“Where is John?” he asked as he hit ‘send.’ “He needs to get this injection as fast as possible and we have to watch him until it’s ready. He could—if he’s not already—” The words were sticking in his mouth. He gripped the worktop to keep from falling over.

“John is still alive.”

“Where is he?”

“Have you made a list?”

Sherlock did his best to lock his eyes on his abhorrent older brother even as he blurred out of focus. His skin was buzzing. He could feel his heart beating at a pace that would have been alarming if he’d cared even slightly.

“Where is he?” he repeated slowly enough to make the threat implicit.

“The list, Sherlock.” Mycroft’s posture was rail straight and Sherlock knew that even if his fighting skills were superior, his detestable brother could make things more difficult than he had time for.

Sherlock reached into his jacket pocket and tossed the paper onto the worktop. Mycroft snatched it, expression unchanging as he calculated in seconds the lengthy list of grams Sherlock had jotted down with each dose. His eyes flashed from the numbers to Sherlock’s face.

“Now tell me,” Sherlock said through gritted teeth.

Mycroft smiled humourlessly as he folded the paper, tucking it neatly into a small notebook that he replaced within his jacket. “All that cocaine and you’re still too slow.” His grey eyes held Sherlock’s mercilessly. “You know where he is.”

“I don’t have time for your games, Mycroft,” Sherlock snarled. “He must be at home. Or at the surgery.” Sherlock had no idea what time it was, what day it was.

“John has been given a death sentence and a minimal amount of time left to live. Do you really think he’s sitting home staring at the walls?”

Sherlock reeled as he understood what Mycroft was saying, and he hated him for being right. Because he did know where John was. He knew exactly where, and he had to get to him. Now.

Sherlock ran, flinging open the doors and jumping into the waiting car, neither noticing nor caring that it was one of Mycroft’s cars and not a taxi.

He shouted the address at the driver, unaware of Mycroft getting into another car behind him.

*

John turned onto a dark, quiet side street. He was always amazed that such a thing could exist in the centre of London. Even somewhere between Piccadilly and Westminster there were empty streets, sheltered from the noisy throngs of tourists just a few blocks over, all herding up and down the same narrow routes.

His head was spinning but he felt good. He had accomplished what he’d set out to do. He had killed Sebastian Moran—one of Moriarty’s most trusted accomplices. There was now one less dangerous criminal in London trying to kill Sherlock. It was the least he could do for him before he would have to go.
He felt impossibly light, almost unaware of the pavement beneath his shoes. As a doctor, John knew the warning signs of fainting. He knew the symptoms of the poison too: hypotension, eventually hypoperfusion. His brain wasn’t getting enough oxygen. He should probably sit down somewhere.

He’d walked a few blocks already; there was a main road up ahead. A black car screeched to a halt and someone leaped out. John stopped, watching the person running. Was he running toward him? It was hard to see through the fog. Though there wasn’t really fog, was there?

John’s skin felt numb. Spots danced on the periphery of his vision. He supposed he should have sat down. But wasn’t it—? It was Sherlock running toward him. Why was he running? It didn’t seem necessary. John wasn’t moving. He was standing perfectly still. Or, more accurately, he was falling. He didn’t realise it until Sherlock caught him.

They sank to the ground, Sherlock’s arms around him. He reached up, holding on to Sherlock’s jacket—where was his coat? Wasn’t it cold? John didn’t know; he couldn’t feel; it wasn’t important. He relaxed into the detective’s embrace. He was tired, so tired. His vertigo made the street slant and tilt precariously beneath them.

His eyelids were heavy and he struggled to look up. When he met Sherlock's eyes John felt a jolt through his body, a shock briefly pulling him back from the brink of sleep. For a moment he was awake again, looking up into the detective’s face. And suddenly it was worth it. The dizziness, the wound, all of it. Was he wounded? He didn’t feel any pain, but he must be. Why else would he be lying in the street? Why would Sherlock be here holding him like this? It didn’t matter. It was worth a wound; it would have been worth many wounds to see that expression on Sherlock Holmes' face.

His usual mask of cold and arrogant indifference had vanished completely, and John had a window into a depth of emotion he would have never thought possible. And it was for him, John understood in amazement. Sherlock’s eyes were wet and he was looking at John like he loved him.

John swallowed. It’s ok, he wanted to say because he wanted Sherlock not to hurt. But his mouth wasn’t responding. The fog was settling back down, pressing in around him.

Sherlock was saying something. He couldn’t hear. It didn’t even sound like English.

He was so dizzy it was hard to see. He just needed to sleep. Sherlock’s wiry arms were around him—the lean strength of the detective’s body—it was comforting, like something he’d wanted all along.

Sherlock was holding him like he was something important, precious even, and John hated that he was just understanding now, when it was too late.

He couldn’t fight sleep any longer. He felt his hand slipping down from Sherlock’s chest as he lost the ability to hold on. Sherlock gripped him harder but John could barely feel it. He was vaguely aware of Sherlock’s curls brushing his face as his eyes fell shut.

*

John was falling and Sherlock caught him but it didn’t seem to matter how tightly he held him because John was still falling.

Sherlock was saying things and he had no idea what he was saying. He hoped he was telling John not to leave him, because he needed John to stay with him, to wake up, to get up. John, John—

John reached up, gripping his jacket, and his eyes searched his face in the same expression of wonderment that had made Sherlock pull him out of the Barts lab and into his flat and into his life all those years ago.
John! John! Sherlock didn’t know if he was thinking it or saying it or shouting it. No, John, no I caught you, see? I have you now. I solved it. I invented the antidote. I solved it. I solved it for you.

John’s eyes lost their focus and his hand dropped. Sherlock tried to hold him tighter, as though he could stop him from falling. But he couldn’t. Because it wasn’t John’s body that was falling. It was a part of John that Sherlock couldn’t reach, falling away from him.

John’s eyes slowly closed and Sherlock buried his face in John’s neck. No, don’t leave, don’t leave me, John, please, I need you. Please—

And then there were hands. There were rough hands on John, maybe four, maybe fifty, trying to pull him away. Sherlock wouldn’t let him go. He was yelling, yelling something, he didn’t know. John was ripped out of his arms and then there were two more hands, firm on his shoulders, pulling him back, pulling him up.

Mycroft.

Mycroft was pushing him into a car, slamming the door shut. Sherlock barely heard him give the address before he blacked out.

Chapter End Notes

Czech translations:

Dej mi další podložní sklíčko -- Get me another slide.
Co je sakra s tebou? Neumíš anglicky? -- What the hell is wrong with you? Can't you speak English?
Jsi natvrdlá? Podej mi to podělané sklíčko! -- Are you stupid? Give me the fucking slide!
Tak odejdi, pokud chceš dělat hloupou! -- Then leave, if you're going to be stupid.
Staying Alive

Black. Heavy, suffocating black was pressing in on him from all sides. He couldn’t see. His limbs were too heavy. He couldn’t move. He fought against it. He had to get up. He had to get back. He had to get to John. A glint of light. He willed himself toward it, dragging his mind forward.

The grey light widened to an image of a darkened hospital room. It blurred into focus. There was a man sitting at a table across from his bed, pale face tinted blue by the glow of a laptop screen.

Sherlock struggled to sit up. His body didn’t cooperate. The air felt heavy around him, intensified gravity pinning him in place. But the man at the table seemed to sense his wakefulness. He stood and walked to the side of the bed.

“He’s alive.”

The information was like a shot of morphine. Sherlock felt his entire body relax, and his leaden eyelids fell shut once again.

*

Molly paced the waiting room. Both Sherlock and John were here and she wasn’t being allowed to see either of them. They were requesting ‘clearance’ for her and waiting for a response. Clearance? What kind of hospital was this? And where was Mary? At first she’d assumed Mary was already in John’s room, but when she asked she was told no one had been admitted. Was it possible they hadn’t told her? John’s wife!

Molly had her number; she would call just to be sure.

*

Sherlock had slept for more than twenty-four hours when he finally opened his eyes again.

“Are you still here?” his voice croaked with disuse.

“Have your observational skills deteriorated so far? You might have noticed I’m wearing an entirely different outfit.”

“Your outfits are rarely worthy of notice.”

“Feeling better already I see,” Mycroft returned with a cold smile.

“Where’s John?”

“Released yesterday. Your antidote worked perfectly. We were able to get him the injection in time. I must admit it was a rather clever bit of chemistry you managed.”

“Yesterday?”

“Saturday. You missed it.”

“Why didn’t he wake me?”

Mycroft frowned, raising his umbrella and inspecting the tip for scuff marks. “No, I’m afraid he wasn’t here. That annoying morgue girl was here for a while, but no one else.”
There was a short silence.

“Honestly, Sherlock, are you surprised? When Mary came to pick John up—”

“What?” Sherlock snapped.

Mycroft glared at him. “As I was saying, when Mary came to pick him up she was absolutely furious with you, and John was none too pleased either. Nine days being poisoned by a bullet he took for you, and you didn’t notice? I can’t say I blame him.”

Sherlock’s expression remained fixed, but Mycroft observed the twitch of his fingers on the bedspread. “Where is he now?”

“I believe Mary said she’d take him back to her place. She is a nurse, among other things. She’ll see to his recovery.”

For a moment Sherlock looked broken, like a shattered window, gaping and hollow, but it vanished in an instant as his face resumed its blank exterior.

“Leave, Mycroft.”

“Come now, Sherlock, you know you don’t have to tell me to leave. I must be the busiest man in London on a Sunday. I couldn’t possibly stay another minute.” He reached the door and turned back. “Don’t try to leave. Your doctor says you’re still in danger of suffering another collapse. You were lucky to come out of it this time; I wouldn’t count on luck again.”

Sherlock was silent, glaring at the opposite wall.

“They’re insisting you stay over at least another night for recovery. And you will, Sherlock. Try anything and you’ll find the nurses here are stronger than you’d expect.”

The door clicked shut behind him and Mycroft paused, just for a moment.

He had warned Sherlock not to get involved. Of course it had been too late even then. And now… He would watch Sherlock closely now.

Mycroft opened his umbrella against the light raindrops as he exited the hospital.

* 

It was Monday evening and Molly had come straight to the hospital from work. Sherlock had been asleep the last time she visited and she hoped she could catch him awake this time. She was a bit nervous about what he would be like if he was awake though. A sleeping Sherlock was much less forbidding than an awake one. And he must be so upset about John… She swallowed, thinking about the way John had looked when she had finally been allowed to see him the night they brought them in.

She and John had never been close. Apart from the occasional Christmas or birthday do the only times she saw him were when Sherlock brought him to the lab. She remembered the first time Sherlock brought him in. She’d been shocked. Sherlock existed in a world of his own, practically oblivious to the people and voices around him, often not knowing or caring who he was talking to or even whether other people were still in the room. So when Sherlock brought John to the lab she was stunned to see that Sherlock watched him. Even just out of the corner of his eye, Molly knew he was tracking John’s movements, glancing up if he left the room or entered it. He was aware of John’s presence the way he was of no one else’s.
And Molly had understood immediately. Sherlock was in love with him. Of course he was. It was no small feat to hold any percentage of that great brain’s attention, and John did it effortlessly. There was nothing so special or spectacular about John Watson, which made it all the more heartbreaking. Molly had believed the scientist could never love an ordinary person. But when he brought John to the lab she realised that he could; it just wasn’t her.

She didn’t resent John though. It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t as though he had swooped in on Sherlock, snatching him up and taking him home and keeping him there, pulling him into his work and his life in an irrevocable way. No, *Sherlock* had done that to John.

Initially she had considered whether she would be able to kill Mike Stamford and make it look like a workplace accident. But of course Sherlock would figure it out. The difficulty of being in love with the world’s most brilliant and beautiful detective: you can’t kill people to get to him.

It hadn’t taken long to get used to John though. He was reserved, not overly warm and friendly, but nice enough. Adjusting to Sherlock looking at someone with that expression was much harder.

John was an idiot for not knowing, but it was obvious he cared for Sherlock a great deal. He looked at Sherlock like he was the most amazing person in the world, and the most important person in his world. It had broken her heart, seeing him at Sherlock’s funeral. She’d spent sleepless nights wondering if she should break the promise she’d made to Sherlock and just tell John he was alive. What did she owe Sherlock anyway? He’d never exactly been kind to her in the years they’d known each other. But in the end there had never been any question where her loyalties lay, and she had avoided John the best she could.

John had, justifiably, been cold toward her at first when Sherlock came back. But he’d warmed eventually—probably, hopefully, understanding he would have done the same had their positions been reversed. She knew he had fully forgiven her when he invited her to his wedding. It was sweet that he counted her as a good enough friend to be invited to the relatively small wedding; he was sweet. They had never been close, but Molly felt tears welling in her eyes that first night they’d brought him in, and she didn’t bother trying to stop them as they spilled over, running freely down her cheeks.

Mary was with him now, but Sherlock must be devastated.

She had thought maybe once John was married Sherlock would finally stop looking at him that way. But he hadn’t, and now she knew he never would. She supposed people like Sherlock didn’t fall in love lightly. But then she really didn’t know. There was no one like Sherlock.

She was walking through the hospital lobby when she nearly collided with him. She looked up, startled to see him out of bed. Under his signature coat he was wearing the clean clothes one of his brother’s assistants had dropped off for him while he was sleeping. He was thin, but he was always thin, and a shower and the few days of rest on an IV had him looking… Well, Molly had found it was better for her overall mental health if she didn’t think too much about the way Sherlock looked.

“Sherlock! Erm, hi! I was just coming to—Did they release you already?”

“Just now.”

She grinned sheepishly. “Ah, you’re speaking English again; that’s good.”

“What?”

“I just, erm—”
“Thank you.”

“What?”

“For helping me in the lab. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

She blushed. “Well, you know, it was for John. I was happy to help.”

Sherlock watched her for a moment and Molly’s blush deepened. “Always, you know I’m always…” she fumbled, “happy to help.”

“If there’s any way I can repay you, I’m in your debt.”

“I—” her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. “H-how’s John today?”

Sherlock’s face darkened. “I wouldn’t know.”


“I haven’t seen him since—”

“You haven’t seen him?” she asked in utter disbelief.

Annoyance was clouding his face. “He went straight off with Mary; how would I see him?”

“But”—Sherlock glared at her—“but I just had a text from Mary this morning! She said there was no change.”

“No change? What do you mean, ‘no change’? Explain immediately.”

“Sherlock,” Molly said carefully. Was it possible he didn’t know? Had his brother not told him? “You do know John’s been in a coma since they brought him here, don’t you? He’s here. Or at least he was this morning.”

Sherlock grabbed her arm and she cried out at the force. “Where? Where is he?”

“Upstairs, five-twenty-one.”

Sherlock dropped her arm. He spun on his heel and dashed upstairs. Molly stood stunned for a second before running after him.

She reached John’s room just a moment after Sherlock.

“You!” she heard Mary shout from the other side of the door. She threw it open in time to see Mary jumping up to block Sherlock’s path. “Stay away from him! This is your fault!”

“You will get out of my way or I will put you out of my way.” The detective’s words were dripping with venom.

Molly was paralysed in the doorway.

“Are you threatening me, Sherlock? John’s not enough? You want to put me in a coma too? He might never wake up, that’s what they’re saying.” There were tears in her eyes but her face was as hard as flint.

Sherlock took another step forward, looming over her. “I will give you one more chance to move.”
There was something dark and dangerous in Sherlock. People called him a sociopath. Molly didn’t know what he was capable of, but Mary was undoubtedly going to find out if she continued to stand between him and John.

“Stop it!” Molly shouted, regaining her wits.

They both turned.

“Stop it, just stop it!”

Sherlock flexed his hands. “Molly, I think Mary should have her own hospital room. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t get her one.”

“Because you owe me a favour, Sherlock, and I’m asking you to stop.”

Sherlock looked at her for a second, and then stiffly took a step back.

Molly turned to Mary. “And Mary, leave him alone. You didn’t see how hard Sherlock worked on that antidote. I did. He almost killed himself inventing it and it’s the only reason John's alive right now.”

“John wouldn’t have needed an antidote in the first place if—”

“Shut up,” Molly snapped.

Sherlock raised his eyebrows at her.

“It’s not Sherlock’s fault. The situation is what it is. You both care for John. Tough tits. You’re going to have to find a way to deal with it that doesn’t involve killing each other.”

“But—” Sherlock started.

Molly was having none of it. “Mary, you’ve had your time with him. It’s Sherlock’s turn now.”

“But—” Mary started.

“Out!”

“Fine,” Mary snarled at Sherlock, “but don’t think they’re going to let you stay after visiting hours. That’s for family only.”

“And since when do ex-wives count as family?”


They ignored her.

“The papers haven’t even gone through yet,” Mary shot back at Sherlock. “I’m much closer to family than you are.”

“Do you want to know the statistics on how often ex-wives either murder or are murdered by their ex-husbands?”

“Sherlock,” Molly warned.
“I’m the one who should be here. He married me for fuck’s sake!” Mary shrieked.

“And he chose me,” Sherlock growled.

“Oh, and what a choice that was! Look where that got him!”

“Mary!” Molly said sharply.

“They won’t let you stay here,” Mary said, glaring at him fiercely.

“Look, we’ll sort it out later,” Molly said, exasperated. “Mary, let’s go.”

“Don’t think this is over,” Mary flung the words back at him as Molly steered her toward the door.

“Eager to continue,” Sherlock sneered.

Molly didn’t look back as the door swung shut behind them. John and Mary were divorced? How? When? Why? And more importantly, what did that mean for Sherlock?

She hoped to god John would wake up soon. He had to stay alive. He had to. Because while John had lived a broken, faded existence for two years when Sherlock died, she felt a cold grip of fear around her heart when she thought of what might happen to Sherlock if John died. Because Sherlock didn’t fade. He burned.
Sherlock walked swiftly to the bed, avoiding looking at the person in it as he snatched the chart off its clip. He scanned the information. Yes, yes it was all correct. John’s body had responded to the antidote—it had halted the deterioration of his circulatory system and redirected his body to heal itself. There were improvements: steady heart rate, blood pressure still low but approaching normal numbers. But the injection had been late. Sherlock knew that. Like a knife in his chest he knew that. John’s body had already shut down by the time he got it. Coma: the body’s the final, desperate method of conserving energy in order to heal from trauma. He was stabilised now, but comas like this one were unpredictable. John could wake up in an hour or a year or never. He had been here like this since Friday night and Sherlock hadn’t known. Mycroft had lied to him.

Sherlock jammed the chart back down onto its clip. His brother had lied to him to get him stay in bed and finish his treatment. The doctor had said he’d needed another twenty-four hours on the IV to fully recover, and Mycroft had known exactly how to get him to do it. He’d put John in the once place Sherlock couldn’t follow him: voluntarily back at Mary’s house. To thank him for it, the next time he saw his rubbish older brother Sherlock would give him a lesson on the subtlety in variation of twenty-eight different kinds of pain.

He stepped carefully to the side of John’s bed, finally forcing his eyes to take in the unconscious figure in front of him. John. There were no visible injuries on him, yet Sherlock knew if he shook him he wouldn’t wake. He was here. Right here. And yet he wasn’t. He wasn’t here at all. The liminal space of a coma. He could take John’s hand and still not be able to reach him.

He sat down in the chair next to the bed. It didn’t look like sleeping. He was too still, too posed. Sleeping was more random. John lay on his side when he was sleeping. He shifted and moved when he was sleeping. But most importantly he always woke up from sleeping, whenever Sherlock touched his shoulder to wake him for a client or a case, eyes fluttering open, murmuring Sherlock’s name in the form of a question.

He swallowed hard at the memory. He reached out to touch John’s arm but he hesitated.

He’d never had a problem touching John before. On cases they often they communicated by touch: light taps to signal, urgent grips and holds to warn, gentle pushes and pulls to guide… They even used touch in their arguments, holding each other in place or pushing back, displays of strength serving as reminders they were well matched. He’d never given a second thought to the intimacy of the contact. But now…

Now there was no case, no argument. There could be no other meaning in the touch at all—no excuse for it—other than intimacy. Sherlock slowly closed his hand on John’s arm, feeling his lack of reaction like a physical ache. How many times had he seen John wake up and taken it for granted? When John napped on the couch, when Sherlock went up to his bedroom to wake him—But of course he’d taken it for granted. He’d never considered there could be a time when John might not—

His grip on John’s forearm reflexively tightened.

A memory surfaced in his mind: Another time they’d been so close but at the same time impossibly separated. It was the cemetery. John reaching out and touching his gravestone. John had spoken to him. Sherlock was there, just a few metres away, watching. He could hear everything.

He remembered the study that found increased brain activity in coma patients who could hear familiar voices. The patients who were constantly spoken to by family and friends recovered
significantly faster than those who heard unfamiliar voices or silence.

So he could talk to John now when he was in a coma the way John had talked to him when he was dead.

He let go of John’s arm and stood up. He felt stupid, but he knew it was the least he could do for John after everything—

No, he couldn’t think about it. He just had to talk.

*

“I, erm, I saw how you killed Moran. They did a story on the telly. They don’t know who shot him, but obviously I do.”

Pause.

“You’re an idiot for just walking in like that. The plan was underdeveloped. I’d almost call you a genius for pulling off something as brilliantly stupid as that.”

Pause.

“I meant, thank you. Moran was a powerful target. With him eliminated Moriarty’s gang might never recover.”

Pause.

“But, erm, the problem is that none of it matters unless you wake up. Nothing matters without...”

Pause.

“I can’t work with an incapacitated blogger.”

Pause.

“Will it work if I promise not to leave dishes around the flat anymore?”

Pause.

“If you come back I promise to put the dishes in the sink.”

Pause.

“John, I—”

Pause.

“John, I’m sorry. I should have been faster; I should have known sooner. I don’t deserve to have you back but I’m asking you to come back anyway because I’m spoilt and selfish and I need you. There. I’ve said it. I need you. I’m sure it was obvious anyway but now I’ve said it. So...”

Pause.

“You asked me once to come back. Just for you, you said. You asked me to come back and I did. It took a long time but I came back. And now I need you to do the same for me. Please, John, I need you to wake up. For me. I know it would be fair if you made me wait two years. I would, of course I
would wait forever, because there will never be anyone else who—"

Pause.

“But please don’t make me do that. I’m not as patient as you are, you know that. I need you to wake up, and I think you will, because since the day we met you’ve been there when I needed you and you’ve done what I’ve asked. You’ve been my flatmate, my blogger, my doctor… the only friend I’ve ever—the only person…”

Pause.

“John, you, erm—"

Pause.

“You’ve been my inspiration throughout the cases and a reason to live between them. You’ve saved my life in more ways than I would have thought possible. You’ve always been everything I’ve ever needed, and now I need you to be awake.”

Pause.

“And I need you to be awake because—"

Pause.

“Because you are everything to me.”

Sherlock dropped his gaze to his shoes, wishing the silence wasn’t so loud. He looked at John.

What were the odds that one man could have such an exact combination of genetics and life experiences and ideas to make up such an appealing person? A person with dark blue eyes and soft blond hair and a charming, youthful face; a person who could save people as skilfully as he could kill them; a person who liked to wear jumpers and make tea and run after murderers with him through London’s alleys; a person who admired him and chose to be his friend in spite of everything; a person who thought him worth protecting; a person who laughed at crime scenes and made him toast…

Before he could think better of it Sherlock was gently brushing his fingers through John’s fringe. He sat down in the chair, leaning over the bed and circling his hand around John’s wrist.

He wished he could sleep. His mind palace was currently inaccessible. There was nothing but a vacuum of black space where it normally existed in his mind. Since Mycroft brought him to the hospital his sleep had been blissfully blank. He wished he could go back to that empty nothingness until John woke up.

He laid his head on his elbow on the side of the bed and continued to hold John’s wrist, fingers resting on his pulse point. He willed the steady beating of John’s heart to drive back the frenzy of thoughts that were gathering on the periphery of his mind—buzzing, angry, black swarms of thoughts. He knew he wouldn’t have the strength to keep them back this time. And he knew they would tear him apart.

*

Nine p.m. approached and Sherlock braced himself for an assault from Mary. She would come in screeching about her right to stay overnight with John and he wasn’t sure he would be able to
prevent himself from tossing her through the window.

There was a hesitant knock at the door. Odd. Mary wouldn’t knock like that. A second later Molly was standing in the doorway.

“If you’re still in mediation mode you may go back downstairs and tell Mary I’m not leaving,” Sherlock said. He didn’t care whether Mary, the hospital staff, or the British Army came through that door. He wouldn’t leave without a fight.

“No, I’m not—” Molly started. “I just came to tell you you can stay. I guess the hospital’s records must have been changed because Mary’s name isn’t on the clearance list anymore. Only yours is now.”

Mycroft. Manipulative bastard. He’d done this as a way of balancing the lie—weakening Sherlock’s justification for being angry with him. Rubbish older brother, blocking Mary from John’s room. Sherlock might even get him a Christmas gift for this.

“Mary was furious,” Molly continued. “They had to get security to escort her out.”

A nice Christmas gift.

Sherlock looked up at her. “Thank you, Molly.”

She started to speak but hesitated, pulling at the cuff of her sleeve. “Do you think,” she said slowly, “that John divorced Mary because he’s in love with you?”

The thought had occurred to him. More than once. Especially the other night when John had kissed him. But he couldn’t think about it now. He’d failed John so irredeemably it only made him sick to think John might love someone who made so many mistakes.

“Thank you, Molly,” he repeated.

She took the hint. “Can I get you anything before I go?”

“No, nothing.”

She left.

Sherlock shut his eyes and let the swarm of thoughts descended on him.

*

Worthless. Useless. Cleverness: Is that all you have to separate you from the ordinary people blundering their way through life like herds of cows? What good is all your cleverness if you can’t even keep John safe? Cleverness: You can’t use it now, can you? No, you’re just like everybody else now. All of those idiot people sitting stupidly by their loved ones in the hospital. That’s you now. You’re just as helpless as they are. You and Mycroft used to mock these people. You thought you were better than them. But you’re not, are you. Chemical defect. You thought you were too clever to end up here. Dangerous disadvantage. And look where you are now. The losing side. Weak. Powerless. Worthless. Look what you’ve done. John wouldn’t be here now if it weren’t for your mistakes. You make so many mistakes. You were supposed to be alone. You were selfish. You wanted him. This is the consequence. You have to be alone. There’s no other option for someone like you. Weak. You thought you didn’t need people. Pathetic. Mycroft can be alone. Mycroft doesn’t need people. But you’ve never been able to do the things Mycroft can. Inferior. You don’t deserve someone like John. He was sick and you didn’t notice. It only proves you’re not capable of caring
for someone the way John deserves to be cared for. You forced him to watch you die a bloody death; there can be no better justice than that you should watch him die now. Of course you’ll have to kill yourself if he dies, but you might consider killing yourself even if he lives. Do everyone a favour. They hate you. They all hate you. They’ve always hated you. Even John might not miss you now. If John wakes up he should hate you for not noticing he was poisoned. He might really be done with you this time. John. Think of his smile. Think of his laugh. Think of his eyes. Now think of him shaking his head, ‘No, I can’t do this anymore.’ And he would be right. It’s what he should say. It’s what he will say. If you haven’t killed him, that is. Picture his gravestone. He didn’t have to picture yours. You’ll never see him again, if they put his body in the ground. His voice, think of his voice. Do you understand you might never hear it again?

It was midnight. The thoughts were relentless. Hours and hours. They tore at him. He was nauseous. He couldn’t breathe. He hadn’t let go of John’s wrist. John’s pulse was the only thing anchoring him in the torrent of vicious abuse. The steady pulse reminded him there was hope, a way out of the all-consuming dark.

He deserved this, he knew. The pain was nothing compared to what he’d done to John. But Sherlock was not used to being at the mercy of emotion and he didn’t know how much longer he would be able to tolerate it.

These thoughts were not new. He’d been left alone with them once before. A week in prison. Solitary confinement. They’d driven him mad. Mad enough upon his release that it had taken sleeping pills and then painkillers and eventually heroin to silence the voices that tormented his waking hours.

“It’s my fault; I should have known. Placing you in solitary confinement was locking you up with your own worst enemy.” Mycroft, a memory.

“It was nothing to do with you.”

And it wasn’t. Mycroft liked to make everything about him (at least Sherlock had thought the solar system revolved around the Earth. Mycroft believed it revolved around himself). Prison might have been the trigger, but the truth was Sherlock would have found drugs anyway. His brain was like a rocket trapped on a launch pad, tearing itself to pieces, and the distractions that the world had to offer—school, research, experiments, even the violin—would have lost their effectiveness with time. He was young, but even then it was inevitable that he would discover the euphoric effects of the chemicals that could save him from himself.

With cocaine he solved problems in whirlwinds of calculations too fast for any of the bad thoughts to catch him, speeding up time to evade the torturous drag of insipid minutes and hours. And with heroin—there was nothing else that could still his racing, self-destructive mind to such a blissful state of numbness. There was nothing else that could shut his thoughts up so completely.

He wouldn’t have survived long if it weren’t for Mycroft and his damned lists. Ever since that first night. Mycroft had found him; he didn’t know how. Wrecked and shaking—wrong doses; he was sure he hadn’t cared by that point. But still it wasn’t his worst overdose. Lestrade had found him for that one. It was a wakeup call that wouldn’t have lasted. For almost a year he’d stayed mostly sober (perhaps a few minor relapses using doses less than half of what he liked), but the needles sang to him at night and the familiar locations of his dealers pulled at him like a magnetic force no matter where he was on the city streets, growing stronger and harder to resist if he neared one.

Sherlock had more or less resigned himself to the tides of life-long addiction, struggling to the shore for periods of sobriety before being swept out again. He’d had a good run, after the episode with Lestrade, but he could feel his will to remain sober ebbing, the drag of the tide calling him back to
depths that blurred hours, days, and weeks. The inevitable overdoses that someone would either pull him back from or they wouldn’t. He’d been lucky so far, he knew that. He also knew there would be a day when his luck would run out. But he found himself caring less and less as tedious time dulled even the thrill of the cases. Without drugs it was all *boring* and *useless* and the cases were all *obvious* and the whole of Scotland Yard was *stupid* and he was sure he was losing his grip on sobriety, because the cold fear of an overdose is a short-term memory, and in the maddening silence of his flat Sherlock was forgetting the point of being sober at all.

And then he’d met John Watson.

John was fascinated by him, and he was fascinating to Sherlock. And suddenly there was a reason to focus again. In John’s eyes the intrigue of the cases was heightened, and in John’s blog there was a better version of himself than had ever existed. Within days John Watson had drowned out the whispering words of his addiction almost completely, and for the first time someone’s praise had resonated in his mind loudly enough to fight back even the worst of the bad thoughts that seeped into his mind in the nights without heroin.

John said he was wonderful and extraordinary and amazing. If someone like John could believe these things, then perhaps Sherlock’s ideas about himself weren’t entirely true.

He didn’t need drugs when he had John. Only the certainty of losing him—the private plane that would take him to Eastern Europe and never bring him back—had made him reach for his syringe again. And now… If he lost John now...

Not even heroin would be strong enough to help him.

Sherlock gripped John’s sheets as another wave of venomous thoughts ripped through him. He couldn’t do this. He wasn’t strong enough. He was weak. *Worthless, useless*...

Wave after wave.

His phone was in his hand. He didn’t remember pulling it from his pocket. Dialling. Who?

“Sherlock,” his brother’s voice was sharp, “what is it?”

Mycroft. In a moment of childish regression he’d called his older brother. He had never acknowledged it, not even when he was younger, but hadn’t he always relied on Mycroft to save him from whatever scrape he got himself into? Didn’t he still?

It was a testament to how far gone Sherlock was that he didn’t hang up immediately. Instead he said, “Mycroft, please,” hating the pain in his voice. “I can’t—”

“I’ll make a call.”

Several minutes later a nurse entered carrying a syringe. Morphine. It was morphine. Mycroft understood. A low tar cigarette for Irene Adler and morphine for John.

Sherlock let the nurse give him the injection. He felt the sharpness of the thoughts that were cutting him apart dull. The voices condemning him quieted. He knew he should endure it all unmedicated because he deserved it. But John was lying there in front of him with his warm skin and his steady breathing and he wasn’t waking up and Sherlock couldn’t… He couldn’t.

He laid his head back down on John’s bed, stroking his thumb over John’s wrist as his consciousness slipped away.
Mycroft ended the call and, frowning, placed his phone down on his desk.

As much as he hated to give his addict (or, what was it Sherlock had called it? 'Occasional user?') brother a drug like morphine, he felt he’d made the right decision. In this circumstance it was undoubtedly preferable to have Sherlock sedated in a controlled environment than it was to leave him up to his own devices.

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hand over his brow. It was almost one o’clock in the morning and he still had a lot of work to do, but Sherlock’s call gave him pause.

The drug Sherlock invented for John had worked. It had stopped the progression of the poison and had acted as a catalyst to allow John’s body to begin healing itself. Mycroft had ordered Sherlock’s notes brought to him from the lab. It was nothing short of incredible what his brother had been able to do in a span of seventy-two hours. The imagination he’d used in selecting chemicals, the balancing reactions: beautifully intricate equations, intriguingly experimental mixtures.

It was a new level of genius for Sherlock and Mycroft was impressed. He had a good knowledge of chemistry himself, but he’d never been passionate about it the way Sherlock was. Mycroft had never been given to passion of any kind. Generally he viewed it as an unnecessary excess of emotion. But passion was Sherlock’s greatest strength as well as his biggest flaw. It drove him to breathtaking heights, but gave him much further to fall. Mycroft had always been steadier, climbing securely from one place to the next, always in control. The result was that he occupied arguably the most powerful position in England while Sherlock was internet-famous for being the detective in the funny hat.

But looking over Sherlock’s notes, Mycroft knew he couldn’t have done anything like it in such a short amount of time. It had been a dangerous exercise in passion: Sherlock’s passion for chemistry tested by his passion for John, and he had pushed himself past his own limits, accomplishing in three days what would have taken even the most brilliant researchers months if not years. But the cost had been high.

Undernutrition. Overdose. Collapse. They had treated him immediately and Mycroft had waited by his side. He’d done it once before. Six years ago. Sherlock had overdosed on heroin. A detective inspector from Scotland Yard had brought him to the hospital and Mycroft had sat by his bed all night, only getting up to leave sometime mid-morning as Sherlock woke.

But now Sherlock was in John’s hospital room. He was alone in John’s hospital room and he had called Mycroft for help.

He was nine years old. Mycroft folded his fingers and rested his chin on them, not seeing the table or the room in front of him but instead looking at a young boy with unruly curls. Sherlock was nine years old. Mycroft couldn’t help seeing him that way. Whenever his little brother got into trouble he was nine years old, looking up at him with tearstained eyes: Mycroft, please.

When they were younger he had done his best to train Sherlock to ignore emotions in order to prevent him from ending up exactly where he was now. But Sherlock had met John, and evidently no amount of training could keep him from falling for the military doctor. Mycroft had seen it right away. And from that point on it had merely been a countdown to this moment. He supposed he could tell Sherlock, ‘I told you so,’ but he didn’t want to.

Because the truth was it hurt him more than he would reveal that his younger brother had asked him for help and there was nothing he could do. Mycroft, please. When they were younger there was no problem Mycroft didn’t already have the solution to, no threat Mycroft couldn’t make disappear.
Sherlock resented him for it, of course, but he trusted him at the same time, coming to him for help when he’d exhausted his other options. Sherlock had always been bitter that Mycroft had answers he didn’t, but Mycroft knew he grudgingly respected him for it.

But now—Mycroft unconsciously clenched his jaw—now there was finally something Sherlock was asking for that he couldn’t do. Sherlock’s MI6 big brother who had saved him from bullies at school and terrorists in Serbia could do nothing now but give him morphine.

_Mycroft, please._ He was nine years old and he was hurting.

Mycroft rubbed his hand over his eyes. _I told you not to get involved. This is what happens when you fall in love. They leave, Sherlock. One way or another they leave, and there is no one who can help you then. Not even me, little brother. It’s the only thing I can’t save you from._
The Lessons Learned

As a child Sherlock was just as nightmarish as you would expect. Far from being in control of his emotions, his was a personality of extremes. The things he liked delighted him to a state of joy that had him giggling and jumping up and down and charming everyone in the room. On the other side his tantrums were enough to make the neighbours call to confirm the boy wasn’t being murdered.

Boredom made him mischievous. Any lack of attention made him intolerably obnoxious. Sherlock needed constant attention, and unfortunately negative attention—scolding from adults and insults from peers—would do just as well as positive.

Sherlock was arrogant and bossy from the time he learned to talk, cleverer than any of his tutors, and a constant torment to their parents. He was a genius—officially declared so by the Stanford-Binet test (although Sherlock’s score, Mycroft discovered with no small amount of smugness when he pinched the envelope from his father’s study, was two points lower than his had been when he’d taken it at the same age)—but he was a hazard as well. He was a profoundly destructive child, gleefully breaking apart toys to see what was inside, cutting his skin to find out what was underneath, and lighting fires to watch how things burned.

But in spite of everything Mycroft couldn’t help feeling a soft spot for his little brother, who looked up at him with wide, earnest eyes and said ‘Mycot’ before he’d mastered the more difficult ‘r’ and ‘f’ sounds.

For Mycroft, however, a ‘soft spot’ meant little in the way of displays of affection. Instead it meant an interest in teaching his younger brother as opposed to ignoring him (which he would otherwise have been inclined to do). Mycroft was seven years old when Sherlock was born, and he decided he would teach him about the difficulties in the world so he would be strong enough to face them.

When Sherlock climbed Mycroft didn’t prevent him from falling. When he reached for something dangerous Mycroft let him have it. When he hurt himself Mycroft let him cry. These were valuable lessons. When they played games he never let Sherlock win. The little boy threw fits about it, but Mycroft could tell his brother held him in higher respect than their parents.

Their parents, who frankly were too old for a challenge like Sherlock, burned through the local agency’s list of nannies in record time, nearly despairing of finding any help at all when finally one arrived who was surprisingly resistant to Sherlock’s antics, and who Sherlock seemed to tolerate in return. Their parents had given up on disciplining him themselves, preferring to comply with his every whim rather than endure a tantrum when he was younger or try to win an argument with him when he was older. Mycroft was the only one who could win an argument with Sherlock, and Sherlock resented him doubly for it.

Even as a very young child Sherlock had always been fiercely independent. He hated that Mycroft was seven years older and that many times more capable. Sherlock would have been the smartest boy in England if Mycroft hadn’t been there first, holding the title above his head. And Mycroft never lost an opportunity to remind his little brother that he was stupid by comparison. Whenever he felt Sherlock’s ego needed an adjustment he would ask him a question he knew he wouldn’t be able to answer.

Mycroft would shake his head. “You’re a very stupid little boy. How disappointing for Mummy and Daddy.”

Such exchanges were necessary; they kept Sherlock’s arrogance in check (if only slightly). But
Sherlock probably never forgave him for it—one of the many reasons for the bitter rift between them.

The two boys had been irreconcilably different from the start. Even their appearances reflected their opposing personalities. Mycroft had perfectly straight, auburn hair and stoic grey eyes. He rarely cried as a baby, and as a young child concealing his feelings was more natural than expressing them. He learned rules quickly and used them to his advantage, manipulating situations and people insidiously, surreptitiously. His handsome, straight-laced appearance and his mastery of social etiquette made him very charming and very likely to get what he wanted. On the other hand Sherlock’s wild black curls and bright, multicoloured irises suggested a kind of chaos that his personality never failed to live up to.

They had both inherited the same exquisite bone structure, ivory skin, and height (though—as Mycroft was thrilled to point out—when Sherlock stopped growing he was the same number of centimetres shorter as the score of his intelligence test was lower: two. They’d had a full on brawl in the garden one Christmas over that point).

They were both sociopathic geniuses but Mycroft had been born with the gift of patience and Sherlock had not. With patience Mycroft had the ability to be diplomatic. He took the time to read people and influence them according to a desired outcome. He refrained from correcting his teachers in order to receive top marks and glowing evaluations. He pretended to like his classmates in order to make connections, always keeping himself in a place of power.

This was the reason why Sherlock had to go in for the psych test and Mycroft hadn’t. Mycroft had the wherewithal to pretend to empathise, to pretend to care about other people. Sherlock didn’t have the patience. His psych test came back labelling him a ‘high-functioning sociopath’ and their mother had cried. Sherlock didn’t understand. He was only six years old at the time.

“You have to pretend,” Mycroft tried to explain.

“But that’s boring,” Sherlock objected.

Mycroft watched his little brother solve the Rubik’s Cube he was playing with, not as fast as he would have done it, but differently. Mycroft would never admit it to his already over-spoilt little brother, but he had always been impressed by Sherlock’s intelligence; he had a unique and creative approach to everything he did.

Despite appearances he truly did care about Sherlock, only six years old and already the only person clever enough for Mycroft to speak to without having to feign interest. He would help him by counterbalancing his parents’ spoiling and endlessly forgiving manner by preparing Sherlock for the real world. He invented stories about The East Wind to tell him at night.

The East Wind was a force that ripped through the Earth, destroying everything in its path and flinging people into oblivion.

“Only the strongest can withstand it,” he explained to Sherlock.

When Sherlock cried, asking why he never survived in the stories (Mycroft took particular pleasure in thinking up new and imaginative ways for little Sherlock to die each night), he replied simply, “The East Wind takes us all in the end.”

“It’s not fair!” Sherlock sniffed, already improving his ability to stop his tears, learning not to cry.

“No,” Mycroft said significantly, “it’s not.”

The point of the stories was to remind Sherlock he wasn’t special, despite their parents insisting he
was. Sherlock was a genius, he was beautiful, but he wasn’t special. He wouldn’t be immune to the forces that would line up against him: the fate of all people who are different. (“When a great genius appears in the world the dunces are all in confederacy against him,” Johnathan Swift had famously written and Mycroft remembered it well.) People would hate Sherlock, Mycroft knew. Jealousy combined with the inability to understand him would make it the most vicious kind of hatred, and Sherlock’s unwillingness to disguise his arrogance would only make it that much easier for the people who would condemn him. It was obvious—entirely predictable for anyone who knew anything about the world and Mycroft certainly knew enough.

He couldn’t change his brother, but he could prepare him. He wouldn’t send the boy out into the battlefield snivelling and defenceless. He would give him the necessary armour to fight. The wind might rage around him, but Sherlock would remain standing. Mycroft would see to it.

As a very young child their parents had, for the most part, kept Sherlock close to home. He had private tutors and little interaction with children his own age or even other adults. Because Sherlock managed to offend nearly everyone who was unfortunate enough to cross his path, their parents wanted to reduce his contact with people as much as possible. He called his tutors idiots and his peers dumb and ugly. It did nothing to reduce Sherlock’s ego that he actually was better looking, smarter dressed (even as a small child), and cleverer than all of them. It might have done wonders for Sherlock’s ability to adjust if only he’d had glasses or plain brown eyes or perhaps even thinner hair.

Fine, Mycroft resolved one evening after some friends of the family walked out angrily following their crying child. If Sherlock wasn’t going to play the game—the society game where people interacted in pre-set ways according to strict rules—then he would have to protect him from it.

* Anticipating trouble on Sherlock’s first day of school Mycroft waited by the schoolyard until his brother inevitably got himself into a fight with about five other boys. Sherlock was irritating, yes, but these imbecilic, inferior children were not worthy of touching him, let alone hitting his (admittedly annoying) face. He didn’t care if it was Sherlock’s fault (he was almost certain it would be). If Sherlock was going to start fights, then the world had better understand that Mycroft was going to finish them.

Mycroft strode through the swarm of little kids, scooping up a struggling Sherlock and placing him safely on top of a slide. Mycroft turned to the boys glaring up at him, they were older than Sherlock, he guessed about nine years old. But he was thirteen and much taller.

“You don’t touch him,” Mycroft warned them.

“Or what?” one of the courser boys challenged him. “What are you going to do about it, toff? I’ll fight you!”

The boy lunged and Mycroft side-stepped him easily, grabbing the back of his collar and stripping his school jacket off.

“Oi!” he yelled. “Give it back!”

There was a fountain just a few paces away and Mycroft wasted no time in submersing the jacket in the water. Turning his back to the kids who were watching him, he furtively pulled a bottle from his pocket and poured it over the jacket as well. He handed it back to the child.

“You think I care?” He threw on the soaking wet jacket to prove his point. “Is that it? If I punch this little twat in the face,”—he pointed up at Sherlock—“you’ll get my jacket wet?”
“No,” Mycroft said casually, “if you, or any of you, so much as touch Sherlock again”—he flipped a lighter out of his pocket and bent to their eyelevel—“I’ll light you on fire.”

With a flick of his wrist he held the lighter under the kid’s sleeve. Flames ripped across the boy’s jacket. The children standing near him shouted and jumped back. The boy screamed, running in circles and flapping his arms.

He didn’t notice when the alcohol Mycroft had poured over the jacket burned off. By his continued high-pitched shrieks it seemed he also had yet to notice that both himself and his jacket were completely unharmed. An old chemistry trick: the water had protected the material and the alcohol had burned off fast; the jacket hadn’t even been singed. The boy threw himself on the ground and the few bystanders who hadn’t run away gaped in horror. Behind him Sherlock was delighted, clapping his hands and jumping up and down at the top of the slide. His gleeful expression would have been enough to send him in for the psych test if he hadn’t already been. He looked at Mycroft like he was a hero.

The teacher who had been supervising a game on the field came running toward them when the kids screamed. Mycroft just had time to give Sherlock a wink before he took off, jumping the fence and returning to his own school.

Needless to say Sherlock continued to be an obnoxious brat throughout the six years he attended that school. Their parents were mystified how it was that he never once came home with a scratch on him.

*

When Mycroft was fifteen there was a girl.

She was fifteen and she was pretty and her laugh made him smile when almost nothing else did. She was clever and she teased him and she held his hand and one day outside of a café she kissed him before darting off to catch her bus. He eventually concluded that he loved her on the grounds that he had never liked anyone. They had almost a year together before she died.

It was senseless. Random. Meningitis. Dangerous swelling of the brain. The severity of the case was rare in England. A freak occurrence. She was only fifteen.

Mycroft went to the hospital. She was unconscious. The doctors said she wasn’t responding well to treatment.

Standing by her hospital bed he told her he loved her, desperation making him want to believe the fairy tales were true—that love could save people or heal them or accomplish anything at all. He was only fifteen.

Like atheists who, when confronted with death, find themselves asking god for help. Fear can make a believer out of anyone. She died within the week, and he understood: Fear can make even the most intelligent people stupid.

Lesson learned. Mycroft would never be afraid again.

The pain, when she was gone, was surprising. He hadn’t had much experience with psychological pain, and was amazed at how he’d underestimated it. He felt torn inside out, like his nerves were exposed and everything hurt. He was drowning and he couldn’t breathe and he knew that this must be worse than dying, because dying has an end.

A fate worse than death and it was entirely preventable, he realised in time when the wound wasn’t
so raw and cold logic could soothe the burning pain. It was really quite simple. If one never fell in love, one would never experience such suffering. Because people were not permanent. People could be ripped away at a moment’s notice. Cancer, a missed red light, a spontaneously rupturing blood vessel, a random act of violence. *The East Wind takes us all in the end.* It was incredible people were stupid enough not to understand the obvious truth: All lives end. All hearts are broken. Caring is not an advantage.

He realised all of this before his seventeenth birthday and he was determined to teach it to Sherlock. He’d been through hell and back but Sherlock didn’t have to. He could avoid all of it, all of the pain. Mycroft had always been level-headed and stoic to the point of unnerving his teachers. Thinking about what loss had done to him he knew he couldn’t allow it to happen to Sherlock. Because if it hurt him that much, he was certain it would destroy his more sensitive little brother.

When Redbeard died it was the ideal opportunity for a lesson.

* 

They had to put him down, that much was clear. Redbeard was old, ten years old. The veterinarian said the lifespan for dogs like Redbeard was between ten and twelve years. Expensive surgeries were halfheartedly discussed for Sherlock’s sake. But the vet shook his head, explaining invasive surgeries would be difficult for an old dog. They would only prolong the inevitable, and not for very long. Sherlock was nine years old. He would be devastated.

Redbeard had originally been a birthday gift for Mycroft the year before Sherlock was born. His name was Charlie then. But Mycroft, six years old at the time, hadn’t been interested. The puppy was messy and chaotic and dumb and he didn’t really understand how to play with it, or why doing so would be desirable. The puppy, probably sensing his disinterest, had never taken to him either. But Charlie fell in love with Sherlock right away, sniffing and licking the baby, and wagging his tail when Sherlock laughed. Mycroft remembered the dog used to sit by, watching like a concerned nanny while Sherlock crawled around the living room. In Mycroft’s memory he had always been Sherlock’s dog.

When Sherlock was five he became obsessed with pirates, only wanting to watch pirate movies and only wanting to hear pirate stories at night. He played ‘pirates’ in the garden with Charlie, who was nicknamed Redbeard for the game, and Sherlock was Captain Shezza. He wore a bandana over his head and tied one around Redbeard’s neck. He had a plastic sword and the two of them went on many daring adventures, some of which involved attacking Captain Mycroft on his way home from school.

Captain Mycroft, however—twelve years old at the time and Shezza’s most formidable enemy—was prepared for this, sometimes engaging in a bit of swordplay (stealing the plastic sword from Redbeard’s collar) if he was feeling indulgent. He was already part of the fencing club at his school and he corrected Sherlock’s posture, teaching him about lunges and parries.

If he was not feeling indulgent, which was more often the case, he simply dodged Sherlock on the front path, lifting him up over his shoulder and carrying him through the house—Sherlock struggling and shouting commands to attack his captor at Redbeard, who insubordinately trotted alongside Mycroft—and putting him down again in the back garden. (Sherlock had always been such a skinny child; it was almost laughably easy to carry him even when he fought. He gave their mother a constant headache by refusing to eat. Even sweets could rarely hold his interest.) Mycroft would lock the sliding glass door behind him for an hour of peace in which he could study, and Captain Shezza and his faithful First Mate Redbeard could go after less challenging foes.

The name stuck and Charlie became Redbeard fulltime, even after Sherlock’s pirate phase faded out.
For Sherlock, who had failed to socialise properly before school, and who regularly made the children at school cry, it would not be an exaggeration to say Redbeard was his only friend. It didn’t matter how much verbal abuse he shouted at the dog when he was upset, Redbeard was always there to greet him eagerly at the door. And Sherlock loved him for it.

But Redbeard was one year older than Sherlock in human years, and by the time the dog was nine he was fifty-five years older than Sherlock in dog years. Sherlock was eight when Redbeard began to slow down. He had arthritis in his hips and he couldn’t run the way he used to.

Mycroft remembered watching Sherlock through the sliding glass doors as he played in the garden one day. Sherlock was running and looking behind him he noticed Redbeard struggling to keep up. Sherlock stopped abruptly. The look on his face suggested he almost, but probably not entirely, grasped the importance of the moment. So begins the lesson on impermanence, Mycroft had thought. It was the hardest lesson to learn.

A year later it was clear they had to put him down. He was old. He was in pain. The line had been crossed—it would be unkind now to let him continue to live. Except for school, which their parents forced him to attend, Sherlock never left Redbeard’s side in that final week.

The night before they had arranged to have Redbeard put down Sherlock was sitting on the floor next to him. He looked up at Mycroft with tearstained eyes.

“Mycroft, please,” Sherlock said, tears rolling down his cheeks. There was no continuation of the sentence, no complete request. There couldn’t be. There was nothing Sherlock could ask of him that would make any logical sense. But Sherlock was nine years old; he was on the floor next to Redbeard, looking up at him and asking him anyway.

It was the first time his little brother asked him for something he couldn’t do.

Sherlock fell asleep on the carpet beside Redbeard and at three o’clock in the morning Mycroft knelt by his side. He put his arms around his brother’s shoulders to raise him up, and still half-asleep Sherlock automatically, like he’d done when he was much younger, wrapped his arms around Mycroft’s neck. Mycroft lifted him without difficulty—the boy was too thin—and carried him to Sherlock’s bedroom. When he put him down in his bed he was already sleeping—that deep, trusting sleep only children can manage. When he woke the next morning Redbeard was gone.

Sherlock was inconsolable the next day, though their parents tried. His brother’s fury and his anguish only confirmed what Mycroft already knew—Sherlock would never be able to handle the pain if it were a person who died, a person who he loved and who perhaps loved him back. It would wreck him beyond repair. He needed to learn now, before it was too late.

A few days later Sherlock was looking out at the back garden and Mycroft caught tears in his eyes in the reflection of the glass door. He stepped up behind him.

“You’re stupid, you know.”

Sherlock whirled around brushing his eyes furiously. “I am not!”

“You are,” Mycroft insisted. “You made a mistake and now you’re crying about it like a baby.”

“I’m not crying!” Sherlock yelled, tears welling in his eyes. He turned his head aside. “What mistake?”

“You loved him,” Mycroft said simply. “This is what happens when you love someone.”
“All living things die,” Sherlock sneered, “whether you love them or not, everybody knows that.”

“But it doesn’t have to hurt, does it?”

“What does that mean?”

Mycroft sighed. “It’s disappointing how slow you are, little brother. Come now, try to think. Do you like the way you feel?”

“It’s horrible”—Sherlock glared out into the garden—“I hate it. I want it to go away.”

“It’s weakness,” Mycroft explained. “This is why you would never survive The East Wind. You’re weak.”

Sherlock didn’t respond.

“Think, Sherlock. I didn’t want Redbeard to die. So why am I not crying?”

“You don’t cry,” Sherlock muttered.

“I am human, Sherlock; I am capable of tears. No, try again.”

Sherlock shrugged. “You didn’t love him.”

“Precisely.”

Sherlock looked up at him.

“To love is to be vulnerable. No one can hurt you if you don’t love.”

“You don’t love anyone?”

“No,” Mycroft said, feeling the cold, hollow place inside of him the girl had left when she died.

“What about Mummy and Daddy?”

“Love is only weakness.”

“But, what about…” Sherlock hesitated.

Mycroft thought about his answer. He loved Sherlock. Of course he did. Sherlock was horribly annoying and stupid at times, but he was also his genius little brother who Mycroft knew even then he would spend his life protecting. Because Sherlock was always going to be in danger. The boy was reckless, antagonistic, ostracized by adults and his peers alike: a magnet for trouble and even violence. When the girl died Mycroft had vowed to never be foolish enough to love again, but it was already too late when it came to his brother. Mycroft could remember the exact moment he knew he loved him.

Initially he hadn’t been keen on Sherlock at all. Having a baby in the house was most inconvenient, not to mention noisy, and he didn’t understand in the slightest why his parents felt it necessary to keep him. He was seven years old, but he had already heard of adoption agencies. However, one afternoon, around six months after they brought him home, Mycroft was sitting on the floor of the living room, back against the sofa, watching telly. Sherlock had recently learned to crawl, and he was doing so around the living room. After a while he crawled over to Mycroft and looked up at him uncertainly. Even then his hair was already curling thick and dark, and his eyes were as bright as ever.
“What?” the seven-year-old Mycroft asked defensively. “What do you want?”

In response Sherlock climbed up onto his lap and flipped over onto his back. Startled, Mycroft instinctively put his arms around the baby to support him. Sherlock was asleep in a minute and Mycroft felt a pull from behind his chest. From that moment on it was too late. He loved his little brother, and it would be his responsibility to teach and protect him, come what may.

And now he was obligated to set a good example. He would lie to Sherlock to teach him the correct behaviour. His weakness didn’t have to be his brother’s.

So, at the age of sixteen, Mycroft looked down with clear eyes at his nine-year-old brother and said, “No, Sherlock, I don’t love you.”

Sherlock flinched, fresh tears springing to his eyes. “Good,” he said, not meeting Mycroft’s eyes but glaring at his chest. “Because I don’t love you either! I hate you!” He ran to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

It was an unpleasant but necessary lesson. And a few months later, Mycroft was rewarded with evidence that his clever brother had internalised it. Their parents asked Sherlock whether he’d like a new puppy and Sherlock shook his head with some vehemence declaring that pets were useless and stupid.

And as far as he could deduce (which was regularly even further than Sherlock), his brother never loved anything or anyone again.

Until John Watson, that is.

* 

It was after two o’clock in the morning when Mycroft stepped quietly into John Watson’s hospital room. His brother was sitting in a chair, half-lying on the bed, one hand clutching John’s wrist.

Sherlock didn’t stir when he entered and Mycroft knew that was the morphine, providing him with a numb, dreamless sleep.

Mycroft had been certain for so many years that Sherlock would avoid this. His reaction to Irene Adler’s death should have been the worst of it—a mere bump in the road: something unpleasant but far from unmanageable. That was how death should be: A minor disruption; sincere condolences; nothing more.

But evidently it had taken just one military doctor to turn everything upside down for Sherlock. Mycroft had seen it right away. That Sherlock had chosen a man was an interesting turn of events, although not unexpected. As little patience as Sherlock had with people in general, he’d always seemed to have less with women.

Initially he was surprised that it was John Watson whom his brother deemed worthy of his affection when for twenty-seven years no one else had been. But after just a moment’s consideration he realised it wasn’t all that surprising. A soldier encompasses an interesting combination of obedience and willpower—an ideal personality for his brother, who would require a certain amount of submission to accept his domineering personality, but also a significant amount of backbone to win his respect. Factor in John’s addiction to danger, his bravery (or the right kind of stupidity), the speed at which he’d become fiercely protective of Sherlock (Mycroft had tested him), his cynical sense of humour, his patience and his loyalty, and he was in many ways the perfect companion for Sherlock. Even his shorter height and lower intelligence were necessary, due to Sherlock’s disdain for anyone
taller than himself and his proven tendency to clash, sometimes violently, with people of equal or higher intelligence.

Add the last remaining variable—that John had fallen for Sherlock almost immediately, despite his brother’s frankly shocking list of flaws—and Sherlock had caved, falling for John in return. Mycroft had seen it the night John shot the cabbie.

Afterward he watched Sherlock trying to pretend it wasn’t true. And John being oblivious—relying too heavily on his previous heterosexual history to see things as they really were. There was a point when Mycroft thought perhaps the two of them had found such an unlikely balance that they could remain in limbo forever. But then Sherlock had decided not to tell John he was alive after he died and John got married and Mycroft was forced to remind Sherlock that he had, indeed, told him not to get involved.

Sherlock had called him from the wedding. Why? Of course John and Mary didn’t care whether he attended. No, Sherlock only called when he needed something. And maybe that day at that wedding his little brother had needed him. The two of them could have stood in the doorway disparaging the wedding guests who had the audacity to enjoy themselves at such a staged, specious and affected ordeal. But for Sherlock the mockery would be just as contrived and hollow as the reception. This time his primary reason for hating the wedding would not have been based on principle. It would have had everything to do with losing John. And Mycroft had no interest in humouring his brother by standing with him on the periphery of the party and allowing him to play pretend.

*Don’t fall in love, Sherlock. You know what happens.*

“They get married, Sherlock,” he’d finally said when Sherlock made him spell it out on the phone. “I warned you: Don’t get involved.”

Of course by that time it was far too late. But Sherlock denied it: “Involved? I’m not involved.”

It was all very childish. The best Mycroft could do then was to remind Sherlock of the lesson he’d learned a long time ago.

“Oh, by the way, Sherlock, do you remember Redbeard?”

Sherlock had chafed at the insinuation. “I’m not a child anymore, Mycroft.”

Standing in the darkened hospital room Mycroft looked grimly at the unconscious and wrecked form of his brother holding desperately onto John’s wrist as though it were a life preserver. The tableau gave him a sense of *déjà vu*. He’d seen this scene before. He’d seen it the night John shot the cab driver. He’d watched Sherlock realising, understanding—watched his eyes as John was suddenly reinterpreted in his mind. And the look on his brother’s face then, eye’s never leaving John’s—Mycroft knew what it meant. It meant this scene, here, now, in the hospital. Like a premonition, Mycroft had seen Sherlock just as he was now at John’s bedside. But of course there were no such things as premonitions. It was simply the balance of probability. His brother’s work was dangerous; it was only a matter of time before John ended up here, either dead or barely alive. It was incredible it hadn’t happened sooner.

Mycroft tightened his grip on his umbrella. There may be a certain kind of sadness for the child who loses his dog, but there’s a certain kind of danger reserved for the person who loses love.

No, Sherlock was not a child anymore. And of all the lessons learned, this was the one Mycroft had hoped he would never have to.
John was walking on soft grass surrounded by thick fog. He couldn’t see more than a metre in front of him. He couldn’t hear his footsteps. For a long time he couldn’t hear anything.

Then there were voices. Bizarrely, Mycroft’s was first. Something about an injection. Murmuring of other voices—he couldn’t hear them. Only Mycroft. He caught enough words to understand he was in a hospital. Coma, it seemed. And then there was Molly’s voice. She was crying. And then Mary’s, telling him everything would be ok. But where was Sherlock?

He ran, desperate to break through the fog, to see something, anything. He needed to wake up. Where was Sherlock? He needed to hear his voice. But there was nothing beyond the fog. Soft, damp grass and thick, grey fog. He had to try to get out. Why hadn’t Sherlock come to see him? What if— But no. He couldn’t consider the possibility.

It seemed like a year that it was just Mary’s voice. She was telling him she loved him. He wished she would stop. He couldn’t hear the entirety of what she was saying but certain sentences came through clearly.

“You can come home with me after all of this is over. This is Sherlock’s fault.”

*Like hell,* John shouted back into the fog. He wished she would leave. He wished she would shut up.

And suddenly there was Sherlock’s voice.

John halted in his tracks. It was like warmth filtering through the mist: invisible, intangible, but it surrounded him, comforting in a way nothing had been since the embrace of Sherlock’s arms around him in the street before he’d closed his eyes.

At first he couldn’t hear individual words, but then they came through in snatches. The word ‘idiot,’ and the word ‘stupid.’ John almost laughed, shaking his head in disbelief. He was probably lying in a coma somewhere and Sherlock was calling him an idiot. It figured.

A full sentence: “John, I’m sorry.”

*Don’t be sorry, Sherlock. If I’m not dead now I know it’s only because of you. Never be sorry. Goddamn it where are you?*

John tried to walk toward the voice, but the sound was illusory. As soon as he was certain he heard it in one direction he was just as sure he’d heard it in another.

There were more words. Not as clear. Something about dishes and the sink… Why was Sherlock talking about dishes? Was his brain garbling the words? He strained to hear more.

“I need you.”

*I know, Sherlock, I know. I’m trying…*

“I’m not as patient as you are.”

*Well give us a twatting minute!*

John picked up his pace; he couldn’t waste time wondering if he was going in the right direction. He just had to go.
“…my inspiration…you’ve saved my life…”

John couldn’t believe his bad luck. Apparently there were two times Sherlock was going to admit to John that he admired him: at his wedding and at his deathbed and now he was missing half of it.

“I need you to be awake…”

_I wouldn’t mind it either right about bloody now_, John thought, turning in circles as he walked to try to get a glimpse of anything through the fog that could ground him.

“…because you are everything to me.”

John stopped dead.

The hesitancy, the uncertainty, the sincerity in the voice he’d come to need as much as its owner made him sink to his knees. Sherlock was here; he must be standing right beside him. But John was nowhere. It was like a nightmare where he was right where he needed to be but couldn’t get there. Lost at home. Desperate to find the person whose voice was all around him. He was with Sherlock now and there was no way to get to him. He wanted to scream in frustration.

John shoved his hands back into his hair. He breathed, trying to ground himself as the oppressive fog threatened to envelop him. There was a light wind rippling the grass beneath his knees. He couldn’t feel it. He couldn’t feel anything. He wasn’t real; he was a shadow of a dream. There was nothing to keep the fog from flowing through him, erasing him. He was numb. He needed something to stabilise him, something that could prove he had solid form: mass and weight—something that could keep him whole even as his skin turned translucent and felt himself disappearing, becoming nothing more than the fog itself.

And suddenly there was heat around his left wrist. A glowing band of heat and soft pressure that shot feeling up his arm and through to his chest. Real heat, not dream mimicry, but real sensation. It flooded through him, rushing solidity and presence into what had been fading. He held his arm out in front of him. There was nothing there, but it felt like someone had wrapped an electric warmer around it. Was it possible—was Sherlock holding his wrist?

*

Mycroft had almost turned to leave when Sherlock shifted, raising his head and sitting up. Mycroft waited for him to speak, but he didn’t. Evidently unaware of Mycroft’s presence he leaned his weight onto John’s bed and, to Mycroft’s surprise, crawled onto it.

Mycroft took a step forward to stop his brother—coma patients were not to be climbed on—but he wavered as Sherlock settled down without knocking out the IV or disturbing any of the equipment. He lay on his side with his head on John’s chest and his arm around him. Was Sherlock awake? He couldn’t be, or he would have noticed his presence in the room.

Seeing his brother like this—trying to hold on to John—he felt the familiar constriction in his chest. It was the same one he’d felt in the helicopter, when Sherlock shot Magnussen in the head. _Magnussen_, Mycroft’s lips tightened at the memory. Magnussen had known weaknesses, pressure points, better than anyone—he’d known Sherlock was his.

Briefly he wondered which would be crueler for his brother, if John died or if John woke up. Because if John woke up they would have to fall back into pretending, if either man wanted to maintain any shred of his self-constructed identity: John as staunchly heterosexual and Sherlock as superior to love and contemptuous of all forms of affection. Looking at Sherlock curled over John’s
body Mycroft sincerely doubted that any such pretence would remain a possibility if John woke up. And what then? Would his haughty brother really condescend to a physical relationship? Or having shattered that delicate friendship—the love they shared so precariously balanced between platonic and not—would they have to say goodbye, knowing self-deception would no longer be an option?

It was a headache Mycroft didn’t have time for. Normally he wouldn’t care—normally being forced to consider his brother’s sexuality would have made him rather cross (in fact it was a blessing that heretofore there hadn’t been one to consider)—but this was different.

With John Watson, he thought wearily as he pressed the button for the nurse, it appeared everything was different.

*  

Heat was radiating around his wrist as John stood and walked forward. The constant pressure and warmth on his skin was combating the numbness that had nearly overwhelmed him before. The fog swirled and parted as he moved. He held his left wrist where he thought Sherlock’s hand was.

It was a while before he noticed the fog was thinning. He could see stretches of grass farther and farther out in front of him and finally there was a dark shape outlined in the distance. A house? John picked up his pace to a jog. Where was he? What was this? It was the first concrete image he’d seen since he shut his eyes in the street with Sherlock—a blur of a memory—how long ago? Days? Weeks?

As he neared the front garden he recognised with a start that it was Sherlock’s parents’ house. The home the detective had grown up in and the place John had been invited to one memorable Christmas which had begun with festive nibbles and ended with Sherlock shooting a newspaper tycoon. But the house was different than when he’d seen it last. The windows were black. There was no doorknob on the front door. John walked the perimeter of the house looking for a way in. But when he reached the back garden he understood that what his mind wanted him to see was not inside the house.

There was a child kneeling in the grass with his back to him. John approached and the boy looked up. John’s breath caught in his chest. It was Sherlock. He couldn’t be more than ten years old, but with his shock of black, curly hair, his pale skin, his thin, wiry frame, and his eyes—there was no mistaking those irises. He was smartly dressed—dark trousers, white collared shirt under dark blue, cashmere jumper. His sleeves were pushed back to his elbows, shirt folded back over the cuffs of the jumper. John tried not to scoff—of course a ten-year-old Sherlock would already have a sense of fashion.

The boy was not surprised to see him there, and he returned his attention to what looked like a pen in his hand. He pointed it toward a line of ants on the ground. He pressed a button and trained the thin laser light on a specific ant until it burned. He did the same to the next.

“They’re so stupid,” Sherlock remarked.

John knelt beside him as ant after ant crumpled under the heat.

He placed his hand gently on the boy’s arm, moving the light away.

Sherlock looked at him curiously.

“Can I see it?” John indicated the laser pointer.
Sherlock passed it to him.

“Where did you get this?” John turned it over in his hands.

“Mycroft.”

Leave it to Mycroft to give young Sherlock illegal ‘toys’ to play with. The strength of the laser was undoubtedly higher than regulations allowed.

When John looked up he was surprised to see Sherlock regarding him carefully.

“John, where are you going?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” John said, handing Sherlock back his laser and standing. “There’s nowhere to go in this fog.”

Sherlock looked up at him. “You’re going that way.” He pointed to a fence John hadn’t noticed before. The gate was open and there was a narrow path through the grass leading out beyond the garden.

Curious, John walked to the gate. He looked out to where the path disappeared into the fog. He felt a pull from within him. Sherlock was right. He was supposed to go this way.

“Don’t go.”

John was startled to find Sherlock standing at his side. It was a strange experience to look down at that head of curls. The child took hold of his left hand.

“I think I’m supposed to.”

As John looked out the fog lifted enough to see farther down the path. There was ocean that way. He could see the shore. Soft sand; the steady pull of the waves. It was nice there, he knew somehow. Everything would be all right if he walked that way.

“I know.” There was sadness in the child’s voice. “I know that’s how it works. Everything I love will leave me. I know.”

John raised his eyebrows. It was a shockingly cynical view for a child, even if the child was Sherlock. But then something else occurred to him.

John blinked down in surprise. “Are you saying you love me?”

“I should have thought it was obvious.”

“It’s not obvious to me.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot.”

John gave a small smile at the familiarity of the conceited words in the young voice.

Sherlock looked back at the ground. “But erm,” he hesitated, “it could also be because it’s not enough. They said I’m a sociopath. It made mummy cry. They said sociopaths don’t love as much as other people, but, John”—Sherlock looked up at him with large eyes—“I love you more than anything.”

Something clenched tight in John’s chest, making it impossible to breathe let alone speak.
“I know you’re supposed to leave now because I told you that, but”—Sherlock’s smaller hand tightened around John’s—“but don’t go. I’m sorry if it’s not enough but it’s everything I have. Please, stay with me.”

John knelt down and held the boy’s arms. There were tears in Sherlock’s eyes but he looked at John steadily.

“Sherlock,” John said, never more certain about anything in his entire life, “I will never leave you. Not if I have a choice.”

Sherlock stepped forward, putting his arms around John’s neck and burying his face into his shoulder. John wrapped one arm around the boy’s thin frame and held the back of his head with his other hand.

“Don’t go, don’t go, please don’t go,” Sherlock was murmuring into his jacket.

“I’ll stay,” John said softly. “I love you.”

The warmth of Sherlock’s body spread through John’s limbs, thawing his numb skin. He felt his nerves prickling like pins and needles, like waking up. He held tightly to Sherlock as the fog dissipated and the garden began to vanish. He would have been falling, he knew, if it weren’t for the weight of Sherlock in his arms, anchoring him while the chaos of the in-between rushed around them.

His eyes were heavy but he was prying them up. Blurring, blurry, sharpening image: Sherlock. Not a child. His eyes were shut but his arm was around him and John’s hand was tangled in the back of his hair, like it had been a moment ago in the garden. The warmth he’d felt had been real. Sherlock was here, lying in his hospital bed, holding him, radiating body heat.

Sherlock, he tried to say. His mouth didn’t work. He moved his hand through Sherlock’s hair but Sherlock didn’t wake. He only tightened his grip on John, pulling him closer.

It was the only moment they had.


Sherlock was pulled away and John found himself unable to protest. There were people around him fussing over monitors and Sherlock was gone.

* 

“We’ll have to move him for rounds in an hour,” the nurse said to Mycroft, looking sceptically at the extra body in her patient’s bed.

“Let him stay until then.”

“I suppose we could—Wait, is that—”

Mycroft had seen it too. They rushed to John’s side as he shifted, lifting his arm to embrace the man curled around him.

“He’s up,” the nurse said urgently. “We have to examine him”—she jabbed her finger at Sherlock—“and we need this guy gone.”
She pressed a button and soon there were more nurses in the room followed by John's doctor. Mycroft murmured instructions to one who grudgingly agreed. They were not in a normal hospital, and the staff were required to follow orders by those who outranked them. Mycroft outranked most people.

The nurse lifted Sherlock’s arm and gave him another injection just as he began to wake. His eyes dropped shut again and the nurses pulled him out of John’s arms and onto a gurney that had been brought in for the purpose. The doctor needed the space to work, to stabilise John, and this was not the time or place for Sherlock’s antics.

Mycroft sent a text and a man met them in the lobby.

“You requested a driver, sir?”

“Yes, he needs a lift home,” he replied, indicating Sherlock’s unconscious form on the gurney. “See that he gets there.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You have the resources to move him? I’m afraid he won’t be of much help.”

“My partner’s in the car. It won’t be a problem, sir.”

The on-call nightshift men of MI6 were no strangers to unusual requests at all odd hours of the night. They were unfailingly reliable and incorruptibly trustworthy. This would not be the first or last time they moved dead weight.

Mycroft nodded. “221B, Baker Street.”
John was asleep, and Mary sat anxiously by the side of his bed. Her name might have been removed from the list of visitors approved to say after nine p.m. (Sherlock’s doing, no doubt), but it was midday on Wednesday, regular visiting hours, and she was resolved to stay until 8:59.

While she waited for him to wake up, she dug into her bag and pulled out her phone. A few clever stokes over the screen and a few would-be top secret codes and she was into the hospital’s system. John’s file downloaded within a few seconds. (The ‘security’ at such a ‘secure’ hospital could stand to be improved, not that the holes in the system weren’t currently working to her advantage.) She needed more than the terse, clipped responses the nurses had given her—all they were willing to provide to someone who wasn’t immediate family.

According to the report, John had woken up in the early hours of Tuesday morning, and Tuesday had been spent testing his responses in the fleeting windows of consciousness that were to be expected as part of the recovery. The process of waking up was gradual—only brief periods of awareness in the beginning. But she was delighted to read that he’d been rapidly improving. As of earlier today, he was able to maintain awareness for over an hour, as opposed to the mere minutes he’d been able to manage at first. He’d recovered his motor responses completely, and the initial confusion and transient aphasia had mostly faded. After three days in a coma, with such quick recovery, John’s prognosis was very good.

Mary snapped her head up from her phone as he stirred, eyes slowly opening.

“John, you’re awake! Thank god you’re awake!” Mary gushed, throwing her arms around him.

He didn’t move. “Where’s Sherlock?”

Mary sat up a bit stiffly. “He’s not here.”

“Where is he? They said he was here last night.”

“Not last night,” Mary corrected. She’d been surprised to find in the visiting records (confidential unless you knew where to look) that Sherlock had not been in John’s room since Monday night. But then she supposed that was Sherlock; he wouldn’t have the patience for sitting by a coma patient.

“Where is he?”

Mary felt her lips tightening. “I don’t know where he is now.”

“I need to see him.” John was looking around her distractedly, as though expecting Sherlock to appear in the doorway.

Mary opened her mouth to protest and then closed it again. It was no use. Looking at the insistence in John’s face—his mind entirely occupied by one track—she could see the truth. Sherlock would always be John’s priority. She and Sherlock had been the two people John loved most in the world, and now that she was out of the running it was only Sherlock. And, if she were being truly honest with herself, it had probably always only been Sherlock. John had only started up with her when he thought Sherlock was dead. And in those years everything John did—his actions, his words, his gestures, his abstracted expressions—everything was shot through with Sherlock’s memory. Even his proposal to her had referenced him: “As you know, these past few years haven’t been easy for me…” It was Sherlock; all the time it was him.
Mary dropped her gaze to her lap. John had been upset with her for deceiving him, but he had deceived her too. Their first date—his heart was available like she was Mary Morstan: not at all. And here he was now, opening his eyes and asking for Sherlock with single-minded desperation. No, there was nothing she could do. Not now, not ever. John had chosen his fate long before he met her.

She stood up from the chair. “I’m leaving now, John. I’m glad you’re awake and feeling better.”

John was holding his phone to his ear. “He’s not answering. Why isn’t he answering?”

“Goodbye, John.”

Mary shut the door gently behind her. She took a deep, shuddering breath. She’d done all she could. If she didn’t want to see John get hurt, there was nothing she could do but not watch. It was over now, and she was determined to hear no more of John Watson and Sherlock Holmes. One day, she knew, she would see John’s name in the obituaries, or his murder on the news, and at that time she would have to take solace in knowing she had spared no effort in trying to prevent it.

She loved him and he didn’t love her back. There was nothing left to do but walk away.

She passed Sherlock’s older brother at the front doors of the hospital. They nodded curtly in acknowledgement of each other as they went their separate ways.

*

John raised the bed up to a sitting position and dropped his head back against the pillow. Why wasn’t Sherlock responding? He’d been here in the hospital, not last night apparently, but the night before. When the initial confusion had begun to dissipate, John remembered waking up like a flash from a dream. Sherlock lying with him in the bed, holding him, pulling him closer. He wouldn’t have believed it, but the nurse confirmed that Sherlock had been there. In his bed. Holding on to him.

Reaching back further, John remembered the fog; he was surprised to find he remembered the coma dream with vivid clarity. It wasn’t like other dreams where the details slipped away with consciousness, leaving only remnants of vague impressions. He remembered everything as though it were a memory and not a dream. The voices—Sherlock’s voice: “You are everything to me.”

Could that mean—did it mean—It must, mustn’t it? Sherlock had lay down in his bed, held him. Even for someone as enigmatic as a consulting detective, a gesture like that couldn’t be ambiguous.

And Sherlock had told him he loved him, hadn’t he?

No he didn’t, John reminded himself sharply. The young version of Sherlock he’d met in the garden was a figment of his own imagination. It was a highly realistic figment, based on the childhood photographs he’d seen (the outfit the boy was wearing was the same one he wore in a photograph on his parents’ living room mantel, the ten-year-old glaring at the camera as though whoever touched the button would have hell to pay) and his memories of what Sherlock had told him (“Mycroft hasn’t been any fun since he gave me lasers to play with,” Sherlock had complained after one of Mycroft’s unwelcome visits to Baker Street), but it was an illusion all the same. The words the child had spoken were inventions of his own mind.

But John, I love you more than anything. John winced as the frankness of the declaration bit into him. Why had his brain given Sherlock those words to say? Was that what he wanted?

John suddenly found swallowing difficult as he understood that unquestionably it was. Whatever uncertainty had previously been lurking around the question had fallen away in the dream. When Sherlock told John he loved him, John’s heart had skipped a beat; the veil of fog in his mind lifted
and he knew absolutely it was what he had unconsciously been wishing, wanting, needing to hear all the time. There had been no need for hesitation when he told Sherlock he loved him too.

And in retrospect it was obvious. It had been obvious to everyone but the two of them all along. There had never been anyone more important to him than Sherlock Holmes, and hadn’t some part of him always known there never would be?

John closed his eyes, replaying the dream-sequence from the garden and seeing Sherlock as his brain had imagined him. He was so young. Why? He thought for a moment and it occurred to him that the answer might be quite simple. Sherlock had to be a child in the dream because John was incapable of imagining the adult Sherlock saying any such things. The child could be vulnerable—the child could say what the adult couldn’t.

It was all true from John’s side. He knew that now. But whether Sherlock’s lines held any weight in the real world was a different story. The scene had been nothing more than a fantasy, possibly even as hollow as wishful thinking. But perhaps John was not as hopeless at deduction as Sherlock despaired of him to be. Perhaps his brain had gleaned more than he was aware of from his observations of the detective’s behaviour—deducing Sherlock’s feelings without being consciously aware of it.

John’s eyes fluttered shut as he attempted to turn his focus inward. He needed to bring up to conscious thought what previously had been nothing but murky, subliminal hints and innuendo. In order to determine how Sherlock thought of him, he would have to think like Sherlock. Evidence. He needed to sort through the evidence to gauge what was real and what was not. It was all there in his memory, but he’d never dared look at it too closely for fear of what he’d find. Now he’d have to haul all of it up out of the dark rivers of his subconscious mind.

John drew in a breath, attempting to block his awareness of his surroundings like Sherlock did.

From the beginning.

It began with silence. Unless Sherlock was lost in deep concentration, the detective filled nearly every waking hour with monologues of thought, complaints, musings, insults—he had a snarky response for anyone brave enough to direct a comment his way (anything ranging from the standard “obviously” to his more creative flourishes, e.g. “you lower the IQ of the whole street”). He could outlive god trying to have the last word. But there was one significant exception. From the very start, Sherlock had never once corrected the dozens of people who’d assumed he and John were a couple. The silence in those moments—the entirely uncharacteristic lack of snide remark—was strange enough to lodge itself at the periphery of John’s awareness. Sherlock lived and breathed just to correct people, yet not even once—

And then there was the way Sherlock looked at him, the way he watched him. John felt the hairs at the back of his neck prickle remembering the sharp brilliance of those exceptional eyes and the way they moved over his skin. He’d caught them lingering on him more than once at crime scenes or in reflections. John wracked his memory to think of any instance where he’d seen Sherlock look at anyone else like that, but he came up empty. Even his gaze on Irene Adler had been different, his expression suggesting something more like uncertain curiosity, grudging admiration, and intellectual appreciation than whatever it was when he looked at John. There was want there, John understood, swelling. Nothing so obvious as lust, but undeniably more than what he’d told himself was merely the cold scrutiny of an inquisitive mind. No, the instinctive tensing of his muscles under that gaze was a reaction to the burn in the scientist’s eyes that had nothing to do with the dispassionate calculation he used on clients.

“Because you chose her.” John felt his chest tighten almost painfully as he recalled the consulting
detective’s expression in that moment, cold mask of aloof detachment stripped by exhaustion and pain, and what John saw there was powerful enough to haunt his dreams. He’d been too upset at the time to properly consider what the emotion in those normally guarded eyes meant (having just learned everything he knew about his wife was a lie), but he’d had plenty of time later, lying awake at night or sleeping fitfully. The vision came back to him again and again.

John’s jaw tightened as he tried to push aside the memory of Sherlock, nearly broken, on the verge of collapse even as he negotiated John and Mary’s reconciliation. The detective’s heart was failing. “You chose her.” John flexed his hands from where they’d clenched into fists around his sheets. He breathed. He had to refocus his thoughts or lose himself to the futile frustration of bitter regret.

Focus.

The kiss from the alley flashed his mind, sending a wave of heat out through his muscles. Sherlock had only done it to prove a theory. But when John gripped his wrist hadn’t he felt the detective’s pulse quick beneath the delicate skin? John willed the memory back to him. Yes, he was positive: it was quicker than it should have been considering they’d only been walking. John hadn’t registered it at the time (too overwhelmed by being kissed without warning by Sherlock Holmes in an alley), but his subconscious must have recorded it, because the sensory memory came back now in full: Sherlock’s pulse beating fast and hard against John’s hand as he was pressing John’s shoulders into the wall and kissing him. John felt his heart rate increase now in equal measure.

He saw an image of Sherlock’s face in the street—the last thing he’d seen before the fog of the coma. John had fallen and Sherlock had caught him. He would never forget that expression. He’d do it all over—the poison and everything—if he could see Sherlock look at him that way again. But near-death experiences are ephemeral. A momentary, fear-induced sentiment is not reliable for predicting whether it would be sustainable long-term. Sherlock had been afraid of losing him. But now that he wasn’t dying—What now?

Concentrate.

Why was there space in Sherlock’s life for John when there wasn’t for anyone else? What had convinced the consulting detective to take him on as a weakness when he’d had so few?

“We’re not a couple.”

“Yes you are.”

John was Sherlock’s biggest weakness, according to the criminal world. And they were right. They’d confirmed it more than once with Semtex and American agents with guns and fire. They were right.

“But look how you care about John Watson.”

He wasn’t the only person Sherlock cared for. There was Lestrade and Molly and Mrs. Hudson and Mycroft (yes, Mycroft; Sherlock would scowl and deny it but John, who was not a petulant child, could see the admiration and respect the detective held for his older brother that ran deep beneath the childish feud). In a more wilfully blind time John would have grouped himself in with the rest of them—just another of the select few Sherlock tolerated: the allies who balanced around the edges of his life, ready to aid when called. But it wasn’t true. He knew with deep-seated certainty that he wasn’t in the same category. Lestrade’s place was Scotland Yard, Molly’s was Barts, Mrs. Hudson’s was Baker Street, and Mycroft’s was the inner-workings of England itself. But John’s place was at the heart of all of it, with Sherlock—at his side, always—inextricable in a way the others weren’t.
John scrubbed a hand over his face. The whole thing was scarcely believable. Him, Sherlock… But the evidence was there. What was it Sherlock was always saying to him? *When you’ve eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.*

However improbable.

John pressed the button for the nurse. He had to get out of here. Now. He needed to get back to Baker Street. He needed to wrap his arms around his detective and never let him go.

* 

“I assume Sherlock isn’t responding.”

Startled, John looked up from his phone. Not a nurse. “Where is he?”

Mycroft sat down in the chair next to the bed. “At Baker Street, I believe.”

“Then why isn’t he—”

“It was necessary to… remove him from your room. He was very much in the way of the medical proceedings.”

John narrowed his eyes. “What did you do?”

“Just gave him something to help him sleep. He should be up by this evening.”

“Hasn’t he been drugged enough lately?”

“Yes, I’m sure he would have responded nicely if the doctor had simply asked him to leave, don’t you think?”

John leaned his head back against the pillow. “How long are they going to keep me here?”

“They want another few days for observation, but I negotiated an option for you to be discharged today with the necessary supplies to maintain an outpatient status.”

John stared at Sherlock’s older brother. “Really?”

“You can leave this evening, if you’d like.”

John’s lips parted in amazement. “Why would you do that for me?”

“It’s all about balance,” Mycroft explained breezily. “Sherlock is bound to be displeased with me for sending him home the other night. However, if I send you home early the balance is restored.”

“It’s always games with you geniuses, isn’t it,” John said, though he couldn’t help the smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. He could go home. Sherlock would be there. At home. Baker Street. Their home.

This was the best part. After they made it through a case, scraped and bruised they could laugh about the whole thing over whisky and takeaway. Not that John’s stomach would be up for either any time soon, but they’d get there. They had time now. Eventually they’d get there.

“Don’t be absurd, John. Life is not a game”—Mycroft stood and re-buttoned his suit jacket—“And anyway, I intend to win.” Mycroft arched an eyebrow as he gave him a half-smile and John wondered if what he’d just witnessed was as close to a real smile as Mycroft Holmes ever came.
“One question,” John asked as Mycroft was turning to leave. “It might just be the coma, but I could have sworn— When Sherlock found me in the street he was talking to me, but I could have sworn he wasn’t speaking English. Do you have any idea what that could be about?”

Mycroft stopped at the end of John’s bed, tapping his hand on the rail. John watched the brief tension in his shoulders—not entirely dissimilar to Sherlock’s posture in the minute pause before a quick decision. Mycroft turned around.

“Sherlock was a mistake,” he said.

“Wh—I don’t—”

“My mother was forty when Sherlock was born. My parents already had two children and they certainly hadn’t planned on a third.”

John gaped. A hundred questions vied for the spot in his mouth but the strongest won out. “Sherlock has another brother? Sister?” Complete disbelief rang in his tone. “There are three of you? But—I mean, where—”

Mycroft held up his hand. “It’s another story for another day. Perhaps you can ask Sherlock to tell it to you at bedtime.”

John shot him an annoyed look and Mycroft smirked.

“Our parents were too old for a child like Sherlock,” he continued, straightening his posture (if it were possible for it to be any straighter) and clasping his umbrella behind his back. “He was a terror, if you can imagine.” John nodded. “Yes, I’m sure you can. They hired a nanny for him. They hired many nannies for him, in fact, all of whom eventually left in tears until one didn’t. She was Czech—only twenty-two years old, blonde hair, very pretty. Her name was Eliška Mila. She seemed to hold a kind of spell over Sherlock. She spoke to him in Czech and he was quiet, listening—he was two years old then. She played with him, sang to him, kissed him—I believe she loved him, and, incredibly, he was almost docile in her presence. She could quiet his tantrums by holding him in place, looking into his eyes, and speaking to him in Czech. Sherlock, being what he is, learned the language quickly enough that it nearly rivalled English as his first language.”

John was listening with rapt attention. This was more about Sherlock’s childhood than he’d ever heard.

“She left a few years after he started school. I’m sure our parents would have kept her on longer”—Mycroft scoffed—‘I’m sure they would have kept her on through his university years. But she had made arrangements to return to the Czech Republic. He cried when she left. He spoke nothing but Czech for a week in protest, believing our parents were responsible for sending her away. I was the only one who could talk to him then. I hadn’t spent much time with the nanny, but as a precaution I learned the language as soon as Sherlock started to speak it.”

“It’s incredible,” John marvelled. He had always known Sherlock’s childhood must have been nothing short of extraordinary. “So you think—that night in the street—you think he was speaking Czech?”

“Because of the early age at which Sherlock learned the language, and because of Miss Mila, Czech seems to be tied to an emotional part of Sherlock’s mind. If he were ever to find himself in great emotional distress his brain might use it as a defence mechanism—an attempt to comfort the way his nanny used it to comfort him as a child.”
“He’s fascinating,” John breathed.

“Is he?” Mycroft’s indolent sarcasm snapped John’s awareness back to centre and he felt a slight flush in his face. He’d forgotten who he was talking to.

“Now I really must be going,” Mycroft said, checking his watch. “My best wishes for a quick recovery.”

John found himself staring at the space one of the most important men in England had just occupied for more than a few seconds before he remembered to blink.

*

Sherlock pulled his eyes open and found himself face down in his bed, fully clothed except for his shoes. Stiffly, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and did his best to bring the symbols on the display into focus. Six p.m. Wednesday. Wednesday.

He sat up fast and the room swam around him. Drugs. He had been given more than morphine at the hospital.

He struggled to order his sluggish thoughts. Why? Why was he back at Baker Street? He was supposed to be in John’s hospital room. They had moved him here. Why? They wanted him out of the way. Or perhaps there was something they didn’t want him to see—

John.

Something had happened; something had changed.

John.

Sherlock leapt off the bed and groped around the floor for his shoes. Images of a flatlining monitor, nurses pulling him off the bed and trying to restart John’s heart, Mycroft barking orders for Sherlock to be sent home—Sherlock nearly choked, bile threatening to surge upward from his stomach.

But hadn’t he remembered John’s hand in his hair? John wrapping his arm around him when he had climbed into John’s bed? No, but he was dreaming. He was asleep then.

Finally he managed to get his shoes on with trembling fingers. He flung open his bedroom door. He had to get back to the hospital.

He had just grabbed his coat from the couch where it had been tossed when he heard the doorknob turn. He stood stock-still as it opened, and he dropped his coat to the floor when he saw who was standing in the doorway.

*

John barely had a chance to get a good look at Sherlock before his flatmate collided with him. He was swept into a bone crushing embrace and John staggered back at the force of it. As soon as his muscles could react he leaned into Sherlock to steady them, wrapping his arms around the detective in turn. He felt Sherlock’s hands gripping the back of his coat in fistfuls—needy, desperate: *I was afraid. I thought you were dead.*

John held Sherlock tightly: *It’s ok. I’m here now.*

Sherlock shifted his hands on John’s back, pulling him closer, though John hadn’t thought it was
possible: *Never leave me again.*

John closed his eyes: *I won’t. Sherlock. I chose to be here. I had a choice and I chose you.*

John leaned into his flatmate’s wiry, sturdy body, thinking of the road through Hell they’d taken to get to this point. Walking through the door of 221B just now had felt like coming home from Afghanistan—wounded and weary, but this time he had someone to come home to. And not just anyone. The person who held him now was his comrade in arms, his flatmate, his detective, his scientist, the man who had saved him again, this time by inventing an impossible antidote, and by simply being who he was: genius, beautiful, inexplicable, infuriating, endearing, intimidating, immature, challenging, wonderful—someone to die for, but more importantly someone to live for.

It was the second time John had made a conscious decision to live for him, and he would do it again every time.

John didn’t know how long they stood there like that in the doorway, but finally he pulled back, separating them just enough that he could see Sherlock’s face. The expression in the detective’s eyes made John’s words catch as he spoke them. “Thank you.”

Sherlock blinked, unresponsive as though he didn’t understand.

“You saved my life.” John struggled to get the words out under the intensity of Sherlock’s stare, which hadn’t moved from his face since he’d separated them.

Sherlock’s only reaction was to pull John in tightly, wrapping his arms around his back. He ducked his head, curls brushing John’s cheek as he buried his face at the base of John’s neck, nose brushing the exposed skin above the collar of his coat. He breathed deeply and John could feel the tension in Sherlock’s muscles ease.

John closed his eyes, relaxation spreading through his own body as he held Sherlock like he was everything in the world worth holding on to.
A thousand apologies had been on the tip of his tongue, but John had thanked him instead.

Rendered speechless, Sherlock found his awareness narrowed to the person in front of him. Dark blue eyes watching him uncertainly beneath sandy hair. It was just a few hours before he’d been forced to consider the possibility he might never see them again. But they were open now and active, searching his face.

John: alive, awake, moving, breathing, shifting, small expressions and gestures flitting through his body with the energy that animated him. Warm blood, warm skin, strong pulse: life-force, real, overwhelmingly present. He had come back.

The confusion of John’s sudden appearance was compounded by the haze of the drug still hanging heavily over his mind, and Sherlock found he wasn’t quick enough to stop his more irrational drives from taking over. He pulled John closer and dropped his face to his neck as though his body knew John’s scent was what it needed to calm it. It worked immediately. As he breathed he felt the tension in his muscles finally, blessedly unwinding.

John smelled like warm tea and cold gunmetal: the familiarity of home and the thrill of danger at the same time. The scent of his skin was uniquely John, and Sherlock felt the comfort he dragged from it edged with something sharper, something like electricity. Because while he and John had become closer than words could label over their years together, there had never been anything as simple as easy familiarity between them. As comfortable as they were in each other’s presence, there was always a hint of tension, a faint ripple of static electricity in the air. The volatility of their relationship could have them clutching at each other, gasping in laughter, or lunging at each other’s throats. And Sherlock needed that. It was like a mirror of his work: as familiar as it was unpredictable and as soothing as it was dangerous. John: the embodiment of home and the promise of violence. Everything he needed.

John stepped back just enough to put his hand to Sherlock’s jaw, raising his face to meet his eyes. “I—” John dropped his hand and gripped Sherlock’s arms to steady himself as he swayed on his feet. Sherlock braced him, eyes flashing over his body. “Are you ok?”

John stood up straighter and a weak smile pulled at his mouth. “I’m fine. I just—I might have to sit out on the rooftop chases for a day or two.”

John’s voice was like a catalyst triggering the release of oxytocin—that unfamiliar, intimacy-based chemical—in his brain. It left him off balance, and it took him longer than he would have liked to respond.

“You should lie down,” he said reluctantly. He didn’t want John to lie down, because that would require letting go of him, and he was not interested in letting go of him. But John was tired—exhausted—of course he was. Sherlock knew the effort it was requiring for him to simply stand here like this. John would need days of rest to regain his strength while the antidote helped his body to heal.

“Yeah, I should.” But John didn’t move. Instead he looked at Sherlock with dilated pupils and the
subsequent wave of norepinephrine flooded his veins with such sudden force that Sherlock nearly jumped back, dropping his arms and turning away.

John stuffed his hands into his coat pockets a bit awkwardly. “I’ll just go lie down for a bit then.”

“Right, erm, you should rest. Take my bed; it’ll be more convenient on the main floor.”

Sherlock noticed a flush around John’s neck as he ducked his head and cleared his throat. “Erm, yeah, all right.”

He moved past Sherlock, but he stopped and turned back just as he reached the hallway. “You invented an antidote for a poison that had none. You saved my life.”

Sherlock regarded John carefully. There was a question he couldn’t ask—an answer he needed. He chose his words with precision. “I asked you to come back.”

He willed John to hear the question in the words borrowed from long ago.

And he did.

John held his gaze. “I heard you.”

*

John slept on and off for the next few days, vaguely aware of Sherlock moving around the flat like a shadow. He never slept, as far as John could tell. He was engrossed in some experiment involving singed hair—not his, John was relieved to learn when he stumbled out of bed at the acrid smell and found Sherlock’s head not on fire.

They barely spoke in the time John was awake, and in many ways he was grateful for the silence. He was exhausted as his body healed itself, and in the brief periods of time he managed in the living room it was soothing to sit quietly and listen to Sherlock play the violin, or to watch him methodically working through an experiment.

Yet as absorbed with his work as Sherlock seemed, John thought he could sense Sherlock’s gaze on him whenever he closed his eyes, or whenever he walked back to the bedroom. And the weight of it was heavy in a way that made John’s heart rate quicken.

On Sunday he felt well enough to venture outdoors for a walk. On Monday he went out for longer. Today he felt almost fully recovered, and when he came home from his walk, trotting briskly up the stairs, he was optimistic enough to consider going for a jog tomorrow.

When he walked into the living room, Mrs. Hudson was in the flat and Sherlock was not.

“Oh, deary I’m so happy you’re home safe and sound,” she said, giving John a tight hug. He realised with a start that he hadn’t seen her, or anyone except Sherlock, since he’d come home from the hospital. Was that Sherlock’s doing, he wondered, keeping people away until John felt better? There had been no clients, no Lestrade, no cases—as far as he knew Sherlock had never even left the flat until today.

“How are you feeling?” Mrs. Hudson asked him.

“I’m fine,” John said dismissively, “just needed some rest. Do you know—”

“He’s at Scotland Yard,” Mrs. Hudson gave him a knowing smile. “They needed a testimony or
something. He told me to ring him as soon as you got home.”

“That’s all right. I’ll text him later.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Hudson looked worried, “are you sure? He was very insistent I let him know right away. He was a bit scary actually.”

John grinned. “Leave him to me.”

“All right, dear, whatever you say. Do you need anything? I can make you a cuppa...”

John declined her offers and relieved her of her watch.

He looked around the empty flat. There were mugs and cups and saucers left around the living room from where Sherlock had evidently been moving restlessly the night before. John could almost see his pacing—the mug left on the mantel, the saucer on the table by his laptop, the cup on the windowsill... John shook his head. His flatmate was truly— John stopped mid-thought as something twiggled in his memory. Leaving dishes around the flat. When Sherlock was talking to him while he was unconscious he’d mentioned something about dishes. John had thought it was his own confusion but what if—had Sherlock...? The sentence came back in full: “If you come back I promise to put the dishes in the sink.”

John grinned. He snapped a picture of the cup and saucer on the table and sent it to Sherlock with a message: I believe we had a deal about this.

He only had to wait a minute for a response.

No memory loss then? SH

None. Tough luck.

I’ve had worse. SH

John smiled. Sherlock, god he’d missed him. His phone buzzed again.

Stay at the flat. On my way. SH

John’s smile broadened.

*

It was a painfully long cab ride back to Baker Street but Sherlock felt he bore it heroically, considering the circumstances. The cabbie, however, did not seem to agree, practically tossing him out at the kerb.

Sherlock had watched John’s recovery carefully. He'd been pleased on Sunday that John had felt strong enough to go out, and he’d wasted no time in following him that day, and each one after. He could have asked to walk with John, but he’d already deduced John would interpret the offer as a form of mollycoddling (which he supposed it was) and refuse anyway. On Monday it was clear that John had much of his strength back, and Monday night had been spent in furious internal debate. But he’d come to a decision in the early hours of the morning.

Lestrade had called for the thirty-eighth time since John had been back from the hospital (Scotland Yard needed him for a hundred things, as usual, but most importantly this time they needed his testimony for the Moran case), but he’d been putting them off until he felt John was recovered
enough to leave him. And still he’d stationed Mrs. Hudson in the flat as a precaution.

Sherlock walked into 221B, swinging the door shut behind him, not bothering to remove his coat or shoes.

John was in the kitchen, wearing one of Sherlock’s favourite striped jumpers, putting the kettle on. He turned at the sound of the door, eyes lighting when they rested on Sherlock’s face. He was momentarily taken aback as he witnessed, in reality, the exact scene he used to play in his mind when he was away from London. He walked into the kitchen, drawn to John as though they were magnetised.

“How was it at Scotland Yard?” John asked, hair glowing bright under the light, still damp from a recent shower.

But Sherlock didn’t stop walking when he should have. He went farther, crowding into John’s space. John’s eyes widened, but he didn’t step back.

Sherlock had thought about this. He had thought about this all night. He needed John, and ever since that night in the cemetery he’d known he needed more from him than basic companionship. And he was tired of holding back. He wanted everything John could give him and more. And he wanted it now, before either of them died again.

And he knew John wanted it too—a rather elementary deduction now that he could consider all of the evidence clearly. And he realised with some surprise that as much as he wanted to take from John he wanted to give him back doubly in return. He would give John whatever would make him happy. And if John wanted this, then the danger to his mind palace would be a necessary risk.

His eyes swept over his doctor—the familiar curves of his face, the scent of his hair fresh from the shower—the proximity was overwhelming. John stood his ground but Sherlock could hear his breathing quicken. He felt the same lack of oxygen as the air seemed to rush from the room. He’d thought about it all night and concluded he could do this. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d chosen John over his work.

“I missed you,” Sherlock said, voice low, and he watched John’s pupils dilate at the sound.

He meant today, at Scotland Yard, he had missed him. He meant the past few days John had been sleeping. He meant the coma. He meant the past year John had been living with Mary. He meant the two years he’d been away from London. He meant every weekend, every conference, every Christmas, every night since they met that Sherlock had opened the door to 221B and John wasn’t there.

Sherlock grabbed a handful of John’s jumper and kissed him.

* 

John could not believe what was happening for the first few seconds it was happening. And then a rush of heat through his veins burned off the paralysis. He reacted. He kissed him back, sliding his hands under Sherlock’s open coat to wrap his arms around the detective’s lean frame even as he felt Sherlock’s hands skimming down his back to grip at his waist.

Kissing Sherlock was like nothing he had ever experienced. How could a person with such hard angles have such soft lips? His coat and hair smelled like the night air, cold and sharp. John let his tongue graze the edge of Sherlock’s lips and Sherlock parted them for him, allowing John to slip his tongue inside, meeting Sherlock’s and feeling a heady rush at the taste of him. The scent of him, the
taste—it was overpowering and he needed more; he had to get closer though there wasn’t any space between them. He found himself undoing Sherlock’s suit jacket and running his hands up his sides and around to his back.

The strength and energy in the detective’s sinewy muscles was provocatively different from the soft curves John was used to. Sherlock’s body was firm, powerful, challenging, directly opposed to the supple and pliant form that John had found attractive in women. And yet John discovered that the more he felt the more he wanted the challenge.

He worked Sherlock’s mouth, intoxicated by the taste of him, running the tip of his tongue along the length of Sherlock’s, stroking, using it to draw Sherlock’s tongue into his mouth.

Sherlock dropped slightly down onto the edge of the kitchen table and John stopped with some astonishment. He hadn’t been aware that he was walking Sherlock backward, pushing him back toward the table. He stood between Sherlock’s legs taking a moment to appreciate the image before him. It was like nothing he had ever seen. Sherlock was beautiful, breathtaking: breathing heavily, lips swollen and pink from kissing, pupils blown wide, eyes never leaving John’s face.

“God, Sherlock,” John breathed, almost choking on the words.

The sight of him, on the edge of the table, looking at him like that—it triggered something deep within his core: a primal instinct that made him want to grab Sherlock’s hair and force him back, kiss him and bite him and claim him in a way John was sure no one had before. There was a certain wiring in his brain that wanted to shove Sherlock down now and have at him until both of their visions blurred.

And Sherlock was looking at him, breathing heavily, eyes questioning, unsure, waiting, and suddenly John wanted to do none of those things. He moved forward and ran his left hand through Sherlock’s hair, gently tangling his fingers in the curls at the back. With his right hand he held the side of Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock was watching him as he ran his thumb over his cheekbone—delicate bone structure—wishing there was a way he could tell Sherlock how beautiful he was without having to use anything as clumsy as language.

John angled his head and when their lips met he paced the kiss deliberate and slow. He kissed Sherlock like he watched him at crime scenes, doing his best to communicate all of his admiration and amazement. He kissed Sherlock like he deserved to be kissed: tenderly, honestly, thoroughly, with all the adoration a person can single-mindedly focus on the body in front of him, on the dazzling mind behind those spectacular eyes. He kissed Sherlock like he was not an outsider, ostracised by all who knew him; he kissed him like he belonged—like there was nowhere he belonged more completely than right here at the centre of John’s world. He kissed Sherlock like he was precious, exquisite and rare, extraordinary, like he was worth protecting, like he was worth everything.

John tipped Sherlock’s head back and kissed him like he loved him.

*  

He kissed John and when John kissed him back it was like being plunged underwater: there was a roar like rushing water in his ears and then silence. Complete silence. John was kissing him, running his hands over his body and Sherlock could hear nothing but the beating of his own heart, all external sounds deafened by the crush of silence pressing in around him. He could hardly breathe. His sensory awareness was narrowed to the scent of John, the taste of him, the heat of his mouth, the scrape of his teeth against his lips, the sturdy strength of John’s body under his hands.
He couldn’t hear. He couldn’t see. His eyes had fallen shut and were not interested in opening again. John was pushing back against him, walking him backward, and Sherlock let him, trusting in a way he could never trust anyone else.

When he found himself half-sitting on the edge of the kitchen table John pulled back and Sherlock’s eyes fluttered open. John was looking at him with an expression that made Sherlock’s breath hitch. It was predatory. He could feel the intensity of John’s want electrifying the air between them.

“God, Sherlock.” John’s voice was deep, desire scraping it course. Sherlock’s eyes fell shut for a moment at the sound of it. He knew without a doubt that whatever John would do to him now, he would let him. Because he wanted it just as much. He could feel the nerves in his skin crying out to be touched the same way his veins used to beg for heroin. But this was new. In the past he’d found kissing thoroughly unpleasant. It was nothing like this. He had never wanted anybody like this. The chemicals in his brain were giving him a rush he hadn’t thought possible without synthetic supplements. But he felt a touch of anxiety weave through his desire—he’d never been here before and, for once, he needed John to guide him.

Suddenly something shifted in John’s expression. If he’d been worried that John might start tearing off his clothes, he realised, as John ran his hand back through Sherlock’s hair almost caressingly, that he needn’t have been. John tightened his grip on his hair and pulled back gently, causing a highly pleasurable sensation that shot directly to Sherlock’s groin. Sherlock’s eyes locked onto John’s as John cupped his face, and when he kissed him again it was completely different.

John was kissing him slowly, deeply, intensely, and Sherlock felt warmth spreading from his core out through the rest of his body. He held the back of John’s head. His hair was cold and damp from the shower: a pleasing contrast to the heat of his skin. He wrapped his arm around John’s back, feeling the energy in the tension of his muscles, smooth in their movement beneath his hand.

With some amazement Sherlock realised John was kissing him like he looked at him: protectively, admiringly, devotedly, and defiantly at the same time. Those looks gripped his heart. This kiss threatened to burn him from the inside out.

The strength of the emotion in the kiss—the one they both hadn’t known they needed for so many years, yet had wanted all the time in dreaming and in glances and long looks and light touches—it was all-consuming.

The silence that had engulfed Sherlock broke. There was roaring in his ears as cascades of Feelings crashed through his mind. He let them sweep him away. He let go and let them carry him. Because the truth was, as tightly controlled as he kept his mind, he liked to let go. He liked to relinquish control and allow himself to be swept along by a current stronger than himself. In the past he had needed drugs for that. Now he needed only John.

John’s tongue was hot against his, clever strokes like a promise of more. Sherlock saw his mind palace, as if from a distance. He watched towering waves crashing over it, ripping through it, tearing the walls apart, and suddenly he felt a grip of horror seize him. His mind palace: years and years of meticulously collected information, his life’s work. It was being destroyed.

NO, something at the back of his mind shouted and Sherlock reacted like a switch had been flipped. He grabbed John’s arms and pushed him back, propelling himself off the table.

John looked at him, dazed and confused, hair mussed from where Sherlock had run his hands through, pupils large and black under the kitchen light. Sherlock looked helplessly, desperately at the only person he’d ever wanted.
*I’m sorry, John,* he thought, the words like pain in his mind. *I can’t do it.*

John kissed Sherlock on the kitchen table and Sherlock responded wonderfully, melting into the kiss and wrapping his arms around him and holding him like he needed him.

He pulled back on Sherlock’s hair and Sherlock groaned just slightly against his lips. The sound sent a wave of pleasure through him that pooled in his lower abdomen. He drew back just enough to breathe—to steady himself—he needed control if he didn’t want to wind up shoving Sherlock backward onto the table. John kissed his lips, kissed the corner of his mouth, the edge of his jaw, the hot pulse point on his neck, the beautiful, porcelain skin of his cheek, tenderly, making the message clear with every kiss: *I love you.*

Sherlock’s eyes were still closed when John went back to reclaim his mouth. Sherlock parted his lips immediately and John was more than happy to indulge the request, keeping his tongue slow, controlled, while Sherlock explored it carefully with his own. John deepened the kiss, losing himself in it, pouring everything into it that he needed Sherlock to know.

He was completely caught off guard when Sherlock shoved him back.

He stared at Sherlock blankly through the haze the kiss left over him, and Sherlock looked back at him for a moment before he strode out the door, slamming it shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, now *lifts hands and backs slowly away from murderous mob* um, let’s just remember that this mind palace thing was an unresolved issue that did need to be addressed… Um, there are still two chapters left… please still read them?
Sherlock paced Mycroft’s obnoxiously posh flat as he worked his way through his third cigarette. It had taken two before his hands stopped shaking. He didn’t bother opening the window. Mycroft was a prat; he deserved whatever smoke fumes he got.

He circled the grand piano as he made his way from the living room to Mycroft’s office and back again. Of course Mycroft’s flat was large enough to contain a grand piano. (Sherlock hadn’t heard him play in a long time, but under duress he would admit that his brother had more talent than even the most revered of the modern pianists, though he never played in public. It was their mother’s greatest joy when she could guilt trip the two of them into playing together, and they made sure to do it as seldom as possible.)

Sherlock arrived in the kitchen only to turn back around for the living room. Mycroft was not home. Sherlock had known he wouldn’t be. He rarely used this flat. When he wasn’t out of town on business he preferred to use the rooms he had in the centre, closer to his office. Breaking in hadn’t exactly been easy, but then Sherlock didn’t require easy when it came to breaking and entering. He never let Lestrade forget how fortunate it was for Scotland Yard that he found solving crimes more interesting than committing them.

He raked his hand through his hair, sensory memories of John’s hands hot on his skin. The look in his eyes, the low growl of his voice—Sherlock took a long drag, letting the smoke burn the taste of him from his mouth. God, what had he done?

He’d been so certain when he kissed John that he could handle it. But he had underestimated by far the strength of John’s reaction and the strength of his own. He’d thought he could tolerate the damage, withstand the impact. But upon being confronted with the reality of the destruction—the perfect organisation of his mind palace upended by the chaos of emotion—he couldn’t let it happen.

John was the most important thing in the world to him. But his work, his mind palace, was him. ‘Sherlock Holmes’ was only a synonym for ‘consulting detective.’ If he allowed emotion to flood his mind palace, he wouldn’t be who he was. It had taken him nine days to notice John was poisoned because he had been distracted trying to hold back waterfalls of feelings that were threatening all the time to sweep away his identity, leave him with nothing but a headful of emotional need and sexual want. He had an addictive personality. He knew this. If he allowed himself to want John… It was doubtless the addiction would follow swift and all-consuming.

Once upon a time it had been easy. Excepting any time John was in real danger, the Closet had been enough keep the cluttering feelings clear of his consciousness. He had deluded himself so well that the searing pain of saying goodbye to John (as he stood on the rooftop of Barts) had almost come as a surprise—tears springing to his eyes at the unexpected sensation of being torn in half. Since when had John become such a significant part of him that leaving the doctor behind resulted in the detective going forward incomplete? A gaping hollow left cold where something warm had been.

The emotions surrounding John in his mind had only become harder to contend with after that. He had thought perhaps things would stabilise after John’s wedding. But then John left Mary and came back to Baker Street and it was everything Sherlock had wanted until that night in the cemetery when he’d realised it wasn’t. It wasn’t enough.

Sherlock pressed his palms into his eyes. He couldn’t hold back the floods anymore. He didn’t want to. He’d thought he would simply let go and deal with the consequences accordingly. He had been naïve. But how could he have known? He’d suffered through the disagreeable act of kissing in the
past; he’d never experienced anything like what had happened in the kitchen today.

His wrist trembled as he held the cigarette to his lips, remembering the scrape of John’s teeth against them—of John’s tongue against his own… It was only kissing. What state would he be in now if John had—Sherlock shut his eyes in attempt to stop the thought in its tracks. He remembered the tenderness of the kisses on his face. He wondered if John had kissed any of his past partners like that. He felt a wave of nausea that had nothing to with the dousing of nicotine his body was taking.

He checked his phone: nothing from John. Sherlock hadn’t sent him a message either. There was nothing he could say. At least not until he solved the problem. There had to be a way he could have what he wanted—give John what he wanted—without compromising his mind palace. Why did desire have to be such massive mental real estate? How could he find space for it when his brain was already filled to critical levels with essential information?

It was true some part of him wanted to give up and give over all the space he had in his mind to John. That, perhaps, had been the part of him responsible for the decision to kiss his doctor so recklessly today. But a stronger part of him knew that if he let go of his mind palace he would lose himself, which meant losing everything John admired about him. A Catch-22. But there must be a solution. He had to be able to reason his way out.

Sherlock took a fourth cigarette from the pack. They were good for brainwork. They were going to help him find a solution that would allow him to have what he wanted. There were so few things he wanted, and with cigarettes, cocaine, and heroin off the table, he needed something on the table. Preferably an army doctor, preferably shirtless—Sherlock fumbled trying to light the cigarette in his hand.

* 

Late the next night found Sherlock turning Mycroft’s flat upside-down looking for cigarettes. He knew his brother. Mycroft didn’t smoke often but Sherlock knew he kept some on hand for the occasional period of stress or even as an alternative to eating (Sherlock was quite complacent in his knowledge of his brother’s stress-eating habit that caused him to go up and down suit sizes depending on the state of political affairs). He swore under his breath as there turned out not to be cigarettes anywhere in Mycroft’s office, not even in the hidden compartments of his desk.

He moved to the living room, targeting the bookshelf. He scrutinised it carefully, reading the dust on the shelves. Mycroft owned an e-reader; he wouldn’t have had cause to take one of these books down recently. He just needed to find—there it was: a break in the thin layer of dust. The book had been removed and replaced recently. It was leather-bound, one of many in a set of classics. Sherlock looked at the title: *Emma*, by Jane Austen. If he had ever known who Jane Austen was he must have deleted it. But unless Emma was a dictator in an oil-rich country he supposed his brother wouldn’t have any interest in the material.

Sure enough, opening the cover revealed a large, rectangular hole cut out from the centre of the pages, leaving only the margins intact. *How very Victorian*, he scoffed at Mycroft, plucking out the pack of cigarettes. There was an envelope folded behind it. When Sherlock turned it over he was faintly surprised to find his name written there. (He supposed it was just as well considering he would have opened it anyway.)

The envelope contained a note in his brother’s handwriting. It read:

*Bookcases before bureaus, brother dearest. I believe you’ll find an answer to your problem in the enclosed text. Enjoy the cigarettes. I bought them low-tar especially for you. M*
Sherlock stared at the page in amazement. His infuriating older brother had anticipated everything. He had been at the hospital. He’d known. He’d seen exactly how it would play out with John, right up to Sherlock being here, looking for cigarettes, and searching his desk before the bookcase. It was only at times when he was forced to interact with Mycroft that Sherlock got the smallest glimpse of why ordinary people hated him so vehemently.

Sherlock drew the second sheet of paper from the envelope and balked. It was a page torn out of a book. Eighteen lines of text. It was a poem.

He blinked in disbelief. Mycroft had known he would come here in a crisis, and he’d left him low-tar cigarettes and a poem.

Sherlock wondered if he could put enough pressure on the right people to get Mycroft transferred to Siberia.

* 

Five hours and half a pack of low-tar cigarettes later Sherlock discovered with finality that the poem was not a cypher. He had employed every method of cryptography he knew and yet it would not break. He was forced to face the inevitable conclusion: the poem was only a poem.

Sherlock despised poetry. Riddles were one thing—they were based in logic. Poetry had nothing to do with logic. It was nothing more than a mess of emotional vomit—sticky and noxious with its unbridled excesses: whining, pathetic sorrow; syrupy, sickening love; idiotic, babbling joy. Nothing he could work with. Of course Mycroft would have known that. A puzzle he couldn’t solve.

He crumpled the poem and tossed it to the floor. He didn’t need his brother’s help.

It wasn’t until the next night that he picked it up again, uncrumpling the paper a bit more forcefully than was necessary.

He dropped down onto Mycroft’s couch and lay back. He’d analysed the poem from every angle he knew with no result, and he’d made no other progress to speak of. But this wasn’t a matter that concerned only him. It was about him and John. And perhaps, he thought as he closed his eyes, it was time to ask for John’s help.

* 

Wearing a black pair of wellies Sherlock stepped carefully through the disaster zone that was his mind palace. There was rubble from the walls and ceilings, books, papers, and boards strewn throughout the area. Water was still rushing over the floors, though the level had lowered enough now to just reach his ankles. He made his way to John’s door, which was hanging off its hinge.

John was sitting on the edge of his bed, facing the door as though he’d been waiting for him. He was also wearing wellies, absently splashing the river flowing across the floor with one foot.

John looked up, giving him a small smile.

Sherlock hesitated in the doorway. He knew it wasn’t really John. It was only his mind’s image. But still he hadn’t seen him since—since the episode in the kitchen and he found even an incorporeal John caused his throat to tighten, making it difficult to swallow.

“Bit of a mess in here,” John commented, looking around with an amused expression.

“I’m trying to fix it,” Sherlock said, walking further into the room.
“How’s that going?”

Sherlock shot him a glare and John licked his lips—a longstanding habit of the doctor’s, but Sherlock had never remembered it being so distracting.

He refocused. “Take a look at this,” he said, pulling the page he’d memorised from his pocket. He handed it to John. “Mycroft says there’s an answer here.”

John stood up from the bed and took the paper. “It’s a poem,” he said with some surprise.

“A sound analysis, John, but I was hoping you’d go deeper.”

John’s eyes flashed up at him in annoyance, but he returned his attention to the text. Sherlock waited. John was a writer. Perhaps he could make something of it. Well, he wasn’t a writer so much as a blogger. How did bloggers fair with poetry? Sherlock didn’t know.

John smiled a bit as he read.

“Well? What does it say?”

John looked up. “Can’t you read it?”

Sherlock sniffed. “No. I’m not versed in emotional drivel.”

John glanced over the words one more time. “It says you’re human. It says you’re allowed to love.” He shrugged, refolded the paper, and handed it back to Sherlock.

Sherlock furrowed his eyebrows in disdain. “What kind of message is that? I don’t need permission from Mycroft for anything, let alone— Especially—” Sherlock began pacing the room, boots splashing in the water. “He’s one to talk,” he scoffed. “He’s the one who—he told me—” He broke off, scowling at the ground.

John was watching him pace. “He told you you weren’t allowed to love.”

Sherlock snapped his head up. John was gazing at him steadily—irises flecked in shades of blue… This exchange might have been easier if he had imagined John with a bag over his head.

He considered John’s words. Mycroft had never said it in those terms, but as a nine-year-old boy wasn’t that exactly how he’d interpreted it? Really it didn’t matter. Even as a child Sherlock had never blindly accepted a rule, not even one from Mycroft. He did his own research; he evaluated evidence on his own terms. Redbeard’s death had lent credence to his brother’s words, and with time he had come to see the soundness of the logic for himself. Sherlock had spent most of his childhood learning, rather bitterly, that Mycroft was usually right. And he wasn’t wrong about this either: Love is only weakness.

The reasoning was elementary. Even if Mycroft had never said anything, Sherlock would have come to the same conclusion. He didn’t like people and they didn’t like him. As he grew up it was clear there was no one worth his time, let alone any kind of risky emotional investment. It was obvious. He hadn’t needed Mycroft to tell him that. He would have put the pieces together on his own.

So the question now was what—

“What is this supposed to mean then?” Sherlock demanded, brandishing the poem at John. “Has he changed his mind? Is he telling me he was wrong?”
“Oh, Sherlock, you’re a very stupid little boy.”

Sherlock whirled around and found Mycroft standing in the doorway sporting a similar pair of black wellies.

“Of course I haven’t changed my mind,” he said, walking to stand directly in front of Sherlock. “And of course I’m not wrong.” He raised his chin, using his extra two centimetres to his advantage. Sherlock got his own back by giving Mycroft a rubber duck pattern on his boots. It was still his mind palace, after all.

“The poem seems to suggest otherwise,” Sherlock countered coolly. “Exceptions to your infallible logic, dear brother?”

“I’m afraid that, as usual, you are entirely missing the point.” The disappointment in Mycroft’s tone was something Sherlock had learned to tune out from an early age. “The theory regards love as a vulgar distraction for an idle mind and a dangerous weakness for a powerful one. It is illogical to make oneself vulnerable in exchange for an arrangement that can only end in loss and pain.”

“Yes, and?” Sherlock knew all of this already.

“The logic,” Mycroft said sharply, “has nothing to do with pretending not to have fallen in love once one has already done so.”

Sherlock’s jaw clamped shut. Oh. He looked over at John, who was standing at ease, hands clasped behind his back, head down. Oh.

“You have been vulnerable since that night in Brixton, and your enemies know it. Surely you must understand that the logic evaporates if you are already in love. The point of the theory was to spare you pain. But it’s too late for that. You’ve been through it already.”

Sherlock hadn’t taken his eyes off of John.

“And you’ll go through it all again. It’ll be much worse when he dies.”

John was motionless, head down.

“You managed to avoid this kind of entanglement for a long time, but there’s nothing you can do about it now. Your feelings tie you to him, regardless of whether you pretend it isn’t so.”

“I know,” Sherlock said softly. Because he must have known. It wasn’t Mycroft speaking.

“Always so logical, little brother. Where is the logic in pretending?”

“The emotion is too strong. It’s too messy,” Sherlock tossed the word out in frustration. “I can’t think clearly with it in my head.” He motioned to the book and teacup floating past between their boots. "Look at this!"

Mycroft sighed. “Sherlock, I can’t even begin to tell you how little your plumbing problems interest me.”

Sherlock gave him a rubber duck rain hat to match his wellies for that. He turned to leave.

“Mycroft—”

Mycroft stopped at the door and turned. “Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile the world goes on.’ The world goes on, Sherlock.”
He left.

Sherlock started when he found John standing at his side. “It’s not quite as moving when he says it with the ducky hat on, is it?”

“No,” Sherlock muttered, distracted.

John put a hand on his shoulder and Sherlock turned toward him. “You can fix this,” he said.

Sherlock huffed in frustration. “Every time you so much as touch me I get waterfalls worth of feelings crashing through here. And I can’t—I’m not strong enough to stop it. I tried.” Sherlock looked away. He didn’t like admitting failure, even if it was just to a figment of his own imagination.

John shrugged. “It’s a design flaw.”

Sherlock looked back at him.

“You’re trying to stop it. Don’t. Control it. Incorporate it instead.”

Sherlock stared at him. Incorporate it.

“If the current design isn’t working, renovate. Remodel.”

Sherlock’s thoughts began to whir. John was right. He could redesign. If he could work his feelings for John into the very structure of his mind palace he could control them.

He knew what he needed to do.

“Are you ready?” John asked, taking a step closer.

“Yes.”

Sherlock closed his eyes and John kissed him. Softly first, and then more insistently, memories of their previous kisses ghosting through the press of his lips and the slide of his tongue. The river running over their boots swelled up past their ankles. John tightened his grip on Sherlock’s waist. “Focus,” he whispered against his lips. And Sherlock did.

He gripped John’s hips, feeling the narrow firmness of them at the band of his jeans. He ran his hands up under his jumper as he kissed him, fingers feeling the sturdy form underneath—a map of flesh and bone Sherlock had memorised long ago—the strength in his elastic muscles. The water was threatening to rise above mid-calf and Sherlock held the sides of John’s face. He paused for a moment, just taking it in. John’s face: so familiar and so pleasing, smooth planes of honey skin, several shades darker than Sherlock’s, the mouth that smiled or tightened in accordance with his moods, lips that shouted reprimands at him or pressed firmly against his own. There was nothing he wanted more than John Watson.

Sherlock shut his eyes, tilted his head and caught John’s lips, feeling the weight of his friend’s body as he relaxed into him. Don’t stop it. Control it. John wrapped his arms around Sherlock’s waist as he kissed him back. Control. Sherlock felt the pressure of the water around his legs disappear. He could still hear the sound of rushing water but he didn’t open his eyes. He carried on kissing John. He kissed him like there was nowhere else he would choose to be, and nothing else he cared to do more.

When John finally stepped back and Sherlock opened his eyes slowly, his mind palace was completely changed. The mess and rubble had cleared away, leaving the room as neat and pristine as
it had ever been. But now the walls were glistening like fountains as streams flowed down from high ceilings, disappearing into the void beneath the floor. The sound had quieted when John stopped kissing him, and as John stepped away the amount of falling water diminished until there were only soft rivulets sweeping silently down the sides of the room.

“Very nice,” John said, looking around. “Not a bad idea, hm?”

“Yes, John, you’re much cleverer today than usual.”

“Well, it’s your brain,” John replied tetchily.

Sherlock grinned. “True.”

He stepped out into the corridor and found the walls there similarly altered. John followed as Sherlock walked through the palace, inspecting his new design. It had been accomplished flawlessly. The rooms were completely dry. The water cascaded harmlessly down the walls into depths below the floor. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of this before. The reason his emotions for John had caused such chaos in his mind was because there was no space for them, and they were too powerful to be locked away.

The new design fully integrated his feelings for John throughout his entire mind palace. They took up no space at all, but at the same time they were omnipresent, surrounding his mind completely—insulating it the way John insulated him from the world. They were like John’s presence at Baker Street: Unobtrusive and quiet, but so essential, so thoroughly woven throughout the space that it would be someplace else entirely without it; comforting, pleasant, always with him, in every room of 221B and now in every room of his mind palace.

He’d never had to worry about John inhibiting his ability to work, annoying him the way everyone else always did. It had never been like that with John. John was different. He alone enhanced Sherlock’s thought process instead of deterring it; he made him better. And now it would be the same with his mind palace. He wouldn’t shut his feelings for John out; they would transform the space; they would improve it. The silent falling water had a calming effect that would help Sherlock concentrate. It would make him better than ever. The way John had.

“Want to give it a test run?” John asked when they stopped in Sherlock’s library, smile playing at his lips.

Sherlock stepped toward him. “If we must.”

John angled his head to kiss him, but ducked at the last instant, bringing his lips to Sherlock’s neck instead. The water poured down the walls, becoming audible as the amount increased. Sherlock’s eyes fell shut as he felt the scrape of John’s teeth and the dart of his tongue—a blissful alternation against his skin. Sherlock ran his fingers through light strands of hair, catching them and pulling John’s head back and kissing him properly, claiming his mouth in a way that wouldn’t allow John to forget who it belonged to now. The waterfalls tumbled down the walls around them, picking up volume until they were roaring—a reminder of a time they’d stood together on the cliffs under the Reichenbach Falls, danger in the air around them like mist, but this was home.

When John pulled back and Sherlock opened his eyes, there was no damage. Not even stray splashes. The water lessened, dwindling back down to quiet streams, thin enough just to glisten along the walls as it caught the light from the palace windows. Sherlock turned, looking around the room as the realisation sank in. He had done it. The water his mind had chosen to represent his emotion for John was contained.
He spun around and grabbed John’s upper arms roughly. “John, I did it. I solved it. This means we can— We can—”

Sherlock’s eyes flew open. Daylight was flooding through the windows of Mycroft’s flat. What time was it? He checked his phone: Two p.m. What day was it? Saturday. John would be at rugby practise. John. He had just enough time to get home, shower, and change clothes. He supposed John would be more inclined to kiss him if he didn’t smell like cigarette smoke.

He leapt off the couch and the poem dropped to the floor. Sherlock would have left it there, but he hesitated, considering. He snatched the piece of paper up and jammed it into his pocket on his way out the door.

*

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.
Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese”
An Obvious Fact

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John caught the ball and raced forward. He made it the few metres to the halfway line before an opponent slammed into him. On the ground, with heavy bodies strewn over him, he managed to scrabble the ball out to his teammate. The crush of weight pressing him to the grass lifted and John sprang to his feet, darting back into position.

Adrenaline surged through him with the pounding of his heart. He felt the flex and tension of his muscles like a blessing as he ran. His body had been aching to work off his frustration through the torturously long days spent recovering. His medical knowledge of convalescence told him that a rugby match was probably not the best move so soon after recovering, but his medical knowledge could be damned for now. He had aggravation wound through him tightly enough to make his head spin and he needed physical action to break it.

A player from the other team cut toward him with the ball and John leapt at him, tackling the man to the ground. In a moment he was up again. The ball sailed toward him and John snatched it out of the air. He shoved aside an attempted tackle with his shoulder and spun, suddenly finding himself in open space. He tore forward, dodging an attack from the left, pushing his muscles as he cut from a full sprint to change direction. There was a thrilling kind of freedom in the exertion—the sheer reliance on muscle memory, the speed of interpreting fast movement around him, and the immediate response of his reflexes.

“All right, Watson!”

“Come on, Watson!”

John heard his teammates shouting as he neared the goal. An opponent was at his heels but there wouldn’t be enough time to catch him. John dove over the line, landing hard on his stomach with the ball firmly on the ground. A successful try.

Hell yeah, John barely had time to think as he jumped to his feet and was immediately almost knocked over again by three of his teammates and the combined force of their enthusiasm.

“Oh, Watson!” Lee Sullivan called, jogging up to him and slapping his congratulations around his shoulders. “That footwork was lousy,” he said, broad smile giving him away. “It’s one thing if you don’t care about the game, but would you mind not cocking it up for the rest of us?”

“Thanks, dickface,” John grinned, flipping him his middle finger as they made their way back toward centre field.

“I don’t want to alarm you,” Sullivan said casually, “but there’s a GQ model on the sideline who’s been watching you for the past ten minutes.”

John whipped his head around. Sherlock was there, standing off to the side of the field, leaning against the pole of one of the lights that illuminated the park at night. His breath caught and he had to consciously exhale to keep it steady.

“You know him?” Sullivan asked.

“That,” John said, “is Sherlock.”
Sullivan lifted his eyebrows. “Ah, Sherlock Holmes.” He looked over at the dark figure across the field. “Better known as the reason you never come to the pub with us.”

John didn’t respond.

“Wait, this doesn’t mean you have to leave, does it? There are fifteen minutes left. We’re going to win, you can’t—”

“No,” John cut him off. “I’m not leaving. I’m going to ignore him, and we’re going to finish this game.”

Sullivan grinned. “Fuck right we are.”

If John had been on his game before, with Sherlock’s eyes burning into his back he was a force to be reckoned with. He hadn’t heard from the detective since the *incident* in the kitchen three days ago. Not a word. Three days. Sherlock had shoved him back and left him there and god knows where he’d been since.

When he hadn’t come back that first night John had sent a text to Mycroft.

*Is he safe?*

He’d gotten two words and one letter back.

*He’s safe. M*

He channelled his anger into his movement, allowing it to push him, strain his muscles aching with the need to fight. Sherlock thought he could do that? Sherlock had kissed him. Not the other way around. Sherlock thought he could kiss him like that and then walk out without a word? Three days and no word? *Fuck* that.

An opposing player was sprinting toward him with the ball. John threw himself forward, smashing into a body moving full speed. He hit the ground hard, but he was up again in a flash. His teammate passed the ball backward and he caught it, tearing up the field to gain valuable ground. He somersaulted forward when he was tackled around his legs and he landed on his back.

“Damn, Watson,” Sullivan said, offering John his hand, “tell your model to come to the games more often.”

*They won by a significant margin and it wasn’t until after the necessary handshakes and polite refusals to join his teammates at the pub, and less polite refusals to introduce them to ‘his friend,’ that John turned to look back at Sherlock. He was half-surprised to see him still standing there. His eyes were fixed on John where he stood in the centre of the field and the stare was piercing enough, even from a distance, that John had to look away.*

The sharpness of Sherlock’s gaze was not something memory could hold. It didn’t matter how many times he’d experienced it. Each time Sherlock looked at him like that John felt his hair prickling the back of his neck and his muscles tensing. John crossed his arms, looking off toward the trees lining the park’s paths, empty on the cold, grey afternoon. He waited for Sherlock to come to him.

He didn’t wait long. Sherlock was striding across the field and stopped just in front of him. Too close. It was always too close. His coat was unbuttoned. He was wearing one of his more flattering suits (as though the wanker owned an unflattering suit) with a grey shirt underneath, deep blue scarf
hanging loosely around his neck. He stuffed his gloved hands into his coat pockets. John, in his rugby kit—knee-high black socks, black athletic shorts, and a red and black striped shirt—set his jaw and didn’t step back. He had the spikes on his rugby boots dug into the grass, good traction if he needed to knock Sherlock over. (He really might need to knock Sherlock over.)

“It’s a violent game,” Sherlock remarked.

John bristled, silently daring Sherlock to tell him he should be at home resting. He could let Sherlock know just how fun it had been to be at home resting the past few days in an empty flat with no goddamn sign of the person who was supposed to live there with him: the person who had kissed him and then apparently changed his mind and didn’t feel it necessary to give any kind of explanation.

But there was no disapproval in Sherlock’s expression. In fact, if anything he looked faintly impressed. While John normally savoured the rare instances he could impress the consulting detective, he was in no mood to appreciate it now.

“What do you want?” John did his best to keep his voice even.

Sherlock looked puzzled for an instant—perhaps at John’s tone or perhaps at the question—but it faded quickly. He glanced down John’s body and up again. It was all John could do to keep still while the detective’s penetrating eyes raked over him, reading god-knew-what from the thin material of his clothes, his skin. Sherlock stepped forward, ducking his head to kiss him. But John grabbed a fistful of his coat and thrust him back, holding him at arm’s length.

Sherlock looked down at John’s hand, startled.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” John snapped.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t mind last time.”

John released Sherlock with a shove. “No. Not until you ran out the fucking door. Three days, Sherlock. Three days and I haven’t seen or heard from you. Not one word. Do you have any idea—” John cut off the words. It was obvious Sherlock didn’t have any idea. He didn’t empathise. It wouldn’t occur to him to consider how it would feel if the situation had been reversed. Wherever he’d been these past few days he probably hadn’t given a thought to what John was feeling—the nausea that had gripped him when Sherlock pushed him away. The crushing, suffocating desperation John had felt at Sherlock letting him kiss him like that and then leaving as though he’d changed his mind—as though he’d re-evaluated and decided it wasn’t good enough or wasn’t worth it. As though he wanted nothing more to do with him. Sherlock wouldn’t have considered any of that. He never would.

“Fuck off,” John said, suddenly feeling more tired than anything. He turned his back on the detective and crossed to the other side of the small field in the park they used as a rugby pitch every Saturday. His gym bag was the only one left and John slung it over his shoulder as he walked to the path leading out of the clearing. Sherlock had taken a more direct route and was waiting for him by the trees at the edge of the path.

“I left to sort things out,” Sherlock said as John approached him.

John stopped and held himself steady. “What things?”

“My mind palace.”

John frowned. “What?”
Sherlock dropped his eyes and John thought he could almost see a hint of colour at his cheeks. “There was… water damage.”

John breathed through his nose as a calming strategy. Normally he didn’t mind when Sherlock talked incomprehensibly about genius mind palace stuff, but right now— “Look, I’m not in the mood. We’ll talk later,” John said, trying to shove past him.

Sherlock’s hands were on him in a flash. He grabbed John by the shoulders and shoved him back into a tree, pinning him there.

John felt his body respond to being pushed with a surge of adrenaline. He locked his eyes on Sherlock’s and thought the whole thing would be a lot easier if the man didn’t have to be so distractingly gorgeous all the time: his nearly black, beautifully curled fringe sweeping across his forehead, impossibly bright eyes electric with the same arousal John could feel quickening his own breath.

“I don’t want to hit you,” John heard his own voice dangerously low, a natural warning.

“Then listen,” Sherlock hissed, gripping John’s shoulders hard enough that the bark of the tree dug into his back. “I couldn’t do it before. My mind hasn’t been set up for anything like—” Sherlock’s gaze wavered from where it had been boring through to the back of John’s head. “I needed to… rearrange. I can do it now.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” John’s patience was stretched to the breaking point.

“It means I can do this.” He swept forward, catching John’s lips in a bruising kiss.

John dropped the gym bag. His lips parted in surprise and Sherlock pressed his advantage, pushing his tongue into John’s mouth. His taste shocked through him, filling his head so completely he could barely think beyond the word ‘more.’ Sherlock was on top of him, pushing into him, his mouth, his hands, his hips. That expensive almond shampoo blurred to a background note beneath the raw scent of Sherlock’s skin. He smelled like the night, like the electricity of a storm, like adrenaline. It sent a wave of aching desire through John’s body and he nearly groaned at the sensation. For a moment he wanted nothing more than to kiss back just as roughly; bite at the detective’s full, improbably soft lips. He’d never wanted anyone more, and at the same time he knew he wouldn’t be stupid enough to put himself in the same position he’d been in three days ago.

John gripped Sherlock’s upper arms and shoved him back hard.

“Fuck, Sherlock!” John breathed.

Sherlock snarled in frustration, “What’s wrong with you? I thought you wanted this!”

“Right,” John panted, “I kiss you back and what? I see you again in another three days? I don’t like your system.”

“You haven’t been listening,” Sherlock growled, grabbing John’s right arm and jerking him towards him. “I told you I fixed it.”

“No, you haven’t been listening. I told you to fuck off.”

John tried to turn away but Sherlock only gripped his arm tighter.

“God damn it!” John whirled around and hit him. His left fist caught the side of Sherlock’s face hard enough that he dropped his arm.
John was too stunned trying to register what he’d just done to duck. Sherlock hit him back fast and he reeled from the impact. But his reflexes were quick, and he grabbed Sherlock’s coat before he could move back out of reach. Sherlock twisted and John grunted trying to hold him. Sherlock snatched John’s shirt and pushed him back, but John spun them, slamming him back into the tree. Sherlock gritted his teeth, eyes flashing brighter than anything on that grey afternoon. He propelled himself off of the tree with surprising force. John tripped backward they hit the ground hard.

They rolled, snarling, grappling, but eventually Sherlock got the reach on him. He flipped John onto his back and straddled his waist, getting his arms into an unbreakable grip, clearly remembering the move from when John had pinned him in the same position. Sherlock was a bloody quick study and it was both annoying and unfair that any trick could only ever work on him once. John dropped his head back into the grass, giving up his efforts at struggling. He exhaled heavily through his nose, eyes making clear the unwillingness with which he was accepting his position.

For a minute they only breathed together, Sherlock’s weight pressing heavily into him, and John felt his adrenaline seeping away, down into the ground, as his muscles relaxed.

It was still a while before he spoke, and when he did his voice was flat—a defeated break in the emotion that had threatened to crush him a moment ago. “Where did you go.”

“Mycroft’s flat. He rarely uses it.”

“And it didn’t occur to you how it would be for me—having you take off like that. Not hearing from you for days after—”

“No.” Sherlock’s face was blank. John believed him.

“I can’t do this. I can’t give you that much and still not be a priority for you.”

Sherlock was watching John’s face steadily. “I can’t empathise with you, John. But you’re an idiot if you don’t know you’ve been my priority from the day we met.”

John wanted to laugh out loud at the absurdity of the statement. Sherlock would carry on talking to him, oblivious to whether he was even in the room. Sherlock would forget him at crime scenes. Sherlock’s work was his priority. Everyone knew that. John scoffed, turning his head to the side.

“Think, John,” Sherlock said, deep voice automatically ensnaring John’s attention, forcing his eyes back to Sherlock’s and holding them there.

Sherlock was looking into John’s eyes intently. He was serious, John realised. With a slow exhale John closed his eyes, willing himself to consider the possibility rationally. With Sherlock’s body firmly pinning him to the ground he wasn’t going anywhere anyway. Memories began to surface in his mind.

“Sherlock doesn’t follow me everywhere,” he’d grumbled to the woman at the Battersea power station. But it wasn’t true, was it. Sherlock had followed him then. And then again on the railway lines, investigating Andrew West’s murder; Sherlock was suddenly at his side.

“How long have you been following me?”

“From the start.”

From the start.

“Amazing how fire exposes our priorities.”
Sherlock had used fire to expose Irene’s, and Magnussen had used fire to expose Sherlock’s.

The sharp crack of a gunshot. “Give my love to Mary. Tell her she’s safe now.”

It had never been for Mary though, had it. Sherlock didn’t care about Mary. It had been for John. Sherlock’s pressure point. In the moment Sherlock shot Magnussen the consulting detective had chosen John over his work. He’d known he would be sent away. He’d known there was a chance he would never be able to work in England again. And he’d done it not even to save John’s life. He’d thrown away his entire career only to prevent John from losing his wife: for John’s happiness.

“Whatever it takes, whatever happens, from now on I swear I will always be there, always…”

John felt his throat go dry. He couldn’t swallow.

“John I hear you’re off to your sister’s, is that right? Sherlock was complaining—er, saying…”

Sherlock talked to John when he was away because he wanted him to be there. Sherlock left him at crime scenes when there was fast work to be done, and he texted John as soon as he’d done it. Prioritising for Sherlock wouldn’t have anything to do with being polite or coddling, careful communication, waiting around patiently for the sake of someone else’s fragile feelings. That wasn’t in Sherlock’s nature and he respected John too much to affect it. Prioritising for Sherlock would mean fitting John into his work where no one else fit (which he’d done). It would mean wanting John at his side during cases and between them (which he did). It would mean dropping everything if John was in danger (which he’d done). It would mean choosing John over his work, if he had to (which he’d done).

Oh god. John couldn’t believe it had taken him this long to understand. This was Sherlock prioritising him. A high-functioning sociopath’s way of proving over and over again that there was nothing more important to him than John. He couldn’t empathise with him, but he could prioritise him.

The consulting detective’s work was everything to him, and John was more.

How could he not have known? How could he have been so blind not to see what even strangers seemed to pick up in a glance? He’d been stupid, so stupid—

“There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.” John’s eyes flew open at the sound of Sherlock’s voice: deep silk answering his thoughts as though he’d spoken them out loud, reading his mind the way he always could.

Sherlock’s eyes were flecked with gold, wide as he watched him. John couldn’t help squirming under the intensity of his gaze and the weight of his body.

There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.

Sherlock cared for John more than anything, and John had been too stupid to see it. Sherlock was like no one else; of course his way of showing affection would have nothing to do with being affectionate. But that didn’t make it any less true, any less real or intense.

And wasn’t it everything John had wanted? He didn’t give a damn about politeness and coddling—the kind of anxious, careful courtesy people use to walk on eggshells around each other. Wasn’t the lack of all that what had attracted John to Sherlock in the first place? His directness and his disregard of the social niceties that trapped everyone else into hollow small talk and fixed smiles. John had done nice before, and frankly nice was not what he was looking for. He didn’t need Sherlock to wait politely for him at crime scenes, to be considerate and gentle, to text him and ask him how his day
was going, to hesitantly confirm his actions were ok with John before he did them, to be patient and understanding with his words. He wouldn’t be Sherlock if he did any of those things, and John wasn’t interested in anyone who wasn’t Sherlock.

*God fucking damn it!*

Sherlock had let go of John’s arms and John surged upwards, catching the detective off guard and flipping him over onto his back, straddling his waist, reversing their positions.

Breathing hard he tried to steady his thoughts. This was everything he’d ever wanted. He had it here, now, wide-eyed underneath him, but still he had to know why—

“Why? Why did you leave like that? I can’t—”

Sherlock was still and John didn’t even bother getting his arms into a grip. “I divorce myself from my emotions by locking them out of my mind palace,” he explained. “My mind is precisely organised and there’s chaos if emotion gets in.”

John waited, aware of Sherlock’s sinewy form beneath him. He kept his eyes on his face, pale irises striking beneath dark hair, beautiful, somehow no less so for the red smudge darkening the porcelain skin just below Sherlock’s right cheekbone where John had hit him. The air was cold around them as the afternoon faded toward evening, but though John was only wearing his rugby shorts and shirt his muscles were warm from the game and his skin was hot from the energy pulsing beneath it. His bare knees were pressing softly into the grass on either side of Sherlock’s waist.

“There was a significant amount of emotion during— When we—” Sherlock’s cheeks coloured, a fainter shade of red blooming beneath the mark from the fight. “I had to leave to prevent considerable damage from being done. I spent the days I was gone redesigning my mind palace.”

“You—you redesigned your mind palace?”

“To incorporate the emotion I have for you.” Sherlock blinked, steady. “Now that it’s integrated into the structure of the palace it’s no longer a threat to its integrity.”

John stared down at him in amazement. “You redesigned your mind palace. For me.”

“It was surprisingly easy to do once I realised what needed to be done. You fit,” he said simply. “You fit in my life and it turns out my emotion for you fits in my mind palace.”

There was a long silence in which John wasn’t even trying to think of a response. Words drifted aimlessly in his mind; his thoughts scattered and blurred. A coherent sentence seemed an unreasonable request.

Sherlock waited and finally John breathed. The deep inhale and long, shaking exhale had something to do with relief, panic, exhaustion, confusion, victory, and defeat.

When he spoke his voice was soft, barely more than another breath lifting and lowering his ribcage. “Christ, Sherlock.” He shut his eyes and when he opened them again the detective’s gaze was burning into him, making John feel the heat through his skin. But John kept his eyes steady on Sherlock’s and didn’t waver. “What do you want from me?”

Sherlock blinked once, and then without warning swept upward, catching the side of John’s face and kissing him firmly. John pulled a sharp breath in surprise, but he reacted quickly, meeting his lips, reaching his left arm around him to support him and twining his fingers into the curls at the back of his head with his right.
He felt Sherlock struggle briefly with something behind his back and then his hands were on him again, ungloved now, sliding through his hair, burning into the skin on the back of his neck, his face. Firm, gentle, the clever hands of a chemist.

John tightened his grip on Sherlock’s hair and was rewarded by his lips parting in a small gasp. John took the opportunity and slid his tongue into his mouth. And god that taste; it was almost alarming how fast his body responded to it. Sherlock leaned up into the contact, and John felt the field and the park around them dim to nothing.

He lost himself in the slide of tongues, the heat beneath his hands radiating through the detective's thin shirt. This was Sherlock. Lean muscles, heat, ivory skin, scent, perfect mouth, taste. Sherlock. Heavy breaths echoed in his ears as they broke through years of tension, years of building need: half unconscious, half willfully ignored, now turned feverish.

John leaned forward and Sherlock yielded, allowing John to solely support him, pushing him down into the grass. Lying fully on his back again Sherlock licked at John’s lips and John opened them, encouraging Sherlock’s tongue as it met and stroked his own. Sherlock slid his hands down John’s sides, and down over his hips to his thighs, playing for a moment with the hem of his shorts. John noted with interest Sherlock’s fingers moving around and over the tops of his socks, stroking the sides of his calves.

John smiled against Sherlock’s lips as the thought occurred to him. “Sherlock,” his voice was rough from kissing, “do you like my kit?”

The detective’s silence was enough of an answer. With a huff that wasn’t quite laughter John leaned up, drinking in the gorgeous sight that was Sherlock spread beneath him, breathing hard, flushed, pupils dilated. The image alone could have knocked him backward. It rocked through him, instantly removing any hint of mirth that had risen at Sherlock’s appreciative attentions to his rugby clothes.

He leaned down, bracing himself with his hands in the grass on either side of Sherlock’s head. Sherlock watched him cautiously as he stayed for a moment, trying to steady himself as a kind of primitive want-take-have coiled through his muscles. He moved a hand to Sherlock’s neck, tugging off the scarf in one quick motion. Sherlock turned his head to the side just slightly and it was all the invitation John needed. He ducked his head, bringing a teeth-edged kiss to the pulse point just below his jaw.

He felt Sherlock shiver beneath him but John held him steady as he kissed his way down Sherlock’s carotid artery to the base of his neck. When he sunk his teeth in there, not hard enough to hurt but hard enough, Sherlock’s hips arched involuntarily and John groaned at the sensation. Sherlock’s arousal was as obvious as his own. Not good for public places.

He breathed to calm himself and reached for Sherlock’s left hand with his right. Sherlock intertwined their fingers, locking their hands together. John felt a slight tingling where the recently healed cut in his palm was pressing against Sherlock’s: Mirror image scars that were neither the first to mark their skin nor would they be the last—the latest in the lines of silver thread that wove them together, visual evidence of the damage that connected them, deep and permanent.

John was pressing Sherlock’s hand firmly into the grass as he held himself above the detective. No, his detective. His beautiful, maddening, genius, dangerous, delightful, high-functioning sociopath detective to whom he’d been irrevocably bound from the start. He’d been fooling himself if he’d ever thought otherwise. No number of girlfriends, not a wife, not even Sherlock’s death had been strong enough to pull them apart. No matter how many times either had strayed, they’d always ended up back at each other’s sides. They belonged to each other, and John could have laughed at how painfully obvious it had always been.
An obvious fact.

But on the other hand he knew the years were necessary. Without the girlfriends, even the wife, there wouldn’t be the same level of certainty he felt now. He knew with doubtless conviction that Sherlock was what he wanted, more than anyone or anything he’d ever wanted before. He held the side of Sherlock’s face, taking a moment to try to make himself believe it was real, that he could have this.

It couldn’t be possible and yet it had to be, because Sherlock was lying under him now looking at John like he might want him just as much. But still the idea seemed to jam the gears in his head. He couldn’t believe Sherlock, Sherlock Holmes, the man who scorned all forms of affection, especially physical—could want this, could want this with him, out of all people—But what was it Sherlock was always saying to him?

When you eliminate the impossible... whatever remains, however improbable...

It was improbable, the whole thing was absurdly improbable and yet no more so than anything else they’d been through. They lived together at the intersection of incredible occurrence and improbable circumstance and perhaps it wasn’t all that surprising that this would conform to the same pattern. Sherlock was right. Of course he was right. The smug bastard was always right. However improbable, it must be true. Sherlock had redesigned his entire mind palace to be able to do this, and that meant more than any affirmation he could ask for.

It must be true.

Sherlock was watching him, sharp, penetrating eyes seeming to read all that was in John’s mind, only waiting for him to come to the conclusion on his own.

John dove down kissed him decisively, deeply, with no less passion for the slow pace. When Sherlock gripped his hips John couldn’t stop himself from rolling them down, and the soft groan the contact pulled from the detective was enough to make John force himself upright, panting. He had to take control of the situation while it was still possible. They had to leave. Now. The things he wanted to do his flatmate were not legal outdoors.

“Come on,” he growled, the frustration of breaking off the kiss scraping his voice course.

He lifted himself up off of his detective (a certain section of his mind kicking and screaming in protest) and stood. He offered his hand to Sherlock, who took it, and once he was standing the flush around his neck was even more apparent, and even more appealing, and John had to remind himself of the effort it had taken to get them both upright to prevent him from knocking Sherlock back down.

He lifted his gaze from Sherlock’s neck and was surprised to find he was looking at him hesitantly, and all at once John remembered that Sherlock (most likely) had never done this before. Technically John had never done this before either, not with a man, but he was a doctor: he knew the logistics at least in theory. But Sherlock had chosen not to be physical with anyone until now, and John resolved not to push him. They would go as slow as necessary—

John found his thoughts cut off by Sherlock grabbing his waist and yanking him forward into a kiss. And then Sherlock’s hands were in his hair and he was biting into John’s lower lip and the flash of pleasure-pain had him amending his previous thought: or as fast as necessary.

Sherlock seemed to have the same idea because he pulled back and grabbed John’s wrist, dragging him along until John had recovered enough to keep pace as they made their way out of the park.

“You want to walk,” John started, “or—"
“Cab.”

John grinned, and as he slid into the seat next to Sherlock and looked over at his scientist, whose curls were sticking out in disarray from where John had been running his fingers through, he wondered if he’d ever been happier. He was winded and giddy from the kiss—god in his entire life he’d never had a kiss like that (only kissing Sherlock the other day in the kitchen could rival it). He should have known tapping into an emotional side of Sherlock would be as explosive and dangerous as any other side.

He was amazed to find that the fluttering thrill gripping him now was no less intense at thirty-four than it had been when he was fifteen. If anything it was even more powerful now, because the person sitting next to him, whose hand was still gripping his wrist as though he’d forgotten to let go, was a force stronger than any he’d ever encountered.

“You pulled your punch.” Sherlock’s voice broke through John’s thoughts. His flatmate was looking at him with some amusement in his eyes.

John didn’t bother denying it. He shrugged. “I like your face.”

Sherlock smirked, though John didn’t miss the genuine pleasure beneath it.

“And the, erm, what The Woman said… That time at her place…” Sherlock wasn’t meeting his eyes.

John remembered.

“Yeah, I always”—he cleared his throat—“I’ve always liked your face.”

Sherlock eyes widened just perceptibly. His lips quirked to a small smile as he turned to look out the window.

“You pulled your punch too,” John pointed out. The spot on his cheek didn’t hurt nearly as much as it should considering Sherlock’s skill in fighting.

“Well I don’t dislike your face either,” he returned, eyes fixed on the passing streets.

John bit his lip to keep himself from smiling too broadly. The compliments of Sherlock Holmes. He found them far more endearing than he should. He desperately wanted to pounce on the detective and snog him senseless right here in the backseat of the cab, but he knew cab drivers frowned on that sort of thing, and despite the near-shag in the field they hadn’t discussed any ground rules for public behaviour. He couldn’t imagine Sherlock going in for PDA, and actually in the past (in more controlled times, he supposed, when his lips weren’t still stinging with the scrape of a consulting detective’s teeth and the heat of his tongue) he didn’t really go in for it either.

He turned to look out his own window. He knew none of this was going to be easy. Sherlock would still be Sherlock. He was difficult: temperamental, impatient, moody, sulky, explosive, and without hesitation John knew there was nothing he wanted more. The other side of Sherlock’s passion was his volatility and John loved both. Sherlock was a challenge, his challenge, and over the years John had proven repeatedly that he was strong enough to match him.

John knew he would still lose him for endless stretches of hours or even days to his work, but as long as Sherlock wanted him there at his side through the cases, and as long as Sherlock would reach for him in between, then it was fine. It was all fine.

*
John shut and locked the door to 221B. He turned and his breath hitched. Sherlock was looking at
him with unguarded want and he felt the new lack of barrier between them like a cold breeze—
exposing enough to make him shiver. He stepped through it, reaching for Sherlock and pulling him
in close. His mouth was warm and his lips were soft and John’s thoughts blurred to a haze as he
pushed Sherlock’s coat off his shoulders.

The game is never over, Sherlock had told him once. No, they would still play the game; that
wouldn’t change. In fact, there might even be little visible difference to those who knew them.
Because they were right; they were all right: Mrs. Hudson, Lestrade, Sally, Irene Adler, all of his
girlfriends, even Moriarty and Magnussen and Moran. He was Sherlock’s boyfriend. He’d been
Sherlock’s boyfriend since the night they’d run through the alleys after the serial killer cabbie,
forgetting his pain, his loneliness, his past, as Sherlock pulled him into his world and asked him,
without ever asking him, to stay.

They’d been a couple without benefits and John couldn’t believe the sheer idiocy of the concept. But
he had to remind himself that he hadn’t known. Not because it wasn’t obvious—it was—and not
because people hadn’t told him—they had, repeatedly. He hadn’t known because he hadn’t been
ready to know. And he assumed the same was true for Sherlock. The feeling—that electricity—had
always been there, but until now they’d moved around each other as though there was a wall
between them, unacknowledged but constant. Now it was gone, and there was a sudden, dizzying
freedom in being released from what had been an invisible cage.

John pushed his hands through Sherlock’s hair on either side, pulling those soft curls back from his
face. He stopped, just for a moment, and opened his eyes. Sherlock’s eyes were still closed and he
nudged his face forward at the sudden absence of John’s lips. When he didn’t find them, his lashes
fluttered slowly open and John was struck speechless by the open warmth and transparent need in his
eyes.

There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.

Sherlock had deceived them all into thinking he didn’t need this. But he did. He was human. Flesh
and blood. It was so obvious and yet John had never seen it. He had always needed this. Touch.
Physical connection. Warmth. Sherlock had always needed to be convinced he was loved. And John
could convince him.

He reclaimed his mouth, demanding and fierce, and Sherlock melted into him with a small noise that
made John’s blood pound in his veins. He yanked Sherlock’s shirt out from his trousers as he
worked his mouth. He ran his hand down the front of that expensive grey shirt, flicking open buttons
and letting his fingertips trace the trail of bare skin. Sherlock responded by slipping his hands beneath
John’s shirt and sliding them up his back.

This was right, exactly right, and his body only confirmed it as his nerves sang with every touch that
burned in the best way. It made sense. They fit together. They balanced each other. They could push
each other as easily as they could restrain each other. They could get through to each other when no
one else could. They needed each other. John could see it now in Sherlock’s eyes as he ran his hands
over his flatmate’s bare chest: the hazy, needy, heart-wrenchingly clear want that had him more
aroused than he’d ever been. He was going to give Sherlock everything he wanted and more.
Always, he hoped. He hoped he would always be able to give Sherlock everything. Because he fully
intended to spend the rest of his life trying.

What had been ambiguous in glances and gestures could now be direct, explicit and real. Now when
his detective was in one of his sulkier moods between cases, instead of only setting tea mugs down at
his side, he could press him back into his chair and kiss him until he remembered just how well he
was loved.

Sherlock surprised him by breaking off and dropping his face to John’s neck. He pulled his hands out from under John’s shirt and wrapped them around his back, pulling him in tightly. He stayed still, steadying his breathing, and John embraced him, holding him securely beneath his open shirt.

And standing there, holding on to each other in the living room of 221B as though it were just the two of them, as though there weren’t eight million people rushing through the city around them, John knew he had never been happier. His wedding day didn’t come close to this—just this moment, standing here with Sherlock pressed close, and the promise of more, the promise of everything. Everything from the way Sherlock would look when he let John take him to bed and take him apart, to the new cases and clients and gunshots and blog posts: their life. It would be their life as it always had been but now without bars and barriers—enhanced, free to be all it could be: research and experiments and fieldwork and Barts and bickering and the violin and sex. Whenever Sherlock didn’t have a case John fully intended to make his head spin in a different (but he hoped no less enjoyable) way. (He hadn’t earned a reputation over three continents for being just mediocre in bed.)

He tightened his hold on Sherlock and thought he had to give credit to all the people in their lives who had seen how apparent it was from the very beginning. Because it really was obvious. There were no two people who belonged together more than Sherlock Holmes and John Watson.

Obviously.

Chapter End Notes

The end!

Thank you everyone so much for reading!

Final note: This story (like so many other BBC canon based fics) could not have been written without the flawless transcripts by Ariane DeVere.

UPDATE 12/2016: Um, has everyone seen this? Thank you, BBC Sherlock, for creating fan art for my story. (But seriously, it's perfect, right?)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!