Northwest Passage

by Kryptaria

Summary

Seven years ago, Captain John Watson of the Canadian Forces Medical Service withdrew from society, seeking a simple, isolated life in the distant northern wilderness of Canada. Though he survives from one day to the next, he doesn't truly live until someone from his dark past calls in a favor and turns his world upside-down with the introduction of Sherlock Holmes.

"The essentials of their relationship distilled through solitude."

--review by Alicat

Notes

Written for robinfootiepajamas' prompt: John is Canadian.

Title suggestion by persian-slipper based on Stan Rogers' Northwest Passage.

I couldn't have done this without Snogandagrope and Mitaya, who stood ready to catch me whenever I slipped out of character, violated the rules of physics, or almost chickened out of the really naughty bits!
Chapter 1

Friday, October 19

Afternoon sunlight bathed the office with a dull gold hue. Outside, pools of shadow darkened the carefully tended lawn as broken clouds passed before the sun. It was five minutes past four, and Mycroft Holmes had put the British government on hold to take this very unwelcome, unwanted trip to the countryside.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Holmes. There’s no one else available here to take charge of your brother’s care,” Director Kullek said apologetically. He smoothed back thinning grey hair and fussed with his glasses, his weak smile never disappearing fully.
Normally, he was the embodiment of serene confidence, a man tailor-made to engender trust and a calm surety that anyone given into his care, no matter how troubled or ill, would be helped. His photograph had adorned clinic pamphlets and investment brochures since he’d taken over the board. Now, though, his expression was tight and nervous, not fearful but desperate. At once, Mycroft realized that there was no threat that he could bring to bear with sufficient force to change the director’s mind.

“And what happened to Dr. Barnard?” Mycroft asked smoothly, not hiding the steel under his polite tone of voice.

“He, ah... he’s in hospital, Mr. Holmes. Um.” The glasses came off, twisted between pudgy fingers. “Suicide watch, actually.”

Mycroft closed his eyes a moment too long to qualify as a blink. “Surely it wasn’t overwork,” he said flatly. “I was given to understand my brother was his only patient.”

“No, sir. I mean, yes. Yes, he is. Was.” Director Kullek bared his teeth again and shoved the glasses back into place, smudging one lens with his thumb. He huffed anxiously and pulled them off, turning his attention to rooting through his desk drawers. “Your brother’s treatment is technically complete, at least physiologically. Now it’s just a matter of, um, controlling the addiction. There are fine therapists —”

“Yes. As Dr. Barnard was a ‘fine therapist’,” Mycroft interrupted sharply. He pressed his fingertips together and gave another slow, thoughtful blink. Really, he wasn’t surprised. This was Sherlock’s third run through rehab, and there was no evidence to point to any more of a success than the first two attempts.

Sherlock was racing towards a future that was nothing more than a blank wall, a spectacular crash and fireball, no survivors, and all the resources Mycroft had at his disposal had so far proved inadequate to the task of showing his brilliant, self-destructive brother that there was life beyond thirty. The worst part was that Mycroft understood. He knew what it was like to be trapped, overwhelmed, drowning in the sensory input, thoughts outpacing the world around him. But where Mycroft had channeled his energy into building his powerbase, Sherlock had floundered, never latching onto anything but his violin and a morbid interest in crime and death.

And then, he’d found drugs.

Mycroft had once asked Sherlock why he would risk destroying himself for artificial bliss. “You said you and I think faster than light,” he’d explained in a casual, languid drawl. His eyes had been closed but moving rapidly behind the thin white lids, tracking the sensory overload brought on by the cocaine. “That’s what this is, Mycroft. I can be my thoughts. Try it yourself. You’ll understand.”

God help him, it had been tempting, but he’d resisted. Dragged Sherlock to yet another hospital. Sat with him through the nausea and paranoia and threats. Stayed with him through the shattering, when Sherlock’s threats had turned to pleading and tears.

They’d come full circle again, though, and it was up to Mycroft to find a way to break Sherlock free. He could sign Sherlock out and bring him back home, but Sherlock would just run off again, back to London and his nightclubs and his dealers, or he could leave Sherlock here to terrorize the staff. Neither was an appealing option for anyone — least of all, Sherlock.

“Mr. Holmes... There is an excellent facility in Switzerland,” Director Kullek hinted, going so far as to slide a glossy brochure across the desk. He’d had it ready in the drawer from which he’d taken the cloth he’d used to polish his glasses.
Mycroft hid a sigh. He had no reason to believe that a change of country would have any more success for his brother’s recovery. It would take something far more radical to keep Sherlock off the path of self-destruction.

He put a hand on the brochure, prepared to push it back, to snap at the director and demand that he stop trying to pass off the responsibility and think of something, no matter how unconventional. And then he froze as he stopped thinking in terms of rehabilitation centres and sobriety and started thinking like... well, like himself. Unconventional solutions were often the only real solutions at hand, and he was expert at manufacturing them when necessary.

Sherlock had turned to drugs out of boredom. Rehab was boring. So he turned his brilliance and willpower to the only available amusement: crushing the staff. None of them had the strength of character to withstand the force of Sherlock’s personality. In fact, other than Mycroft himself, there was only one person he knew who might have the required resilience and strength of character to survive Sherlock at his worst.

~~~

The grey and blue Kitfox Model IV made a slow dive towards the thin runway edged with autumn-gold grass. Only as the ultra-light aircraft banked and came around to proper alignment did the gravel strip become visible, barely a hundred feet wide and dotted with weeds that disappeared only near the double-wide trailer that served as an airport. Standing on the back porch of the airport, John Watson shaded his eyes with one hand and watched his plane touch down and brake. The prop slowed as the plane taxied to an almost perfect stop off to the side of the building.

He picked up his frame pack and rifle and headed for the plane, followed by Chuck from Fairlake’s Grocery and Feed. The boy was carrying a sack of feed almost as big as he was. The feed was for John’s nearest neighbor, Molly Hooper, to be bartered for a share of eggs from her henhouse. Molly lived thirteen kilometers downriver from John, who exchanged visits with her once every two weeks in good weather.

“Looks good,” Mark shouted over the sound of the Kitfox’s engine. He hopped down out of the pilot’s seat and said, “I’ll take care of the paperwork to update your registration. You can pick it up when you come back for your mail.”

“Thanks, Mark.” John passed him a fifty, hidden by a quick handshake. The stringent requirements for ultra-light aircraft tended to be only lightly enforced this far out in the middle of nowhere, which was how the residents liked it.

“Think you’ll make it back before winter really sets in?”

John shrugged, keeping an eye on Chuck as he loaded the feed into the little cargo compartment behind the seats. “Might. If satellite cooperates, I’ll send you an email.”

“If not, see you next spring. You take care of yourself.”

John smiled briefly. “You, too. Fuel up for me?”

“Got it,” Mark agreed, and went to the fuel pump, leaving John to tip Chuck and secure the pack in the passenger seat. A day in town was about as much civilisation as John could tolerate. Now, all he wanted was to get back home.
Mark refuelled the ultra-light aircraft, charged the cost to John’s card, and waved him off to the runway. He owned and ran the airport, acting as air traffic control, customs, and chief engineer. When John had inherited his cabin, he’d introduced himself to Mark with a gift of choice venison cuts and two days’ help patching up the airport roof. In return, Mark didn’t give John any shit and took care of John’s paperwork.

In ten minutes, he was up in the sky, not entirely comfortable with the light, home-built frame that would do nothing to protect him in a crash. He’d never meant to be a pilot, but he’d never meant to be a lot of things. At his age, he was supposed to be in Toronto at a teaching hospital, or perhaps practicing in the States and getting rich off fat insurance companies, or maybe dead in the desert. Not living in the backwoods of Canada in a place so remote that he needed a plane or snowmobile to reach the nearest grocery store.

The radio crackled to life, startling him. “Charlie-India-One-Seven-Three, this is Fairlake tower, over,” Mark said.

Baffled, John toggled on the mic and answered, “Fairlake, this is Charlie-India-One-Seven-Three. What’s up, Mark?”

“Can you swing back ’round? Just got a message for you.”

“Seriously?” John glanced out at the ridge of pine trees that hid the blue ribbon that was his highway home, upriver of Fairlake. The only thing he could imagine was that the army needed to get hold of him — possibly some issue with his disability payments — but that sort of thing could be handled through the mail. “What the hell?”

“Uh, says to tell you it’s Python?” Mark said uncertainly.

John’s hands clenched on the controls. His mouth went dry as he heard the radio crackle with static before a posh British voice promised the impossible: Rescue. Survival.

Numbly, John said, “Charlie-Seven-Three turning back to the runway. Request clearance for priority landing.”

“Fairlake tower acknowledges, Charlie-Seven-Three. You are cleared to land. Drive safe, John.”

Taking deep breaths, John keyed off the mic and eased the Kitfox around, circling wide and studying the brilliant, endless blue sky, so pale and different than the sky in his nightmares. Only when his hands were rock-steady did he turn fully and begin his descent back to Fairlake Airport.
Chapter 2

Sunday, October 21

Nine hours on a plane — even in the luxury of a first class seat with internet access and personal service — was almost as bad a living hell as rehab, at least for Sherlock Holmes. Before leaving the clinic, he’d terrorised one of the doctors into giving him a grand total of four sleeping pills. He’d taken one every time he’d awakened for more than ten minutes to use the loo, but that still left him conscious long enough to determine that he should have insisted Mycroft provide a private jet. It would have added flying time due to the need to stop and refuel, but at least he wouldn’t have been surrounded by idiots. Being rich enough to fly first-class was no guarantee of intelligence. Quite the opposite, in fact.

When he arrived at Calgary International Airport, he looked around with disdain. He’d been expecting something... more. He’d traveled through Europe, of course, and had developed certain notions of what constituted a proper airport. For an international airport, Calgary had a very definite improvised feel.

Of course, compared to the next airport, Calgary International was practically Heathrow.

From Calgary, he took a small, sixteen-passenger jet to the ominously named Little Prairie Airport, which was hardly an airport at all. It was a single terminal with no jetbridges. Instead, passengers disembarked via a wheeled staircase, and then were encouraged to wait around on the tarmac so they could pick up their luggage as it was offloaded. It saved the trouble of waiting at the baggage carousel.

As he waited for his bags, he looked around with growing horror at the thought of being trapped here. The air traffic control tower was three storeys high, little more than a room perched atop a cement post. There were two runways and one single-storey L-shaped concrete building with small windows. The airport wasn’t fenced off, though the cows were. At least, he assumed they were cows. Possibly they were bulls. He’d never been tasked to investigate a crime involving either, so he had no idea what they were. For all he knew, they might even be yaks.

He circled completely around and didn’t see a single building taller than the control tower. There wasn’t a single nightclub or bar in sight — not one where he’d be caught dead, anyway — and he doubted that even his highest high would make anyone here worth the effort of seducing. And this wasn’t his final destination.

He had more baggage than any three other passengers: a carry-on suitcase, a wheeled suitcase, a garment bag, his laptop bag, and his violin case. He’d been told to pack for an extended stay overseas. He’d envisioned Switzerland and had, in fact, spent three days researching the various ski resorts he might want to visit.

Now, seeing the grim reality of his future, he decided he’d have to find a way to escape Canada (assuming that was where he actually was) and get back to England so he could have his brother assassinated.

As he stood on the tarmac, wondering how to handle all of his luggage, a helpful steward-type ran over. At least, Sherlock assumed he was a steward. No one would willingly wear that much navy blue polyester unless it was a uniform.

Sherlock kept his laptop bag and violin case, as they were his most valuable possessions. “Here,” he
said, handing off the carry-on bag. He waved at the garment bag and suitcase, adding, “Those are also mine.”

“Uh, you, uh... Are you Sherlock Holmes? Really? That’s a name?” the young man asked, consulting a small notepad taken from his breast pocket.

“No, it’s a title.”

The man stared at him.

Sherlock closed his eyes, rubbing at the back of his stiff neck with his free hand. “Yes, that’s me. What is it?” he demanded.

“Your plane’s here. The other way,” he said, pointing away from the concrete bunker that passed for a local airport.

“Obviously, given that I just arrived on this plane,” Sherlock said, gesturing at the little jet without any affection at all.

“Not that one. That one,” he said, ducking his head to drop under the pointy end of the jet to indicate a little toy plane a short distance away. It was grey on top and blue underneath with C-I173 painted in black on the tail. Sherlock blinked at it a couple of times before he realised there was a man standing by it, leaning on the wing, giving it a sense of scale. So it wasn’t quite miniature, but it was definitely close.

“That toy isn’t a plane,” he observed numbly as the words ‘your plane’ sank in. When Mycroft had proposed this international trip, Sherlock had agreed only with the assurance that he wasn’t going to be subjected to another round of tedious rehab. Now, walking towards the little plane, Sherlock wondered if Mycroft’s plan was simply to eliminate him altogether in a convenient crash in the middle of nowhere. Perhaps this was Mycroft’s way of provoking an international diplomatic incident with Canada?

The man leaning against the wing turned to regard Sherlock through metallic brown sunglasses. He wore a heavy leather jacket and faded jeans, ragged cuffs trailing threads over worn work boots. He was six inches shorter than Sherlock but at least a stone heavier, all of it solid muscle, judging by the way the jeans fit him. He didn’t spend his money to replace clothes that were still serviceable, but he bought quality: the Oakley sunglasses would have cost almost six hundred pounds back in London and the jacket, battered as it was, looked to have once been designer.

Anywhere else, Sherlock would have immediately tried to determine his sexual orientation. He was ruggedly attractive, far from the usual type, male or female, who would’ve caught Sherlock’s eye. But Sherlock wasn’t one to allow first impressions to fool him. Whoever he was, he chose to live here, which indicated some deep flaw somewhere in him. Beyond the attractive façade, he was probably boring beyond all reasonable expectation, and Sherlock had high standards even for one-night stands.

“Captain?” Sherlock’s steward called out.

“To be a proper captain, one must have a proper airplane,” Sherlock muttered.

“Christ, how much luggage did you bring?” the so-called ‘captain’ asked sharply, looking Sherlock up and down before surveying his belongings.

“I have absolutely no intention of taxing that thing’s cargo capacity with anything I treasure more than my socks,” Sherlock answered.
Instead of getting angry, the captain barked out a laugh. “Suit yourself,” he said, fishing around in his front pocket for a moment. He pulled out a roll of brightly-coloured money, peeled a blue bill off, and handed it to Sherlock’s steward, who let go of the luggage to take it.

“Thanks, captain.” The steward grinned, and trotted off at a gesture from the captain.

“It’s six hundred fifty kilometers back home, give or take. You probably don’t want to walk.”

“Six hundred — We’re already nowhere,” Sherlock said, resisting the urge to put down his violin case so he could cross his arms.

Turning, the man climbed up into the little aircraft. His jacket rode up just enough to show a black holster at his left hip — most likely a .45, though Sherlock would need to see more to be certain. What he needed it for here, Sherlock couldn’t imagine, unless the cows were prone to outbursts of violence.

“You coming?” the captain asked once he was settled into his seat.

Sherlock looked back at the concrete airport and the bland blue sky and the gentle hills that made it seem like the nothingness stretched out in all directions, forever. He thought about being trapped here even for as long as it would take to fly back to the relative civilisation of Calgary International Airport. He thought about making it that far only to discover Mycroft had alerted customs or border control or some other authority that Sherlock wasn’t permitted to return to London.

Slowly, he turned to look back at the captain with his expensive jacket and gun and tight jeans. Sherlock wanted to strangle Mycroft for exiling him like this. He wanted to be back home, lost in the London night, with his parties and partners and drugs, anything to scrape away the dullness that had rotted his brain since business had turned slow.

He took a deep breath and carried his violin case to the airplane. The cargo area behind the side-by-side seats was tiny; Sherlock would have to carry the laptop and violin in his lap if he had any hope of fitting everything in, and his suitcase might not make it at all.

After a moment’s consideration, he set the violin case and laptop on the empty seat. The carry-on bag fit nicely behind the seats, and he draped the garment bag over it. There was no way to fit the suitcase, even with a blowtorch and a prybar, so he flipped it over, opened the case, and started scooping out his neatly folded clothes to pile on top of the garment bag.

Instead of protesting, the captain laughed.

~~~

It took twenty minutes to escape the crowded airspace around Little Prairie and get back into the wild, heading north for Fairlake. Without weighing the cargo that His Majesty had brought along, John wasn’t willing to risk running out of fuel over the trees. He’d stop to top off the fuel tank at Fairlake. Remembering his lessons, he kept a wary eye on the fuel gauge and didn’t take any chances with wind or speed.

At least his passenger seemed content to stay quiet, though he wasn’t obviously admiring the view. Once they leveled off to cruising altitude, he rearranged the luggage on his lap and at his feet, freeing his hands so he could get at a mobile taken from the inside pocket of his jacket.
John frowned as he glanced over, only then realising that he hadn’t seen another jacket. “Holmes said you’re staying —”

“I’m Holmes. Sherlock Holmes,” he interrupted. He gave John a sharp, narrow-eyed look that was probably meant to be intimidating. “Consider it a reminder that you have yet to introduce yourself.”

With a snort, he answered, “John Watson. The other Holmes said you were staying through the end of the year.”

Holmes’ only answer was a huff through flared nostrils as he turned his attention back to his mobile. “We’ll see about that,” he muttered more to himself than to John.

John shrugged and went back to flying. The Kitfox was small and cheap and maneuverable, but it was also a constant bitch to fine-tune, without anything even resembling autopilot functions. John could have bought something fancier, but he saw no reason to bother. The Kitfox worked just fine for him. Other than his trial flight and a couple of quick trips to town with Molly, he’d never carried any passengers.

In fact, he realized that Sherlock was going to be the first outsider to see inside his house since he’d taken ownership. Years ago, he’d had architects and engineers and surveyors out, and the building crew had spent a month living onsite in tents, but those days were over. Even the propane and diesel delivery pilots who flew in twice a year saw nothing but the exterior tanks. Molly was his only occasional visitor, and she didn’t stay longer than an afternoon.

The thought made John’s chest go tight and his fingers itch, but he took a deep breath and concentrated on the sensitive controls. He owed Python, and if it took an unwanted houseguest to clear that debt, so be it.

The fact that the houseguest in question was gorgeous complicated matters, but John would find a way to live with it.

So they flew in silence that was surprisingly comfortable, broken only near the end of the first leg, when John keyed the mic. “Fairlake tower, this is Charlie-India-One-Seven-Three requesting weather report and landing clearance to refuel.”

“Charlie-India-One-Seven-Three, this is Fairlake tower. Weather is cloudy with light snow, decent visibility. You are clear to land whenever you like. How was Little Prairie? Over.”

“The usual, Mark. Glad to be home. Should be wheels-down in twenty.”

“I’ll put up the coffee, John. Fairlake tower out.”

John glanced over at Sherlock, who was staring at him so intently that John wondered if the man was some sort of telepath, trying to read his mind. Hadn’t the CIA experimented with something like that in the seventies? Telling himself that he’d been reading too many stupid conspiracy theory thrillers, he asked, “Something wrong?”

“Where exactly are we going?” Sherlock asked in that posh baritone of his. With a voice like that, John would be content to listen to him read the phone book.

“Fairlake,” John said, reminding himself that he was supposed to be piloting, not ogling his passenger. “The house is another forty minutes’ flying time northish of the airport.”

“You fly home. Don’t you have a car?”
John laughed and shook his head. “No roads up to my property. You can take a boat, if the draft is shallow enough, but I don’t enjoy rowing.” He resisted the urge to rub his shoulder and kept his hands on the controls instead. “The only other option is a quad or snowmobile.”

Instead of answering, Sherlock turned his attention back to his mobile. “I haven’t had signal for an hour,” he said darkly.

“Not out here,” John agreed.

~~~

If Little Prairie had been tiny, Fairlake was... horrifying. The runway was nothing but a gravel strip next to a flimsy-looking mobile home. “Where’s the tower?” Sherlock asked.

John laughed briefly. “No tower here, unless you count hunting stands.”

After a landing that jolted every bone in Sherlock’s body, they circled at the end of the runway and drove towards an open-sided hangar that looked like a carport. There were three small planes and a helicopter parked nearby. All four looked more sturdy than John’s aircraft, and Sherlock wondered what it would cost to buy one for the duration of his stay. Not that he knew how to fly.

And then, there was the snow.

Snow in London was nothing but an inconvenience, forcing Sherlock to change his habits of dress and behaviour to accommodate cold that even he couldn’t disregard. Snow caused traffic delays and ruined carefully planned outfits and encouraged people to stay inside.

Snow here was thick and slow and blindingly white even with the heavy cloud cover that turned day into dusk. Sherlock shivered as he watched it build up on the windscreen, but it didn’t look like the chill would be knife-sharp and biting. It forced his mind uncomfortably deep into the past, to memories of vacationing in Europe with the family — a proper family with a mother and father, instead of this bitter half-family that remained to him and Mycroft. He thought of fires and warm blankets and scientific texts pinched from his father’s shelves, listening while his parents spoke in a polyglot of Russian and French and German, as if thinking Sherlock couldn’t understand all three of those languages by the time he was seven.

“You need to get out, stretch your legs?” John asked as he turned off the plane’s engine.

Sherlock almost said yes, because he felt as though he’d been trapped in a coffin. (That had happened to him once, but it had been an accident caused by enthusiastic sex that had tipped an unsteady bookshelf across the coffin lid, rather than anything more nefarious.) Then he spotted the man walking towards them — older, smoker, accustomed to the cold, friendly smile, casual posture — and realised that if he got out, he’d be expected to socialise, which could draw out this unwanted visit even longer than was necessary to refuel.

“No.”

“Suit yourself.” John exited the aircraft in a blast of cold air that didn’t warm up even after he closed the door. Sherlock wrapped his perfectly good overcoat around himself and shoved his gloved hands against his body, watching as John and the other man — Mark, presumably — chatted while refuelling the plane. Mark had handed John two paper cups of coffee, the sight of which was nearly
After an interminable eight minutes, John binned his coffee and carried the other cup to the plane. He climbed into the pilot’s seat and offered the cup to Sherlock. “Sure you’re all right?”

“Fine.” Sherlock sipped the coffee and found it a vile brew laced with artificial creamer, but it was hot, and right now he’d drink diesel fuel if it would help him warm up. Even his spine felt cold.

He drained the cup as John finished checking gauges and chatting with Mark, who was answering with a handheld radio. Then John was steering the plane around the others, to the far end of the runway.

“Almost home,” John said, sounding relieved, as the plane accelerated towards the not-so-distant trees.

Sherlock glanced at him, noting the way his shoulders had relaxed. The tight lines at the corners of his mouth had all but disappeared, and Sherlock revised his estimate of John’s age downwards by five years. That was curious. He’d been self-confident and comfortable in dealing with the baggage handler at Little Prairie and with Mark, but had maintained a level of tension that apparently wasn’t natural. Was he relaxed by the thought of going home, as some people were, or was it something else?

Whatever the answer, Sherlock would probably have it figured out by the end of the night. But given the crushing boredom that was the alternative, he welcomed even this insignificant little mystery.

~~~

Anyone meeting John at Fairlake would perhaps assume ‘home’ meant a single-room cabin or kit-built hut, the type of place surrounded by disassembled vehicles and unwanted furniture and half-feral dogs running wild. The reality was far more comfortable. The cabin was small but warm and well-appointed and had everything John needed.

The property had been in John’s family for generations, remnant of an old mineral claim his great-grandfather had staked. At various times, it had been used for gold panning, hunting, and fishing, but it hadn’t actually been developed until John’s father retired from his medical practice just after John had enlisted. The dirt airstrip had already been present, and Dad had added a hangar for the family’s old Beechcraft. John had traded the six-seater aircraft for the Kitfox and the services of a builder willing to construct a winter-proof shed for his snowmobile and quad.

The cabin itself had four habitable rooms, a small attic, and a storage cellar that allowed access to the pipes for repairs. It was built of tightly-chinked logs, double-pane windows, and a sturdy stone roof. John had upgraded the power and heating with redundancies — batteries, both diesel and propane generator systems, and solar panels for those rare days when the sun was out. The fuel tanks were safely stored in a shed well away from the house.

After landing, John taxied the plane as close to the house as he could get. He left the engine idling and looked back at the pile of clothing filling the cargo compartment. When Sherlock had emptied and abandoned his suitcase back in Little Prairie, John had been amused. Now, John said, “Need me to get you a bag or something to carry all that inside?”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. He nodded absently, still looking at the property as though plotting an
escape route. John hoped he wouldn’t have to go chasing the Londoner through the woods, ending with both of them fighting off pneumonia.

“Right. Come on, then,” he finally said, and exited the plane, heading through the light snow for the front porch. He pushed open the door and entered without bothering to turn on the lights, going right for the fireplace.

“You don’t lock your door?” Sherlock asked, momentarily silhouetted against the iron grey sky before he closed the door.

“A polite visitor will knock. Anyone else would just break a window if they couldn’t get in through a door. Do you know what a bitch it is to get new windows out here?” John answered, not mentioning that he welcomed anyone to try, as long as he was home. And if he wasn’t home, he really didn’t care. His few valuables were in the bedroom safe, which would take explosives to open without the proper combination.

He knelt down by the hearth and struck a long match. He’d laid the fire before going out. Now, the firelighter caught at once, sending licks of flame out along the kindling.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Which ‘this’?” John kept his eyes on the fire, enjoying the tingling warmth that touched his face. “Building a fire?”

“Oh, I’m building a fire. What do you think I’m doing?” Sherlock said dryly. “Why me? And what exactly am I meant to be doing here?”

John shrugged, reaching in to set a split log in place. The kindling crackled under the weight, but enough of it had caught that he wasn’t in danger of smothering the young flames. “Whatever you want.” He glanced back and saw Sherlock standing near one of the bookshelves that lined the walls, though the light was too faint for him to read the titles. “Do you fish?”

“Do I — No,” Sherlock answered as though horrified.

John snorted, laying a couple more logs onto the iron grate before he stood. He brushed down his jacket, absently verifying the reassuring presence of the .45 at his hip. “Why are you here, then?” he asked, picking his way around the furniture to the kitchen. A riverstone archway separated the living room and kitchen, where a potbelly stove served for both cooking and heating.

Sherlock followed, stopping in the archway. “What did Mycroft tell you?”

The evasive answer made John glance back, but the hazy grey light coming in through the windows wasn’t enough to give him any details of her expression. “Doesn’t really matter, does it? You’re a grown man, not a child.”

Sherlock went very quiet and still — not dangerously, though Mycroft had warned John that Sherlock had a potentially violent temper. No, this felt surprised, almost vulnerable, rather than threatening, and John began to wonder if he’d said the wrong thing.

Finally, John broke the silence by handing over his frame pack. He kept it in the kitchen for when he flew to town to pick up groceries and supplies. “That should work well enough. Get moving. I want to get the plane tucked away before it gets too dark,” he said, and went to light the bedroom fireplace.
The glowing fire in the living room gave off enough illumination that Sherlock was tempted to stay and examine the room in hopes of getting some hint at what made John Watson tick, but he had a feeling that he was meant to retrieve his belongings on his own. Going out in the snow was bad enough. Going out in the snow and pitch darkness was that much worse.

So he ventured back outside, bringing his violin and laptop safely to the living room, where he opened the violin case to allow the instrument to acclimate to the temperature and humidity. He wouldn’t touch it for another day, but simply having it with him was a comfort. One more trip was sufficient for him to bring in everything else. Abandoning his suitcase at the other tiny airport was inconvenient, but Mycroft had provided the luggage, so he couldn’t be arsed to actually care.

John was back outside, presumably putting the plane back into its garage or hangar or wherever he kept it out of the weather, leaving Sherlock to make himself at home. He found a bedroom off the living room — the only bedroom, which gave him pause for a moment as he wondered just what Mycroft was expecting him to accomplish on this little visit. Was he meant to... to what? To seduce John? Was this one of Mycroft’s games of intrigue and espionage?

He leaned against the bedroom wall and pressed his hands against his eyes, hating the way his brain felt sluggish. The world was screaming at him, filling his hyper-aware senses with input, but he couldn’t process it all. Simple deductions, such as reading the attendant at the last airport, still came easily to him, but John seemed to be a more complex creature.

Perhaps Mycroft wanted John dead, and instead of sending an assassin after him, he’d sent his unstable, hair-trigger brother. It was far easier to explain death with a recovering addict’s violent temper. Perhaps he simply expected Sherlock to expertly hide the body or leave it out for the bears to eat.

“Sherlock?”

His head whipped around at the call that sounded like it came from the living room. Peering through the bedroom doorway, he saw John, now holding an oil lamp, looking around in confusion. His expression cleared when he met Sherlock’s eyes. “There you are. I should have asked while we were in town. Any food allergies? I’m going to start dinner.”

“What? No.” Abandoning the backpack and carry-on case in the bedroom, Sherlock followed John into the living room and around to the kitchen.

John had removed his heavy leather jacket, revealing a physique that confirmed Sherlock’s suspicions that he was in very good, very appealing shape. He was still wearing his gun at his left hip. The leather holster was old and worn but well-maintained. Seconds dripped by, glacially slow, as Sherlock took in the comfortable way John carried the weapon, the fact that he was armed in his own house but didn’t bother to lock the doors, the neat-but-worn clothing, his stance, and his hair, which looked two months grown out of a buzz-cut. Military, then, which made Sherlock again wonder about Mycroft’s motivation for sending him here.

“If you want the bedroom, that’s fine,” John said, his back turned to Sherlock. He set a metal kettle on top of the round-bodied iron stove before he moved to the counter, where he hung the oil lantern on a wrought iron hook over the sink. There was a conventional light fixture overhead and a switch by the living room archway, but John ignored both.
“You do have electricity, don’t you?” Sherlock asked with growing concern. He could live without his mobile, but not without his laptop and email.

John nodded. “Main generator, backup generator, batteries, and an inverter system. I try to keep my power use to a minimum. I’ll show you how to use the satellite uplink once I’m done preparing dinner.”

For a few minutes, Sherlock listened to the sound of John chopping something with quick, sure motions. The kitchen was an odd contrast between the primitive (the stove and oil lamp) and luxurious (expert carpentry, wrought iron fixtures and handles, deep freezer). There was little in the way of decoration and nothing at all to hint at the homeowner’s personality, though — no photos or trinkets or even decoratively embroidered tea towels.

Sherlock considered a cigarette, needing the chemical boost to help him think, before he realised with something like horror that they were miles away from the nearest store. Once his supply ran out, he’d be entirely without nicotine. He looked again at the ice chest and a door that he presumed led to a pantry and tried to calculate how often John would be forced to go to town for supplies. Even with two of them eating their way through the provisions, it could be weeks.

His brain caught up with him, then, and he asked, “Where are you going to sleep? That’s your bedroom, isn’t it?”

Without turning around, John shrugged. “Living room is fine for me. I don’t sleep much.”

“Nor do I.”

John’s left hand paused, and he looked over his shoulder. “Just don’t sneak up on me while I’m sleeping. I’m... not used to having anyone else here.”

Sherlock studied John’s face, for the first time reading guarded shame in his expression. He considered and dismissed a few leading questions, thinking that he had plenty of time to indulge his curiosity. If he really was trapped here, there was no point in rushing to solve the mystery of why he was here and who John Watson really was.

~~~

Dinner was a simple stir fry of venison and mushrooms served with pan-fried cornbread. Sherlock took his tea over-sweetened, perhaps to make up for the lack of milk or proper cream. John didn’t bother suggesting the powdered stuff he had in the pantry. It was clear that Sherlock was a creature of cities and civilization just as John had been a few years earlier, before he’d decided to retire to the forest.

Outside, the snow had died down. John did the washing, set the dishes to dry, and said, “I’m going for a walk. Make yourself at home. Try not to use all the hot water, if you shower. It’s only a forty-gallon heater.”

Sherlock stared at him. John bit back a laugh, all too easily able to picture Sherlock as the type to indulge in long, hot showers. Did his brother even know how John lived? Was exiling Sherlock to live primitively for the winter some sort of subtle attack in an ongoing war of sibling rivalry between the two of them?
After a moment, John left the kitchen. He put on his jacket, gloves, and hat before he went outside into the cold. The temperature hovered just below freezing; as happened sometimes, the end of the snowfall brought a degree or two of warmth. If the weather held through tomorrow, the inch-deep layer of snow would be melted in sunny spots by midday.

Every night, he walked the property, checking on the fuel tanks, the small hangar, the shed, and the windows and roof and structure of the cabin. Sometimes, he went to watch the river, but not often. Growing up, he’d rarely seen more than a handful of stars at a time, thanks to a childhood spent under the light pollution of Detroit, Toronto, and other cities. He’d fallen in love with the infinite night sky, but that love had shattered one night in the desert. Now, he felt safer in the dark and shadows, as though the light of the Milky Way somehow stripped away his defences, leaving him exposed and vulnerable.

It didn’t escape him that Sherlock’s pale blue eyes felt like that starlight. Just thinking of them made him shiver in a way that might have been good and might have been bad. Sherlock was handsome and interesting and that voice — Christ, *that voice* — but John didn’t let anyone in his head, and Sherlock seemed just the type to pry where he wasn’t wanted.

Even after everything he’d experienced, John tried to be a good, fair person. He minimised his interactions with others because of the anger and pain lurking just beneath the calm surface of his mind. He could barely remember the John Watson of his school days, when he’d never had trouble finding dates, when he’d lived surrounded by friends and acquaintances, never alone for longer than it took to cross his dormitory or walk from one class to the next, and even then, he’d usually had someone at his side.

He finished his check, verifying that the emergency supplies were packed in the cargo compartments of both the ATV and snowmobile in the garage beyond the hangar. Tomorrow, he’d double the rations and add another water filter, in case he had to bug out and take Sherlock with him. It was ridiculous to think anything would drive him to actually *use* his emergency plans, but just having them was a reassurance that he needed desperately.

A bit reluctantly, he went back inside and hung up his outerwear by the door. The walk had refreshed him and the warmth of the fires encouraged a drowsy, languid mood to creep over him, but he still felt restless. His days were usually filled with bursts of physical labor — mostly chopping firewood — and quiet periods of intense mental concentration. Spending the entire day in flight had been strangely taxing.

The hot water heater in the central utility closet was gurgling. With a sigh, John went to pound on the door between the kitchen and bathroom. “You’re almost out of hot water!” he warned loudly enough to be heard over the shower. When the water turned off a few seconds later, John smiled to himself and went to his desk.

Though he had an old laptop in one of the drawers, the centre of the desk was occupied by a manual typewriter he’d found in a pawn shop almost ten years ago. To the left, he had a stack of blank paper; to the right, a much smaller stack of typed pages. Below the desk, he kept a basket for discarded sheets that he could later use to start fires.

He’d stopped typing in the middle of his last sheet. Now, he ran a finger over the typed lines, feeling the impression of the letters without actually reading the words, letting the story spin out in his mind. He considered how the different plot threads twisted together, weaving into a pattern that would hopefully go unrecognized until the climax. He was only thirty pages in, and already the characters were coming to life in his head, adding little nuances of behaviour that would help make them more real to the reader.
Closing his eyes, he focused his attention on the next scene, listening to the voices in his head. When he found the perfect place to begin, he set his hands on the raised keys and began to type.

Sherlock wasn’t particularly modest, but he was definitely motivated by some level of comfort. He’d brought pyjamas and a dressing gown into the small bathroom and dressed quickly, though the room retained warmth surprisingly well despite having two doors. Once he was dressed, he brought his travel clothes into the bedroom, half-listening to a repetitive clattering sound that was familiar but not immediately identifiable.

The bedroom was furnished with a surprisingly self-indulgent king-sized bed, though there were only enough pillows for one occupant. A quick look inside the tall dresser showed that John’s taste in clothes was consistent: practical, well-made, purchased without a hint of concern for fashion. More interesting was the tall gun safe next to the dresser, built to hold not just handguns but rifles. Possibly artillery or machine guns, judging by the size.

Perhaps John was one of those militia types hiding out in the wilderness to await the collapse of civilisation? But no, from what Sherlock understood, they usually locked their doors and lived in walled compounds. Not tidy little cabins full of packed bookshelves and not much else, with no photographs or pictures or any hint of personality.

Finally, Sherlock followed the sound out into the living room, where an oil lamp cast a soft white glow on John, who was bent over the typewriter. His expression was one of fierce concentration, though by the way his shoulders tensed, Sherlock knew John was absolutely aware of his presence.

Quietly, Sherlock crossed to the sofa by the fire and sat down. Like the rest of the furniture in the cabin, it was a wood frame with cushions, though it was surprisingly comfortable. A glance showed that John hadn’t disturbed Sherlock’s violin or laptop bag. Sherlock was momentarily tempted to play, but he reminded himself that if he damaged the violin, the nearest trustworthy luthier was probably thousands of miles away.

So he closed his eyes and began reviewing and cataloguing the events of the past twenty-four hours before focusing on John, committing to memory every detail he’d observed.
Monday, October 22

Sherlock opened his eyes to warm shadows lit only by a faint glow of banked coals. The window might as well have been painted black, the darkness beyond was so all-encompassing. For a few minutes that stretched into timelessness, he simply lay there, allowing his senses to report on the newness of his situation. The air itself tasted ashy and alive, free of the chemical odour of London. It was different, though not unpleasantly so.

For now, the novelty of his situation was enough to occupy his mind, especially with his thought processes slow and rusty. The enforced isolation of rehab had fragmented his intellect. Now that he was free, he could take the necessary time to rebuild himself. Stimulants — cocaine, nicotine, caffeine — would help, but not as much as simply being away from the worthless so-called doctors and nurses with their incessant questions about ‘feelings’ and insistence upon ‘group therapy’, as if increasing the number of idiots in a room would somehow raise the collective IQ.

Irritation at his memories drove Sherlock out of bed. He put on a dressing gown over his pyjamas and tried not to think about how he’d react if there was no coffee to be had.

Sherlock stopped, one hand on the door that let out to the living room. What if there was no coffee? What if Mycroft’s idea of Sherlock’s continuing rehabilitation included some sort of healthy-living initiative?

If that was the case, he’d have no choice but to treat John as a potential hostile and make his escape. Or to steal John’s gun and shoot himself.

John was awake, still dressed in yesterday’s clothes, rising from the couch as Sherlock entered the living room. He stood stiffly, as if his back hurt, and the darkness around his eyes implied he’d slept poorly. He looked around, quick and wary, before focussing back on Sherlock. “Something wrong?”

Interesting. Not ‘good morning’ or whatever greeting was appropriate at this hour. Sherlock shook his head and asked, “Is there coffee? Or tea?”

John exhaled, some of the tension bleeding out of his posture. “Beans are in the pantry, second shelf down, green canister. Grinder is mounted to the inside of — Hell, I’ll do it,” he said with a sigh, scrubbing his hands over his face as he headed towards the kitchen.

Sherlock followed and sat down at the small table. There were two chairs, though only one had previously been at the table. John had brought the other one in from the porch last night, after brushing spiderwebs off the underside. Like everything else, the table and chairs were well-crafted and sturdy, expensive but not fashionable.

“Was the bed comfortable for you?” John asked as he crouched in front of the stove and built up the fire he’d banked earlier.

“It’s fine. Better than the couch was for you.”

John glanced at him. “It’s fine,” he repeated, arranging two split logs in the belly of the stove before he closed the door. “I always keep a full kettle on to save time.” He unnecessarily gestured at the kettle atop the stove before he went to the pantry.

Why do you live like this? The question was on the tip of his tongue, but he held back, preferring to
find the answer some other way. He listened to the sound of coffee beans pouring into a metallic container of some kind.

“Come over here. Let me show you how to use the grinder,” John said, looking out from behind the pantry door. Sherlock rose and went to the pantry. He was unsurprised to see the shelves were stocked with cans and sealed jars, with several plastic tubs on the floor. “Raw beans are in a canvas bag. I roast once or twice a week, and they go in here,” he said, tapping a green canister on a shelf. He turned to a grinder mounted to the inside of the door. “Dry goods grinder. It can be used for anything — wheat, spices, whatever — but I mostly use it for coffee.”

“Is electricity so scarce here?” Sherlock asked as John worked the crank to turn the simple mechanism. Coffee grounds fell into a tall, narrow copper pot resting on a small shelf below the crank.

“I prefer as few fuel deliveries as possible. It’s a redundant system — solar and a backup generator to power the batteries. The water heater, bathroom power, deep freezer, and refrigerator are always on, but everything else is manual — washing machine, computer, satellite, that sort of thing. There’s a radio in the attic that will reach as far as Fairlake, in an emergency.” He picked up the pot and brushed past Sherlock on the way to the counter.

“Did you design the system?” Sherlock asked, trying to hide the skepticism in his voice. John didn’t strike him as an engineer.

John laughed softly and shook his head. “No, I hired a consulting firm to set it all up. I can handle basic maintenance, but for anything else — the propane lines, for example — I call in a specialist. Did you want to see the specs?” he offered.

Surprised, Sherlock nodded. “I’d like that, yes.”

“Watch the water. When it boils, fill the pot,” he said, and left the kitchen.

~~~

The house plans were in the safe, along with two legal hunting rifles, two shotguns, three not-so-legal handguns, a very illegal machine gun, and a single sniper rifle that John could possibly explain away as a bear-defence weapon. He knelt on the floor and opened the bottom drawer of the safe, where he kept the fireproof file box. He unlocked the box and rifled through the files — insurance papers, identification and passport, military service record, school transcripts, certificates, property deed — to the folded-up blueprints and engineering reports near the back.

This had to be the urge to show off. He was proud of what he’d accomplished. The desire to share his accomplishments was only natural, even for him. Perhaps especially for him.

He wasn’t a recluse by nature, but by circumstance. As he locked everything back away, he shivered, remembering how he’d nearly shot Sherlock as an intruder — an enemy — before his sleep-fogged mind identified him as a house guest. Mycroft Holmes was the only reason John was alive. He wasn’t about to repay that debt by killing his younger brother.

He brought the paperwork into the kitchen and turned on the overhead light so Sherlock could read the blueprints more easily. The coffee chased away the last of his fatigue, and by the time dawn’s light turned the outside world from black to a pale, foggy white, John felt almost human again. He’d
had nearly five hours of sleep, which wasn’t too bad, at least for him.

Figuring he should play the role of host, he asked, “Was there anything you wanted to see?”

“Is there anything to see?” Sherlock countered.

John shrugged. “River and forest, mostly, if you like that sort of thing. We could take the quad and go visit Molly.”

“Molly?”

“Lives downriver, about thirteen kilometers away. I was going to go see her yesterday, but...” He gestured at Sherlock. “She’ll have fresh eggs for us, maybe some chicken, if any of them are ready for slaughter.”

“Chicken,” Sherlock repeated.

John laughed and gathered up the blueprints and engineering specs. “If not, you’re welcome to stay here. I’ll go shave and change. Be ready to leave in a half hour, if you want,” he said, and went to go lock everything back up in the safe.

~~~

Faced with the choice between isolation in the remote house and going anywhere, Sherlock chose the latter. He had no idea what John meant by ‘we could take the quad’ but assumed that a suit was hardly appropriate dress. In fact, most of his clothing was worthless here. Damn Mycroft for not warning him.

He had packed two pairs of jeans: one black and tight, meant for clubbing, and one blue and artfully torn, meant for seducing. The blue pair won out as being marginally more comfortable, so he tossed them on the bed and left the black ones in the suitcase. Other than T-shirts meant for sleep, he’d brought only button-downs; plain white was the closest thing he had to informal. He was clearly going to need to go shopping — assuming there were any stores anywhere in Canada besides airport duty free shops, something he was beginning to doubt.

He wasn’t just going to kill Mycroft. He was going to kill Mycroft slowly, with great attention to detail.

John emerged from the bathroom without warning, clad only in a towel wrapped around his hips. He carried his holster and clothes tucked under one arm. Sherlock began to take in the view before he felt his lungs go cold, his throat tightening to trap his breath.

John’s chest was covered in scars, the worst being a deep pucker of keratin just below his left clavicle — the poorly treated remnant of an old bullet wound. Thinner lines were from knives, and shiny white patches showed where he’d been burned, leaving barely a square inch of his torso unmarked.

This wasn’t Sherlock’s first time seeing such damage. He’d just never seen the victim still on his feet and breathing.

Almost immediately, John turned his back and went to the closet in the corner. “Sorry,” he muttered
over the sound of wire hangers being shoved out of the way.

The bullet wound was mirrored on his back, though it was a starry web of white lines radiating out from a dull red centre, showing the exit path of the bullet. Sherlock tried not to stare, because he didn’t want to follow the conclusions his brain was already drawing. Injured in battle. Tortured. Immediately left active duty to isolate himself here in the middle of the forest.

Suddenly uncomfortable with the picture building in his imagination, Sherlock turned away and continued to dress. Behind him, he heard John approach, open a drawer, rifle through the contents, and then close it. He left for the living room without dressing, perhaps preferring a minimum of privacy, after how Sherlock had been staring. He couldn’t be self-conscious, or he would have dressed in the bathroom — or perhaps he hadn’t thought Sherlock would be in the bedroom.

Before, Sherlock had been curious about John simply because the alternative was to rot from boredom. Now, he needed to know what had happened, and for the first time since he’d been trapped in rehab, he felt his mind go sharp and focussed as he came alive.

When John had landed his miniature deathtrap of a plane at this remote cabin, Sherlock had expected crushing, stifling, mind-destroying boredom — not the mystery of John Watson.

~~~

Between the quad’s loud engine and the rattling cargo trailer, conversation was impossible, which suited John just fine. He’d been tempted to leave as soon as he was dressed, but he thought that abandoning Sherlock for the day would just make things more awkward between them. Of course, that had been before Sherlock had climbed onto the quad behind John, a position that forced them close together, with Sherlock’s hands on John’s hips to help him balance.

Telling himself not to think about the past was no help. He was a damned idiot. He should have at least put on a T-shirt before going into the bedroom, but he was so used to living alone, he hadn’t even thought about it. Fucking hell. Now, Sherlock was guaranteed to ask what had happened, probably at the wrong time (though really, there was no good time to discuss that), and John would avoid the conversation, and soon they wouldn’t be speaking at all.

He shouldn’t have broken his rule — not even to repay a debt of honour. Isolation protected him from the past. Living as he did forced him to concentrate on the present and plan for the future.

But the worst of it was that a part of John’s mind was using this, dwelling on Sherlock’s expression, the way his eyes had widened in shock before he’d gone blank, lips pressed tightly closed as though to keep from speaking. With a little polishing, he could adapt the experience for his writing — assuming he didn’t suffer a complete mental breakdown and shoot himself at his typewriter.

He felt no calmer by the time Molly’s house was in sight, and he realised he’d forgotten to radio ahead. The quad was loud enough to get her attention, though, and she appeared around the side of the house before he’d made it across the yard. She hesitated in mid-wave when she spotted John’s passenger, and shaded her eyes with her hand to get a better look against the sun’s glare.

Molly Hooper was a few years younger than John, a slender, pretty brunette who was surprisingly well-suited for rural living. She was a riparian biologist who’d rented the old Grossman place for a summer to do a study on the ecology of the Fairlake River. She’d liked it so much that she purchased...
it — she was from a wealthy Boston family, she’d once admitted — and had proven to be the perfect neighbour for John, respecting his privacy and bartering fairly with him.

He pulled the quad up to the old barn that she’d turned into a laboratory and henhouse. The chickens had the run of a yard enclosed with chain link fencing. Her first year of raising them had been a disaster for everyone but the local forest predators, mostly wolves, weasels, and foxes.

John dismounted awkwardly, needing to put some space between himself and Sherlock. “Sorry I didn’t call ahead,” he said, giving Molly a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“It’s no problem. Toby, no!” she added in a shout as Toby, Molly’s mongrel dog, came barreling out of the house, barking at Sherlock. Molly went to intercept the dog. Toby was a coward — all bark, no bite, as the saying went. Fortunately, Sherlock didn’t seem put off by the threat.

John followed, watching Sherlock look Molly over with what seemed to be his customary intense focus. “Molly Hooper, this is Sherlock Holmes. He’s... staying with me for a few months,” he said as he stripped off his protective gloves.

Molly gave John a quick, startled look before she rose, one hand wrapped around Toby’s collar. “Hi,” she said, extending her free hand to Sherlock. Her eyes stayed wide and her cheeks flushed a dusky pink.

Sherlock’s smile was brief and falsely polite. “Miss Hooper,” he said, shaking her hand.

“It’s ‘doctor’, actually,” John said as he dropped his gloves onto the quad’s small dashboard.

“All the rage in the neighborhood, us doctors,” Molly said, flashing John a bright smile.

John felt Sherlock’s sudden, penetrating stare. He coughed and shrugged, blatantly changing the subject. “Usual place for the feed?”

“Oh, please. Can I get you both anything to drink? Iced tea?”

“Iced tea?” Sherlock asked, sounding horrified.

“Oh. Um, hot tea? That’s more British, isn’t it?” Molly asked quickly. “I love your accent, by the way. You have a beautiful voice.”

With a slight huff of exertion, John picked up the bag of feed and escaped the flirtation, feeling a queasy mix of irritation and relief. He could already see where this was going. Molly would be charming and intelligent, Sherlock would be receptive, and by the end of the month, he’d be staying in Molly’s far more comfortable house. Hell, John gave it even odds that Sherlock wouldn’t even bother leaving with John in a couple of hours.

He’d chosen his lifestyle intentionally, knowing he was best off alone. When Mycroft had asked John to let his little brother stay with him for a few months, John had been irrationally angry at the invasion of his privacy. But in less than twenty-four hours, Sherlock had proven to be... not too bad. He was quiet and polite and not nearly the terror Mycroft had implied.

The thought of being rid of Sherlock should have made John happy. Instead, though, it felt as though the emptiness that had been growing inside him since the war had just grown a little bit bigger.
Under normal circumstances, Sherlock thought that if one were to find oneself trapped in the middle of a forest, Dr. Molly Hooper would be an ideal companion — especially since she had a laboratory. He hadn’t had access to a proper lab since his had been dismantled by Scotland Yard’s finest idiots when they’d accused him of cooking up methamphetamines. That charge had been dropped without Mycroft’s intervention, once they found a functionally competent chemist to verify that the chemicals in Sherlock’s lab had no recreational purpose whatsoever.

The fact that he was subsequently accused of being a domestic terrorist producing chemical weapons did require Mycroft’s aid, but at least the investigation had cleared his name of the drugs charge. That one drugs charge, anyway.

Molly went out of her way to make Sherlock comfortable, providing properly hot tea, though without milk, and some Canadian excuse for biscuits that proved to be tasteless crackers that had no business being served with tea. Because he wanted to leave open the option for future laboratory use, assuming he found anything interesting enough to study in this godforsaken wasteland, he chose not to comment.

It took John a full quarter-hour to join them in Molly’s kitchen. He unzipped his jacket, poured himself a glass of iced tea, and said, “The coops look good. Holding up all right?”

“Fine.” Molly gave him a sunny smile. “The roof seems fine, too. No leaks after last night’s snow.”

“It doesn’t count if it burns off the next day,” John said as he sat down. “Want to come up for dinner next week? I was going to try my luck at fishing.”

“Mmm, fresh trout. All right.” She grinned at Sherlock. “Do you fish?”

Sherlock repressed his instinct to cringe. These people were obsessed with fishing. “Not unless you count helping police divers locate bodies in the Thames.”

Molly’s eyes went wide. “You — What?”

“I consult with the police from time to time,” he said, leaving off the past tense. He honestly wasn’t certain if he’d get back his access to interesting cases, once he was back in civilization. If nothing else, he could probably find a way to gain access to the Canadian police. People had to kill each other here. There was certainly nothing else to do.

“I thought you were a chemist.” Molly gave a faltering smile. “I mean, look at us. Three doctors and all.”

Sherlock glanced at John, who was looking resolutely down into a cold glass of weak tea, his jaw tight. What kind of doctor was he, then? Not an engineer, or he would’ve done his house plans himself. Not a medical doctor, living out in the middle of nowhere — severe lack of patients and all. A more esoteric doctorate, then? Something that would allow him to work remotely, using the typewriter? Political science, perhaps, though Sherlock was loath to use the two words in the same sentence. ‘Politics’ was as scientific as phrenology or augury. Too many idiots running the world without half a brain between them.

A touch on his hand made him flinch back in surprise. Molly asked, “Is your tea all right?”

“Fine. Lovely.” He turned on his polite smile, pushing his curiosity aside for now.

“Well, if the roof’s okay, anything you need me to do while I’m here?” John offered, as he put down
his glass, now mostly empty.

“Oh. No, thanks. Dinner next Sunday, then?” Molly asked as she and John rose. Relieved to be escaping, Sherlock followed suit.

“What day’s today?”

“Monday,” Molly and Sherlock both answered.

John’s cheeks colored slightly and he nodded. “Right. Sunday, then.”

Molly went for the coat hanging by the door. “Let me pack up some eggs for you,” she offered, leaving the kitchen while John gathered up their cups and took them to the sink.

Sherlock took the opportunity to look around the kitchen, noting that she, unlike John, was prepared to host guests — four chairs at the table, four garish placemats with sunflowers, a proper coffee pot and a wire tree to hang a matched set of six mugs. Either she was a good housekeeper or she actually had visitors. The latter was more likely; she seemed too flighty and had too many active experiments in progress to spend much time dusting unused dishes.

“How far is the road from here?”

Surprised, John said, “Just a few kilometers, at the edge of her property line.”

“So she’s not off the electric grid,” Sherlock said thoughtfully. “Why are you?”

John shrugged as he finished washing their cups and stacked them in the drying rack. “No point in running a line up to the cabin. I do well enough.”

Sherlock nodded, crossing to the front of the house, where he looked out the window. As he’d guessed, there was an electrical pole visible ten yards away, with lines going to the house at roof-level. He wondered if part of John’s reluctance was because it would be so easy for someone to track down his house by simply following the power lines. How close was he to the river? Sherlock remembered seeing glimpses of a blue ribbon between the trees when they’d flown in yesterday, but he couldn’t anticipate the river’s twists and turns. He suspected, though, that John’s cabin was positioned in such a way that it wouldn’t be easily seen from the water.

Out back, Molly was tying down a substantial cardboard box in the trailer. A sharp thud made Sherlock look over towards the barn, where John was pulling a hatchet out of a log. For a moment, Sherlock had no idea what John was doing. Then he saw the blood and broke into a run, heart jolting in surprise and worry.

“John!”

He twisted, looking back with a confused frown barely visible behind his metallic brown Oakleys. “Something wrong?”

Sherlock stopped when he saw white feathers, some of them bloody. He let out a breath and shook his head, for once at a loss for words. “No.”

“I’ll be just another couple of minutes. You might not want to watch,” John said as he slipped the dead chicken’s feet through a loop of rope hanging from the side of the log. Blood drained from the severed neck, dripping into rivulets in the dirt, as John headed back into the barn.

“I hate doing that,” Molly admitted, coming up beside Sherlock. “I don’t mind fish so much, but the
chickens are too...” She unhelpfully trailed off and shrugged. “They taste good, though. Much better than anything I ever got from the supermarket.”

For once, Sherlock had no answer for that. The closest he’d ever come to seeing his food alive was lobster.

In quick order, John had three more chickens butchered and hanging. The first two, now drained of blood, went into a plastic bag. He left the others hanging from the bloodstained log.

“I’m probably going back to town on Wednesday. If you need anything, radio me,” John said, giving Molly a one-armed hug and a kiss on the cheek, still holding the bag of dead chickens. Then he went to stow the chickens behind the cardboard box, tucking them under one of the straps.

“Thanks.” She smiled up at Sherlock and then wrapped a small hand around the back of his neck, trying to pull him down for a kiss on the cheek. When she failed, she turned it into a hug instead, saying, “It was nice to meet you. See you next week.”

“Likewise. Yes,” he said, feeling a bit distanced from reality. Rehab had been bad, but this — two doctors butchering chickens in the middle of nowhere — felt so surreal that he wondered if he was losing his mind. Still in a daze, he got onto the quad behind John, who zipped up his jacket and pulled on his gloves before starting the engine.

“Take care,” John told Molly as he steered the quad carefully in a circle. He twisted to look back, saying to Sherlock, “Keep an eye on the cargo, will you? That chicken’s our dinner tonight. No sense having it fly off the trailer and feed the wolves.”

~~~

Back home, John lost himself in all the physical work required to maintain the house the way he did. He carefully unpacked the cardboard box of eggs, cushioned in styrofoam packing peanuts and crumbled paper. It had taken some experimentation to determine the best way to transport eggs on a quad or snowmobile, but the peanuts seemed to do the trick. John kept them carefully boxed up to return to Molly. He couldn’t always depend on the Fairlake post office to have more.

With winter coming, he needed to spend a couple of hours a day gathering and chopping deadfall for firewood. He’d take the quad out tomorrow. For now, he used some of the stacked wood to build a fire out back, and then filled his deepest pot with water. He hung the pot on a tripod over the fire and went back to sorting out the firewood. Last winter had been the first winter he hadn’t come up short and been forced to chop wood in hip-deep snow.

Once the water was boiling, he used it to dip the chickens, which let him strip off the feathers without difficulty. He dumped the feathers a couple hundred yards from the house, along with the feet. Everything else, he’d find a way to use. He’d become a somewhat inventive cook over the past few years.

Sherlock was waiting for him when he returned to the house. “I need to check my email.”

John sighed and nodded. He had promised, after all. “Right. Let’s get you set up, then,” he agreed, leaving the chickens in the kitchen. He washed his hands thoroughly before he went to flip the switch that powered his satellite uplink and router. Remembering that England was on a 220 volt system, he asked, “Did you bring a power converter? The house is set up for twelve volts or one-
“Yes. Mycroft at least gave me enough forewarning for that,” Sherlock said flatly. “He hadn’t mentioned the” — he gestured around as John moved the typewriter, clearing desk space for his laptop — “conditions. I’ll need better clothes.”

John looked Sherlock over, firmly telling himself not to let the view catch his interest. Unlike John’s clothes, which had ripped through circumstance and chance, the tears in Sherlock’s blue jeans were carefully calculated to draw the eye with teasing glimpses of pale skin and taut muscle.

“Right,” he said, forcing himself to turn back to the desk. He rooted through the drawers, trying to find where he’d put the login information. “The general store in Fairlake might have something serviceable, but if not, you’ll either have to order and have it shipped, or we’ll have to fly somewhere more populated.”

“I’ll order.” Sherlock laughed coldly. “Mycroft can afford whatever the shipping cost is. It’s his fault for not advising me on what to pack, after all.”

Admittedly, John had been wondering about all the suits. He passed Sherlock the login information and wrote down the address of his post box at Fairlake. “You can ship whatever you want to this address,” he said, sliding the pad over to Sherlock. “Think you can make it through the end of the week?”

“Only if no one else asks me if I like fishing,” Sherlock answered with a quick grin as he started to type. “One more suggestion of fishing, and I can’t be held responsible for my actions.”

John laughed. “So much for our plans tomorrow,” he said, and went back to sorting out dinner.

~~~

The satellite connection was abysmally slow, but it was a lifeline to the outside world all the same, and Sherlock contentedly spent fifteen minutes checking emails. Blocking HTML and attachments helped with the speed and with the feeling of isolation. He really didn’t need to download photos of nightclubs he couldn’t visit or people he wouldn’t see for months.

He placed an order quickly, amused to find that Amazon had its own Canadian website. With the help of a site that translated English clothing sizes into Canadian, he ordered clothes — jeans, warm shirts and jumpers, and wool socks recommended for the cold. He ordered boots, snow gloves, and a new scarf, and then threw in a down parka even more expensive than his favorite overcoat in retribution for Mycroft sending him here.

After a minute, he considered what he knew of John so far. He considered the interested glances, the way John had gone tense and quiet with Molly as though jealous of her attention towards Sherlock, and then thought about the bleak months ahead. Not so bleak, though, if he handled this properly, and he confidently added two more line items to the order, in reasonable quantities, thinking it best not to take chances. He doubted there was a proper market in town, and he absolutely refused to let the challenges of winter shipping to the middle of nowhere get in the way of what might well be the only distraction this cabin had to offer, once they were snowed in.

John had been carefully non-intrusive, perhaps thinking that if he respected Sherlock’s privacy, Sherlock would reciprocate. Given that he kept his network password on a sticky pad, Sherlock
doubted he had the technical expertise to track website access. Because of that, he opened up a new tab and began a search for ‘John Watson, doctor, Canadian military’.

He wasn’t surprised to find nothing relevant. The name was common enough that he sorted through three pages of hits before switching to another search engine that wasn’t accessible to the public. He used Mycroft’s credentials, smiling grimly as the authentication went through. Clever bastard that he was, Mycroft probably expected Sherlock to run this very search, which was why he hadn’t changed his password to access this particular server.

The lure of information was high enough that Sherlock conceded the battle. Let Mycroft have his little victory. Hopefully, what he learned would be worth it.

To his surprise, John had a classified file at MI6. Remote authentication wasn’t sufficient to allow access to most of the documents in the file, but he was able to open three: a heavily-redacted SAS report on Operation [Redacted], a debriefing that was entirely blank except for the officer’s name (Captain JH Watson), and a video. Curious, Sherlock set the video to download — the idea of streaming a video over this horrid internet connection made him cringe — and turned his attention to the papers on the desk while he waited.

At first, he analysed John’s skill as a typist and his mastery of the language without paying attention to what he was reading. Then the words filtered into his consciousness, confusing him until he rifled through the stack and realized it was fiction. John was apparently writing a novel. A children’s novel, judging by the short sentences and the frequent mention of dragons, elves, and magical swords.

But at the bottom of the pile, the tone of the writing shifted abruptly, going from fantasy to the grim reality of war without warning. The notation at the bottom corner of each page also changed. The fantasy pages were marked ‘RB’, but these new pages had ‘JM’ at the bottom. So he was working on two books at once — two extremely different books.

“Rice or potatoes?”

Startled, Sherlock looked back and saw John in the kitchen archway. His eyes went immediately to the pistol still holstered at John’s left hip. “Either.”

John let out an amused huff of breath. “Not exactly the pain in the ass your brother implied. Does he even know you?”

“No.” It came out flat and hostile.

“His loss,” John said easily, and went back into the kitchen.

Sherlock stared after him, wondering what the hell that meant. After a day of John seeming tense and standoffish, was he trying to be nice? Flirting? He’d certainly been staring earlier (which wasn’t a surprise — Sherlock hadn’t exactly dressed for subtlety). And yet, he’d avoided giving Sherlock a clear view of his body —

No, of his scars.

John was comfortable with physical contact, shaking hands without hesitation, giving Molly friendly hugs and kisses. He didn’t avoid brushing against Sherlock as he walked by. And he’d openly admired Sherlock a few times over the past day, which implied that he most likely wasn’t straight.

If Sherlock could get John past his self-consciousness about the scars, the next few months might prove significantly less boring. The scars certainly didn’t put Sherlock off. The opposite, in fact. In a
The world of artificial perfection, plastic surgery, and body modification, the scars made John more interesting, more attractive, not less.

The laptop beeped to let Sherlock know the download was complete. He turned off the volume so John wouldn’t hear and then started the video.

After a few seconds of black, the footage turned grainy, showing a poorly lit green and white flag that was unfamiliar. The curved writing was Arabic, and Sherlock leaned forward, watching intently as the clip changed. The flag disappeared, replaced by several armed soldiers, faces masked, surrounding a hooded man bound to a chair. He wore brown camouflage trousers but no shirt. His bared chest was covered in blood and bruises and angry red burns, with filthy gauze taped over his left shoulder and collarbone. The canvas sack over his head was stained a rusty red along the bottom edge where the fabric touched the wounds.

Sherlock went cold, his gut twisting as he tried to deny what he was seeing.

The armed men shouted and gesticulated with their guns for a moment before another soldier stepped into the scene. He pointed back at the bound man and addressed the camera, mouth moving beneath the black and white chequered scarf that hid everything but his eyes. Sherlock didn’t need to know the language to understand that he was delivering an ultimatum — comply or the prisoner died.

Then he turned and reached back to remove the hood, revealing the bloody, bruised face of John Watson.
Thursday, October 25

For the next three days, Sherlock tried to push the video out of his mind, tried to delete it, to deny it even existed, but it was too wrapped up in the mystery of John Watson’s current life. It was fundamental to him, a shattered bridge between who he was now and whoever he might have been in the past.

Standing outside, wrapped up in his coat and the black jeans he’d worn the previous day, he looked up at an alien night sky and thought about John. Polite, mild-tempered, isolated. Utterly skilled at surviving and even thriving in a solitary environment that would drive most humans mad — Sherlock included, if not for the mystery of unraveling exactly who John was. And, more importantly, how he’d survived.

Late that first night, he had run down his laptop’s battery watching the video. It lasted for only one minute twenty-eight seconds, and John’s face was only visible for fifty-four of them, but Sherlock had been able to catalogue almost everything they’d done to him. Comparing John’s posture and behavior in the video to Sherlock’s all-too-precise memory of the scars on his chest, he assumed that their torture had continued after filming had ended.

It seemed a terrible omission now that he didn’t speak Arabic. He couldn’t identify their country of origin or their political or religious affiliation by accent. Even the flag had turned into a dead-end. It wasn’t a national flag but instead identified one of a thousand different groups, one that had never become prominent enough to merit its own entry on Wikipedia. Or perhaps this had been their opening foray, one that Mycroft had shut down before they’d ever really got started.

Sherlock had no doubt that this was how Mycroft had come to know of a Canadian military officer named John Watson. This video was what put John’s name on Mycroft’s desk. And John had stated that Sherlock was here, now, as a favour to Mycroft.

What favour could be so great that a man like John — a man who treasured his privacy and isolation — would accept a houseguest for not a few days but a few months? Nothing short of a life saved.

SAS Operation [Redacted], then. That must have been the order of things. Mycroft got his hands on the video, sent the SAS to rescue the hostage, and then debriefed him for whatever useful intelligence he had on the men who’d held him and tortured him. That explained the lack of information about the organisation. Acting on John’s knowledge, Mycroft had probably sent the SAS back in to scour away any trace of the terrorists.

But why wasn’t John broken? Why wasn’t he tearing himself apart from the inside, after all he’d endured? Sherlock had no real experience with soldiers or terrorists, but he’d seen more than his share of victims. John shouldn’t have survived a year, especially not in a house full of guns, a favored suicide method for men. At the very least, he should have fallen prey to alcohol or tranquilisers, but so far, Sherlock had yet to find more than a single bottle of whisky, mostly untouched, and no drugs stronger than aspirin.

He paced through the yard, looking up at the sky, but the stars held no answer. There were tens of thousands of them, far more than he’d ever imagined, even out in the countryside where he’d grown up. The sky was washed with shades of pale blue and silver where the stars blended their light into radiant bands. The details were meaningless to him — he didn’t care about naming constellations or astrophysics or even the missions to explore space — but he could appreciate the beauty, and had
found himself drawn to it each night, after dinner and coffee.

He listened as the rhythmic clatter of John’s typing, attenuated by the thick window, stopped. A moment later, the door creaked open. “Everything all right?” John asked, right on schedule. Twenty minutes in the cold, and John automatically grew concerned for Sherlock, but he never actually came out from under the shelter of the porch.

Only when he did his before-bed walkarounds did he actually leave the doorstep to circle around the house. Sherlock had watched him moving through the darkness with certain, quiet footsteps as he checked the perimeter of the house, the aircraft hangar, and the fuel tanks some distance away. Not once on those checks did he look up at the stars, though. Had he become blase living here? Or was he simply immune to a sight so remarkable, so compelling that even Sherlock was captivated by it?

For the past two nights, Sherlock had let the query draw him back inside. Now, though, he stood his ground and kept looking up at the sky. “It’s beautiful here.”

Instead of taking the bait, John stayed by the door. “It is,” he agreed.

Sherlock glanced back, noting his instinctive desire to stand to attention in the way his shoulders were held stiffly squared, chin upright. His hands still hung casually at his sides, but the left was curled, fingertips just touching the holster he always wore or kept close at hand.

“What do you know the constellations?” Sherlock asked as though curious. He had no interest, but he knew the logical answer would be for John to come out beside Sherlock so he could more accurately point to various groupings of stars.


“Bollocks,” Sherlock muttered, and turned to follow.

~~~

For as long as John could remember, he’d had an active, rich imagination. He’d grown up on Tolkien’s stories, from the well-known Lord of the Rings to the esoteric *Silmarillion* and almost-unknown *Smith of Wootton Major*. He’d read all of Madeleine L’Engle’s Time Quartet, not just *A Wrinkle in Time*, and everything by Anne McCaffrey and Ursula Le Guin. His most memorable birthday gift was the compiled Lord of the Rings saga, a single leather-bound volume with gold leaf and pages of fold-out maps that were long since lost, having spent years taped to his bedroom walls. He remembered how his young, skinny arms ached under the weight of it but he refused to put it down until the end of whatever chapter he was reading.

Now, though, the images in his head had gone stagnant and dark, the musical Elvish language degenerating into harsh Arabic tones, clipped and bloody in John’s memory. He pressed his hands against his eyes, elbows braced to either side of his typewriter, and tried to see through the sandstorm to the tall blue-green forest with its golden-wood treehouses in the world he’d created. He was off his timeline. He should have had a first draft finished already. Soon, the emails from his editor and publisher would start coming — polite inquiries at first, followed by sharper-worded reminders that while he hadn’t signed a contract, he was jeopardising his working relationship with them.

Finally, he ripped the sheet out of the typewriter and tipped it towards the oil lantern. He only had to
read a few lines before he huffed in frustration and threw it into the discard basket below the desk. So much for story focus.

Of course, there was the other story, the one his editor and publisher didn’t know about, the one he’d started not with the intent of sharing but to exorcise his demons, one word at a time. That one came all too easily to him, as though the more his world of childhood fantasy slipped away, the easier the nightmare took its place. But he wasn’t ready. Not yet. One page a month, maybe two — that was the most he could handle. He thought about Sherlock’s beautiful light blue eyes and how he’d reacted to the sight of his scars.

Before he even realised he was moving, he was up out of his chair and crossing to the bedroom. Sherlock looked up abruptly but didn’t follow. He had a book in his lap, one of the books taken from the bookshelves that lined almost every available wall of the cabin.

He typed the six-digit combination into the gun safe and swung open the door. The tiny halogen light mounted in the top of the safe came on, casting a harsh white glow over oiled metal and matte black composite and softer wood stocks. He got out the .22, an old, lovingly-tended Remington, and slung it over his shoulder. The ammunition was dirt cheap and stocked in quantity in Fairlake, which made it perfect for target shooting.

Rather than going back into the living room, he cut through the bathroom, not ready to answer any questions Sherlock might ask. He put on the patched, threadbare jacket that he kept in the kitchen. He didn’t bother with gloves, though he knew his fingers would go stiff, then burn with the cold, then finally go numb if he stayed out long enough.

It was a couple of hours until midnight, and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. John walked out back, trying not to look up at the stars, and went to the airstrip. Originally, it had been just over twelve hundred feet. When John had taken possession of the property, he’d expanded it by another two-fifty. He’d paid a small fortune to have it covered with gravel and spent a couple of hours every season hitting it with weed killer.

It made a convenient target range for everything but the sniper rifle. At the far end of the runway, he’d hung scrap metal plates from tree branches. He put the box of ammunition down on the edge of the gravel and crouched, not looking up at the sky as he dropped the magazine into his palm. It only held ten shots, which forced him to take a breath every few seconds while he reloaded.

When he pressed the first bullet into the magazine, his hands shook.

His internal dissonance had to be because Sherlock was there in the house, a living, breathing presence where before there had only been silence. It didn’t help that he was fucking gorgeous, with those eyes and that voice and that strange sense of calm intensity. He didn’t fill the air with meaningless conversation; he was content to sit in silence, but he always watched, whatever John was doing, wherever he went.

Even now, John kept an ear out for the creak of the back door. He wondered how long it would take between the first shot and when he heard it. Probably only a few seconds.

He preferred shooting left-handed, but the ejection port was on the right side of the rifle, and he didn’t feel like eating hot brass.

The scope wasn’t very powerful, but that didn’t matter. He could barely see his target area, much less an actual target, so he looked in the right direction and brought the rifle up into his line of sight, waiting a few seconds while he tried to distinguish anything. It was pointless — without moonlight,
even the infinite stars overhead weren’t enough to light up his target — so he eased his finger against
the trigger, changing pressure in slight increments until he heard the sharp, sudden report of the firing
pin striking. A .22 sounded more like silverware dropped on a tile floor than the boom of a higher-
calibre round, and the recoil was too slight for him to detect, even if he’d braced against his bad
shoulder.

He squeezed off two more rounds before he heard the back door slam open, wood striking wood
more loudly than the echo of the fourth round. That one hit a target, judging by the faint, distant ting
he heard from the far end of the runway.

“John?” Sherlock shouted.

“Clear,” he called back, raising the muzzle. Then, realising Sherlock might not understand, he added,
“I’m at the runway, to your left.”

As he listened to Sherlock crunch across the early autumn grass, blades made brittle by the cold, he
crouched down, balanced on the balls of his feet, and dropped out the magazine. He felt for the box
of ammunition and loaded four rounds to replace the ones he’d fired. His fingers were already stiff,
fighting the spring pressure, but his head felt clearer. When he wasn’t firing at a living target — and
when no one was shooting back at him — he found shooting to be relaxing.

“Are you all right? Did something happen?” Sherlock asked as he stopped beside John. In the
starlight, he was a tall silhouette wrapped in a dramatic coat. John could just make out the pale face
above the dark wool, but he couldn’t pick out the details of his fine bone structure or beautiful eyes.
Just as well. He didn’t need to torture himself with what he couldn’t have.

“It’s fine. I have some targets at the far end,” he said, gesturing down the runway.

Sherlock turned. “Can you even see them?” he asked sceptically.

John grinned. “Not even a little.” He looked up at Sherlock and impulsively asked, “Want to give it a
try?”

Sherlock’s laugh was sudden and unguarded and did more to lift John’s spirits than the target
shooting had. “You’re offering me a weapon? You didn’t listen to anything my brother said, did
you?”

“Like I said on day one, you’re an adult.” John turned, holding the rifle out while trying to remember
what little he knew of UK gun laws. “Ever fired one of these before?”

“Once or twice,” Sherlock said with forced casualness.

“Uh huh. Safety’s a button behind the trigger.” He set the weapon in Sherlock’s hands, covering
them with his own, directing his fingers to each part of the firearm by feel. “You’ve got ten shots.
The bolt will work automatically. On the last shot, it’ll stay open.” Gently, he pressed the rifle up and
circled around behind Sherlock’s right shoulder. The wool coat was soft under his hands. “Snug it in
the hollow of your shoulder, but don’t worry about recoil. You won’t feel it.”

“Twenty-two, isn’t it?” Sherlock murmured.

“Yes. Oh, ah, did you want me to find safety glasses or ear protection?” he offered. He had some in
the gun safe for when he went hunting.

“Safe is another word for boring.”
John glanced up at him, surprised, but let that pass. “You’re clear to fire, as long as you stay aimed down the runway. I own the property, and anyone on it is trespassing.”

“I’ll help hide the bodies,” Sherlock offered lightly, shifting his stance. That was all the warning John needed to step back, and a moment later, he heard Sherlock fire the first round. As the echo died out, Sherlock brought his head up, then back down to rest in alignment with the scope. “There’s really no point in aiming, is there?”

“Want me to dig out the nightvision gear?” John offered

Sherlock laughed, a warm sound that slithered through John before coiling itself contentedly in his chest. “Another time.”

~~~

John’s sudden departure hadn’t caught Sherlock by surprise. His typing had become more and more erratic as the hours passed, until the pauses between words stretched out into nearly a full minute each. The first surprise had been when he’d listened to John open the gun safe, and Sherlock actually wondered if he’d need to stop a suicide until he dismissed the thought as foolish. John wasn’t depressed — *distressed*, yes, and angry, but not depressed.

As soon as John left, Sherlock had checked the page John had discarded from his typewriter. It was more of the same fantasy writing but lacked the vivid imagery of the other pages. Sherlock went back to his book, dismissing John’s behavior as a symptom of a bad night, until he’d heard the first gunshot.

Adrenaline slammed into his veins. He ran to John without even thinking, caught up in the sudden fear that he’d assessed the situation wrongly. He had the terrible mental image of John lying dead in the yard, starlight turning his blood to shadowy, liquid black, and he’d never been so glad to be so wrong.

John’s impromptu lesson in marksmanship was unnecessary but seemed to amuse him, so Sherlock didn’t bother to correct his assumptions that he was a novice. Instead, he enjoyed having John close to him, cold hands guiding his fingers over the weapon. When Sherlock fired, John stayed close, though carefully out of the path of the ejected cartridges, and when all ten rounds were spent, John showed Sherlock the release and caught the magazine as it fell free.

John crouched beside Sherlock, shoulder to knee, and began reloading the magazine. “We can do this in daylight, if you’d actually like to see what you’re hitting,” he offered.

Supporting the rifle with his left hand, Sherlock found it natural and comfortable to drop his right hand to brush against John’s hair. “It’s not fishing, so yes.”

“I’ll also show you how to butcher whatever you hit, so you might want to rethink that,” John threatened with a laugh.

Surprised, Sherlock went tense before silently scolding his rusty, unused mind for not having anticipated this facet of John’s lifestyle. Of course he hunted. He was living across the continent from the nearest grocery store. Just days earlier, Sherlock had watched him butcher live chickens.

John rose, resting a hand on Sherlock’s arm. “Or not,” he said uncertainly. “It’s fine. It’s nothing — I
“No,” Sherlock interrupted just as uncertainly, wondering how he’d so unexpectedly ended up in this
new territory. He’d worked with the police several times, and enough of those cases had been
murders. Corpses were nothing new to him, except he was accustomed to *human* bodies, not
animals.

And he’d never killed anyone. Or anything at all, except for cockroaches and the incident with the
rat that got into his chemicals cupboard a couple of years earlier.

He felt strangely reluctant to even consider it.

A few seconds passed before John seemed to come to a conclusion. “Well, whatever you’re
comfortable with.” He gave Sherlock’s arm a brief squeeze before running his hand down to find
Sherlock’s. He pressed the loaded magazine to his palm before hesitating. “Did you want to keep
shooting? It’s freezing out.”

Actually, he did — but while he was wearing his warm coat, John was wearing the jacket he threw
on when he had to run out to grab more firewood, a battered windbreaker that was doing little to
keep off the cold. His fingers were like ice against Sherlock’s palm.

The fact that Sherlock noticed was nothing unusual. Most of the time, he could anticipate
physiological responses to weather based on what a person was wearing and his estimates of
metabolism and body fat. He wanted to stay and play with the rifle, because he’d always enjoyed the
challenge of target shooting (even when he couldn’t see the target), but he didn’t want John to get
cold. Colder.

“Let’s go inside,” he said as an idea struck him.

John’s fingers twitched against Sherlock’s hand before he reclaimed the magazine. “All right. One
minute,” he said, easing the rifle from Sherlock’s grasp.

He stepped ahead of Sherlock, raised the weapon, and fired all ten rounds with a quick, precise
rhythm in the time it took him to exhale, filling the air with the sharp smell of gunsmoke. Then he
slung the rifle over his shoulder, bent to pick up the ammunition box at his feet, and said, “I’m going
to make coffee, if you want some. Or are you going to bed?”

Sherlock smiled. “I have a better idea.”

~~~

John knew most of what Sherlock had brought into the cabin, from the two flash drives in an outside
pocket of his laptop bag to the lump of what John thought was raw amber stowed in his violin case.
He hadn’t gone snooping, precisely, but transporting someone in a tiny aircraft to an equally tiny
cabin meant they were practically living in each other’s skin, even if John was still sleeping (badly)
on the couch.

So when Sherlock took the amber out of his violin case, John was curious but not surprised — not
until Sherlock picked up his bow. He twisted a little silver rod at one end and then set a flat surface
of the amber to the pale cream strings, stroking the length of the strings down the amber.
“It’s rosin,” Sherlock said, his eyes fixed to what his hands were doing. John wondered if that was the British pronunciation of ‘resin’, but was too embarrassed to ask. Bad enough that Sherlock had somehow picked up his curiosity without even looking at him.

The typewriter was calling to him, but his mind was still too dark, urging him not to the fantasy epic but the other book, the one he didn’t want to write. Intentionally, John kicked up his legs, crossed his booted feet over the arm of the sofa, and laid back, looking up at the firelight playing on the beams supporting the attic floor. He knew he should go clean the .22, but he justified his laziness by thinking he’d take Sherlock out for some proper target shooting after breakfast, if the weather cooperated.

At first, the sounds were random plucks of metal strings, individual notes twisting and warping as Sherlock tuned the violin. John wasn’t impressed, but he’d never been particularly musical, so he had no standards by which to judge. Since anything was better than listening to his own thoughts, he closed his eyes and stopped trying to think about his writing.

The music, when it began, caught John by surprise. He’d never been a fan of classical music, but this was... good. Really good. Familiar, too, he realised before he propped up on his elbows to stare at Sherlock and asked, “Is that Santana?”

Sherlock’s smile was almost invisible, a barely-there crinkle around his eyes and a twitch of his lips. “Classical training isn’t meant to limit skill. The best musicians are all classically trained, no matter their final genre.”

John laughed and laid back down, closing his eyes. “It’s beautiful,” he said honestly. “And thank you for choosing something I actually recognize. Fairlake isn’t exactly a stop on anyone’s concert touring schedule.”

The answering laugh was almost too soft to be heard over the music.
“Snow today,” John said over the sound of frying bacon. “Think your order’s made it to the post office yet?”

“I should hope so.” Sherlock stared at John’s back, noting the easy way he stood and moved. In the five nights Sherlock had been at the cabin, he hadn’t seen John sleep more than three hours at a time until last night. The ache in Sherlock’s fingers should have been irritating, but he felt oddly pleased, as if he’d accomplished something significant, and he couldn’t convince himself it was the scientific satisfaction of analysing and altering John’s behavior.

“We’ll fly in today,” John decided. “Mark will keep the Fairlake runway clear, if it’s not too bad, but if it sticks tonight and continues through tomorrow, we’ll have to take the snowmobile and overnight in town.”

Sherlock considered the gravel runway and the sheer difficulty of keeping it free of snow. He started to nod before he realised that takeoff was only half the battle. “What about landing?” he asked sharply as John slid bacon onto a plate.

John shrugged, cracking eggs into the pan of bacon grease. “We’ll be fine. The snow at Fairlake is always worse, because of the open air. If it gets that bad at Fairlake, I’ll just leave the plane there until the weather clears, and we’ll take the long way back here.”

“Why?” Sherlock asked before he could stop himself. “Why do you live like this?”

A hint of tension appeared in John’s shoulders and the way his head came up, though he didn’t look away from the stove. “I like the quiet,” he said in an absolutely neutral tone. With his back turned, Sherlock couldn’t watch for the usual tells, but he sensed John was lying anyway.

He could understand that John enjoyed the physical work required to maintain a primitive lifestyle. Just watching him chop wood had been exhausting for Sherlock, who hadn’t done more than sit in the kitchen, looking out the window and drinking coffee. Between caring for the house, preparing for the winter, and his writing, he was constantly busy — something Sherlock could appreciate.

And yet, while he was obviously practiced at some aspects, in others, he was terribly unprepared for such an isolated lifestyle. While wandering the grounds on his second day there, Sherlock had found a weed-choked, dead garden. Somewhat embarrassed, John explained that he’d tried to grow his own vegetables for three years before deciding he had no talent at gardening. Instead, he stocked canned vegetables and bartered with Molly, whose garden was small but significantly more successful.

But the reality was that John was a social creature, as John proved not two hours later, in the so-called ‘village’ of Fairlake. The habitation was little more than a cluster of fifteen buildings, the largest of which was the two-storey feed and goods store. The post office was the only commercial building that didn’t have an attached residence or its own fenced pen of goats, pigs, sheep, or cows.

Suddenly starved for mental input, Sherlock threw himself into exploring and actually went so far as to chat up every single person he met. He even kept his observations to himself, though he privately identified four alcoholics, one polygamous marriage, and the statistical improbability of three separate men in this tiny town, all unknown to one another, who dressed in women’s clothing in the privacy
of their own homes.

He also learned that he could, with minimal effort, rob the entire town blind. Only the post office had locks that would take him more than thirty seconds to pick. The townsfolk were universally friendly (perhaps ‘desperate’ was a better word), and Sherlock was invited into almost every house for tea, water, or just a quick greeting. He noted typical hiding places for valuables and analysed the shifts in importance with which people regarded their belongings. Guns, for example, were almost universally displayed, either in safes or glass-fronted cabinets or hanging on the wall, all of them loaded and close at hand. When Sherlock casually commented on what looked like an antique from the first World War, he was told, “Still good for killing bears. That’s all that matters.”

And finally, he learned that everyone — everyone — liked John, and he seemed genuinely friendly in return. Sherlock had dealt with recluses before. He had watched them attempt to function when forced into a social situation, with varying degrees of success, and John bore none of the same traits. In fact, the only behavior that was at all unusual was an obvious sense of awareness. As they walked through town, Sherlock watched John mark the location of every person or vehicle or animal on the street, saw the way he noted windows and doors, observed how he glanced to the side as they passed a corner.

For the first time, Sherlock regretted leaving rehab. There had been soldiers there. Not many, but enough that he could have questioned them, dug into their minds, learned what it was like to see war and be unable to subsequently return to society. John’s experience in the Middle East had to be the reason for the contrast between his life of isolation and his genuine friendliness. He knew he would figure it out eventually — in the end, he always did — but knowing there was more than he could deduce frustrated him to no end.

~~~

Between Sherlock and the clothes he’d purchased, John had only a few kilos of leeway for supplies. Before they’d even left the house, he’d decided there was no point in being practical about restocking. He wouldn’t have the available weight allowance for the Kitfox to carry even one bulk sack of rice. So while Sherlock tried on his new clothes in the bathroom at the general store, John browsed the aisles and tried to remember the last time he’d indulged in any sort of luxury purchase. His memory came up empty. For years, he’d focussed on survival and challenging himself to live with less, not more.

He thought about Sherlock, who came from London, and about having Molly over for dinner on Sunday night, and considered a bottle of wine, but he didn’t know good wine from bad. Besides, Fairlake’s stock of alcohol tended towards the cheap and plentiful, a temptation he’d managed to ignore on all levels, though he did keep a single bottle of whisky at the cabin. Ingestible alcohol was too useful not to have on hand in emergencies.

Instead, he wandered over to the baking aisle, thinking of his disastrous attempts at making desserts or casseroles. He’d finally concluded that it was impossible to actually bake anything using the wood stove with its variable temperatures and random cool spots. But he could improvise, he thought, eyeing the supply of crackers. Graham crackers and the last two bags of marshmallows were a good start, and there was more than enough chocolate stocked by the cash register. He picked up a bag of milk as well, recalling Sherlock’s opinion about powdered creamer. After he paid, everything went into the small backpack he’d brought with him, and he went outside to check the weather.
Sherlock joined him a few minutes later. He still wore his long, sweeping overcoat, though he’d changed his slacks for blue jeans and his shoes for heavy-treaded hiking boots. Over one arm, he carried a down parka with a fur-lined hood, and he had a blue and black backpack slung over the other shoulder.

“Going to tell your brother you’ve gone native?” John asked as he led Sherlock in the direction of the airfield.

Sherlock gave him an odd look before he took the phone out of his coat pocket. He’d been keeping it turned off to conserve battery power. “Will I even get signal here?”

“No.” John gestured for him to put the phone away. “He wanted me to call him next time I was in town. Figured you might want to talk to him.”

Sherlock’s expression shuttered. “He wants you to report on me.”

“Then he’ll be disappointed.” When Sherlock looked at him in surprise, John reminded him, “Adult, remember? I’m not going to spy on you for him.”

“It’s what he expects. He arranged —” Sherlock cut off and shook his head abruptly. “It’s not important. He won’t be happy with you.”

“I’m heartbroken,” John said flatly, unable to keep the edge of hostility out of his voice. Since Holmes had decided to call in his debt, John had felt uncomfortable at being trapped between two warring brothers.

He thought he’d known what to expect when he’d learned he was getting himself a cocaine addict to watch through the first half of the snowy season, if not longer. What he got, though, was nothing like what he’d been told. No violence, no paranoia, no mood swings or hostility or anything undesirable at all, unless one counted Sherlock’s inherent laziness. He’d never even courteously offered to wash a dish, though he hadn’t contributed to any household mess. He hung his towels and kept the bedroom in order and was surprisingly good company, or at least not as much of a pain in the ass as he might have been.

“If he expects you to call him —”

“I’ll call him,” John interrupted, “and I’ll tell him you arrived safely and are in fine health for someone who doesn’t sleep enough and probably could stand to gain ten pounds or so. Then you can tell him whatever you’d like, including ‘fuck off’, if that’s what you want.”

Sherlock stared at him before his lips slowly curled up in a smile. “You mean that.”

“Of course I do. Just don’t take too long, or we’ll be landing in the snow and dark.”

~~~

Back at the cabin, Sherlock followed John to the pantry, saying, “He’s an interfering bastard, but he’s proven useful now and then.” John set down the backpack he’d filled while in town and bent to open it. Sherlock watched; he hadn’t been able to determine what John had bought, and the curiosity had been nagging at him.
“He’s your brother. Maybe he just cares,” John suggested as he took two plastic bags of...

“Marshmallows?” Sherlock asked, baffled. They’d been useful at uni when combined with a microwave oven or certain chemicals, but John didn’t even own a microwave.

John’s brows went up. He took out a rattling box of digestives labelled ‘graham crackers’ and held it up as if it were significant. “You have had s’mores, haven’t you?”

“Is that even a word?”

“God, have you been living under a rock?” John asked, though not harshly. His laugh was warm and friendly and inclusive, as though he were happy to introduce Sherlock to something new. “We’ll save some for Sunday, but you have to try them tonight. Would you get the fire started in the living room?”

Driven by curiosity, Sherlock nodded and picked up one of the oil lamps in the kitchen and carried it to the living room. He raised his voice to continue the conversation. He doubted John cared about etiquette and yelling in the house — not that the house was large enough to actually warrant yelling.

“Mycroft doesn’t ‘care’ about anyone except himself and his powerbase. He’s only interfered in my life this much because someone might get the idea that I’m a good target to use as leverage against him. He probably would have had me killed, except I’m useful.”

“Sherlock!” John stepped into the archway a moment later, staring at him in shock. “How could you say that about your own brother?”

“It’s nothing but the truth.” Sherlock used the lamp to light the end of a thin twig, and then transferred the flame to the kindling laid in the hearth. “I occasionally do some minor work for Mycroft — usually when his pet spies and analysts prove incompetent, or when he wants to hide something even from his own black ops teams.” He let out an irritated huff, wondering how Mycroft could stand working with people day in and day out. Even his handpicked teams were often frustratingly dense. Sherlock would have probably packed the lot of them into a boat and then arranged for it to sink.

Once the kindling was going well, he started laying split logs onto the grate, careful not to smother the flames. Realising John had gone quiet, he glanced over, expecting that John had gone back into the kitchen to start dinner or put up coffee as was his habit.

But he was still standing in the archway, eyes fixed on Sherlock, left hand resting on his handgun in a manner that was familiar but no longer casual at all. He seemed almost relaxed, weight balanced evenly, shoulders loose, but a sense of danger crackled around him.

Instinctively, Sherlock rose, taking a carefully measured step back, suddenly aware that he was unarmed and terribly out of practice. More than a year ago, he’d realised money spent on judo could be better spent on forgetting reality. Even at the height of his training, though, he doubted he would have been able to manage this situation, because he had no idea what he was facing. He only knew that John — friendly, odd, helpful John — was suddenly very, very dangerous.

“What now?” John asked quietly.

A hundred answers flitted through Sherlock’s mind: things he would say to criminals, broken down further into burglars, murderers, kidnappers, or unknown; things he would say to police, authorities, and Mycroft’s thugs; things he would say to strangers or acquaintances or his dealers, to junkies in a bad trip or a paranoid crash. But without the ability to properly categorise John, he had no idea what
to say, except, “Marshmallows and digestives?”

Whatever John had been expecting, it apparently wasn’t that. “Marshmallows and what?”


John stared at him, some of the threat fading, leaving Sherlock to breathe more easily. “You... you mean dessert. You want —” He shook his head, closing his eyes for just a second. “I mean, what are you actually planning to do?”

“I have no idea,” Sherlock admitted before his brain caught up with the situation as the adrenaline in his system finally did its job, burning through another layer of the recovery-fog left over from rehab. “Black ops. You think I work for him. God, no. I’d sooner shoot myself.”

John’s eyes narrowed, but the tension eased another tiny bit. He didn’t move his hand from the butt of his gun, but his fingers relaxed. “You do work for him. You said so: ‘minor work’.”

“That’s nothing to do with you,” Sherlock said, trying to remember anything he’d done for Mycroft that qualified as even vaguely interesting. “Finding security leaks, retrieving stolen files, that sort of thing. And only if I have no other choice, or if I can extort immense sums of money from him. I love ruining his budget,” he added with a fierce grin. “I used his entire discretionary budget for two years in a single month to retrieve the formula for a bioengineered strain of anthrax early last year, before it could be put on the market in Hong Kong.”

“What do you want from me, then?”

That, he could answer. He gave John his most charming smile and let his voice drop low, asking, “Would you rather I make a list?”

John’s hand fell away from his gun. “Are you...” He trailed off into silence and shook his head, finally lifting his hand to rake through his hair. “Sorry. Never mind,” he said distantly as he went back into the kitchen. “I’ll just... start dinner.”

Sherlock let out a breath and rested his arm on the stone mantle, wondering if he’d misread John’s inclinations. No relationship with Molly, no real attempt at hiding the way he looked at Sherlock... probably not gay, but definitely not straight, and just as definitely interested in Sherlock. Wasn’t he? Of course he was.

Sherlock couldn’t remember the last time he’d tried to seduce someone outside a club or the streets or a party. He thought back all the way to the start of uni and wondered if he ever had. He certainly hadn’t bothered at boarding school — even a whiff of homosexuality there would have made his life even more hellish than it already had been, and he saw no reason to give his enemies any more ammunition to use against him, especially not if it would disarm him of his best blackmail material.

He threw a quick glance at the fireplace to ensure it wouldn’t go cold, and then went for the bedroom to get rid of his boots, buying himself time to think of his next move.

~~~

Mechanically, John dumped the chicken quarters into a deep pan, added salt and pepper, and then went outside. Cold air enveloped him, pressing into his lungs with almost suffocating force. He
rubbed his hands over his long sleeves and looked out into the snow that gave the illusion of light without actually showing anything.

That had been close. Too close. Idiotic, stupid, foolish paranoia. Of course Sherlock hadn’t been sent to kill him. He’d had ample opportunity as recently as last night, when John had actually fallen asleep with Sherlock right there in the room with him. While it was true that John had awakened the moment Sherlock had stopped playing the violin, he hadn’t snapped to full alertness. Rather, it had been the type of drowsy rise from sleep that he never experienced these days, as though surfacing just enough to verify that there was no threat. He’d even gone back to sleep before Sherlock had finished putting the violin back in its case.

He knew he should go back inside and apologise, but he had no idea how to phrase it so he didn’t sound like a complete fool. There was no way to say ‘sorry for nearly shooting you, but I thought you’d been sent to kill me’ and still sound sane.

But this proved one thing: Having Sherlock here was a terrible idea. The best thing would be to fly Sherlock back to Fairlake tomorrow and pay Mark to get him out to Little Prairie or some other airport where he could get a connecting flight to anywhere else, as far from Fairlake and John as possible. Hell, if he thought Sherlock could drive the quad and not get lost, he’d send him out to Molly’s tonight. Or he could go to Molly’s, and leave Sherlock safely on his own at the cabin. That might be a better alternative. He’d stayed at Molly’s a couple of times, usually because of bad weather. She wouldn’t be in any danger from him. Molly couldn’t threaten a fly.

He went out into the snow, testing the depth. Not even a half inch, and it wasn’t coming down too strongly — just enough to obscure visibility, not enough to let him use the snowmobile.

Perhaps he could stay, just for tonight. Then he’d take Sherlock to Molly’s tomorrow. They’d been together for five days, after all, and this was the first incident of any kind. Hell, it was almost understandable, given Sherlock’s phrasing and what John knew about his elder brother’s role in the military. He’d just have to watch himself more carefully, he decided.

Somewhat reluctantly, he drew his gun and started back inside, thumbing the release to drop the magazine out. Cupping his hand over the ejection port, he racked the slide back and caught the round he kept chambered. He pocketed the round and the magazine and slid the gun back into the holster. He wouldn’t disarm completely, but he could at least remove the ability to immediately fire the weapon.

He pushed open the kitchen door, trying to get the magazine comfortable in his pocket, and nearly walked into Sherlock, who was reaching for the door from inside. “What —”

“You said yourself you didn’t care why my brother sent me here,” Sherlock said after John flipped and scraped the last quarter. “Based on the limited information you have, it’s perfectly reasonable that you assumed I’m here here to... as a threat.”
John dropped the tongs on the counter with a loud clatter. “Can we not do this, please?” he asked sharply, wrapping his hand with a towel. He picked up the hot kettle, gave it a shake to estimate the volume of water, and put it back on the stovetop.

When Sherlock answered, his voice was much closer. “I’m happy to never mention him again, if you can think of something more engaging to discuss,” he offered, his voice full of deep, significant tones that in anyone else, in any other circumstance, John would have called innuendo, even invitation. Now, he just flinched and looked back, wondering how the hell Sherlock had crept so close without him noticing.

“Fine,” John said tightly. He tried to force a smile and turned quickly away, knowing he was destined to fail. “Fine by me. Care to set up the coffee?” he suggested.

“Later.” Sherlock was closer now, right at John’s back, though he wasn’t touching him. “I shouldn’t have mentioned him at all. How can I make it up to you?” he asked, leaning down to purr the words right in John’s ear.

For a few endless seconds, John forgot all about resisting, caught up in the unexpected pleasure of a game he hadn’t played for years. Sherlock was gorgeous and talented and intelligent, and against all odds, apparently interested.

But when a hand curved around John’s right hip, fingers brushing the magazine of bullets in his pocket, John twisted away violently enough that he bumped into the stove, nearly sending the pan flying — not because he didn’t want that touch, but because he did.

The last time anyone had even tried to hit on him, it had been Molly, and he’d managed to convince her that he wasn’t interested in anyone at all. Guiltily, he realised he hadn’t even tried that with Sherlock. Hell, in some ways, he’d done the opposite, encouraging Sherlock’s closeness under the guise of offered friendship.

Either way, that should have been Sherlock’s cue to back off, but he didn’t. He stepped closer, looking down at John with almost predatory interest. “You don’t think I’ll hurt you,” he said speculatively, and though the phrasing was ominous, it didn’t come out as a threat. “You’re not straight,” he continued, studying John’s face as he spoke, softly, curiously. “You’re not in a relationship.”

“Not looking for one,” John said, forcing himself to breathe steadily. The stove was hot at his back, so he sidestepped, breathing easier when he was out in the open space near the back door.

“Neither am I,” Sherlock pointed out reasonably.

Before Sherlock could make an offer that would probably be too tempting for him to resist, John interrupted, “Good. Settled, then. I’ll start the coffee. Dinner won’t be ready for another twenty or thirty minutes, if you want to go check your email.”

Uncertainty flickered across Sherlock’s expression. He didn’t take the single step that would bring him close again. His gaze dropped, skimming in quick, darting glances over John’s body, lingering for a moment on the holstered, unloaded gun. “You should load that,” he said, his voice absolutely neutral, still a beautiful, silky baritone. Without the low, rough purr, it sounded cold and empty, and John couldn’t hide his flinch.

“It’s not —”

“Everyone in town had a loaded gun, and bears are more likely to show up here, in the middle of
nowhere,” Sherlock said, abruptly turning away. He headed for the living room desk, where he now had a clear space for his laptop. “Besides, you’re more comfortable if you’re armed.”

John stared into the living room, watching the firelight play over half of Sherlock’s body as he leaned over to flip the switch, powering up the router and satellite dish. Then he sat down and pushed open his laptop to wait for it to come out of hibernation.

Exhaling sharply, John turned and went to get a glass of water from the sink. His hands were shaking and his jeans were uncomfortably tight, reminding him why he didn’t do this. He drank the water, considered the whisky in the cupboard, and decided that there was no sense tempting fate. Maybe if they both just let this drop, they could go back to the comfortable, somewhat distant, safe friendship they’d developed. John wouldn’t take any risks with Sherlock, but he also didn’t want to lose him entirely.

He drained the glass of water, and when his hands were steady, he set the gun, the magazine, and the bullet on the counter. After a moment’s consideration, he pushed the magazine into place, and then racked the slide to chamber a round. Then he dropped the magazine, fed the spare bullet into it, and pushed the magazine back. He holstered the gun, making certain to snap the retainer strap into place.

Sherlock was right. He did feel more comfortable.
Chapter 6

Saturday, October 27

As Sherlock followed John into the trees, he couldn’t help but glance at the shotgun slung over John’s shoulder. He was no expert with shotguns — handguns were far more common in London — but it didn’t strike Sherlock as an appropriate weapon for casual target shooting. Of course, he also didn’t know why they were going out into the woods, rather than using the makeshift firing range at the airstrip. Perhaps John’s heavier weaponry was in case of bear attack.

The thought made Sherlock’s skin crawl. He’d rather face down a hundred of London’s worst criminals than meet a single bear in the wild.

“Where are we going?” he asked softly. The cloudy forest seemed to encourage quiet conversation.

“Thought I’d show you some of the property.” He flashed Sherlock a quick smile that seemed genuine, though even Sherlock had difficulty reading the nuances through John’s dark sunglasses. “I promise, no fishing,” he added with a laugh.

Last night had been tense and awkward, even for Sherlock. John had cooked dinner, made coffee, and settled in at his typewriter without commenting either on Sherlock’s interest or on his own misunderstanding. Finally, Sherlock had gone to bed — frustratingly alone — and had stared up into the darkness, listening as John’s typing finally achieved a quick, steady rhythm that lulled Sherlock into a doze.

At some point, John must have slept, though he was awake and cooking breakfast when the dreary grey light of dawn came through the windows and woke Sherlock. Apparently accustomed to little sleep and exercise, John walked with easy, casual confidence, showing none of the wariness he’d demonstrated in Fairlake. To him, the unknown predators in the forest (which Sherlock imagined lurking behind every tree and in every shadow) were no threat. Rather, John perceived people as a threat. Not Molly (though she was just as unthreatening as her absurd dog) and, until last night, not Sherlock. And apparently, Sherlock had gone back to being a non-threat this morning; otherwise, John wouldn’t have armed him.

He shrugged his shoulders to adjust the fall of the backpack he wore over his new parka. John had insisted they both carry emergency supplies, even though they hadn’t planned on walking far. He’d packed for Sherlock, showing him where everything was stowed for quick retrieval — mylar emergency blanket, small first aid kit, torch (with batteries tested), folding knife, cigarette lighter (with redundant waterproof matches), granola bars, and water. He’d even apologised for not having two-way radios on hand, and warned Sherlock not to stray too far from his side.

Not that Sherlock planned on letting John get away from him that easily. After last night, he was more interested in John, not less, but John seemed to have gone the opposite way. He was friendly, courteous, and caring, but he’d reverted to the polite, quiet distance of their first day together. Embarrassed over his disproportionate reaction, most likely.

As they walked, Sherlock considered and dismissed various strategies to manipulate John into getting past this awkward distance he was attempting to maintain. An injury was the most obvious way to get John close and evoke a deeper sense of concern. A firearms accident seemed ideal at first, but Sherlock dismissed the thought at once, realising that would just bring back John’s own traumatic memories. Best to avoid any injury at all.
Flattery usually worked well. John was obviously more knowledgeable about this unpopulated wilderness. A few carefully-chosen questions would reinforce his ego and allow Sherlock to safely express his admiration. But there was the very real possibility that John might actually expect Sherlock to pay attention, even to remember whatever they discussed, and Sherlock had no desire to memorise information that would be useless once he was back in civilisation.

He stopped, his eyes going to John’s back as he realised he’d be going back alone.

He didn’t want that. Oh, he desperately wanted to get back to London. He’d already been away for far too long. He craved the city more deeply than he’d ever desired any chemical release from reality, as if London’s streets were engraved through his veins and nerves, his bones constructed from her buildings.

He closed his eyes, immersing himself in the sense-memory of the smell and sound and sight of a thousand windows looking out into the London night, every one of them hiding the possibility of mystery and intrigue, danger and pleasure, and he realised at that moment that he didn’t just want to go back. He wanted John to go back with him. He wanted to see how John, after years of self-imposed isolation, would react to Sherlock’s city.

Forget the tourist destinations and arts and culture. Sherlock would take John to the hidden city underneath the public veneer. He’d take John into his world of nightclubs and private parties — and that was an image that nearly overloaded Sherlock’s imagination, John in tight jeans and a shirt straining across his broad chest and shoulders, showing off his forearms. At first glance, John seemed so harmless, so forgettable, as though his allure crept up in unseen, unnoticed increments until the full impact of John’s physique and willpower and competence overwhelmed the observer, just as it had with Sherlock, who had been so quick to initially dismiss him.

John’s sigh scattered the lovely, distracting thoughts. Sherlock opened his eyes, suddenly glad that he’d bought a parka that hung well past his hips, and saw John standing a careful eight feet away. His gloved hands were shoved into his pockets as though he were making a point of not even touching the rifle hanging over his shoulder or the handgun under his jacket.

“Look, I know this must be... uncomfortable,” John said apologetically. He was turned in Sherlock’s direction, but Sherlock had the impression that his gaze was averted, hidden behind the sunglasses. “Why don’t we just go back? I can take you to Molly’s house on the quad. It’s safe enough.”

So much for a manufactured excuse to bridge the distance between them. He physically crossed that distance, watching the way John tensed, not to attack or defend but to back away. He didn’t move, though, which was encouraging, and Sherlock didn’t stop until he was only a foot away, close enough that their winter-fogged breath mingled in a pale cloud between them.

“Much as I look forward to returning to London, I have no intention of doing so now, nor do I have any desire to spend any significant time with your neighbour,” he said, letting his voice pitch low and smooth.

John shifted his weight, prepared to step back, and Sherlock caught his sleeve, cursing the bulky jackets and gloves that separated them both. At the touch, John went still, saying, “Sherlock —”

“John,” he interrupted quietly. He wanted to pull away the sunglasses but sensed that John needed that little artificial distance. If Sherlock pushed too hard, John would shut down completely, and Sherlock might never get another chance at him. Even this might be too much, but Sherlock had to try.
Lightly holding John’s sleeve, Sherlock raised his free hand and used his teeth to tug off the glove. John’s head turned sharply to watch the path of the glove as Sherlock tossed it aside. Cold air bit at Sherlock’s fingers, but he didn’t care. He set his fingertips to John’s face, for an instant feeling the golden brown stubble and icy skin of his jaw before John flinched away.

“John,” Sherlock repeated quietly, soothingly, and touched again. This time, John didn’t pull back. He parted his lips and took a quick breath. The motion drew Sherlock’s eyes down, and he saw no reason at all not to chase that breath.

Tight with tension, John’s lips tasted of cold and snow. Subtle, burning points of contact connected them skin to skin — Sherlock’s fingertips on John’s face, his thumb on the thinner flesh over John’s cheekbone, their lips touching lightly, barely more than the air they shared for one breath, two, before John’s exhale shuddered against Sherlock’s mouth.

Encouraged, Sherlock licked at John’s cold, chapped lips, gently pressing with his fingertips. Stubble prickled against his skin, shifting as John’s mouth opened just enough for Sherlock’s tongue to flick across his teeth. John’s inhale was sharper now, and a hand pressed against Sherlock’s side not to pull him close or push him away, but simply to touch. His mouth opened further, and the brush of John’s tongue — just the tip — crackled through Sherlock like lightning.

Then John did move, shifting a half-step closer and standing taller, swiping his tongue across Sherlock’s before he pushed into Sherlock’s mouth, bringing with it heat and nerve-snapping tension and fierce desire. Their noses bumped coldly, nostrils flared as they both tried to breathe without losing their connection. Sherlock’s hand on John’s sleeve tightened into a fist as John’s hand slid to Sherlock’s back, and it was maddening that Sherlock couldn’t feel John’s body through the ridiculous layers of down-stuffed Gore-Tex and wool and far, far too much clothing.

It was John who broke the kiss. His hand fell from Sherlock’s body and he stepped back with a deep breath as though to steady himself. He licked his lips, an action Sherlock mirrored, wanting to capture the lingering taste of John’s mouth before the cold stole it away. He felt John’s absence like a bone-deep ache that made him shiver from the effort to recapture John’s closeness. The tension was returning to John’s posture — not like last night, but enough to warn Sherlock to tread carefully or risk chasing John away.

For a moment, they stood in the silent, snowy forest, breathing out of rhythm but equally deeply. Sherlock wondered if the cold felt like fire in John’s lungs the way it did in his own. He wondered if John’s body tingled painfully at the absence of touch and if he could still feel the impression of Sherlock’s lips against his own.

John broke the silence as well, boot crunching through the light snow and into the fallen leaves beneath. He bent to retrieve Sherlock’s castoff glove, his free hand automatically dropping to steady the rifle at his side.

“Idiot,” he said as he offered the glove to Sherlock, a strange affection in his voice. Sherlock couldn’t see his eyes, but he imagined the way they were tight with humor. “Do you want frostbite? Put that back on.”

Sherlock took the glove with a laugh and put it on as he fell in beside John, both of them walking again. Neither of them mentioned the kiss, and there was no attempt to hold hands or touch, but the distance between them had disappeared, which was good enough for now.
Kissing Sherlock Holmes — kissing anyone, in fact — was a spectacularly bad idea. Without even trying, John could think of fifteen or twenty reasons not to have a repeat.

It was just a kiss. No big deal. At least, at one point in John’s life, it wouldn’t have been. Back in school, he’d had a hell of a reputation, both with women and men. Molly had kissed him, back when they’d first started to build a friendship. He’d been tempted; she was sweet and pretty and John was admittedly sick of being alone, but he’d turned her down, knowing it was the best choice for them both. They were still friends. So there was no reason to think he couldn’t do the same with Sherlock.

But he wanted it. Desperately. After all these years, he’d thought he’d trained himself out of craving intimacy and closeness, whether it was the rush of sex or the sweet laziness of cuddling with a loved one. He’d convinced himself not to think about Molly in that way, and he’d been so successful that he’d grown cocky. That was the only explanation. False confidence had made him vulnerable, and now Sherlock had slipped past his guard and under his skin and there was no way in hell that he’d be able to say no.

As it turned out, Sherlock already knew how to shoot (though not as well as he kissed, a treacherous corner of John’s mind supplied), so John was able to give him a couple of tips to improve his aim and then lean back against a tree, watching him and trying not to overthink the situation.

Once Sherlock seemed to get bored with target shooting, John challenged him to lead the way back, thinking it best if Sherlock started learning his way around the forest in case he got lost. To John’s surprise, Sherlock didn’t try to backtrack. Instead, he looked thoughtfully into the distance for a moment before he started walking. John followed, trying not to give any hints, lazily keeping an eye on their surroundings. Bears weren’t usually a problem now, but an encounter with wolves or coyotes could be disquieting. He was more interested in game animals, though, so he kept his attention on the low brush near small clearings.

When they came in sight of the cabin, John asked, “All right, how’d you do it?”

Sherlock glanced back at him before looking up at the sky. “Position of the sun, slight contour of the ground, sound of the river. I never get lost, especially not in an open area without many obstacles to one’s path — unlike in London, with twisting streets and an interfering river.”

John laughed, and Sherlock shot him a closed, defensive glare. “I’m impressed,” he said quickly, realising Sherlock thought the laugh was mocking. “You yourself said you’re not the outdoorsy type.”

“Neither are you.”

The truth of that hit a little too close to home. It was John’s turn to bristle, though he tried to hide it with another laugh. “You have noticed where I live, right? I’ve been here for... six years now? Almost seven,” he said, a bit of bleak amazement creeping into his thoughts. On December 31, it would be seven years.

Seven years, and he hadn’t expected to even live out one. Hell, sometimes he thought he’d chosen to move out to the wilds to save someone else the trouble of cleaning up his body after he finally got sick of the nightmares and put a bullet in his brain. Seven years of surviving — not really living — weighed heavily against a lifetime built in small, happy pieces, from childhood to medical school to the terrible exhilaration of war. He struggled against the weight pressing down on his chest, the hot tension knotting up his throat, the pressure behind his eyes, until his mind lost the battle against his body, and he was able to take a breath.
When he exhaled unsteadily, he realised Sherlock had stopped walking and turned back to face him.
“Sorry, planning the dinner menu for tomorrow,” John lied clumsily. He’d never been a particularly
good liar — not when honesty had served him well through most of his years — and Sherlock didn’t
miss anything.

Now, Sherlock’s blue-grey eyes sharpened, fixed intently on John’s face as though he knew every
thought slithering around in John’s fucked-up mind. Panic seized John’s breath all over again, but
this time, he channeled it into motion. He might have said something — *Let’s get inside,* perhaps, or
something about the cold — but he had no idea what. He pushed past Sherlock and headed with
brisk steps for the cabin’s front door, forcing himself to think only as far ahead as the next hour: build
up the fires, set up dinner, clean the guns. Everything else would have to wait.

~~~

Dinner was sausages made by the Coles, a family of butchers and taxidermists in Fairlake. Last
winter, John had shot a bear not too far out of town and had managed to get it to his quad and into
town before the meat could go rancid. The Coles had butchered it and traded half the meat and the
pelt for sausages, burgers, steaks, and roasts enough to fill John’s deep freezer. He served the
sausages with beans that had been soaking since yesterday and pan-fried cornbread made with the
morning’s bacon drippings.

After John washed the dishes, he dried out the skillet, listening as Sherlock finally pushed his chair
away from the table. Usually, as soon as his plate was clear, he’d be in the living room to check his
email. John had grown accustomed to bringing Sherlock his coffee at the desk before he went back
to the kitchen to clean up after dinner. This time, though, Sherlock had stayed at the table for coffee,
and what had been a comfortable silence turned awkward as John’s imagination took flight, filling
the silence with expectation and prying curiosity.

He left the dry skillet on the counter and went to the pantry, watching Sherlock out of the corner of
his eye. Instead of going into the living room, Sherlock crossed to the pantry and asked, “Dessert?”

John’s breath caught. He’d never heard ‘dessert’ laden with such innuendo — or maybe it was just
his imagination. He wasn’t just rusty at flirtation; he couldn’t even reliably tell when it was actually
happening. “Coffee,” he managed to say.

“I don’t want more coffee, John.” Sherlock pulled the door open so he could get closer to John, who
was trying to remember which of the plastic tubs held the green coffee beans. After their walk,
Sherlock had showered and changed clothes. He smelled of soap, and the cool humidity had dried
his hair in messy curls hanging down towards his right eye. All through dinner, John’s fingers had
twitched from the desire to brush those curls away.

“We’ll be out in three days if I don’t roast more. Maybe two, the way you go through coffee,” John
answered, resolutely not looking. He finally pried off one of the lids and glared at the rice inside. He
replaced the lid with a loud *snap.*

“It can wait.”

Realising they were about to have the talk, John took a breath to steady himself, rose from his
crouch, and turned to find Sherlock standing much closer than he’d expected, only inches away.
“Look, I —”
“Must we?” Sherlock asked sharply as his hands came up, long fingers skimming over John’s face, sliding back along his jaw to brush lightly, chillingly over his hair. “I prefer not to waste time in unnecessary conversation — as do you.”

It was true, and another time, John might have said so. He wanted to say something, but he knew he’d come off sounding like a babbling idiot if he started to talk.

Sherlock took his silence for consent, which, in a way, it must have been, because when he leaned down to steal a kiss, John couldn’t find it in himself to protest. He leaned into it, hands sliding up to grasp Sherlock’s waist, holding him lightly but closely. The kiss was sweet, tasting of coffee, and full of confident aggression as if to encourage John to let go of his inhibitions.

Seven years of self-denial proved too much of a strain. The last of John’s reservations dissipated like fog, and he pulled Sherlock close to take control of the kiss, reveling in the feel of a body pressed to his, warm and hard and very real. Sherlock’s fingers twisted in John’s hair as he parted his lips further, allowing John to explore his mouth and nip at his lips.

Somewhere on the other side of the kiss, John knew things would be worse. First times were always awkward, especially since there wouldn’t be a first time; he hadn’t actually bought condoms since he’d moved to the cabin. For now, though, the kiss was enough — almost too much, in fact. He was starved for intimacy, for knowing that he had someone in his arms and that person wanted him just as much.

He broke the kiss to taste Sherlock’s skin, feeling the heat of his throat before he licked right over Sherlock’s pulse. The answering exhale was just shaky enough to hint at a desire for more. Experimentally, John bit, being over-careful because it had been so long and he didn’t want to hurt Sherlock. A shiver passed through Sherlock, who shifted and got one foot between John’s, pushing his hips forward as his thigh abruptly pressed against John’s erection.

Heat arced between them, scorching away another layer of John’s fears and reservations. He stopped counting the reasons not to do this and started thinking instead about the sofa, which was close to the kitchen, versus the bed, which was much larger. He dropped his hands, feeling the back pockets of Sherlock’s jeans and tense muscle and tight curves, and braced himself before pulling Sherlock’s hips against his body.

With a muttered curse, Sherlock pushed John back a step and twisted, crowding him back with another overwhelming, devastating kiss. John’s shoulders pressed back against the wall beside the pantry and Sherlock pulled his hair, tipping his head back, so he could run his tongue up John’s throat, the motion translating into a sinuous press of their bodies from knees to chests.

Sherlock’s free hand braced on the wall beside John’s shoulder, and John’s breath stuttered, catching like gears knocked out of alignment before he stopped breathing. Suffocated and trapped, he felt panic rise up through him in a single heartbeat. He pushed, awkwardly at first, hands sliding over a soft cashmere sweater, before his instincts took over. His second push was a solid shove to the sternum, a twist of his hips putting strength behind the blow that freed him. He wrenched away from the wall, getting out into open space, gasping in a breath as though he’d been drowning.

_Sherlock_, he thought, realizing what he’d done. Thank God he hadn’t actually hurt Sherlock, who was standing warily back, his eyes locked to John’s. He stood balanced and ready, as though prepared to be attacked. He hadn’t run, though. He hadn’t fled the cabin or tried to barricade himself in the bedroom, nor had he fought back.

John exhaled, confusion snapping through him as if his fraying thoughts were finally breaking under the tension. He realised his left hand was on his gun — thankfully, he hadn’t actually drawn it — but
he couldn’t pry his fingers away. He could still taste Sherlock’s kiss, and his throat had a single icy strip etched into the skin where the open air froze the path Sherlock had licked.

Abruptly, he turned and rushed out of the house, needing to escape himself.
Chapter 7

Saturday, October 27

Sherlock watched John storm out of the house and rubbed a hand soothingly over his chest where John had pushed him. John hadn’t actually hit him, but the push had been hard enough to startle him off-balance and stagger his breathing. Because it hadn’t felt like an attack, Sherlock had momentarily wondered if it was John’s way of escalating the intensity crackling between them, and hadn’t responded in self-defence — and then, John had left. Obviously Sherlock was wrong.

He closed his eyes, reviewing his memory in meticulous detail. At first, John had responded enthusiastically, as Sherlock had predicted he would, based on the admiring way John had been watching him through dinner. He hadn’t tried to stop Sherlock, hadn’t said ‘no’ or indicated that he’d rather take things slowly. Body and mind, he’d most definitely been interested, until he suddenly hadn’t.

Though both times they’d kissed, John had waited for Sherlock to initiate, but he hadn’t been passive. He hadn’t mirrored Sherlock’s touches, and he’d followed his own desires. There’d been no hint of shyness or uncertainty after the first few seconds.

They’d kissed. John had kissed and bit Sherlock’s throat with a gentle care, just hard enough to hint at crossing the thin line between pleasure and pain. In response, Sherlock hadn’t bit; he’d licked, but that wouldn’t evoke this sort of response. And then John had pulled him close, bracing his body to grind up against Sherlock’s erection. Sherlock could still feel the hard press of strong fingertips against his arse.

Then it had changed. When? When Sherlock had pushed John out of the pantry and up against the wall. For one moment, he’d responded, going relaxed and pliant under Sherlock’s hands, before everything had gone wrong. Sherlock closed his eyes, remembering John’s stillness in the moment before he’d pushed Sherlock away. Not just stillness, though. He’d gone from breathless and wide-eyed and hard against Sherlock’s thigh to tense and defensive, without a hint of the arousal that had been scorching through them both.

The speed of the physiological change told Sherlock that this wasn’t some whim of John’s. His assault, controlled as it was, hadn’t been a conscious decision but reflexive.

The memory of John’s strength and desire threatened to interrupt Sherlock’s focus, so he went to his laptop bag in the living room and took out one of his precious, dwindling stash of cigarettes. He pulled on his coat, remembering that John had gone outside without a jacket. Instead of going out front and lighting up, he trapped the cigarette between his lips and went to the kitchen door, where John’s work jacket was hanging on a wrought iron hook. Sherlock took it down, feeling the soft canvas between his fingertips, smelling the woodsmoke embedded in the fibres.

He reached for the door, and the connections inside his mind finally snapped into place. When Sherlock had approached John at the pantry, John had been momentarily defensive, only relaxing when Sherlock had stopped his advance. It had been John who’d pulled Sherlock close with every sign of enthusiasm and physical arousal, and that responsiveness had encouraged Sherlock to crowd John up against the wall.

Trapping John.

Furious with himself, Sherlock pulled open the back door. John was on the porch, not out in the
yard. His hands were braced on the railing and his head bowed down. His posture screamed his embarrassment and regret and self-reproach.

“Don’t be stupid, John,” Sherlock scolded. “There’s only enough room for one idiot here tonight, and it’s apparently my turn.”

John flinched and started to lift his head, before he turned away. Sherlock draped the coat over John’s back, feeling an uncharacteristic twinge of regret. In retrospect, all the little behavioural oddities and habits added up to a conclusion that should have been obvious.

Sherlock stepped back, putting two feet of space between their bodies, and lit his cigarette. He inhaled deeply, eyes fixed on the faint illumination that spilled through the kitchen windows, falling on the ruined garden and the gravel patch surrounding the barbecue and the meat smoker improvised from a large steel oil drum.

Slowly, John straightened and put on the jacket. He zipped it to the collar but didn’t tug it up to reveal his handgun for quick access. He was cold but didn’t feel threatened. A good sign, that.

“Thanks.” The word was clipped and harsh.

Sherlock took another drag before offering John the cigarette. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw John give him a disbelieving look, followed by a moment’s hesitation. Then he took the cigarette awkwardly and set it to his lips, inhaling too quickly. His exhale was choked and ragged.

“Christ, how can you stand these things?” he asked, offering it back to Sherlock.

“Practice.” Careful not to let their fingers touch, Sherlock took the cigarette. He considered stepping back to lean against the house, but that would put him behind John. Better to stay in John’s sight.

The cigarette was halfway to ash before either of them broke the silence. “Did I hurt you?” John asked in a quick rush, as though needing momentum to get the question from start to finish.

Sherlock shook his head, though John wasn’t watching him directly. “No. Which, if you consider it, is rather impressive. You were very careful not to cause injury.”

John’s exhale was too sharp to be anything but disbelief, not at Sherlock’s words but at himself. “Good. Well, it’s too late tonight — I prefer not to fly in the dark — but —”

“No,” Sherlock interrupted. It didn’t take his genius to see where this was going. “I’m not upset, I’m not angry, and I’m certainly not going to go back to Fairlake or spend the winter with Dr. Hooper.” He crossed behind John with long, casual strides, trying to minimise the time he was out of John’s sight. The side railing creaked as he leaned back against it.

“You can’t stay,” he said as he turned to face Sherlock. John’s hands were in his coat pockets and he pressed his arms against his sides as if to hold in body warmth, but his posture was balanced and relaxed.

Escape routes, Sherlock thought, hiding a grin at his successful deduction of what John needed. One step back would put John in line with both the kitchen door and the two creaky steps into the backyard. Space meant safety, though John wasn’t claustrophobic — not with that little deathtrap of a plane. Sherlock clawed at the facts, trying to put them all together, and for a moment, he wanted to go back to England to strangle the doctors and counselors who’d dulled his mind’s edge.

“I’m not leaving.” He pitched the cigarette out into the night, watching John’s profile for the three seconds he took to watch it arc away and fall and sputter out.
“Why?” John demanded more sharply as he turned back to face Sherlock. “After what happened —”

“What happened,” Sherlock interrupted again, “was perfectly understandable. I should have seen it before, but I can’t think properly.”

John took a step closer, frowning up at him, though he didn’t take his hands from his pockets to touch Sherlock. “What do you mean, you can’t think?”

More connections sparked in his brain, teasing him with conclusions that were right there, within reach, if he could just find the key. He studied John’s posture, the way he still had one foot back, prepared to shift his weight away from Sherlock so he could turn and bolt.

Sherlock’s mind lit up as things fell into place. It wasn’t claustrophobia but something far more subtle: fear of being closed-in by a person. When Sherlock had pinned John to the wall — that was the trigger. Most likely, it would have happened with an embrace or if Sherlock had pushed him down on the sofa.

And just like that, he knew how to prevent a repeat, at least of this specific incident.

“It’s not important,” Sherlock said calmly. He lifted his hands from the porch rail, holding them out towards John in a calculatedly inviting manner. The easiest way to ensure John was comfortable would be to put the decisions in his hands. “Trust me, John.”

John glanced down at Sherlock’s hands and licked his lips. This time, Sherlock didn’t think John’s shiver had anything to do with the freezing night. “I feel like that should be my line, but I wouldn’t ask it of you,” he said quietly.

“You won’t —” Sherlock cut off, realising too late that using words like ‘panic’ or ‘assault me’ would only reinforce John’s reticence. “You can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy the kiss.”

Between the faint light radiating through the window and the chill that turned every inch of exposed skin ruddy, it was impossible to tell if John was blushing, though Sherlock guessed that he was. Then his chin came up almost defiantly and he admitted, “I did.”

“So there’s no sense protesting that you’re not gay,” Sherlock continued.

“I’m not.” John’s smirk was brief, but the humor in it gave Sherlock hope that he finally had repaired the situation.

“Bisexual, then, or pansexual, or whatever word you want to use that leaves room for us,” he said, injecting amused exasperation into his tone. “You want me. And it’s obvious that I want you.”

“It’s still not a good idea.”

“I won’t let you hurt me.”

John’s smile vanished. He shoved his hands further into his pockets, pulling his jacket taut against his tense, broad shoulders. “You can’t know that, Sherlock.”

Resisting the urge to light another cigarette, Sherlock waved a hand dismissively. “Perhaps it’s better phrased: I won’t create a situation in which your instinctive response will be to defend yourself.”

With a flinch that was more surprised than stung, John asked, “What?”

“John.” The exasperation was much less amused, this time. “Either you can trust that I know what
I’m doing, or we can both freeze to death discussing it. I much prefer the option that isn’t fatally boring.”

John laughed. “Did you really just describe freezing to death as ‘boring’?”

“Yes. So come here,” he insisted, twitching his fingers invitingly, both to get John moving and to prove to himself that his fingers hadn’t frozen solid.

Thankfully, John pulled his hands out of his pockets and accepted the invitation, closing the last step between them as their fingers awkwardly intertwined. The contact did nothing to share body heat, but Sherlock was too caught up in deciphering John to care.

“We should go back inside,” John said quietly, looking up at Sherlock. Their coats brushed together with a soft whisper of fabric that wasn’t enough.

“We will, in one minute.” Sherlock leaned further back, lowering himself a few inches to John’s height, and stretched out one leg, brushing his middle fingers over John’s wrists to search for his pulse. He would have been much more comfortable spreading his legs to get John’s body pressed against his, but he wanted to avoid even the hint of trapping or surrounding John. “First, I want another kiss.”

John’s gaze flicked down to Sherlock’s mouth. His pulse jumped, a hard spike that was just as much confirmation that Sherlock was on the right track as the soft brush of John’s lips that followed a moment later. They were both cold and getting sniffly, but the heat of John’s mouth as his lips parted was more than enough reason for Sherlock to push winter out of his mind and focus instead on the feel of John’s teeth under his tongue. He encouraged John’s lips to part further and shuddered pleasantly at the way John melted against him, perhaps not as aroused as he’d been earlier, but good enough for now.

As the kiss grew heated and aggressive, Sherlock had to work to remember not to clench his fingers around John’s. He kept his touch light, feeling the steady, rapid beat of John’s strong heart, and he let John break the kiss naturally. For a few seconds, John pressed his cheek to Sherlock’s until their cold skin started to warm up.

“Inside?” John invited, with no sign of hesitation or anxiety in his voice.

Sherlock laughed, reveling in the way John shivered as warm breath swept over his ear. “You’ll have to be more specific, John. ‘Inside’ what? Or whom?”

John’s inhale was a hiss of surprise that Sherlock ignored in favor of biting back a laugh at how his pulse jumped. A shift of position put Sherlock’s hips squarely against the erection that was most definitely back, and John muttered, “Fuck,” under his breath.

“Not out here.” With some effort, Sherlock stood up straight. John stepped back, giving Sherlock room to step away from the railing.

“Right. I wouldn’t want you fatally bored,” John said with a laugh. He released one hand but kept the other, leading Sherlock into the warmth of the house.

~~~
It took five interminable minutes of careful touches and heated kisses for Sherlock to subtly steer John through the kitchen and past the sofa, where he’d headed as though by instinct. The comfortable sofa in front of the fireplace was a good option, the type of romantic scene that would appeal to almost anyone, but the sofa had a back and arms, and Sherlock didn’t want to chance John feeling trapped or cornered in any way. Ideally, he’d start with the baseline of an entirely empty room with multiple routes of egress, but given the limited facilities, the only truly open option was outside. And since freezing to death would accomplish nothing except feeding the local predators, the bedroom was the logical second choice.

As soon as Sherlock stepped backwards through the bedroom door, he let go of John’s hand and pulled off his cashmere jumper. He tossed it aside and let John draw him close for another kiss, and for a few minutes, he let himself be distracted by the feel of John’s mouth on his before the kiss turned into sharper bites along his jaw and throat. Without any hint of hesitation, John’s hands went to Sherlock’s shirt. As he opened the first three buttons, he moved down to taste the newly exposed skin.

There wasn’t a hint of anxiety about John now, and Sherlock’s growing arousal spiked further, riding the high of a successful deduction.

Normally, within minutes of the first kiss, Sherlock could predict every facet of the encounter, no matter the partner, and most of the time, his deductions were spot-on. With John, he didn’t dare try, and the novelty of being barely a half-step ahead was exhilarating, adding a level of mystery to what otherwise surely would have been a satisfying but ultimately common experience.

At the fourth button, John paused, leaning his forehead against Sherlock’s sternum before he rose from his crouch. “Shit. Sherlock, I — I wasn’t exactly planning this,” he said, suddenly awkward, avoiding meeting his eyes.

Sherlock had anticipated this days ago, when he’d first decided that John could be an interesting diversion, but he couldn’t resist the opportunity to tease. John was far too polite to have snooped in his suitcase to see what he’d ordered along with warm, rugged clothing. Besides, he knew he was correct. “You’re clean.”

“How do —”

“No medications. Not even vitamin supplements.”

John stared at him before his lips curved up just slightly. He laughed and asked, “You noticed that? What, you were snooping through the medicine cabinet?”

“You don’t have a medicine cabinet. But yes.”

“I should be offended by the invasion of privacy, you know. And how do you know I just haven’t been tested?”

Because you’re a doctor, Sherlock almost said, but he remembered John’s awkward, discomfited reaction when Molly had brought it up. Instead, he said, “You take care of yourself. You’re disgustingly healthy, in fact, for someone who actually kills and butchers half of what he eats and who lives a thousand miles from anything resembling civilisation.”

“All right,” John conceded with another laugh. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I don’t do unprotected sex.”

“I was tested — multiple times,” Sherlock added, irritated by the memory of how the doctors had
assumed that an addiction to cocaine had dropped his IQ to substandard levels. “And I’ve been miserably celibate for more than eight months.”

“No,” John insisted predictably. “There are other things we can... Why are you laughing?”

“Do you really think I hadn’t anticipated this reaction?” Sherlock asked as he stepped reluctantly away from John and went to the closet where he’d stowed his carry-on suitcase. “When I left London, I expected to be going somewhere civilised, and packed accordingly. When I realised... this” — unzipping the suitcase with one hand, he gestured with the other, indicating the primitive cabin — “I chose not to restrict my online purchases to just winter clothing.”

“Wait — anticipated what?” John asked as he walked up behind Sherlock. He looked down at the boxes of condoms and lubricant and asked, “Dear god, are you preparing for the collapse of civilisation or something?”

Sherlock looked up from the boxes. “Is there anything else to do in the winter here?”

“If we actually use all those, we’ll probably be dead from exhaustion.”

“At least we won’t be bored.”

John laughed and left the closet to sit on the edge of the bed. “Where had you planned on going before your brother sent you here?”

Sherlock went back to opening shipping boxes. “Switzerland. Expensive, discreet spas and ski lodges for the rich, stupid, and beautiful. I’d hoped for Ibiza, but there’s too much temptation there for Mycroft to even consider it, I’m certain.”

“Ibiza? Isn’t that some sort of... I don’t even know how to describe it.”

“All that and more,” Sherlock said with a tight smile. The one time he’d gone there, he’d managed to lose Mycroft’s watchers for three weeks, of which he only remembered one, and even that was hazy, full of parties at villas during the day, nightclubs and party boats once the sun went down. He’d experimented with heroin and hashish there, along with newer chemical formulations that had only served to irritate him. He wanted his mind sharp, not fogged and confused.

A moment later, he tossed a string of condoms and bottle of lubricant on the bed beside John, who raised an eyebrow and asked wryly, “Sure that’s enough for tonight?”

Sherlock got rid of his shirt and let it fall as he walked forward. “There are two of us,” he pointed out logically. Instead of standing over John, he sat down beside him, wishing he’d found an earlier opportunity to get rid of his boots. They were warm and offered decent traction in the snow, but had no business at all getting even this close to the bed.

“Should I be insulted that you’d decided we were going to...” John laughed softly, brushing one hand up Sherlock’s arm, lightly enough to make him shiver. “For some reason, the words ‘have sex’ seem incredibly inadequate for all that,” he said, gesturing in the direction of the suitcase.

“Why would you be insulted? You must know you’re attractive, and judging by your self-confidence — when you’re relaxed enough to express it — you’re obviously good in bed. There’s no reason I wouldn’t want to at least give you a try.”

“I’m not a car you can take out for a test drive,” John protested halfheartedly.

Finally freed of the boots, Sherlock kicked them out of the way and tugged up his jeans enough to
get rid of his warm wool socks. He twisted sideways on the bed, bending one leg up under the other, and touched John’s face to draw him closer. John was still wearing at least two layers of shirts, but like Sherlock, he’d got rid of his boots.

“You were interesting from the moment I saw you,” Sherlock told him quietly, pitching his voice low and intimate, in the way he’d learned most people enjoyed. John’s shiver was subtle but very much present. “Yes, I took a chance that you might be straight or asexual or not attracted to me.”

“Not fucking likely,” John muttered, closing the last inch to lick at Sherlock’s lips.

Sherlock laughed into the kiss before he moved back and laid down on his side, propped up on one elbow. “I gave myself a goal. For eight months, my brain’s been rotting away, until you.”

John followed him down, distant enough that he could comfortably let his eyes roam over Sherlock’s bared chest. “You’re too thin,” he said quietly, pressing a finger against Sherlock’s body to trace the line of one rib. “I’m not interesting, Sherlock.”

“Of course you’re not interesting to you,” Sherlock answered logically, fighting to keep his voice steady as the touch skimmed the edge between enticing and ticklish.

Irritation prickled through Sherlock, adding sharpness to his voice as he asked, “Are we going to spend all night talking?”

John snapped, “I think we should —” and then cut himself off, brows pulled down in sudden determination. “Fuck it. It’s not like I even remember how this is supposed to work.”

“This?”

“A... Whatever ‘this’ is, between us.” He wormed his way closer and slid his hand down to Sherlock’s hip, fingers hooking possessively into the belt loop of his jeans. “What do you want to do?”

“How does ‘shut up and fuck me already’ sound?” His precise diction and upper-class accent made the question that much more filthy.

John exhaled, abrupt and unsteady. “Perfect.”

~~~

Twice after his return to Canada, John had allowed himself to get close to someone else — one man, one woman. Both had been attractive and interested and willing to take things slow, but the quiet dinners and movies and gentle kisses had done nothing for him. There was no reason for him to not be interested, except that he wasn’t. They were what he should have wanted, but not what he did want, and what he did want, he couldn’t have. Intensity of any kind was too close to his triggers for him to risk an attack for the selfish reward of sexual gratification.

Except for now, at least a little, because Sherlock was abrasive, thoughtless, discourteous, and spoiled, but also understanding, which in everyone else brought with it sympathy that inevitably fell
into pity. John couldn’t imagine Sherlock being sympathetic to anyone, and he probably pitied everyone who wasn’t him. He’d certainly dismissed the populace of the entire world as being stupid, often enough.

And yet, here he was, sprawled on John’s bed, raising his hips to help get rid of his jeans and underwear, pale skin and long legs and everything exposed to John’s sight and hands. He watched as if John were the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen, his eyes gone dark from the low firelight, his pupils dilated and his eyelids lowered. His lashes were incredibly dark against his face, which had resumed its pallor without winter’s bite to add colour to his cheeks.

Unprompted, Sherlock moved up the bed and twisted so he was no longer lying across it. When John reached for the blanket, Sherlock huffed as if in annoyance but complied, contorting himself to go from on top of the blanket to underneath. Still fully dressed, John followed him, remembering to snag the condoms and lubricant and stash them close at hand.

He fought his way further under the blanket, pushing Sherlock’s legs apart so he could settle between them. Weight braced on his good right arm, he slipped his free hand over the inside of Sherlock’s thigh, smiling in the darkness as he listened to Sherlock’s breath catch. One hand came down to brush through his hair, but there was no twist or pull — only a gentle, almost tentative touch that wasn’t enough but also wasn’t too much.

Using his own hand as a guide, John pressed a quick, dry kiss to Sherlock’s leg, feeling the lack of any reaction beyond a slight shift in position. Then he licked, tongue pressed hard against Sherlock’s skin, moving slowly and taking his time to taste and feel. Sherlock’s fingers clenched in John’s hair, a momentary reflex that he conquered almost immediately, leaving only the memory of a sting on John’s scalp.

John inched up the bed, biting back a groan as the movement made his jeans go tighter. Being clothed like this seemed deliciously obscene, narrowing his focus not to his own desires but to Sherlock’s. He trailed his tongue up the crease at the top of Sherlock’s thigh, and Sherlock brought up his legs and twitched his hips in response.

“John,” he complained, the sound muffled slightly by the heavy blanket.

John laughed, intentionally turning his head to the side, knowing his breath would be warm on Sherlock’s cock. “Something wrong?”

Sherlock’s answering growl made John grin. “Just because we have all winter doesn’t mean you need to take —” He cut off with a moan as John wrapped a hand around his cock and gently moved down, circling the base with his fingers.

Despite all the health class lectures on safe sex and the medical courses on STIs, he couldn’t fault Sherlock’s logical assertion that they were both most likely clean. So he took a risk and swiped his tongue over the glans, holding Sherlock steady as his hips bucked up again. The fingers in John’s hair went tight. This time, they didn’t relax, fanning John’s arousal from a slow burn to a blaze, and he couldn’t stop himself from taking Sherlock’s cock in his mouth.

For a moment, he held still, pressing up with his tongue, feeling the hard flesh against the roof of his mouth, before he carefully moved down. It had been far too long since he’d done this, but he’d once been good at it. He licked generously, extravagantly, pulling off to wet his lips before he went back down, each time taking Sherlock deeper into his mouth. Sherlock’s breathing went ragged, and a hot spike of arousal and satisfaction cut through John, spurring him on to fight his gag reflex until soon he was gasping for breath and then holding it, trying to remember the knack of swallowing and not choking.
Sherlock’s hand suddenly fisted hard, tearing strands of hair free as he pulled John up. “Too close,” he panted, flailing to throw the blanket off.

John pressed a hand to his own cock as he scrambled up Sherlock’s body. He could swear the damned zipper was imprinted on his skin even through his boxers, he was so hard. It was as if seven years of celibacy had turned him into a teenager again.

“What do you want?” he asked, trying not to whimper when he had to get his hand off his cock and onto the bed to support his weight. Sherlock’s hands took its place, and the moan (or possibly whimper) made its appearance. “Tell me what you want.”

Most other partners, as John dimly remembered, would have made some sort of polite request, but ‘Sherlock’ and ‘polite’ didn’t belong in the same thought. Instead, he snapped, “I already did,” in a tone that was an intoxicating combination of harsh and commanding but also desperate and needy.

“Right,” John muttered, sitting up enough to feel around for where he’d put the lubricant.

Sherlock caught hold of it first and said, “Jeans. Pants.”

A knot of tension deep in John’s chest untwisted when Sherlock made no mention of his layers of shirts. Given that Sherlock had already seen his chest, it was ridiculous to be self-conscious, but there was nothing logical about that part of John’s past or its impact on his psyche now. He complied with enthusiasm, kicking off his jeans and boxers. He even took off the button-down shirt he’d been wearing under his sweatshirt, leaving him in only a tee.

Propping himself up on one elbow, Sherlock spread his legs, braced his feet on the bed, and tossed the bottle of lubricant onto the mattress between his feet. John picked it up and said, “It’d be easier if you lie back.”

“I want to watch.”

Four simple words should not have shattered John’s self-control as they did, and his hands shook a bit as he snapped open the cap, only to find he had to unscrew the top to rip off the safety seal. Cursing whoever had invented the damned things, he got it unsealed and spilled a slippery puddle into his hand before making a mess of things when he put the cap back on. Trying not to think of things like the hassle of laundry, he made himself comfortable between Sherlock’s legs and swiped one finger over his entrance.

Sherlock’s breath hissed before he snapped his teeth shut. He lifted his hips more, encouragingly, and John carefully pressed in, just enough to feel the tight muscle before he drew back and circled. Sherlock had said something about being celibate for months, so John took his time easing one finger in, though his motivations were more than a little self-centered. For him, it had been years, and he wanted to luxuriate in the tight heat and the intimacy of the moment.

With careful, gentle motions, he encouraged Sherlock’s body to relax, until his finger was as deep inside as he could manage. He twisted slowly and pulled out just a bit, then back in, gently pressing and relaxing and sliding skin over sensitive nerve endings that had Sherlock twitching.

“Can you come like this?” John asked, his voice low and rough.

Sherlock’s eyes flew open and he glared at John. It was probably meant to be fierce but came off as desperate instead. “Sometimes. John, now.”

“Just a little more —”
“Now.”

He couldn’t refuse. Ignoring the tiny protest that came from the doctor-part of his mind, he eased his finger out, unable to resist one last brush over Sherlock’s prostate. Sherlock’s moan made John fumble his attempts to rip open one of the condom packets, and before he could catch himself, he asked, “Next time, can I suck you off while doing that?”

Sherlock lifted his head off the pillow to stare at him, eyes blown wide and dark. “Inside me. Now,” he said harshly.

Somehow, John got the condom on without tearing it and without coming on the spot. He snatched up the nearby bottle, flipped open the cap, and slathered lubricant over his cock as quickly as he could. Then he swiped more over Sherlock’s entrance in one last effort to avoid hurting him. Sherlock hissed out an impatient curse and pulled John up over himself, one hand fisted in John’s T-shirt, the other wrapped around the back of his neck.

Barely prepared, Sherlock was tight, so tight that John was convinced he’d do damage, and he clenched his teeth and tried to go as slowly as possible. Braced with one hand on the mattress, he reached for Sherlock’s cock, thinking to distract him from what had to hurt, but Sherlock caught his wrist tightly for a moment, before he let go and pushed his hand away instead.

“You first,” he insisted, pulling his knees back further. John slipped another half-inch deeper, making them both go momentarily breathless. “I want you to come first.”

The words twisted deep inside John, spiking his arousal to dangerous levels. He wasn’t going to last two minutes like this, but he also didn’t care. He dared to thrust a little bit harder, whispering, “Oh, fuck, Sherlock,” at the pressure.

“Yes,” Sherlock hissed. “Get to it already.”

With a growl of his own, John tensed up and pushed the last couple of inches inside, pressure building in his cock, heat burning through his gut and chest and into his throat. He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes as he pulled back, the drag over his cock too much to resist. He lasted for all of ten seconds that felt like forever before the searing pressure in him reached a breaking point. One last thrust and the world whited out, a single pinpoint of pleasure shattering into flames that pulsed with each twitch of his hips.

When he could think and move again, he withdrew slowly, on the verge of being painfully oversensitive, and rolled onto his side. He made it most of the way up the bed, though he missed the pillow. He considered removing the condom, but at the moment, that was too much like effort.

Sherlock’s long fingers slid back through his hair, making him blink his eyes open to meet Sherlock’s heated gaze. “Next time I say ‘now’, don’t argue. Trust me,” he said in an insufferably smug tone of voice.

John felt his cheeks burn. “Next time, I’ll try to last more than thirty fucking seconds,” he muttered into the bedsheets. “Assuming you even want a next time.”

“Stop that. If I didn’t want you again, you’d know.” He tugged on John’s hair, and John opened his eyes, turning to look at Sherlock. “My turn,” he said in a low growl that reignited the banked flames in John’s gut.

“What —” He cut off, thinking of being under Sherlock, trapped under his weight, caught up in his long limbs, and his breath turned to ice.
But Sherlock made no effort to move from where he lay. Instead, he gave John’s hair another pull, this time suggestively down towards his hips. “Does this count as ‘next time’?”

After one confused moment, John realised what Sherlock wanted. He breathed easier as he let Sherlock guide him back down, grateful for even a temporary reprieve. “Fuck, yes;” he whispered, and he reached for the condoms while Sherlock reached for him to strip off the used condom, and they both made things more difficult by kissing again.

Finally John rolled the condom down over Sherlock’s cock, and Sherlock collapsed back onto the pillows in a blatant hint that John couldn’t refuse. He kicked the tangled blankets away, settled between Sherlock’s legs, and swiped his tongue over the condom, glad Sherlock had purchased the unlubricated kind.

Sherlock’s sigh was very nearly the purr of a contented cat. “Fuck, that’s good, John. Start with two fingers. Remind me how good it felt to have you inside me.”

It never occurred to John to hesitate or question. Still lavishing long, slow licks, feeling hot skin under the artificial smoothness of the condom, he flailed with one hand until he found the lubricant. He flicked the bottle open with his thumb, catching the nail, and spilled the contents over the fingers of his left hand. He closed the bottle, tossed it aside, and used his right hand to steady Sherlock’s cock as he surrounded the glans with his mouth and started to sink down. The position was uncomfortable, straining his back and thighs and knees, and he didn’t give a damn. He just slid two fingers inside, not fast but steady and inexorable, loving the way Sherlock’s body had opened just enough that he didn’t have to fight or worry about hurting him.

Sherlock’s fingers combed through John’s hair, not pushing but holding him with gentle pressure. “Can you go deeper?” he asked in a gravelly voice. It sounded more like a challenge than a request or plea, but no surprise there; John could barely picture Sherlock making a polite request much less actually begging.

*Hand or mouth?* John wanted to ask, but he didn’t want to stop. He settled for looking up the length of Sherlock’s body, glowing under the faint sheen of sweat that caught the dying firelight. Meeting Sherlock’s gaze sent a shock through John, and he felt his cock twitch and try to rise to the occasion again, despite his age and the force with which he’d come only minutes before.

So he attempted both, pushing his fingers in until he felt Sherlock’s hole strain against his hand, taking Sherlock’s cock as deep as he could, fighting past his throat’s reflex to go tight and close up. He coughed out through his nose, drew back to gasp, and tried again, feeling clumsily around with his fingers for the cluster of nerves that would make Sherlock writhe under him.

Sherlock was talking, his voice a low purr that stroked along John’s bones, shivering down his spine without the words actually registering in his consciousness. Instead, Sherlock spoke to him through the fingers twisted in his hair, the pulse of blood in his body, the way his hips lifted with every sharp, fast exhale.

John knew the moment Sherlock’s self-control started to break. Sherlock planted his feet on the mattress and braced to thrust up hard into John’s mouth, fucking himself on John’s fingers. Through one stroke of John’s fingers, then another, and then a third, Sherlock kept it barely polite. Needing to tip Sherlock over the edge, John twisted his hand and pulled out, then pushed back in hard, using three fingers this time.

Sherlock’s curse was John’s only warning before the fingers in his hair went painfully tight, and the next thrust nearly triggered John’s conquered gag reflex. John didn’t fight—*couldn’t* fight—and just relaxed into it, concentrating on the press of his tongue and the way his fingers curled. Heat
spread through his body and he realised he was rutting against the mattress, but he didn’t free up one hand to take hold of himself.

Then Sherlock’s balls drew up and his hand went still, pulling John almost all the way up and off as his muscles clamped down around John’s fingers. The condom filled in pulses stronger than the racing beat of Sherlock’s heart, and John coughed and gasped to get air. His body screamed at him for release, but he didn’t move either hand until the last spasms had slowed and stopped.

John pulled back, gently easing his fingers out of Sherlock’s body, careful of how over-sensitised he had to be. He blinked to clear his eyes and rolled onto his back, his right hand moving down to circle his own cock.

At his side, the mattress dipped. “Let me,” Sherlock offered, cool, long fingers wrapping over John’s.

He didn’t have it in him to refuse Sherlock anything. He let his hand fall away and felt the smooth softness of Sherlock’s palm swipe over the glans. “Fuck,” he whispered. Need burned through him, but he wasn’t so close that he could come with a single touch. He draped his forearm over his eyes to block out sight and better concentrate on how his body felt.

Sherlock moved again. After a plastic click, he felt Sherlock’s grasp shift and go slick and icy for a moment. “Relax,” Sherlock said as John squirmed in protest at the cold. The lubricant helped, though, and in three quick, light strokes, Sherlock had John moaning. He took his time, teasing John and finding exactly how to unravel his self-control all over again.

When the orgasm finally came, it was almost hypnotic, hot pulses sweeping through his body, leaving a tingling euphoria in their wake. Sherlock’s touch turned light, just enough to coax him through, drawing out the pleasure until he was dizzy and exhausted. Relieved of the stress and tension that constantly weighed him down, he felt as though he were floating.

Then a rough softness fell over his hips, and he moved his arm and looked down to see a towel. A T-shirt and fresh boxers followed, tossed at him from the dresser where Sherlock stood, pale body traced with shadow and dull red highlights cast by the fire.

“I’m going to wash up.” He closed the dresser drawer and walked to the bed, gracefully leaning down on one knee to press a kiss to John’s lips. “Will you stay?”

John’s throat went tight at the invitation. He wanted to say yes — he almost did say yes — but he closed his eyes and found the strength to say, “No.” Then, because he felt guilty, he added, “You’ll sleep better without —”

Sherlock silenced him with another kiss. “It’s fine.” He pushed up off the bed and crossed to the bathroom, closing the door quietly. A moment later, John heard the water start to run in the sink.

He cleaned himself up, wishing he could trust himself enough to stay, and not just because the bed was infinitely more comfortable than the sofa. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d fallen asleep beside someone, and after what he and Sherlock had just shared, he knew he should stay.

All the more reason not to take that risk. He changed his clothes quickly, conscious that Sherlock could come back in at any moment, and checked the bed to see if he needed to change the sheets now or if it could wait until morning. Shivering at the chill in the room, he tossed his clothes in the laundry basket with Sherlock’s, put another couple of split logs on the fire, and then left, closing the living room door to give Sherlock privacy.
He built up the fire in the living room and went to the couch, automatically reaching for the side table where he kept his gun before realising he’d left it in the bedroom. The water was off, which meant Sherlock was probably in bed, possibly asleep, but John knew he’d never be comfortable unarmed.

Quietly, he went to the bedroom door, only to have it open as he reached for it, startling him.

Sherlock was dressed in ridiculously impractical silk pyjamas, lips curved up in a half-smile as he extended his arm, offering John his holstered gun.

“How did —” John stopped himself and took the weapon. “Thanks.”

Sherlock nodded. “If you change your mind, you’re welcome to join me,” he invited, leaving the door open as he went to the bed. It was too dark for John to clearly see more than the shift of the blanket as the mattress creaked.

John hesitated before he retreated back to the sofa. He put the .45 on the side table and wrapped up in his blanket, and he stared at the fire for what felt like hours, conscious of the bedroom door still open in invitation, until exhaustion finally dragged him under.
Chapter 8

Sunday, October 28

John should have known better than to expect an awkward morning-after. Despite the hard sofa, he slept deeply and well, rousing only when he heard the bathroom door creak, and even then, he came awake swiftly but without the jolt of adrenaline that usually had him reaching for a weapon before his eyes were even open.

A moment later, Sherlock came into sight, looking through the kitchen archway. “Coffee,” he said, going right for his laptop. It wasn’t an offer but a request.

John couldn’t help but guiltily (and a bit smugly) watch for any sign of last night’s activities in Sherlock’s walk, but he seemed fine. He was dressed as he had been since they’d gone to town to pick up his clothes — jeans, a button-down shirt, and a sweater, this one a finely-knit deep maroon that was probably silk. Today, John knew exactly what was under that clothing, and he couldn’t help but stare.

Shivering, John went to build up the fire, a little surprised to see the faint grey light of dawn outside the window. He must have slept for six hours straight, something that hadn’t happened since he’d flushed the last of his sleeping pills back in Toronto. He reached back to pull the blanket off the sofa and drape it over himself, using it to trap the fire’s warmth as he crouched in front of the hearth.

Sherlock sat down at the desk and flipped the switch that turned on power to the router and satellite dish. “And breakfast,” he said, pushing his laptop open.

“‘You could share in the cooking,” John pointed out. Then he frowned, asking, “Can you cook?”

“I’m a chemist. Of course I can cook.”

John laughed. “Can you cook anything that’s not toxic?”

Sherlock threw a sly glance over his shoulder. “Do hallucinogens count? Some actually have health benefits.”

“Right. Stay out of my kitchen,” John said, affectionate warmth spreading through his chest. By the time he was in the bedroom, searching through what little remained of his clean clothing, he was grinning at the thought that Sherlock wanted a repeat encounter. At least, he’d said so last night. Or implied it. John’s exact memories were a bit fuzzy on that point.

He kept grinning all through his morning wash. Remembering that Molly was coming over, he filled the sink with hot water and set the cup of hard shaving soap and badger brush to soaking. As he held a wet towel to his jaw, he peered into the mirror, wondering if he should cut his hair. Normally he kept clippers on hand and gave himself an all-over short cut, not bothering with different lengths of clipper guards. It was more practical than going to the barber in town (especially given that the barber was one of the Cole family — the one whose main skill was taxidermy) and it wasn’t as if he felt the need to impress anyone. He cut his hair mostly to keep it neat and out of his eyes.

Now, though, he thought about last night, the feeling of Sherlock’s fingers twisted in his hair, sparking bright pinpoints of pain on his scalp. He switched the washcloth to one hand and ran his wet fingers through his hair, feeling the length, before he reluctantly decided he should follow through with his decision cut it.
He dropped the washcloth back in the hot water and dug through the under-sink cabinet to find his clippers. After a bad incident with a dropped candle and a near-fall, the bathroom electrical power was always on, so he plugged the clippers in and flicked them on, wondering when he’d last oiled the blades. They seemed in good working order, so he turned them off and set them on the shelf over the toilet.

He’d just got the washcloth back over his face when the door from the kitchen opened without benefit of a polite knock. Sherlock glanced at him — at his hair, specifically — before he spotted the clippers, visually tracing the power cord to the wall. “Don’t —” he started to say, before his gaze fell on the straight razor folded on the left side of the sink.

John frowned at him and draped the washcloth over the faucet. “You all right?” he asked, tipping the water out of the cup of soap. He took out the brush and shook the excess water out of the bristles.

Without bothering to answer, Sherlock reached past John and picked up the razor. “Carbon steel.” He opened the blade and held it up to the light to examine it. “Well cared-for.”

“I prefer to avoid rust when I shave, yes,” John said agreeably. He should have been upset at the invasion of privacy, but found himself vaguely amused instead.

Sherlock made a faint sound of assent and glanced into the cup. “Plain glycerine soap. That’s why I didn’t smell it on you,” he said, almost accusingly. “Probably all stored in the black bag under the sink?”

“So you did search the bathroom.”

“I didn’t open the bag. I thought it was a travel kit.” Sherlock sounded unhappy about that.

“Now you know. Do you mind?” John asked, gesturing to the razor.

Sherlock’s fingers went tight on the handle. “I want to do it.”

It was only at that moment that John recalled he’d left his handgun in the bedroom. He stared at the razor, a weapon as deadly as the knife he’d once carried, and braced himself against the icy sense of panic that didn’t quite break the surface of his mind. Curious, he searched inside himself; the fear was still there, lurking under his skin in lines etched in white scarring across his chest, but he wasn’t paralyzed. He knew Sherlock wouldn’t hurt him, but knowing had never stopped the fear before.

Still, he knew he shouldn’t take a chance. If he panicked with that razor to his skin, he could well end up hurting himself, and he didn’t want to find out if Sherlock knew how to stitch wounds. “Not —” He stopped himself before saying ‘a good idea’ and instead said, “No need.”

Disappointment flickered in Sherlock’s expression. He nodded and folded the blade, setting it in John’s palm. He left without saying another word, closing the door quietly.

Then, before John could do more than take a breath, the door banged open again. “Don’t cut your hair,” Sherlock said, glaring in the direction of the clippers.

John laughed. “All right,” he said, conceding that much, at least.

This time, before Sherlock left, he smiled.

~~~
Absently, Sherlock wandered the kitchen, bringing to mind the steps in John’s coffee-making ritual. As far as Sherlock was concerned, the only complication coffee should bring was a five-minutes wait when there was a line at the nearest café. John’s process was overly complicated. But no matter how muddled his mind felt these days, he wasn’t a complete idiot. He’d memorised the process by which John made coffee; he’d just never bothered to actually do it for himself until today. So he built up the fire in the stove and checked the kettle and was just about to try and remember where John kept the coffee beans when the bathroom door opened far too quickly for John to have finished shaving.

He braced for an argument over the haircut and immediately thought of several reasons that John should let his hair grow out at least a little — long enough for Sherlock to grab hold of it even more tightly than he’d done last night. But instead of looking contentious, John seemed uncertain and nervous.

“What you offered...” John only looked at Sherlock in quick glances, letting his gaze skip around the kitchen. “If you still want to, you can.”

Sherlock’s irritation vanished. He smiled far more than the situation could possibly warrant. “By the stove, where it’s warmer. Go move a chair,” he said, passing John to retrieve the razor, soap, and towels.

“You have used a straight razor before?” John called after him. “And not for, I don’t know, threatening someone.”

“Not just for that, no,” Sherlock said, laughing. He picked up the razor and dropped it into a pocket before he draped clean towels over one arm. He added a fresh washcloth to the stack. “I trust it’s sharp?”

“It is.”

No surprise there. Sherlock picked up the brush and soap and took everything back out to the kitchen, where John was sitting a bit stiffly in the chair he’d moved close to the stove. While in the bathroom, he’d put on jeans, but still only wore the T-shirt in which he’d slept, and Sherlock took the opportunity to study his arms in the weak light of the early morning. The scars there were old and faint, none of them standing out as anything more than the usual scars an active boy would earn while growing up. John had a good sense of balance and was comfortable enough with his body to imply he’d had an athletic childhood, playing rugby or football or whatever it was they did in Canada. Snowshoeing, perhaps.

Sherlock set everything down on the counter between the sink and the stove. John had a full set of cast iron cooking pots, so Sherlock found a medium-sized one and filled it from the kettle. He set it on the counter to cool a bit, dropping the fresh washcloth in, and took out the razor to examine the edge.

“You’ve done this for someone else, I mean?” John asked.

Sherlock bit back his impulse to snap. John needed reassurance, irritating as it was. Then the irritation vanished as Sherlock remembered that the wounds he’d seen in the video and the scars pointed to knives having been used on him at some point.

“When I was at uni, I brought someone home with me for Christmas. He used an electric razor,” Sherlock said with a shudder. “My family would’ve eaten him alive if he’d come to the dinner table like that.”
John looked at him in surprise. “Cannibalism run in your family, then?” he asked, grinning.

“I’m almost certain of it,” Sherlock said with a grin of his own. “Half of them are in politics.”

“Christ, I’m sorry. You’re welcome to hide here as long as you want,” John answered sincerely, and tingling warmth filled Sherlock’s chest again at the affection in John’s tone of voice.

“Ask me again if we get through the winter without being killed and eaten by bears.” Sherlock tested the water before he pulled out the cloth, wringing it lightly. “Lean back.”

The desk chair would have been better for this — it was a adjustable and could recline — but John just slouched down and tipped his head back, closing his eyes, baring his throat without hesitation. Sherlock looked down at him, realising that he hadn’t even put on his gun; it was most likely still in the bedroom where he’d left it after getting his clothing from the closet.

When was the last time someone had trusted him this much? Especially someone so... He hesitated to think ‘paranoid’, because John’s behavior only shared some of the symptoms with paranoia. So, cautious, then.

Never, as far as Sherlock could determine, and certainly never so completely. At first, John had allowed Sherlock into his very private home because of Mycroft, but he’d made it clear even before this morning that Sherlock was welcome to stay. He’d given up his bed and slept, however lightly, without locked doors between them. He’d put a gun in Sherlock’s hands and let Sherlock walk behind him, armed. And even if he hadn’t stayed, he’d followed Sherlock to bed last night and given, with barely any thought to his own pleasure.

In London, Sherlock surrounded himself with people who generally had one or two interesting facets to their personalities, but were otherwise predictable and boring. He used them for whatever value they offered — entertainment, information, access to whatever he wanted — and catalogued them on a sliding scale of assets to liabilities. He’d risked actual trust only a very few times, and all but once, he’d been burned, eventually learning to depend only upon himself.

John wasn’t useful, except that he offered one path to staying sane this winter. The easiest and most logical path, of course, was to get the hell out of... wherever they were. He’d acquired enough of Mycroft’s money that he could get to civilisation, even if he didn’t dare risk returning to London just yet.

But he didn’t think about it beyond idle speculation. He brushed his fingers over the damp stubble on John’s jaw and carefully draped the hot, wet cloth over the hairs, covering it gently with his palms both to warm his fingers and to press the cloth against John’s throat. He kept his touch carefully light and stayed at John’s shoulder, not in front of him, leaving a clear escape route, though he showed no sign of needing one.

He stroked his fingers over John’s face, feeling the bone structure deep below the hot toweling. Last night, he’d kissed and licked and tasted, running his tongue over stubble. Now, he wanted bare skin.

He took off the cloth, soaked it again, and replaced it, thinking that he should say something, but he didn’t know what to say. John didn’t need the silence filled with meaningless conversation and small talk, something Sherlock appreciated. So he left the towel in place and prepared the soap, working up a lather with the bristles. When the mix was right, he pulled the cloth aside and started stroking the brush over John’s skin, twisting as he went, laying a thick coat of lather over his jaw, hiding skin turned ruddy from the heat under a layer of whitish foam. John shivered slightly and kept his eyes closed, hands shifting restlessly on his thighs, and Sherlock paused for a moment, arrested by the image of using the brush, dry and soft, over John’s entire body.
Finally, Sherlock put the brush aside and touched John’s hair in warning. He opened the razor, saying, “Stay relaxed,” as he set the blade at the edge of the foam high on John’s cheek. Smoothly, he drew it down, marking the subtle catch of the blade on the hairs. John’s breathing turned shallow but stayed slow, encouraging Sherlock to continue. After he wiped the excess foam off on a towel, he made a second stroke just forward of the first.

Confident that John wasn’t going to flinch and end up needing stitches, Sherlock continued, losing himself in the concentration required to keep from causing even the slightest injury or irritation. John was entirely pliant under his fingers, allowing Sherlock to tip his head or press a finger to his lips to hold his skin taut. The only time his breath actually hitched was when Sherlock touched his chin and pulled the razor down the underside of his jaw, but even then, his hands stayed relaxed on his legs.

When Sherlock finished, John went to sit forward, freezing when Sherlock touched his shoulder. “Something wrong?” John asked, lifting a hand as if to check for bloodshed.

“I’m not done.”

“But —”

“Trust me,” Sherlock said, intentionally using the same inflection as he had last night. The subtle widening of John’s eyes confirmed that he’d caught the parallel. He licked his lips nervously but leaned back, tension in his posture. It took a moment for Sherlock to realise John really had no idea what he was doing. Sherlock set the washcloth back in the pot of hot water and touched John’s face, stepping to the side of the chair to better meet his eyes.

“This is adequate, but not perfect,” Sherlock explained, stroking his thumb down the line of John’s jaw and then back up. The stubble was imperceptible compared to a safety razor or electric, but it was still there.

John smiled as the tension melted away. “It’s good enough. It’s just dinner with Molly.”

Sherlock leaned down and pressed his lips to the path his thumb had just traced, listening to the way John’s breathing stuttered. “She doesn’t get to feel the difference. I want to do this, John.”

“How the hell am I supposed to say no to that?” John asked breathily.

Sherlock smiled. “Now you’re learning,” he approved, and turned to get the washcloth to start the second shave.

~~~

John had never been one for anything fancier than a barber shop. His mother had once tried to drag him along to a family vacation at some health spa in Key West, but he’d escaped that fate, and more than once, his army buddies had gone to so-called salons, usually in the Far East, where shaves and haircuts came with questionable benefits. John had never paid for sex, even under the disguise of staying within regulations for hair length, and had refused every time they asked him to come along.

He’d never had a shave take even fifteen minutes, except maybe the first time he’d picked up a straight razor in a shaking hand and set it to his skin, wondering if he was going to actually shave or cut his throat and if it would be accidental or intentional.
Not content to shave him twice — once with the grain of his hair, once at an angle across it — Sherlock had insisted on three separate shaves, the last one against the grain over skin so smooth that the razorblade barely whispered.

After the third pass, Sherlock carefully ran the wet cloth over his face, leaning in close to study John’s skin. His eyes were practically glowing with satisfaction, and the subtle smile tugging at the corners of his mouth made it worth all the fuss and effort and the ache that had settled in John’s back.

“Perfect,” Sherlock murmured, tossing the cloth aside. He set his fingertips to John’s face and traced little circles over every inch that he’d shaved, making John shiver. He had illegally talented fingers, and John found himself entirely content to sit in the damned uncomfortable wooden chair all day, if it meant Sherlock would keep petting him.

A distant part of his mind wondered what had brought this on. Sherlock didn’t strike John as the intimate type — sexually self-indulgent, yes, but not intimate. Whatever brought on this moment of gentleness, John could get used to it.

Then, realising his idle fantasies had strayed into dangerous territory, he muttered a thanks to Sherlock and got up out of the chair, letting the burn in his back and neck distract him. He was in no position to think about things like ‘relationship’ or ‘long-term’ or anything at all beyond the end of winter, when Sherlock would go back to London.

Best to look at this as a vacation, John decided. A break from his everyday, solitary routine. Vacations ended, leaving fond memories to cling to when everyday life became too boring or stressful.

He went to the bathroom to rinse away the last of the shaving foam and carefully smooth moisturiser over his skin. He used a straight razor because it was easier than buying disposables by the carton in town and because charging an electric razor was a waste of fuel, but the shave was so close that it stripped away the top layer of dead skin cells.

Sherlock let himself in, again without bothering to knock, as John was leaning over the sink to peer into the mirror, admiring the result of Sherlock’s thorough attentions. “I never put in this much effort,” John told him, meeting his eyes in the mirror.

“‘You should.’” Sherlock stepped up to his side and touched John’s chin with one fingertip. With gentle pressure, he turned John to face him.

Firelight suited Sherlock better than electric, John decided, staring up at his face, lit by the two bulbs over the mirror. He smiled, thinking that for all the effort Sherlock had put into shaving John, he hadn’t bothered for himself. His jaw was dusted with sparse stubble a shade lighter than his curly hair.

“I’d offer to do the same, but I wouldn’t trust myself,” John said, mirroring Sherlock’s touch for a moment, before he indulged and slid his fingers along Sherlock’s jawline.

“I do.” Sherlock leaned in and set his lips to John’s skin, inhaling deeply through his nose. “Lanolin and beeswax?”

“Mmm, something I get in town. Hettie — the one with all the sheep — makes it,” John said absently, holding himself very still. The light touch of Sherlock’s lips was tentative and fragile. He didn’t want to lose even that slight contact.

“It is your turn,” Sherlock murmured, tongue darting out to lightly brush the point of John’s jaw,
under his ear. Electricity crawled down his spine, sparking through his body, waking him more effectively than coffee ever had.

“To do what?” John asked, curving his fingers around the back of Sherlock’s neck to hold him close. His heart was pounding, pulse racing.

“To shave me. I trust you,” Sherlock said insistently. “You’re a surgeon.”

The words fell over John like a bucket of ice water, driving him back a step. “What?” he asked, his throat so tight that the word came out as a whisper. “How do you know?”

“Your hands. You’re a doctor,” he answered calmly, eyes never leaving John’s face. “A doctor with small hands and excellent manual dexterity — you would have been steered towards surgery from your first day in medical school. You didn’t go into medicine for the money, or you’d be a plastic surgeon in California or Paris. You joined the army, so you wanted to help people. To save lives. So, surgery — trauma specialisation, perhaps.”

“How —”

He continued relentlessly, “You don’t practice anymore, obviously. Probably isn’t a sterile operating theatre within a thousand miles. Your licence has most likely expired, and you don’t plan on renewing it or you’d be taking continuing education courses. Maybe you barter your skills informally in town. They know you’re a doctor — if nothing else, Molly’s told them, since she’s so free with that information.”

“Enough,” John interrupted when Sherlock finally paused for breath. He braced one hand against the sink, focusing almost desperately on breathing, fighting off the memories that clawed at his mind.

“God. You should come with a damned warning label.”

Seconds slipped by, marked only by the gradual slowing of John’s pulse and breathing. Sherlock finally shifted his weight, asking, “Was I right?”

Not ‘are you okay’ or ‘I’m sorry’ or ‘should I leave you alone’. A laugh tore itself free from somewhere inside John, harsh at first, before he saw the black humour in the situation, standing in his damned bathroom with a man who was still a total stranger, despite the mind-blowing sex last night and the strange intimacy of this morning, listening to him verbally dissect a facet of John’s life, and his only concern was his accuracy.

John took another breath, and this time, the laugh was a lighter, cleaner thing. He turned to put both hands on the sink, needing the support as the adrenaline crash hit, leaving a tingling lassitude spreading through his body. He wanted nothing more than to sprawl on his bed and sleep for a couple of hours, as though his body and brain needed to shut down and reboot.

“Yes,” he finally said, still laughing. “Right on all counts. Fucking brilliant, actually.”

“You don’t have to sound so surprised,” Sherlock countered as though offended.

“Arrogant prick,” John accused fondly, looking over at Sherlock.

Tentatively, Sherlock grinned. “Also true.”

“Go fill the kettle,” John said, pushing back from the sink. “I’ll consider reciprocating the shave after breakfast and coffee.”
Sunday, October 28

Sherlock lay on the sofa, staring up at the beams supporting the attic floor, idly running his fingers over his jaw. After breakfast, John had given in, as predicted, and there hadn’t been the faintest hint of a tremor in his hands as he worked the razor over Sherlock’s skin. He’d been slow and meticulous and careful. Despite all of his concern, he hadn’t left a single nick or scratch.

John did suffer from an intermittent tremor in his left hand, but it only appeared after physical exertion strained his shoulder. The bullet wound was the obvious culprit, but any damage should have been healed by now. Lingering trauma, then, exacerbated by lack of immediate treatment. He thought back to the video, remembering the bloody bandage taped over John’s shoulder, and wondered how long it had gone untreated. Sherlock had yet to work out how long John had been held captive before his rescue.

John had gone out fishing for tonight’s dinner, an activity Sherlock had no desire to share. To fend off the boredom that threatened, Sherlock rolled off the sofa and went to the desk. He’d already checked his email, so he left the power off and turned his attention instead to the typed pages by the corner. John had made no effort to hide them – not that Sherlock couldn’t have uncovered any hiding space – so he didn’t hesitate to pick up the stack, turn it over, and start reading.

The fantasy novel was elegantly written but transparent, the plot devoid of complexities that would alienate young readers. (Sherlock distinctly recalled his frustration with such simplistic plots in the early days of school, when he’d sometimes bothered to actually complete his assignments.) He began to sort out the pages marked ‘JM’, finding the material disturbing but darkly engaging.

John hadn’t chosen to recount the tale of his own experiences in war. The story — actually less a proper manuscript and more a very detailed summary with bullet point outlines and notes — was set during the Cold War between the US and USSR, and the main character was a US Air Force pilot, not a Canadian surgeon, but there were similarities nonetheless. The pilot was shot down in contested airspace north of Japan, captured, and handed over to the KGB for interrogation. A few early pages, labelled ‘JM2’, detailed a parallel plot line about a special ops team being mobilised to rescue the main character and had notes about a possible KGB traitor who would help with the escape, but nothing had been done with those story arcs.

Sherlock restored the pages to the stack and abandoned the desk to think. He set up and tuned his violin absently, wondering if John’s writing was a good thing or bad. It was clear that his past experiences had left deep scars on his psyche as well as his body, but writing seemed just as pointless as group therapy. If he’d really been trying to write this story for years and had only made it to thirty-odd pages, clearly this form of therapy wasn’t working for him.

He lost himself in playing and thinking about John, until he took a deep breath, and his nose caught a distinctly wet, fishy odour. He opened his eyes and saw that John had returned at some point during Sherlock’s distraction, but had been too polite to interrupt.

“That was beautiful.”

Sherlock smiled and looked him over, noting the dark spots of mud on his jeans and two fresh scratches on his right hand. “You were successful.”

“We won’t starve,” John agreed, grinning. He rose, looking even shorter in his socks; apparently
he’d left his wellies elsewhere. “I’m going to have a shower. I didn’t want the water heater rattling to interrupt your playing.”

“I can scrub your back, if you’d like,” Sherlock proposed, letting his voice go deep and inviting. He knew John would refuse; what he didn’t know was how.

John tensed, but not as much as he might have done if he were actually upset by the offer. “Thanks, but even I don’t want to be in there with me at the moment.” He wrinkled his nose and headed for the bathroom.

Sherlock leaned against the mantle, toying idly with his bow. John had liked the idea enough to consider it, despite his deep-seated need to hide his scars. Slow steps, Sherlock decided, setting himself the goal of seeing the full extent of John’s scars by the end of the week — by John’s invitation.

~~~

The engine-rumble of Molly’s ATV shattered the silence that filled the cabin, rousing John from his doze. Sherlock was somewhere — bedroom, perhaps, locked away with a book — so John took it upon himself to go out front and greet her.

She pulled off her helmet and dismounted, grinning cheerily. “Hi! Not too early, am I?” she asked, unhooking the bungee cords holding a bag to the back of the seat in place of a passenger.

“Not at all.” He jogged out into the cold and took the bag courteously, giving her a quick hug with his free arm. “How was the trip?”

“Be careful. I saw this” — she tugged off a glove with her teeth and stuck her bare hand into the pocket of her jeans, pulling out a thin bundle of cinnamon-brown fur — “on that stand of pines by the river, the one where I spotted the beavers that one time.”

John nodded, remembering the spot from photographs she’d shown him. “Black bear or grizzly?” he asked worriedly. Either one might have brown fur, contrary to the name ‘black bear’.

“I couldn’t tell,” she admitted.

“Want me to ride back with you tonight?” he offered. No matter how enticing Sherlock’s company was — assuming Sherlock was still interested — John didn’t like the idea of taking a chance with Molly’s safety.

She gave him a shy smile and shrugged, leading the way up the front steps to the cabin door. She wanted to play brave and refuse, but she was sensible enough to instead say, “Maybe.” They both knew John was a much better shot than she was.

Sherlock was inside, now dressed in one of his suits from last week and a charming smile. “Good to see you again, Molly,” he said, offering a hand.

“Oh, hi,” she said, clasping his hand as her cheeks went pink. She looked down at her jeans and fleece sweatshirt, then back at Sherlock. “Look at you. I feel all underdressed now.”

John put an arm around her shoulders and stage-whispered, “I lied and told him we were going to a
fancy dinner in Edmonton, just so he’d dress up.”

Molly laughed and Sherlock’s smile turned genuine, which John counted as two small victories. “Well, we can pretend. I made a salad with the last of the fresh vegetables.”

“I’ll start dinner.” He glanced at Sherlock’s violin, suddenly uncertain if he’d take offense at a request to play the violin for Molly. He’d never precisely offered to play for John; he’d just done it.

Before John could say a word, Sherlock turned and strode away from them, opening the case. “Do you like the classics, Molly?”

Her expression turned incredulous. “Yes. You play? Really?” she asked. She circled around the couch and sat, looking adoringly up at Sherlock. John couldn’t blame her.

“I do.” Sherlock must have been planning this, because he didn’t bother to tune the violin or tighten the bow. His smile turned sly as he set the violin on his shoulder and looked John’s way. Then he closed his eyes, and the first notes of Limelight by Rush filled the cabin.

Grinning, John leaned against the kitchen archway, still holding Molly’s bag, and watched her until he saw her eyes go wide with recognition. “I know that!” she exclaimed to John, then snapped her mouth shut, looking anxiously back at Sherlock in silent apology. He ignored the interruption and kept playing silently, though John saw the tension in his body as he tried not to laugh aloud.

Relieved that the afternoon had started so well, John took the bag into the kitchen and got started on dinner, listening as Sherlock played through the highlights of Rush, The Smiths, and The Cure, finishing with Queen by the time the pan-fried trout was ready.

~~~

One of the facets of Sherlock’s personality that bothered Mycroft the most was that he could be polite, genial company. Sherlock was a Holmes; he hadn’t been raised by wolves, so it shouldn’t have come as such a surprise to Mycroft that Sherlock could pass through society just as smoothly as Mycroft himself could. He just usually didn’t bother. Being nice, he’d learned, encouraged idiots to come back for more conversation later.

But charm was as much a weapon as it was a lure, and Sherlock had no qualms at all about enchanting Molly with his personality in order to impress John and wear away more of his defences. So all through dinner, he engaged Molly in conversation and subtly drew John back any time he grew too quiet.

The close quarters helped. The table in the kitchen was built for two, and John brought the secretary’s chair in from the living room desk for himself. Their proximity meant that they were all bumping feet and knees under the table, so Sherlock had the perfect excuse to press his leg against John’s. The touch not only soothed John but gave Sherlock one more way to read his mood.

It also helped that Molly wasn’t tediously boring. Granted, she was easy to read, without a hint of deception in her personality, but she also proved to be intelligent, especially when Sherlock turned the question to her field of expertise. He didn’t know a damned thing about the ecosystems of glacier-fed northern wilderness rivers, but he knew science and could figure out what questions to ask well enough.
When the last of the trout (which proved to be surprisingly good) was finished, John asked, “Coffee and dessert?”

“Dessert?” Molly gave him a surprised smile. “Did you figure out how to use your oven for baking? Or did you?” she added, looking to Sherlock.

Sherlock waved in John’s direction, remembering the tension that had interrupted John’s plan to preview his dessert two nights ago. “I don’t usually cook unless I need explosives or other interesting chemicals. This is all John’s idea.”

“Wonderful disclaimer there, thanks,” John drawled, rolling his chair back from the table. He flashed Sherlock a quick grin. “For that, you get to clear the table while I set up in the living room.”

“I’ll help,” Molly offered at once, despite being a guest. Then again, John had done the washing-up at Molly’s house, so perhaps this was customary between them.

Sherlock left the dishes piled in the sink. When Molly would have started washing them, Sherlock suggested, “He’s probably ready for us.” He couldn’t imagine that digestives, chocolate, and marshmallows could require much preparation, no matter the expected end result.

“Okay. You go in; I’ll get the coffee ready,” she said, going for the pantry.

Saved from actually having to wash dishes, Sherlock went to the living room. John was sitting on the floor by the hearth, surrounded by bags and boxes and partially-unwrapped chocolate bars. He beckoned Sherlock to join him and ripped open the first plastic bag. “You have roasted marshmallows, haven’t you?”

“Intentionally or because I lit something else on fire?” Sherlock asked a bit evasively as he sat beside John, careful not to crowd him.

John shot him a suspicious look. “There’s a story there.”

“It wasn’t my dorm,” he protested over the sound of coffee beans being poured into the grinder.

John grinned. “Now I have to hear it, some time. But first, here,” he said, taking a marshmallow and impaling it on a long metal skewer. “You hold this in the fire. Not too close — you want it melted and a little crispy, but not solid black unless that’s what you like.”

“This is more like science than cooking,” Sherlock said, switching the skewer to his other hand to better reach the fireplace. In the kitchen, Molly started cranking the grinder loudly.

After a moment, John shifted unnecessarily closer and reached for one of the chocolate bars. “Feel free to experiment,” he said quietly, no longer talking about dessert.

Sherlock met his eyes and hid a triumphant grin when he saw nothing but interest there — no wariness or reticence at all. He lifted a hand to John’s face, tracing his thumb over the path where he’d set a line of kisses earlier, and John’s eyes closed in obvious memory. Sherlock pressed a finger over the pulse in his throat, marking the rapid acceleration with satisfaction.

“If you have any suggestions on where you’d like me to start...” Sherlock hinted quietly, leaning closer to replace the finger on John’s pulse with his lips.

John’s hand slid over Sherlock’s leg, fingers tightening. “Sherlock,” he protested tightly. “Molly’s right —”
“Making coffee,” Sherlock interrupted, though John’s protest didn’t go silent until Sherlock nipped his throat, making him gasp. “But there’s no need to rush,” he lied, leaning closer so he could brush his lips over John’s ear. “We have time for any experiments you’d like to try.”

John’s curse was lost under a soft, broken cough from the kitchen and Molly’s voice faintly saying, “Uh, fire.”

John jerked away from Sherlock, face flushed with embarrassment. Then he laughed raggedly and gestured to the fireplace, where the marshmallow had reached critical temperature and was now blazing. Sherlock glanced over and told himself not to throw the skewer in a fit of pique.

“This is why I don’t cook,” he told John firmly as the marshmallow lost all structural integrity, liquefied, and splashed into the flames.

~~~

From a practical sense, s’mores had been a successful choice for dessert — a perfect solution for the limitations imposed by John’s absolute lack of ability to use a wood-burning oven for anything but lighting things on fire. In fact, he was already planning on going back to Fairlake at least once more before the snow got too heavy in hopes that the store had restocked, just so he could buy out every marshmallow and chocolate bar. He looked forward to watching Sherlock licking his fingers clean every damned night.

But as the sun went down and Molly hinted at leaving, John’s protective side reared its head. Still somewhat embarrassed at catching Sherlock and John practically making out with one another, Molly insisted on doing the dishes. John promptly went to the bedroom, where he unbuckled his belt and removed his holstered .45.

Sherlock stepped through the doorway a moment later, watching with interest. “Getting an early start?” he asked suggestively.

“Taking Molly back. She found bear-sign on the way up here. It’s probably safe, but I’d rather not take any chances.” He looked back, letting his eyes rove over Sherlock’s body. He’d been looking forward to undoing every button on that shirt one at a time. “You should stay here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sherlock said, stepping into the bedroom and closing the door. He shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it onto the foot of the bed.

“It’s safer,” John insisted, turning back to the selection of guns. He had a Kimber 8400 classic bolt-action rifle for big game hunting. Loaded with 160 grain .270 Winchester rounds, it would be sufficient to take down a bear. He loaded three rounds into the magazine and pocketed another three, and then set the rifle on the bed, muzzle facing away from Sherlock.

John couldn’t help but stop to stare as Sherlock stepped out of his trousers. He wore nothing but black silk boxers that made John want to forget about everything but petting him, contrasting the feel of silk with skin.

“You’re too damned distracting,” John accused, finally forcing himself to turn back around. Sherlock’s laugh was low and knowing, and it took all of John’s self-control to ignore it. He took out the old .44 Magnum revolver he’d picked up in Fairlake and gave it a quick check, though he knew all his weapons in the safe were clean and ready to go. He hated the recoil but fired it enough to be
confident he could hit a close-up target, which was all that mattered tonight. He wasn’t hunting a bear; he was just trying to keep everyone safe.

He loaded it with 240 grain bullets and slipped it into a holster. When he hung it on his belt, the weight difference was immediately apparent. He drew it a couple of times to remind his muscles of the change from his usual .45.

“I take it this isn’t excessive?” Sherlock asked as he looked at the revolver.

“Anything less will just get it angry. As I said, it’s probably safe, but best not to take chances.” John closed and locked the safe, and then picked up the rifle, slinging it over his shoulder. He looked Sherlock over, taking in the warm layers that now hid his thin frame, and again wished he wasn’t quite so protective of one of his last remaining friends.

Sherlock was frowning, glancing between John and the door. “She could stay here tonight,” he ventured, sounding unhappy about the idea.

John laughed uncomfortably. If Molly stayed, he’d insist she take the bed, which would leave Sherlock on the sofa and John awake through the night. “We’ve embarrassed her enough for one night, don’t you think?”

Sherlock’s brows rose sceptically. “On the contrary,” he said, stepping in front of John. He leaned down and spoke softly into his ear: “Judging by her reaction, I think she wanted to watch.”
Sunday, October 28

“Well, that was a complete waste of three hours,” Sherlock said acidly as he dismounted gracelessly from the quad John pulled right up to the front of the cabin.

“You didn’t have to come,” John growled back, fumbling the key out of the ignition. He left the quad where it was, too cold and irritated to give a damn about stowing it safely away. He’d deal with it tomorrow, assuming the storm didn’t bury it, in which case he’d just shovel the damned thing out in the spring and scrap it.

Sherlock actually had the audacity to accuse, “There was no bear.” He banged the cabin door open and went right for the fireplace. The cabin was almost as freezing as the outside air. As always, John had put out the fires before leaving.

As if John could make a bear appear on demand? He left his rifle by the front door — it would need to be dried and oiled before he put it away — and followed Sherlock to the hearth. “I’ll do that.”

“I have it! I know how to build a bloody fire!” Sherlock snapped.

John resisted the urge to smack the back of Sherlock’s head and instead dragged himself to the kitchen. The wood stove heated more efficiently than the fireplaces, so the kitchen would warm up quickly, and he wanted to get a hot drink into both of them. A few years ago, he’d picked up a box of herbal tea meant to fight insomnia. It tasted like shit and had done nothing to help with his sleeping problems (which were far from ordinary insomnia) but it might calm Sherlock’s temper.

As soon as he had the fire built and the kettle heating, he went into the bathroom and started the shower. “Sherlock! Get in here!” he shouted. Because the pipe from the water heater was only a couple of metres, the bathroom almost immediately started filling with steam. He breathed deeply, letting it burn through the ice clogging his lungs.

“I’m perfectly capable of —”

“I know!” John interrupted sharply, leaning against the sink. He pressed his hands to his eyes, thinking this was a fine time for Sherlock to drag out this side of his personality. Python had warned him about this. “Just get in here!”

Sherlock stormed in a moment later, tall and furious, sharp eyes glaring, pale cheeks flagged with colour. It would have been imposing if not for the snow-damp hair that hung in his eyes. His glare softened into suspicion when he glanced at the tiny shower cubicle.

“Get in there before you actually do die, and I’m stuck with your corpse for the winter. Fairlake doesn’t have a mortician.”

Startled by the consideration, John resisted the urge to touch the old scar. It was aching, but he thought he’d hid it well. “I’m fine,” he lied, gesturing Sherlock towards the shower. “Just don’t use up all the hot water.”

“You need it more than I do.”
“Which is why you should get your ass in there and stop wasting it. Christ, are you *always* this stubborn?” John muttered, trying to push past Sherlock so he could go build up the bedroom fire.

Sherlock caught his arm, making him tense warily, but all he did was study John’s face intently. Slowly, Sherlock’s fingers uncurled, releasing him. He turned away, apparently satisfied with whatever he saw. “The Coles.”

Baffled, John asked, “What?”

“Taxidermists. Almost the same skillset as morticians.”

John stared at the pale line of skin at the back of Sherlock’s neck. Droplets of melting snow were slithering down his nape, disappearing into the collar of his shirt. The last of his irritation vanished under the sudden desire to taste them as Sherlock’s words finally registered in his brain.

He snorted out a laugh and forced himself to turn away. “There’s a gruesome thought.”

“Impractical, too. Though you’re welcome to keep my skull.”

“Gruesome, but romantic,” John answered as went into the bedroom. He settled down in front of the cold hearth and checked the layer of ash under the grate.

Sherlock’s laugh sounded pleasantly surprised.

~~~

Sherlock pulled his knees to his chest and wrapped himself in the blanket taken from John’s bed. He should have felt ridiculous in all his unwieldy layers of clothes, including three pairs of socks, but he still felt cold, and that *never* happened to him. Before rehab, he’d been able to control cold or fatigue or hunger or any other discomfort his body imposed on him. Now, he’d apparently had lost the knack. He slept for as much as five hours at a time and ate every meal John prepared without protest and despite a hot shower and the fire and the way he’d pushed the sofa right up to the hearth, he was still freezing.

Now he was certain, though, that Mycroft had sent him here to die in obscurity. John didn’t even have to exert himself to kill Sherlock. Canada would do all the work for him.

He hoped John was the type to take trophies, though all evidence — namely the cabin virtually devoid of personal touches — suggested otherwise. Perhaps he’d take Sherlock up on the offer, though, and keep his skull.

Puzzling, that. John had *laughed*. He hadn’t reacted with disgust or disdain or even a hint of fear at what was, in retrospect, a blatantly sociopathic statement. Sherlock recalled that soldiers, like police, tended to develop certain defence mechanisms, gallows humour being the most common. John should have adapted his behaviour in accordance with his reintegration with civilian life, but he hadn’t. Sherlock was glad of that. ‘Normal’ was even more boring than nearly freezing to death as Sherlock knew all too well, having now experienced both.

John’s showers normally lasted just under four minutes. This one took six, and it was another five minutes before John came out to the living room.
“Still cold?”

Sherlock nodded, turning to look at John. “I hate Canada.”

Instead of taking offence, John smiled at him. “I assume you didn’t make coffee or tea. Which would you prefer?”

“Tea.”

John left him to his misery, returning a few minutes later with two cups of tea that smelt like decomposing plant matter. He handed one to Sherlock. “We’re now out of milk.” He climbed over the arm of the sofa and sat down opposite Sherlock. Leaning over, he set his tea on the hearth and tugged his fleece blanket off the back of the sofa so he could wrap himself up warmly. Like Sherlock, he was dressed in layers, though perhaps not quite so extremely.

After a few minutes of staring at the fire, John said, “I’m sorry. I should have been more clear about going out in this kind of weather.”

Sherlock huffed in irritation. “You didn’t even anticipate it. You were no more prepared than I was.”

“Well, no,” John said, frowning, “but it’s more than just wearing snow —”

“Or did you?” Sherlock asked as new connections sparked deep in his brain. “You take precautions, but minimally. Your whole lifestyle is centred around personal risk. You brought a rifle and backup handgun to deal with the possibility of a bear attack — to keep Molly safe — but you didn’t bother to dress for what you surely recognised as the possibility of a sudden snowstorm. And now you’re apologising to me because your risk didn’t only involve you.”

Taken aback, John went silent. His face, usually so open and expressive, became a blank mask.

Sherlock twisted on the sofa, tucking one leg under the other, and leaned forward, studying John’s face. Firelight and shadow changed the shape of his cheeks and eyes and jaw, darkening his deep blue eyes to a shade closer to midnight.

“Tell me something,” Sherlock said quietly. His thoughts were soaring now, high on the exhilaration of watching the pieces of a mystery come together, giving him another facet of the puzzle that was John Watson. But the high was tempered with the realisation of a truth John was probably hiding from himself.

“What?” John asked tightly, still staring at the fire.

“If you had been alone, would you have carried your usual handgun instead?”

~~~

The last day of December. Seven years. John could still remember that first day, the first year, how often he’d forgotten something critical. Food supplies. Firewood. Clean, warm socks. He’d risked injury and nearly died a hundred times that first winter, and every time, he’d faced his trial with a stoic sense of calm. He’d never thought about it or psychoanalysed it, because he’d been too busy trying not to get himself killed.
He didn’t want to think about what Sherlock was saying. He didn’t want to follow Sherlock’s thoughts to their ultimate conclusion. Contrary to what Sherlock thought, he wasn’t a complete idiot. He could see where this was all leading.

“I’m not suicidal, if that’s what you’re implying,” he said as coldly as he could manage, and threw in a glare for good measure.

Rather than looking properly apologetic, Sherlock smirked. “No. You just face ever-escalating risks, and don’t care if the price of failure is your life.”

“Stop.” John snapped out the command and turned away, unable to meet Sherlock’s eyes. “Just stop it, Sherlock. You have no right to go digging around in how I think.”

“Someone has to. Seven years, John. Seven years,” Sherlock said relentlessly. “You’re still hiding in the middle of nowhere, turning meaningless danger into a game and challenging death to win because you know that one day, it must.”

“So?” The word came out as a shout. John put his mug down on the stone hearth before he could give in to the temptation to throw it. Anger raged through him, burning along his veins in an irrational blaze that he had to control.

He breathed deeply, eyes closed, and listened to his heart pounding in his ears. Refusing to think about Sherlock’s words, he focussed instead on his body: the crude support of the old sofa cushion over the hard wooden frame, the contrast between the cold air at the back of his neck and the fire’s warmth on his face and fingers, the smell of the smoke and clean snap of wood.

Slowly, he calmed down. Sherlock had been speaking, but John hadn’t listened to a single word. He took another breath, gauging how far his anger had receded, before saying, “Your brother said you’re a manipulative bastard. He said you drove your last doctor to try and kill himself.”

Seconds passed like hours before Sherlock asked defensively, “And?”

John laughed harshly. “Of course, you wouldn’t deny it.” He stayed calm, falling through the last, lingering anger to the other side, where everything inside him was cold and deathly still. “Are you staying up?”

Sherlock’s frown turned puzzled. “Yes.”

“Fine.” John untangled himself from his blanket and rose, climbing back over the arm of the sofa. He threw the blanket over his shoulder and went to the bedroom, closing the door to keep in the heat. It took two minutes to bank the fire for warmth and darkness, and then he climbed into bed, put his gun on the nightstand, and dragged the blanket over himself. He didn’t want the damned herbal tea anyway.

~~~

Sherlock leaned back, staring up at the wall over the fireplace, wondering for a moment why John had deviated from local decorating customs to leave the wall empty, rather than mounting one of his rifles there. The idle thought flitted through his consciousness quickly, but the fact that it existed at all was vexing. His mind was supposed to be sharp and focussed, not bouncing between disconnected thoughts the way it was.
At first, he couldn’t decipher John’s reaction. Sherlock was correct — of course he was — and people often reacted with hostility when Sherlock forced them to face some unpleasant reality they’d previously denied. But John had gone from anger to hostility to... something else, something Sherlock couldn’t readily identify. And then he’d left, going to the bed where Sherlock had been sleeping for the past week. Was that an invitation or simply a practical reaction to Sherlock remaining on the sofa?

He rearranged the blanket more comfortably and looked down at the fire, mentally replaying every word and nuance of their conversation. John hadn’t denied the truth of Sherlock’s words. Likely he’d never considered his behavior in that light. John didn’t strike Sherlock as the introspective type. Otherwise, he’d be living in a city where he could participate in meaningless group therapy and talk to a so-called doctor about his feelings.

Not that therapy would help John. He was actively seeking out danger, carefully measuring his risks. On the surface, his actions seemed reasonable, but not when scrutinized. Tonight, the easy solution would have been to have Molly stay at the cabin and escort her home tomorrow, in daylight. Instead, John had risked an accident in the darkness as well as a potential encounter with a bear. If he were genuinely suicidal, he wouldn’t have armed himself specifically to deal with the threat of a bear. But if he were genuinely interested in avoiding the risk, he simply would have stayed at home.

His behavior could be explained away by the trauma he’d survived, but there was more to it. He’d joined the military. He’d gone to medical school, and he obviously had money, so the likelihood of crushing student debt was slim. Why join the military, then? Was it a sense of duty and patriotism? If so, he would still be a part of society, working in some veteran’s hospital or doing charity work for the poor or participating in Médecins Sans Frontières, not hiding in the middle of nowhere.

The one thing the military offered that the others didn’t was danger, which was the one thing John was still courting — except that here in the woods, his danger had no purpose. The only meaningful result of getting mauled by a bear was that predators and scavengers would get a good meal.

The military offered John danger but also a focus, a goal, whether that goal was survival or saving lives or even taking them. Sherlock closed his eyes, thinking of the underside of London, his world of interesting case work and criminals and the exciting lure of tracking down criminals who might or might not be more clever than he was, but who universally wanted him gone.

A normal doctor would tell Sherlock he was insane for living the life he did, even before the economy had reduced his client pool to almost nothing and he’d turned to drugs and nightclubs and sex to alleviate his boredom. But John was hardly a ‘normal’ doctor.

And he might just be the one thing Sherlock had never imagined having: the perfect partner.

~~~

John dropped to one knee, crouched defensively beside the bed, gun braced on the mattress and aimed directly at the door before he was fully awake. His trigger finger trembled, caught by the conflicting urge to identify his target first or just shoot blindly, and for painfully long seconds, he had no idea where he was. The darkness and fire and smell of smoke disoriented him more than his sudden awakening did.

“I’d rather you not shoot me.”
Silky baritone, full of dry wit. John exhaled and dropped his face to the bed as his fingers relaxed, letting the gun rest safely on the blankets. “Fuck,” he muttered, trembling with the sudden jolt of adrenaline coursing through his veins. He didn’t think he could stand, so he sat down on the floor, resting his right arm on the bed. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

“You didn’t shoot,” Sherlock said, as if the end result was all that mattered. John heard him cross the room and felt the other side of the mattress dip under his weight. Fabric rustled loudly — his blanket, the one that Sherlock had been using. Air moved in a soft breeze against John’s arm and face as Sherlock shook the blanket out.

“Right. Want the bed back?” he asked, leaning on the mattress for balance as he stood.

“Stay.”

“No.” John picked up his gun, hands still shaking.

“John, stay.”

“Which part of ‘no’ did you miss?”

Sherlock sighed dramatically. “You’re not going to hurt me, and I’m not going to hurt you.”

John gritted his teeth. “I don’t sleep near other people.” He stripped his blanket off the bed — or tried to. Sherlock was holding the other end.

“Stay,” Sherlock repeated again. This time, he added, “Please.”

Forced to either give up or put down the gun and get into a schoolyard fight over a blanket, John let go of the blanket and stepped back from the bed. The cool bedroom air had him starting to shiver already. “I’m sorry, Sherlock, but I’m really not interested in sex right now,” he said bluntly. Silently, he berated himself for not keeping extra blankets on hand. He had a sleeping bag rolled up in the attic, but he had no energy to climb up there and get it.

Sherlock huffed in amusement. “I turn down most clients because their cases are too boring. Police cases, too. Cold cases are usually interesting but not exciting.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” John asked, giving his blanket an experimental tug. Either Sherlock was still holding it or he’d rolled on top of it. Of all the times to revert to being a five-year-old, apparently he had to pick now.

“My work, John,” Sherlock answered as if that should be obvious. “Most of it is cheating spouses — and generally the answer is yes, if you have to ask, the other person is cheating. Minor thefts. Embezzlement that any half-competent accountant could catch.”

John shoved the gun into the back of his jeans, pinning it temporarily in his waistband. It was ridiculously unsafe, but at the moment, he didn’t care. “So?” he asked, folding his arms as if he could trap his body heat.

“The last serial killer was three years ago.” He sounded sad about that. “Only five victims, so the police didn’t have much to work on. He electrocuted them. Did a good job making it look accidental, too.”

John went cold, flashes of memory shattering his composure. He sat down, landing on the edge of the bed by sheer luck. His arms tensed, pressing against his body, fists clenched against his ribs.
“The detective investigating the last death wanted to rule it an accident and close the case. He refused to listen when I told him it wasn't an isolated accident. I finally went after the killer alone.”

Faced with the choice of listening to Sherlock’s odd story or venturing into his own nightmares, John clung desperately to Sherlock’s voice. He told himself to breathe, steady and deep, and tried not to count his too-rapid heartbeats. He didn’t feel cold anymore, but that was an illusion. He knew he should get under a blanket. He just didn’t want to move.

“He wasn’t in some grubby council flat or abandoned warehouse. Cinema is hardly a representation of reality,” Sherlock scoffed. “He lived with his wife in a flat in Islington. Worked as a bank clerk. I went to his flat and confronted him."

Slowly, the foolishness of Sherlock’s actions worked its way through the jagged thoughts scraping at John’s brain. “That was incredibly stupid. You went alone, I take it?”

“The idiot detective had no interest in accompanying me, so yes.” Sherlock huffed as if irritated. “My mistake was dismissing the wife. She stabbed me with a fork.”

“What?” John twisted around to stare at Sherlock in the darkness. The motion tightened the waistband of his jeans, forcing the gun to dig uncomfortably against his spine.

Propping himself up on one elbow to face John, Sherlock shrugged. “It happens. After I disarmed her, I called in a less-stupid detective, and that’s one less serial killer on the streets.”

“So she was the serial killer?”

“No, she was apparently afraid of losing her husband’s pension if he went to prison.”

John couldn’t help but laugh. It was terrible, because Sherlock was talking about a serial killer and an insanely devoted (and greedy) wife and an incident in which he’d ended up stabbed, but once the laughter started, he couldn’t stop.

“So tell me,” Sherlock continued, reaching out to touch John’s hip, “why should I let you go back to the couch?”

“What does that have to do —”

Sherlock shifted closer, sliding his hand down to curve over John’s thigh. “You won’t hurt me.”

“It’s not...” John hesitated, shaking his head. “It’s not just that, Sherlock. You saw how I woke up. It’s not just dangerous. It’s not —”

“Don’t say ‘normal’,” Sherlock warned quietly. He sat up so he could move closer, pushing the blankets out of the way. “If I wanted ‘normal’, I wouldn’t have set my sociology classroom on fire and quit university to become the world’s only consulting detective.”

“You realise most people would describe that as ‘insane’, don’t you?”

“Do you really think I care?”

John closed his eyes and raked a hand through his hair. He supposed he should take offence at the thought that the only person who was actually stupid enough to want to spend an entire night with him, nightmares and all, was most likely clinically insane, but ‘normal’ held little appeal for him, too. Logically, he knew he should get up and leave the room, even if it meant shivering sleeplessly through the night until Sherlock relented and surrendered a blanket, but logic had nothing to do with
the emptiness inside him. He’d never meant to be alone.

Sherlock moved even closer, drawing his hand up from John’s thigh to his chest. John flinched but didn’t move away as Sherlock pressed his palm over his sternum, fingertips resting on his throat, above the collar of his shirt. “You don’t have to talk about your scars.”

“Fuck,” John gasped, flinching violently this time. “Sherlock —”

“I already know.”

Through clenched teeth, John accused, “Your brother told —”

“Told me nothing,” Sherlock interrupted. He closed the distance between them again and touched John’s face as if to hold him still. “I saw enough, John. You still don’t understand. I observe. I know more about you than you do.”

“Sherlock —”

“And I’m still here.”

John closed his mouth, turning away from Sherlock, though the motion pressed his face against Sherlock’s palm. His hand was warm and steady, holding him without trapping him.

“That’s just one more indication that you’re probably crazy,” John managed to say, his voice distant and faint.

“So?”

John laughed and nodded tightly. He pulled the gun out of his waistband and put it on the nightstand, finally feeling the cold. Shivering, he pushed back into Sherlock, saying, “Back up. You’re hogging the bed.”

“We’ll be warmer if we share blankets,” Sherlock suggested.

John hesitated. “Sherlock...”

In answer, Sherlock moved back, mattress shifting as he settled down on the far side of the bed. “Tomorrow night, then.”

“I didn’t picture you as an optimist.”

“Realist,” Sherlock corrected. “Go to sleep. You’re awful company if you don’t get at least four hours.”

“Thanks,” John muttered, pulling his blanket up and trying not to tell himself that Sherlock was right about sharing warmth. He curled up at the very edge of the bed and stared into the darkness, wondering if he’d be able to fall asleep listening to the sound of someone else’s slow breathing.

~~~

Without full disclosure of John’s past experiences, thoughts, and (Sherlock shuddered at the thought) his feelings, Sherlock couldn’t be one hundred percent certain that John suffered from post-traumatic
stress disorder. The so-called professionals couldn’t agree if it even existed or if it should have a different name or on a course of treatment. Still, he’d done what research he could, given the limitation of internet access that was only marginally faster than tying pieces of paper to rocks and throwing them from place to place, so he felt prepared to handle the abrupt onset of John’s nightmare.

John didn’t scream or thrash or even speak. Instead, he went quiet and tense, body moving in minute twitches, reminding Sherlock of watching the hunting dogs dreaming in a pile on the kennel floor. He couldn’t have been more than five when he’d asked Mycroft why the dogs’ feet were moving, and Mycroft, twelve years old and pompous with unearned wisdom, had given some platitude about ‘chasing rabbits’. He’d been entirely unprepared for Sherlock’s demands to analyse the difference between dog and human consciousness and to explain how dogs could dream if they were ‘only animals’.

John moved in his sleep, sprawling out over the bed one limb at a time, until he seemed to achieve an impossible state by all laws of physics and anatomy, occupying far more of the mattress than a man of his stature possibly could. Sherlock had awakened each time a hand or foot had invaded his side of the bed, determined that John was restfully sleeping, and retreated until he was at the very edge of the king-sized mattress.

At once, though, he identified the difference between those movements and John’s sudden tension. Without a proper bedside light, Sherlock had to depend on his mobile, but he knew better than to risk awakening John while still in arm’s reach. He guessed that John would perceive any attempt at stealth as a threat, so he moved off the bed quietly but naturally and picked up his mobile from the bedside table as he stepped back.

He powered the device up and turned it, playing the glow of the startup screen over John. The blankets covered him from the neck down, magnifying every little twitch of his hands and feet into wavelike motions of fabric. Behind his closed lids, his eyes were moving rapidly, and his jaw was clenched. His pulse and respiration were accelerated.

Nightmare, then.

Sherlock couldn’t gauge if it was a particularly bad nightmare, but it was best not to take any chances — not for his own safety but for John’s peace of mind. Shivering in the cold, he moved to the foot of the bed and held his mobile in one hand, pointed upwards to illuminate himself and the room as best he could.

“John,” he said, his voice calm and pitched low but firm. He waited a few seconds before repeating John’s name two more times.

The fact that John didn’t immediately awaken and grab for his weapon felt like an accomplishment. Subconsciously, at least, he might well have recognized Sherlock’s voice and categorised him as safe.

Cautiously, Sherlock said, “John, wake up,” as he reached down to touch the top of John’s foot.

Immediately, John’s body coiled in on itself before he twisted and sat up. The blanket went flying as he reached out with both arms, a quick motion to assess his surroundings that was distinct from the way he reached unerringly for the weapon on the left side of the bed.

His hand never made it that far. He stopped before his fingers even crossed the edge of the mattress and stared at Sherlock, panting to catch his breath.
“Sherlock?” he asked, his voice soft and very tight, almost a whisper.

In answer, Sherlock pressed and held the power button on his mobile. “Go back to sleep,” he said, determined to treat the situation as nothing out of the ordinary. He crawled up the bed, tossed the BlackBerry on the table, and then tried to sort out his blankets.

“What —” John began, still sitting up. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. Though I’ve no idea how someone of your height can take up more space than even me,” he accused, mostly to divert John’s mind from any lingering trace of the nightmare.

John didn’t immediately answer. He moved gracelessly back down the bed and thrashed under his blankets to get himself sorted. Only when he was lying down, blankets pulled up over his body, did he roll onto his right side to face Sherlock. “I had a nightmare,” he said.

Sherlock bit back his response: Obviously.

After a few silent seconds ticked by, John asked, “Did I hurt you?”

“No.”

John’s exhale was shaky. “That’s good. I didn’t... say anything, did I?”

Sherlock moved a bit closer, shifting his pillow. John owned only two of them, and though he apparently was used to sleeping with both, he’d ceded one to Sherlock. “No. You barely even moved.”

He couldn’t see John’s frown, but he could hear it in his tone of voice as he asked, “Then why did you wake me? Did I take up that much of the bed?”

“Yes, but that’s not why.” Sherlock laughed softly. “Consensus is apparently that it’s best to wake someone from a nightmare. Did it help?”

“Hell if I know.” He moved, then, reaching out to find Sherlock’s arm with his fingertips. “Thanks.”

Sherlock resisted the urge to take John’s hand and instead pressed into the touch, taking it as an unspoken invitation to move closer. “If this were group therapy, I’d be expected to ask you how you feel,” he said, unable to hide the distaste in his voice.

“Christ. Don’t,” John said, sounding equally repulsed. “If you want to stay awake, there are far better things we can do than talk. Or I can just go out into the living room and let you sleep.”

“Sleep is a pointless waste of time,” Sherlock said, trailing his fingers along the underside of John’s forearm, though he was still wearing his long-sleeved shirt and jeans. John shivered and made a pleased little sound. Encouraged, Sherlock hinted, “You’re wearing too much for anything but talk, though.”

John laughed. “Let me build up the fire. You deal with the mess we’ve made of the blankets.”

Sherlock sighed and reached for his mobile to turn it back on for light. “John...” he said as an idea struck him.

“Hm?”

“When you told my brother I could stay with you this winter, did either of you specify where?”
“Well, no...” John hesitated before asking, “Did you want to leave?”

“How would you like to see Ibiza?”

Instead of an amused laugh, John went quiet before he said, “Afraid you’ll have to do that one on your own. I told him you could stay here, but you’re not a prisoner. If you want to go —”

Startled by the sudden change in John’s tone, Sherlock interrupted, “John. I’m not going anywhere without you. If you’d rather stay, we’ll stay. Going somewhere warmer would let us take off our clothes without worrying about freezing to death, that’s all.”

John said nothing as he worked on building up the fire. Slowly, light filled that corner of the room, throwing long shadows everywhere. John rose, surrounded by an aura of red-gold light that brought out bright highlights in his hair. His back was turned, arms crossed, hands rubbing over his biceps.

“Is that your way of saying sex with me is boring?” he asked, turning enough for Sherlock to see his profile. Though the words were delivered deadpan, Sherlock caught a hint of amusement — or perhaps a lack of anger — in his half-glimpsed expression.

He forced his sleepy, dull mind to work faster, concentrating for a full second before he laughed. “Freezing to death before we even get to the sex is definitely boring.”

John laughed and broke from the fireplace, crossing to the bathroom. “Then sort out the blankets, lazy bastard,” he said, his voice light and full of the humour he’d hidden before. “And go break into your stash. We have a lot of condoms to get through before spring.”

The bathroom door shut firmly, and Sherlock laughed, satisfaction warming him more than the blankets. He knew better than to suggest they go anywhere crowded — and Ibiza was nothing if not crowded — but John hadn’t taken offence at his slip. Instead, he’d pushed past any sense of embarrassment and discomfort to make a clever, subtle joke.

John was resilient. That was how he’d survived this long, even if he hadn’t healed from the trauma of his experience. And that deep, solid foundation of inner strength was all Sherlock needed to help him recover.
Sunday, October 28

Standing in the bathroom, John splashed water on his face and tried to push away the surreal feeling that had crept over him. His nightmares were nothing new. Fragments of imagery clung to him day and night, and he never went twenty-four hours without waking in a cold sweat at least once. When Sherlock had stubbornly decided to share the bed for sleep, John had expected this. Feared it. And now that it had happened...

Nothing.

Sherlock had safely pulled John out of the nightmare — John didn’t miss the fact that Sherlock had awakened him from the other side of the room, intentionally visible and recognisable in the light of his cell phone — and then treated the whole incident as nothing remarkable. No awkward questions, no demands that John share his fears, no crushing insistence on cuddling or any physical contact at all, in fact. He hadn’t even commented on John’s reaction to the Ibiza invitation, though he had to know it wasn’t normal for a grown man to avoid other people the way John did.

This could work, whispered the little voice in the back of John’s mind that had been silent for seven years.

Hope felt alien to him, but in a good way. He didn’t try to hide from it. Instead, he allowed himself to acknowledge that Sherlock might be just as fucked up as John was, in his own way, and that might be just what John... if not needed then at least wanted.

He went back into the bedroom and found Sherlock under both blankets, both pillows stacked under his head. His bared arms were visible, hands tucked behind his neck, lazy and casual. His pyjamas were draped over the side of the bed. Deliberately, he’d placed a zig-zag fan of condoms and the bottle of lubricant on the corner of the mattress, where John wouldn’t miss them.

“Not bored already, are you?” John asked as he started to unbutton his shirt.

Sherlock’s eyes dropped to watch John’s fingers, and his lips curled up in a sly, satisfied smile. “Not anymore.”

John’s heart pounded at the look of obvious desire on Sherlock’s face, even as he had to turn away. He hadn’t been self-conscious about getting undressed in front of someone for years. High school locker rooms, university, the army... Any hint of body-shyness had been long since cured, except for seven years ago.

He shivered as cold air slithered over his bare arms and told himself he was wearing the T-shirt for warmth, not to hide. Sometimes, he could almost believe his own bullshit, though tonight wasn’t one of those times. “I take it you have some ideas, then?” he asked to hide his own embarrassment as he tossed the button-down shirt in the laundry basket.

“A list of them,” Sherlock confirmed.

John grinned as another layer of tension melted away. He rid himself his jeans as quickly as he could, stripped off his socks, and got under the blankets, pushing them up so he could roll on top of Sherlock. “Where did you want to start?”

Moving slowly, Sherlock slid his hands out from under his neck and reached up to touch John’s face.
He combed his fingers back through John’s hair, tugging lightly. “You shouldn’t think about cutting this short,” he said thoughtfully.

“Not exactly an answer,” John said, trying to sound unaffected, but the gently rough touch stole his breath. The beginnings of panic slithered down his spine, but he pushed up onto all fours, and the freedom of movement helped keep the anxiety at bay. Trying to seem like the movement had been casual, he laid back down, chest against Sherlock’s, and waited for their shared body warmth to steal through his T-shirt.

Sherlock pulled John up for a kiss, slow and undemanding. His hands never moved down to John’s back or hips or T-shirt but stayed tangled in his hair, and John let the kiss relax him into the possessive touch. When he moved to trace the line of Sherlock’s jaw, he muttered, “You’re right, you know.”

“Of course I am.”

John laughed and nipped before continuing a lazy path up towards Sherlock’s ear. “I mean about the shaving. It’s an interesting difference.” John could feel his answering smirk.

“I’m always right.”

That earned Sherlock another nip, this time on his earlobe, and in response, Sherlock’s fingers twisted. Heat spiked down from John’s scalp, making his skin tingle. He shifted to get one leg between Sherlock’s, regretting the thin fabric of his boxers that separated his cock from Sherlock’s hip.

John shifted his weight to free his left hand and clawed at the waistband of his boxers. Sherlock made no effort to help. Instead, he took advantage of the distraction to bite more sharply at John’s throat, and the tingling in John’s body turned to fire. He kicked his boxers away under the blankets and straddled Sherlock’s body, cursing quietly as his cock brushed against Sherlock’s.

Sherlock let out a soft gasp of his own. His hands relaxed, releasing John’s hair, and he shifted himself down and reached not for John’s arms or back but for his legs. “Move up,” he instructed, blunt nails scratching at John’s thighs. Momentarily confused, John rose up on all fours, spreading his legs when Sherlock pushed at his knees to spread them wider. Then Sherlock moved down, still lying on his back, and John forgot how to breathe as he realised what Sherlock was planning.

“Sherlock, you — Oh, fuck,” he gasped, feeling Sherlock’s tongue sweep over his balls from one side to the other. One hand slid over the back of John’s left thigh, holding him in place as Sherlock licked again.

“Stay still,” Sherlock said, his voice gravelly and quiet. His hand slipped further up, fingers curving around John’s ass. The tips brushed lightly over sensitive skin, making him shiver.

He bit his lip to keep from cursing. The blanket’s weight draped over his back was almost too much, but it was soft and familiar. He took deep breaths, cold air from the room mixed with the slight warmth trapped by his body. His fingers dug into the sheets, and he pushed the pillow away. Breathing a bit more easily, he braced himself on his right hand and reached down with his left, searching for Sherlock in the darkness under the blanket.

“John,” Sherlock warned sharply. “Stay still.”

John hesitated, suddenly very much aware of his body, positioned exactly how Sherlock had placed him, though he wasn’t held or pinned down in any way. It was different and tense, but not quite
enough to push him over the edge. He took a deep breath and forced himself to think about obeying and waited to see if the fucked-up darkness in his mind would wreck everything.

Finally, he decided he could do this. He wanted to do this, or at least to try.

Slowly, he pulled his hand back and dug his fingers into the sheet, balancing his weight on all fours again.

Sherlock didn’t say anything, which was fine with John. This wasn’t something he was prepared to think about, much less to discuss — not that he could have tried, once Sherlock went back to his meticulous examination of John’s body. His hand slipped forward to cup John’s balls, fingers gentle but firm. The mattress dipped as Sherlock moved again, and his next lick was a slow stripe up John’s cock.

His thought of protesting the lack of a condom died out before he could even try to remember how to speak. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had done anything like this, and by the time Sherlock pushed up off the mattress enough to take John’s cock in his mouth, John gave up even trying to think.

~~~

With every touch, Sherlock could track John’s thoughts. His thighs tensed in preparation of moving forward, out from under the blanket and away from the bed. His gut went tight as he fought to breathe steadily. Between the mattress and Sherlock’s best efforts, John was having difficulty staying balanced on all fours. It wasn’t an ideal position — his shoulder still pained him, especially after the cold and the stress of going out into the snow earlier — but short of standing up in the middle of the room, this was the best way to keep John warm, give Sherlock access to his body, and leave him free to escape if he felt the need.

That restriction was perhaps more difficult for Sherlock than it was for John. Sherlock wanted nothing more than to throw John down on his back and pin him to the mattress, leaving his body open for Sherlock to take whatever he wanted, but not yet. Perhaps not ever, though Sherlock would work diligently to help John overcome his fears. The thought of watching John struggle to endure not pain but pleasure, of Sherlock pushing the boundaries of John’s desire before granting him any relief, was intoxicating.

He started now, using one hand to keep John’s hips steady while he slowly took John’s length into his mouth. The angle didn’t allow him to take him too deep, but Sherlock made up for the lack with his tongue, reading John’s breath and body to decipher what he liked and what he wanted and what was too much.

It was almost unfair, really. Sex was less about technique and more about reading one’s partner, and more than anything else, Sherlock indulged solely because he had the ability to uncover every hidden desire and tear apart his partner’s boundaries. Physical gratification was a poor second to exposing someone’s secret desires.

When John was gasping for breath, hips twitching with his need for more, Sherlock backed off, smiling when John cursed aloud. “Don’t move,” he reminded John and pushed further down the bed. Keeping the blanket in place was an awkward necessity, but he managed. He twisted up onto his knees, carefully staying between John’s legs, maintaining the illusion of John’s freedom. He didn’t
Sherlock thought John would want to move away now, even if provoked, but this wasn’t about fear. Sherlock wanted him entirely focussed only on pleasure and desire.

“John?”

John had to take two breaths before he could steadily respond, “Yeah?”

“I want you to trust me. If you need me to stop, tell me, and I will. Do you understand?” Sherlock asked, hating the way the blanket muffled his voice. He knew the effect it had on John. But he wasn’t about to have an extended discussion about negotiation or safewords, because if all went as planned, he wouldn’t do anything John didn’t want. It was simply a matter of John allowing himself to accept it.

“Now you say that?” John asked with a ragged laugh. “Great fucking timing.”

“I thought so,” Sherlock answered smugly, brushing his hand up the back of John’s thigh.

Shivering, John said, “All right. As if I could actually say anything else.”

Good enough. Sherlock leaned in and pressed his lips to John’s arse, feeling soft skin over muscles that went tense with surprise. It took almost ten seconds for John to relax, and he tensed again when Sherlock flicked the tip of his tongue over warm skin. He stroked a hand down John’s thigh to calm him before he moved in, following the curve of John’s body.

John’s back arched as he inhaled sharply. “Sherlock —”

“Trust,” he interrupted, speaking the word into John’s skin. He drew his hand further up, stroking his thumb lightly over John’s entrance, drawing another gasp of surprise. When John didn’t pull away, Sherlock repeated the motion, pressing more firmly.

After a moment, John allowed himself to relax. His back arched down and he shifted to spread his legs a bit more, just enough to show his acceptance of the touch. Sherlock had guessed he wouldn’t mind bottoming, but there had been too little evidence for him to be certain. Not that Sherlock intended to fuck him any time soon.

He eased the pressure of his thumb and swiped lightly, teasingly, before he gently pushed John’s arse open just enough that he could trace his thumb’s path with his tongue. John’s hips bucked forward in surprise, and Sherlock quashed the instinctive desire to grab hold of his hips and pin him in place. Instead, he followed John’s body and licked again more slowly, pressing the tip of his tongue against John’s entrance for a moment before he drew back.

John’s breathing was deep and rough, his head hanging down between his arms. Sherlock lifted his head, closing his eyes when the weight of the blanket pushed his hair down to tangle in his lashes.

He touched John’s hip to get his attention and said, “Fold your arms on the bed. You’ll be more steady, and your shoulder will be more comfortable.”

To Sherlock’s delight, John complied at once, not even hesitating to consider how the change in position would affect his ability to move away. His hips were forced up, leaving him open to Sherlock’s attentions, allowing Sherlock to lick a long, slow stripe from the soft skin behind his balls all the way up to the base of his spine.

He lifted his left hand to brush a finger over John’s entrance, feeling the way his body reacted to the contrasting touch. His fingertips were calloused from years of pressing against violin strings. Then he licked again, lightly at first, taking note of the subtle differences in John’s response. Curious, he pressed his tongue against John’s hole, making him gasp and tense up, though his hips didn’t pull
away.

When faced with a puzzle, Sherlock was nothing if not methodical. Determined to tease out every nuance of John’s reactions, he tested and experimented, varying the touch of his tongue and finger until John had relaxed enough that Sherlock could push his tongue into his body, turning John’s curses to wordless moans of pleasure.

As soon as John’s trembling legs folded, leaving him up on his knees and still very much open to Sherlock, he knew he could take John without protest. He very nearly did — this had been as much a test of Sherlock’s self control as it was of John’s — but he needed John’s complete, absolute trust.

After indulging in one last lick, he moved away and fought out from under the blankets. John seemed barely able to lift his head and give Sherlock a wide-eyed stare, too lost in his own head to even form words.

All but purring with satisfaction, Sherlock rolled over onto his back and made a point of arranging the pillows comfortably under his head. Then he found the lubricant and uncapped it, saying, “Come here.”

John unfolded from his collapsed crouch and laid against Sherlock. He kissed without hesitation or protest at what Sherlock had been doing with his tongue only a minute before, and he allowed Sherlock to guide him, with gentle pushes on his leg, to straddle Sherlock’s hips.

Still kissing John, Sherlock curled his fingers and poured lubricant over them and into his palm, coating them liberally. John was relaxed, but Sherlock wanted him completely open. He wouldn’t risk any unnecessary pain for John.

“Lift up,” Sherlock told him, and slipped his hand between their bodies, brushing deliberately over John’s balls. John groaned into Sherlock’s mouth and held still as Sherlock’s slicked fingers brushed over his entrance.

After the work Sherlock had already done to relax John’s body, one finger slipped in easily, but there was no need to rush. John’s balls were heavy against his wrist, and the back of his hand pressed against his own cock enough to take the edge off his growing need. He reached down further and pressed a second finger inside, and John’s only reaction was a sharp, needy exhale.

Sherlock bit John’s lip and then swiped his tongue across as he pushed his fingers deeper. The heat made him forget about the cold bedroom air, and he had to force himself not to rush to get a third finger inside. Instead, he pulled out and curled his fingers into the messy, dripping pool of warm lubricant in his palm before running the tips teasingly over John’s entrance.

“Sherlock,” John complained, nearly begging.

He stopped himself from pushing back into John’s body and instead repeated the teasing stroke. He lifted his free hand to touch John’s lips, meeting his eyes. “Tell me what you want.”

John’s hesitation lasted a moment too long. “More,” he said, evasively dropping his gaze. He tried to prevent further questions with a kiss.

Sherlock moved his hand from John’s mouth to his hair, pulling sharply enough to break the kiss. John gasped, lips parted, and his eyes fell closed.

The tentative conclusions building in Sherlock’s mind all coalesced into clarity. He kept hold of John’s hair and pushed two fingers back into his body, fast enough to hint at roughness and pain without actually crossing that threshold.
John cursed and bucked his hips down, body pressing hard against Sherlock’s hand. His eyes opened, meeting Sherlock’s gaze, and he pulled against the hand in his hair so he could kiss Sherlock, brutally hard and demanding.

Every cell in Sherlock’s body was screaming for him to forget self-control. He wanted nothing more than to bury himself in John and stay there until they both forgot how to think, but John wasn’t ready for that. Hating himself, Sherlock twisted the fingers in John’s hair until the kiss broke enough for him to insist, “I said, tell me what you want.”

John took a single breath, not answering immediately but also not protesting. “You. Inside me.”

Staring up at him, Sherlock hid a smile as he realized John, for all his swearing, was actually shy. Here was a boundary he could push easily.

He drew his fingers out enough to make John hiss with pleasure, then pushed slowly back into him, curling his fingers to brush against the nerves that made John gasp. Then, deliberately, he stilled his hand and said, “I am inside you.”

“Sherlock.” It was almost a plea.

In response, Sherlock pulled his hand back, pressing his wrist up against John’s balls as he moved. “Be specific, John,” he whispered remorselessly, this time pressing three fingers into him, just enough to stretch the muscle.

The sound John made in response was closer to a whimper than a moan. “Fuck,” he whispered.

“Not specific enough,” Sherlock teased, flexing his wrist to move his fingers deeper, just up to the second knuckle. John’s body was tight and hot but nearly ready, testing Sherlock’s ability to hold himself back.

“Bastard. Fuck me,” John snapped, fingers digging into the sheets on either side of the pillows.

Satisfied for now, Sherlock let go of John’s hair, pushed his fingers a bit deeper. “Get a condom. Put it on me.”

“Lazy bastard,” John muttered, and twisted to the side, lifting his hips.

Sherlock caught John’s hip, taking the risk of holding him in place, and distracted him by twisting his fingers. “Without moving away,” he ordered. “I’m not finished.” To punctuate his words, he pressed gently over John’s prostate.

John dropped the condom he’d picked up, fumbled it off the bed, and moved back over Sherlock’s body. He braced up on his right hand and used his teeth to rip open the condom sachet. Sherlock allowed himself a small smile as he deliberately interrupted John’s attempts at extracting the condom and smoothing it over Sherlock’s cock, fingers twisting and sliding in and out of John’s body. By the time the condom was in place, John was nearly trembling.

“Now more lubricant,” Sherlock instructed.

With another muttered curse, John found where Sherlock had dropped the bottle, then dropped it himself when Sherlock distracted him with another well-timed thrust of his fingers. Concentrating fiercely, John managed to cover Sherlock’s cock with lubricant, rallying himself enough to add a few teasing strokes of his fist that stole Sherlock’s breath.

Once he was finished, John hesitated before he shifted to the side, prepared to move off Sherlock’s
body again. “No,” Sherlock quickly said, sliding his fingers out. “Like this. I want to watch you.”

John went still and looked down, and Sherlock thought he was about to refuse. Then he reached for
Sherlock’s cock awkwardly, saying, “I haven’t — not like this.”

This time, Sherlock let himself smile fully. “First time... This can be mine, then,” he said, reaching
down to help John, though it hardly seemed necessary. John was relaxed enough that the resistance
was minimal. Sherlock caught his hip again and said, “Slowly, John. I want to feel you.”

Trembling, John exhaled in brusque frustration and leaned back down, hands braced for balance. He
let Sherlock’s hand guide his hips down until Sherlock’s cock was deep inside him, leaving them
both panting and breathless. It had been far too long since Sherlock had been inside anyone like this,
man or woman, and he silently cursed the vigilant idiots at rehab for ensuring he remained celibate.

He allowed John to tentatively take control, subtly guiding him with one hand as he experimented
with angle and speed. He wished he’d thought to turn on power to the bedroom so he could see John
in proper light, but he wasn’t about to interrupt this to find the switches or build up the fire.

John established a comfortable rhythm, just fast enough to burn through Sherlock’s self-control like
slow-acting acid. Sherlock moved his hand, still slick with lubricant, to John’s cock. He felt a pleased
sense of satisfaction that John had remained erect through the penetration. Circling his fingers lightly
around, swiping his thumb across the glans, he listened to the way John’s breathing changed.

Pushing his heels against the mattress, Sherlock tensed his abdomen and pushed up, changing the
angle just slightly. John gasped, and Sherlock took full advantage of his distraction, closing his
fingers more tightly and working John’s cock in rhythm with his body.

Barely another minute passed before John’s rhythm faltered. He ground down hard on Sherlock’s
cock, muscles clenching tight, and Sherlock thrust into him as best he could, remembering the ideal
speed and pressure to coax John to orgasm. When it hit, he held his breath and closed his eyes,
sinking into the sensation of John’s whole body trembling around his cock, and that concentration
was all it took to push his body over the edge.

~~~

Sherlock stood in the dark shower cubicle, leaning against the cold tile, hot water running down his
chest as he fixed every detail of John’s reactions into his memories. Now that they’d switched roles
and experimented a bit, John should have been easily dismissed as boring, but Sherlock found
himself thinking the opposite. Tonight’s sex had answered some questions but others had taken their
place. What else did John like? What else had he never tried? How far could Sherlock push until he
pushed back?

He turned, closing his eyes as the hot water hit his cold back. One day, he’d get John into a proper
hotel, even if he had to kidnap him and drag him across international borders. Ibiza was too crowded,
but again, there was always Switzerland. John wouldn’t object to the weather — not after living here
— and Sherlock could probably even convince Mycroft to make all the arrangements as part of
Sherlock’s ‘holistic growth and recovery process’ or whatever buzzwords were appropriately
meaningless.

New goal, then: Get John out of the primitive hell that was Canada, before year’s end. He pictured
John in a steaming hot tub, surrounded by snow, and his smile turned predatory.

The bathroom door opened, admitting only a faint glow from the dying bedroom fire. John entered and closed the door. “Almost done?”

Sherlock hid a sigh and made a mental note to rent a ski lodge that had a proper hot water tank or one of those on-demand systems. “Yes.” He pushed open the plexiglass door and went to step out, but John was right there. Cold hands pressed against Sherlock’s chest for a moment, confusing him. He stepped back and heard the rustle of fabric.

Then John stepped into the cubicle and pulled the door closed. Wishing he’d thought to turn the lights on, Sherlock held still, back pressed to the tile. There was no way to avoid crowding John; even breathing took up too much room.

John rested his hands on Sherlock’s hips and leaned his forehead on Sherlock’s shoulder. Water hit the back of his shoulders, splashing up onto Sherlock’s face in a cool mist. He wanted to pull John close and wrap his arms around John’s body, but he didn’t dare. Even this might be too much.

So he stayed there, moving his hands just enough to brush his fingers against John’s hips, touching without holding. After a minute, John turned his face enough to press a kiss against Sherlock’s collarbone. Then he turned and moved a few inches away — as far as he could go — and said, “I banked the fire. You get to fix the blankets.”

Sherlock allowed himself a smile, relieved that the close quarters hadn’t provoked a panic attack. “I suppose I can do that,” he said as he pushed open the shower door. He got out and dried off quickly; there was hardly enough room in the small bathroom for them both to dry off at once, and he didn’t want John worried that Sherlock would see his scars, as much as he wanted the chance. John had trusted him, and Sherlock wouldn’t betray that trust.

He left the warm bathroom and shivered while he put on his pyjamas, though he was tempted to sleep without any clothes in hopes of encouraging John to stay close. It was just too damned cold for that, which made him mentally note that the ski lodge should also have central heating as well as fireplaces for ambiance. Good central heating — maybe a radiant system in the flooring, to start.

John was finished with his shower by the time Sherlock had the blankets sorted out. From the warmth of the bed, Sherlock watched John emerge from the bathroom as he had that first morning, wearing only a towel. The banked fire showed no details at all, but Sherlock watched anyway, appreciating the way the reddish light changed the visual quality of John’s skin.

John went to the dresser and put on a T-shirt, boxers, and fleece tracksuit pants. Sherlock didn’t bother to hide a sigh of disappointment. John heard him and laughed, getting quickly under his own blanket. Before he laid down, he reached out with his left hand to touch the .45 on the bedside table, making a minute adjustment to its position.

Then he rolled over to face Sherlock, burrowing down under his blanket. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

Sherlock smiled at him and slipped a hand from under his blanket to John’s, finding his fingertips. He touched lightly, giving John every chance to pull back, but he didn’t. Instead, he spread his fingers just enough to lace the tips with Sherlock’s, joining their hands without either of them holding the other in place.
Monday, October 29

Sherlock came awake slowly and lazily to dull white light intruding on his consciousness. He opened his eyes and blinked at John, who lay beside him, watching him. Their pillows touched, but their bodies didn’t, separated by a barrier of clothes and blankets.

“Sorry if I’m rusty,” John said quietly. The window glowed with sunlight diffused through a blizzard of snow, casting new shadows over John’s face. He looked tired and serious, and Sherlock felt the immediate impulse to erase his grave expression and transmute it into a smile.

“Rusty?”

“At talking,” John took a deep breath and rolled onto his back. He lifted his arms and folded his hands under his head. The cold bedroom air raised the hair on his forearms, a pale blond aura over his skin. “Twelve years ago, I was an officer in the CFMS — the Canadian Forces Medical Service. I left seven years ago. Something happened —” He shook his head, the motion barely visible. “I came here to get away from people.”

Sherlock clenched his fingers in the blanket to keep from reaching for John. He wanted to say something — ‘I know’ — but he wouldn’t immediately be able to rationalise his conclusions without mentioning the video.

“It’s not that last night was... bad,” John continued uncertainly. His brief laugh was soft and nervous. “Anything but that. But I don’t... I can’t do this, Sherlock.” He turned his head to look sadly at Sherlock. “Trust me when I say you don’t even want me to try.”

“Trust has nothing to do with you being wrong.” Sherlock moved closer and watched John’s arms tense, though he didn’t try to move away. “As a blanket statement, ‘I trust you’ is almost always invalidated by reality. I trust you to safely fly that deathtrap of yours, but I don’t ‘trust’ that you’ll get us safely back on land every time. It’s out of your control.”

John’s expression had slowly shifted from sad to puzzled. A hint of irritation creased his brow. “Do you ever actually listen to yourself speak?” He rolled onto his side, propping up on his right arm. “I’m saying you shouldn’t be involved with me, Sherlock. I’m not what you want, no matter what you think. I’m not even safe.”

“How many others have got this close to you since you —” Sherlock cut off before he could reference the reason John had left the military. He blamed the near-slip on the unexpected, unwelcome surprise of this conversation happening before even a single cup of coffee, which would help both of them be able to discuss this rationally. “Since you left the military?”

Evasively, John looked away. “None. Not for lack of trying —”

“Failures,” Sherlock dismissed. “Did you enjoy last night?”

John met his eyes for an instant, colour rising in his cheeks. “Well, of course.”

“And the night before?”

“Sherlock, it’s just a matter —”
“It’s not just ‘a matter of time’,” Sherlock interrupted sharply. “It’s the fact that almost everyone else is too stupid to understand you — to recognise what you want and what you don’t want and what you want but can’t have, and to help you have it anyway.”

John shook his head, saying, “That makes no sense.”

Sherlock let out a huff, wanting to roll on top of John and hold him down and try to make him understand, but that would only make matters worse. So instead he caught hold of John’s left arm and pulled, rolling onto his back. Surprised and wary of hurting Sherlock, John didn’t struggle, though he snapped, “Sherlock!”

Only when John was on top of him, blankets tangled around their legs, did Sherlock let go. He looked up at John, saying, “I know how to make this safe, John. You don’t have to be worried. I know you won’t be held down. If you feel trapped, your instinct is to fight free —”

John went pale. “Christ,” he muttered as he pushed up on all fours, kicking at the blankets.

Before John could back up, Sherlock reached up to touch his face. “Stop. John —”

“No. No, this is what your brother said you do. You fuck with people’s minds.”

Outwardly Sherlock huffed in irritation, but secretly he smiled; John was still on top of him as though tethered there by the feather-light touch of Sherlock’s fingertips on his cheek. “He does the same thing, only he uses people.”

“And you?” John demanded. “Is that what you’re doing? Using me?”

“I’m giving you what you want — what you thought you could never have again.”

Slowly, John sat back on Sherlock’s thighs, looking down at the blanket. He closed his eyes and pushed a hand through his sleep-mussed hair, making it stand up in little spikes. “Why?”

It was Sherlock’s turn to fall silent, his confidence faltering as he realised there was no easy answer. At first, he had been using John, but in slow, small steps, his motives had become less selfish. He’d looked at John as a challenge — a puzzle to solve, someone who could be fixed — but at some point, perhaps when he’d first pictured showing his London to John, he’d begun to care. John was intelligent and sexy and he reacted to Sherlock in unpredictable ways, which no one, not even Mycroft, had ever before done.

Finally John shook his head and moved off Sherlock, throwing the blankets roughly aside. “Forget it. Forget I said anything. I told you —”

“John.” Sherlock’s mind snapped back into gear, and he caught John’s T-shirt just as John stood up beside the bed. When John looked back down at him, he said, “I’m staying, John. You can’t scare me away, and you won’t hurt me.”

“You don’t know me,” John said angrily, though again, he didn’t pull away. Sherlock saw desperation in his eyes — he wanted to believe, but his past had taught him otherwise. Now, he needed time to allow himself the room to believe.

Sherlock let go of John’s shirt and twisted to sit up on the edge of the bed. “I do know you, John. And because I know you, I trust you.”
For the first time in a week, John spent the day apart from Sherlock. While Sherlock had been showering, John had opened the gunsafe, closed it again, and left the property on the quad, despite the blizzard conditions.

Sherlock tried to summon his usual calm detachment, but the effort was a miserable failure. He went through two pots of coffee and smoked three of his precious remaining cigarettes, focussing on the fact that John was strong. He wouldn’t get lost, even in the snow, and he wouldn’t shoot himself. Sherlock had been very careful to avoid pushing John too far.

Finally he went to his laptop and turned on the power to the satellite connection. He checked his email and website, hoping to find a case that was interesting enough to help lure John to London, but found only the usual array of cheating spouses, blackmail, and employee theft. What happened to all the serial killers and clever thieves?

Frustrated, he played the violin and drank more coffee and read John’s fantasy manuscript, which was surprisingly good, and then reread the other pages until the disturbing images they evoked in his mind grew too much to bear. Then he spent twenty minutes cracking the combination to John’s safe, finally figuring it out by the subtle wear pattern on the buttons.

Hunger forced him into the kitchen, where he heated up leftover meat of some kind. While he cooked and ate it, he tried to figure out if it was venison or beef or bear or something else, but the skills that allowed him to expertly identify the parts of a human corpse were useless when it came to game animals.

When John finally returned, entering the cabin on a gust of wind-driven snow, Sherlock snapped, “Where were you?”

John pushed back his fur-edged hood and pulled off a ski mask crusted white with snow and tiny shards of ice. “Hunting.” His voice sounded raspy and harsh. He went right for the kitchen, fumbling to take off thick gloves. Over his shoulder, he carried the rifle he’d brought to Molly’s last night.

“You were hunting a bear?” Sherlock demanded incredulously. “Alone?”

John threw his gloves down on the kitchen counter and took a mug out of the dish rack. “Of course not. I have a mule deer tag.”

“A what?”

“A licence. To hunt two mule deer, if I have any fucking luck,” he added in a mutter as he used a towel to pick up the kettle. He gave it a shake and snapped, “You couldn’t have kept this full?”

Unaccustomed to guilt, Sherlock snapped back, “You left! You said nothing about where you were going! You just went out in a blizzard alone —”

“I live alone!” John slammed the kettle down onto the counter and turned, bracing his hands against the edge as he took a deep breath. “I’m cold, I’m hungry, and I’m tired, Sherlock.”

Sherlock wanted to retreat. He wanted to shout at John for how stupid he’d been to take such unnecessary risks. This was why he didn’t deal with people and why he kept them all at arm’s length. Inevitably, they all did something stupid and Sherlock would know how to fix it, and either they wouldn’t let him fix it and would only make matters worse, or they would start to expect him to
deal with their problems every time.

“Go. Just... go in the living room or something,” John said only a bit less angrily. “I’ll get dinner started in a few minutes.”

“I’ll do it,” Sherlock said, not realising he’d spoken until the words were out.

John looked back over his shoulder. “What?”

“I’ll do it!” Sherlock repeated. He crossed the kitchen and took the towel out of John’s hands, then used it to pick up the kettle. “Go take a hot shower. I’ll make dinner and tea. Or coffee.”

“Tea’s fine,” John said, confused. “But —”

“Stop arguing and go!”

~~~

The water went from hot to warm, warning John that he had less than five minutes to finish up, but he still felt the cold deep in his body. Only his left shoulder felt warm, and that was an agonising flame, not a comfortable glow. He stood sideways to the shower spray, aimed the water directly at the bullet scar, and rested his forehead against his other arm, propped against the cold tile wall.

Sherlock’s words twisted in him like knives. The unspoken accusation had hit home. John should have asked Sherlock to come with him — he’d wanted to, which was exactly why he hadn’t. He didn’t dare grow dependent on Sherlock’s presence. As it was, just having Sherlock in his bed was an addiction that John already felt hooked deep in his mind.

The bathroom door opened. John didn’t have the energy to complain that Sherlock again hadn’t bothered to knock.

Then the light went out, and John looked up abruptly. “Huh?”

In answer, the shower cubicle door opened. “The water’s turning cold,” Sherlock said, his voice subdued. He slid a hand over John’s bare chest, startling John into flinching back. A moment later, the shower turned off, and John shivered at the absence of warmth.

“Where’s my —” John cut off as his groping hand encountered rough fabric. Then Sherlock was right in front of him, wrapping him in a towel. Wondering if this was some sort of apology for losing his temper (and thinking that he was the one who should be apologising to Sherlock, not the other way around), John said, “Sherlock, you don’t have to.”

Sherlock’s hands went still, lightly resting on John’s upper arms. “I want to.”

John nodded before remembering Sherlock wouldn’t be able to see. “All right,” he agreed quietly, and shivered as Sherlock went back to drying him off.

Instead of taking the towel from John’s shoulders, Sherlock reached for his own towel to dry off John’s legs. Tentatively, John brushed his fingers through Sherlock’s hair. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that.”

Sherlock rose, letting his towel fall. His hands returned to John’s arms, sliding up, but he stopped
before John’s shoulder as if he knew how badly the bullet scar ached. “I don’t do relationships, John. I don’t even have friends. I know hundreds of people in London, and not one of them is my friend.”

“Sherlock —”

“Don’t say anything,” he interrupted. “I’m not like other people. Neither are you. Everything you think you know about me — everything you think you should fear — is wrong.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better?”

Sherlock’s hand lifted from John’s left arm, and a moment later, soft fingertips brushed over his lips. “Trust me, John. You trusted me last night. Did you regret it, then?”

He couldn’t bring himself to say no and he didn’t dare lie — not to Sherlock. Instead he asked, “Why did you turn off the light?”

Sherlock’s hand moved to press against John’s chest. “You want to hide your scars, though you don’t have to.”

John’s heart thudded uncomfortably against his ribs. Was he that transparent, or was Sherlock really so inhumanly perceptive? It was as if he were a damned mind-reader. John was very, very glad for the darkness.

“It’s getting cold,” he said evasively, though truthfully.

Sherlock left his hand resting warmly against John’s sternum as he leaned down to kiss him. “Get dressed. The kitchen’s warm and dinner is almost ready.”

When Sherlock stepped back, it took all of John’s self-control not to go after him. As it was, he felt almost dizzy without Sherlock’s warm, steady presence close by. To distract himself, he asked, “What did you make?”

“Meat and mushroom rice. I would have made proper risotto, but I have no idea what sort of rice was in the bin.”

“‘Meat’? What kind?”

“I’ve no idea. It’s not chicken, fish, or human.”

“Human?” John asked, horrified.

“I consulted for the police on a cannibalism case two years ago.”

It was awful to consider, but John couldn’t quite hold back a choked laugh. He could all too easily picture Sherlock assessing the meat in the deep freezer and choosing dinner based not on a particular meal plan but on the ‘not cannibalism’ requirement.

Impulsively, he reached up and pulled Sherlock close for another kiss. “Thank you again.”

~~~

“You’re not going out tonight,” Sherlock observed as John joined him on the sofa. He’d finished the
dishes and they'd had their coffee, which meant it was time for John to do his usual check of the property. “The blizzard?”

“I spent enough time outside. We have firewood and water even if a pipe breaks. Everything else can wait until daylight,” John confirmed, turning to sit sideways opposite Sherlock, rather than cuddling close beside him.

Sherlock had taken his violin from its case. He considered putting it back, but instead held it upright, propped on his thigh, and began practicing his fingering. His fingers were less dextrous in the cold.

“So, you keep saying you know me. How? And don’t say that you ‘observe’."

Sherlock couldn’t hide his smirk. “It’s more than that. Anyone who’s not dead or comatose takes in far more information than most people realise. Right now, what are your senses telling you?”

For a moment, Sherlock was disappointed to see confusion in John’s expression, and he braced against the bland report of ‘It’s cold’ and ‘The fire’s lit’. Then John said, “The fire’s been lit all day, but the ashes haven’t been scooped. The flame’s not as hot as it could be. Probably needs a bit of cleaning, too.”

“Good,” Sherlock said, unable to hide his surprise. “Very good.”

John grinned. “The wind’s from the northwest, so hopefully it won’t still be snowing come morning. I can just barely hear the water heater. It’s running but not filling, so you can have a long shower. You get tetchy if you don’t have two showers a day.”


“Um...” John looked around. “It’s too soon to tell if you’re coming down with a cold from exposure yesterday, but your breathing sounds fine, for someone who smokes. We’ll have to do something about that,” he added sternly.

“The three I had today are your fault.”

“My fault!”

“I’m certain it won’t happen again, now that you know not to go out in a blizzard without talking to me first.”

John shifted so he could kick at Sherlock’s leg with one foot. “Then you can come with me tomorrow.”

“Stop changing the subject.” Sherlock reached down, resting his hand on top of John’s foot. His wool sock was warm. “What else?”

After a moment’s consideration, John shook his head. “That’s it. I mean, it’s my house. It’s not like any of it’s unfamiliar.”

Sherlock nodded, sliding his hand up John’s leg just enough to trace the lines of elastic ribbing at the top of his sock. “Your left shoulder hurts — the damp and cold aggravates the scar where you were shot, but you went out anyway,” he said, feeling the subtle shift as John tensed. “You took a gun with heavy recoil, so you were prepared to shoot right-handed again. You’re just as good, though you’re more comfortable shooting left-handed: You carry your handgun on your left hip.”

John bought himself time by nodding thoughtfully and taking a deep breath before he said, “You
knew all of that already, though.”

“...You’re sitting with your left side to the back of the couch. You keep shifting because your shoulder hurts when you put any weight on it, but you want to stay facing me, so you’re enduring it for now.”

Unconsciously, John lifted his right hand to rub at the site of the bullet wound. Then he caught himself and shrugged, lowering his hand again. “Okay. All true.”

Sherlock pressed his fingers against John’s shin a bit more firmly to ground him, rubbing in little circles. “You were shot while standing or kneeling over someone,” he said more quietly, keeping his voice very steady and calm.

John’s eyes widened and he hitched in a very quiet, subtle gasp before he stopped breathing altogether. His lips parted, shaping the word ‘How?’ though he said nothing.

“The angle between the entrance and exit wound is too sharp. The bullet most likely fractured your collarbone, rather than shattering it, and exited out the top of your trapezius muscle. There’s a chance it nicked the upper part of your shoulderblade, but I doubt it.”

“Christ,” John whispered. He swallowed hard and licked his lips.

Sherlock considered remaining silent, but he knew that they needed to have this discussion at some point. Best to get it out of the way now, rather than leaving John to worry over it for days or even weeks.

“It was intentional,” Sherlock said quietly. “The shot was disabling, not fatal.”

“Intentional?”

“You were targeted. Most likely, you went to a patient’s aid — not in hospital, but in the field somewhere. He was someone you didn’t know, but he appeared wounded and in need, so you trusted him enough to lower your guard. As soon as you were in range, he shot you from a prone position.”

John’s skin had gone ashen. “How — How do you —”

“As few as ten percent of people are left-handed. If you specifically hadn’t been targeted, he would have aimed for the right shoulder. The shot was precisely placed — an inch in any direction and it could have been fatal, especially if immediate medical treatment weren’t provided. So, he was a crack shot, able to play at being harmless, lure you close, and then take precise aim and shoot flawlessly.”

“He did,” John whispered. “He was a civilian. I thought...”

When John didn’t continue, Sherlock filled the silence, saying, “It happened at night, somewhere outside a city. The weather was clear.”

“Fucking hell.” John turned, pulling his foot free not to escape Sherlock but to balance himself. He rested his elbows on his knees and let his head hang down, taking deep breaths.

Tentatively, Sherlock moved towards John, though he sat back as soon as John’s shoulders tightened. “That’s why you don’t practice medicine anymore,” he said softly, prepared to cut off his words at any hint that it was too much. It wasn’t — not quite, not yet. “You went to help someone you perceived to be a patient, and you were attacked.”
“Noncombatant,” John whispered tightly. He lifted his head, eyes closed, and drew in a harsh, deep breath. “I was a medic. I only had a handgun.”

“The other soldiers were supposed to protect you.”

“They didn’t. They wanted to get done with the patrol and back to base. We were supposed to be in safe territory,” John said with a bitter laugh.

Sherlock studied John’s profile, taking in a thousand little details, from the lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth to his steady hands. Carefully, he said, “That’s when you were captured.”

John turned just enough to look at Sherlock. “Your brother —”

“Your scars,” Sherlock corrected. “They’re too new to be a mark of child abuse, but too old to have happened after you left the military.”

John started to nod before his self-control broke. He rose, pushing away from the sofa, pacing stiffly into the kitchen. Sherlock stayed on the sofa, knowing John needed to feel open space, but prepared to run after him if he went outside. In his state, he might not notice the cold, even without his boots and coat. He listened intently for the characteristic metal-on-glass sound of the whisky bottle or the metallic clatter of John handling his sidearm, but all Sherlock heard was the sink. After a few seconds — just long enough to fill a glass — John turned off the water.

“They wanted a surgeon,” he said, just loudly enough to be heard in the living room.

Sherlock rose, intentionally bumping against the sofa to make noise. He walked to the kitchen archway but stood on the other side, away from the sink where John was still standing, his back to the room.

“One of their leaders had been shot. Penetrating abdominal trauma,” he said tonelessly. “They’d treated it, but infection had set in. The bullet nicked his small intestine, and they didn’t have anyone skilled to do the surgery.”

Sherlock remained silent, though he moved into the kitchen, putting himself into John’s peripheral line-of-sight. He sat down at the table. John put down his glass and took two mugs from the dish rack, setting them both on the counter before he went to the pantry.

“I refused.”

He took the box of tea bags from its shelf and dropped it when he tried to open it. Sherlock tensed to stand, but stayed where he was. John’s hands were shaking, but he wasn’t angry. He just crouched down, balanced on the balls of his feet, and started scooping up sachets of tea. Finally, he got all but two back in the box and replaced the box on its shelf. He ripped them open as he walked back to the counter.

“How long?” Sherlock finally asked.

“Don’t you know?” John snapped. Then he shook his head and quickly said, “I’m sorry.” He dropped one tea bag into each mug.

“It was at least three days,” Sherlock said, before he could stop himself. “Perhaps as long as six or seven.”

John let out one sharp, bitter laugh. “How do you know that?”
“You resisted their initial efforts to torture you into complying,” Sherlock said quietly. “The patient died on the second or third day, but they kept you because you were still valuable. Their threats escalated after that, but they focussed their attentions on your chest — not your hands, which would be the greater threat to a soldier and a doctor. They were hedging their bets. If they couldn’t trade you, they would —”

“How?” John demanded. He’d picked up the towel he used to handle the kettle. Now, he threw it down and started towards Sherlock, his face a mask of shock and anger. “How do you know?”

Silently berating himself — he always had to be clever, too clever for his own damned good — Sherlock considered his options. There was no room to lie convincingly, and he had a feeling John wouldn’t accept anything but a full, complete answer. So he forced himself to look up and meet John’s angry gaze and admitted, “I saw the video.”
Monday, October 29

John breathed in, tasting smoke and steam. He was cold, especially the lower half of his body, but his hands were warm. Everything around him was quiet, except for the crackle of flames and the familiar bubbling gurgle that he identified as his water heater.

Water heater. The cabin.

He opened his eyes and found himself staring at the wood floor of his kitchen, with its layers of scuffs and polish and dried mud. Another inhale brought the distant sense of snow under the taste of woodsmoke.

His hands twitched, reflexively closing around warm ceramic. He looked up and tried to sit up straight, only to have his back and left shoulder scream in protest.

“Fuck,” he muttered, closing his eyes when he saw Sherlock sitting on the floor off to one side. His throat felt tight and his eyes were stinging. He lifted the mug in his hands and took a sip. The tea was lukewarm and tasted stale and bitter.

“The floor is cold,” Sherlock said quietly. “Should I get you a blanket?”

Embarrassed, John shook his head, wondering why the hell he’d... not blacked out, precisely, because he remembered. He just remembered the wrong thing, as if his cabin and Sherlock had been shifted aside, dropping John back more than seven years.

“I’m fine.” It was a lie, but a necessary one. He shifted the mug to his right hand and tried to lift his left hand to scrub at his face, but doing more than twitching his fingers sent shooting pains down from his shoulder, into his arm and chest. He stopped trying to move and tried to breathe through it.

He glanced at Sherlock, hating how difficult he was to read even at the best of times. “Aspirin?” John hinted, needing a moment of privacy to recover his composure as best he could.

Sherlock nodded and rose stiffly, as though he’d been sitting on the floor for some time. John looked to the window, but all he saw was faint light glowing on snow. The oil lamps over the sink and at the table had been turned down, leaving the kitchen only dimly lit, which was a small mercy. He put the mug down beside his right hip and rubbed the damp tracks on his face.

After a minute, Sherlock returned with three aspirin. Lecturing him about dosages was pointless, and John was actually regretting not keeping codeine on hand, so he just took all three, washing them down with the tea. When John went to put the mug back on the floor, Sherlock took it instead.

“Do you want to stay here?” he asked as if it was perfectly normal for adults to sit on the kitchen floor.

John shook his head. Thankfully, Sherlock didn’t offer to help him up, though he stayed a bit too close as John got awkwardly to his feet. He couldn’t feel his toes or tailbone. Exhaustion lay heavy in every muscle, making him want nothing more than sleep, but he knew that if he tried, he’d have nightmares.

He went to the bedroom anyway, knowing that somewhere in his fucked-up mind, he considered it the safest spot in the cabin. Sherlock followed, still silent, probably still carrying John’s tea. As soon
as he was in the room, he went to the hearth to build up the fire, which left John free to go right for the bed.

As was his habit, he drew his gun and set it on the nightstand, only then realising that Sherlock had left him armed despite his loss of self-control. Maybe Sherlock had been too wary to try and disarm him.

The last thing he wanted to do was to discuss what had happened, but he’d already neglected Sherlock’s safety too much. He sat down on the edge of the bed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Sherlock.”

“Hm?” he asked casually, focussed on building up the fire.

John clasped his hands tightly together, trying to think of where to begin. The words were all there in his head — everything he needed to tell Sherlock to make certain they were both safe if John’s self-control broke again — but he couldn’t figure out where to begin. For a writer, it was doubly frustrating to fumble through mental false starts and incoherent phrases all jumbled together.

When the fire was blazing, filling the room with warmth and light, Sherlock took the two steps to the edge of the bed and sat, turning to face John. Despite Mycroft’s dire warnings, Sherlock seemed the embodiment of patience, as if he would be content to sit all night in silence. Finally, John decided there was no point in trying to explain. Sherlock probably knew more about this than John himself did.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” John said without looking at Sherlock. “If... that happens again, you can’t leave me armed.”

“I was safe.”

Anger flickered to life, but John was too tired for it to actually take hold. “You weren’t. Sherlock, when —”


John glared at him. “This isn’t some mind-game, Sherlock. I could have killed you!”

“No, you couldn’t — not without provocation.”

“What the hell does that mean?” John demanded.

Sherlock took a breath and looked up at the ceiling. “Haven’t you been paying attention at all for the past week? I know what provokes your self-defence reflexes, John. I sat next to you for over two hours, and I was never in danger.”

“Jesus,” he whispered, looking away. Two hours. The sad part was, he had no idea if that was a long time or not, because he hadn’t blacked out in front of a witness for seven years, since leaving the hospital where he’d recovered from his shoulder surgery.

“You won’t hurt me,” Sherlock repeated confidently. “I sat beside you for two hours, John. I touched you. I handed you a mug of tea. Twice. Neither of which you drank,” he added accusingly. “I promise, John, you don’t have to worry.”

“You’re wrong,” John insisted. “You don’t understand. Anything could trigger me. You can’t predict —”
“I did.”

John’s thoughts, spiralling out of control, abruptly stalled. “What?”

“I did. I knew it was a possibility. No, not a possibility. When we started our discussion, I knew it was inevitable.”

“Why didn’t you stop it, then?” The question was absurd, because once John’s brain decided to go wallow in the darkness, nothing could stop it.

Sherlock sighed. “I wanted to get it over with. Now you can stop trying to hide, so I can —”

“Is that what this was about?” John demanded in disbelief. “Me wearing a shirt to bed?”

Sherlock glared and deliberately continued, “So I can stop hiding the fact that I know. I’ve known since I first saw you after your shower.”

John turned away and took a few breaths, trying to rationalise what Sherlock was saying, but he was exhausted and worn down and felt childishly resentful that Sherlock, supposedly a sociopathic drug addict, could function so damned normally while John couldn’t go twenty-four hours without nightmares, asleep or awake.

“I see everything, John. I put together the smallest minutiae, things most people never consciously acknowledge, into a coherent picture that no one else can see until I show it to them. For a week, I’ve hidden that knowledge, waiting until you were ready.”

John nodded, still refusing to look at Sherlock. On the surface, it all made perfect sense. Deeper down, on an emotional level, it was all kinds of fucked-up, but John had a feeling that was nothing more than a fear-based reaction.

“The video,” he said, trying to stick to cold, calm logic. “How?”

“The first day I had internet access, I broke into my brother’s server and found your files. Most of it was redacted, but there was enough left for me to form a coherent picture. The rest, I deduced based on observing you.”

He’d been sitting on this knowledge since last Monday, then. More than a week. John let out a sharp, bitter laugh. “And you still stayed? You still —” He cut off awkwardly and gestured back at the bed they’d shared just this morning.

“With most people, the longer I know them, the more boring they are. It seems to work backwards with you,” he admitted, sounding puzzled.

“Fuck,” John whispered, shaking his head. Logic could only go so far against his emotional exhaustion. “I can’t do this now.”

“I’m staying,” Sherlock said at once, as though prepared to defend his right.

John just waved a hand at the far side of the bed. He rose enough to push away the blanket and got under its comforting weight, fully dressed. Without hesitation, Sherlock followed suit. John laid on his back, but he gave in after only a few seconds and rolled over to face Sherlock.

“You really will sleep better under both blankets,” Sherlock said quietly.

“You’re burning two days’ worth of firewood,” John said, even though Sherlock was right. He was
still cold, and he could feel the weight of Sherlock’s stare, so he sighed and said, “Fine. Just don’t crowd —”

“I know,” Sherlock said impatiently. He sat up and shook out his blanket over John’s, and then got out of bed and started to strip off his clothes.

Wondering if there had been a miscommunication, John said, “Sherlock, I’m really not in the mood...”

With a huff of frustration, Sherlock asked, “In the military, did you sleep clothed?”

“Of course — What, you’re stripping for contrast?” John asked, a smile flickering to life for the first time since everything had gone wrong.

“You should, as well.” Sherlock dropped his shirt on the floor and looked back over his bare shoulder. “If I wanted you out of your clothes for sex, you’d know it, John. This is only to help you sleep.”

John surrendered, though more because it was damned uncomfortable to sleep in blue jeans than because Sherlock’s theory made any sort of sense. Then again, a whole battalion of therapists had accomplished virtually nothing. Sherlock had as good a chance as anyone else to accidentally stumble upon something to help John actually start to recover. And there was no sense in hiding his scars, though he did take off his shirt with his back turned, and made a point to get under the blankets as quickly as he could, without showing his chest.

Two minutes later, they were back in bed, this time under layers of blankets. Already, the heat had worn away the sharp edges of John’s post-blackout nervousness. He laid on his side, absently rubbing at the scarred entry wound on his shoulder. Another night, he might have tried a hot water bottle to soothe the ache, but right now, he wasn’t getting out of bed.

“Tomorrow, I’ll give you a massage,” Sherlock offered.

“Do you know how?”

“Of course,” he said as though offended by the question. “It’s a useful skill. People talk when they’re relaxed.”

John laughed and reached for Sherlock’s hand. “Then talk to me. Help me relax.”

“What shall I talk about?”

John searched his mind, knowing that he had a thousand questions for Sherlock, but he couldn’t recall any of them. He was too tired to remember much tomorrow, anyway. “You said something about the police involving you in a case with cannibals?”

Sherlock’s hand twitched under his. “That’s what you’re asking? Now?”

“Shit. I’m sorry,” John said, turning his head to look at Sherlock. “If it upset you, you don’t have —”

“No. No, it was interesting,” he said, sounding baffled. “But won’t it disturb you?”

John snorted and shook his head, letting his eyes fall closed. “I was attacked by insurgents, Sherlock, not cannibals.”

Sherlock made a pleased little sound and flexed his hand under John’s palm, allowing John’s fingers
to lace with his. After a moment’s thought, he said, “It started with hikers going missing all over the southwest. The police thought it was unrelated, but I knew better as soon as they came to me for help...”
Chapter 14

Tuesday, October 30

John shifted his weight without lifting his feet, the movement silent despite the crust of snow, a half-inch deep, and fallen leaves that carpeted the forest. With every breath, the air in front of him fogged downwards, deflected by the field glasses held to his eyes. He turned so slowly that Sherlock, watching for any sign of movement, almost didn’t notice the subtle contraction and extension of muscles as John scanned the area and then went still again.

One corner of John’s mouth twitched upwards in satisfaction. Slowly, he lowered the field glasses, taking care to catch the neck strap so it didn’t swing free.

Sherlock was supposed to be helping to search for deer. He was positioned thirty yards away, with low-powered field glasses of his own but no rifle. John had given some complicated explanation of esoteric hunting laws and then admitted they were breaking those laws anyway just by having Sherlock go out to help spot game. And then John had negated the explanation by saying, “No one’s going to check, in any case. The two part-time rangers around here are both from Fairlake. They don’t care, so long as the deer population stays stable.”

Not that Sherlock particularly cared about deer. He watched John instead, his mind filled with excitement as he took the measure of John’s patience. How many hours, even days, had Sherlock spent in an alley or abandoned flat or up on a rainy rooftop, observing his targets? Stake-outs were the worst part of the work. And while this hunt had only lasted hours so far, not days, John hadn’t shown the slightest sign of being bored. In anyone else, Sherlock would have attributed that lack to a dull, unimaginative mind, but not John.

Sherlock watched as John raised his rifle — the one he’d taken out two nights ago, to defend against bears — and set it to his left shoulder. He shifted position slightly before lowering his cheek to rest above the stock, left eye aligned with the scope. He was focussed and alert yet calm and perfectly controlled. Sherlock had no doubt that John was absolutely aware of Sherlock’s position, though almost a hundred feet separated them.

This John wouldn’t have been caught off-guard by an attacker masquerading as a patient.

When the shot rang out, Sherlock couldn’t help but twitch in surprise. The echo seemed to fill the forest with sound. Two seconds after the shot, John lowered the rifle to hang across his chest on its sling. His stillness drained away, and he grinned over at Sherlock, expression shadowed by the fur-edged hood for a moment, before he pushed it back and ran a gloved hand through his hair.

“Care to help?” he offered as he picked up his frame pack and then started walking towards the deer he’d shot.

Curious, Sherlock followed, jogging to catch up with him. “What about the second deer? You said you can take two.”

John laughed, looking up at Sherlock with a grin that seemed to chase away the cold settling into Sherlock’s extremities. “As soon as I took the shot, the others were already running away. Besides, do you really want to try to carry two deer back? We’ll come back out tomorrow.”

“I can think of better things to do tomorrow,” Sherlock hinted, grinning back at John.
Mock-cheerfully, John answered, “Yes, and then we can spend all of January starving.” He elbowed Sherlock and then pulled the rifle sling over his head, offering the weapon to Sherlock. “Here, you can carry this. I know better than to expect you to do anything resembling physical labour.”

“I’ve never — What are we doing?” Sherlock asked. He pulled the strap over his shoulder, trying to find a comfortable way to carry the rifle. It was heavier than the ones he’d used previously, but those had been for target shooting, not actually killing anything.

“Field dressing. We need to remove the lower GI tract to prevent contamination, and we want the meat to cool as quickly as possible. Tastes better that way.”

“Martha Christie,” Sherlock muttered, thinking back to a case that should have been interesting, but wasn’t.

“Hm?”

“Martha Christie. She hired me to investigate her fiance. Thought he might be dangerous when she found an oddly curved knife in his closet.” Sherlock huffed in remembered irritation. “It was for hunting. They got married later that year and sent me a duck in thanks.”

John laughed, leaning companionably close for a moment, before the terrain forced him to step around a half-hidden branch, parting them. “I have a waterfowl licence. We could go out to the lake tomorrow, if you’d rather,” he offered.

Sherlock glanced thoughtfully at John, barely noticing they’d reached the deer. “We have hunting rights on the family estate,” he said with a falsely casual air. “Deer, birds, that sort of thing.”

“You have an estate?” John asked incredulously. He dropped his pack and crouched down to open it.

“Technically, a share of one, yes. Mycroft is the elder, so he’s the primary heir. Normally, the estate would be all his, but our parents did some complicated legal arranging on my behalf.” Sherlock crossed his arms, fiddling with the rifle strap over his shoulder. Mycroft had undone almost all of that after Sherlock’s latest drugs arrest, when he’d taken legal oversight of Sherlock’s care and finances for the duration of his treatment. Technically, he had twenty-seven months before he’d be free again, and though he’d never particularly concerned himself with money, the restriction chafed at him all the same.

John rifled through the pack in silence before finally taking out a coil of neon orange rope and a black plastic refuse bag. “So... your parents, then...” he asked, subdued.

“Dead, yes.” It took Sherlock a moment to remember that John had only referenced his family in the past tense. “Yours?”

John nodded. “My sister’s in Toronto. We don’t speak.” He rose and went to the deer, which had collapsed in an ungainly heap. “Can you help? If not, don’t worry. I’d rather you not throw up on it,” he teased.

Sherlock glared and went to take hold of the deer’s hind legs. He’d never been this close to a dead deer — or a live one, for that matter, unless one counted trips to the zoo. “I’ve done post-mortem examinations.”

John looked at him across the deer, his grin just a bit awed. “You really don’t live a very normal life, do you?” It didn’t sound like a criticism or accusation.
Sherlock grinned back. “Normal is —”

“Boring. Yes, I know,” John said with a laugh. “Right, help me get her on her left side, and drag her feet off to the right a bit.”

Bracing himself, Sherlock lifted and moved as John directed. “You’re not.”

John glanced down at the deer, frowning. “Not? Not what?”

“Boring.”

Releasing the deer’s weight with a grunt, John straightened and took a folding knife from the left outer pocket of his parka. He used a lever to open it without having to take off his gloves. “Thanks,” he said quietly.

Sherlock smiled.

~~~

John had gone through medical school and war and through the awkwardness of teaching himself how to hunt and field dress game. He’d prided himself on being part of the quiet minority who’d made it through surgical observations and dissections without vomiting. He had a strong stomach and a respectful understanding of anatomy.

And he was never taking Sherlock hunting again. He’d leave Sherlock tied up in the cabin before ever letting him near another carcass.

Field dressing was a squishy, messy chore. There was nothing neat about an animal’s abdominal cavity and digestive tract, but the viscera wouldn’t go to waste. John kept the heart and liver, wrapped up in plastic bags, and left the digestive organs for the predators and scavengers — or so he’d intended.

After stowing the heart and liver in his pack, he’d turned back only to find Sherlock had taken his knife and was cutting into the organs that John had pulled out of the abdominal cavity. “Berries? Are these berries? I thought deer ate grass,” Sherlock complained.

John turned away, closing his eyes, and took deep breaths until the nausea passed. He blamed it on the shock of the unexpected, not on what Sherlock was actually doing.

He managed to get through the rest of the field dressing without incident, and Sherlock actually did prove useful in helping him to carry the deer the kilometer or so back to where they’d parked the quad and trailer.

“Are you bringing it all the way to town, to the Coles?” Sherlock asked a half hour later, standing back to let John do all the work of tying the carcass down to the trailer.

Shaking his head, John made certain it was secure and that the hunting tag was visible. “I can butcher it myself. I’ll bring in the head and some of the meat in a few days.”

“For taxidermy?”

“Prion disease testing.” John gave one last tug on the ropes and then put his gloves back on.
Sherlock was staring at him, eyes alight. “In deer? Really?”

“Well, yes. It’s safe enough. There’s no evidence of disease —”

“Keep the head.”

John pulled up his hood, tugging the zipper of his parka all the way up. “Why? Do you want a trophy?” he asked, thinking it odd. He was the one who’d shot the deer, and it wasn’t even a buck with impressive antlers.

Evasively, Sherlock just repeated, “Keep the head. Can we visit Molly tomorrow?”

Wondering if he’d missed a whole section of the conversation, he asked blankly, “Molly?”

“We’ll take it to her. You can give her some of the meat. We can’t eat it all, right? She’ll trade for chickens.”

“Uh huh. What exactly are you planning?” John asked suspiciously, leaning his hip against the quad.

Sherlock grinned fiercely. “I want to examine the brain. Molly has a lab.”

“You —” John cut off, failing to entirely process this new madness. “Sherlock —”

“I’ve never seen the biological effects of prion disease. I’d hoped the cannibals would display symptoms of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, but they didn’t.”

A small part of John wanted to protest, because this was insane. The rest of him, though — the part of him that he was certain no longer functioned in a proper, socially-accepted manner — understood. He knew he should do this right, sending the head for government examination and cataloging, as he did every year, but Sherlock’s intense fascination seemed to have transmitted itself to John, who slowly smiled. It wasn’t as if his education had included all but a cursory lecture on prion disease.

“All right. Though if Molly hits you instead of letting you use her lab, it’s not my fault.”

Sherlock’s smile was like the sun rising over new snow. He took two swift steps forward, to the other side of the quad, and leaned over, pulling John into a hard, fast kiss that left them both panting.

“You brother never warned me about this,” John said when Sherlock stepped back.

“My brother only thinks he knows me. He doesn’t.”

A quiet sense of pride filled John at the thought that he might be the first person to ever get to know the real Sherlock. He got on the quad and started the engine, waiting for Sherlock to settle behind him. Sherlock was a polite passenger, holding John by the waist or hips, rather than crowding forward on the seat, but now, John cautiously leaned back and pulled Sherlock’s arms around him. He braced himself for the suffocating panic to rise up inside, but while the edges of it were there, his mind stayed clear.

“John?” Sherlock asked, carefully not tightening his arms.

John’s instinct was to shrug as if this were insignificant, but they both knew better. “It’s fine,” he said, surprised to find that it was true. He squeezed Sherlock’s forearm for a moment, holding him in place, before he leaned forward to start the engine.

Sherlock said nothing, but he leaned close against John’s back, arms around his waist, for the entire ride back to the cabin.
“This is a first,” John said as he closed the lid of the deep freezer. “Never had brains in there before.”

“You’re welcome,” Sherlock answered over the sound of running water. He’d offered to wash the blood off John’s gloves — the first time he’d offered to do any work around the cabin, other than putting away his own laundry. After John ran it through the wash and hung it on the rack in the kitchen to dry.

“Is this typical for you, then? I mean, you’re a detective, not a doctor or pathologist.” John went to the stove, eyeing the two steaks he was frying. The smell of rosemary made his stomach growl.

Sherlock was conspicuously silent.

“Oh, god. It is, isn’t it?” John asked, though he couldn’t imagine how that could be. Sherlock seemed a little too comfortable with the idea of dissecting a possibly-infected brain for this to be a one-off.

“I have contacts at the morgue.” Sherlock threw a sidelong glance his way. “Sometimes, my cases require specialised information.”

“From corpses.”

“Usually only the murders,” Sherlock pointed out comfortably.

John couldn’t help but laugh. He picked up the tongs and carefully flipped each steak. Seared on the outside, medium-rare inside. “Grab us a couple of plates, will you? And what do you mean, usually?”

Sherlock retrieved two plates from the cupboard and set them beside the stove, looming close to John. He’d been doing that, on and off, since they’d returned to the cabin, as though testing John’s reactions, trying to find John’s breaking point in careful, measured increments rather than full-out attacking him. John fought the impulse to punch him, but it was less because of a panic attack and more at the thought of being used as a test-subject.

Sherlock turned to lean back against the counter, his expression thoughtful. “It’s not always the actual experiment that matters, but the process. The scientific method is a tool for advanced thinking. It’s not as if people haven’t tested the effect of acid on fingernails or the breaking pattern of various bones,” he said dismissively. “Replicating the effect forces one’s mind to think properly. It’s about focus, not the experiment itself.”

“That... makes sense,” John admitted slowly, transferring the steaks to the plates. “Christ, that means I really have gone crazy, doesn’t it? Your brother warned me about that.”

Sherlock ran a hand up John’s arm, his voice going low as he asked, “Does it bother you?”

John shook his head and laughed. “It probably should, but no, it doesn’t.” He picked up his plate and brought it to the table. He’d already put out silverware and coffee. “So, what is it about you and your brother, anyway? You don’t seem to like him very much.”

“He’s in politics,” Sherlock answered as he sat down opposite John. “He’s an insufferable meddler,
always poking his nose where it doesn’t belong. Sometimes I think he manufactures domestic or international crises just to amuse himself — watch the underlings scurry to do his bidding, that sort of thing.”

“Older brother?”

“By seven years. I’d say he’s a genetic aberration, but he is intelligent — even if he wastes it with ridiculous games of intrigue and diplomacy.” Sherlock huffed and stabbed his fork into his steak. “He could have been a brilliant scientist.”

John nodded, trying to keep his voice light, focussing on cutting the first bite off his own steak. “You realise I’d probably be dead without him.”

Sherlock dropped his fork with a loud clatter.

Without looking up, John chewed and swallowed, letting the taste help ground him here, in the reality of his safe, warm cabin on the other side of the world from his nightmares. “I still don’t know how or why he sent a team after me, but he —”

“You had information for him,” Sherlock said absently, the casual tone at odds with his shocked, wide-eyed expression.

John met his eyes and put down his silverware so he could reach across the table for Sherlock. “Are you all right?”

Sherlock let John take his hands, but only for a moment. “I’m fine. I hate feeling _grateful_ to him, that’s all,” he muttered darkly. “He’ll use this against me for years, if I give him the chance.” He looked down at his fork on the floor, and then stole John’s so he could get back to cutting up his dinner. “You met him at the debriefing, while you were still in hospital — probably the day you were rescued.”

“Debriefing? How — That was classified —”

“I found the file. Everything’s redacted except for your name,” Sherlock said unhappily. He took a bite of his steak and blinked down at his plate in surprise. “This... This is _good_.”

“By all means, keep the fork,” John said, trying to latch onto any humour to keep from thinking too much about the bleak path their conversation had taken. He rose, picked Sherlock’s fork up off the floor, and went to find a replacement.

“You saw the video.”

John let Sherlock’s fork fall into the sink. He closed his eyes, telling himself not to think about it. Not to remember watching. He tried to breathe, but his throat was going tight and his chest felt cold, as if imagined ice could somehow make him numb to the memory.

At least five minutes passed, maybe more, before he could open his eyes. Sherlock had stayed at the table, but John knew he’d turned to keep an eye on him. Yes, he was protective and concerned, but by now, John understood that Sherlock was also studying him. He didn’t mean it to be cold or heartless; it was just the way he was.

Finally, John found the strength to nod and say, “I saw it. How did you know?”

“You weren’t surprised when I mentioned it. But I know my brother. He showed it to you, to force you to remember more details. Location, identities... He probably showed it to you while you were
still in hospital. Over the objection of your doctors, no doubt, but he insisted it was for the good of the war effort or something. He might have even played on your sense of duty and enlisted your consent.”

John nodded again, though he couldn’t speak. He held tightly to the edge of the sink and breathed, staring down into the stainless steel basin, scrubbed meticulously clean, and the single fork at the bottom. The silverware pattern was old, part of a mismatched set of four place settings he’d picked up in Fairlake for two dollars back when he’d first moved into the cabin.

Sherlock was right on all counts, and every word was like a spear of ice in John’s chest. He forced himself to breathe through it, determined not to have a repeat of yesterday. He distinctly remembered overhearing two of his therapists in Toronto as they discussed his case in tones of low fury at the thought that he’d been subjected to watching that video less than thirty hours after his rescue, while in recovery from surgery.

He took another couple of deep breaths, and finally the memory relaxed its claws from his mind. “I was able to identify two of them who hadn’t been killed in the rescue,” John said. His voice sounded distant and toneless. “They had pictures of the ones the team had killed, but there were others who escaped.”

“They’re all dead now.”

John turned to look at Sherlock.

“He didn’t tell you,” Sherlock said wonderingly. Then he clenched his teeth and shook his head angrily. “Of course not. Why bother?”

“What?”

Sherlock turned his chair to face John, though John could see the tension in him. He wanted to get up and go to John, but he’d accepted John’s need for space at moments like this.

“There’s no record of the organisation that took you,” Sherlock said, meeting John’s eyes. “They’re gone. Entirely eradicated, as though they never existed at all, except perhaps in some government records. I can’t access those files remotely,” he added apologetically.

Something inside John came undone, a little knot of fear deep in his gut, carried with him since he’d looked down at what he thought was a dying young man, only to be shot for his act of compassion. He turned to lean his back against the sink, scrubbing his hands over his face. He’d never thought they would come after him again, so it wasn’t relief or a feeling of safety. It was, perhaps, the thought that the world was a bit better place without them.

The sound of Sherlock’s footsteps warned John to anticipate the gentle touch, long fingers brushing over the backs of his hands. “He should have told you,” Sherlock said, his voice quiet but angry.

John allowed Sherlock to take his hands. He pushed away from the sink to close the careful foot of space Sherlock had left between their bodies and rested his cheek against Sherlock’s shoulder.

“If you want, you can shoot him,” Sherlock offered. “Not fatally, but somewhere painful.”

A choked laugh forced its way out John’s throat. “I’m not going to shoot anyone. I’ve never shot a person in my life.”

“I’d say you can hit him with a car, but I don’t have a car. Terribly impractical in London.”
John shook his head and freed his fingers from Sherlock’s grasp so he could put his arms around him. “It’s fine, Sherlock. I didn’t choose to live out here so they wouldn’t find me. It’s not like I’ve been living in fear of them.”

“But you feel better, knowing they’re dead.” Sherlock rubbed at John’s arms, still wary of holding him.

“I do,” John agreed quietly. He moved closer against Sherlock’s body, and slowly Sherlock’s hands slid to his back. The tension that rose up in John’s gut was only a small, reflexive reaction, smothered by the warm reality of Sherlock’s body against his. He felt safe, not trapped — which was probably another indicator of his descent into insanity, because there was nothing at all about Sherlock that was safe.

“If you change your mind, we’ll hire a car,” Sherlock finally decided, turning to press a kiss to John’s hair.

John laughed and nodded. “Okay.” He took a deep breath and backed away enough to meet Sherlock’s eyes. “Come on. Let’s finish dinner. The first steaks are always the best. Wouldn’t want to let your brother ruin that, hm?”

Sherlock grinned and abruptly released him. He went back to the table and dug out his cell phone. Puzzled, John said, “No signal out here, remember?”

“It’s not that.” Sherlock tapped his fingers impatiently against the plastic case, and then aimed the phone at the table so he could snap a picture. “Mycroft is perpetually on a diet. I think he deserves an email update, don’t you?”

“That’s just cruel,” John said, though he couldn’t hide his grin. He remembered to get a fork before he sat down and got back to his steak, appetite renewed.

“Yes, it is,” Sherlock agreed smugly.
Wednesday, October 31

“So. Um. How long have you two... been dating?” Molly asked.

Startled by the question, John lifted his head and banged into the open refrigerator door. He bit back a curse and rubbed his scalp, saying, “We’re not —” before he remembered Molly had caught them kissing on Sunday night, by the fire.

Then he remembered what Sherlock had said about Molly wanting to watch, and he quickly went back to finding room in her freezer for the venison cuts he’d brought her.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.” John shoved the meat into the freezer bin with a bit more force than necessary. “We’re not dating.”

“You two are adorable together.” She sighed. “And you know what they say. All the best ones are taken, gay, or both.”

“Thanks for letting him use your lab,” John said, deliberately trying to change the subject. “I know it’s a little weird.”

“Yeah. I thought he was a chemist,” she said curiously.

He packed the last two steaks into an empty space on top of some boxed pie crusts. “I’m not sure there are words to describe him,” he admitted, closing the low freezer door. “Done with the fridge?”

“Oh. Yes, thanks. He’s really not a doctor? He’s very intelligent.”

“You know how they say there’s a fine line between genius and insanity?” John asked, closing the refrigerator door. “I get the feeling that line doesn’t exist for Sherlock. He probably could get his doctorate, but he’s already told me school was boring.”

“God, I know,” she agreed.

“Yes, but I think our ‘boring’ threshold and Sherlock’s are very different.” John laughed, picturing the terror Sherlock must have been back in school.

Molly’s answer was interrupted by the kettle whistling. She turned to fill three mugs with hot water, saying, “I’ll just bring his tea out to the lab for him.”

“I can do that.”

“Oh, it’s fine. I want to see what he’s up to. How does he take it?”

“Too much sugar. Do you have any milk?” he asked, trying to remember if he’d seen any in the fridge.

“Sorry, no. There’s powdered creamer,” she offered, taking a plastic tub of sugar out of the cupboard.

“Never suggest that to him,” John advised with a grin. He went to spoon three helpings of sugar into
one of the mugs, then started mashing the tea bag to get it to steep more quickly. He gave it one last stir, strained the tea bag, and let her take the mug. Then he considered some of the experiments Sherlock had mentioned doing in the past and added, “If he’s doing anything weird or hazardous, don’t interrupt. Just come get me, okay?”

Molly gave him a wide-eyed look. “Um. Sure,” she said uncertainly.

Through the kitchen window, he watched her jog across the yard to the barn, hoping Sherlock was only playing with the deer brains and not cooking up explosives or experimenting on the chickens. The last thing he needed was Sherlock feeding mule deer brains to the chickens to test prion disease transmission. In fact, he rather hoped this particular deer’s brain was free of infection — the infection rates in the wild were actually extremely low — despite how disappointed Sherlock would be.

Molly came back inside five minutes later, looking just a bit dazed. “He’s very...”

When she couldn’t find a way to finish the sentence, John just smiled and said, “Yes. He is.”

She sat down at the kitchen table with him and gave him a smile. “He’s good for you, though.”

“What?”

“Look at you!” She reached out to pat his hand, her smile turning wistful. “You always have this tension, only it’s gone now. And I’ve never seen you smile so much.”

John shook his head wryly, thinking she couldn’t be more wrong. In the space of just over a week, he’d suffered more near-misses and actual attacks than he had for years before now. “He’s —”

“He asked about you,” she said, speaking over him. Her smile was sly. “He said I should let him know if you started getting bored.”

“God, I’m not ten years old. Or him,” John said with a laugh.

“See?” Molly nudged him under the table and picked up her tea. “He makes you laugh, when he’s not even here.”

“Molly...” John smiled at her, but shook his head, saying, “He’s only here for the winter. He’ll be back in London before spring.”

“Oh.” Molly’s eyes went wide. “Oh, god. I’m — It’s — I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I thought — I mean, you two, together — you’re so perfect for each other.”

John nodded, caught himself at it, and shook his head instead as bands of tension locked around his chest. “It’s just... casual,” he said, and his smile turned brittle, because it wasn’t. Not for him.

Sherlock talked about London every day — his cases, his network of informants, his contacts — but John... Somewhere inside, he’d still been living day-to-day, and Sherlock had just slotted into his life as if he’d always belonged there. He felt better now, better than he had in years, as if a part of him from before the war was slowly reawakening.

He’d never thought about what would happen when Sherlock went back to London. Sherlock would pick up his old life and hopefully stay off the drugs and get his shit in order, and John...

John would go back to his cabin, back to surviving instead of really living, back to being alone, and all the work he’d done to fortify himself would be gone, leaving him raw and condemned to his self-imposed isolation. He wouldn’t make it a week before he’d snap and put a bullet in his brain.
“John?”

Molly’s quiet voice intruded on his bleak thoughts. He gave her a quick, forced smile and shook his head. “Sorry,” he said, hearing the unsteady edge in his voice. “I’m just — I should check and see how long Sherlock needs. The weather. Unpredictable.”

Her pretty brown eyes went soft and sympathetic. In the years they’d been friends, she’d grown accustomed to his sudden mood swings. She’d once asked, but hadn’t pushed for an explanation. “Sure,” was all she said.

~~~

Sherlock recognised John’s footsteps and paused in his cutting, turning instead to watch the door open. It was too soon for John to be bringing more tea, and Molly had insisted on delaying Sherlock’s access to their lab by feeding them sandwiches, so it couldn’t be food. Either John was bored of Molly, which was possible, or something was wrong.

In a single glance, he took in the tense set of John’s shoulders and the way his face looked drawn and flushed with cold, as if he’d been standing outside for at least ten minutes. Normally, John didn’t avoid going outdoors in the cold, but only when there was a purpose to it. Sherlock hadn’t heard him doing any manual labor, nor had he heard any disturbance among the chicken coops on the other side of the barn. John had just been standing outside, avoiding Molly’s company — and Sherlock’s, since he hadn’t come to the lab until now.

Something was wrong.

Sherlock abandoned the slide he was preparing and went right to John, asking, “What is it?”

John blinked and looked away evasively. “Nothing,” he lied. Badly. Sherlock could hear the strained edge in his voice. “Just wondering how long you’d be. The weather could turn.”

So John wanted to leave. Now. Stripping off his latex gloves, Sherlock went back to the table and picked up his parka and gloves.

“No, you don’t — Sherlock, you’re not done,” John protested as Sherlock dressed to go outside.

It was his turn to lie, saying, “It’s fine.” He wasn’t finished, but his experiment was secondary to whatever had disturbed John. He needed to focus, to find out what it was and fix it. Prion disease detection could wait.

“Sherlock —”

“John,” he cut in sharply, looking back at him as he zipped up his parka.

John sighed and nodded, looking down with an air of defeat. “I’ll let Molly know.”

“I will,” Sherlock corrected. He considered for a moment, then waved at the half-processed brain and the slides. “Put that away.”

Some hint of life came back to John’s eyes in the form of resignation. “You want me to put half a deer brain in Molly’s freezer?”
“It doesn’t need to go in with her food. She has another one for experiments,” Sherlock said, pointing to the small freezer in the corner of the lab. He slipped past John, giving him a little shove away from the doorway. “I’ll get your coat and meet you back here.”

Uncharacteristically, John didn’t protest. He just nodded and went to the workbench, where he took a pair of latex gloves out of the box.

Satisfied that he’d be busy for at least a few minutes, Sherlock swept out, took the stairs down two at a time, and crossed the yard, fury burning away the chill bite of the wind.

Molly must have been watching. She opened the door and started to greet him on the porch, then backed inside with a startled yelp as he came at her without even a moment’s hesitation. Once they were both inside, he took hold of the door and slammed it shut, demanding, “What happened? What did you say to him?”

She stared up at him, eyes huge, and backed away. She was flustered but worried; she’d been fussing with her hair, chewing on the ends, the type of loathsome habit people indulged when they were either bored, in deep thought, or distressed. “What? I didn’t —”

“Don’t lie,” he growled.

She backed up another step and hit one of the kitchen chairs with her hip. As though jolted out of her surprise, she sucked in a breath. Her expression switched to one of determination, and she raised her chin to meet Sherlock’s eyes. “We were talking about you,” she said accusingly.

Wrong-footed, he asked, “Me?”

“You.” She nodded, tossing her head to throw her hair, damp ends and all, back over her shoulder. “He said you’re leaving him.”

The words hit him like a punch, stealing his breath. “What?” he asked dumbly, trying to impose some order on his thoughts, but somehow, Molly had managed to scatter his composure — and his anger — as though she’d unleashed her mongrel into a flock of pigeons.

Defiantly, she crossed her arms and said, “I thought gay men were supposed to be more sensitive. You’re really not that different at all, are you?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, thrown back to rehab, where everyone wanted to talk about feelings and no one actually cared about the mind-killing boredom the staff were inflicting on their test-subjects in the name of therapy. “Oh, god. Don’t bring up feelings —”

“He loves you!”

Sherlock froze, staring at her.

As though his silence gave her courage, she advanced on him, snapping out, “Don’t you accuse me of upsetting my best friend when you’re the one who’s breaking his heart!”

He actually backed up a step, scrambling to try and rally himself. This was ridiculous. People fell in love after months, not... ten days. And no one fell in love with him, ever. No one would ever be that stupid — especially not John, who definitely wasn’t stupid. Not at all.

“So don’t you dare come in here, yelling at me, when this is all on you!” she continued, barely pausing for breath. She stabbed a finger into his chest, hard enough that it actually hurt, and demanded, “If you don’t even care, why don’t you just go back to London now, maybe give him a
She was being ridiculous. She had no idea what was really going on. She’d built this little fantasy because that’s what women did — that’s what people did, imagining love and fluffy happiness around them to deny the reality of the world. There was no point in arguing with her.

“Whatever you said or did, don’t,” he warned her, though the words hardly made sense. Furious with himself, he looked around the kitchen, spotting John’s outerwear on a chair in the living room. He swept past her, now determined to get John away from her and not let him come back. They could find some other way to get eggs and chickens and whatever else they needed from Molly.

“At least tell him now, so he —”

“Tell him what?” Sherlock demanded, glaring back at her so fiercely that she stopped in the doorway. With a huff of satisfaction, he turned to gather up John’s coat, making sure to also pick up both gloves, his scarf, and his hat.

“That you don’t love him! It’s not fair, leading him on like that.”

Hugging the parka to his chest, Sherlock turned on her, furious all over again. “Unlike you, I’m helping him. For seven years, he’s been rotting away here, in the middle of nowhere, and I’m going to get him out. Don’t try to stop me,” he warned.

Apparently, she wasn’t expecting to hear that. She stared up at him, her anger melting into surprise, and he took advantage of her sudden silence to let himself out of the house.

Anger carried him across the yard, though his steps slowed as he approached the barn. His hands clenched in the parka he carried as a hint of worry and doubt began to creep through his confidence. What if Molly was right? Could she be right? She couldn’t be. Sherlock would know if someone was in love with him, wouldn’t he?

After ten days, he could read John’s moods almost perfectly. He could see the first hints of tension and anxiety before they even registered in John’s consciousness. He knew when John was tired or bored or frustrated with his writing. He knew how to provoke a smile or that dark, needy shade of deep blue that came into his eyes when his lust focussed solely on Sherlock.

John wanted him. John could thrive beside him, even in London with its crowds and its incredibly high population of idiots. With just a little effort, Sherlock could help John heal from the wounds inflicted not just by terrorists or insurgents or whatever they were but by Mycroft’s heavy-handed disregard for what must have been the incredibly fragile state of John’s mind.

Together, they would thrive, rather than rotting separately away in boredom and isolation.

The barn door opened and John stepped out, shivering. Immediately, he reached for his parka. “You all right?”

Sherlock blinked at him and nodded. “Yes.” He handed over John’s hat, gloves, and scarf, smiling as he recognised the signs that John’s mood had improved. Definitely all Molly’s fault, he decided. “Are you?” he asked, just in case there was some lingering anxiety that needed to be addressed.

John’s smile faltered a bit. “I’m fine,” he lied. He zipped up his parka and pulled his hood up over his hat. “Let’s get home before the weather turns.”

Sherlock wanted to press him for answers, but not here, where Molly could interrupt them with her baseless accusations. Besides, there was also the very practical matter of the cold, which would only
get worse as the day progressed. So he just nodded and climbed onto the quad and wrapped his arms around John, leaning close to him. John’s glove pressed into Sherlock’s sleeve before he started the engine.

So he stayed quiet — not that there was any point trying to speak over the engine noise — and held John comforting close, telling himself that the warmth filling his chest was shared body heat and that Molly couldn’t possibly be right.
Chapter 16

Wednesday, October 31

“It’s Wednesday, isn’t it?” John asked, breathing deeply as he walked into the cabin to the smell of onions and garlic and rich broth. He focussed on tonight, looking forward to a hot meal and Sherlock’s demanding attentions and maybe, just maybe, having only one nightmare. He just wouldn’t think about next week or next month or the turn of the year.

“Yes.”

“Halloween, then. God, I used to love Halloween,” he said idly. He didn’t precisely expect a response — Sherlock wasn’t one for idle conversation — but when Sherlock ignored him completely and went to the living room, he couldn’t help feeling a little bit alone.

He forced himself to ignore it and instead started making coffee. He didn’t hear Sherlock building up the fire, so he glanced through the archway to see he’d sat down at the desk instead. His laptop was already open.

Wonderful. So they weren’t talking at all. Or was he just being oversensitive? Just a week ago, he’d been glad Sherlock was quiet company, not placing demands on his time. He needed to find that detachment again. In a few months, Sherlock would be gone.

Fuck. He needed to stop thinking about it.

He ground the coffee and started it brewing while he finally got rid of his outerwear. Sherlock didn’t look away from his laptop when John went to the front closet. He’d removed his parka and dropped it on the arm of the couch as he had every day. For the first time, the sight of it spiked irritation through John.

He told himself he was being irrational. He’d known from the start that this visit had a definite end point, and it was time to drag his mind out of fantasies and back to reality. There was no point in taking his anger out on Sherlock. Their time was very much limited, and no matter how irrational his emotions were, intellectually he knew he should enjoy every moment. So he just picked up Sherlock’s coat and hung it up with his own.

“Dinner should be ready in a few minutes.”

“Bring it here,” Sherlock said, never looking away from his laptop.

Forgetting his resolution to enjoy their time together, John snapped, “Do I look like a waiter?”

Sherlock’s head came up, and he frowned at John. “I want you to see this as well. You may as well save time and eat while you read.”

Guilt hit John immediately, before he reminded himself that he’d essentially been waiting on Sherlock hand and foot for the last ten days, so it was a logical assumption. How was he supposed to know Sherlock wanted John to read something on his laptop without first being invited?

Fuck it. Mentally throwing his hands in the air, he went to get their venison stew and coffee.
Sherlock knew that John had never seen his website; he might not even remember that Sherlock had a website at all. In the ten days Sherlock had been living with him, he’d never even seen John take out his own laptop, nor had John asked to use Sherlock’s. (There was no possibility that John could hack Sherlock’s password, since it was a random string of twenty-eight alphanumeric characters and symbols generating using four different random seeds, one of which was based on cesium decay calculations acquired through the creative use of Mycroft’s login credentials.)

But now, as Sherlock had hoped, John was reading every word, and Sherlock couldn’t help but grin with delight at John’s fascination. Granted, John had skimmed the work-in-progress monograph on identifying over one-hundred-forty different types of ash, but the forums had captured his attention — both the visitors’ posts and Sherlock’s infrequent responses.

“Sherlock, did you see this?” he asked, pointing at the screen with his spoon. He was being careful not to eat over the keyboard, but Sherlock still felt a twinge of alarm at the thought of drips. Then he pushed the thought aside. He could just buy a new laptop with Mycroft’s credit card.

“Which one?” he asked, rising from where he was perched on the arm of the sofa. Careful not to spill the bowl of stew John had brought him, he leaned over the back of the chair, reveling in the way John pushed back against him, rather than flinching away.

“Missing child. Thinks the husband took the kids out of the country,” he said.

Sherlock grimaced at the post in question. He’d intended to delete it, but even refreshing a page was painful at this speed. “Yes. Not my area,” he said evasively.

“You don’t like kids?”

“I actually like children more than most adults. It takes time and effort to work up to the levels of stupidity possessed by most people. Children at least have open minds.”

John gave Sherlock an odd look, but it came with a very slight smile, so Sherlock assumed it was generally positive. “Can’t argue with that,” he agreed, turning back to the screen as he scooped up another spoonful of the stew. “Dinner okay?”

“Very good,” Sherlock said truthfully. “I haven’t eaten this well since before I went off to public school. Our family cook won awards before he retired and came to work for us.”

“Wow. Count yourself lucky, then. I lived on Ramen and pizza through college,” John said with a laugh. Then he frowned, asking, “Someone wants you to find a missing cat?”

“Stupid people, John,” he sighed, reading over John’s shoulder. “They’re all over the internet... Oh. Well.” He smiled thoughtfully as he reread the text, seeing the meaning hidden in the unremarkable request.


“Mmm, yes. Read it again.” He leaned a hip against the side of the desk, swirling his spoon around in the bowl to find another chunk of venison.

John turned his attention back to the screen, reading the three short sentences slowly while he
continued to eat. “Is this ‘mutual friend’ trying to pull a trick on you or something? I can’t picture any ‘friend’ sending you a missing cat case, unless it’s... I dunno, some solid gold ancient Egyptian cat-statue?”

Sherlock grinned, irrationally pleased at John’s creativity. He slid his hand to the back of John’s neck, playing with the short hairs, and watched John’s eyes fall closed as he shivered. “Possibly. But in this case, given the economic situation in the UK, the only ‘mutual friends’ who might be sending me clients are all in business — primarily banking and investments. So it isn’t ‘cat’ but C.A.T., or Certified Accounting Technician, a professional certification for chartered accountants. That means it’s either identity theft or fraud, or it could be something exciting, like money laundering.”

“Are you serious?” John asked, twisting around to look up at him, brows arched high. “You’re serious. You got all that from ‘a mutual friend’ and ‘a missing cat’?”

“Simple deduction. Could be a good one, though,” Sherlock mused, brushing his fingers up into John’s hair, enjoying the subtle way John tipped his head back against the touch. He stroked down over his nape, brushing too lightly to feel his cervical vertebrae, earning another shiver. “Money laundering makes the most sense, actually. Otherwise, why not involve the police?”

“What? It’s illegal, money laundering.”

Sherlock shrugged dismissively. “It’s a matter of reputation, though. A senior partner or upper manager using an organisational account to launder funds through an overseas bank, probably just below daily legal reporting limits. A junior technician spots the irregularity. Then what? Blackmail and threats to ruin the company’s reputation? Fear of the business disruption caused by an audit? Lack of faith from investors spooked by a hint of irregularity? Money laundering is controversial. It could cause the collapse of the company.”

“How’s that worse than identity theft?”

Sherlock waved a hand dismissively before he put his bowl and spoon down on the desk, carefully away from John’s in-progress manuscripts. “These days, everyone has a security breach resulting in loss of credit card numbers, passwords, or some other identifier. It’s practically publicity. In April of last year, Sony lost twelve million credit card numbers.”

“So... what are you going to do about it?” An edge of nervousness crept into John’s voice. “Do you need to go back?”

Sherlock frowned, flattening his palm on the back of John’s neck, fingers curling around to feel his pulse; it was unusually fast. “No.” He looked sidelong at John and watched his mouth soften, corners twitching up. Curious, he continued to monitor John’s reactions while he said, “Besides, it could be dangerous. This post implies sums of money reaching into millions of pounds, and people are willing to kill for that many zeroes.”

He’d correctly anticipated the way John went tense, but not the look John gave him — a hard, cold look of warning. “You’re not going, are you?” he asked, his tone implying that ‘no’ was the only acceptable answer.

“Not alone, no,” Sherlock answered.

John’s pulse jumped, though he turned away, forcing a casual tone as he said, “Good.”

Sherlock let his fingers relax, casually running the tips over the side of John’s neck. “What I do is dangerous.”
“It’s either danger or boring with you, isn’t it?”

“If I wanted boring, I would have followed Mycroft into government.” Sherlock leaned down, ostensibly to look at the screen, and let out a derisive huff that ghosted over John’s ear. “I wouldn’t last three hours before I set my desk on fire and escaped out the window.”

John laughed, though the laugh faltered as Sherlock brushed his lips over the curve of his ear. “Sherlock...”

He leaned down further, laying a trail of hot, gentle kisses down John’s neck. He hooked a finger in the collar of John’s button-down and tugged it aside, baring a triangle of flesh over his right shoulder — intentionally avoiding the left, for now — so he could bite, pressing his teeth in slowly, listening to the way John’s breath stuttered. John fumbled to set his bowl down and reached out to grab hold of Sherlock’s leg. The chair creaked as he leaned back, eyes closed, laptop forgotten.

After Sherlock released the bite just as slowly, he asked, “Are you done with dinner, then?”

John laughed breathily. “Now you ask?” He rolled the chair two inches back and turned to face Sherlock. He started to rise, but Sherlock stopped him very, very carefully, resting his fingertips lightly on John’s chest. He was wary of triggering another attack, but it was necessary that he push John’s boundaries. There was no other way to prove that John was strong enough to leave the cocoon of the cabin and go back into the world, at Sherlock’s side.

“Stay,” Sherlock said, circling around in front of John. He stayed slightly off-centre, though, leaving John’s left side clear, a reassurance to John’s subconscious that he could break free if he felt the need. Slowly, Sherlock let his hand trail down John’s chest, fingers catching on the buttons, dipping into the gaps to touch his T-shirt underneath.

Tentatively, John leaned back again, eyes fixed to Sherlock. He licked his lips and Sherlock couldn’t resist leaning in to chase John’s tongue back into his mouth in a sudden kiss that seemed to catch John off guard. John’s hands skimmed up Sherlock’s sides, holding him close with a light touch.

Sherlock caught John’s face much more firmly, biting at his lower lip before he swept his tongue back into John’s mouth. He lowered himself to kneel upright, pressing his body against John’s right leg, and only then let his right hand fall to John’s chest.

This time, when he followed the trail of shirt buttons down, John shivered and whispered, “Sherlock.”

“Don’t talk,” Sherlock said, kissing him into silence. When John relaxed, complying, Sherlock kissed him again and brushed the calloused fingers of his left hand up over John’s eyelashes. “Keep your eyes closed for me.”

Tension rippled through John, but he nodded slightly, his expression taking on an air of determination. He licked his lips again and opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again.

After one more kiss to reward John’s self-control, Sherlock knelt back on his heels, resting his hands on John’s thighs. Immediately, his legs parted just slightly, the movement so subtle as to be subconscious. Sherlock smiled, watching John’s face as he trailed his hands down to John’s inner thighs, pressing his legs open a bit more, taking John’s subconscious movement and making it his own.

Again, Sherlock slid his hands up the insides of John’s thighs, reading the subtle responses on his face. He lightened his pressure as he ran both hands up over John’s cock, feeling it swell under the
touch, straining at his jeans. John shifted his hips but made no effort to move away, and his eyes stayed closed even as his lips silently parted. His breathing was loud over the sounds of the laptop fan and ever-present crackle of burning wood.

Quickly, Sherlock worked at John’s belt buckle, freeing it so he could get at the buttons and zipper below. He’d considered drawing this out, but for the first time since Molly’s house, the quality of John’s tension had changed to something far more desirable than the unreasonable stress she’d created. Sherlock wanted to reinforce that, so he tugged John’s jeans open as far as he could. It wasn’t far enough.

“Lift,” he said, his voice lower and rougher than he’d anticipated. His own body was reminding him of his neglect, but he pushed it aside to focus solely on John.

Without hesitation, John shifted against the chair, bracing his feet on the floor, hands on the seat. He lifted his hips enough for Sherlock to work his jeans down to his thighs. Sherlock considered removing them completely, but there were boots in the way and he was too impatient. Besides, the restricted movement would offer another potential trigger for John to fight and conquer, with Sherlock’s help.

To distract John from consciously recognising the way his jeans trapped his legs, Sherlock leaned over his thigh to press his mouth against John’s cock. He breathed through the stretchy cotton pants John still wore.

John moaned, whispering, “Fuck,” under his breath as he slid his hand into Sherlock’s hair.

Sherlock lifted his head to look up at John’s face. “Quiet,” he said firmly, though he smiled to see John had kept his eyes closed.

John exhaled sharply, his jaw going tight. He scratched his fingers gently over Sherlock’s scalp. Seconds ticked by. Entranced, Sherlock watched John struggle against his own impulse to speak or move or pull Sherlock’s head back down, and he saw the moment John surrendered, relaxing, waiting for Sherlock to continue or not, as he chose.

Heat blossomed deep in Sherlock’s gut as, for one moment, he mentally abandoned his plan. He considered bending John over the desk or the back of the sofa, taking him slowly, lavishing attention on his body until his self-control broke and he begged to be properly fucked. He thought about two nights ago and how he could lie down on the sofa and have John do all the work, letting Sherlock focus all his attention on observing John’s every reaction.

Only the fact that he had a goal kept him on track. He pushed aside the fantasies, though not permanently — he would indulge in every one of them, some other night — and leaned down again, pressing his lips to the damp spot of fabric stretched taut over John’s glans. John’s whole body reacted with a sudden twitch, and his hands dropped to clench the sides of the chair. Sherlock hid a smile and opened his mouth to press his tongue over the fabric instead, exhaling slowly, listening to the quiet sounds John made.

With slow, teasing motions, Sherlock worked his fingers under the waistband of John’s pants. Almost immediately, John went to lift his hips, but Sherlock let go of the elastic to press his hips down. “Don’t move,” he warned.

John growled under his breath, knuckles going white. He added a huff to express his displeasure, but he was still playing by the rules. Mostly.

Quietly laughing, Sherlock eased the waistband away from John’s skin and leaned over, chest
pressed to John’s knees, and licked at his abdomen. John’s breath hitched; he wasn’t ticklish there, but the touch had caught him by surprise. Sherlock slid his fingers together, pulling the waistband further away, exposing John’s cock to the cool air for just a moment. Then he closed the distance and flicked his tongue over the slit, losing the contact when John’s cock jerked up at the touch.

For a few seconds that probably felt to John like minutes, Sherlock teased, lightly licking wherever he could reach without taking John’s pants further down his body. John’s breathing became ragged, and though he didn’t overtly move, his spine arched and his hips canted in an effort to coax Sherlock closer.

When Sherlock finally said, “Lift up,” John’s movement was so abrupt and uncontrolled that the chair rolled back three inches before Sherlock caught it by the base. John swore under his breath, but Sherlock let it pass, amused by John’s overwhelming arousal. He was usually the model of self-control, which made its loss to pleasure that much more appealing to Sherlock.

Once John conquered his fears, Sherlock would be free to push him further than he’d ever imagined. The thought was intoxicating, stealing Sherlock’s breath away. He knew it would be glorious.

~~~

John’s head rolled against the back of the chair when Sherlock finally — finally — took John’s cock in his mouth. He bit his lip to keep quiet, thinking only that if he said anything, Sherlock might stop, and John might well die on the spot if he did.

It wasn’t possible that Sherlock had him so on-edge now, with virtually no actual foreplay. The only explanation was that he’d somehow reverted to being a teenager. Two nights of mind-blowing sex, a night off in preparation for a pre-dawn deer hunt, and now John was right back on the edge of desperation again. If Sherlock stopped for more than a second, John might well end up begging him to continue.

For now, though, John lost himself in the wet heat of Sherlock’s mouth, the teasing brush of teeth, the hard flex of Sherlock’s tongue, and it took what felt like an eternity for it occur to him that the condoms were still in the other room.

He let go of the chair to reach for Sherlock’s shoulder, thinking to push him away. “Stop. Sherlock —”

To John’s dismay, Sherlock did stop, lifting completely off John’s cock, which twitched in protest at the sudden, cold neglect. Fingers touched John’s lips, silencing him. “Trust me.”

John hesitated and started to say condom, but Sherlock turned his hand to cover John’s whole mouth. “Trust me, John,” he repeated sternly.

He had no idea if it was that gorgeous baritone or the commanding tone or the fact that his body was screaming for relief, but he hesitantly pushed thoughts of safe sex aside, wanting desperately to believe that Sherlock was right, that they were both clean. He nodded, realising only then that he still had his eyes closed. The thought made him want to open them, to look into Sherlock’s eyes and watch, but he didn’t.

John had no reason to trust Sherlock, except that he had yet to betray his trust. He hadn’t pressed for
details of anything John didn’t want to discuss. He’d gone out of his way to not sneak a look at his scars, though he’d had every opportunity. It was as if he knew which boundaries to respect and which he could push.

John tried to relax, to show, silently and without moving, that he was complying.

It felt like forever before Sherlock finally took his hand away. John pressed his lips together to keep from speaking, though he had no idea if he’d insist Sherlock get a condom or if he’d beg for Sherlock to continue. But a moment later, the point was moot. Sherlock licked a broad stripe up John’s cock, tearing a moan from his throat, before he closed his lips around and took him in again, resuming as if the interruption had never happened at all.

Sherlock was far too good at this, John decided. It was unnatural the way he knew exactly how to bring John to the very edge of orgasm before he backed off, lightly sweeping his tongue over John’s length as the urgency receded. Then he started again, his incredible mouth overwhelming John’s ability to think rationally, and John’s world narrowed down to the effort not to beg for release, not to grab Sherlock’s hair and fuck his mouth.

When Sherlock pulled back off his cock, John made a sound suspiciously like a whimper. He nearly let go of the chair, and his eyelids fluttered, almost opening, before Sherlock’s fingers wrapped around his cock and Sherlock’s tongue pressed against John’s balls. John bit his lip hard, catching skin between his teeth, as Sherlock’s hand worked him closer to the edge once more. He pressed his mouth against John’s balls and sucked lightly as they drew up tight. His fingers pulled in quick, strong movements, and white light flared against John’s eyelids as sharp heat spiked through him in waves of pleasure that left him breathless and tingling.

He forgot about silence, forgot about stillness, forgot about keeping his eyes closed.

Forgot about everything for a moment.

Breathless, he looked down, feeling the little aftershocks of his orgasm settle into his gut and chest, warming him as he stared into Sherlock’s beautiful blue-grey eyes.

“You’re amazing,” he whispered, cupping Sherlock’s cheek with one shaky hand, knuckles aching from the strain of clenching the chair.

Sherlock closed his eyes and pressed into the touch like a cat needing to be petted. With a soft smile, John leaned down, conscious of the damp mess on his shirt, and kissed Sherlock’s forehead. At some point, his growing affection for Sherlock had crept up behind him, evolving into something deeper, something far more powerful, and he had to close his mouth to keep from saying something he might well regret.

*He’s leaving,* John reminded himself, sliding his hand to the back of Sherlock’s neck. In response, Sherlock drew close, chest pressed to John’s legs, fingers curved over his bare thighs above his jeans. Now that the desperate need had been satisfied, he had to work to fight off a growing sense of loss.

They had one less time together in their future, one more memory that John knew wouldn’t be enough to hold him steady once Sherlock was gone. He swallowed, throat tight, and closed his eyes against the growing pressure that he couldn’t face.

When he finally could speak, he asked, “Bed?”

In answer, Sherlock drew back to look at him, eyes flicking over John’s face. His eyes went wide
and his stare turned disconcertingly intense. Remembering Sherlock’s unnatural ability to read every one of John’s thoughts at a glance, John looked away and rose, pushing the wheeled chair back to make room. He pulled up his pants enough to not feel quite so exposed and said, “I’ll be right in.” Then, cowardly as it was, he retreated, quickly crossing the bedroom to go into the bathroom.

There, he closed the door and leaned back against it, trying to convince himself that he couldn’t be falling in love. Not after just ten days. And definitely not with Sherlock, who was going to leave, whether John loved him or not.
Chapter 17

Wednesday, October 31

Molly was right.

Sherlock watched John disappear into the bathroom, too stunned to move. He could still feel John’s hand on his face, the kiss John had pressed to his forehead. When he closed his eyes, he could see, with perfect clarity, every detail of John’s expression as their eyes had met, and he could hear in his imagination the three words that John hadn’t spoken but had been thinking.

So many times before, Sherlock had faced his schoolmates and clients and the police and told every single one of them that they were all too blind to see properly, and too rooted in expectations to accept the truth simply because it didn’t fit with whatever stories they’d constructed in their minds. ‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth’: words he’d lived by since he’d been old enough to understand the basic principles of scientific reason.

In this case, John’s tender expression and gentle touch left no room for doubt. Sherlock tried to blame the post-orgasmic haze of neurochemicals, but the look in his eyes had been far too eloquent for anything other than a true, genuine emotional reaction.

No. Not the look. The fear that had followed — fear of loss.

‘He loves you!’ Molly had insisted with absolute conviction. And she’d followed that impossible (but apparently true) declaration with a demand that Sherlock tell John that his love wasn’t reciprocated, so John wouldn’t cling to false hope.

Sherlock pulled his laptop bag out from under the table, fished out the pack holding his last two cigarettes, and went for the front door. It was freezing outside, but he needed the nicotine to help him think. The taste of John’s skin was drugging him, turning his thoughts slow and lazy with satisfaction at how completely John had given himself to Sherlock.

‘Trust me,’ Sherlock had said, and John had, beautifully.

Shivering, he lit the cigarette, hands cupped around the end to absorb its pitiful warmth. He looked out at the overcast sky and inhaled deeply, the warmth of smoke and icy air mingling oddly in his lungs.

John loved him. It struck him as unlikely and unwise, but it was apparently true.

John was afraid of him. Molly had put words to that fear: ‘You’re the one breaking his heart.’ John was afraid of losing him.

False premise. Sherlock didn’t want to leave without John. All John had to do was be willing to take a chance — to follow the courage that was an intrinsic part of his psyche — and they could be together, which was what John wanted. What Sherlock wanted, more than he’d ever wanted anything before.

Was it love?

Sherlock took another drag, wondering a bit desperately if there were any chemicals, natural or artificial, from which he could manufacture a stronger stimulant than nicotine. Right now, he would
cheerfully shoot someone for just a few milligrams of cocaine in hopes that it would help him find the answers that he knew were right there in front of him, if he could just see.

When their parents died, Mycroft had told him to harden himself against emotional attachments. He’d been young, just reaching the point where his body was beginning to awaken to sexual interest. Caught between hormones and grief, he’d accepted Mycroft’s advice as law, finding his emotional distance no handicap at all to getting whatever he wanted.

Early on, Sherlock had learned what he liked and how to manipulate people to get what he wanted, and he’d always thought that was enough. Free of emotional entanglement, sex had been a simple, convenient, easily-found distraction when work was slow. He’d prided himself on being immune to the emotional vulnerability that others seemed to recklessly seek out, no matter how often they paid the price in breakups and divorces.

His passing interests through school had come and gone, leaving barely any imprint on his psyche. Even Victor, the only one he’d ever brought home, had been more of a friend with benefits than an actual lover. They got on well enough, but Sherlock had been bored of everything but the sex, and Victor had wanted to marry a woman and build a family. They’d parted on good terms — rare for Sherlock — and occasionally exchanged emails. Sherlock still liked him, but even at the height of their relationship, he wouldn’t have called it love.

He closed his eyes and thought about John, realising at once that he’d lost that objective distance. He laughed softly, a bit bitterly, and breathed in more warm smoke and icy air. All the while, he’d been trying to encourage John to trust him, to let Sherlock help him heal, and instead, Sherlock had let John become a part of him. He would sooner cut off a limb than lose John.

Today, when he’d thought Molly had hurt John, he would have cheerfully killed her if he’d thought it would help. Now, he was probably going to have to apologise to her.

He smoked the cigarette down to the filter, but the chemical rush in his blood brought with it no answers. No plan for how to proceed. It seemed unbelievable to walk up to John and say, “I love you,” with no forewarning. Sherlock had too often seen those three short, ridiculous words turn into an emotional minefield of misunderstandings and expectations. Besides, what if John decided to refuse him under some misguided sense of sacrifice ‘for Sherlock’s protection’?

No, saying it would be too dangerous — even pointless, except perhaps for the momentary self-gratification of expressing what he really was apparently feeling. It definitely wasn’t lust: just thinking those three words provoked a physical reaction that entirely eclipsed any sort of sexual desire he had for John, filling him with an all-consuming warmth, as though his entire life before John had been dull and grey and ordinary, and only with John had vibrant music and colour come into his world.

Trembling from the cold, he flicked the cigarette butt out into the crust of snow. It burned bright for a few seconds before melting enough ice to extinguish the flame. Thinking about going back inside to see John brought a rush of pleasure, and while he could, with a bit of concentration, figure out precisely which chemicals were affecting his brain, he couldn’t be arsed to care.

He went back inside, and the warmth of the fires hit him like a truck. He looked longingly in the direction of the living room hearth but ignored it, pausing only to flip the switch to shut off electricity to the satellite dish and router. He closed his laptop to keep from running the battery down and then headed for the bedroom.

John was still in the bathroom, so Sherlock closed the door and went to build up the fire, both for the selfish reason that he felt half-frozen and because he knew the cold would make John’s scars ache.
As he stirred up the embers and coaxed the fire to catch, first on small twigs, then on larger split logs, he considered fetching drinks for them both. Alcohol was far from his drug of choice, but one glass would help John to relax. Then he pushed the idea aside. He wanted John’s trust, and that implied conscious, fully-aware consent, not trust born of artificially relaxed inhibitions.

The bathroom door clicked, hinges squealing softly as John entered the bedroom and closed the door again. “Need help?” he offered. His voice was two steps higher than normal. He was still anxious but hiding it as best he could.

Deciding that the fire would do for now, Sherlock shook his head, rose, and turned, looking John over. He’d changed into a T-shirt and pants, which meant he’d come out of the bathroom to fetch clothes from the dresser while Sherlock had been smoking.

The thought reminded Sherlock of John’s distaste for smoking. “Get under the blankets before you freeze. The room hasn’t warmed up yet,” he urged, going to pull the stacked blankets back for John. A glance showed that John’s gun was already on his bedside table.

With a muttered thanks, John climbed into the bed and slid across to his side, avoiding looking at Sherlock for more than a second at a time. Unexpectedly, the evasion hurt, and then it was his turn to retreat to the bathroom, where he closed the door and hid like a coward until he could figure out what to do next.

~~~

John watched as Sherlock walked out of the bathroom, firelight playing over every inch of his beautifully bare skin, and thought that he really should learn to hate him for being such a gorgeous, perfect bastard. Half-remembered sayings flitted through John’s mind, things about love and loss and how experiencing one day of love balanced out a lifetime of loss, and John thought all of them were absolute bullshit.

Seven years ago, he’d thought he’d lost everything there was to lose. Then Sherlock had swept into his life and turned everything upside-down, and John had realised he hadn’t been living at all until now. And soon it would all be gone again, only the emptiness would be that much bigger.

Casually, Sherlock threw his armful of clothes into the laundry basket and got under the blankets. He didn’t fuck around with staying on his side of the bed or waiting for John to close the last foot of space between them. He worked his way across the king-sized mattress and forced an arm under John’s pillow as he laid down on his back.

“Come here,” he said quietly.

“Sherlock,” he protested, wanting to turn his back and curl up and try to stop hurting. Anticipation of pain was sometimes worse than the pain itself. That lesson had been cut and arced and burned into his flesh, and now he was learning it all over again in a way that couldn’t be stitched or bandaged. He needed to roll onto his left side, facing away from Sherlock, despite how much his left shoulder would hurt, and try to pretend that the emptiness was already there, just so he could start trying to acclimate to it.

“Trust me,” Sherlock said, as seemed to be his habit, these days. But then he added, “Please,” and while John could have resisted the first request, he had no defence against the second.
He moved close enough that his T-shirt brushed against Sherlock’s side whenever he inhaled, but that wasn’t enough for Sherlock. The arm snaked out from under John’s pillow, circling his back, and John fought down the instinct to flail and get free. The pressure was gentle, not stifling, and guided John to move over and keep moving until he was lying on top of Sherlock.

He thought about protesting — he hurt too much, deep inside his chest, to have any interest in sex, but Sherlock’s hands settled lightly on the small of his back and he looked up at John with a serious, thoughtful expression that silenced him.

“I will never be bored of you,” Sherlock said quietly.

John stared down at him, trying to think of how he could possibly respond to that, but there were too many layers of meaning hidden below the outwardly simple phrase. He studied Sherlock’s expression, half-hidden by the shadows thrown by the blanket draped over John’s back. His shoulder started to give out under his own weight and he shifted more weight to his right arm.

Sherlock frowned and ran his hands up John’s back, pressing more firmly between his shoulderblades. “Lie down before you hurt yourself,” he insisted.

“I’m too heavy and you’re —”

“John.” Sherlock sighed, pulling him close, for the first time in days taking choice away from him. Fear rose up, choking him from the inside, and his pulse hammered in his ears, and right as he neared the breaking point where he’d have to get free, at any cost, Sherlock’s arms relaxed and fell aside.

It was like sunlight breaking through clouds. John drew in a deep breath that was almost a gasp and felt the panic start to drain away, like water trickling through a clogged pipe. Sherlock’s hands moved down to rest lightly on his, idly tracing ticklish little circles over his sides. It took some time before John realised those circles were drawn to the rhythm of his breath, and he fixed on them, consciously trying to match the movements. He didn’t know which changed first — if he slowed his breathing or Sherlock slowed his fingers — but soon he was relaxed enough to inch down so he could rest his head on Sherlock’s perfect, unscarred, pale left shoulder.

Sherlock’s right hand slipped up, fingers combing through John’s hair, and though he wasn’t precisely comfortable, fighting to balance on Sherlock’s too-thin frame, hipbones digging into his abdomen, he stayed. He didn’t have this closeness in his life — not with anyone.

“I won’t hurt you,” Sherlock said, his voice a deep, resonant rumble that seemed to sing along John’s bones.

John closed his eyes and curled his fingers around Sherlock’s shoulders. The feeling of fingers in his hair was hypnotic. “I know.”

“But I will push you, though never more than you can endure. I promise.”

John sighed and moved, fighting Sherlock’s arm for three seconds before Sherlock relented and let him go. He rolled onto his back a foot away, kicking to sort out the blankets tangled around his legs, and pressed his hands to his eyes.

“You’re not here to do experiments on me.”

“It’s not an experiment.” Sherlock twisted up onto his left side to face John. His right hand slid across under the blanket, lifting the fabric before settling possessively on John’s hip. “I want you with me.”
John went tense and still, his mind thrown back to the times when a shot rang out from nowhere, echoing through the maze of twisting streets and tall buildings, and all you could do was drop for the nearest cover, never knowing if you were on the right side of the wall to hide from the sniper or if he was somewhere behind you. His red cross badge, marking him as a noncombatant, had been no protection then, and he was equally defenceless now.

“Always.”

John’s mind shattered, not into darkness but into a war against itself, a war he could never win, between the side of him that wanted to believe that *always* meant what he thought it meant — what he hoped it meant — and the other part, the part that found safety in the shadows and solitude.

He knew better than to hope this was Sherlock’s awkward way of offering to stay in Canada, but he wanted to cling to that tiny hope anyway, because the alternative was impossible. He couldn’t go to London, not even with the temptation of Sherlock to lure him there. He could barely stay in Fairlake for more than a few hours, and he knew every single resident. Even the trip to Little Prairie had strained his self-control, leaving him with two solid nights of nightmares. If a tiny town in the middle of nowhere could put him on edge, London would leave him catatonic. He’d end up hiding in Sherlock’s basement like some sort of strange, foreign monster, creeping out at night to feed himself and go back to his lair before anyone ever saw him.

“John.”

Sherlock snapped out his name like a verbal slap. He lowered his hands from his eyes, slowly working his fingers open. His palms stung from where his nails had dug in, and his chest burned as though he’d stopped breathing.

John turned his head to look at Sherlock, who took the slight motion as an invitation to inch closer. “I can’t —”

“No, not yet,” Sherlock agreed steadily. He deliberately moved his hand from John’s hip to rest over his heart, where four fingertip-sized burn marks formed a ragged geometric shape, one of them bisected by a small puncture wound.

John caught Sherlock’s hand, fingers clenching tight around the long, fine bones. It had to hurt Sherlock, but John couldn’t stop himself, and Sherlock made no protest. “I can’t;” he repeated.

“You *will*, though.” Sherlock held his hand steady over John’s heart, raising up on his left elbow to look down into John’s eyes. “You’re strong, John. Stronger than anyone I know.”

The kindness stung more than the fear and loneliness did. John closed his eyes, swallowing, his throat painfully tight.

“Have I given you any reason not to trust me?” Sherlock asked.

John didn’t want to have this conversation, but Sherlock wasn’t going to let him get away. He shook his head, hoping to get it over with quickly. Sleep wasn’t painless, but at least it was an old, familiar pain. Even his nightmares would be easier to endure than this.

“Then trust me now,” he continued relentlessly. “Say you’ll let me help you. Please, John.”

“Fuck,” John whispered raggedly. He opened his eyes, blinking rapidly for a second. “Why?”

“Because if you can’t — if you try and you still can’t come back with me — then I’ll stay here with you.”
John’s world tilted as Sherlock’s words left him disoriented, scrambling for balance, because what he’d heard couldn’t possibly be right. Sherlock loved London. Every time he mentioned it, his eyes lit up and his voice filled with excitement and life.

“You hate it here.” John shook his head and moved, twisting around to face Sherlock. He didn’t dare let himself hope that this wasn’t some huge misunderstanding, because this couldn’t be happening to him.

“And deep inside, so do you,” Sherlock said with a dismissive half-shrug. He brushed his fingertips over John’s jaw and pressed his thumb to the corner of John’s mouth.

“But —”

His thumb swiped over John’s mouth, pressing gently, silencing him. “Tell me that you trust me, John.”

“Sherlock...”

“Say it, John. If you really do trust me, then say so.”

John closed his eyes and lifted his hand to take Sherlock’s. He pressed his lips to Sherlock’s palm and quietly said, “I trust you.”

Sherlock sighed as though relieved, as though there had been any doubt at all. “Thank you.” He spread his fingers to catch John’s, lacing their hands together. He ducked his head to brush his lips over John’s knuckles, and when he spoke again, his voice was subdued and almost hesitant. “I have to tell you something, but I don’t want you to say anything about it until you’ve made your decision.”

Anxiety twisted through John as he tried to anticipate Sherlock’s words and failed miserably. He’d been disoriented since this had all started, and he still could hardly believe Sherlock would actually give up London, just for him.

“What decision?”

“Three choices.” Sherlock squeezed his hand and looked up, meeting his eyes. “We go to London, together. We stay here, together. Or you tell me to leave.”

“Fuck. Sherlock —”

“John,” he interrupted. “Three choices. One day, when you’re ready, I’ll ask which one you choose. Then you can tell me, but not until then.”

John took a shaky breath. “Tell you what?” he asked. The obvious answer was which choice he picked, but Sherlock wasn’t one to ever choose the obvious answer.

“How you feel about me.”

The anxiety evaporated into a sense of almost desperate relief. He knew how he felt — he’d been wrestling with that realisation for what felt like days now, though he couldn’t say exactly when it had started. “But I know —”

“Not until then, John,” Sherlock interrupted intently, “and you’re not ready now.”

John folded his arm beneath himself and laid back down on his pillow. Sherlock mirrored his
movements, and they looked into each other’s eyes in the faint glow of reflected firelight. “This isn’t how a normal relationship is supposed to work, you know.”

“I don’t want normal. I want you.”

From anyone else, that would have been an insult, but John knew Sherlock too well to take it as such from him. “And how am I supposed to stand London for thirty seconds without ‘normal’?”

Sherlock huffed and untangled his fingers so he could brush through John’s hair. His hand slipped down to the back of his neck, holding him steady for a brief kiss. “You’re not meant to be a tourist, John. Anyone normal venturing into my London would be eaten alive. I want you strong and in control, but you will never, ever be normal.”

“How is that possibly a compliment?” John asked, trying for indignant, though he ruined it with a faint smile.

“I already told you. Normal is boring, but I’ll never be bored of you, John.”
Chapter 18

Thursday, November 1

“Do you ever sleep?” John asked, his voice a low, lazy growl. He didn’t open his eyes, but his fingers, resting against Sherlock’s arm, lifted to slide forward over his wrist.

“It’s a waste of time better spent thinking. Still, I’ve slept more here than I ever did before,” Sherlock admitted, studying the subtle changes to John’s face as he awoke fully.

John laughed quietly, barely more than a huff of air and a smile. “Sleep okay when you did?”

“Fine.” Sherlock wanted to lift his hand to touch John’s face and smooth down his spiky hair, but he held still. John’s fingers moved and shifted aimlessly, not to read his pulse or feel his bones but simply to touch.

His voice took on a self-conscious edge as he asked, “I didn’t wake you up? My nightmares and all...”

“You had two, but I was able to interrupt them.” Sherlock gave in to temptation and moved closer, shifting from his pillow to share John’s. “Does it help? Do you feel better today than most mornings?”

John closed his eyes, considering, and slowly his lips turned up in a smile. “I think so.” He lifted his head enough to briefly kiss Sherlock’s lips. “It’s barely dawn. Want to go back to sleep?”

“John...”

Grinning now, John sat up and arched his back, eyes closing as he stretched. “Waste of time, right.” Sherlock couldn’t resist reaching out to smooth his hand up John’s back, careful to not disturb the T-shirt too much. John pushed back against his hand and lowered his arms, rubbing briefly at his left shoulder “Coffee? Breakfast?”

“Mmm.” Sherlock laid back, twisting to watch as John slipped out from under the blankets, trying not to disturb them too much. He circled around the foot of the bed, pausing for a few seconds to build up the fire, and then disappeared into the bathroom.

Sherlock looked up at the ceiling, thinking back to last night. John had been restless, waking Sherlock every time he moved, and Sherlock had finally given in to the impulse to spend the night watching John instead. Through intense observation, he’d begun to categorise the signs differentiating between John’s dreams and nightmares, and he’d carefully experimented with gentle ways to interrupt the nightmares before they took hold.

Then he smiled as he realised that John hadn’t expressed any concern for Sherlock’s presence during his nightmares. There was no warning that John might hurt him. Knowing that John was trusting him turned his smile into a grin.

He listened to the sound of John’s morning routine. A corner of his mind collected data, counting the seconds between when the toilet flushed and when the water in the sink came on and how the pipes rattled when John turned the hot water tap, but most of his thoughts were too caught up in the hazy, wonderful fog of affection — of love — that consumed him. He’d seen people in this state before, smiling at everything as if their private, personal emotional state somehow made the whole world brighter, but only now did he actually understand it.
Somehow, just knowing that John was in the next room made even this boring, primitive cabin into something wonderful.

Sherlock rolled onto his side to face the bathroom door, thinking that the person he’d been just a month ago would have looked at this future-self and probably shot himself to avoid this very future. Well, even he had his moments of idiocy. At least he’d resisted falling into the trap of love before, leaving himself available to John instead of some lesser creature acquired earlier in life.

John returned to the bedroom and gave Sherlock an odd, amused look, full of affection. He’d been headed for the closet but diverted to the bed, where he leaned down, weight on his right arm, to give Sherlock another kiss. “Bathroom’s yours,” he said unnecessarily, breath smelling of toothpaste, skin flushed from a splash of hot water. “I’m going to fry up the last of the eggs.”

“You could just come back to bed,” Sherlock suggested.

John grinned, the expression lighting up his whole face. “Or I could feed you up to a healthy weight, and then we could both go back to bed.”

Idly, Sherlock considered suggesting breakfast in bed, but John got back up and walked to the closet, leaving Sherlock to silently admire the view. He let his eyes trace down John’s back, over the curve of his arse, and down his legs, thinking back to his past partners, the ones who lifted weights or did yoga or rotted their brains with mindless jogging on treadmills, and not one of them could possibly compare to John.

“Have you been to Greece?”

The apparently non sequitur didn’t even get a strange look. John was growing accustomed to Sherlock’s habit of skipping the boring parts of conversations. “No. You?” he just asked, taking far too many clothes out of the closet — jeans and a vest and a button-down shirt and a jumper. He draped them over his arm and went to the dresser.

“Years ago. Family trip.” Sherlock curled around, bringing the pillow with him, so his view of John continued without interruption. “They don’t allow cars on Hydra Island. All travel is by foot or bicycle.”

John threw him a curious look. “Sounds different.”

“We could lease a villa there, on the beach. We’d never have to see anyone, and you wouldn’t have to put on all that clothing,” Sherlock said a bit petulantly.

John laughed and tossed his clothes on the foot of the bed. He followed, crawling up over the covers to trap Sherlock under his weight. “How exactly are we supposed to lease a villa on some primitive Greek island?”

Sherlock freed his arm from the blankets so he could take hold of John’s hip, hoping to coax him into staying for at least a little while. Coffee sounded appealing, in a distant way, but John belonged here with him, not out in the kitchen. “I have my passport and Mycroft’s credit cards. What else do we need?”

Grinning, John leaned down to kiss his nose, startling him. “Small steps, Sherlock. Let’s start with coffee,” he said, and got back off the bed, to Sherlock’s infinite disappointment.
Winter weather at the cabin was nothing if not unpredictable. By the time John had the breakfast dishes washed and a second pot of coffee brewed, the clouds had dissipated, leaving the bright sun to melt through the thin crust of ice and snow. He dried his hands, looking out the kitchen window, and thought absently about all the things he’d normally be doing to prepare for winter. He had to check the snowmobile now, in case something had gone wrong while it sat idle over the summer. He could go look for more deadfall; there was never enough firewood, and any he gathered now would be seasoned by the end of winter. He could inspect the fuel lines to the generator for any cracking or brittle spots. He could go out to catch his second deer.

Instead, he fixed up two mugs of coffee and carried them into the living room, where Sherlock was sprawled over the sofa, right arm draped out as though reaching for the fire. In his left hand, he held a paperback. The book didn’t register at first; John had stocked the cabin with every book that caught his eye at various used bookstores, thinking it wise to have years worth of winter reading materials on hand. Sherlock had dived into the collection without waiting for an invitation, so the sight of him reading was nothing new.

Then John saw the cover art — a giant wolf-man with an axe, a swordswoman in chainmail armor, and a leather-wearing man with two wicked daggers — and realised it was his book, first in a series he’d started two years ago.

“You know the target audience for that is age twelve to eighteen, don’t you?” he asked self-consciously.

“So I gathered.” Sherlock rolled onto his side and pressed back against the cushions, making just enough room for John to perch on the edge of the sofa. “I’ve never read much fiction,” he admitted.

John handed over the mug with three sugars. He’d learned not to mix them up. He didn’t know which was worse: accidentally drinking coffee laced with three sugars or Sherlock taking his straight black. “Don’t feel obliged to read it.”

“I never feel obliged to do anything.” Sherlock said bluntly. He sat up, somehow managing to curl around John and press a kiss to the back of his neck in the process, all without putting the book down or spilling a drop of coffee. He turned the book, showing John the cover, and asked, “Why ‘Richard Brook’?”

A bit uncomfortably, he said, “John Watson isn’t exactly a remarkable name for an author.”

Sherlock gave him a sharp-eyed look; nothing got past him. “And Richard Brook is?”

With a rustle of paper, Sherlock set the book down on the back of the sofa to free his hand. He touched John’s forearm, fingers curling gently to brush his wrist, pushing the cuff of his shirt aside.

“I went through rehab three times,” he said quietly.

Startled, John looked at him, wondering if he’d missed the part where the conversation shifted from pseudonyms to addiction. “Your brother said that, but I told you before — it doesn’t matter.”

Sherlock gave an irritated little huff. “It didn’t help. Oh, maybe physically — they had the facilities to support the physiological process of withdrawal,” he said clinically, “but it actually accomplished nothing for me. All anyone wanted to do was talk. Private counseling, group counseling... As if I cared about talking to strangers?”
John wasn’t Sherlock. He couldn’t read someone else’s thoughts in a glance, with only subtle shifts of expression and body language to guide him. “I can’t say I have experience with addiction, but you seem...” He trailed off, trying to find a word other than ‘normal’. “Unaffected,” he finally said.

“Drugs weren’t a matter of entertainment. I used them to create specific effects on my neurochemistry and thought processes. But that isn’t the point.”

The doctor buried deep in John’s mind rebelled at the ridiculous idea. “Wait,” he interrupted as Sherlock took a breath. “You started using —”

“Unimportant,” Sherlock cut in. “The point is, talking solved nothing. Do you really think any of the idiots at rehab could even begin to comprehend the importance of maximising the efficiency of my thought processes?”

“I’m not sure I do,” John admitted. “Not if it took — What were you on, anyway?”

“Primarily cocaine and morphine.”

“Jesus.” John shook his head. “For a fucking genius, you really are incredibly stupid, you know.”

Instead of taking offence, Sherlock snorted a brief laugh. “Talking to the counselors there was as helpful as talking to this sofa.”

“Is that likely to happen? Because I can’t picture you taking to the couch, but I can picture you yelling at it, and I’d appreciate the forewarning.”

“Hardly.” Sherlock’s hand tightened around John’s wrist. “The point is, you haven’t had anyone worth the effort of talking to either, until now.”

John took a deep breath, biting back his instinctive, angry refusal, a reaction learned after months of failed therapy with the counselors and doctors seven years ago. “I thought part of the benefit of therapy was that you could be honest with a stranger. No... I don’t know. Fear of embarrassment or something, I suppose,” he said numbly.

“As if there’s some universal solution,” Sherlock scoffed. “Even the so-called doctors of psychiatry can’t seem to understand that every mind is different. Obviously you found no benefit in talking to strangers any more than I did.”

“It’s a little little terrifying to think you might be right, you know,” John admitted, giving Sherlock a faint smile.

Sherlock’s answering smile was smug. “Of course I’m right. I know you, John.”

John looked down into his coffee before his eyes were drawn to the pale, long fingers still draped loosely over his wrist. “I wanted to start over,” he said quietly. “John Watson wouldn’t write a children’s book. I needed to see another name on the title page.”

“And the other book you’re writing?”

John hissed in a breath, closing his eyes. He’d known that Sherlock would have found those pages by now, but he hadn’t really allowed himself to think about them. “It’s not for children.”

Sherlock’s fingers pressed gently over his pulse. “JM. John...”

“James, actually. James Moriarty.” John laughed uncomfortably. “It sounds... appropriately dark. It’s
not a very pleasant story. God knows I wouldn’t want to read it.”

“Does it help to write it?”

John shrugged. He turned the mug, taking the handle with his left hand so he could drink his coffee without pulling away from Sherlock’s touch. “I don’t know,” he finally admitted. “I haven’t made it far enough. Thirty-something pages is barely the first couple of chapters.”

“Are you —”

John shook his head, rising abruptly, though he tried not to make it seem like he was avoiding Sherlock’s hand. “We should go,” he interrupted. “The sooner we get that second deer, the better. Towing the trailer with the snowmobile is a bitch.”

Sherlock looked up at him with those too-sharp eyes, and John could almost see his brain analysing John’s reaction. For one cold, suffocating moment, John thought Sherlock might push him to keep talking. But then he nodded and rose, fixing John with a wicked smile as he asked, “Care to help me change?”

John laughed and pulled Sherlock down for a kiss, careful not to spill his coffee. “I’ll help you warm up later. How’s that?”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

~~~

When successful, deer hunting was an acceptable pastime, if the alternative was sitting alone in an isolated cabin with terrible internet speeds and several thousand chewed-up paperback books. When unsuccessful, though, deer hunting was cold, boring, and frustrating even with the distraction that John presented simply by existing. In a rare moment of empathy, Sherlock recognised that he was close to snapping and forced himself to seek any distraction, but none of his usual coping mechanisms were available. His violin was at the cabin, his mobile was a dead lump of plastic with no signal, he was nearly out of cigarettes, and his last-resort — idiot-baiting — was entirely out of the question, given that John was the only living creature in earshot. There certainly weren’t any deer.

So Sherlock trailed through the little piles of snow and mud puddles, staying well behind John, and tried to think of new ways to make Mycroft’s life miserable, which was always a good diversion — except this time, he kept returning to the thought that without Mycroft’s heavy-handed intervention, Sherlock never would have found John at all.

The very idea that he should be grateful to Mycroft made his irritation that much more difficult to bear.

Finally, as his temper reached the breaking point, he stomped forward to where John was standing in the shadows under a tree, surveying their surroundings with his field glasses.

“We’re not going to starve,” Sherlock said, his voice sounding absurdly loud in the silent forest, though he kept to a normal speaking volume. “Is there any logical reason for us to stay here, when we could instead be back at the cabin, having sex?”
John had begun to turn, most likely to reprimand Sherlock for startling game animals (who clearly weren’t in the area anyway). Then he dropped the field glasses, making them swing against the strap around his neck, and started to laugh.

Bastard.

“I take it that counts as a romantic proposition, coming from you?” he asked without a hint of irritation.

The laugh seemed to slip beneath Sherlock’s skin, winding through his ribs and around his heart, pushing away his irritation and boredom even though he tried to cling to them, because it was just a laugh, not an interesting diversion or productive use of his time.

Ignoring Sherlock’s fierce glare, John set his gloved hands on Sherlock’s waist, compressing the down parka to pull Sherlock against his body. The kiss was cold and hot at once, soothing Sherlock’s mood that much more. As if of their own volition, his hands came up to circle John’s shoulders, and the last of his pique slipped away under the teasing swipes of John’s tongue.

When the kiss ended, Sherlock asked, “Does this mean we can go back?”

To his limitless frustration, John shook his head. “No. But I think I owe you for last night.”

Sherlock blamed the cold on his inability to immediately see John’s intent. When John pushed him back, he almost tripped, startled, scanning John’s face for any hint of anger or panic, but all he saw was sly amusement. Then his back hit a tree; drops of water fell on his hood and rolled down the waterproof fabric, and the thick layer of down cushioned him from feeling the bark.

John kissed him again, pressing his chest against Sherlock’s, rising up on his toes to better reach. Sherlock slipped on the tree roots and caught John’s arm for balance, remembering at the last moment to avoid his left shoulder. Then he almost slipped again as John dropped to a crouch in front of him, and his hands, now bare of the gloves, slipped up under Sherlock’s hip-length parka to find his belt.

The last of his irritation vanished in a white-hot flash. John was wonderful and brilliant and Sherlock would never be bored with him again. He dug his boots into the dirt between the tree roots and let his head fall back against the bark, closing his eyes in anticipation.

Then he almost yelped in indignant surprise. “Cold hands!” he snapped, sucking in his gut to avoid the icy touch.

John laughed, looking up at Sherlock, and grinned, “I wasn’t planning on using my hands.”

Oh.

Sherlock’s shiver had nothing to do with the cold. He thought about asking if John had changed his mind about the condoms, but then he decided there was no sense talking at all. John opened Sherlock’s jeans just enough, tugged down the waistband of his pants, and licked at his cock just once. The contrast of icy air and John’s tongue sent liquid fire boiling up from Sherlock’s gut, up through his spine, and into his brain, destroying all rational thought.

He reached for John’s hair, but he couldn’t catch hold with his gloves on. John’s laugh drove away the chilly air before his mouth followed, taking Sherlock’s entire half-hard cock into his mouth at once before he had to draw back as Sherlock went from halfway to entirely there in what felt like a single heartbeat.
“You’re perfect,” Sherlock whispered, fighting to keep his balance only because falling would mean John would stop. “John, you’re wonderful. Oh, fuck.”

John laughed without stopping, hands clenching the backs of Sherlock’s thighs for balance. He was in an awkward crouch, not on his knees on the damp earth, and he kept having to pull back to breathe through his sniffling at the cold, and Sherlock didn’t dare move, though all he wanted was to fuck John’s mouth. He had no idea how he’d gone so quickly from fatally bored to so aroused that he wouldn’t notice if a bear attacked, except to tell the bear to wait and let him finish.

Then John found his balance, resting one knee on Sherlock’s boot, and it hurt enough to momentarily distract him until John took his cock deeper, fighting his gag reflex and swallowing until his nose pressed against Sherlock’s body, something John had tried but hadn’t managed with him before.

“Bloody fucking — Don’t stop, John,” he grated out, aware in some distant way that his voice had taken on overtones of pleading. Thankfully John didn’t even hesitate but kept at it instead, letting the press of Sherlock’s hand guide him to move faster, take him another fraction deeper into his throat, and Sherlock tried to gasp out a warning, but his mind had stopped functioning.

He came in a flash of blinding pleasure and affection he’d never even imagined, because love had never been tied up with sex for him. If he’d been able to speak, he might have let his thoughts — his feelings — escape, but it was all he could do to breathe. He didn’t even flinch when cold fingertips brushed his abdomen as John pulled up his pants and fastened his jeans and fumbled to get his belt buckled in place.

Cursing the gloves that made his fingers clumsy, he tried to help John to his feet but just ended up uselessly petting his parka. Laughing at his efforts, John fisted his bare hands into Sherlock’s jacket and kissed him, slow and sweet, filling the air with the warmth of their mingled breath.

“Thanks for last night,” John whispered against Sherlock’s lips.

All but purring inside, Sherlock crossed his hands at the small of John’s back, holding him close, ignoring the rifle and field glasses trapped between their bodies. “Can we go hunting again tomorrow?”
Chapter 19

Friday, November 2

As the little aircraft taxied to a stop, Sherlock glanced sidelong at John, who was busy with the controls. Tension had crept into John’s body and expression over the last hour as Little Prairie Air Traffic Control had guided them through the crowded airspace (well, crowded compared to Fairlake). Now, Sherlock could almost see the protective walls surrounding John. Necessary as they were, Sherlock hated them. He wondered if they’d ever truly be gone, or if John would simply learn how to better hide them.

“You don’t have to do this,” Sherlock insisted.

“After yesterday?” John laughed tightly and shook his head. He unlatched the door, letting a blast of cold air into the warm passenger compartment. Quickly, Sherlock zipped up his parka and exited his side of the plane.

Sherlock huffed, breath steaming in the frigid air, and fumbled his gloves out of his pockets as the chill settled into his fingers. They’d discussed this last night and this morning, and John had absolutely refused to change his mind. He’d even gone so far as to tell Sherlock he could stay back at the cabin — as if Sherlock would let John go out alone?

This was too soon. Just one incident could negate all the subtle progress John had made towards his recovery. And for what? To prove something that Sherlock logically knew to be true, as if logic wasn’t enough.

Normally, that would be enough to set off Sherlock’s temper, but he couldn’t work up more than a mild irritation. John was doing this for Sherlock’s benefit — not for his own. This was one more way that he could ensure Sherlock’s safety and health, and even though it wasn’t necessary, some little, illogical, emotional corner of Sherlock’s mind loved him all the more for it.

So he walked beside John, trying to find the precise placement that would offer comfort and support without crowding. He thought of all the things that people might say to fill the silence, but none of them sounded natural. Instead, he stayed silent and vigilant, focussing his attention on scanning the area for anything that John might perceive as a threat.

John led the way to the terminal, where he showed his identification to the security guard, who also checked Sherlock’s passport before allowing them to enter. They didn’t even pass through a metal detector, though John had made a point of leaving his .45 back at the cabin. Sherlock sniffed derisively; at least security at Heathrow and Gatwick provided a mild challenge.

“Be nice,” John muttered, giving Sherlock a tight smile. He paused and looked around, still wearing his metallic brown sunglasses, and then headed in the direction of a small ‘Car Rentals’ sign. “You have a licence?”

“Yes. Makes it easier to avoid attracting notice whenever I steal Mycroft’s car.” Sherlock grinned at him, and was relieved that John’s answering laugh was a bit closer to normal.

Ten minutes later, they were in possession of a set of keys to a Ford Taurus and a paper map that John opened up after tossing the keys Sherlock’s way, saying, “You can drive.”

Sherlock stared at the map for a moment before he laughed and dug his mobile out of his pocket.
He’d been carrying it out of habit, even powered down. Now, he started it up and said, “GPS. What’s the destination address?”

“GPS? Really?” John stopped looking around the parking lot for their car and leaned against Sherlock’s arm to watch the screen.

With anyone else, Sherlock would have asked sharp questions about living under rocks or in dark caves. “Don’t you have a — Of course you don’t,” Sherlock said, momentarily wrong-footed at the idea of someone in this modern age who owned an airplane, even a little homemade one, but didn’t have a mobile phone. And with no television and minimal internet access, it was all too possible that John had never even seen a smartphone.

As his mobile searched for signal, Sherlock toggled the alarm button on the keychain, and then followed the sound of the horn to their car. He unlocked the doors and had an awkward moment when he was faced with the evidence that the driver’s seat was on the wrong side. He covered by holding the door open for John, who just gave him a tense smile of thanks and got into the passenger seat.

Sherlock’s mobile beeped. Five text messages and twelve voicemails. He got into the car and started the engine before checking any of them.

“Mycroft,” he said with a sigh a moment later. “Isn’t there a war on somewhere?”

John’s jaw went tense, and he kept his attention fixed on the paper map.

After one puzzled moment, Sherlock clenched his fingers tightly around his mobile. If John had no idea about smartphones, of course he wouldn’t know anything about world news. “It was a serious question,” Sherlock said truthfully, ignoring the voicemails in favor of opening his GPS app. “There was something in Afghanistan, maybe Korea.”

John gave him a strange look before shaking his head fractionally. “No idea,” he admitted, nodding at the phone. “Civilian GPS. I never thought it would happen.”

Sherlock smiled, relieved that the tense moment had been defused. “Here. It picks up our location immediately. Just type the destination into the ‘to’ field,” he said, handing over the mobile.

~~~

“Ah, dear brother. I was starting to wonder if you’d ever return my calls.”

“If I don’t answer one voicemail, why would you expect I’d answer eleven more?” Sherlock asked acidly. He took a deep drag of his cigarette, reveling in the buzz of comparatively fresh nicotine, and kept his eyes locked to the clinic doors. John had steadfastly refused to allow Sherlock to accompany him inside.

“And yet, here you are. How are you enjoying Canada?”

Sherlock’s smile was like ice. “Do you have anything important to tell me, or did you just want to chat?”

“I worry for you, Sherlock. Are you clean?”
“Why not ask my keeper? That is what you expect, isn’t it?”

To Sherlock’s delight, Mycroft’s voice took on the slightest edge of irritation. “By all means, put him on.”

“You spoke to him a week ago.”

“For less than a minute, via radio,” Mycroft protested. “Sherlock, I know you loathe the very idea of family, but you are my brother. I’ve only ever wanted to help you, but ever since our parents died—”

“Don’t bring them into this,” Sherlock snapped, though he regretted the outburst before the words were even out. He pulled smoke deep into his lungs and held it, not listening to Mycroft’s platitudes. Mycroft was older, successful, powerful, and even smarter, damn him, but Sherlock would wither away and die in his lifestyle — a lifestyle he wanted to inflict on Sherlock.

No, not a lifestyle. A cage.

Finally, Sherlock exhaled and cut into the soothing tenor: “Yes, yes. Time to go now, though. Always a delight talking to you.”

“I expect you to have him call—”

“No reception at the cabin or Fairlake. But oh, that’s right. You knew that already when you chose to exile me there, didn’t you?” Sherlock demanded, unable to hide the bitterness in his voice. No matter how well things had turned out, there was no possible way Mycroft could have imagined the deep connection that had grown between Sherlock and John. No, his sole intent had been to send Sherlock to the most remote location he could imagine, short of that Russian research centre on Antarctica, with an iron-willed ex-soldier as his jailor.

“Then how are you calling me now?” Mycroft asked smoothly.

_Bloody hell,_ Sherlock thought, looking around quickly. His phone’s GPS would pinpoint his location, and the last thing he needed was Mycroft demanding to know what he was doing outside a health clinic. He honestly didn’t know what was worse for Mycroft to think: that he was shagging John or scamming the clinic for drugs.

(Did Mycroft even _know_ that codeine was available here over the counter? Idiot.)

Fortunately, the clinic shared a parking lot with two strip malls and a new-looking apartment complex covered in somewhat desperate ‘We’re renting! Immediate move-in!’ signs. Relieved, Sherlock started towards the strip mall to his right, saying, “Ah yes, seven hours’ time difference. You’d be at home at this hour, so no immediate GPS trace. We’re in town now. Fairlake isn’t exactly known for its shopping.”

“You say ‘we’, meaning you and Captain Watson, yes?”

“As opposed to whom, Mycroft?”

Mycroft’s sigh was eloquent, perfectly calculated to evoke the image of a lovingly concerned elder brother, and it didn’t fool Sherlock for a second. “I see this conversation will accomplish nothing. Thank you for contacting me.”

“Oh, did you not get my email? Properly cooked, venison —”
“Yes. I did. Very childish, Sherlock.”

Sherlock smiled like a shark. “It was lovely,” he said before he disconnected. He’d never been able to resist scoring points off Mycroft. His therapists had called it childish and suggested he try to form a more productive, healthy, adult relationship with his brother, opening the door for him to analyse their familial relations. As far as he was aware, that resulted in two divorces, one child abuse investigation, and one Home Office investigation for immigration fraud.

Tempted as Sherlock was to take advantage of his much faster mobile internet connection, he turned off the phone, disabling the GPS, and then headed back for the parking lot to wait for John in the car where it was warm.

~~~

“This is the only reason to come to civilisation,” John said as he pulled open the door to an unfamiliar fast food restaurant.

Sherlock glanced at the gaudy red scrawl on the side of the building once more. “Who’s Tim Horton?” he asked, following John inside.

“Poor thing, you,” John said mock-sadly. Despite the fact that the unremarkable beige restaurant was crowded, with perhaps three-quarters of the plastic tables occupied, John walked right in without hesitation.

Sherlock stayed protectively close, trying not to be too obvious, and followed John to a stack of plastic trays hanging in front of a long counter staffed with young people in T-shirts and hats. For a moment, he had a flashback of his own to the cafeteria in the detention centre where he’d been trapped for an entire weekend while Mycroft, in a fit of pique, decided to ‘teach Sherlock a lesson’ by leaving him incarcerated after one of his drugs arrests. But the smell of coffee — decidedly not instant — and subtle, sublime baked goods soothed his worries, and he took off his gloves and picked up a tray with something approaching enthusiasm.

Ten minutes later, he was riding a fantastic sugar high, washing down the remains of his third doughnut with rich coffee, properly sweetened and lightened. John grinned at him, having taken the more traditional route of starting on his chili, saving his doughnut for last. Faced with a significantly more boring grilled Tuscan chicken panini of his own, Sherlock eyed John’s doughnut and lifted a hand.

“Yes,” John said, giving Sherlock a warning glare.

“Hm?”

“Yes, I am going to eat that.”

Sherlock sighed and looked in the direction of the counter. Despite his lack of concern over the crowd, John had insisted on taking a corner table, regrettably close to the loo and employee-only door. Sherlock couldn’t see the baked goods display, but he had a perfect memory of the available choices. Perhaps he should skip the bigger doughnuts and get the little round ones — they were called ‘Timbits’, a name undoubtedly thought up by some sex-starved advertising executive.

Under the table, John kicked him. “Eat your lunch. We’ll get some dessert to-go, if you want.”
With another sigh, Sherlock picked up half of his sandwich and took a small bite. To his profound disappointment, it was almost as good as the doughnuts had been, which seemed somehow wrong. “Is this why you chose Little Prairie?” he asked before taking another bite.

“Hm? Oh.” John chuckled and scraped his spoon in the bowl to get at the last of his chili. “No, this is a chain. They’re all over Canada.”

“And you live outside the one town in Canada that doesn’t have these?” he asked, using the sandwich to point at John’s still-untouched doughnut.

With another affectionate nudge, John said, “We’ll come back whenever you like, at least until the snow sets in.”

“Do you need to come back for the results?”

John shook his head, going absolutely still for a moment at a loud clatter from the kitchen. Then he shook his head and said, “We’ll go to Fairlake on Monday afternoon and use the phone at the airfield.”

Sherlock nodded, hiding his disappointment at having to wait through the entire weekend. He respected John’s need for reassurance, but these lab tests would simply validate his conclusions. It was an impractical waste of time — not to mention patently unfair, given John’s wilful disregard for the rules of safe sex just yesterday. But John needed this, and coming here had given Sherlock the opportunity to observe John outside his normal environment, so in the end, it was worth the effort.

“I spoke to Mycroft,” Sherlock said before he started on the second half of his sandwich.

“Oh?”

“As predicted, he’s upset at your lack of regular reports.”

John sighed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “I don’t care,” he said quietly. “You and I both know what I owe him, but that doesn’t give him the right to expect me to spy on you.”

“I didn’t tell him anything about us.” Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. He broke a piece of crust off his sandwich and crushed it between his fingertips. “He wouldn’t approve.”

“That I’m male?” John asked, his voice frosty.

Sherlock snorted. “No. He didn’t choose you to be a friend. He chose you to be a watchdog. If he knew, he’d immediately decide your objectivity had been compromised and demand I leave at once.”

John laughed quietly. “I can imagine how well that would go over. As long as he doesn’t send a retrieval team to take you away, I think we can live with him complaining from seven thousand kilometers away.”
Wednesday, November 7

John bagged his second deer barely an hour into the hunt, thanks to an unlikely shot of opportunity from just ten yards away, when the wind blew just right and the snow cleared enough for him to see the herd, brown fur blending seamlessly against winter-bare brown trees. Sherlock, who had been hinting that they should go for walks in the snowy forest for two days, since John’s tests came back negative, had actually sulked until John offered to let him field dress the carcass.

Someone else would’ve been put off by the way Sherlock had grinned and asked, “Where do I make the first cut?”

John just kissed him and showed him how to properly hold the knife.

By late afternoon, they were back at the cabin, carcass dressed and butchered, packed away in the deep freezer. John made tea and set a pot of stew to reheat, looking over towards Sherlock when he heard the slap of a book dropped onto the kitchen table.

“There’s a sequel. There has to be, with that ending,” Sherlock complained as he sat down, twisting around so he could put his feet up on John’s usual chair. “It’s not the one you’re writing, though.”

“I finished the sequel this summer. Don’t have a final copy yet,” John answered apologetically. “I got the proof but had to send it back. A couple of pages ended up printed out of order.”

Sherlock huffed in irritation. “And you don’t have an electronic copy.”

“Actually, I do. It’s —” John blinked, watching as Sherlock kicked the chair aside and left, long strides taking him back into the living room. A moment later, he heard the desk drawer open. “— on my laptop,” he finished, amused, and pulled the tea bags out of the mugs.

“The battery’s dead!” Sherlock complained loudly. “What’s the point in having a laptop if you’re going to let the battery run down?”

“I don’t actually use it, in case you haven’t noticed, except to email my publisher.” John frowned, stirring sugar into Sherlock’s tea with loud clinks of the spoon. He’d set up a new email account for his writing mostly so he wouldn’t have to deal with messages from Harry and old friends from his past life.

He checked the fire in the stove, trying to gauge if it was hot enough to scorch the bottom of the stew, and then brought the tea out to the living room. Sherlock had made a mess of the desk, stacking his laptop on John’s in-progress stack of manuscript pages to make room for the second laptop, with the power cord draped over the box of blank paper on the other side.

“You don’t even have a password?” Sherlock scolded.

“Why bother? You’re the first person to touch the thing besides me since I bought it, and you’d probably be able to guess any password I thought up,” John said, finding a clear spot for Sherlock’s tea, well away from the manuscript.

“True.” Sherlock smirked. “The code for your gun safe is five-one-one-five-four-three. Does it mean anything?”
“Other than the fact that you’re terrifying?”

With a huff of amusement, Sherlock turned, saying, “Really, John. It’s simple. I’ll show you.”

Thinking Sherlock was going to show him something on the laptop, John leaned in just as Sherlock rose. His elbow hit John’s arm, jostling him, and hot tea splashed everywhere, soaking through his shirt and jeans and Sherlock’s sleeve.

He backed away and hit the couch with bruising force, clawing at his shirt, panic rising up in his chest. He heard a footstep and lashed out with a clumsy kick as he reached behind himself, pushing something out of the way so he could stagger back.

The sound of his name cut through the suffocating, dizzying fear that gripped him. Sherlock, he thought, and the panic receded a step. Dizzy, he crouched down so he could sit on the floor before he lost his balance and fell. He took a deep breath and heat seared into his skin, threatening to drag him under again.

“I’m fine,” he said tightly, more for his own benefit than Sherlock’s. His fingers burned, clenched around the still-hot fabric, but he could breathe. He knew Sherlock was nearby, just a few feet away, giving him the space he needed.

He opened his eyes, staring at the floor, and took a few more breaths. His pulse started to slow and a tiny, incredulous part of his mind realised that this hadn’t been so bad. His shirt was still warm under his hand and cool where he had it pulled away from his body, allowing air to flow around the wet fabric. No more than two minutes, start to finish. Maybe less. That was a hell of a lot better than two hours.

Sherlock moved, not to approach John but to leave the room. John closed his eyes and leaned against the wood slats forming the back of the sofa. He had to find a way to stop this from happening. Sherlock would only tolerate this for so long before he left, and John would be alone again. He was alone now — a thought that threatened to pull him back under once more.

Then Sherlock came back, settling down on the floor off to John’s left, a foot of space carefully left between them. “Take off your wet shirt,” he said, holding out John’s warm bathrobe.

John’s hesitation lasted less than a second. There was no point in trying to hide the physical scars that were insignificant compared to the minefield of his subconscious, and he needed to get out of his shirt. He tried to undo the buttons but his hands were shaking from the adrenaline still flooding his system. The harder he tried to steady himself, the worse the trembling became, until finally, embarrassed, he said, “Sherlock…”

Without a word, Sherlock leaned over and unbuttoned John’s shirt for him. He let John pull it off and took it from him, and then took the T-shirt as well. John fought to pull on the robe, shivering from the cold air on wet skin.

“Can you stand?”

The denial was on his lips, but that, too, was pointless. He shook his head and held out a hand, not meeting Sherlock’s eyes. “Help me up, will you?”

Sherlock took his hand and steadied himself, offering John balance without trying to guide him or cling to him. Embarrassed, hating that this kept happening to him, John murmured apologies which Sherlock ignored in favor of keeping him upright and tugging the thick terry cloth robe closed, holding it at the waist with his free hand.
“Did you burn your legs?”

“No. Maybe. Shit, I don’t know,” John admitted. He thought about the effort it would take to get through his belt and jeans, and he was still wearing his boots, and he gave up on the idea. Instead, he buried his face against Sherlock’s chest, breathing in the smoky wool of his soft sweater.

Sherlock let go of the robe and gently took John by the arms, making no move to hold him, to trap him, until John pressed closer as if he could burrow into Sherlock’s warmth. Then Sherlock’s arms closed around him and he pressed a kiss to John’s hair, offering a silent, comforting presence and demanding nothing in return.

~~~

Inside, Sherlock berated himself. He should have been more careful. He had better spatial awareness than that. How many times had he used the accidentally-spilled-drink trick to get close to someone, either to unobtrusively interrogate a source or to as the first step in a complex game of seduction? For him to be so clumsy was inexcusable — especially with John.

He kept any hint of his thoughts out of his body language, knowing John’s senses were heightened on a subconscious level. He’d be looking for any hint that Sherlock was disappointed in his lack of self-control, genuine or not, and Sherlock was determined that he wouldn’t see anything he could possibly misinterpret that way.

Seven minutes ticked over to eight before John tensed, lifting his head fractionally. “This isn’t going to work,” he said, striving to control his voice. He was good enough to fool anyone who wasn’t Sherlock. “I can’t — I wouldn’t make it even a day in London.”

“Not like this, no,” Sherlock agreed. He felt John’s surprise reflected in the way he drew back just slightly, no more than a shift of his weight back onto his heels. “I’m not asking you to leave now, though. I’m asking you to trust me — to let me help you. That’s all.”

“What’s the point?” John sighed, breath warm through the layers of shirts Sherlock wore. He leaned into Sherlock’s arms again, resignation heavy in the slump of his shoulders and the way his head bowed. His stubble caught on Sherlock’s knit jumper.

“Must there be one? I want to do this.”

“I’m not a science experiment.”

“No. You’re not.” Sherlock’s arms tightened protectively, possessively, new feelings that he was discovering he liked. “It is a scientific process, though. I’m not some” — he cast his mind about, trying to find just the right words to express his contempt — “some witch doctor stumbling around in your mind. I’m a scientist, John. You need logic, not voodoo.”

John’s tension disappeared in a snorted, choked burst of laughter. “Voodoo?” He leaned back enough to look up at Sherlock, grinning a bit desperately. “Voodoo?”

Sherlock shrugged dismissively. “I understand you. The more I get to know you, the more I can see what should have been so obvious to whoever failed to help you before. Let me help you.”

“Why?” John reached up to touch Sherlock’s face as he asked, “Why is this so important? Two
“Two weeks ago, neither of us had a future worth living for,” Sherlock said, feeling a little shiver crawl up his spine. Two weeks ago, he would have killed someone to escape rehab and go back to his existence. Oblivion in drugs and self-indulgence was far better than the alternative, or so he’d thought.

He tightened his arms around John, ducking his head down to kiss him hard. “Tell me this isn’t better,” he asked, drawing back only enough to speak, lips brushing against John’s with each syllable. “Tell me you couldn’t be content like this. Even happy.”

John shook his head, sliding his hand around the back of Sherlock’s neck to hold him close. “You’d just know I was lying, if I tried,” he whispered. “Trust you. That’s all?”

Sherlock laughed quietly. “That’s all.”

“You know that’s not... Trust doesn’t come easily for me.” John sighed and looked away, his expression going distant. “I can say ‘I trust you’ all day, but...”

“I know. But that’s only here,” Sherlock told him, moving one hand to touch John’s forehead. “Inside, you already do trust me.”

With a faint smile, John asked, “Cocky, aren’t you?”

“I’m right.” Then, in a rare fit of modesty, he said, “I’m almost always right.”

“Humble, too.”

“Look at the evidence,” Sherlock snapped, though the tone lost most of its sting as he grinned down at John, who was struggling not to laugh at him. “You fell asleep beside me. I woke you from your nightmares, and you barely moved. You didn’t try to attack me or defend yourself. You already do trust me.”

John took a deep breath, tipping his head back and closing his eyes. “Okay. Okay, I can see that,” he said slowly, thoughtfully. “But look at this. I mean, it was a fucking cup of tea, not —”

“Sensory association.” Sherlock stepped back, moving his hand to slide down John’s arm until he could lace their fingers together. “Heat. Burns. I should have been more careful,” he said softly, regretfully, as he touched John’s chest with his other hand.

The tension returned to John’s body, but he didn’t pull away from Sherlock’s grasp. “How could you possibly have known how I’d react? Even I wouldn’t have guessed —”

“I don’t guess,” Sherlock corrected, flattening his hand on John’s sternum, feeling his heartbeat. “It’s an obvious mental connection. I’ll be more careful, in future.”

“I don’t want you treating me like I’m made of glass.”

Sherlock snorted. “I wouldn’t want you if you were.” He looked into John’s eyes, studying his expression, and slowly shook his head. “You don’t see it, do you? You don’t know how strong you actually are.”

This time, John did pull away. He turned and walked for the bedroom, looking down as he distracted himself by unbuckling his belt. “Strong enough that I live here? I’m not exactly impressed.”
“Strong enough that you’re alive at all.” He followed, resisting the urge to chase John down and pull him close. The sight of him wasn’t enough to soothe Sherlock’s sudden, irrational terror at the thought of losing him.

With a bitter little laugh, John said, “Yes, well. They did a good enough job of drumming that into my head at the hospital, even if they didn’t accomplish much else.”

“What?”

“Suicide isn’t an answer,” John said as though quoting.

Sherlock had known that John must have considered suicide, though it was difficult for him to think rationally rather than reacting emotionally to the idea. Actually hearing him say the word was enough to break Sherlock’s resolve, and he crossed to where John stood by the banked fire in four quick strides.

Startled, John looked up, meeting his eyes for just a moment before Sherlock pulled him into his arms. He told himself that he shouldn’t be holding John like this — that it would be too much, especially with the heavy emotional darkness pressing in on them from all sides — but he needed to feel John’s breath and heartbeat, to reassure some primitive corner of his mind that John was safe and alive. His breath came in strained gasps, and something in his chest shattered into spikes of hot pain.

Then John’s arms circled him, holding him just as tightly. “It’s all right,” he said softly, pressing a kiss against Sherlock’s throat. “It’s okay. I’m here.”

Of course he was. Obvious. Sherlock wanted to snap and rail at him for being so stupidly transparent, but he couldn’t breathe enough to speak and he couldn’t let go because he needed John in his arms, though all he could do was cling to him in silence as John’s hand pressed gentle circles against Sherlock’s back, as though Sherlock were the one in need of comforting.
Tuesday, November 20

“You must realise the futility of keeping secrets from me,” Sherlock said as soon as he circled the tail of the aircraft to John’s side. Cold wind tugged at the hood of his parka, and a painful chill settled into every inch of exposed skin. He snified and cupped his hands in front of his face, blowing on them to try and trap warm air.

“By now, yes,” John agreed as he opened his door. He twisted around on the pilot’s seat and lifted out the cardboard box that had been their sole purpose in the late-season trip to Fairlake.

To Sherlock’s infinite irritation, the box had been securely closed with twine, and whatever was inside was wrapped and packed too carefully to have any characteristic rattle, smell, or even shifting weight. He took the box from John and gave it another experimental shake.

Bastard that he was, John just laughed and turned back to the controls. “Get that inside. And if you open it, no sex for a week.”

“John —”

“No, make that two weeks,” John threatened. He waved Sherlock clear before steering the aircraft across the yard in the direction of the hangar.

Muttering under his breath, Sherlock carried the carton (24 by 20 by 20 inches, 5.5 cubic foot capacity, 200 pound test, though the contents didn’t weigh more than a stone) into the house. He set the box on the kitchen table and glared at it as though he could see through the corrugated cardboard if he just concentrated hard enough, but his best efforts failed.

The wrapping of twine was excessively thorough, all the twists interlaced so that opening the knot would allow the whole intricate arrangement to fall apart. The pattern reminded Sherlock of a spider’s web — simple in appearance but difficult to duplicate without practice. The knot was just as complicated, but Sherlock could replicate that with ease. The real problem was that he wouldn’t have enough time to undo the twine, peek at the contents, and get everything fixed back up before John was finished stowing the plane in the hangar.

Knowing John, he’d probably follow through with his threat, too. He wasn’t the type to back down once his mind was set on a course of action.

“Bloody buggering fuck,” Sherlock muttered, finally abandoning the box. He threw off his gloves and went to the stove, building up the fire with distressing ease. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d simply turned the dial on a proper gas hob.

By the time Sherlock had tea brewed, John was back inside, stripping off his outerwear and grinning like a fiend. “God, thanks,” he said, pausing to cast a careful eye over the box before he took the offered mug of tea. He sipped despite the heat, set the mug down on the table, and then, to Sherlock’s delight, started to undo the knotted twine.

“Yes will you tell me what’s in there?” Sherlock demanded, coming right up behind John. He pressed an encouraging kiss to the back of John’s neck, under the ends of his hair, which had grown out nicely over the last few weeks.

“Mmm... I’ll show you one item. Care to take a —” The word ‘guess’ trailed off into a moan as
Sherlock closed his teeth on a lock of hair and pulled sharply. “Fuck,” John whispered, shivering back against Sherlock.

“Box first,” Sherlock insisted, trying not to sound too smug. If he got John off-balance enough, he wouldn’t mind showing Sherlock everything in the box.

Then John decided to cheat, pushing back and rising up on his toes, grinding his arse against Sherlock’s cock, which promptly woke up and suggested Sherlock forget all about the bloody cardboard box, because nothing in there could be better than the man standing between him and it. Sherlock put his tea safely on the table to free his hands so he could tug at the bottom of John’s old University of Toronto sweatshirt. Happy to go along with the change of plans, John lifted his arms and turned as Sherlock got rid of the offending layer of heavy fabric.

“Box first, huh? Sure about that?” John asked, lowering his arms to circle Sherlock’s neck.

The sound Sherlock made as he ducked to kiss John was a mix of a purr of satisfaction and a frustrated growl. He licked and nibbled at John’s lips until John was panting against him, fingers clenched in the back of his shirt, tugging the tails out of his jeans. “Just show me,” he whispered in the low, seductive tones that John could never refuse.

“One thing,” John repeated, and took a nip of his own, teeth closing on Sherlock’s bottom lip just hard enough to make his whole body tingle.

“Stubborn bastard,” Sherlock complained, deliberately nudging his thigh against John’s erection before he stepped back, denying him any further satisfaction. The fact that his tactic was double-edged wasn’t lost on him.

Grinning, John affectionately said, “I have to be, to put up with you.” He turned around and went back to work on the knotted twine.

Sherlock’s huff of irritation wasn’t very convincing. He moved up behind John again, arms wrapped around his body, and looked over John’s shoulder as the knot opened and the twine finally slithered free. The flaps of the box were interlaced, folded one over the other. John tugged at the opening in the middle, and the flaps slid apart with a papery rasp, revealing tightly crumpled brown butcher paper.

“Packing material doesn’t count,” Sherlock said at once.

“What are you, six years old?” John teased, sticking his hand into the box and feeling around, rather than just taking the paper away.

This time, Sherlock’s huff was more convincing. “It’d be easier if you just took the paper out,” he pointed out logically.

John matched his tone precisely, saying, “We’d be warmer if you went and built up the other fires.”

Smugly, Sherlock inched forward until their bodies were as close as could be, not counting the hateful layers of blue jeans and shirts separating them. “Or I could do this,” he murmured, licking the curve of John’s ear.

John’s pleased hum turned into an “Aha!” of satisfaction. He pulled his hand out of the box, holding a plastic bag.

Sherlock stared at the garish red and blue print on the bag. “Milk.”
“For your tea,” John said, the very embodiment of innocence. He turned around and presented it to Sherlock, dark blue eyes gleaming wickedly. “We’ve been out for three weeks, as you haven’t failed to remind me at least once every day.”

Sherlock peered at the box, but could still only see butcher paper. “I hate you,” he lied sullenly, taking the bag of milk. Turning on his heel, possessively held it to his chest as he went to find the scissors and milk pitcher so he could fix his tea properly.

~~~

Surprising Sherlock was nearly impossible, but John wasn’t one to let ‘impossible’ stop him from trying.

Step one had been arranging for a distraction. Sherlock’s interest in target shooting was perfect, and twice, John sent him out to the airstrip firing range with the .22 so John could sneak up into the attic. There, on both occasions, he made a quick radio call to Fairlake so he could enlist Mark as a co-conspirator, helping with the assembly and packaging of the surprise.

Unfortunately, Sherlock was too clever and sharp-eyed to miss even the subtlest of clues, and soon started asking John what he was up to, so step two had been to employ a campaign of diversion. He didn’t bother trying to lie; with Sherlock, there was no point. When Sherlock had tried to look over John’s shoulder at his laptop, John asked him to read an old, rejected manuscript instead, giving John just enough time to place the order before shutting everything down again.

And then, step three: package retrieval. Thankfully, Mark had taken John’s warnings to heart and had made the box as tamper-proof as he could. To avoid a scene when picking up the package, John had mentioned to Sherlock that the general store probably had restocked its selection of cigarettes, much as his medical training railed against the thought. Sherlock’s impromptu shopping trip had given John just enough time to get the box into plane’s little cargo compartment.

Naturally, Sherlock had spotted the box before he’d even settled into his seat. John had smacked his hand when he’d automatically reached for the knot. Then he started the pre-flight check, forcing Sherlock to buckle into the harness that kept him from being able to satisfy his curiosity about the box.

The flight home had been a wild seesaw between sullen demands (“What’s in the box?” and “You’ve never seen Seven, have you?”) and an eloquent diatribe on the lack of decent tobacco brands in Canada.

Now, the box was safely tucked away in the cold cellar, trapdoor deliberately and blatantly weighted down by a heavy plastic tub of rice. Sherlock would be able to move it, but it would be loud enough to alert John to the attempt. So John would just have to keep Sherlock beside him for the next twelve or so hours — he figured dawn was about as far as he could stretch the anticipation — and then he would have won.

Most nights, while dinner fried or simmered (or in one memorable case caught fire), John sat down at the typewriter and wrote, keys out of sync with the rhythm of Sherlock’s violin. He was finally back on schedule and had sent the first six chapters of his new novel to his editor just a few days ago. Tonight, though, he was too twisted up with anxiety to concentrate despite the beautiful music that should have soothed him.
Had this all been a mistake? Sherlock could be sensual and caring and even sweet — and abrasive as hell, impatient, even childish. But he was not romantic, not by any stretch. John couldn’t imagine Sherlock signing an office birthday card (or being in an office for anything but one of his cases, for that matter) much less thinking in terms of anniversaries, and certainly not something as trivial as one month.

Christ, it was like John was back in eighth grade, trying to work up the nerve to get Shelley Matheson behind her dad’s boathouse so he could try and kiss her.

He finally surrendered and turned away from the typewriter so he could watch Sherlock play. The light of the oil lamp was too harsh on Sherlock’s pale skin, so John reached out to turn the flame down until the only illumination in the room was the warmer glow of the fireplace. Without pause in his playing, Sherlock opened his eyes and looked at John through his lashes.

John looked back, absolutely captivated, and made no attempt at all to conceal his thoughts or feelings. The words — those three little words — had yet to make their appearance, but he’d given up trying to control or hide how he felt. ‘Trust me,’ Sherlock had said, and John had given him that trust, equal parts excitement and terror. Sherlock had never once betrayed him.

John could believe, almost completely, that they would find a way to do this... this. Whether they spent next winter here at the cabin or made it to London by spring, they would be together, and John’s whole body ached with the intensity of his emotions.

With a sudden frown, Sherlock’s bow stilled, silencing the strings. He lowered the violin and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Panic spiked through John, nothing to do with the war and everything to do with a sudden, possibly irrational terror that Sherlock knew exactly what he was thinking and wanted nothing more to do with him. Sex was one thing; love was something entirely different, and Sherlock hadn’t said that word to him. John had thought they’d both been circling that declaration, awkward and tentative, but what if it had been his imagination? What if those three words never even entered Sherlock’s mind? There was a hell of a difference between ‘I’ll never be bored of you’ and ‘I love you’.

“John,” Sherlock snapped, his tone more worried than harsh. He set the violin and bow carefully on the sofa and walked towards him, eyes fixed not on John’s face but on his chest. “Are you in pain?”

John looked down, realised that he was rubbing at his chest, and quickly curled his hand into a fist and dropped it to his side. “I’m fine.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” Sherlock scoffed, not for the first time. He knelt down in front of John, touching the exact spot where he’d been rubbing. “Tell me.”

John avoided Sherlock’s too-sharp eyes and looked at the fire instead. “I’m fine. Really.”

Sherlock made an unsatisfied sort of sound. “Please,” he said softly, and it was his turn to look away, eyes fixed to John’s shirt. “It’s important, whatever it is. I was trying to help you write, and it didn’t work. Why not?”

Confused, John looked at him, lifting a hand to brush his fingers through Sherlock’s soft, long curls. “You were?”

“I don’t just play random music like an iPod on shuffle,” he scoffed, pressing up into John’s touch. “There are certain compositions that help you focus when you’re writing.”

John smiled, some of his fears receding. Maybe Sherlock hadn’t said it, but he behaved as if he loved
John, and that was what counted. Wasn’t it?

He pulled Sherlock’s hair, encouraging him to kneel up so John could kiss him, soft and sweet. “You really are incredible. I hadn’t noticed — the thing with the music, I mean.”

“You weren’t meant to notice,” Sherlock complained. “Now you’ll be conscious of it and you’ll try to analyse your writing based on my playing, and that might invalidate my efforts completely.”

Laughing now, John kissed him again until he stopped pouting. “Thank you.”

Catlike, Sherlock knelt down on his heels and twisted sideways so he could lean his shoulder against the seat between John’s legs. He tipped his head, resting it on John’s thigh, and said, “You still haven’t told me why it wasn’t working tonight.”

John didn’t answer right away. He petted Sherlock’s hair and thought about the cardboard box in the cellar and finally said, “Tomorrow makes it one month since we first met.”

Sherlock turned his face just enough to look up at John without interrupting the petting. “Is that all? It feels like forever.”

“Sorry if I’m boring you,” John snapped, immediately regretting his tone.

With an irritated huff, Sherlock twisted away and rose, catching hold of John’s hand to pull him up to his feet. “Stop making assumptions — especially incorrect ones. I told you, I could never be bored of you,” he insisted, his cold, logical tone at odds with the gentle way he wrapped his arms around John’s body to hold him close.

John sighed and rested his forehead against Sherlock’s shoulder. “I never thought I’d have anyone for a single day, much less a month. It’s...”

“Yes...”

“Important.”

“Then it is to me, as well,” Sherlock said, his deep voice sharpening, taking on a sly edge. His hands slid down John’s back, fingers pressing to either side of his spine, catching on his belt before dropping lower. He dipped his head and pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses to John’s throat, then nipped sharply at his jaw, and John’s knees almost buckled. “I believe a celebration is traditional in London. Does the same apply to Canada?”

“You talk too much,” John complained.

“Not tonight,” Sherlock purred against John’s skin, clipping the last ‘t’ sound with another bite. “We should save our energy to properly celebrate tomorrow. If we’re going to celebrate tonight, then you’ll need to get that box out of the cellar so we can do this properly.”

Oh, fucking hell, John thought. He’d expected — he’d feared — Sherlock would be contemptuous of a little one-month-anniversary surprise, disdaining it as the sort of thing that dull mortals did, because there was no room in their brains for anything more complicated. He’d never imagined that Sherlock would put that brilliant, absolutely evil brain of his behind the idea and come up with something far worse than a surprise package picked up in town.


Sherlock laughed and licked and blew gently, freezing the warmth right out of John’s throat. “Liar.”
“It is. Historical basis,” John tried, groaning when Sherlock’s hips ground up against him, one thigh pressing his cock in just the right way. “You know. In case we freeze to death before the actual date. Can’t die without celebrating.”

Sherlock’s breathing turned into snorts of laughter that he failed to completely muffle against John’s shirt. “Forget everything I’ve said about lying to me,” he said, grinning so hard that John could feel it against his chest. “Your lies are ridiculously entertaining. Keep trying.”

“Entertaining? You want entertaining?” John growled in mock-anger. He backed away just enough to get a hand down between their bodies, fingers teasing over Sherlock’s jeans.

To his surprise, Sherlock took one long step back, eyes dark with lust but glittering with amusement. “I thought we were saving that for our anniversary, remember?”

“We? I didn’t agree to any ‘we’ in that,” John complained.

Sherlock’s innocent act was no longer even remotely convincing. “Oh? Well, I suppose we could celebrate early. You go get the box. I’ll get the lubricant.”

“Right.” John felt his smile go icy and determined. He deliberately walked to the couch and settled down at one end. “Tomorrow it is, then. You can go back to your playing,” he added, gesturing at the abandoned violin and bow.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. He made a thoughtful, frustrated sound and then cleared the sofa, replacing his violin and bow in the case. He closed the lid and snapped the latches in place before taking his place on the far side of the sofa. The firelight gave a devilish glare to his eyes, shadow filling the hollows beneath his sharp cheekbones, highlighting the gloss of his lower lip as his tongue swept over it. The bastard was absolutely gorgeous and knew it.

Twelve hours, John thought, letting his eyes sweep over Sherlock’s body. The thick cable-knit sweater added minimal bulk to his lean frame, and his tight blue jeans hid almost nothing that John’s imagination couldn’t fill in with toe-curling accuracy. He wasn’t just sitting — he was posed, fully aware of precisely how the light played over him and the angle at which John sat.

Sherlock was an arrogant, clever bastard, but John was determined. He hadn’t made all his careful plans just to have them undone by lust. If Sherlock wanted sex tonight, John was fine with that. More than fine. But the box was staying in the cellar, no matter what persuasion Sherlock attempted. He’d have to keep Sherlock distracted and off-balance.

There was only one way John was going to make it through until tomorrow, and that was by playing dirty. Time to cheat, he decided, and unbuckled his belt.

~~~

The subtle metallic rattle and leathery rasp of John’s belt was a familiar sound, one that never failed to arouse Sherlock’s interest in a Pavlovian response based entirely on what inevitably followed. He glanced to the side before he realised he’d moved, ruining the attempt to capture John’s interest with his profile. John had his belt undone, and now his fingers, strong and sure, worked to unbutton the waistband of his jeans.

Sherlock’s brain shut down like a computer program locking up, errors messages flashing onscreen.
They were on the couch, not in bed, and while they’d kissed and very rarely cuddled and once John had gone to his knees and given Sherlock a truly breathtaking blow job on the couch, the sight of John stripping in the living room was new, outside all previously established parameters.

The sound of John’s zipper was deafening.

Sherlock knew John was trying to provoke him. He knew he should turn away and look back towards the fire, summoning up an air of lofty disdain. He tried to focus on the puzzle of what was in the cardboard box, but there was no hope for it. He could barely even remember the dimensions of the box, much less speculate on the contents.

Then John sat forward to pull off his shirt, and Sherlock wondered if he was going to lose this battle after all. John took off not just his sweatshirt but his T-shirt, baring his scarred chest to the direct light radiating from the fireplace, and Sherlock couldn’t help but stare. John had been less self-conscious about his scars — just in time for the snow season to bear down on the cabin with relentless force, driving them both to pile on layers of warm clothing. Not wanting to push too hard, Sherlock had refrained from trying to study them in good light. Now, he couldn’t help but stare.

John lifted his hips just enough to push his jeans down past his hips. He toed off the old trainers he wore when he had no plans to go outside, kicking them away as he shoved his jeans further down. They fell to the floor, followed a moment later by his heavy wool socks.

The cabin was silent, save for the soft crackle of the fire. Sherlock didn’t move, didn’t make a sound, irrationally thinking that if he did, John might get dressed and leave.

Then John turned sideways to lean against the arm of the sofa, reaching back to arrange the throw pillows more comfortably. He put his right foot on the cushion and slid it forward until his bare toes just touched Sherlock’s thigh. With his left foot on the floor, his legs were spread invitingly wide, and Sherlock had to remind himself that he was trying to make a point about John keeping secrets from him.

John reached down, letting his left hand rest on his own thigh, fingers curling slowly over his skin with a soft touch Sherlock could all too easily imagine experiencing. Almost casually, he moved his hand up until his fingers were just barely tucked under his plain grey boxers. His cock was just hard enough to push against the fabric, though not enough to strain the gap in front, held closed by one little plastic button that Sherlock suddenly, irrationally hated.

“Since you’re not doing anything, care to build up the fire?” John suggested casually, toying with the edge of the boxers where they were just starting to fray.

Sherlock’s first instinct was to refuse; he wasn’t about to be complicit in John’s plan to break his resolve. If John wanted sex, all he had to do was show Sherlock what was in the box hidden away in the cellar.

But only on the surface was this about sex or the mysterious package they’d picked up in Fairlake. Beneath it was John’s desire to include Sherlock in a celebration of a date that, while it seemed arbitrary, could be looked at as having some significance to them both. The cardboard box was a surprise, a gift, and while in Sherlock’s experiences, all gifts came with costs that far outweighed their value, he suspected that John would once again prove the exception. John hadn’t arranged this surprise with an ulterior motive. There was nothing of Sherlock’s that John couldn’t have, simply by asking. He had no need to give gifts.

John could have ended this all by giving in, graciously or in a fit of ill-temper. He could have stormed off, slammed the bedroom door, and refused to have anything to do with Sherlock until his
self-appointed deadline of Anniversary Day had dawned. Instead, he’d taken the one route that Sherlock hadn’t predicted: a playful escalation of the conflict, done not out of malice but affection, and Sherlock was completely disarmed.

He rose, moving his violin case aside, and spent a few minutes rearranging the logs already on the fire before he added two more atop the rest. Conscious of how John’s scars ached in the cold, he took his time, even though all he wanted was to go back to the sofa. In a month, he’d become adept not just at keeping fires alive but at learning how to stack the logs to reflect more heat into the room. When he was finally satisfied by the warmth, he sat back down and turned sideways, making no attempt to hide his interest.

John’s smile went from sly to genuine. “Thanks,” he said, sliding his right foot forward another inch, tucking his toes under Sherlock’s leg. Sherlock reached down and rested his hand on John’s ankle, only to have John pull his foot back with a scolding look as the sly smile made its reappearance. “Thought you were too distracted by your surprise to be interested.”

Never boring, Sherlock thought, hiding his affectionate smile. He faked an irritated huff and deliberately draped his arm across the back of the sofa to remove the temptation to reach for John again.

John grinned, shifting down a bit more. With his right leg bent, foot flat on the cushion, his hips were canted invitingly up. His hand didn’t move, but his thigh slid beneath his fingertips, until the hem of his boxers was dragged all the way up. He slipped one finger further under the material, following the crease of his thigh, and Sherlock had never been so pleased that John tended to wear loose, comfortable boxers.

Two more fingers followed, disappearing under material that shifted as John skimmed his hand over his balls. In the silence of the cabin, Sherlock could distinctly hear the soft rustle of hair against fabric.

“By all means, feel free to make yourself comfortable. It’s your sofa, after all,” Sherlock said dryly. He put both of his feet on the sofa cushion, knees pressed to his chest to hide his growing erection, and glared sullenly at John.

Refusing to be baited, John asked, “Are you going to make me do this alone?”

Sherlock loved games, especially clever, intelligent, engaging games. Though he played only rarely, once engaged, he was absolutely cutthroat, whether the game was chess or poker or seduction. He played not only to win but to absolutely destroy the competition, using any means necessary.

And this game, he cheerfully lost after only a token show of resistance. Pushing all thoughts of the box aside, he reached for John, who gave him a stern look and said, “The box stays in the cellar.”

“Take those off,” Sherlock said, flicking a glance at the boxers.

“Only if you agree. No stopping in the middle of sex to renegotiate, or sneaking downstairs after I’m asleep. I expect you to play fair.”

“I never play fair.”

“You will, with me.”

Despite all Sherlock’s practice at deception, his sigh didn’t come close to sounding genuine. “You’re very stubborn,” he complained, twisting around to sprawl across the couch, reaching for John. “Take them off.”
He was accustomed to John’s compliance — not all the time, but often enough — so he was surprised when John just put out a hand, fingers to Sherlock’s forehead, to stop him. “Sherlock,” John warned.

In answer, Sherlock ducked his head and bit gently at John’s thigh. It was only fair, giving that John was holding him there anyway. “Fine.”

“Fine what?”

“Fine. I agree! I’ll wait until your arbitrary choice of date,” Sherlock snapped, emphasising his words with a sharper nip.

John didn’t fall for his irritated act. Laughing, John combed his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, the touch full of amused affection. “I’ll just have to keep you from getting bored.”

Sherlock smiled, pressing up into John’s touch, and finished crawling up over his body. “Do that. Start now.”
Chapter 22

Wednesday, November 21

Sherlock awoke alone, which was nothing unusual. On average, John rose before him three days a week and did his best to courteously sneak out without waking Sherlock, no matter how often Sherlock had tried to explain that he didn’t need that much sleep. It was just a remnant habit formed during the mind-rotting boredom of rehab.

Knowing there was only minimal chance of luring John back to bed this early, Sherlock slid out from under the blankets and dressed in warm layers. The smell of coffee lured him to the kitchen by way of the bathroom, where he hurried to take care of the necessities. Warm tingling seemed to fill him, body and mind, as though he were still caught up in the last night’s sexual high. Keeping the same partner for more than two nights in a row had always been boring before, but not John. Not even after this long...

One month, he remembered as his sleepy mind finally woke enough for him to recall the cardboard box. He finished brushing his teeth and threw open the door into the kitchen, taking note of the relevant details: John, still wearing his usual morning outfit of thick tracksuit and terrycloth dressing gown, standing at the stove; smell of ham and coffee, sizzling sound of pancakes; electric lights on, rather than the oil lamps John usually preferred. Cardboard box on the table.

It took all of Sherlock’s self-restraint to go to John rather than the table. When John turned to look at him over one shoulder, mouth turned up in a grin, Sherlock caught him by the hair, pulled his head further back, and kissed him. The tingling warmth of well-being alchemised into a rush of pure, fiery love that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with John, and all Sherlock wanted to do was to keep John close and never let him go.

He finally did, though, relaxing his fingers to comb through John’s hair as he looked down into deep blue eyes, smiling at the way they’d gone dark and wide. “Tell me what brought that on, so I can do it every morning,” John said, his grin lazy and satisfied.

Sherlock grinned and leaned down to nip at John’s lip. “You burnt breakfast.”

“I’ll never undercook pancakes again,” John promised.

Sherlock rolled his eyes and finally surrendered to his curiosity. He went to the table, leaving John to burn breakfast all he wanted, and looked down at the cardboard box. The flaps were interlocked again. The diagonal crease in one, from where it had been shoved under another, was more pronounced than it had been yesterday.

He circled around, taking the time to examine the box. Purchased new, most likely at the Fairlake post office, he decided. It wasn’t marked with product identification, shipping labels, or anything to show the box had been repurposed. The general store hadn’t sold cardboard packing boxes last time they’d visited. Perhaps Mark sold shipping supplies out of the double-wide trailer that served as an airport terminal, but the post office was the better option.

“Your presents are in the box,” John said, sounding both puzzled and amused. The frying pan sizzled as he scraped the last of the pancake batter into the pool of molten butter. “You can have the box, too, if you want...”

Sherlock sniffed and opened the box slowly, savouring the report of his senses. He wanted to
reconstruct all the details of the package’s origins. He’d gone with John on every single trip to Fairlake, and at no point had John even hinted at this. That meant he’d enlisted outside help. Molly was the first logical choice, with Mark at the airfield a distant second.

After taking out the milk, John had replaced the crumpled butcher paper. Now, Sherlock took it out, fully intending to examine it in detail, but the bright, silvery gleam of foil caught his eye. He set the butcher paper aside and lifted out what proved to be a pie wrapped first in foil and then in cling film.

“That’s for dessert tonight,” John warned as he abandoned the pancakes and walked over. He took the pie out of Sherlock’s hands and said, “There’s more in there.”

The lure of ‘more’ made Sherlock look back down into the box, where he found another layer of butcher paper. As he pulled it out, the light over the table revealed a hint of off-white that was familiar.

Bone.

Easing the paper aside, Sherlock revealed the smooth, gentle curve of a skull. Not human, he recognised at once, unless it was deformed and made unnaturally narrow. More carefully, he pulled out more butcher paper to reveal an oblong skull, side-oriented orbits for partial binocular vision, tooth configuration of an herbivore, no sign of antlers. The lower jaw was tied in place with clear fishing line.

“Deer,” Sherlock said, looking down at the skull. He’d studied human skulls, of course, and had once borrowed a mummified jackal’s head from the archaeology department, but he’d never actually held a deer skull. “This is the second mule deer.”

John looked back with a shy smile. “Thought you’d like it. You cracked open the other —”

“You didn’t send it for prion disease testing,” he wondered. John was incredibly conscientious of health concerns. He’d indulged Sherlock’s curiosity about deer once already, but he’d insisted on flying the second deer head to Fairlake, so he could send it off for testing and cataloguing.

“No. I thought —”

“You lied to me!” Sherlock interrupted, suddenly grinning. Instead of sending the head off to the government, he must have given it to the Coles two weeks ago. He’d been planning this, and he’d managed to hide it from Sherlock that whole time. “You actually lied to me!”

John flushed and turned back to the stove. “You’re a pain in the ass to surprise, you know. And that’s not all. Should be one more, down at the bottom of the box.”

“More bones?” Sherlock put the skull down, though he rested one hand on the parietal bones and dug through the remaining butcher paper with the other. His fingers encountered a small, narrow cardboard package in the corner. He lifted it out, surprised at the weight.

The box was black, labelled ‘Extreme Hogue’ in somewhat overexcited capital letters that almost obscured the much smaller words — ‘folding knife’ — in the corner. Sherlock opened the side of the box, tearing it, and slid out a bundle wrapped in turquoise paper, which he set aside. The knife was matte black with bright steel hardware, the grip textured and notched in the front. One side had a metal belt clip. He pressed the safety button and eased the blade out of the grip. The mechanism was stiff. The blade was slick with oil, and it locked firmly into place at full extension.

John nudged him aside and set down a plate, nervously asking, “Is it all right? I didn’t know —”
Sherlock switched the knife to his other hand and wrapped his free arm around John’s body, pulling him close. He captured John’s gasp with a kiss that said all the words that he couldn’t force past the tightness in his chest. He’d endured a lifetime of relatives giving him gifts of clothes and trinkets to the point where receiving a gift was more of a chore than a treat. Until now.

“It’s perfect,” he whispered, leaning his forehead against John’s. “You’re perfect.”

John pulled Sherlock close, strong arms around his waist. “Happy anniversary, Sherlock.”
Monday, December 10

To: sherlock.holmes@thescienceofdeduction.co.uk
From: ejones@sterlingtravel.co.uk
Subject: Travel Itinerary SH41942466

Mr Holmes:

Your return flight details are as follows:

Passenger name: Sherlock Holmes
Ticket number: 13724463415808

* Little Prairie (XLP) to Calgary International (YYC): 17 Dec, WesTran Air flight 5115, Depart: 16:05 (MST), Arrive: 18:20 (MST), seat 2A, confirmation code LT199X

Passenger name: Sherlock Holmes
Ticket number: 5810483199266

* Calgary International (YYC) to London Heathrow (LHR): 17 Dec, British Airways flight BA102, Depart: 21:35 (MST), Arrive: 13:25 (BST) (Next Day), seat 4A, confirmation code LS1411

Charged to Mycroft Holmes.

Please print this document for your records. Check-in is available at the automatic kiosks. Automated check-in may not be available at some airports. Airport staff is available to assist with the check-in process if needed.

Please ensure that your travel arrangements to Little Prairie allow sufficient time for security check-in. Should you require assistance, please contact this office directly.

Regards,

Edward Jones
Sterling Travel Assistance, Ltd.

~~~

An unfamiliar sound intruded on John’s consciousness, making him drop the pen he’d been chewing thoughtfully. He hated editing, mostly because every page he edited was one he’d have to retype, but reviewing by hand like this was a necessary part of his process. He always missed something, but at least doing two separate edit passes minimised the work his publisher had to do.

He tipped his chair back on two legs and looked through the archway to the living room. Normally, Sherlock’s typing was almost silent, barely a rustle of clicks. Now, though, it sounded like he was trying to beat his laptop to death.

“Everything all right?” he called, not particularly worried. The cabin was surrounded by three feet of
snow, and Sherlock had been out of cigarettes for eight tense days. John had been quietly hoping to break Sherlock of his smoking habit, but if necessary, he was willing to take the snowmobile to Fairlake. (He had skis for the plane but was nervous about using them and only would take that chance in a real emergency.)

“You have a sniper rifle. I know a smuggler.”

John sat upright with a thump of chair legs. He rose and went into the living room, trying to find a logical connection between ‘sniper rifle’ and ‘smuggler’ that didn’t end with some sort of international criminal incident. He was failing.

“Going into the arms dealing business?” he asked, resting a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. The glow of his laptop screen highlighted his winter-pale skin, giving him a ghostly appearance.

“I’m going to kill my brother. I’ll need to practice. What’s the range on your rifle?” Sherlock forced the words past gritted teeth. He never once stopped his typing.

“Remind me to change the safe combination.” John moved his hand to the back of the chair and gave it a push. After a moment’s resistance, Sherlock stopped typing and allowed John to turn the chair away from the laptop. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s helpfully booked my flight back to London. In seven days.”

No.

John felt panic rise up in his chest, clawing at his throat. He wasn’t ready. He didn’t want Sherlock to leave alone, but he wasn’t ready. They were supposed to have more time. Sherlock hadn’t even been here for two months. Two months was nothing after seven years.

His hands clenched around long, cool fingers. He took deep breaths and tried to ground himself in the present, telling himself that he was safe and Sherlock was here, and that was all that mattered for now. Distantly, he felt Sherlock steering him backwards before giving him a little push, and the backs of his legs touched the hard wood frame and soft cushion of the couch.

Realising just how shaky his legs were, he sat and tried to relax his death-grip on Sherlock’s hands. Sherlock sat down beside him and quietly said, “You don’t have to come with me. I can go there, kill him, and be back in three days.”

The absurdity of the statement cut through John’s rising panic like a knife. He choked out a laugh and tipped his head back, feeling the stretch relax the muscles in his throat. “Christ, I’m not letting you go kill your brother. Or wound him, so don’t ask that either,” he said preemptively.

Sherlock gave John an assessing, sullen look before he sighed and leaned against John’s right shoulder. He was always careful to sit on John’s right side, conscious of aggravating the old wound.

“Fine. I didn’t want to go back anyway.”

John’s heart thudded into his ribs, but he pushed away the reminder. He let go of Sherlock’s hands so he could get his arms around Sherlock instead. “You’ll have to, though, one day. If you —”

“Don’t.”

Sherlock’s arms circled John’s body tightly, and it was a measure of how far he’d come — how much he trusted Sherlock — that the panic was barely a whisper in the back of his mind. John let out a shaky exhale and got one leg over Sherlock’s, holding him more tightly. They both shifted and leaned back into the cushions until they couldn’t get any closer together.
Reply to: ejones@sterlingtravel.co.uk
CC: stop.emailing.me@mycroftholmes.co.uk, info@mycroftholmes.co.uk
RE: Travel Itinerary SH41942466

Cancel the tickets. I don’t care if they’re refundable. I will not be using them. Do not contact me again.

— Sherlock Holmes

After turning to ensure John read the terse email, Sherlock sent it off. He didn’t actually care about the minion from the travel agency; Mycroft and his pet assistant were the ones who needed to get the message. Then he closed his laptop and rose from the desk, leaning over to switch off the power.

“Come to bed,” he invited, holding out a hand to John. Subdued, John accepted, allowing Sherlock to lead him into the bedroom, where he pulled free and went to the fireplace. Casting a worried glance John’s way, Sherlock reluctantly went to the bathroom to get ready for bed. Worrying about John would accomplish nothing. He had to find his own way back to a good mood, though Sherlock could certainly encourage him.

He ceded the bathroom to John, stripped off his clothes, and got under the blankets. The sheets were like ice, and he curled up to try and warm the bed with body heat. Switzerland, he thought, shivering. Somewhere with central heat. With a decent internet connection and Mycroft’s credit card, Sherlock was positive he could find an isolated cabin with proper heating, electricity, and amenities. Hell, he’d just charter a damned plane to fly them there directly, so John wouldn’t have to put up with being locked in a metal tube full of idiots for hours.

When John came out of the bathroom, instead of coming to the bed, he went back to the fire. Sherlock twisted to his back and propped up on his elbows, watching as John used the cast iron fireplace tools to re-stack the logs into a firebox configuration, reflecting heat and light back into the room. Originally, he had built the fire for a long-duration slow burn, filling the room with just enough heat to last through the night. With this fire, they’d have to feed it again in a few hours or they’d wake up freezing.

Once the fire was built, John undressed and put his gun on the bedside table. Then he got under the blankets without bothering to put on pyjamas, something he’d only conceded to Sherlock after receiving his STI test results.

Usually, he curled up against Sherlock’s side, but this time, he laid on his back and got an arm under Sherlock’s neck. “You should know,” he said quietly.

Though Sherlock wanted nothing more than to curl up on top of John, limbs interlocked, he knew better. Instead, he rested his head on the pillow beside John’s and set his palm on John’s chest. “I probably already do.”

John exhaled, a sound that might have been humour or irritation — it was too soft to decipher. “I need to say it.”

“You don’t have to say anything you don’t want to.”
John sighed, the rise and fall of his chest shifting Sherlock’s fingers over the scar tissue. “I do, though, don’t I? I’m not getting any better.”

“You went to Little Prairie.”

“More than a month ago.” John shook his head, hair rustling against the pillow. He’d insisted upon cutting it a couple of weeks back, though he’d allowed Sherlock to do the actual trimming, using the biggest clipper-guard he had. Sherlock’s own hair was in dire need of a cut, though John insisted he looked adorable, not unruly.

“We have time.”

“No, we really don’t,” John insisted. He covered Sherlock’s hand with his own, work-callused fingers stroking down to Sherlock’s wrist and back to his knuckles. “I’ve wasted seven years of my life here, Sherlock. I’m not going waste seven more years — for both of us.”

“If you hadn’t, my brother wouldn’t have sent me to you,” Sherlock pointed out quietly.

“You’re here now. That’s what matters. But that’s also why you should know...”

John fell silent, and this time, Sherlock waited, listening to the unusually fast beat of his heart, at odds with his slow, carefully controlled breathing. The line of his back was rigid against the firm mattress, and his fingernails scratched short, light lines against Sherlock’s ribs. The fire’s warmth slowly stole over them, and Sherlock relaxed a bit more, easing his foot on top of John’s just to get that much closer.

“I was twenty-seven when I joined the CFHS, as an in-garrison surgeon. I was stationed here, in Canada,” John said, abruptly breaking the silence. “Three months later, September eleventh happened. A month after that, I volunteered to deploy to Afghanistan in support of Task Force K-Bar, a multinational team of special forces who were the first ground assault teams into Afghanistan. After K-Bar ended six months later, I stayed on, doing support and outreach work — mostly going into allied villages to provide medical support to the locals. I came back here on leave — well, to Toronto — but kept redeploying, until I ended up near Fallujah after the Blackwater incident.”

Sherlock had never heard of Task Force K-Bar or Fallujah, and the only Blackwater he knew about was an American private militia of some kind, but he stayed quiet, listening to John’s voice and breath and heartbeat. He was no more tense than when he’d begun, but his heart was racing now.

“I wasn’t actually in Fallujah — not officially. No Canadians were officially participants in the Fallujah conflict like that. But they needed all the doctors they could get, and I wanted to do all I could, even for our allies. The fighting started early in the year and was still going into December. We hadn’t had any allied forces in the city since April, except a couple —” He cut off and shook his head. “Anyway, the whole damned city was one big booby trap. The roads were mined with IEDs, snipers everywhere... They turned it into a kill zone.”

Sherlock had never even tried to visualise war, but he could imagine it well enough now. John’s voice had gone toneless and cold, as though he were reciting from a script. This wasn’t the whole story — the hesitation proved that — but this was more than Sherlock had ever expected to hear.

He’d never imagined that he would refuse any knowledge, even if he deleted it later as useless, but this, like the video, was something he viscerally wanted to reject, something he wanted to scrub not only from his hearing but from John’s past.

“We needed intel from inside the city. Local intel. So I went out to try and make friends.” He let out
one short, bitter laugh. “That’s one way you do it — you try and be nice to them, show them you’re not the bad guys. Maybe give them supplies — hell, bottles of clean drinking water, even. And medical care. Me and a couple of the other docs, we’d scavenge up any supplies the base could spare and go out to stitch cuts and take out bullets and bandage burns, all in hopes that someone would tell us something.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, dreading what he knew would follow, realising he’d been wrong about his initial assessment. Mycroft hadn’t ordered John’s rescue for his intel. If Canadian forces weren’t supposed to be there, then in capturing John, the insurgents had got their hands on a hostage whose value as a political tool went far beyond any mere doctor.

He should have known. He would have known, or at least considered it, if he hadn’t been so bloody dulled by rehab. His mind was like a razor, and without regular honing, his edge would blunt and break.

“We were way the hell outside the city,” John was saying. “The city’s built up against the Euphrates River, mostly on the east bank, and it’s surrounded by a shitload of nothing. Dreamland was to the east, in the middle of that nothing.”

“Dreamland?”

“Sorry. Camp Baharia, one of the US bases. Anyway, other than some irrigated farms and Dreamland, it was empty. Some nights, when they weren’t shooting or flying UAVs, you could look up at the sky and see forever. I loved it. The heat, the emptiness, the sky... It was like being reborn.”

He shivered, his arm pressing tight to Sherlock’s back.

When John spoke again, his voice was low and shaky. “You know what came next. I never did find out what happened to the troops I went out with. I don’t know if they escaped or died or what happened.”

Sherlock thought about Mycroft, with his obsession with power and knowledge, and wondered if he could get Mycroft to find out. Would it help John or would it only bring these memories to the fore all over again?

“Three days, they wanted me to do that surgery,” John continued. “I refused. Then... that video.” His fingers curled around Sherlock’s hand, clenching tight. “I’d seen it happen before. We all had. Sometimes, they’d release hostages — usually the contractors or journalists — but a lot of them ended up dead. Beheaded, mostly.”

Sherlock’s heart seemed to leap to his throat. “John,” he whispered, despite his intent not to interrupt. John’s arm pressed him even closer. “They usually filmed it. When they shot the video... I thought that was it. I didn’t know that much Arabic, so I didn’t know what the hell they were saying. Then they shut off the camera —” He cut off, his inhale sharp and jagged.

“They weren’t speaking English?” Sherlock asked into the silence.

John shook his head. “Don’t know if any of them did.”

Sherlock went cold, rubbing his fingertips over the scars on John’s chest as if he could erase them. John hadn’t been interrogated. He’d been tortured, for no reason. He’d refused to do as they wanted. They made their video and documented their brutality. But the torture had continued, possibly up until the moment the rescue team arrived, and for no reason at all.
It was no wonder he hadn’t healed after seven years. There wasn’t even a shred of logic for his mind to use, to rationalise the reason behind what had been done to him, except for the senseless cruelty of war. He couldn’t even feel pride in his ability to resist them because after the third day, they’d made no demands of him.

“You survived,” Sherlock said, his voice rough, strained with the effort to try and sound comforting. “That’s all that matters, John.”

“I never met Python,” John continued as though Sherlock hadn’t spoken. “Your brother, I mean. That was what his team called him. He was just a voice on a sat-phone. I don’t even remember what he said to me, after the first surgery for my shoulder. He asked something about ID-ing the insurgents. Had a shrink there to help me remember —”

“I’m going to kill him,” Sherlock whispered.

“Sherlock, he was —”

“He had no right!”

Sherlock took a deep breath and caught himself reaching around John’s body to hold him protectively close. He tugged up the blanket instead, trying to make it look natural, and clenched his fingers in the soft fabric, though he wanted nothing more than to strangle Mycroft for his thoughtlessness.

Almost in a whisper, he said, “He had no right to do that to you — to subject you to that so soon...”

John sighed. “Yeah. I know,” he agreed quietly. “That was... The doctors said that was just as bad as what they’d done to me. It’s just... It’s done with. It’s over.”

Rage and grief tore at Sherlock, though he tried to hide it. He let go of the damned blanket because he needed to hold John, who suddenly moved, thrashing at the blanket to roll over, facing him. Sherlock ended up on his back, fought to get his arm out from under John’s weight, and then pulled him tightly close.

John needed him. He needed Sherlock to be strong, not to be furious at Mycroft and bleeding inside at the thought of what John had endured, but Sherlock couldn’t find the cool distance that had helped him through the death of his parents or all the trials that followed in life. John had torn right through his defences, and it felt as if he were sharing every one of John’s wounds somewhere deep inside, unseen.

Somehow, he kept from asking John what he could do. He couldn’t put that burden on John, because he wouldn’t have an answer. Maybe there wasn’t any answer at all, except for what he was doing right now. ‘Being there for him’ seemed a poor solution to Sherlock, who was used to actively taking charge and doing something in the face of a problem or crisis, but for now, it would have to be enough.

So he held John, patient and silent, and listened to the sound of his breathing for hours that felt like days.
Interlude: Monday, December 10

To: mycroftholmes@mycroftholmes.co.uk
Fwd: RE: Travel Itinerary SH41942466

Sir:

Please instruct regarding the following.

Regards,

Edward Jones

Sterling Travel Assistance, Ltd.

Forwarded message follows:

|| Cancel the tickets. I don’t care if they’re refundable. I will not be using them. Do not contact me again.
|| — Sherlock Holmes

~~~

“Something wrong, love?”

The glow of the mobile was garish and bright, stinging Mycroft’s eyes. The rudeness of checking his email while in bed was absolutely unconscionable, but his filters had marked this particular email as high priority — a designation restricted to political crises, messages from his superiors, or those involving one particular keyword. Sherlock.

As Mycroft read the terse email, he pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling an all-too-familiar headache creeping up on him. Over four thousand miles away, and Sherlock still had the uncanny ability to interrupt a brief interlude of peace that Mycroft had been planning for weeks.

This was why he couldn’t date. No human on earth would put up with his schedule — except, apparently, for one.

Mycroft turned and gave a practiced, easy smile. Apologetically, he said, “Nothing to worry about, but I’m afraid —”

A hand slid up his arm, the touch reassuring. “It’s all right. Go ahead. Save the free world — I’ll be here when you’re done.”

Save the free world. If only it were so noble a cause. Guiltily, Mycroft nodded and excused himself from the bedroom, stopping only to retrieve his dressing gown.
Mycroft had been driven by desperation when he’d sent Sherlock out of the country. Clinics and rehabilitation and addiction counseling had no impact on Sherlock’s behaviour. In asking Captain Watson to watch over Sherlock for a few months, he’d intended only to force Sherlock’s mind to find a new path. Balance.

He’d never anticipated that Sherlock would refuse to return to the life he so obviously loved. The question was, had he truly overcome his self-destructive streak, or had he simply found some new addiction? Was he even in Canada? Captain Watson lived in one of the most remote areas on earth. Mycroft had absolutely no surveillance capability there whatsoever.

What if Sherlock had done the unthinkable and eliminated Captain Watson in order to escape his vigilance? Sherlock’s capacity for violence had thus far limited itself to verbal evisceration and his mastery of self-defence techniques, but under stress, people were capable of anything. He hoped he was wrong.

As he stepped into the quiet upstairs hallway, his mobile rang. “Right on schedule,” he said in answer.

“Good evening, sir.” Despite the late hour, his assistant’s voice was crisp and professional. Dealing with Sherlock’s foibles wasn’t part of her job, but she’d taken on the additional responsibility, and Mycroft rewarded her handsomely for it. He made a mental note to give her a bonus. He didn’t want anyone luring her away with better pay or benefits, and lately, some of the Royals had come sniffing around like hungry jackals.

“It seems I may have miscalculated,” Mycroft admitted. That was his assistant’s other value: he could be honest with her.

“I... may have some insight on this situation, sir.”

The hesitation was uncharacteristic. He tugged his dressing gown closed and headed for the stairs. “Please, continue.”

“I anticipated a request for further information and called upon a contact in the Canadian Parliament. Most of the information on Captain Watson matches what we had in his dossier, sir. However, there have been two new entries to his file.”

In the library, Mycroft retrieved a Bluetooth earpiece from his desk. He slipped it in place and activated the connection so he could drop his mobile in his pocket. “What are they?”

“On Friday, the seventh of November, Captain Watson was given a battery of STI and HIV testing at the Little Prairie Regional Clinic for Health and Wellbeing.”

Mycroft froze in mid-step. He’d been heading for the kitchen, thinking tea was in order. Now, he turned for the brandy on the sideboard. “I see,” he said, his voice calm only because in his line of work he was accustomed to unexpected twists in conversations.

“The results were negative.”

“How fortunate,” Mycroft said somewhat automatically, thinking that Sherlock’s own test results, despite his absurdly risky lifestyle, had been negative as well. Fully aware of incubation periods and test limitations, Mycroft had made it clear to every rehab clinic that Sherlock was to be periodically tested for everything possible. “Is there any record of my brother being tested as well?”

“No, sir, but if he used a false name or stolen identity...”
Mycroft sighed. “Yes, of course.” He poured a double measure of brandy and sat down in a comfortable armchair. “You said two entries?”

“Marjorie Williams, notary at the aforementioned clinic, filed a wills notice with the Vital Statistics Agency on behalf of Captain Watson, replacing his former notice.”

“Do we know the contents of this new will?” Mycroft asked as he mentally shuffled and reshuffled this new information. In light of the STI testing, the only logical conclusion was one he’d never expected.

“No, sir. According to my research, the wills notice merely advises the government that a will exists, as well as its location. I’m trying to find out what that is, but my contact has run into some small difficulty. The will itself doesn’t need to be filed or even seen until the event of Captain Watson’s death.”

“Most likely, it’s hidden away at Captain Watson’s residence, or in the hands of a trusted ally.”

“Yes, sir. But given the timing of the change... Captain Watson has no close relatives, sir. He’s estranged from his sister, and his parents died years ago.”

Mycroft sighed and sipped his brandy. “Thank you. You’re entirely correct — this is almost certainly the reason why my brother has chosen to stay.”

“Shall I cancel the travel arrangements, sir?”

“Yes, sir. Will that be all?”

“Good night, sir.”

Mycroft took the Bluetooth out of his ear and tossed it on the side table. He leaned back, looking up at the ceiling, and thought about going back to bed, but he needed time to process this. It wasn’t so much the shock of Sherlock and Watson becoming lovers. Sherlock could be remarkably persuasive, and apparently Watson was amenable to a male partner.

No, the real surprise was the apparent longevity of their relationship. How often had Mycroft watched Sherlock go from strangers to acquaintances to lovers and back to strangers, almost always in less than a week? Oh, there had been exceptions, of course — Victor came to mind — but that hadn’t happened for years now.

Sherlock’s problem had never been a lack of empathy, but the opposite. He’d been devastated by their parents’ death, and had looked to Mycroft for support. Young himself, Mycroft had perhaps wrongfully advised Sherlock to harden himself to loss, never realising that he would turn away from all emotional connections.

So how had Watson managed to break through to Sherlock? Was it the lack of drugs and the temptations of his self-destructive lifestyle?

Mycroft had sent Sherlock to Canada out of the desperate hope that Watson, who had survived trials no man should have to endure, could withstand Sherlock’s instinct to lash out and destroy everything around him. Apparently he had done far more than that.
If their relationship was genuine, then there was a chance, however slight, that Watson had undone
the damage that Mycroft had unintentionally inflicted upon Sherlock so many years ago. And if that
was the case, he’d done far more than simply repaying the debt of a life saved.

He might well have given back Mycroft’s brother.
Chapter 25

Wednesday, March 27

“You shouldn’t need to do anything,” John said, a tiny frown drawing his brows together as he stared across the kitchen table. “We plan to be back for a couple of weeks in the fall, and if not, I can probably get someone in town to check up on the pipes and things.”

Lunch had come and gone, starting with the venison roast John had started last night and ending with a pie Molly had baked. Outside, the weather was only a bit colder than London’s typical weather in late March, though the midday sun was painfully bright.

Last night, John and Sherlock had driven the quad to Molly’s house, towing the trailer of luggage and essentials that would travel with them back to London. Sherlock had spent an hour carefully cushioning the precious deer skull that had resided in a place of honour on the living room fireplace mantel. John had insisted upon bringing his old manual typewriter. Months ago, Sherlock had ordered a new suitcase to replace the one he’d abandoned at Little Prairie, along with several more for John’s clothes. The clothes were the last things to be packed late yesterday afternoon, before leaving for Molly’s.

They’d spent the night in one of Molly’s guest rooms, and then packed her pickup truck this morning. She would drive them to Fairlake, where John had arranged for one of the residents to fly them and their luggage to Little Prairie. Except for making the actual reservations to fly back to London, John had planned everything down to the last detail. For better or for worse, he had practice by now.

Twice over the last two months, Sherlock had made reservations, and twice he had cancelled them without a thought to deposits when John’s anxiety had been too much. Unobtrusively, Sherlock watched John for any hint of misgivings. Now, though, there was no sign of panic — only a tense, wary excitement.

Molly smiled reassuringly and slipped a bit of pie crust under the table to Toby. “It’s not a problem. And if you need me to ship you anything, don’t hesitate to call.”

“Thanks.” John focussed on her and smiled, reaching across the table to take her hands. “You’ve been the best friend I could ever ask for, Molly.”

Blinking back the tears that had been threatening all morning, she squeezed his hands and said, “I wish I could hate one of you for stealing the other without giving me a chance, but you’re too good for each other.”

John laughed and turned his smile on Sherlock. “I’d say we’re too awful for anyone else.”

“No intentionally, on John’s part,” Sherlock said. “He’s too nice.”

“Nice enough that I’ll go finish up the last of the packing,” John said agreeably. He looked sternly at Sherlock, eyes sparkling, and said, “Dishes.”

“Oh, he doesn’t have to,” Molly protested.

“Yes, he does. You’re doing us enough of a favor, driving us to town again.” John leaned down to kiss each of them on the cheek before leaving Molly’s warm, cluttered kitchen.
Sherlock’s contribution to the dishes was to set the dirtiest on the floor for Toby to pre-wash — a perfectly practical solution, in his opinion — while Molly wrapped and refrigerated the leftovers. For a few minutes, the only sounds were rustling foil and Toby clattering the plates across the floor. Then, long after the front door had banged closed, Molly said, “Sherlock...”

He’d anticipated this, though in truth, he’d expected it back in February, when they’d first planned to leave Fairlake. “Don’t be tedious, Molly. I’m not going to hurt him, so there’s no need to threaten.”

She looked back from the refrigerator and smiled. “Good. Because remember, he gave me his hunting rifle.” She let the refrigerator door swing closed and nodded towards the sink.

Taking the hint, Sherlock gathered the plates from the floor and carried them over. Quietly, he said, “I won’t hurt him. I won’t let anyone hurt him.”

She avoided his eyes as she started washing. Only when he’d brought over the silverware and glasses did she say, “I’m sorry. I’ve been meaning to say it for months, but... with everything that happened with you leaving and then not leaving — both of you, I mean...” She shook her head.

Sherlock resisted the urge to snap at her far more easily than he would have just a year ago. Contrary to what others might think, patience came naturally to him, but only when it furthered his chosen work. He’d much rather endure a week long stakeout than participate in some halting, incoherent conversation, especially one that was obviously heading towards the murky realm of emotions. But six months at John’s side had taught him some measure of self-control, so he just made a cursory effort to rinse everything off and let her carry on.

Finally she said, “I’m sorry for how I yelled at you.”

“You were right,” he said, a little surprised that the words didn’t grate on him as much as he’d expected.

She looked up at him. “I — Well, yes, but I shouldn’t have... I mean, the way I said it —”

He waved a hand, scattered water droplets, and went to find a dish towel. “Irrelevant. You recognised what we had before I did.” Briskly, he dried off his hands and then tossed the towel aside.

Slowly, Molly smiled. “Does that mean I can come visit? I’ve always wanted to see England.”

“Any time you’d like — once we’re settled in London. We’ll be at my old house for a few weeks. It’s not easy to find a good flat in the city.”

“Thanks.” Grinning now, she went back to washing the dishes.

Sherlock watched her, remembering how viciously she’d leapt to defend John, giving Sherlock the push he’d needed to realise his own feelings. He kissed the top of her head, startling her, and said, “Thank you, Molly.”

~~~

Ten hours later, Sherlock abandoned his new overnight bag just inside the door to their hotel room — a loathsome, tiny chain hotel with awful polyester bedspreads and a rattling heater that sounded
like a collapsing factory. “I realise Canada is made up of all the bits of land left over by America, but must it be so hatefully big?”

“You do realise I’m Canadian, don’t you?” John asked, taking it upon himself to close the door, throw the locks, and deal with the bags.

“Only until we can fix your citizenship.” Sherlock stalked to the window and pulled the drapes closed, and then scrubbed his fingertips on his jeans. More polyester.

“You’re skipping the relevant details again.”

In one move, Sherlock pulled away the bedspread and threw it in the corner. The sheets were almost as awful, but they’d only be here for one night. He could live with it. Or he could just steal a car and find that Tim Horton’s again. In fact, that was a brilliant thought. “We should get doughnuts.”

“It’s eleven at night, I’m exhausted, and I’m still Canadian.” John walked over and gave Sherlock a little push back towards the bed. “All I want is to spend the night right here, with you, in private.”

Sherlock allowed himself to drop back onto the edge of the bed, pulling John along with him. He rolled over on top of John, propping up on his elbows, and looked down into John’s eyes. There wasn’t a hint of panic or tension in him, and Sherlock couldn’t help but feel smugly proud of himself. John had changed drastically over the six months they’d been together, but at the core, he was the same man he’d been from the beginning.

Smiling, Sherlock asked, “Doughnuts after? Or for breakfast?” Then he corrected himself: “And for breakfast.”

“Christ, I thought breaking your nicotine addiction was bad.” John laughed and tipped his head up to kiss Sherlock. “Fine. I can’t refuse you anything, bastard; you know that. But first, what are you planning?”

With a dramatic sigh, Sherlock said, “Mycroft runs the British government. He can do something useful with all that power for a change and expedite your citizenship.”

“And I need British citizenship why? I thought you said you’d taken care of all the paperwork.”

“To stay.” Sherlock frowned then, a tiny twist of fear rising up inside him. “You do want to stay, don’t you?”

John got his arms around Sherlock’s body and pulled him back down. “Of course I do.” He took a deep breath, tension rising in his body. Sherlock almost rolled off him, not wanting to push, but John’s arms went tight. “There’s another way, you know... I mean, we’ve never talked about it, but it’s legal in Canada.”

It was Sherlock’s turn to go tense. He lifted his head to look into John’s eyes and saw a hint of fear there. “Is it — Mycroft can just — Do you want —” he started, hating the way that suddenly he’d turned into Molly, stammering like an awkward teenager rather than speaking with his usual clarity and determination.

John finally pulled him down into a kiss, silencing him. “Whatever you want, it’s fine. I don’t know the laws —”

“I love you.”

The words slipped out, silencing them both, and Sherlock looked away for a moment, unwilling to
face the possibility, however remote, of John’s rejection. For all these months, he’d held back, waiting for John to decide he was ready to say it, only to go blurting it out without any sort of plan or logic.

When he finally turned back and met John’s eyes, John smiled. “I love you, too,” he said quietly.

“You’ve never said that before.” Again, Sherlock was just talking, not thinking. It was obvious. Neither of them had.

“Neither have you,” John countered logically. “Both our fault, then.”

Slowly, the fact that they were both in accord filtered through Sherlock’s fear, and he told himself he was being irrational. He’d known for months that he loved John. The words themselves were just that — words — even if hearing them from John somehow made it real.

“Sherlock?” John asked tentatively, touching his face.

With a little shake of his head, Sherlock said, “Now you’re ready to leave.”

“What?”

“Remember I said when you were ready, you could tell me how you feel?”

John’s confusion melted away into understanding. “Yeah.” He brushed his fingers over Sherlock’s face, staring up at him affectionately. “At first, it was there, but it didn’t... I don’t know, it didn’t feel right to say it. And then it was just like we both knew it.”

“And now, you’re ready.” Sherlock kissed him again, finally taking his time, thinking that he’d have to encourage John to say it more often. “England has civil partnership, I think. There may be some other laws. Mycroft can figure it out.”

“There’s no rush. If nothing else, we’ll be back here in the fall.” Bracing himself, John twisted around, throwing Sherlock onto his back with a surprised huff. “We have all the time in the world to figure it out.”

All but purring with contentment inside, Sherlock asked, “Are you afraid of flying? Someone else flying, I mean. You were tense on the flight here from Fairlake.”


Sherlock’s smile turned wicked. “It’s a charter flight. We’re the only passengers. If we can find some basic hand tools, I’m certain the seats can fully recline.”

“You are not taking our aircraft apart while we’re flying in it.”

“But —”

“The rest of my life is going to be me stopping you from doing something dangerous bordering on suicidal, isn’t it?”

“Do you mind?” Sherlock asked.

John laughed and shook his head. “At least I’ll never be bored.”
Thursday, March 28 — Friday, March 29

“Aren’t we supposed to only have one carry-on bag?” John asked, vaguely recalling the commercial flight he’d taken from Toronto to Little Prairie years ago.

“We’re the only passengers,” Sherlock reminded him as he paused, looking around the tiny airport. With one hand, he was towing his wheeled suitcase; with the other, he carried a Tim Horton’s shopping bag with three boxes of doughnuts, and his violin case. “We could bring whole shipping pallets of doughnuts, if we chose. Ah, there,” he said, and swept off towards the security checkpoint.

John followed, overcome with a sense of sadness and loss at the sight of Sherlock’s long overcoat billowing out behind him. The warm parka Sherlock had worn for the last six months was packed in the bags that had hopefully been loaded onto their plane some time last night. Under the overcoat, Sherlock wore one of the suits he’d worn that first week.

It was a reversal in time that marked, as nothing else had, that this was a changing point for them both. The life that awaited them both on the other side of the airport was something new, something that John hoped would be wonderful but realistically knew would have its terrible moments. Before, that would have been enough to send him fleeing back to Fairlake. Now, he knew he didn’t have to face those moments alone.

In an effort to cheer himself up, or at least distract his thoughts, he said, “You really didn’t have to charter a plane, you know. Or you could have at least let me pay.”

Sherlock dumped his bags onto the conveyor belt. Only a few passengers were in line ahead of them. “John, my brother has more money than some third world nations, and that’s without embezzling from the British government. He can pay.”

John laughed, still a bit nervous, and put his backpack on the conveyor behind the box of doughnuts. He’d never considered permanently leaving Canada, even before he’d gone to the Middle East, but now he was thinking of all the things he should do and wondering if he could. There was always medicine, but he wasn’t certain he was ready for that. Besides, he’d practically have to repeat med school and residency to catch up on the last eight years, and he wasn’t certain he even wanted to go back to being a surgeon. Maybe he could go into family medicine as a GP.

Once they were through security, they followed the signs to gate three, where an older woman in a smart navy suit was arguing with a cheerful-looking young man who was crushing a hat under one arm. “... and that means not one single word — Gentlemen!” She switched gears smoothly, turning to beam at John and Sherlock. “On behalf of MJN Air, welcome to... to... Arthur, where are we?”

“Canada!” the young man exclaimed.

“Yes, very helpful. Do shut up.” Her smile never faltered. “Direct service to London for a Dr. Watson and Mr. Holmes?” she inquired, looking first to Sherlock (who did truthfully look more reputable, more like a proper doctor) and then to John.

“Yes, other way around,” Sherlock corrected absently. “There’s no one else aboard, is there? No little government minions scurrying about in the cargo hold? No overdressed know-it-all with an umbrella?”
Without missing a beat, the woman said, “Only our pilots, sir, and I assure you, they are as far from being government minions as they can get. They barely qualify as my minions.”

“Did you need an umbrella, though?” the young man offered hopefully. “I can find —”


“Oh. Right, Mum.” Grinning, he went to take Sherlock’s bag, causing a brief scuffle over the bag of doughnuts. In the end, the young man retreated in defeat, slung John’s backpack over a shoulder, and headed out the gate three door. The woman held the door open for John and Sherlock before she walked swiftly ahead to go yell at the young man again.

As they walked out onto the asphalt, John hung back, touching Sherlock’s arm. “You’re certain this is safe?” he asked very quietly. “They don’t seem...”

“No idea,” Sherlock said with a shrug. “Apparently, they’re on Mycroft’s ‘authorised travel provider’ list.”

“Wonderful. Let’s hope they can find London. Otherwise, you may get that trip to Ibiza after all.”

~~~

The plane was old and had a somewhat makeshift air about it, but it was obviously cared for well enough to have maintained Mycroft’s stamp of approval. Sherlock was pleased to find that the cabin was deserted as promised, though the presence of two flight attendants seemed excessive for only two passengers. Still, all that mattered was that they had the flight to themselves, and the cabin seating was spacious and comfortable, with armrests that could be folded out of the way, turning two seats into a cozy settee.

Rather than taking his own pair of seats, he took the window seat beside John, who unsurprisingly stayed near the aisle. Sherlock sprawled comfortably sideways in his seat, back against the curved exterior wall of the jet, legs across John’s lap.

John just raised his brows, glanced up at the illuminated seatbelt sign, and shook his head. Without a word, he rested his three-ring binder across Sherlock’s shins so he could continue the editing work that had occupied him for the last three weeks. He still hadn’t finished the Cold War novel, but the young adult one had been received with delight by his publisher.

“My publisher’s been hinting at doing marketing events, you know,” he said as the plane began taxiing to the runway. “Remind me to email her and find out about our sales in the UK.”

Sherlock sniffed derisively. “You write young adult books, John. Do you really want to be mobbed with teenagers?”

“I thought you liked children.”

“Only when they’re too young to have a fully-developed sense of stupidity. Teenagers actually have excess stupidity. They have to bleed it off with all the hormones before they can properly join society as functional adults.”

John looked at him and tapped his pen on the page. “You went to drugs rehab three times, got
arrested for domestic terrorism, and are a professional consulting detective. I’ve been hiding in a
cabin in northern Canada for seven years. Which part of that is even remotely ‘functional’, much less
‘adult’?”

Sherlock smiled, inching down in his seat a bit more. “I’ll answer both once the cabin lights are
turned off and we have some privacy. Or if you’re not shy, my coat is big enough —”

“God! No,” John said, cheeks going bright. He glared for good measure and turned his attention
back to his editing.

Snickering under his breath, Sherlock took his knife from his pocket and flicked the blade open,
turned the handle, and then snapped it closed. Back in London, he’d always fidgeted with his
mobile, even when he wasn’t sending texts every thirty seconds. At the cabin, playing with the knife
had become his new habit.

Without looking up from the proofreader’s mark he was scribbling in the margin, John asked, “Did
you actually smuggle that through security?”

“Simple.”

“I did mention that one of my goals in life is to not get arrested, right?”

“As if I’d ever let that happen,” Sherlock said, trying to sound reassuring, though it came out more
fierce than anything else. When John turned to meet his eyes, Sherlock sat up a bit and reached out
with his free hand, promising, “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

John took his hand and smiled, steadying his book as the whole plane rattled over a bump in the
asphalt. “I know. I just hope I can promise the same in return.”

~~~

“See?” John whispered in the darkness of the cabin as he rolled on top of Sherlock, settling between
his legs.

“Hm?”

“No screwdriver needed. The seats do recline enough.”

~~~

“Ladies and gentlemen. Well, Mum and gentlemen. Gentlemen, actually, since Mum, you already
know and are standing right over —”

John glanced over at Sherlock, whose eyes were bright with suppressed laughter.

The other flight attendant, Carolyn, took over the announcement: “Gentlemen, we are now making
our final approach to Fitton Airfield. The current weather is slightly overcast, with a seasonable low
temperature of four degrees. Please return your seatbacks to the upright position and fasten your
seatbelts. A flight attendant will collect your trash shortly. Please refrain from the use of any mobile electronics until the plane has taxied to a halt and the captain has turned off the seatbelt sign. On behalf of MJN Air, we would like to thank you for flying with us and we do look forward to serving you in future.”

“Are all charter flights so improvised?” John asked softly as he rearranged his seat, surreptitiously checking to make certain his clothes were in order.

Sherlock just made a thoughtful sort of hum in response and watched intently as the young man, Arthur, came to where they were sitting and held out a white trash bag.

“If I can divest yourselves of any rubbish —” he began, before snapping his mouth shut.

“You’ve been a flight attendant all your life,” Sherlock said to Arthur.

The young man beamed at him. “Yes! Yes, I have! Even when I wasn’t because I couldn’t be, I was, though there was that time I thought about being a pilot — Oh! Damn. I’m not supposed to speak on this flight. Sorry, chaps. Sirs. Gentlemen.”

John watched him rush forward to the galley. “Remember your reaction on first seeing my plane?”

Sherlock smirked at him. “I distinctly remember being much more interested in you. For someone with no fashion sense at all, you looked far too good to belong anywhere named ‘Little Prairie’.”

“It’s sweet when you lie to me,” John said wryly. He unbuckled his seatbelt and reached over to fasten Sherlock’s, since he couldn’t be bothered.

Always willing to take advantage of unexpected opportunities, Sherlock slid an arm around John’s shoulders to hold him close for a moment. “Fitton’s not Heathrow. You don’t have to worry.”

“I’m not worried,” John said, a little surprised to find it was true. He stole a quick kiss before moving back to his own seat so he could do up his own seatbelt once more. “Well, I’m not worried about the airport. Your family’s another matter. Do you really think I’m ready to meet them?”

“You’re only ‘meeting’ them because they’ll be at the house. We can just stay in the private wing the whole time and have servants bring us trays whenever we get hungry. You shouldn’t feel obliged to socialise. I certainly don’t.”

Gratefully, John squeezed his hand and looked past Sherlock to the window. The sky seemed full of lights that obscured the stars, lines of crawling red and white showing the roads and highways snaking between tall, bright buildings. “Is that London?”

Sherlock turned and shook his head. “You can barely see the outskirts. Fitton’s just under an hour west of the city centre.”

John took a deep breath and kept looking. Just thinking about all those lights — all those people — had his heart racing, but he was still in control of it. The presence of the unfamiliar flight attendants had kept him from falling asleep, but he and Sherlock had managed to keep each other occupied. Through the flight, he’d avoided thinking about what would happen when they landed and disembarked and he had to face a whole new country.

He could do this. *He could do this.*

He kept thinking it as the plane landed with a rough jolt. They braked hard, harder than he was accustomed to in his little Kitfox, and he braced his feet against the carpeted floor until the plane
finally slowed.

Sherlock still had John’s right hand in his left, though he’d taken his cell phone out. So much for following the rules. Automatically, John looked around to see if the flight attendants were paying attention, but there was no sign of them.

“Good. Our car’s here. Mycroft can be depended on for some things,” Sherlock said smugly as he tucked his phone back into his pocket.

“I suppose I’ll need to get one of those.”

Sherlock glanced at John a bit slyly. “I’ve been looking for one for you already. Or I would have done, if you’d had any sort of decent internet at the cabin,” he scolded. “And a new laptop.”

“I’ll trust you to pick something appropriate,” John said, trying not to feel embarrassed. He was more than seven years out of date with technology. The only reason he even owned a laptop was because his publisher had asked him to please never send her a hardcopy manuscript again.

The plane finally came to a stop, and the seatbelt light went off. John unbuckled his seatbelt with relief, blinking against the sudden glare as all the overhead lights came on. Then, at a shout of, “Arthur!” half the lights went out again.

“It’s almost one in the morning, local time,” Sherlock said as he also rose. He ducked out into the aisle and opened the overhead. “We’ll be at the house by half two, three at the latest.”

“Half two? You mean two-thirty?”

Sherlock handed John his bag. “That’s what I said. Half two.” He snapped out the handle of his carry-on bag and took down the bag of doughnuts, now significantly depleted.

The doughnuts, John reflected, had been a genius plan. Airplane food hadn’t improved significantly in seven years, even on a private flight.

Feeling a bit cowardly, John stepped back to let Sherlock lead the way. He followed Sherlock forward, reminding himself that he was ready to face this and that he was entirely in control of himself and his reactions.

“Good evening, thank you for allowing yourselves to convey yourselves to Fitton, and on behalf of MJN air, we who actually are MJN Air do hope yourselves will return with your patronage forthwith,” the young flight attendant said cheerily.

They disembarked via a rolling staircase. The older lady was waiting at the bottom, keeping one eye out for them while instructing uniformed crewmen to unload the cargo from the hold. A baggage cart was already standing by.

“Gentlemen,” she said, smiling up at them. “Your car awaits, and I assure you, your luggage will be loaded into the waiting transit van, and will be delivered just as soon as humanly possible.”

“Thanks,” John told her, since all Sherlock did was give a brusque nod and head in the direction she pointed.

“Have a wonderful evening, gentlemen,” she answered, before climbing up the stairs with a shouted, “Arthur!” as seemed to be her habit.

John jogged after Sherlock, looking around warily. “Sherlock? Don’t we need to go through
“Mycroft will have handled all that,” Sherlock said dismissively. “Note that we didn’t fill out any tedious paperwork as I had to do flying to Canada.”

“Missed that part,” John admitted.

The car waiting for them was actually a limousine, an extravagance that John felt was a little over the top. Was Sherlock showing off for his benefit, or was there something else going on?

As soon as they approached, a woman got out of the back, holding something in one hand. “Welcome back, Mr. Holmes. Doctor Watson, welcome to England.”

“Hi,” John said, giving Sherlock a curious glance when he neglected to perform an introduction.

“If I may have your passport, Doctor?” she asked, never offering a name or handshake.

“Um. Sure.” John was carrying his papers in his coat. He put down his backpack and found his passport, which he offered to her.

She took the passport and set it on the roof of the car, just as John heard someone approach them from behind. He turned, stepping between Sherlock and the noise, and saw a man in a bland, dark suit. “Your bags, please?” he asked as the trunk popped open.

Engaged in glaring suspiciously at the interior of the vehicle, Sherlock just waved a hand at his abandoned carry-on bag. In his other hands, he still held the precious bag of doughnuts. John set down his backpack, wondering how this was in any way normal. He’d been expecting customs and lines and maybe a hired car or taxi, not whatever this was.

He turned back in time to see the woman press a small stamp to one of the pages in his passport. Then she handed it back to him and smiled. “Thank you, Doctor,” she said, replacing the stamp into a small metal box. Then, pointedly, she gestured to the interior of the car. “Gentlemen?”

Sherlock pulled his coat around himself, squared his shoulders, and ducked into the vehicle with the air of a man going to battle. The panic that scraped its claws down John’s spine had nothing to do with the war and everything to do with being in an unknown, unfamiliar situation in which Sherlock — Sherlock — was actually tense, maybe even nervous.

Protectively, John followed right on Sherlock’s heels, prepared to deal with whatever threat he found — soldiers, police, the ‘thugs’ that Sherlock was always mentioning in reference to his brother.

What he found, though, was an unexpectedly ordinary-looking man, somewhat older than John, with thinning hair combed neatly back and the type of suit that looked as though it cost more than John’s cabin. He had a benevolent smile that he turned on John, saying, “Doctor Watson, so good to finally meet you in person.”

The voice almost froze John, and he sat down much more heavily than he’d intended. It was one thing to speak with him over a bad telephone connection between Fairlake and England. This sounded more like the voice John had heard on a sat-phone years ago in a military hospital.

“Python.”

“Don’t indulge his code names or he’ll think he’s a spy,” Sherlock scolded, glaring out the window.

“Forgive my brother, John — May I call you John? Please, call me Mycroft,” Python said smoothly,
offering a hand.

The car door slammed shut, making John flinch in surprise before he forced himself to lean past Sherlock to accept the handshake. Mycroft was seated along the side of the vehicle, allowing John and Sherlock to sit side-by-side at the back. John inched closer to Sherlock so their legs pressed together from hip to knee, needing the security of his presence.

“As I was saying, John, thank you for all you’ve done for Sherlock. I have no doubt that only the best awaits you both now.”

“Thanks,” John said awkwardly, trying to subtly nudge Sherlock into responding.

Apparently, Mycroft didn’t expect Sherlock’s participation in the conversation. He just smiled at John, touched a button on the console built into the other side of the limousine, and said, “We’re ready to leave.” A moment later, the car started moving, and they spent the rest of the drive in awkward, tense silence.

~~~

In the darkness of the limousine, Mycroft studied his brother and his new partner, trying to read six months of details in their body language and silence. Despite his lack of a haircut and the condition of his suit after such a long flight, Sherlock looked healthy, his face no longer gaunt and shadowed. He’d put on just enough weight to reinforce that image, and he looked nothing like the dying drug addict he’d been only a year before. His posture screamed his displeasure at finding that Mycroft had taken the time to meet them at the airport, but it was a carefully manufactured affectation. The lack of barbed sarcasm or outright hostility told Mycroft more loudly than words that Sherlock might even have been happy to see him, albeit unwilling to admit it.

John, though, was far more difficult to read, full of complex layers that Mycroft had expected only because of their few brief phone calls. He looked better than he did even in his most recent passport photo, as though he’d finally moved past the tension that had plagued him for years. His clothes were new, fitted well enough but not perfectly. The colours had been chosen with care, bringing out the lingering hints of gold in his sandy brown hair and the unexpected depth of his dark blue eyes, and Mycroft read Sherlock’s hand in those careful choices.

They sat close without being clingy or smothering one another, and though John was sitting a bit more forward, as though prepared to jump in front of Sherlock to defend him, it was Sherlock who reached out to cover John’s fingertips with his own in a subtle touch that betrayed just how close they actually were. Mycroft had never known Sherlock to be physically affectionate at all, in fact.

Was this another sign of Sherlock’s recovery? Mycroft hoped so. Sherlock needed someone in his life, and while Mycroft had never intended John to be more than a positive influence — someone who could teach Sherlock to survive — it seemed John had done so much more.

Sherlock turned his head just enough to meet Mycroft’s eyes. He was defensive and tense, ready to tear Mycroft apart if there was even a hint of disapproval. That level of fierce determination was the last confirmation Mycroft needed to know that the emotional bond between Sherlock and John was genuine.

Tomorrow — actually today, given the late hour — was the start of the Easter weekend, when the
extended family would descend upon the old family house, most of them monied and powerful and entirely conventional, husbands and wives and children. The very few who forged their own paths, like Sherlock, tended to avoid such conservative holiday gatherings. It spoke volumes to Mycroft that Sherlock had worked so hard to bring John home before the holiday and not after, when they would have months to settle in before the Christmas season.

Sherlock wasn’t just happy. He was proud of John and of the relationship they had built — proud enough to want to introduce him to a family that was old and set in its ways. While the younger set might not look twice, the eldest — the grandfathers and great-aunts — would hardly approve of him choosing a man as his partner.

And John would stand by Sherlock’s side before the family who had never really approved of Sherlock’s wild streak and the abrasive wit he’d developed to protect himself from anyone who tried to get close to him. That much was obvious in the subtly protective, comfortable way they sat together.

Mycroft smiled, the expression barely a twitch of lips and narrowing of eyes, though into that smile, he put all of his happiness and hope.

Sherlock saw it. His eyes went wide, and his fingertips twitched against John’s.

At the touch, John turned to look at Sherlock, who went back to staring silently out the window.

Mycroft watched as John subtly closed his hand around Sherlock’s, their fingers curling together, a silent display that defied anyone to try and part them.

Swallowing past the sudden lump in his throat, Mycroft turned away from them both and took his mobile out of his pocket. He was the de facto patriarch of the family. His life was consumed by his duty to Queen and country. He had no room in his life for personal relationships — a sacrifice he’d willingly made, a sacrifice he had only lately begun to regret.

I apologise for the late invitation, but would you care to join my family for the Easter holiday? — M

He sent off the text before he could stop himself and immediately felt a stab of nervousness that had nothing to do with regret at the sudden, impulsive, emotional decision. Seeing his brother’s happiness served to highlight the emptiness in Mycroft that duty to country and family no longer filled, but that was no excuse for attempting to escalate a casual relationship to something so much more.

Love to, but only if you promise not to complain about my wardrobe. Not all of us have a clothes budget to outdo third world countries.

Nearly overwhelmed with relief, Mycroft smiled down at the mobile and answered quickly:

I don’t care what you wear. All that matters is you. — M

A faint sound made him look up to see Sherlock watching him, a hint of a shy smile playing on his lips, though he couldn’t have possibly seen the texts. His expression, though, had been uncharacteristically open and unguarded for just a moment, which was all Sherlock had ever needed.

With a somewhat resigned sigh, he tucked the mobile away in his pocket and turned back to Sherlock, who smiled at him in warm, affectionate approval for the first time since before their parents had died.
Epilogue: Hydra Island, Greece

Sunlight drew a hot, thin line across the soft sheet tangled around John’s legs, waking him. He opened his eyes, alert but calm, and felt Sherlock stir against him. He’d stolen all but one of the pillows again, making John wonder how they’d managed to keep from killing one another halfway around the world, when they’d had only two pillows to share.

The shutters were propped open, and the window, without a screen or even glass, admitted a sluggish morning breeze that carried the smell of flowers and the Aegean Sea. The villa’s thick walls helped keep the evening temperature reasonable without air conditioning.

Rolling onto his side, John got an arm around Sherlock’s waist and pulled him close. He pressed a kiss to the back of Sherlock’s neck, nudging the long curls out of his way.

Sherlock’s attempt at a sleepy, unhappy grumble sounded more like a contented purr. His arm slid out from under the sheet to cover John’s. “I’m not awake.”

“Liar.” John kissed him again. “You said you’d teach me how to sail.”

“Later.”

“Later it’ll be too hot, and then it’ll be too late, and then it’ll be tomorrow morning, and you’ll say the same thing.”

Grumbling, Sherlock twisted around, managing to strip the sheets completely off John. “You don’t need to know how to sail. You don’t own a boat. You certainly wouldn’t want to sail on the Thames, even if you did own a boat.”

“No, but I want to lounge around on the deck watching you do all the work, for once. In your swim trunks. There’s a nice bonus,” John added smugly.

“Or we could forego the swim trunks completely and stay right here.” Sherlock hooked his leg around John’s, reminding him unnecessarily that they hadn’t bothered wearing clothes to bed for months now.

“I did not let you talk me into taking you to Greece just to spend our whole vacation in bed.”

“Two monastery visits, a bicycle tour of wildlife, some incomprehensible modern theatre performance at the Hydrama, a different restaurant every night — that’s hardly spending our ‘whole vacation’ in bed.”

“Breakfast. Sailing. And then...” John rolled onto his back, strong arms pulling Sherlock over on top of him. “Anything you want.”

“Anything?”

“Anything, love.”
‘Anything’, John reflected that afternoon, was an absolutely wonderful idea when filtered through the incredibly creative mind of Sherlock Holmes. Later, he’d be feeling the ache in his muscles and the hint of sunburn on his skin (though not as badly as Sherlock, who had declared sunscreen ‘tedious’), but for now, he couldn’t remember ever feeling this good.

The villa’s landward patio was on the east, and the shade helped to cool their skin. The air was absolutely still, just hot enough to encourage lazy napping. Hydra Island was a place outside time, and John felt as if the whole world had fallen away except for this small private villa.

England had been good — challenging, but good. For now, John and Sherlock lived at the country house but frequently visited London. At first, those trips had been a trial, but slowly, John had come to look forward to them, and they’d finally started looking for a place to live in the city. The vacation was a welcome distraction from all the hectic real estate viewings, even though the timing could probably be better. They’d no sooner be settled in London before they’d be going back to Canada for a couple of weeks to check on the cabin and visit with Molly.

John had other ideas about that visit. England had civil partnership laws, but a part of him wanted more. He had no idea how Canada’s gay marriage statute would translate once he moved to England officially. The details of the law, however, were less important than the acknowledgement that he and Sherlock were together, forever.

For now, though, he had lazier, more immediate concerns. He had a distant memory of making dinner reservations for later that night, but his mobile was somewhere by his clothes piled on the floor, all the way on the other side of Sherlock’s lounge chair.

“Sherlock.” He reached one arm out and poked a finger at Sherlock’s hip, careful to avoid any of his reddening skin. “Sherlock, pass me my phone, will you?”

“No.”

John chuckled softly. “We have dinner reservations. I don’t remember what time.”

“Not hungry.”

“Surprise me.” John sat up and arched his back, cracking his spine. The lounge chairs weren’t exactly comfortable, especially not for what they’d been doing. Not that he was complaining. The afternoon heat had sapped them both of their strength, turning their usual vigorous sex into something lazy and luxurious that felt as if it had lasted for days.

He got up and circled around Sherlock’s lounge chair to the pile of clothes they’d discarded. He started sorting through the abandoned swim trunks and T-shirts, and two mobiles fell out of the pile. Sherlock’s BlackBerry flashed an alert.

“You’ve got a message,” John said, tossing the BlackBerry onto Sherlock’s lounge chair, conveniently close to his hand. Long fingers crept to it, pressing buttons without Sherlock even bothering to lift his head and watch. Amused, John took his own phone back to his chair and sat down to open the calendar app.

“Sherlock? Hello, dear?”

It was a woman’s whispering voice, sounding old and quavering. Something about the tension in her
tinted made John’s senses, dulled by heat and sex, come alert. Sherlock twisted and sat up, eyes bright
and intent as he stared down at the phone.

“Oh. I suppose it’s your answering machine. Sherlock, dear, it’s Emma Hudson. I do hope you
remember me. I got your number from Mrs. Harcourt. She said... Well, she said you might be able to
help me, dear. She said you’re a detective now. You sometimes work with the police? I’m... well,
I’m in Florida now, dear. I remarried after George died, and... Oh, Sherlock...”

Her voice dropped even lower, almost too soft for John to hear. She sounded close to tears. “I think
something terrible is going on, dear. It’s my new husband. I’m... I’m scared, Sherlock. I don’t know
what to do, and I was hoping you could help... I’ll try to call back later. Please, don’t call. I don’t
want him knowing I called you. I... hope everything’s all right with you, dear. Give my love to your
brother.” After a few seconds, the recording ended.

“God, she sounded terrified,” John said tightly. “Who was that?”

Sherlock was staring at his mobile, face gone pale beneath his tan. “Mrs. Hudson. She was one of
our tutors. She retired when I was old enough to go off to boarding school.” Sherlock looked at John
as though stricken. “John...”

“Florida. Right,” he said immediately, standing back up as he sorted through his most recent phone
calls to find the restaurant’s number. “Get us a flight. I’ll cancel dinner so we can pack tonight and
leave first thing in the morning.”

“John,” Sherlock protested half-heartedly. He rose and put his hand over John’s mobile to stop him
from calling the restaurant. “We’re on vacation. This is meant to be for us.”

John dropped his mobile on the end of the lounge chair so he could cup Sherlock’s face between his
palms. Gently, he touched the sharp, suntanned cheeks, glad that he’d at least got sunscreen on
Sherlock’s face. “Sherlock, it’s been great, but it’ll be here later. We can come back anytime you
want.”

Silently, Sherlock stared down into his eyes, searching his face, and the desperate edge faded from
his expression. “You’re wonderful,” he said quietly, leaning down to kiss John. Then he stepped
back and swept up the pile of discarded clothing so he could get dressed. “Do you want to go back
to the estate, or to London? You could keep looking for a flat.”

“Or I could come with you, you idiot,” John said with a fond laugh. “I’ve never been to Florida.”

Startled, Sherlock looked back at him. “You’re certain?”

“I just got you, Sherlock. I’m not going to let anything take you away from me.” John took a deep
breath, trying to find his confidence. It was there, though shaky.

Abandoning his clothes, Sherlock stepped over to him, and his smile had a new fire in it. “There’s no
one I’d rather have with me. It could be dangerous.”

In answer, John pulled Sherlock down for a kiss as his reservations melted away. Whatever was to
come, he would face it, not just for Sherlock but for himself. He was done with hiding. “Then let’s
do this, love. I’m ready.”

Chapter End Notes
This has been a wonderful, incredible experience. Thank you for all the kudos and emails and encouraging comments, both here and on Tumblr.

And special thanks to Snogandagrope, Mitaya, and my secret beta for sitting with me, sometimes as I was typing, and cheerleading me on to the ending.

Works inspired by this one:
- Cover for Northwest Passage by moonblossom graphics (moonblossom), Do you want to get frostbite? by ladymac111, Podfic of "Northwest Passage" by DaltonG, Heart of the Porcupine by GwendolynnFiction, Northwest Passage [PODFIC] by Lockedinjohnlock, Cover art for "Northwest Passage [PODFIC]" by kacaso, Cover Art for "Northwest Passage" by Ttime42

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!