Castle and Sand

by grey853

Summary

Sherlock and John both have difficult pasts that affect their evolving relationship. When John prevents a mugging, it sets off a dangerous chain of events that not only impacts him, but his whole family. In the end there's a wedding and a honeymoon, but will there really be a happy ending?
Chapter One

"Is this a castle?"

Sherlock glanced up from his cell phone with disinterest. "Chateau."

"What's the difference?"

"Spelling and battlements mostly. Why are you looking at my personal files?"

"Don't be an arsehole, and it's open on my bloody computer, that's why." After a brief pause, John asked, "Why is there a castle on my computer?"

Sherlock went back to texting. "Mine was in the other room."

"And you couldn't be arsed to get up and get your own." It was a statement not a question. John knew better than to bother asking.

"Yours is adequate enough, though I highly recommend an upgrade with your next purchase."

John snorted and shook his head in weary amusement. "Yeah, I'll put that on the long list of things I can't afford at the moment, shall I?"

Still not satisfied with his flat mate's answer, he asked again, "Castle, Sherlock? What's this about?"

Sherlock finally looked up. "Oh, that."

"Yes, that."

"I was checking for comparables in the area."

Not quite sure he'd heard correctly, John's expression narrowed. "When you say comparables, are you saying you want to know what castles are going for in France these days?"

"Yes."

"Is this for a case?"

"No."

Frustration knotted his belly. Talking to Sherlock was often like getting Chinese translations from wigmakers in Chelsea. "Are you going to tell me why you need to know that?"

"Why are you asking?"

"I think I have a right to know since it's on my bloody computer."

"Actually..."

"Sherlock, just tell me for fuck sake. Why are you checking out castles in France?"

A familiar voice sounded from the doorway. "I believe I can answer that, Dr. Watson."
"Mycroft, why are you here?" Sherlock's displeasure was immediate, his voice suddenly tight and disapproving. "You have to call or at least knock first. We had an agreement!"

"Which I was more than happy to abide by, Little Brother, but you weren't answering my calls or texts."

"You should have taken the hint. You never used to be so dense. Government work has damaged your capacity to ascertain even the obvious."

Wearily, John stood up and motioned to the chair. The constant bickering between the Holmes boys got on his nerves, but he couldn't really say much, not since his relationship with his own sibling had gone into the shithole. John was many things, but he tried very hard not to be a complete hypocrite. If Sherlock disliked his brother so much, he likely had good cause. Still, there was no reason not to at least try to be civil in their own home. "Have a seat, Mycroft. Tea?"

"No, he bloody well does not want tea and don't bother to sit down," Sherlock snapped. "Again, why are you here?"

Mycroft settled into John's chair with an air of satisfaction and defiance. "I think you know. And, yes, John, I'd love some tea. Sherlock and I have some important details to discuss."

"We don't." Sherlock hesitated before he added, "I won't apologize. It's not my fault."

"I know that."

"Then why are you here? Why persist in going on and on about it?"

"That's not what I'm doing, Sherlock. I'm trying to handle the details, details that seem far too mundane for you to handle."

"Boring."

"As I said, mundane to you perhaps, but unfortunately quite necessary."

John frowned in confusion as he stood in the doorway of the kitchen. "What's going on? Am I missing something? I'm missing something, aren't I?"

"Nothing important. Go make tea." Sherlock made a shooing motion for John to leave.

John's face heated at being ordered about like he was some lowly servant, dismissed like he didn't matter, like he wasn't the same man who rushed around catching criminals and shooting people just for Sherlock, the ungrateful wanker. Hell, Sherlock was probably raised in a castle full of butlers and maids and fucking stable hands. That would certainly explain a lot about his behavior both at home and at crime scenes. John should be used to it, but he wasn't, never would be, not really. He crossed his arms and stubbornly asked, "What's this about a bloody castle then?"

Mycroft smiled, giving him that creepy, no tooth smile that made John want to punch him. "My brother has inherited an estate from our Uncle Charles. He died several months ago and we're in the process of probate. Dealing with it seems to be beneath my younger brother's attention."

"It's boring and I didn't ask for it."

Mycroft's expression actually softened. "I know that."

"It should have been left to both of us."
"I know that as well."

John interrupted, holding up his hand to stop the squabbling for a moment. "So, hang on. What you're saying is that Sherlock inherited a castle from your uncle, as in he owns a real honest-to-god castle?"

"Do try to keep up, John."

He ignored his partner's pissy comment and focused his attention on Mycroft. He knew better than to bother with Sherlock when he was in such a stroppy mood. "Explain."

"There's little to explain. My uncle and I did not get on." Sherlock snorted before Mycroft continued his story. "Uncle Charles was my mother's brother. When Mummy married our father, she signed away her rights to the estate in order to keep other properties and accounts. At the time it was financially agreeable to all concerned. It was, however, a way of cutting her off from the French side of the family for a bit. As it turned out, she was able to reestablish ties within a few years. That in turn allowed for Sherlock to spend some of his summers in France at the estate."

John still didn't understand completely. Not all the pieces fit. Not getting on was one thing, being ignored completely another. "But you got cut out of his will when he died? Why?"

Mycroft wouldn't meet his eyes. "It's not important. What is important is that Sherlock seems to be determined to make the probate as difficult as possible."

"I am not."

"You are. You still haven't signed the papers I sent over two days ago. I need those, Sherlock, if I'm going to obtain the deed so that you might sell the place. That is, after all, what you said you wanted to do when we last spoke."

Sherlock stood up and walked over to the window, his back to his brother and John, hands behind his back. His voice steady, he spoke softly. "It's not fair that you were cut out of the will."

"I agree, but it was his decision. We both know Uncle Charles wasn't exactly fair in a lot of his dealings. He always chose your company over mine. I assume that his leaving you his entire estate is a reflection of that preference."

Still not facing his brother, Sherlock said, "Handle the probate and the sale, Mycroft, and whatever is left after fees and taxes, take half."

Mycroft didn't respond right away. After taking a deep breath, he said, "That's uncharacteristically generous, Dear Brother. May I ask what brought on this charitable turn of events?"

"It's what you deserve. I won't perpetuate unfairness, especially not from my uncle. My half will go back to Mummy."

"Mummy's already said she doesn't want it and legally can't receive it even through a third party, not after the previous agreement she signed. It's a small fortune, Sherlock. You can't just not accept it."

"Then donate it to charity. I don't want it."

"Charity? Sentiment, Sherlock? How unlike you."

Turning around, a smile on his face, but his eyes cold, Sherlock responded, "It's got nothing to do
I don't want to deal with the boring aspects of property transfer. With the present real estate market, you'll have quite a challenge to sell a 15th century chateau in the French countryside. It's not what one might consider a hot property. I believe that's the correct term for it."

"It is, and it's quite true that the real estate market isn't as strong as it once was. However, there have already been some inquiries. So, perhaps it won't be quite as difficult as first suspected."

"Good. The sooner it's gone, the better."

Mycroft frowned. "I would have thought you had fond memories of the place, Brother Mine."

"My memories are my own business. Now, are we done here? I have things to do and John can't sit around all day. He gets bored and limpy. We need to go out and find a case."

John turned his attention fully on Sherlock, his face red and his jaw clenched. "Bored and limpy? Seriously? That's how you see me?"

"I'm only stating the obvious."

John snapped, "It's my leg, so piss off."

Mycroft chuckled. "Ever erudite, my dear Dr. Watson."

"You can piss off, too." Angrily, John went to the door, grabbed his jacket, and headed down the stairs. All that money and he just gave it away when John could barely afford rent. Then he had the fucking balls to call him limpy in front of his brother. What the fuck, Sherlock? "I need some fresh air."

Sherlock called after him, completely unperturbed by John's sudden temper. "We need milk."

"Fuck the bloody milk."

After a few moments passed and they were alone, Mycroft stated, "He is really quite petulant sometimes, isn't he? As a soldier, one would have thought he would have learned to be less sensitive to criticism."

Sherlock shook his head, his energy suddenly drained. "Go away, Mycroft. You've done enough for one day."

"What did I do?"

"John's upset and it's all your fault."

"I fail to see..."

"Exactly. You fail to see. Leave."

"Sign the papers first. Then I'll go."

Sherlock grabbed the legal papers from under his files on the desk, signed them quickly, and restrained himself from tossing them at his brother. He held them out instead. "Take them and don't bother me about this again."

"I'll need you to sign various papers allowing me power to deal with the estate. I could just as easily put your money in another trust until you need it. Still, if you're serious about this charity business, then you'll have to let me know which one."
"Fine, whatever. You're annoying."

"He'll be back."

Sherlock didn't pretend not to know to what his brother was referring. However, he didn't answer, just turned his back and looked out the window. He took a deep breath. "I despise that place. I want nothing to do with it."

"Sherlock..."

Words came out harsh and breathy, as Sherlock made a rare confession. "Uncle Charles is dead and I'm glad. I wanted to celebrate when I heard. If John hadn't been here, I might have. It was close."

Mycroft paused, his expression darkening, not quite sure how to take those words. He knew all too well what Sherlock did when he celebrated. It was a chapter in his brother's life he had hoped was over. "Based on his dealings with Mummy and myself, I realize that he was not an honorable man."

Sherlock laughed without humor. "That's being kind. I'm glad Mummy left when she did and you were lucky to be sent away."

"Yes, no doubt." Mycroft hesitated, still unsure if his growing suspicions were justified. "Perhaps you should tell John about your summers there."

"Perhaps you should leave now, or as John would say, piss off."

Mycroft swallowed hard and felt like he was a teenager again, someone powerless to deal with a sudden dark truth. He hated that feeling and he suddenly loathed his dead uncle with every fiber of his being. "I had no idea."

"You still don't."

"Perhaps not, but your behavior would suggest..."

"Mycroft, if I ask you to leave one more time, I won't be accountable for my actions."

Mycroft gave a nod and a curt response. "Understood."

Mycroft left, his head down, disturbed by the notion that he'd missed something so vital about his brother, something that he should have guessed even as a younger, less worldly man. He shook his head and made his decision. He needed to store this away for later. Sherlock was Sherlock. Interfering would just make matters worse. That didn't mean that he couldn't be persuaded to desecrate a grave in France on his next day off.

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Several hours and too many pints later, John returned to 221B Baker Street a lot calmer than when he'd left. It wasn't like he didn't know his limp came and went like some pimply teenager, moody as hell and just as unpredictable. That didn't mean he liked hearing Sherlock complain about it in front of Mycroft of all people.

He heard the violin from the bottom of the stairs. He took a deep breath and a few extra moments to steady himself before going up to open the door.

Sherlock ignored him and continued playing. As John took off his coat, he settled on the sofa to
listen. He stretched out, his head back, his eyes closed. The tune sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. Obviously, it was classical. Sherlock rarely played anything else, but this was really quite nice. After about half an hour more, the last note sounded. His eyes still closed, he heard his friend put away his instrument. John sighed and said, "I liked that."

"Paganini, Caprice in C minor, Op.1, No. 4."

"Sounded like you played it more than once, though, each time a bit different."

"I like to try variations. It's a particularly challenging piece."

"You been playing since I left?" When he got no answer, John opened his eyes and asked, "You okay?"

"Fine."

"You and your brother..."

"I don't want to talk about Mycroft."

"That was generous about the inheritance, giving him half."

Without saying another word, Sherlock left the room, slamming his door behind him. John let out a long breath and closed his eyes again. "Told me."

The next morning, John didn't remember making it up to bed, but he must have since that was where he found himself when he woke up. He still wore his clothes and needed a shower, the sooner the better. He smelled too much like one of Sherlock's homeless group, or even worse like one of his experiments gone wrong. The thought made him more than a little bit nauseated.

A tall glass of water and six aspirin tablets were on the bedside table. "Six? Jesus, Sherlock." He took two of the pills and drank all the water, hoping that the god-awful pounding would ease up before he had to go to work. It was a long shift, and he didn't have the time or the energy to be hung over.

Sliding out of bed, he headed downstairs, his leg aching all the way. Sherlock lay on the sofa in his blue dressing gown, his eyes closed, his fingertips steepled in front of his face. John asked, "Tea?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Sherlock rarely said thank you, so John stared a few extra beats before he turned on the kettle. He went to the bathroom, stripped off his dirty clothes, and put on a robe before going back out into the sitting room. He'd shower after tea, after he got his body up and running and the mental cobwebs cleared.

Worry niggled at the back of his mind. Something wasn't right about the whole castle business. He studied his friend before he said, "Sherlock, you okay?"

"You keep asking me that. Repetition is boring."

"I'm a doctor. It's what I do."

"I'm fine, John."
"You been up all night?"

"How's your head?"

John snorted to himself and went to the kitchen to finish the tea. He called back over his shoulder, 
"Seriously, Sherlock, six aspirin? Did you want me to end up with an overdose?"

"The standard male should be able to process..."

"Doctor, remember?"

"Then you should know that there's no significant concern if one should ingest twice the regular 
dosage of something as benign as aspirin."

"More like three times the recommended dosage and it could definitely cause concern under the 
right conditions, but never mind. It was a nice gesture. I appreciate it." John put the tea bags in the 
mugs and asked again, "Did you sleep at all last night?"

"Not everyone requires as much sleep as you do."

"That's a no then."

After a few minutes Sherlock sat up as John brought over his tea, already fixed the way his partner 
liked it. Sherlock sipped and John studied his friend's face. Dark circles bruised those closed eyes 
and his lips drew in a tight line when he wasn't drinking his tea. "You look tried."

"Stop fussing." The words were brusque, but not harsh, not snappish like they could be if Sherlock 
were really bothered.

John finished his own tea before fetching a second cup. Then he sat down again, clearing his 
throat. "I'm sorry for running out on you last night."

"Mycroft has that effect on people."

John shook his head. "It had nothing to do with Mycroft."

Sherlock met his eyes for the first time that morning. "You drank rather more than usual last night, 
six pints rather than two. That would indicate a much higher level of anxiety than normal."

John kept his voice even, not wanting to have another row. "You might say that."

"I'm not quite sure what triggered the severity of the reaction. Nothing we were talking about had 
anything to do with you, yet you seemed to take it all quite personally. Surely my comment about 
the leg was harmless enough."

"Forget about the leg, though in the future I'd appreciate it if you didn't refer to me as limpy."

"Not good?"

"Bit not good, yeah. War vets, we're a touchy bunch."

Rather than debate the point or, heaven forbid, apologize, Sherlock simply nodded. "Noted."

Putting down his cup, John considered his next words carefully. "Why am I here?"

"It's a bit early in the day for rhetorical or philosophical questions, John. However, I can
recommend some excellent texts on existentialism."

"I need an answer, Sherlock. You and Mycroft, you obviously come from money."

"I don't see your point. Besides, you already knew that. I see no reason why that should upset you."

"Think about it with that massive brain of yours and you'll figure it out."

Sherlock studied John a few more moments before his expression softened as he finally solved the puzzle. "You're wondering why I'd need someone to split the rent."

"Got it in one. Well done."

"You think that I've played you for a fool in some way, tricked you as it were."

"Something like that, yeah. It makes no sense otherwise."

"Don't be an idiot."

Instead of being insulted, John pressed harder. "Maybe I am an idiot. Maybe that's what I've been all along. What I need now is for you to explain it, Sherlock. If you've got so much money, why in hell would you need me?"

"You really are terribly slow sometimes."

"Yeah, yeah, thick as a plank, got it. Stop stalling."

"As you've probably gathered, my git of a brother handles most of my finances."

"Figures since you can't be half bothered to deal with things as trivial as budgets and paying bills."

Sherlock ignored the sarcasm and continued. "Then you should also know that he often uses that as leverage."

"Leverage for what?"

"He blackmails me into doing his dirty work. Boring cases, labeled as national security, which are ridiculously tedious. I have no desire to work for Mycroft, never have, yet he persists in demanding that I work on certain cases. You've been involved in a few, so you know what he's like."

"I do, yes, but what's that got to do with anything?"

"When I asked you to be my flat mate, he had cut me off with just a minimal stipend to live on. It wasn't a trick or a ploy, John. I seriously needed your half of the rent in order to procure 221B Baker Street. It was vital for the work."

John hesitated to ask, but he had to know for his own peace of mind. "Needed it then, but not now?"

Sherlock sat back and took a deep breath. "No, not now. While a large portion of my trust..."

"You've got a trust?" John snorted and shook his head in amusement. "Of course, you've got a trust. Why am I not surprised?"

"Yes, well as I said, most of it is tied up, but I do have access to substantial funds at the moment. It's more than adequate for my needs."
John swallowed hard as the reality hit home. "So, you really don't need me anymore."

"You're being unbearably obtuse today, John. I must insist you cut back on your alcohol consumption if it's going to so negatively impact your mental faculties in the future."

Frowning, John shook his head in confusion. "I don't get it. Why do you need me if you can now pay the rent on your own?"

"Think about it."

John snapped, "I am thinking about it. Stop playing mind games, Sherlock. What the hell do you need me for?"

Sherlock's voice was hushed, like he was telling a secret he wanted only John to hear. "You're my blogger and my friend, John. How can you sit there and not realize that I now need you for far more than the rent?"

John stared at his partner, not sure what to say. To have Sherlock be so forthcoming was totally out of character. But something still wasn't right. He cleared his throat before he answered, "I appreciate that, Sherlock, I do. I think of you as a friend, too."

"Then I hope we can put to rest any more discussion of why you're here. If you'd like, I can cover your part of the rent from now on. It's not a problem. Then perhaps you can stop working at that horrid little surgery when you should be helping me on cases."

"I'll pay my own rent, thanks."

"But you don't have to."

"I do. I pay my own way. Always have, always will."

"I was just suggestion..."

"Thanks, but no thanks." John sat back and asked the real question, the one that had been at the back of his mind since he'd learned about the inheritance and witnessed Sherlock's strange reaction to it. "Tell me about the castle."

Sherlock stiffened, his eyes suddenly dark. "That is not up for discussion."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not."

Sherlock stood up and headed to his bedroom. John got up and caught his arm. "Sherlock..."

"Remove your hand, John."

John released him immediately. He'd missed something, something important. "Why don't you want to talk about this? You've got a fucking castle and you're just giving it away. Nobody just gives away a castle, Sherlock, not even you. There has to be a bloody good reason. I've been thinking about it all night and I can't figure it out."

"Not surprising."

John ignored the insult and carried on analyzing his friend's odd reaction. "It's not sentiment because you don't care that much about your brother, or fairness, or for charities in general. So,
"Why?" His voice tighter, John repeated himself. "Why give it away?"

Sherlock leaned closer and hissed, "I despised my uncle, John. He was evil. I want nothing of his."

"But why?"

Sherlock moved to his door and stopped, glancing over his shoulder. "I've said all I'm going to say on the matter. Don't ask me again."

John studied him a bit longer and nodded. "All right. No more questions. If you want to give away a fortune, it's your business."

"Yes, it is."

Sherlock disappeared into his bedroom as John stood stone still for a few more moments. He sat down hard on the sofa, his mind marching into dark corners, disturbed by what he'd just heard in his friend's voice. He'd heard anger and hatred, sadness and fear. A terrible picture formed in his mind and he closed his eyes in sudden realization of what it all meant. "Well fuck."

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Halfway through his shift, John crashed. He could hardly stand the thought of tending one more bout of flu, complaint of joint pain, or migraine. A thundering headache smashed around inside his skull and his leg was killing him. He refused to use his cane, but he knew if Lestrade didn't send them a case soon, he might have to. The damn leg had a mind of its own and sometimes it was all he could do not to beat it like the traitor it was.

There was a short rap and his office door opened. "John? It's time for lunch. Would you like to go out and get something or order in?"

"I'm fine, Sarah, thanks. I've got it covered."

"All right." She hesitated before asking, "Everything okay? You've seemed distracted all morning."

He rubbed his face with both hands, his brain thumping like a jack hammer. He knew he'd only half paid attention to his patients today, enough to get the job done, but nothing that would win him a doctor of the year award. "Bit of a late night."

"Sherlock?"

"Not everything is about Sherlock," he grumbled.

"Really? Could've fooled me." The words weren't accusing, simply a cross between a tease and a statement. After so many spoiled dates, she had a right to be bitter, but she wasn't, just accepting. He liked that about Sarah, the fact that she didn't hold it against him that he chose to work with Sherlock over dating her. None of his other ex-girlfriends were so forgiving. She spoke again to get his attention. "Want to talk about it? Might help to clear the head."

"No, thanks. I think I'll go out to lunch. I'll be back for the one o'clock."

"Mr. O'Banon? The old guy who comes in like clockwork every month to complain about his constipation?"

"That's the one, yeah."

"Lucky you."
John laughed, but not out of humor. Sometimes pathetic chuckles were all he could muster. He stood up, bracing himself with one hand on his desk, worried that the treacherous leg might give out again. It held, but just barely. "I'll be back." His leg knifed pain up through his lower back in complaint.

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"Lunch. JW"

It took only a few moments before a return text appeared on his phone. "Now? MH"

"Now. JW."

"I'll send a car. MH."

Less than two minutes later a black sedan stopped at the curb and John got in the backseat. The driver pulled off without speaking. A few minutes later he was in front of Mycroft's club. John got out of the car and went inside. An escort took him to the back where Sherlock's brother was already sitting at a table having tea. Mycroft pointed at the empty seat. "Please join me."

John kept his jacket on, but sat down, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets. "Hope you weren't too busy."

"It's been a relatively slow day." Mycroft paused before he added, "You've never asked me to have lunch before. I thought it might be an important occasion. May I assume that my brother knows nothing of this meeting?"

"You assume correctly."

Tea was served and orders for food taken. As soon as they were alone, John took a deep breath to still his nerves. He wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing, but he needed information and he couldn't ask Sherlock. Mycroft would have to do. "Did you know?"

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow and put down his teacup. "I know many things, John. You'll need to be a bit more precise."

"You know what I'm talking about. Don't sit there and act like you don't. Did you know about Sherlock and your uncle?"

Mycroft didn't feign ignorance any longer. "No, I didn't know. If you're suggesting that I'd let something untoward occur and do nothing about it, well, you've got an even lower opinion of me than I earlier surmised."

John bit back that a lower opinion really wasn't possible. But he still wasn't satisfied with Mycroft's protest. "When did you suspect?"

"Yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"Yes."

"No sooner?"

"No."
John leaned back, his outrage slightly deflated. "Right."

"You?"

"Me what?"

"Sherlock would not have spoken to you about this, so something he did or said aroused your suspicion."

"Might have done, yeah."

Food arrived and they were both quiet until they were alone again. John pushed his sandwich away and rubbed his forehead, the headache worse than ever. "I've lost my appetite."

"If it's any consolation, whatever happened occurred when he was a teenager over twenty years ago."

"It's not." Turning his mind away from his flat mate, John focused in on Mycroft. "Why didn't your uncle like you?"

Mycroft cleared his throat, obviously discomforted by the question. He motioned for one of the waiters. "Bring me my regular."

"Yes, sir." The waiter returned quickly with a drink.

Mycroft sniffed it and took a long swallow of the whiskey before he spoke quietly. "We argued. I was still upset by how he'd cheated our mother out of part of her inheritance and I made that displeasure known, rather loudly I'm afraid."

"Is that the only reason?"

"My uncle had an eye for beauty. I was not a beautiful young man, nothing like my brother in that regard."

The idea of Sherlock being gorgeous was not a new one for John. He'd often thought about how physically stunning Sherlock was and how he must have left a trail of broken hearts behind him when he was growing up. Now he had a new picture, one of a young man who had been taken advantage of by someone trusted by his own family. It made his stomach turn. He kept his voice low, but he couldn't hide the anger. "And that didn't make anybody suspicious, that this Charles might have ulterior motives for having Sherlock there by himself in the summers?"

"He was our uncle, John. If we had even an inkling that something had happened..."

"What? What would you have done?"

"Someone would've stopped it, Mummy most likely. My uncle was a scoundrel, an absolute terror in the business world. He was accused of many unscrupulous affairs with women, but I assure you that there was never the slightest hint of pedophilia."

"Sherlock never complained?"

"Not until the end of the second summer. He came home early and swore never to go back. We just thought he'd grown bored like with everything else in his life. It never occurred to anyone..."

"That he'd been molested?"
Mycroft lowered his eyes in shame and shook his head, "No, it never did."

"And now?"

"Now what?"

"What do we do about it?"

Staring at John for several long moments, Mycroft leaned forward, his face pinched. "There is nothing to do, John. We must respect his wishes."

"To pretend it never happened? Just like that?"

"Just like that." He paused and added, "What would you want to do about it so many years later if it were you?"

"But it wasn't me, was it? It was Sherlock."

"Sadly, yes, though he'll never confirm it."

"He doesn't have to. It explains so much, especially the drugs and the way he hates to be touched."

"Yes, it does."

John stood up to leave. "This was a major clusterfuck, Mycroft. Don't worry. I don't blame you. You weren't much more than a boy yourself when this happened, but someone should've seen it, done something about it. There's no excuse for the fact that he suffered through this alone."

"What would you have me say?"

"There's nothing left to say. Just sell the fucking castle as fast as you can and be grateful your uncle is already in the ground."

Storming out, John didn't bother to wait for a response. Anything Mycroft bothered to say at that point would be pretty damn useless anyway. The past was the past and couldn't be changed, but that didn't mean he had to like it even a little bit.

His world went flashing red for a while, a really dangerous color for a man named Watson or anyone sorry enough to get in his way when all he wanted to do was to murder a man who was never going to see the light of day again. That kind of hatred was so much easier to handle when he was marching in a warzone, knowing he could put down his enemy with one fatal shot. If there was one thing John knew how to do, it was to take steady aim even when there were bombs falling all around.

However, carrying and controlling the war inside him, that required a different battle plan entirely.

Sherlock sat alone in his flat, staring out the window, the inside of his left arm lined with three fresh nicotine patches. The stimulant lifted his brain to just the edge of the fog. He was bored, seriously bored. He'd already texted Lestrade five times that morning and there were still no interesting murders or thefts to investigate. London crime just wasn't what it used to be.

At least if John were home, he wouldn't be quite so bored. John always had something to say or do to amuse him. If nothing else, John could make tea. He knew just how Sherlock liked it, with two sugars. In fact, John usually seemed more than willing to make it for both of them without
complaint. Sherlock hadn't said as much, but he'd certainly noticed the pleasure John took in serving him tea and trying to feed him. He rather enjoyed the little game they played, Feed the Sherlock, letting it seem like John had won when Sherlock would've eaten anyway. It pleased John so it pleased him. Sherlock wasn't quite sure when that shift had happened, but being aware of it made him a bit uneasy, not uneasy enough to stop, but enough to store it in the back of his mind for further study.

Moving from the window to the sofa, Sherlock stretched out and closed his eyes. John wouldn't be home for hours. Why he was so stubborn about continuing to work as a doctor when Sherlock could so easily support them both made no sense. Why should working himself sick at a tiresome surgery give him more pride than working by his side, solving crimes or writing his blog? Their partnership was far more important and valuable than John's work with Sarah.

Why he still wanted to be friends with that Sawyer woman baffled him, too. It was obvious that she no longer considered John a viable sexual partner. Idiot woman had lost her chance after their first date. Granted, she'd been kidnapped and nearly killed, but so had John. John didn't mind, so why should she? John thrived on such experiences. Obviously, she didn't have the superior mettle to be a suitable mate for his friend.

Not that she was alone in that distinction. There were no women who deserved his John, no men, either, for that matter. Sherlock recognized his own possessiveness. He'd never been good at sharing, no reason to start. John was his no matter how many times his friend dated or continued to search for some ridiculous notion of a traditional relationship.

His cell phone beeped. Sherlock frowned at the interruption to his meditation. When he recognized the surgery's number, he sat up quickly in alarm. Why wouldn't John just use his own phone? He would if he could. Sherlock pushed the button. "John?"

"No, not John, sorry. Sarah."

Troubled by her anxious tone, he leaned forward, his elbows braced on his knees. "Has something happened to John?"

"I was hoping he was there with you."

"He's supposed to be working today."

"He left for lunch and hasn't returned. He's not answering my calls. I thought I'd check with you to see if he'd gone home or was on a case."

Sherlock's body went on alert, but he forced himself to sound calm. John could take care of himself. Even so, he was a man of routine on workdays and when that changed for no obvious reason, Sherlock needed to investigate. "He didn't call in?"

"No, and that's not like him. If he can't make a shift, he always calls, even if it's last minute."

Sherlock heard the hesitation in her voice and pushed for more information. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Maybe it's nothing, but he wasn't himself this morning."

"Be more specific." God, the woman was infuriatingly slow.

"He obviously had a headache and was distracted...and he was limping."
"Limping?"

"Yes, it comes and goes, but this was the worst it's been in a while. He said it was nothing, but if he's not here and he's not with you...well, now I'm worried."

"I'm sure he's fine. I'll find him."

"Thank you."

Sherlock disconnected, but before he could dial John's number, his phone chirped a text. "Do you know where your blogger is? GL."

He texted back. "With you I take it. SH."

"Yes. GL."

Sherlock swallowed hard, his chest tight as he typed. "Is he unharmed? SH."

"You should see the other guys. GL."

Good god. "On my way. SH."

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Lestrade studied the perfectly average-looking man sitting on the bench next to Mrs. Edith MacPherson. She was an elderly lady, grey-haired and stooped, the recent victim of an attempted mugging. Still distressed by the experience, she snifflled into her white hankie. John Watson's arm went around her shoulders, comforting her, and it seemed to be working. She was no longer sobbing out of control. Dr. Watson had a great bedside manner even if he was sitting in the middle of a busy police station.

John certainly looked a bit worse for wear, his clothes ripped around the edges, his right eye puffy, a wound above it, blood seeping through the makeshift bandage. Both hands were wrapped, his knuckles as tattered as his sleeves. He would no doubt need stitches. Of course, the thugs who attacked Mrs. MacPherson would need much more than that. One was already in surgery and the other was still unconscious.

John Watson didn't look that dangerous, but over the years Lestrade had learned the hard way that looks were deceiving.

"Inspector?"

"Sherlock. Glad you're here." Lestrade turned and saw his friend, the worry and concern etched into his pale features. He'd never seen Sherlock care about anybody before except maybe Mrs. Hudson. It was an odd thing to see the changes in Sherlock since the arrival of John Watson into his life, but it was a good thing, or at least it had been so far.

"What's going on? Is John being charged?"

"For stopping a mugging, no."

"Then why is he still here?"

"We're working on witness statements."

Sherlock glanced across the room and zeroed in on John, who looked up at the same moment. Watson smiled with a nod of acknowledgement to Sherlock's presence but then turned his attention
back to the needy woman next to him.

Before Sherlock could go over to John, Lestrade stepped closer and motioned for him to follow. "Come to my office first."

"What's going on, Lestrade? John's been injured. Why isn't he in hospital being treated?"

"He's fine. He's got a black eye and he'll need stitches, but otherwise he's in one piece."

Once inside his own office, he closed the door. Sherlock said, "And the men you mentioned in your text? I assume those are the assailants."

"You need to see something before I answer any more questions."

Lestrade turned on his computer monitor and played the video of the attack. The images pulled from the CCTV monitors were grainy, but the situation was plain to see. Two burly men approached the elderly woman, not only grabbing her purse, but roughly shoving her down to the pavement. One of the men, the taller one, pulled back a foot to kick her, but didn't have the chance to finish. A blur of motion caught him off guard and slammed him to the ground. Several quick blows later he was out and John sprang up and swung around for the second man who held a knife in his right hand. There was a glint of steel knuckle dusters across the assailant's left fist. The fight was brutal, but over so fast that Lestrade was tempted to rewind and do it in slow motion. The opponent landed only a handful of blows, but John's own punches and kicks were efficient and well placed. Lestrade had only seen fighting like that in training courses for special forces or in martial arts films. He'd never let on, but he'd always suspected that John wasn't just a doctor in Afghanistan.

Lestrade turned to Sherlock and asked, "You want to see it again?"

"That won't be necessary." Sherlock crossed his arms. "Quite clearly he stopped a crime in progress."

"Yes, but he put both men in the hospital."

"It's better than killing them, which, as you can see by his skill level, would have been just as easy to do."

"You don't find that disturbing?"

"Why should I? We both know John's a soldier at heart. Just because he's disabled from active service doesn't mean he's forgotten all his training."

"He didn't look the least bit disabled to me."

Reluctantly, Sherlock agreed. "No, he didn't."

"One of the men is having his spleen removed and the other had a serious head trauma. He might not recover."

"Crime has its risks."

"You're missing the point."

Sherlock's voice remained unemotional, with that detached way he had of speaking that got right up Lestrade's nose. "What point is that, Inspector? John thwarted a crime. Are you saying he might
be in legal trouble because of the condition of the felons who tried to rob an old woman?"

"He might. He didn't just stop a crime, Sherlock. He beat the men to bloody heaps. In law enforcement we call that overkill."

"Some would say that they deserved it."

"Some might say that, yeah, but I'm not one of them. It's one thing to stop a crime, another to commit manslaughter in the process. I know sometimes in the heat of the moment, people get carried away. This seemed like more than that. I think he knew what he was doing every second."

"There are no grounds for a criminal case against John. If those idiots were injured during the commission of a crime, that's of their own doing. He's a civilian now and not a police officer."

"Which is probably the only reason he won't be charged."

"If they were to bring a civil case..."

"If they survive."

"A civil case would be foolish. John would have the very best legal representation. I would see to that. He's a decorated war hero. All we'd have to do is bring out his service record and the woman he rescued. It would be a waste of time for all concerned."

"I'm not worried about a trial, Sherlock. You're missing my point completely."

"What point is that?"

Lestrade brought up a screen capture of John in the midst of his fight. "This is my point." The picture showed a blood-spattered John still fighting like a madman as he hammered the second man already defeated and lying unconscious on the ground.

Sherlock reached over and turned off the screen. "I understand your concern, but he's fine."

"Is he?"

"Find us a good case and you'll see."

"It's not just about cases, Sherlock. Cases might not be enough anymore."

"Don't be so dramatic." Sherlock smiled and stood taller, totally confident and assured of his own position. "Be glad that John saved a life today, an innocent woman who needed his help. He might have used a bit more force than you deem necessary to subdue the suspects, but you weren't there and neither were any other police officers. He did what he had to in order to protect a victim just like he did when he was a soldier."

"He's still a soldier. Sometimes I don't think he even realizes he's home." Lestrade shook his head and bit his lower lip. "He worries me, Sherlock, he really does. To look at him, you see this everyday guy, this easygoing bloke who gets along with just about everybody, including you, which is a miracle in its own right. Then I see this video and I know that it's all a front. He's not who he seems to be, not even close."

Sherlock snorted, his lips thinned in cynical amusement. "Are any of us who we seem to be on the surface?"

"But..."
"If you'll excuse me, I must collect John and get him medical attention. Call me if you have a real case that deserves our consideration."

"Sherlock, don't dismiss this. It might be his PTSD or it might be something more."

"There's nothing to dismiss. You're overreacting. John's perfectly sound. Are there any papers to sign for his release?"

"He's not charged and he's already given a statement."

"Then we're done here."

Sherlock left his office and Lestrade followed. He watched as Sherlock went over to John, who stood up and introduced the woman beside him on the bench. After a few moments Mrs. MacPherson gave John a final hug. Then Holmes and Watson left together, John walking fast enough to keep up with his friend's long stride.

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John's body still hummed with the adrenaline that had pumped through his system during the fight. Instead of shaking, his thinly bandaged hands were steady as he ate, stuffed his face really. He was bloody well starving and the Chinese takeaway was fantastic. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd eaten and everything tasted so perfectly spicy. He'd missed that feeling, that rush that came from a good fight won, the whole world amped up around him.

The only thing missing was a good shag after, but that wasn't likely to happen. He hadn't dated in months and with Sherlock cock blocking him at every turn, it was just too much trouble. Still, he was half hard, had been since the fight, and the only one he really thought about was Sherlock. He knew it was wrong, even worse now that he knew his friend's history with his uncle. It still didn't stop him from thinking about kissing him, running his hands all over his long, lean body, feeling the tight muscles below miles of pale skin.

John pushed the erotic images away before he got harder and had another dumpling instead.

"You were certainly hungry."

"Yeah, I was actually." John glanced over and saw that Sherlock hadn't eaten anything, not even an egg roll. "We don't have a case. You should eat while you can. Lestrade's bound to come up with something soon. I'm sure all the murderers in London haven't gone on strike yet."

"I'm sure they haven't. There have been several murders over the last few days, but they're all typical and petty, husband kills wife, wife slashes the girlfriend. Boring."

John stuffed the last of the pork into his mouth, his mind still flashing back to fighting off the men who'd attacked Mrs. MacPherson. He nodded at Sherlock's words, but he really wasn't paying attention.

"John?"

He finally looked up and focused. "What?"

"I called your name three times. You didn't hear me."

"Really? Sorry." Then he smiled and shrugged. "Blow to the head. My hearing might be affected."
"No, it's not."

"You're right, it's not."

"You're terribly cheerful for a man who just got eight stitches in his forehead, ten in his left hand, and has an impressive black eye blooming."

Without thinking, John flexed his fingers, touching the edge of the bandage on his left hand. The analgesic hadn't worn off so he still felt no pain, just a dull ache. He was just happy he hadn't broken any bones. Hands were a bitch to heal and for a doctor that could be problematic. "Well, I did save a woman from being robbed and beaten."

"That you did." Sherlock paused before he added. "Your limp is gone, too. I noticed when we left the Yard."

John frowned and then nodded slowly in realization. He no longer felt like a cripple, which was a definite improvement over how he'd felt only a few hours before. "I guess it really is all in my head, yeah?"

"You're a strange man, John Watson."

"You're one to talk."

"Quite true." Sherlock sipped his tea. He still wore his black coat, the collar turned up, even though the heat was on inside the flat. Sherlock said, "I called Sarah. She sends her oh my gods and best wishes."

"Oh, shit, I forgot. Fuck." John put down his chopsticks and wiped his hands on a napkin. "I should've called. I always call."

"You were obviously a bit busy."

"True, but that's no excuse. I should call her now, explain a bit, say I'm sorry."

"But you're not sorry."

John looked up and met knowing eyes. He sighed and sat back against the sofa. He rarely hid a thing from Sherlock. He had no idea why he kept trying. "Well, I am sorry for not calling, but you're right, I'm not sorry for not going back."

"Why go at all?"

Crossing his arms, John tensed up. "We've had this discussion. I have to work. Rent and bills to pay. We're not all born to money."

Sherlock ignored the jab. "But you don't have to necessarily work at the surgery. There are other jobs, John."

"I know. It's my own fault. It's just been easier to stay there."

"Easier, but not easier, not really."

"That actually makes sense."

"I try."
John chuckled and relaxed. "I should start looking, maybe work in an A&E for a while. That's bound to be more exciting that dealing with vomiting and diarrhea day after day."

"Sarah would miss you."

John tilted his head and studied Sherlock. The words might have sounded innocent, but he knew better. Sherlock tolerated Sarah, but he didn't like her any more than his other exes. Sherlock wasn't the only one who could read his partner. "No, she wouldn't, not after about a week. You do realize we're just friends."

"I realize that. I wasn't suggesting..."

"Yes, you were, and that's okay, but there's never going to be anything between Sarah and me, so it's not an issue."

Sherlock stood up, took off his coat, and threw it over the back of the sofa. He sat back down in the chair opposite John before he casually asked, "Did my brother kidnap you again today?"

Surprised by the question, John's eyes narrowed. He didn't want Sherlock knowing about that meeting, but he wasn't about to lie about it, not exactly. "No, why would you think..."

"I saw the CCTV footage, John. The incident didn't happen anywhere near the surgery. It was, however, only a few blocks from my brother's club."

Damn Sherlock and his eagle vision anyway. "Well spotted."

"So?"

"So what?"

"If he didn't kidnap you, you went voluntarily."

"Yes, I did."

"Why?"

John took a deep breath. He wasn't quite sure how he would smooth over what he'd done, which was to invade Sherlock's privacy. At the same time, he was glad he had seen Mycroft when he did and had decided to walk off his anger. Otherwise, he couldn't have saved Mrs. MacPherson. She deserved saving and he hadn't enjoyed an afternoon quite so much in months.

"If I said it was personal, would you leave it alone?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

"Was it about me?"

"Yes, but not in the way you're thinking."

"You were concerned about me because you feel I've somehow revealed something disturbing about my childhood and you wanted it confirmed by my brother."

John shook his head in amazement. Sherlock was bloody brilliant and never ceased to impress. "Maybe it was the way you were thinking after all." John leaned forward, his hands together, his
eyes no longer meeting Sherlock's solemn stare. "Look, I wanted to talk to him. You won't talk about it and I respect that. I am sorry if you feel like I've overstepped. I didn't mean it that way and I won't push you to talk about anything you don't want to talk about."

"How kind."

"Don't be a surly bastard." John hesitated, planning his words carefully. "I've been thinking a lot about this all day and my head is a lot clearer now. We all have things in our past that we don't want to talk about. That's fine, it really is. I mean, I was upset this morning, but I realized, hell, I don't talk about a lot of things that happened to me when I grew up or about the war or about how I feel about..., well, a lot of things. So, it's all fine, couldn't be more fine. Understand?"

Sherlock visibly relaxed, his shoulders no longer tense. His pale eyes sparkled a bit brighter and his lips turned up just a bit, not into a grin, but into that half smile he gave when he was pleased but didn't really want to show it. "I do."

"Good. There is just one more thing and then we don't have to say anything else about all this."

"What's that?"

"If you ever do decide you want to talk about it, you can talk to me, not as a doctor, but as a friend, your best friend. Nothing you say will go in a blog or be repeated to anybody. You can trust me."

"I do trust you, John, but there's nothing to talk about."

John sat back, more relaxed, hoping he'd done the right thing, feeling in his gut he had. "That's sorted then. Who does the wash up?"

"Is that a serious question?"

Laughing, John stood up and started to pick up the take away boxes. It took all of his self control not to reach out and ruffle his friend's thick black curls. Instead, he just complained, "That's what I thought, you lazy git."

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John still ached a bit all over a week later, but it was a good ache, the kind of pain that made him remember how many times during the war he'd felt the same way, all beat up and edgy, but ready to get back to fighting and saving lives. He probably looked a bit daft standing at a crime scene, completely content as he waited for Sherlock to finish surveying the whole area without interference.

Lestrade interrupted his thoughts. "How are the head and hands doing?"

"Fine, thanks. The sutures are itchy, but they're coming out later today." He touched the raised area on his forehead just above his right eye. "Shouldn't leave a scar if I'm lucky."

"I figured you might take some time off."

John studied the serious features carefully. Lestrade wasn't one to dance around an issue when he could come at it straight on, but he was all but doing a two-step at the moment. Come to think about it, the inspector had been antsy around him since he arrived, avoiding eye contact, watching John on the sly, like living with Sherlock hadn't taught him every the cop trick in the book. There was nothing like the direct approach to get the ball rolling. "So, what's on your mind, Inspector?"
Lestrade's eyebrow lifted in surprise at John's question, but he had a quick response. "Miller and Jones will recover."

"Who?"

"The two men you put in hospital. Remember them?"

"I do, yes." John made a fist with his damaged left hand. "The guy with the knuckle dusters especially."

"That would be Miller."

He still wasn't sure what Lestrade was on about, but he was sure he didn't like how the man was staring at him like he was some kind of freak, like he felt sorry for him for some reason. He ignored the prickly sensation and asked, "What about charges? Will they be arraigned once they're well enough?"

"They will, but that won't be right away. They'll be in hospital for a while, a few more weeks probably."

John stopped watching Sherlock waltz around the corpse and brought his full attention back to Lestrade. "Weeks? Seriously?"

"Miller had internal bleeding and had his spleen out. Jones had to have emergency surgery for blood on the brain. So, yeah, a few weeks yet."

John wasn't sure what it said about him as a doctor that he felt so detached and not even a twinge of regret for his actions. Still, he couldn't escape the stare from Lestrade and noted the concern there. He suddenly suspected he knew the reason for it. "In the war we had a definite enemy. It was them or us, twenty-four seven, no breaks, no time off. I had to worry every day about whether there'd be another day, had to patch up kids with limbs blown off, see my mates explode in front of me. Took a round in my shoulder and nearly died for my troubles."

"John, listen..."

"No, you listen. I need you to understand something. I wasn't thrill seeking when this happened. I was just walking along a public street, minding my own fucking business. This is London, not some backwater town in Afghanistan, the roads littered with IEDs and booby-trapped children. I should be able to take a walk just like everybody else." He fought to keep his voice steady, but his face heated with a rush of anger and frustration. "These men were the enemy. They attacked first, and, no, I didn't pull any punches. I'm not going to apologize for that."

"John, I'm not accusing you of anything."

"Sounded like it."

Before Lestrade could respond, Sherlock called out impatiently. "John, there are questions about cause of death. Stop wasting time and come tell me what you think."

John didn't move to his friend immediately. Instead, he gritted his teeth and stared down the inspector. He kept his voice low, not really wanting to deal with what Sherlock might say if he overheard their conversation. Thank god his partner was concentrating on the corpse more than on what John was doing. "I might have beaten those men, but I also saved them. If you'll read the report, you'll see that when the ambulance arrived, I triaged their care, making sure they were checked carefully for possible internal and neurological injuries. I didn't realize they were injured
quite so severely, but it doesn't matter. If they hadn't attacked that woman in the first place, none of this would've happened. You can't blame me for that."

"I wasn't blaming you, John, and I did read the report. You did help save them. The doctors said so, commented on how professionally you directed treatment."

"Then what's your bloody problem?"

"I'm worried. It's not like you to lose control like that." Greg paused and then added, "And it all feels off, not right somehow."

"John!" Sherlock called out again in frustration and then started to head their way.

John shouted back and held up his hand. "I'm coming!" He met Lestrade's brown eyes. "Are we done?"

"For now, yeah."

As John headed over to see what Sherlock was on about, the hair on the back of his neck stood straight up. Lestrade was still watching, still observing his every move. He really shouldn't care so much about what Greg thought about him, but he did. It bothered him that the inspector seemed to think he overreacted, that there was something off about his behavior. Still, given the same circumstances, John had no doubt that he'd do the exact same thing again. Soldiers didn't just stop being soldiers because the geography of the battlefield shifted.

"Where's the fire, Sherlock?"

"No fire, just an injection site behind her left ear. See there? I don't think the bullet to the chest killed her, John. I think she was poisoned first." Sherlock could barely contain his excitement. He grinned as he guided John closer to observe his discovery.

John kneeled by the body, his leg sound and his hands steady.

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"Well, that was disappointing in the extreme." Sherlock flopped down on the sofa still wearing his coat, slumping dramatically, ungodly long arms stretched up and out across the back.

"They can't all be challenging."

"But the sister? How banal."

John took off his new grey jacket and hung it up. His old one was still at the cleaners being mended. He hoped they could get the blood out because he really loved that jacket. His mum had given it to him before the war. "You solved it faster than the police would have. That has to count for something."

Sherlock shook his head and sighed heavily, very put out. "I had such high hopes."

"Oh, well, there will be another one soon enough. Tea?"

"Yes." He finally sat up while John put the kettle on. Sherlock took off his coat and threw it to land on the back of the chair across the room before sitting back down.

When John didn't fuss about dropping his things wherever they fell, Sherlock frowned. "You've been moody all day. What's wrong?"
"Moody? I'm not moody. Besides, coming from you, that's a laugh."

Sherlock shook his head in dismissal and waved a hand. "You knew that about me when you moved in. It's no use complaining about it now."

"I wasn't."

"Don't change the subject. You've been reticent ever since we first got the case."

John watched Sherlock close his eyes, processing the day through that mental slideshow he had in his head. He really didn't want to deal with a Sherlock-style interrogation at the moment. "I'm tired."

Sherlock opened his eyes, staring at John intently, and announced his conclusion. "Lestrade said something that bothered you."

"It's nothing. By the way, I called Sarah and told her I wanted to look for something else, maybe an A&E position. She actually gave me some leads on openings."

"Did she?"

"She did."

"How accommodating of her and you're changing the subject again."

"I am. No wonder you call yourself a detective."

Sherlock didn't respond right away, just watched him as he made tea and then served it. John's skin got all itchy from the scrutiny. After a few sips he finally put his cup down. "All right, all right, he did say something."

"He's worried about you."

John's head snapped up. They'd been talking behind his back. What bloody bastards. "He spoke to you about it first?"

"He did. He thinks you overreacted during the attack. He called it overkill."

John snorted. "Overkill? That's bollocks. If I hadn't stepped in, we'd be having a different conversation."

"You don't have to defend your actions to me, John." His voice was very quiet, very calm.

"No?"

"No."

John relaxed, thankful that he wasn't being criticized by the one person whose opinion really mattered to him. "You don't think I overreacted?"

"I wasn't there, neither was Lestrade. You were. You have to trust your own judgment. Besides, if you think I care one wit about either one of those nasty miscreants, you're mistaken. I care about you being safe. That's all that matters to me."

John suddenly felt warm all over like he was standing in the middle of the desert again, his body blasted by the heat of the noonday sun. He smiled. "Yeah?"
"Yes. Surely you must know that."

"I did, but it's nice hearing it."

"Is it?"

Sherlock studied him like he was a brand new puzzle, a new case to be cracked and added to his collection of successes. He had to admit that for once he didn't mind it. "Yeah, it is."

"So you're saying that you like to hear me state the obvious." Sherlock stared a few more moments and then shook his head like a child the first time he was told to multiply fractions. Then Sherlock shifted, took his shoes off, and stretched out on the sofa, his eyes closed. "I don't think I'll ever get used to this."

"This what?"

Sherlock moved his right hand in a circular motion, first pointing at John and then around to himself. He put his left forearm arm over his eyes. "This. You and me, give and take, talking about emotions. It's all new to me."

"Is it?"

"Yes. I find it unsettling, but..."

"But what?"

"But interesting, too. I usually master things quickly."

"Goes without saying considering you're brilliant."

Ignoring the compliment, he continued. "But not this, not you. I still have no idea why."

John held his breath for a few moments, not sure how to take Sherlock's revelation. He kept his voice steady, not wanting to assume too much. With Sherlock it wasn't a good idea to expose his heart, open himself up to harsh words that could slice through and cause more harm than that sniper bullet did to his shoulder. So he teased instead. "You saying I've got you baffled? The great Sherlock Holmes is stumped by somebody as simple as me?"

"Not baffled. Intrigued. And don't be stupid, you're anything but simple."

"Intrigued is good, stupid not so much."

"Well, stop saying stupid things then." Sherlock's voice faded a bit. "Definitely intriguing."

"How so?"

Instead of answering, Sherlock lay there, his breathing suddenly slower and more even.

Well, hell, just when John thought he might finally get some insight into Sherlock's view of their relationship, the sod fell asleep. Sure, he'd been awake for at least three days, maybe more, and needed the rest when he could get it. Still, John regretted the lost opportunity of having Sherlock explain why his wasn't tired of hanging out with John yet.

John stepped over and picked up the long black coat from the chair and draped it over Sherlock's still form. He smiled with affection, wishing that he could have Sherlock sleeping upstairs, warm and safe in his bed. It was never going to happen, but that didn't mean he couldn't dream about it
when Sherlock wasn't paying attention.

"That tears it, that bloody well tears it!"

"Calm down, Inspector. An aneurysm serves no useful purpose." Sherlock followed closely behind Lestrade as he ranted at the edge of the crime scene. Technicians worked to secure the area, all carefully ignoring their commanding officer's snit.

"You saw what he did. He's got a bloody death wish, that's what. He's not coming back on my patch, not until he sorted."

Sherlock lifted his chin defiantly. "Sorted? Explain."

"He's barred until he sees somebody."

"As in a therapist?"

"Bloody well right. He's barkin' mad and I can't have him on the job when he pulls shit like this, Sherlock. I won't be responsible."

"He already sees a therapist." Of course, Sherlock didn't mention that John had stopped going months ago since it was counterproductive to his argument.

"Then he's not doing his job, is he?"

"She actually."

Lestrade ignored the correction and continued complaining. "Jesus Christ. Shetland was armed. Your man nearly got himself killed."

"John disarmed the suspect. If he hadn't, Donovan and others might have been injured or killed."

"Donovan might have been in range, but Shetland was aiming at you."

"I'm well aware of that fact, Lestrade."

"He put himself between a bullet and you when he didn't have to. We could've negotiated or used the sniper. Shetland wasn't going to shoot until John went at him."

"I disagree. It was obvious from the involuntary spasms of his trigger finger that he might fire at any moment. John realized that and disarmed him, rather efficiently considering the circumstances."

"He was shot."

"Grazed."

"Same difference."

His voice pissy, Sherlock retorted, "What does that even mean, same difference?"

"Sod the semantics." Lestrade stared over at the ambulance as the paramedics treated John's wounded right side. Cooling down a bit, he took a deep breath. "I'm surprised you're not over there supervising."
"It's a minor injury and they're more than competent."

Lestrade looked him straight in the eye. "You're not fooling anybody, Sherlock. I saw your face."

"My face?"

"When the gun went off."

"Ah."

"Yes, bloody well ah. You were as scared as I was. He could've been killed."

"Any of us could die at any time. It's what people do."

"Yeah, we could, but most of us don't go charging in headfirst to hurry it along. I swear, a little crazy goes a long way between you two. I really don't know how the pair of you get by, I really don't."

Sherlock turned his collar up and stuffed his hands deep into his pockets, never taking his eyes off John sitting on the step at the end of the ambulance. His throat dry, he swallowed several times before he spoke. "You can't bar him from the scenes."

"I can and I will."

"Then you'll have to bar me as well."

"I will if I have to."

Sherlock turned and met the dark, determined gaze, surprised by the adamant tone. "You're serious."

"Damn right I am."

"We have a mutually beneficial relationship, Lestrade. Let's not spoil it with a hasty decision."

"It's not hasty. I've been thinking about it since I watched the fight. This just makes me more sure."

"You're being unfair to both John and me."

"Maybe. But I won't sleep at night if I thought I allowed him in and he got killed pulling another stunt like this."

"You don't sleep anyway."

"Not the point."

Sherlock offered a compromise. "What if I talked to him, get him to rein in some of the more impulsive aspects of his behavior?"

"You think you can do that on your own?"

"I don't see why not."

"Because being a therapist is easy, is it?"

"No, because I know John better than anyone. He'll listen to me."
The inspector's face had gradually returned to its natural color and his voice wasn't so strained. Lestrade shrugged. "Maybe. We'll see, but I need a break from all this lunacy, I really do. I'm getting too old for this shit."

"Sussex is nice this time of year."

"Seriously? You're going to make a joke right now?"

"I'm not joking. I actually have a house there."

"Yeah, you would have. Anyway, we'll see. Ask me again in a week." Lestrade scrubbed a right hand over his face, finally showing some recovery from the stress of the shooting. "Go on then. Go see how he is. You know you want to."

Sherlock walked away and headed over to the ambulance where John argued with the paramedics. "I'm a doctor. It's just a scratch. I don't need stitches."

Sherlock interrupted. "Stitches?"

One of the attending answered, "Yes, sir. We were just saying that it might be a more appropriate than just a simple bandage from us. The laceration is rather deep and still bleeding."

John shook his head, still stubbornly resiting any other treatment, holding his side while he talked. It obviously hurt more than he was letting on. "It's fine. I've had worse cuts shaving."

"I'll take him."

John looked up, ready to put up another fight. "I don't need..."


Sherlock waved the paramedics away and stepped in closer, his voice a whisper, his face only a few inches from John's. He put a firm right hand on John's left shoulder and squeezed, not tightly, but enough to make him really feel it. "I'm taking you for stitches, you incredibly stubborn, brave man."

John swallowed hard, his cheeks suddenly a lot pinker. "Okay, sure if it'll make you feel better."

Sherlock turned around and called for a taxi, avoiding the hungry blue eyes that watched his every move. They'd talk later in private.

If John wanted him to state the obvious, he would. He'd tell him exactly how much he meant to his work, to his very quality of life. He'd make it clear that while he might go on breathing without John beside him, he wouldn't want to. Surely that would be enough to make a difference.

&&&&&&

"Get cleaned up and changed. I'll fix the tea."

John's footsteps stuttered in the doorway. "Tea? You?"

"I do know how to make tea, John. It's just basic chemistry."

"Too basic usually. I can't remember the last time..."
"January 12th. You had that respiratory infection."

John smiled at the memory, not the infection part, but the bit about Sherlock serving him tea in bed. "Oh, yeah, I remember."

Sherlock clapped his hands together quickly in a hurry up motion. "Now go. Ten minutes. That should be enough time surely."

"Should be if we've got any clean cups and milk left."

John went to his room, chucking the ruined jacket and shirt in the bin. He winced as he stripped off his bloody tee shirt and threw it away as well. The bandage covered the 28 new sutures in the area across his right rib cage and just along his underarm. Despite the pain medication, it still ached and he'd sport a spectacular bruise before long. He couldn't complain, though, not considering just a twist of the wrist inward and the bullet would've gone through his right lung instead of skimming right along the edge of his chest. That would've certainly hurt a lot worse and having treated enough pulmonary injuries in the war, it wasn't something he ever wanted to experience personally.

He took a clean tee shirt, jeans, and blue jumper with him to the loo. He carefully washed with alcohol around the edges of the bandage to remove the blood and Betadine stains. The whole thing looked nasty, but he's seen and had a lot worse. He had survived and so had Sherlock. That's all that mattered.

As he dressed, he thought about Sherlock's behavior since the shooting. He'd been unusually accommodating. Maybe Sherlock thought he was in shock. Maybe he was. He still felt a bit dizzy at being touched and called brave by his friend. He hated to admit how much Sherlock's high opinion meant to him. It was a rare thing to hear and he treasured it all the more because of that.

When he came out of the bathroom, Sherlock sat on the sofa ready to serve. On the coffee table was a tray with a pink flowered teapot, a plate of fresh pecan scones, and raspberry jam. He snorted in amusement. Sherlock was a cunning bastard. "Mrs. Hudson made the tea. How'd you manage that?"

"She was quite tearful when I told her you'd been shot, but I assured her it was only a slight injury, certainly a lot less than it could have been. She gave us this as a get well present for you. She'd be here fussing over you herself, but she had a previous appointment."

John sat down in the chair, his mouth watering. Nobody made better tea and scones than Mrs. Hudson. "That was nice of her."

"It was." Sherlock poured the tea and paused before handing it to John. "Or perhaps you'd prefer something stronger. Whiskey, perhaps? We've got a bottle leftover from Christmas in the cupboard somewhere."

John took the cup. "Tea is fine, thanks." He drank half of it while Sherlock fixed his own cup with two sugars. Something was off. Sherlock was far too pleasant and not himself at all. Maybe he had a head injury and didn't tell anyone. Now that would be like the Sherlock he knew, to bash his head in and keep it quiet. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You sure? You seem different."

"Different how?"
"I don't know, calmer than usual, polite, serving tea, normal. We just solved a case. It's really not like you to be so calm."

Sherlock sat back and casually sipped his tea. "Well, I'm certainly calmer than Lestrade."

John put his cup down, bracing himself for what was coming. "I saw him yelling. It's not his fault I got shot if that's what he's on about."

"I know. It's my fault."

"What?" John shook his head in confusion. "How in the world do you figure that?"

"You disarmed Shetland to save me."

"And Donovan and anyone else the mad bastard decided to shoot. The man was in a panic, waving that gun around like a maniac. Sally was closest, but she couldn't do anything from where she was positioned. I know there was sniper on the opposite roof, but Shetland was canny enough to stay just out of his line of sight. I could see Shetland's trigger finger twitching. I couldn't take a chance that the gun would go off and hit someone. When he looked away at the last second, I had a chance to stop him so I took it."

"He was aiming at me."

John sat very still and studied Sherlock, the bright eyes locked onto his. He worked hard to block the image in his mind of Shetland just seconds away from killing Sherlock. "Yes, he was."

"And so you stepped in to stop him primarily to save me."

Hesitating, John saw that it was no use denying the truth. "Yes, but..."

"So, essentially it was my fault you were shot."

"Don't be stupid. I miscalculated. Bottom line, it's nobody's fault but Shetland's. He's the one with the bloody gun, not you."

"Miscalculated? How?"

"I thought I'd have enough time to get the gun off him, but I didn't and it discharged." John held his side, the throbbing a reminder of how close he'd come to losing everything.

Sherlock tilted his head as he studied him. Then he drank the rest of his tea before placing the cup on the tray. He said calmly, "Lestrade thinks you've got a death wish."

"What? Me? No. I like living, thank you."

"If I thought you were suicidal, John, I'd section you myself, but I don't think that."

Relieved that Sherlock didn't think he was entirely off his head, John smiled. "Good to know." He picked up one of Mrs. Hudson's scones and then added the jam. He hadn't eaten since that morning and he stuffed half in his mouth at once. It tasted like heaven.

"However, we still have a problem."

John finished chewing and swallowing his scone and asked, "What problem?"

"Lestrade didn't used to be so squeamish, but he must like you."
"Like me?"

"Yes, he's rather protective. Thinks you don't have enough sense to understand the concept of self-preservation."

"What does that mean exactly?"

"It means he's banned us from crime scenes until he's sure you're in your right mind again. He thinks you should stop risking your life for others so eagerly."

John's blood ran cold. Sherlock would surely leave him behind if he thought John kept him from working with the Yard. "Ban us? Or ban me?"

"It's the same thing. I told him as much. I won't work without you, not anymore." He paused before he added, "I've found that you're quite helpful to my concentration."

Pleased by the compliment, John took a few moments to respond. "Thanks, but surely he won't keep you off the job."

"When the first complicated murder comes along, he'll change his mind. In the meantime, we find ourselves on leave for a few days. I was thinking perhaps you'd like to accompany me to Sussex."

"Sussex? What's in Sussex?"

"I have a small house there. I'm sure Sarah could spare you from the surgery for the week."

"You have a place in Sussex? Why am I just hearing about this?"

"Mainly because I rarely go there. It's been five years in fact."

John wiped the crumbs from his fingers as he processed the new information. He wasn't sure what Sherlock was playing at, but there was no way it was to get him to just spend a week in the country doing nothing. "So is there an unsolved murder you want to investigate firsthand? A cold case of some kind? A missing person's case? I can't really help if I don't know the details."

"March is rather a nice month to visit, not as nice as June or July, mind you, but pleasant enough. I'll have Mycroft call and have it prepared. We've got lovely caretakers, the Halloways. They've worked for the family for decades."

John still couldn't believe it. "So you really want to take a vacation?"

"People do take vacations, John. Why is this such a novel concept?"

John tried not to be angry, but he found it difficult. He didn't want to think Sherlock would flat out lie to him, but he'd seen him do it to others to get what he wanted. What he couldn't figure out was what that lie might be in this case. What the fuck was in Sussex? Maybe Sherlock really did think he'd lost it and needed time off. "Some people take vacations, Sherlock, but not you. You've only had a handful of days off since I've known you. So, why now? You think I need a rest cure? Is that it?"

"If by rest cure you mean do I think your mental capacity is diminished and that you need to have complete rest to recover, no."

"Then why Sussex?"

"I actually thought you'd like it. I'm rather fond of the place. It's quite private and there an apiary.
Of course, it's a bit early for bee activity, but it's one of the best things about summer if we should ever go again."

John still didn't understand. Sherlock must be winding him up. "I'm not following. Don't get me wrong, I'm flattered, but why would you want me to see it?"

"You told me once that you liked me to state the obvious, so I thought I was, but apparently not clearly enough. Let me be more plain." Sherlock cleared his throat and leaned forward, his eyes trained on John. John had never seen him more serious. "I don't have friends. I only have one. I'd like very much to keep you and share my life with you, John. Sussex is just a small part of that life, but I thought I'd start simply."

Stunned, John found his heart in his throat. He barely managed to say the words, "Keep me and share your life with me?"

"Yes. I've thought for some time now that such an arrangement might suit you, but I had no serious motivation to pursue confirmation. Your actions of late force me to make my intentions clear. I want you with me. I realize I can't stop your heroics completely. That's simply part of what makes you so attractive. However, I thought, perhaps, if you knew the nature of my true feelings that you might curb your risk taking to some small degree in order to appease me."

"Heroic actions? True feelings?"

"John, I once told you that heroes don't exist, but I was wrong. You are a hero in every sense of the word. You would gladly sacrifice your life for another, a friend or stranger, it wouldn't matter. In addition, you've guarded me with your own life. You've even killed to save me. How is that anything but heroic? As for true feelings, yes, I care for you. I haven't said it, because I'm not naturally demonstrative about such things, but I feel it necessary to state the obvious."

John could hardly breathe, hardly take in the meaning of all those words strung together, but he definitely got the gist of it. "You care for me, yeah? But is this care for me as in best friend or something else?"

"Don't be dim, John."

"I'm really trying not to be, but I need it spelled out. Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Sherlock sighed in frustration. "This isn't going as I planned. You should understand by now."

"Just say it. What is it you want from me?"

"I want you, John Watson, to be my partner in all things, my work and my life."

Bloody fucking hell. John's mind screamed for him to say yes, but he couldn't. It was too much. He stood up, one hand on his side, the other on the back of the chair to steady himself. He actually felt faint, like he was still in a dream somewhere, not awake and hearing Sherlock making a proposal. "I swear to god, if you're messing me about with this because you know how I feel, I'll leave today and never come back."

Alarmed, Sherlock got up and stepped closer. "John? Do you seriously think this is something I'd say as a kind of trick?"

"I wouldn't think so, but I don't understand." John met serious grey blue eyes staring into his. "That sounded like a marriage proposal."
"I was actually thinking civil union, but marriage will do."

"We're not even dating."

"We live together already. We've gone out to hundreds of meals together. I supposed if you wanted to revert to traditional courtship rituals, we could do that."

John snorted in disbelief. In his dreams, the times when he'd actually let himself imagine Sherlock coming on to him, it'd been a quick kiss that led to more, a little snog, maybe a shag or two. Nothing ever made him think it would be more than that, anything deeper. "Sherlock, you know I care about you."

"Obvious."

"Yes, well, I didn't realize you realized."

"You should have. It's not like you've been hiding it that well and I am the world's greatest detective."

Slightly embarrassed that he'd given himself away so easily, John complained. "All right, all right. I get your point. It's hard to hide anything from the Great Sherlock Holmes." He swallowed hard before he confessed. "It's just that I couldn't handle it if you really didn't mean it, if this were just another one of your experiments to see how I'd react."

Sherlock stepped closer and studied him before he spoke. "You don't trust me."

"I do trust you. I trust you with my life."

"But not about this."

"It's just so sudden and so extreme."

"What about that isn't like me?"

John chuckled and admitted, "True, but what about the rest of it?"

"Rest of it?"

"I date women. You don't date at all. How's this going to work?"

"Ah, you're referring to the sexual intercourse aspect."

John sputtered, embarrassed by Sherlock's bluntness. "Sexual intercourse? Bloody hell, we haven't even kissed yet."

Sherlock put his hands on both sides of John's face and leaned in, his breath warm against his skin. His lips touched John's softly at first and then with more pressure. The tip of his tongue flicked out for just a second and then he pulled back. "Now we have."

John could hardly catch his breath to speak. "Jesus. This is really happening."

"Only if you agree."

He hesitated, wanting to say yes, but still fearful. Sherlock could declare his feelings one day and deny them just as easily the next. A minefield was less dangerous. Of course, a minefield didn't kiss like that. "I can't commit, not yet. We need to take our time and make sure..."
Sherlock stepped back, his face suddenly paler. "You're saying no."

"No, I'm not saying no."

"But you're not saying yes. How is that not no?"

"I'm saying yes with conditions."

"That's the same as no."

"No, it's not."

Sherlock walked over to the window, the earlier brightness gone. He crossed his arms, his expression suddenly guarded and unhappy. "What conditions?"

"I don't want to go to Sussex, not yet. I do want to see it, but later, once we've actually been together for a while, once we know it'll work out."

Sherlock took a moment before he nodded. "What else?"

John moved closer and kept his voice steady. "I want to be with you, I do, but this is all new and I'm not like you. I can't just jump into something so serious without knowing you really mean it."

"I don't say things I don't mean."

"You say and do things you don't mean all the time to get what you want."

Sherlock grudgingly agreed. "That's true, but I'd never lie about something like this, not to you."

John put his hand on Sherlock's back, happy that his friend didn't pull away from him, didn't even flinch. "If you mean it now, then you'll mean it a week from now, or next month, or even next year. We need to go a bit slower. I need to go a bit slower."

Sherlock turned, his eyes shinier than John had ever seen them. He wrapped his arms around him, drawing John closer, but careful not to put too much pressure on his wounded side. "You're not sure of my affection. Then I must work harder to prove it to you."

Their lips met again, this time with more passion. John hadn't kissed like that in ages and drew back to catch his breath. "Wow."

"You approve?"

"I do." And he did. John knew it was just the first step, but it was a good one in showing him that Sherlock wasn't just using him to make a point, wasn't trying to control him or run an experiment on his feelings.

"Are there any other conditions?"

"None that I can think of right now, no."

"Good." Sherlock kissed him again and then asked, "Angelo's tonight? We could make it our first official date."

"Angelo will be pleased."

"Angelo already thinks we're married."
John joked. "If we do end up getting married, he'll have to be the caterer."

Sherlock grinned, very pleased. "Oh, Mycroft would love that. He just looks at Italian food and gains weight."

"Maybe we won't invite him."

Sherlock rested his forehead against John's. "Oh, I do like the way you think."

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If John were honest with himself, he'd fallen for Sherlock months ago. He'd tried to fight it, gone on as many dates with women as he could, but they never worked out. It wasn't just because Sherlock kept calling or showing up. John's heart was obviously yearning for someone else, someone like Sherlock.

So it really shouldn't have been a big surprise that he'd taken to kissing Sherlock like a baby to sweets. Kissing a man wasn't much different from kissing a woman. There were the whiskers and the larger tongue to get used to, more power overall, but otherwise, it was all good, more than good really. He loved kissing and John found that kissing Sherlock took his breath away.

Despite how much he liked it, crashing from the rush of the shooting and then the shock of Sherlock's proposal made his head swim. Or maybe it was Sherlock nibbling on the side of his neck, nipping and tugging the skin up between his teeth, sending heat jetting right down to his groin. "Sherlock?"

"Uhhhm?"

"What are you doing?"

Sherlock lifted his head, his eyes unfocused and dreamy. "Marking you."

John hadn't had a love bite since he was a teenager when Jane Wexford nearly gnawed him to death, not that he ever complained about it at the time. "Why?"

"You're mine."

He knew he shouldn't, knew it would open him up for abuse with the nurses tomorrow, but he didn't care. He liked the idea that Sherlock wanted to own him like that. "Show off."

Sherlock did another long, lazy lick up the side of his jaw, his hands roaming up under John's jumper, carefully avoiding the wounded right side. Then his hand wandered down between John's legs, cupping his cock and balls through the fabric of his jeans. His breath hitched and John reached down and captured Sherlock's wrist. "Wait."

Sherlock took an extra second to respond. "Wait?"

"Yes, wait."

Sherlock eased back and met John's eyes, checking to see if he was serious. "I thought we were supposed to be snogging. Isn't that what you called it?"

"I did and we are, but if you go much further, it'll be in shagging territory and I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

"I am."
"Yeah, I get that. But it's been a long day and I have work tomorrow."

The spell broken, Sherlock sat back and moved away, taking a deep breath. He ran a rather unsteady hand through his mussed curls. "I never took you for a tease, John."

That was a new one. He'd never once been called that before. He didn't much care for it, either. "A tease? Seriously?"

Sherlock complained, whined really. "We had our first official date and now we're supposed to be having sex. That's the natural progression in such matters."

John sat up, wincing at the stab in his side. Snogging was a great pain killer until it was over and then all the hurt came rushing back. "Just because you bought me dinner doesn't mean we're having sex."

Sherlock objected. "Why not? When you had your first date with Sarah, you wanted to 'get a leg over'. Isn't that what you called it? How is this different? Why do other people get to have sex on the first date and I don't?"

John studied the man beside him, not really sure how to take the aggressive change in attitude. Was that Sherlock's plan all along, to say he cared about him just to have sex? It didn't seem likely, but there were a lot of things about Sherlock he didn't completely understand yet. "First off, I never had sex with Sarah thanks to that disaster of a first date."

"Not because you didn't want to."

"But that was with Sarah, not with you. Is that what you want from me, just sex? Is that why you proposed in the first place?"

"Don't be stupid. I want sex because that's what people do. That's what you do. You like sex. Lord knows you've moaned enough about not getting any after more dates than I care to count. Now I want to have some, too, and you say no. How is that fair?" Sherlock sounded downright stroppy.

John's voice softened. "I do like sex, but I'm tired and hurting. I wouldn't be up for much and I want our first time to be good for you, too."

Sherlock's eye's brightened. He put his hand in the center of John's chest, his fingers splayed. "But it would be. I want to fellate you. I've been dreaming of it for some time, how you'd taste, how you would look when you had your orgasm. I've got a list of things I want to observe."

John's heart beat a lot faster and his face flushed. "You want to give me a blowjob?"

"Yes."

Closing his eyes, it took all his strength not to give in. The idea of Sherlock's mouth on his cock, Sherlock sucking him off, it was something he'd only dreamed about. He got hard just thinking about it. He gulped and then opened his eyes. "You have no idea how much I want that, too, but not tonight."

"Why not?"

"I know it's going to sound crazy, but I want it to be special between us and right now I hurt too much. I couldn't return the favor."

"I'm not asking you to."
"I know you're not, but I want to."

Sherlock studied him for several long moments and then removed his hand. He shook his head in confusion, a rare state for Sherlock. "I don't understand. Nobody's ever turned me down before."

"Nobody?"

"No."

John wasn't really sure he wanted to know, but he had to ask, "Who's nobody?"

Sherlock shrugged. "Just people, nobody special."

John frowned. "Just people? How many just people are we talking about and when was this?"

Slouching on the sofa, his head back, eyes closed, Sherlock sighed heavily. "It was a long time ago, John. No need to be jealous."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"Maybe a little. It's just, I've never seen you show sexual interest for anyone and now you're wanting to give me a blowjob on our couch. You have to give me time to get used to the idea."

"I give spectacular fellatio, or so they tell me. I hardly remember it."

John had no doubt that whatever Sherlock did with that divine mouth, that it would be spectacular. That wasn't the point. It was the other part of that statement that triggered all kinds of red flags in his head. Still, if he were going to commit himself to Sherlock, he needed to know what he was in for, all of it, not just the brilliant bits, but all the other. "When you say you hardly remember it, what are you talking about? Is this when you were using drugs?"

"Do we really need to discuss this now? I'm no longer feeling quite so amorous."

"Join the club. Now, tell me."

Sherlock kept his eyes closed, his voice even, but he sounded detached like he did when he was simply reporting the facts at a crime scene. "I started using different drugs at school when I was fourteen, nothing too drastic, just experimenting really. It didn't become a problem until several years after I left university. I didn't know what I wanted to do. Life was tedious and dull and I went clubbing a lot. The cocaine made it so much easier to cope until it didn't. After Mycroft cut me off, well, things got desperate for a while. However, I found that there were men who liked how I looked and they would pay for the things I wanted in return for favors."

John's mouth went dry. He had known about the drug use, but this was something worse, something he hardly imagined. His eyes stung as he urged Sherlock on. "What happened?"

"You want prurient details?"

"I'm not sure what I want."

After an extended silence, Sherlock opened his eyes. "There are things I've done that I really don't like to remember, but find difficult to delete." He reached out and took John's hand, their fingers intertwined. "I fear that my earlier sexual experiences have somewhat mired my ability to understand what's appropriate." He swallowed hard. "I've never actually been in a committed
relationship. So, while I might have had many previous sexual partners, you're the only one I've ever really wanted."

"You've never had a boyfriend?"

"No. Not really."

"What's that mean, not really?"

"There were men I was with for a while, but it was more for their convenience. I've never really cared about sex before. It was just a means to an end."

"You mean to get drugs?"

"And shelter. After all, there's a reason I'm able to use the homeless network so well."

John was shocked. "You were homeless?"

"On occasion."

John's heart ached at knowing Sherlock had been alone for so long, so alone and so desperate that he'd given his body away for drugs and a place to sleep. He squeezed Sherlock's hand in reassurance. "That was the past. Now you're with me."

Sherlock smiled, but his eyes still didn't have the earlier brightness. Some of the light had been stolen by the ugly memories.

John stood up and tugged him to his feet. "Come on. Let's go to bed."

"For sex?"

"To sleep."

"You're a stubborn man, John Watson."

"I'm a tired man. I've got work tomorrow."

They stood there a few moments before Sherlock asked, "Which bed should we use?"

"Well, since yours is covered with god knows what, I'd prefer mine."

"Agreed." As the headed up the stairs, Sherlock added, "You know if you marry me, you don't have to ever work again, at least not at a local surgery. You could have your own practice. You'll be quite rolling in it."

"Rolling in it?"

"Isn't that what they call it when one is filthy rich?"

"Yeah, they do, but..."

"Then you should quit."

"We're not married yet and I'm not quitting even when we are. I'm paying my share of the rent."

Sherlock flopped down on John's bed without bothering to pull back the covers or change out of his clothes. "You're really one of the most obstinate people I've ever met."
"You've met yourself, right?"

"Very amusing. Would it bother you if I slept in the nude tonight?"

John nearly choked. "The nude?"

"Yes, you haven't done the laundry this week and my pajamas are all dirty."

"You can borrow a pair of mine."

"There's nothing wrong with the human form, John. As a doctor, I would think you would know that. Besides, your pajamas will be far too short. I'll look ridiculous."

What John knew was that Sherlock hadn't given up on the idea of seducing him. He tossed the gorgeous man in his bed his spare pajama bottoms. "Put those on while I get changed. If you stay with me tonight, you'll wear them. I need to get some sleep."

"Sleep is boring."

"Sherlock..."

"Very well, but I can't promise to fall asleep right away."

"Then maybe you should go back downstairs and come to bed later when you can. I'll be useless tomorrow if I don't get at least six hours. It's late."

Sherlock got up, kissed John softly, and pulled back. "If I called Sarah and told her you were shot saving my life, she'd give you the day off."

"I know, but I'm not taking the day off. I need the money."

Sherlock stared for a few extra moments and then nodded. "Sleep. We'll talk in the morning." Then he took the pajamas and left.

John wanted to call him back, wanted to fall asleep in his arms, but he knew better. Sherlock would likely be up most of the night. John changed into his own pajamas before he took one of his pain pills and got under the covers. Sleep didn't come right away, not until he heard the familiar strains of Sherlock's violin following him into his dreams.

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John rolled over and woke up quickly to a slicing pain across his chest. He hissed, "Shit." After a few minutes, the pain eased. He had to be more careful how he moved until the wound healed a bit more.

The spot beside him was empty. John frowned and wondered if Sherlock had ever made it to bed. If he did, he didn't remember it. The Percocet had knocked him out for the night. He glanced over at the clock and saw it was nearly time to get up anyway.

He got out of bed carefully before changing into clean underwear, jeans, and a fresh tee.

Downstairs he paused when he saw the empty flat. "Sherlock?"

When there was no answer, John pushed the worry to the back of his mind. He had to pee and he had to get cleaned up for work. He couldn't take a shower, but the dressing needed changing.
He prepared all the materials he would need for cleansing the wound and replacing the bandage. After putting on rubber gloves, he peeled off the old dressing. He heard the door to the flat open and called out, "Sherlock?"

The taller man appeared in the doorway with a familiar bakery sack and paper cup. "I got you doughnuts and coffee from Lenny's."

John smiled, pleased by the gesture. "Thanks. You must have left early. Did you ever come to bed?"

Sherlock never took his eyes off of the wound. "I slept for a few hours. I didn't want to wake you so I slept down here."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I know. Does it hurt?"

John looked at the puckered line, some of the stitches tugging hard at the reddened skin. A livid bruise flowered out about six centimeters all around it. There was a section near his nipple that puffed up more than the rest. John knew he needed to watch that more closely for infection. "A bit."

Sherlock snorted at his lie and left. He quickly returned and said. "Let me clean and dress it for you."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know, but I want to. Just tell me what to do."

So John did, directing Sherlock to don gloves and told him how to use the antiseptic and antibiotic gels. Then he watched as a kneeling Sherlock carefully positioned the bandage before taping it in place. He did an expert job. "Well done. We'll make a medic out of you yet."

"I hope not." Before John could ask what he meant, Sherlock leaned in and kissed his stomach right over his navel. He stood up, removed the gloves, and then left the room, leaving John more than a little bewildered.

By the time John had finished cleaning up and dressing, Sherlock was standing at the window, his arms crossed and his face gloomy. John asked, "What is it?"

"I'm not a doctor."

"I know that."

"Even if I were, what good is knowing all the medicine or science in the world if the person you care about goes and does something stupid and gets himself killed? It doesn't really matter why he did it, just that he's dead. How do people live with that?"

Taking a deep breath, knowing Sherlock wasn't just talking about any old bloke who nearly got offed, he stepped closer. He placed a hand on Sherlock's arm. "I'm not dead."

"But you might have died."

"So might you a dozen times a day. A person could go mad if he stood around worrying about when his time is up."
"I don't worry about me."

"I know that. You leave that to me."

Sherlock turned to meet his gaze, his voice intense. "Is this how you feel whenever I take off without you? When I go into danger and you're not there?"

"Every time, yeah."

"Good god, how do you stand it?"

"Practice, but it's not easy, never easy."

"I'm sorry."

John reached up and cupped the side of Sherlock's face. "I'm not asking you to change. Just take me along for the ride."

Sherlock's lips twitched and he smiled. "Why would I go anywhere without my blogger?"

Why, indeed? John leaned in and stole his first kiss of the morning. If he had to show up late for work, he couldn't think of a better reason.

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"Is that a love bite?"

John's hand flew up to the side of his neck to cover the tell-tale mark, his face suddenly pink. He knew he should've picked the turtleneck jumper. "Uh, maybe."

"So, here I am thinking you've been wounded in action and you're out snogging a new lady?"

"Well, I really did get shot, just a graze though."

"Do I need to check it?"

John hugged his side. Since he was working, he'd not taken the pain pill. He could definitely tell a difference. "No, it's fine."

Sarah continued to tease. They were sitting in her office taking a tea break. It was one of those rare slow days, for which John was very grateful. "That would explain your funny walk when you got here this morning."

"You'd be singing a different tune if you'd had to call in Stevens to cover my shift."

"True. Look, it's none of my business, but this is the second injury in less than a month. You need to start taking better care of yourself, learn to duck and cover or something."

"I'll keep that in mind, thanks."

Sarah sipped her tea and then casually asked, "So, who's the new woman? Do I know her?"

Sherlock and he hadn't discussed telling anyone. John wasn't quite sure what to say, especially to Sarah. She'd been a good friend, but she wasn't exactly a huge fan of Sherlock. She'd told him more than once that he'd be better off leaving and finding a place on his own. She'd nagged and said repeatedly that he'd never find anybody as long as Sherlock was there to run interference. He'd lost
count of how many times he denied there was anything between them other than being flat mates. Now that had all changed.

He decided to take a risk. He cleared his throat, a bit nervous and not sure how Sarah would respond. "Actually, you do know the person. It's Sherlock."

"Well, it's about bloody time."

"What?"

She sat back in her chair and waved a hand of dismissal. "Please, the only one here who didn't know you two were together was you." She grinned and leaned forward, her elbows on the desk. "So, who made the first move, him or you? I'll bet it was him. You wouldn't do it."

Even though she was right, John didn't particularly like the smug way she said it. "And why in hell wouldn't I do it?"

"Did you?"

"No, but I could have if I'd had any idea that there was a chance."

Sarah stopped grinning. "What happened?"

"It was after the shooting. I think he got scared and decided to tell me he cared."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah, just like that."

"Well, he always was a direct fucker."

"The mouth on you."

"You've got the dirtiest mouth this side of Bristol. I was a delicate flower before I met you."

"I hate to say it, but you're probably right. I am a bad influence or so I've been told more than once."

She sighed and stood up, moving around her desk. She settled herself next to John on the sofa, her warm body right up next to his. "We have to get back to work, but before we do, I just want to say I'm happy for you." She reached out and squeezed his knee.

"Thanks. You can't tell anyone else. It's still really new."

"Sure, I'm good with secrets. Look, I've got no clue what you see in Sherlock Holmes other than the brilliance and the sodding good looks, but I sure know what he sees in you."

John was almost afraid to ask. "What?"

"A damn fine man." She kissed the side of his cheek and then gently rubbed away any traces of lipstick with her thumb. "All the girls are going to be crushed when they find out you're off the market."

"They had their chance."

Sarah laughed so hard she nearly cried. "Oh, John darling, they so didn't."
"What the hell is that smell?" John trudged up the stairs and through the door, worn out from the flood of patients who'd shown up during the second half of the shift with everything from piles to puking. The odor coming from the flat wasn't a lot better than the ton of bile little Bobby Fletcher had thrown up when he'd checked his tonsils. He looked around at the mess and grumbled, "What the fuck, Sherlock?"

"Ah, John, you're finally home. Hand me that bunch of yellow gladiola. It's right next to the basket of lilies by the doorway."

John took in the sight of what had been their living room. His eyes and nose itched as he fought back a sneeze. "Please tell me you didn't rob a funeral home."

Sherlock was in the kitchen glued to the microscope. "Don't be absurd. I have a friend who works at Morgan's who owes me a favor. He was charged with indecent exposure and I proved it wasn't him, but his twin."

"So, his twin exposed himself and went to jail instead of him?"

"Yes, thus the favor. Would you believe they just throw these away after services if the family doesn't want them?" He held out his hand and snapped his fingers without looking up. "Gladiola, now."

Out of habit John complied and got the flowers. Once he did, he scanned the place and saw two funeral wreaths along with about twenty arrangements, mostly made up of different varieties of lily, but also carnations, roses, and even orchids. The flat reeked, bringing back memories of how many funerals John had attended over the years, especially when he first got back from Afghanistan. There must have been four or five a month until he finally had to stop going or lose his damn mind.

When John saw the kitchen table littered with Petri dishes containing human fingers covered with yellow dust, he'd had enough. "What the hell are you doing?"

Sherlock didn't look up as he explained, "Pollen, John, pollen. The stamen of individual plants hold varying amounts of the stuff, millions of particles. They all have their unique appearance. It's amazing! I wanted to see if different forms of pollen affected the decomposition rates of human flesh. Plus, I'm mentally cataloguing each type. I might someday use it to determine the location of a corpse based on pollen found on the tissue."

John sneezed several times in a row and Sherlock looked up in surprise. "Oh."

"Yeah, allergies."

"I didn't know."

"You never asked."

"But I should know these things. Is it just certain types of pollen or all kinds? Maybe we should test..."

"Shut up."

He did at first, but then said, "You've had a bad day."
"Well deduced, that. I'm tired, I'm going to take a pain pill and lie down. When I come back, I want the flowers out of the flat."

"But..."

John sneezed before he demanded, "What?"

"I actually got them for you."

"What are you talking about? Why would you get me a flat full of stinky funeral flowers?"

"I read on the internet that when one is dating, that flowers and chocolate are good gifts for one's romantic interest. So, I got you flowers."

John pinched the bridge of his irritated nose in frustration. "But funeral flowers, Sherlock?"

"Flowers are flowers. What's the difference?"

John closed his eyes and prayed for patience before he explained, "It was a nice thought, but you don't have to get me flowers."

"Why not? I thought a proper courting ritual was what you wanted."

"I'm not a woman. I don't need flowers or chocolates or Valentines, nothing like that for you to date me."

"That sounds incredibly gender-biased."

"When the hell have you ever cared about gender-bias or any other social convention when it didn't suit you?"

"I don't, but you usually do. You're usually quite politically correct."

"Yeah, well, while some men like flowers, and I'm sure there are plenty, I don't need them, and I especially don't want a bunch of funeral leftovers. Besides, be honest, you really just wanted them for your experiments."

"I promise you that was just an afterthought once I got them here. I was particularly inspired by the conspicuous stamen of the lily. What a magnificent reproductive design. It was then that I..."

"Get rid of them."

"But my experiments..."

"Use what you have and then get...rid...of...them." John turned away and headed upstairs. Within a few moments, Sherlock was there, watching him take a pain pill. "I thought it would please you."

"I know. I'm sorry. I don't mean to be ungrateful."

"But?"

"Do you have any idea how many funerals I had to go to during and after the war? That god awful cloying smell just triggers memories of some of the most miserable times of my life." His voice choked up. "I lost mates, Sherlock, good friends who I'll never see again."

"I had no idea you would react this way."
"I know." John held up a hand. "It's me who's wrong here. You tried to do a nice thing and I'm just too fucked up to appreciate it. I'm sorry."

Sherlock dismissed his apology. "Don't be. It's a silly convention. The internet is an atrocity of misinformation about romance."

Sherlock stepped closer, wrapping his arms around him and then drawing him close. John let his face fall against Sherlock's chest. John was grateful for Sherlock's understanding and for his touch. "Thanks."

Sherlock lifted John's chin with one hand and smiled. "You rest and I'll have the flowers cleared out by the time you get up." He paused suddenly and turned John's face, frowning. His voice suddenly took on an edge of accusation. "She kissed you."

John remembered the peck on the cheek earlier. "I won't even ask how you know that, but yeah. It's nothing."

"Sarah kissing you is nothing?"

"It is when she's congratulating me for hooking up with you."

"You told her?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

John touched the side of his neck where Sherlock had left his love bite. "Because you, you possessive sod, had to mark me and she wanted to know who the new lucky lady was."

Obviously relieved, Sherlock relaxed. "I'm glad she knows about us. I want everyone to know."

"Do you?"

Sherlock sneaked a kiss and pulled back. "Just try and stop me."

"But what if..."

"If I fail to convince you of my affection?" Sherlock studied him for an extra moment before adding softly, his voice full of disappointment. "Or perhaps it's not my affection about which you're unsure."

John hugged him closer. "I'm sure about how I feel. Even if we never work out romantically, I do love you."

Sherlock's voice lowered slightly. "Love?"

John pulled back and met Sherlock's gaze. "That is what we're talking about here, right? I haven't misread things?"

"Yes, but we've never said it out loud."

"That's true."

"Then it's about time we did. I love you and I want to be with you for the rest of my life. Whatever it takes to make that happen, to convince you of my sincerity, I'll do." He kissed John briefly and
pulled away just a little. "Tell me what I have to do and I'll do it."

John had never felt so powerful and vulnerable at the same time. He didn't want to say the wrong thing, so he decided not to say anything, but leaned in for another kiss. That was as good a place to start as any.

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It took several moments before John opened his eyes in the dark and registered what it was that woke him up. There were angry voices, very loud irate voices inside the flat. He couldn't make out the words, but he sure as hell knew the tone. Shit.

He got up too quickly and then sat back down just as fast, the room spinning around him. He shook his head to clear away the dizziness. Damn pain pills always made him light-headed, not to mention his throat felt like he'd swallowed half the goddamn desert. He got up again more carefully, steadying himself with one hand on the bedpost, and slipped on his shoes. Then he headed downstairs to find out what was going on before World War Three broke out.

The first thing he noticed was that the flat was cleared of all the funeral flowers, thank god. The second was that Sherlock and Lestrade were yelling abuse at one another in a very tense face off. "Oi! What's going on?"

Sherlock and Lestrade both shut up immediately, looking more like angry schoolboys caught out by the teacher than grown men. Sherlock's face was flushed with rage as he poked a finger into Lestrade's chest. "See what you've done, you idiot. I told you he was sleeping."

"I wasn't the only one shouting."

John took a deep breath, knowing from experience that the explanation might take longer than he had patience for. So, he cut to the chase. "Both of you shut it and tell me what's going on."

Sherlock frowned, puzzled. "How can we both be quiet and explain at the same time?"

Lestrade smirked. "And you call us idiots."

"You're an idiot."

His head pounding, John snapped, "Shut up! Jesus." Both men hushed. "Thank you. Now do we have tea?" Neither man spoke, but Sherlock shook his head. "Right, well, let me put the kettle on and then we'll talk. In the meantime, try not to fucking kill each other while I'm in the kitchen."

John didn't miss Sherlock glaring at Lestrade, if looks could kill and all that. He'd seen that angry expression more times than he could count usually aimed at inept police but sometimes at himself. He filled and turned on the kettle and set out the things to make tea. From the other room he heard the frantic, hushed whispers of the two men still having whatever pissing contest they were having. It was like babysitting children sometimes, honestly.

It took a few minutes, but once the tea was made, he carried the cups back into the sitting room on a serving tray. Sherlock sat sulking with his arms crossed on the sofa and Lestrade was still standing and staring out the window. That was usually Sherlock's spot, but his partner was too busy fuming and being all dramatic. Strained silence would've been an improvement.

John put the tray down and got his own cup. He thought about sitting next to Sherlock, but considering his foul mood, he thought better of it and settled into his own chair. "Serve yourselves."
"Lestrade won't be having any. He's leaving."

"Lestrade can speak for himself." Lestrade came over and got himself some tea. "Thanks."

Grudgingly, Sherlock fixed his own drink with sugar. No one spoke for an extended period and despite the obvious tension, John rather appreciated the silence while he got his bearings and the tea kicked in. Finally he asked, "All right, I know I'll probably regret this, but what are you two on about?"

Sherlock put his cup down, his voice harsh. "Do you want to tell him or shall I, Inspector? You are, after all, the one who brought us this ridiculous information."

"Don't shoot the messenger, Sherlock. I'm not the one who made the decision. If it were up to me, these arseholes would be put away, no question."

"It might not be your decision, but you work for the fools who made it."

"It's the bloody Crown, not me. Tell them about it and leave me out of it."

John held up a hand as he broke in. He was getting the picture, and it was an ugly one. "Wait, are you telling me the Crown isn't going to put those men who attacked Mrs. MacPherson in jail? Why the hell not?"

Lestrade put his teacup down and cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable with what he was about to say. The words came out as if they'd been rehearsed. "On advice of their solicitors, both men made a deal for lesser charges and got off without jail time. The Crown decided since nothing was actually stolen and the victim wasn't seriously injured, unlike the offenders who were, it wasn't in the best interest of the public to pursue it further."

Sherlock chipped in, "Had they slit the poor woman's throat before John stopped them, then they would bother. Unless there's absolute mayhem, it's apparently not worth their time to prosecute criminals. What utter idiots. It's no wonder crime is rampant in this country."

John took it all in, stunned and quite numb. It wasn't the result he'd expected. He found it hard to believe that thugs could go after little old ladies with knives and rob them blind in broad daylight, and nothing was going to be done about it. Was this what he'd fought a war for, what his mates had died for? It didn't make any sense and it was supposed to make sense, make all the suffering mean something. He wasn't brilliant like Sherlock, but he knew that much.

After he hadn't spoken for a few moments, Sherlock asked, "John, are you all right?"

"I'm not sure."

Lestrade said, "I know it's not fair, but that's the system."

Sherlock complained, "Your precious system is broken."

"It's the only one we have. We do what we can."

"Which isn't much apparently."

"Both of you just stop it." John rubbed both hands over his face, suddenly incredibly tired, and stood up. He couldn't listen to another minute of bollocks. His voice sounded much calmer than he felt. "What's done is done. It's over."
"But..."

"No, Sherlock. I don't want to talk about it." John stepped over to Lestrade and held out a hand. "Thank you for coming personally to tell me. I appreciate it."

Greg studied him with concern for an extra heartbeat but then shook his hand. "You're welcome. I really am sorry about this."

"I understand." He said the words, but he didn't mean them, not really. He didn't understand any of it. "Now, if you'll both excuse me, I need some fresh air."

Sherlock stood up. "I'll come with you."

"No, not this time. I need to clear my head."

Hesitating, Sherlock studied him closely, but finally nodded. "Understood."

John grabbed his jacket and headed outside alone, his leg joining in with his aching chest to remind him of how human he was and how damaged he felt.

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John ordered his second pint, counting out his money carefully to make sure he had enough to pay for it. His check wasn't due until Friday, two days away. While he waited for his drink, he closed his eyes, drowning out the usual hum of pub voices, women laughing a little too loudly, rude comments from blokes on the pull. All of it played out with a background of out-of-date music from the nineties and the clink of glasses. He really should find a different place to drink. The whole thing was giving him a massive headache. The pint arrived and he paid for it. He'd no sooner drank about half when he heard a familiar voice. "John? John Watson?"

Not really in the mood for company but not wanting to be unfriendly, he turned and smiled at his old friend. "Mike. What brings you around?"

"Just in the neighborhood. I've got a cousin who lives not far from here. She's getting married next month. Needed a bit of tension relief."

"Tension relief?"

"Dr. Who marathon. She loves it, but her bloke is a wanker who can't stand it. Can you believe that?"

"Who doesn't like Dr. Who?"

"I know, right? Anyway, he's away at a conference, so she had me over. Then I thought I'd drop in for pint on my way home. See you've had the same idea." Mike raised a hand to order his drink and kept talking. "So, where's your better half?"

"Not a fan of the pub scene."

"I don't think Sherlock's ever been to a pub unless it's for a case. I remember..." He droned on for several minutes and John's mind wandered, didn't really go anywhere special, just went in circles still trying to figure out the law and order thing. How did the legal system tally with letting thugs go when they were caught red-handed. "John?"

A hand settled lightly on his shoulder and John flinched away from the touch. "What?"
"You drifted off there. Sorry if I'm boring you." Mike paused. "I hope you don't mind me saying this, but you look a bit rough around the edges. You okay?"

"I'm fine. Just tired. The surgery was busy today. You know how it is. I really should be getting back." John turned to leave but his fucking traitor of a leg nearly gave way. He caught himself on the edge of the bar.

"Your leg still a bother?"

"It's fine, just a bit dodgy every now and again. No worries." John hated his leg, wanted to beat it into submission even though that never worked, never really did much but give him bruises. "I'll see you later, yeah?"

"Sure. Hey, I heard you were looking for an A&E job."

"I put a few feelers out but no luck so far."

"Royal London is looking to expand services. You might try there. Talk to Dr. Carl Reynolds. He's a mate of mine and I happen to know he's partial to vets. I can put in a good word if you like."

His spirit lifted, John nodded. "Thanks. I'll look into it."

"Good luck. Say hi to Sherlock for me."

"I will, thanks."

As he headed out into the night, the drizzle suddenly got a bit heavier, flirting with turning into real rain. John didn't have an umbrella, but didn't really care. He was thinking instead about how he needed a boost in his career and A&E might be just the ticket. As he walked along, his leg cramped up again, but he kept moving, limping and trying his best to ignore the pain. He wanted to get home and talk to Sherlock about the possibility of a new job.

About halfway back to the flat, John slowed, his senses suddenly on full alert. One thing the army taught him was to trust his instinct and it was screaming that he was being followed. He stopped and looked all around. A few people hurried along, huddled close together under umbrellas, and shops were closing up for the night. He saw nothing suspicious, but he knew without a doubt someone was watching.

As he scanned the area once again more carefully, he saw it, the glow of a cigarette in the dark alley just half a block away. John waited, wondering if the person would show himself or just hang back. Was it a robber or someone else, someone connected with Sherlock or worse, Moriarty? After a few moments, the person stepped out of the shadows and came toward him. John tensed and readied himself for an attack at the approach.

The man was tall and stocky, a lot heavier than John, and his face oddly familiar, but not exactly the same as the one in his memory. John asked, "You related to Miller?"

"So you do know his name."

John fought down the desire to call him an ugly bastard. "What do you want?"

The man took a long final drag off his cigarette and then dropped it, crushing it with the toe of his boot. "You don't look like much. And Joe never said you were a cripple."

John stiffened, but ignored the taunt. "Why are you following me?"
"Just wanted to see the man who nearly killed my brother and his mate."

"You've seen me. Now what?"

"Nothing yet."

"Yet? Are you threatening me?"

"I'm just warning you to watch yourself. A bloke like you never knows when he might get his arse kicked."

Keeping his voice even, John stepped closer. He calmly studied the face of the man trying to intimidate him. He saw evidence of an often broken nose, a missing front tooth, and a previous fractured jawbone. The man had obviously had his fair share of being a bruiser. John met his gaze, his own eyes hard and full of intent. "Why wait?"

Caught off guard, the man frowned. "What?"

"You heard me. Why wait? You want to kick my arse, go for it. I should warn you, however, that it's a one-shot deal. I can't guarantee that you'll do any better than Joe did." His voice steely, John smirked. "In fact, I'm pretty sure you won't fair as well."

The stare down didn't last as long as John had hoped. The man swallowed several times and blinked first. His voice wasn't nearly as threatening as before. "Well, I'm just warning you, that's all. Stay away from my brother."

"I've no intention of going near your brother. That said, you come after me again, I'll put you and anyone you bring with you in the ground. Clear?"

The man studied him for a few extra seconds and shook his head in disbelief. "Blimey, Joe said you were mental. I never believed it."

There was nothing crazy about protecting oneself and others. But John wasn't about to debate the point with some overgrown bully. "Are we done here?"

"Yeah, we're done for now."

"Might be a good time to take off before I change my mind and beat the shit out of you for being a fucking tosser."

"Yeah, all right, all right." The man took a couple of extra seconds before he turned and walked away, the swagger all gone as he headed back into the darkness.

John didn't move right away, his body still hyped on the surge of adrenaline he'd gotten from the confrontation. He wasn't quite sure if it was over with the Miller brothers, but he found he really didn't care.

When he finally turned to go home, he realized his leg didn't hurt anymore. Fucking leg was as much a danger junkie as he was.

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"Something's happened." Sherlock looked up from typing on his laptop as John entered the flat.

John didn't answer right away, but instead hung up his jacket and then settled onto the sofa. The side of his chest hitched, but the pain was manageable, not quite as bad as before. Sherlock got up
from the desk and sat beside him. "What happened? Something dangerous it would appear."

"What makes you think something dangerous happened?"

"You're not limping."

John snorted in amusement. "So my leg is your gauge of my mental health now, is it?"

"It does seem to reflect it more times than not." Sherlock reached over and touched the offending right leg. "It seems to have a mind of its own at times."

John laughed, but more out of frustration than humor. "It's a pain in more ways than one."

Sherlock asked again. "John, what happened? You know if you don't tell me, I'll deduce it."

John ran his hand through Sherlock's curls and smiled. He spoke with affection. "Arrogant prick."

"John..."

"All right, all right. When I left, I really didn't know what to think."

"Granted. I could see you were disturbed by Lestrade's news."

"Putting it mildly. I walked a while, went to a pub, saw Mike Stamford, and then met Joe Miller's brother. Ugly sod, I must say."

Sherlock straightened, his eyes narrowing as he studied John more carefully. "You're uninjured, so I assume there was no actual physical engagement involved."

John loved how Sherlock talked, loved how he made fighting sound so much classier than it was. "No, not that I would've walked away from one if he'd been up for it. Seems the guy didn't have the bollocks for a good fight."

Sherlock's brow furrowed. "Explain."

"He threatened to kick my arse and I told him he could try."

"And he just walked away from the challenge, just like that?"

"He did."

"You're not telling me everything. Normally, a man like that wouldn't walk away from such combat."

John sighed heavily and shrugged, not sure how to explain it. "You don't see it, but I've been told I can be rather intimidating when I choose to be."

"You're wrong."

"What? You don't think I can be intimidating?"

"No, I know you can be. You're wrong about me not seeing it. When you need to be, you can be extremely commanding."

John grinned. Sherlock didn't give many compliments, so he took them where he could. "You think so?"
"I know so." Sherlock traced a finger down the edge of John's jaw. "I find that side of your personality quite attractive, but then I find all sides of you appealing."

John cupped the side of Sherlock's face as he leaned in closer. He whispered, his voice huskier. "You do, eh?"

"I do."

"Good. That's bloody brilliant." Their lips met and tongues wrestled. John pulled back only to catch his breath. "I really do love you."

"I know." Sherlock met his gaze and smiled. He teased, "I deduced that ages ago."

"What gave me away?"

"Do you want a detailed list?"

"Might as well."

"It started when you shot the cabbie."

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Chapter Six

The first time John was captured, they starved him for five days and gave him only enough water to keep alive. When he passed out from dehydration, they poured buckets of slop over his head to bring him around. Then they kicked him over and over again as they asked ridiculous questions he had no intention of answering.

Information is currency in a war, and he kept all his savings at the back of his mind. No matter what they asked or how they demanded, he never told them what they wanted to know. Four ragged scars ran along the inside of his left upper arm and two smaller round ones marred his lower back. X-rays would show a roadmap of mended bones. They were all mementos from interrogations that provided nothing for the enemy, but gave John the knowledge that if seriously pressed, he would not break.

The second time he was captured on patrol, he nearly broke, not because of his own pain, but because he wasn't captured alone. After they tortured John, they tortured Corporal Danny Bailey. In the end, they threw the whimpering, battered man back into the cell so John could watch him die.

John, his hands cuffed behind his back and chained to a wall, weak from the heat and from listening to Danny scream for hours, could do nothing except talk. He spoke quietly throughout the night, whispering encouragement, telling Danny all about what they'd do when they were rescued, all about the ballgames, food, movies, anything nice he could think of to keep Danny from being alone in the freezing dark. By morning, he had no voice and Danny was dead, too far gone from any comforting words John might have left to say.

When John was rescued that same day, he had a dislocated shoulder and two broken wrists, but the enemy didn't break him. He'd not told any state secrets. He also didn't speak for two weeks while recovering in hospital. In his sleep he still heard the final cries of his brother in arms, the final words of thanks for not leaving him alone. It was enough.

The third and last time he was captured, he was on his own and it was on purpose. He killed all but
one of the four enemy soldiers who had dragged him into the hut for questioning. He'd let the one man go as a warning to others in the village and because he was really just a boy, fourteen at most. Others might have called it sentiment; he called it practical mercy. Back at base, he reported that the local cell had been neutralized and they gave him another medal.

It was shortly after that when it all went seriously wrong, when a high caliber bullet brought him down and finally did what the enemy couldn't do before. It broke him and forced his discharge from service. Some nights, when he was honest with himself, John secretly wished that the enemy soldier had made a clean kill shot to finish him off. Of course, he never told his therapist that or wrote it in his blog. Sherlock could never know about the darker hours when he'd lie awake, fighting with all his might against the bloody images parading through his brain even when he wasn't sleeping.

Bad enough his dreams were littered with bombs and corpses, but being awake was sometimes worse. The crushing impotence to change anything of importance robbed him of his good sense of self preservation.

The war was supposed to be over for him, or at least it should have been, but it wasn't, not really. He had a new thing in his life, being with Sherlock, but sometimes he had trouble believing it was real. What could Sherlock possibly see in him, a wreck of a soldier, a man who couldn't even control his own fucking leg? He envied Sherlock's emotional control, his ability for cool detachment while investigating a violent crime, he really did. He wished more than anything that he could believe that his life had finally turned around, that there would be a way to finally leave the bloody desert behind. Sherlock deserved better than a man still buried up to his neck in sand.

What he really needed was sleep, real sleep. From long experience he knew any chance for that was slim to none for the night. John looked at the digital clock glowing a pale blue 4 am in the dark. He had to be up in a few hours anyway.

Turning on the bedside light, he sat on the edge of the bed.

"You're awake."

Sherlock's voice startled him, but he quickly recovered. "You, too."

"Yes, but it's not unusual for me."

John looked at Sherlock and grinned, trying not to laugh out loud at what he saw. "You're wearing my pajama bottoms."

"And you still haven't done the laundry." Sherlock looked down at himself, the pants at least a foot too short on his long legs. "They're actually quite comfortable even if they are a bit breezy."

"They look ridiculous."

"I said they would."

"You were right."

"I usually am." Sherlock paused before he asked, "Why can't you sleep?"

"I guess the long nap after work was enough."

"Hardly."
"Leave it." He stood up and walked over to Sherlock, gave him a brief kiss, and then walked downstairs. He had no intention of discussing his chronic insomnia with a man who barely slept at all. "Guess I'm up, so I'll make us something to drink."

Sherlock followed him down to the kitchen, his bare feet padding close behind. John put the kettle on and then turned to find his partner in his space. Sherlock asked again more forcefully, "What's wrong? Tell me."

"It's nothing."

"You're pale, you've got double bags under your eyes, and those tight little lines around your mouth that you get when you're stressed or too tired."

"That sounds attractive." John refused to look up. Instead, he reached around Sherlock to get the cups. He had to use the small space on the counter to make the tea since the damn Petri dishes with pollen-covered fingers were still scattered all over the table. "When are you going to clear out this mess?"

"I haven't finished the experiment yet."

John wrinkled his nose in disgust. "It stinks."

"Decomposition does that. I would think as a doctor and a soldier you'd be accustomed to the odor of rotting flesh by now."

"Whether I'm used to it or not doesn't change the fact that it reeks and it's in our kitchen."

"Where else should I put it? It's not like I have a proper facility to work."

"I really don't care, just somewhere other than our fucking kitchen!"

John turned away, angry, but not sure why. It wasn't like oozing body parts in the flat were anything new.

Sherlock's calm voice questioned, "Are we fighting?"

"Seems like it."

"But it's not really about human remains in the kitchen, is it?"

John closed his eyes, suddenly deflated, and braced himself against the counter with outstretched arms. "I'm sorry. I'm just tired."

"Which is why you should be sleeping." Sherlock paused, the way he did when he figured out problems. "Ah, I suspected as much."

John turned, his arms crossed, feeling defensive. "Ah? What the hell does that mean?"

"It's not nightmares because you haven't slept, but the insomnia is no doubt triggered by the incident with the Miller brother."

"No."

"No?"

"Well, that might be part of it, but just a small part."
"The war then."

"Yeah."

The taller man studied him a long moment. "Do you miss it?" John snorted and Sherlock frowned in confusion. "What?"

"The first time I met him, your brother told me I didn't have PTSD, that I missed the war."

"Well, do you?"

John didn't answer. Instead he turned and finished fixing the tea. Sherlock was being incredibly patient, quietly waiting for an explanation. He didn't usually show that much restraint. Finally, John took his cup and headed for the living room and Sherlock followed, holding his own drink. When John settled on the sofa, Sherlock sat beside him and waited.

After a few more minutes, John finished drinking, put the cup down, and spoke quietly. "I don't miss the war. I miss being useful."

"You are useful. I couldn't do the work without you."

"I appreciate that, I do, but I miss being a surgeon and being able to keep seriously injured people alive. I know I couldn't save them all. Lord knows I know that, but I do miss being able to practice medicine like before. I was a good surgeon."

"I'm sure you were."

John lifted his left hand out in front of them both, holding it steady. "I want to do it again, but I know I can't. The tremor comes and goes just like the pain in the leg. I can't trust either one or myself for that matter. I guess what I miss the most is myself, or the myself I used to be, before the war."

"War changes a man."

John dropped his hand to his lap and then turned his head. He spoke more harshly than he meant to. "Platitudes, Sherlock? That doesn't sound like you."

"What would you have me say? I can't even imagine what you went through, and believe me I have a stunning imagination."

"That you do."

"Maybe if you told me about it, it might help. It's never done a thing for me, that whole sharing business, but I read somewhere that it sometimes works for others."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because there are things about me I don't want anyone to know, not even you. Besides, some of it's classified. If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

John expected hurt, but instead got understanding in those pale blue eyes. "We all have our secrets, things that we bury away."

"Yes."
"In the war, you were more than a doctor."

"You knew that."

"I did, yes. I would think it quite conflicting to be a doctor, pledging to do no harm, and then to have to kill men in the line of duty."

"You'd think that, yeah."

"And yet you found it easier than you thought it should have been." Sherlock made it a statement rather than a question.

"In the end, yeah, I did." John eyes stung and he fought down the choking sensation. He was not going to cry, he was not going to shed tears over what had happened, all the awful things he'd done in the name of Queen and Country, all the terrible things done to him. "I had bad days, days when it was sometimes hard to tell the difference between me and them."

"Was there really any difference?"

"God, I hope so. Otherwise, I am well and truly fucked." John leaned his head against Sherlock and closed his eyes. "I'm so tired."

"I know. Sleep."

"I can't. I've got to get up in a couple of hours and go to work."

Sherlock shifted and wrapped his arm around John, pulling him closer. "You'll do nobody any good if you walk in like some kind of reanimated corpse."

"You mean like a zombie?"

"I believe that's what I said."

John chuckled, his nose pushed into the blue silk of Sherlock's dressing gown. The musky smell of his partner mixed with the faint hint of tea and sugar. Comfortable for the first time all night, he snuggled closer. "You make a great pillow."

"It's one of my greatest achievements. I'm glad you approve."

"I do." Eyes squeezed shut, he let himself drift and didn't even tell Sherlock to wake him. He ignored the nagging throb in his chest and let himself drift, safe in Sherlock's strong arms.

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John knocked on Sarah's office door and heard her quick reply. "Come in."

John stepped inside and asked, "You got a minute?"

"Sure." She put her pen down and frowned in concern. "You look shattered. Another late night out with Sherlock?"

"No, and a good morning to you, too."

She stood up and came around her desk. "I'm serious, John." She put the back of her hand to his forehead and he didn't pull away. "You've got a slight fever."
"I know. I've got an infection. Probably just need some oral antibiotics."

"What kind of infection?"

"I was shot, remember? Part of the wound is seeping."

She motioned with her head for him to follow. "Let's go to an exam room."

"Is that really necessary?"

"If you want me to write a script, yeah."

John muttered a curse under his breath. He knew she'd insist on seeing the wound, but that didn't mean he had to like it. In the examining room, she ordered, "Take off your shirt."

"You've been wanting to say that for a long while, yeah?"

Sarah smiled and shook her head in amusement. "You're an incorrigible flirt."

"Might be." He joked as he loosened his tie and then unbuttoned his plaid shirt to remove it.

Sarah remained quiet while she checked his temperature with a digital ear thermometer. When it beeped, she said, "38.3, slightly elevated."

"Thought as much."

As directed, John sat on the table while she listened to his lungs, checked his pulse, and then took his blood pressure. "Lungs clear, heart rate sixty, pressure 100/65, well done. Other than the fever, those are excellent readings. Now, let's look at this wound."

She put on latex gloves first and, even though she did it carefully, John yelped as she pulled away the bandage. "Oi! Chest hairs!"

She ignored his complaint. "You're right about the infection." She used her gloved fingers to probe around the puffy edge of the stitches, especially the tender area around his right nipple. "You're using topical antibiotics?"

"Doesn't seem to be working."

"No, it's not. Are you allergic to penicillin?"

"No. I'm from hardy stock, no drug allergies. Just don't send me flowers."

"Pollen allergy?"

"Yeah."

"Common enough. Best I give you a script for an antibiotic and you can fill it when you go home after I drain this mess."

John shook his head, not wanting to lose another day's pay. "Can't. I've got morning appointments."

"I'll call Stevens in. Do him good to get off his lazy bum and he could use the extra hours. You need to go home, take the medicine, and rest." She paused before she commented, "I got a call from Carl Reynolds. He said you contacted him this morning about a job."
Surprised, John said, "Yeah, I did. That was quick. Did he call for a reference?"

Sarah talked while she worked, efficiently draining away the thick, yellow discharge. "Yes. Carl and I know one another."

The way she said it made it clear that she meant the knowing to mean more than just being medical colleagues. "So, you dated. Was it serious?"

Sarah snorted. "Sherlock's rubbing off on you. You would've never picked up on that before."

"Maybe. Is he a good guy, this Reynolds bloke?"

"He's a good doctor." She patted the skin dry around his stitches and then applied more antiseptic.

John bit his lower lip, trying his best to ignore the sting and discomfort. The damn thing hurt more at the moment than it did when he first got shot. He spoke through clenched teeth. "I hope you put in a good word for me."

"I did." She finished cleaning the area and dressed the wound before she said anything else. "You do realize that's probably going to leave a scar, right?"

"Won't be the first."

"I see that. Anyway, Carl's going to call and tell you to come in for an interview, probably later this afternoon. He's got an immediate opening."

"That's great news." And it was. He remembered the thrill of being in the thick of things, treating trauma patients, dealing with one medical crisis after another with hardly any time to think. He really missed the rush of that kind of medicine. If he couldn't do surgery, it was the next best thing.

Sarah interrupted his musing. "I'm probably overstepping, but I don't think it'll be a good fit."

John frowned, wondering what she was on about. "Why not? I started out in A & E. I know the ropes."

"Oh, I'm sure you could do the work, no question, but only if that were your only job. It isn't. Let's face it, John, you don't work a regular schedule here. You come in, but you're just as likely to tear off as soon as Sherlock calls about a case than to stay a full shift. We're just a small surgery so there are people to cover when you leave. Working an A & E might be more exciting, but you won't have the flexibility you have here."

"You think it'll be an issue then, me working with Sherlock while trying to do that, too?"

"I do. Carl's a real stickler about attendance and rules."

"Bugger." That didn't sound good at all, not considering John rarely went a week without missing a shift. "One of those, eh?"

"Well, on the plus side, he's well organized. He'd have to be to run that kind of program." She finished his dressing, stripped off her gloves, and then spoke as she washed and dried her hands. "I'm really not trying to discourage you. I just want you to be prepared. He's a knob if he thinks you're putting the job second to something else."

"I appreciate the warning and the reference, thanks."

She nodded, her job nearly done. "I'll write that script. If the fever gets worse, take some
paracetamol to bring it down. If the infection doesn't get better in a day or two, I might need to give you a stab of something stronger or change the antibiotics."

John smiled and tilted his head as he said, "I am a doctor. I know what to do."

"In my experience, doctors make the worst patients." She patted his cheek and said, "Now, go home and get some rest, doctor's orders."

When she left the room, John sat on the exam table a while longer, disappointed. He'd had hopes for an A & E job, but Sarah had a good point about the possible conflict. Given a choice between working with Sherlock or sticking with medicine, there really was no hard decision to make. Sherlock would win every time, not that he'd tell the arrogant bastard that. His head was too damn big as it was. Besides, he had no doubt that Sherlock already knew John favored him over all else anyway.

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Sherlock hit send and then stood up. He went to stand by the open window, raising his arms high above his head to stretch his lower back muscles. Sleeping on the sofa with John, while comforting, also reminded him that his body wasn't quite as young as it used to be.

He didn't like to think about aging so his thoughts quickly returned to the last email. If Lestrade wouldn't give him cases, he'd find his own. Unfortunately, private cases tended to be far too simple, dull really. The first only took five minutes to solve and the second one of the morning took even less time. How could people be so stupid and survive?

"Good morning, Dear Brother. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"You always disturb me." Sherlock didn't bother to turn around. "It's a bit early to be out. You usually don't rise before sunset."

"You're not nearly as amusing as you think." Then Mycroft cleared his throat, strangling a chuckle. "Good god, Sherlock, do my eyes deceive me? Are you really wearing your flat mate's pajama bottoms?"

Sherlock kept his features calm, not wanting to give Mycroft the satisfaction of seeing his embarrassed reaction. It was one thing to be teased by John, but totally different when it was his obnoxious brother. "John hasn't done the laundry yet."

"The good doctor does your laundry? How very domestic."

His brother said it in that dry, smug way he had. Sherlock refused to rise to the bait. He snapped, "What do you want?"

"I thought you'd like to know that Uncle Charles's estate is settled and his castle sold."

"Good." Sherlock hadn't thought about that whole business for weeks. If he had his way, he'd delete it completely. Unfortunately, while he might be able to erase general information like astronomy, personal information was a bit more persistent, annoyingly so. "Are there papers to sign?"

"No, I just thought I'd let you know that the selling price was four million pounds."

Immediately suspicious, Sherlock said, "But that's more than you originally asked."
"Yes, but apparently bidding wars have their use. The final buyer was highly motivated and really wanted the property."

Sherlock studied his brother for a moment and realized the truth. He wasn't sure whether to be admiring or disgusted by his brother's ingenuity and greed. "You were the other bidder."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the odds of two bidders wanting that same property in this market are extremely low and you have a tell."

"A tell? I do not."

"Oh, you do. It's a little tick to the side when you've had a small success."

"Four million pounds is a bit more than a small success."

"So, I'm right!"

Mycroft sighed, realizing the trick a touch too late. "I have no tell."

"Not really, no, but I do know you and if there were a way to get a higher price, you'd find it even if you had to resort to cheating. You're a greedy prat, Mycroft, you always have been."

"Just because I don't want to live in squalor with a nearly penniless ex-soldier doesn't make me greedy, Little Brother."

"John is a richer man than you'll ever be."

Mycroft pursed his lips and studied him briefly. "Please tell me that this obsession of yours hasn't progressed any further than letting him tag along on your outings."

Sherlock crossed his arms and held his chin high. Nobody ever put him on the defensive like Mycroft. "And what if it has? What if I've asked him to be my partner?"

"Partner?"

"Domestic partner, as in my husband."

Mycroft's shocked expression was definitely worth telling him about John sooner than he planned. "Good God, you can't be serious."

"I'm deadly serious."

Mycroft pinched the bridge of his nose, acting totally put out, as if what Sherlock did with John had anything to do with him. "And I'm sure he no doubt jumped at your proposal."

"Actually, he's thinking about it."

Mycroft paused, his voice no longer quite as abrasive. "Now, that is surprising." After another second, he added, "Though I don't doubt for a minute what his final answer will be. We both know he's been smitten from the start. It's really rather pathetic, all that simpering loyalty."

"You know nothing about real loyalty. You have to buy yours, rather like you have to pay for your dates."
Mycroft ignored the jibe. "I fear you're making a horrible miscalculation with Watson."

"Why can't you be happy for me like a normal person?"

His harsh laugh echoed in the room. "Normal? Neither of us are normal, never have been, and for that I'm very grateful."

"Sometimes I hate you."

Instead of addressing that comment, Mycroft changed the subject. "You do realize that you're setting yourself up for heartbreak. We're not like other people, Sherlock. Have you learned nothing of what I've tried to teach you? Feelings are not an advantage."

"You're wrong."

"Not about this. This man, this doctor of yours, he's damaged."

"He's no more damaged than I am, or you for that matter."

"Surely if you want to form a romantic attachment, you could find someone more appropriate."

"More appropriate? Like someone from the peerage, someone with money? Someone who could further your agenda, perhaps? Is that what you mean by more appropriate, you fat bastard?"

"Calm yourself. There's no reason to be overwrought. I'm just trying to look out for your best interests. I wouldn't want someone like your doctor to take advantage."

"Take advantage?"

"The term gold-digger comes to mind. You have to admit, it would be quite the windfall for him, a man with next to nothing to his name attaching himself to someone of your wealth and status."

Sherlock fought back blind rage, the building roar that threatened to block out any ability to think clearly. He knew what Mycroft was trying to do, what he always did, replace reason for anything that truly mattered. "John Watson has more courage, more honor, than you'll ever know. You have no concept of what he means to me. You can never understand."

Mycroft remained silent for a few extra moments and then nodded, conceding the point in his own way. "Perhaps you're right. He does seem rather remarkable considering his less than fortunate upbringing."

The words were nearly more than he could stand. "You should leave."

Mycroft didn't move, but instead asked, "Are you really serious about giving away your half of the proceeds from the sale of the castle?"

"I am."

"Then I need the name of the charity or charities you want named. I can take care of that this afternoon."

Sherlock didn't hesitate. "There are two, Help for Heroes and the Army Benevolent Fund. You can split the money between them."

"Ah, I see your doctor's influence on your choices."
"John doesn't know. You don't need to tell him. Make the donations anonymously."

"For tax purposes..."

"I don't care how you do it, just take care of it!"

Mycroft nodded and then stepped to the door, turning at the last moment. "You really have changed, Little Brother. I hardly know you."

"Good."

"Is it? I fear you'll find romantic love is nothing like you might expect. Please be careful."

Mycroft sounded sincere, but then he was good at that, an expert at shamming true emotion without feeling a thing. "I don't need to be careful. I have John."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps he has you."

"Oh, there's no perhaps about it, Mycroft. I'm his for as long as he'll have me."

Mycroft shook his head in disappointment. "I thought I'd taught you better than this."

"You tried, but John's a much better teacher. He knows what truly matters."

"I hope so, Sherlock. For your sake, I truly hope so."

"Why are you home so soon?"

John countered, "Why aren't you dressed?"

"Laundry...still not done."

"Oh, for god sakes, you're a grown man."

Quietly Sherlock said, "I want you to teach me."

"Teach you? What, how to do the laundry?"

"Yes."

"Seriously? It's pretty boring stuff."

"Before you, I sent it out."

John settled on the sofa next to Sherlock who had obviously spent most of the morning sulking. "So, you're telling me that I not only provided half the rent when I moved in, but all the housework?"

"John..."

"I'm just kidding. What's brought this on, this sudden desire to learn about domestic chores?"

Instead of answering, Sherlock reached out and gently touched John's cheek, cupping his face with his long fingers. "You're ill."
"Just a slight fever, nothing serious." John reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a bottle. "Sarah gave me antibiotics and sent me home. Guess I have time to teach you how to sort and fold, eh?"

"Absolutely not. You're going to bed to rest."

"Nice thought, but as much as those short bottoms amuse me, I much prefer you wearing your own. Besides, I've run out, too."

Sherlock smiled, his voice suddenly husky. "Sleeping in the nude seems our only recourse."

"Horny sod."

Sherlock asked, his voice more serious. "You're really not seriously ill?"

"I'm fine." He patted Sherlock's leg and then stood up. "Let's get the laundry started. I can rest between cycles."

"Cycles?"

"God, what did they teach you growing up?" John held up a finger as if suddenly remembering something important. "Oh, yeah, that's right, you had servants for such lowly manual labor."

"That's not my fault."

Sherlock's surly, snappish tone surprised him. "I was just joking."

"Mycroft was here."

"Well, that explains it. He always gets your back up." John sat back down before he asked, "What did he want this time?"

"The chateau sold."

"So, you no longer own a castle."

"Apparently not."

After an extended period of silence, John asked, "You want to talk about it?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"I don't know. It seems to be on your mind."

Sherlock stood up and paced, his voice suddenly angry. "I don't understand why I can't just delete it, be done with it. It's incredibly irritating."

"Bad things happen. They stick with us whether we want them to or not. We're not computers, Sherlock. We can't just delete whatever it is that's bothering us. It doesn't work that way."

"Why not? It would be more efficient. You'd certainly sleep better at night if we could."

John stiffened. "We're not talking about me here."

Sherlock came over and nudged John over so he could sit on the other side of him. He put his right arm across his shoulders and dragged him closer. "I don't care about the chateau, I really don't.
That was years ago. I'm not fine with what happened, but I've dealt with it, I really have."

John wasn't sure who Sherlock was trying to convince, but he wasn't going to push the point. "All
good. I'm glad."

"But you haven't."

"Haven't what?"

"Dealt with whatever's bothering you."

John looked away, his eyes closed. He took a long, deep breath. "It's too early in the morning for
this conversation."

Sherlock kissed the top of his head. "Then you should go to sleep. You can teach me the mechanics
of the washing machine later."

"It's not rocket science. You could actually figure it out yourself if you bothered."

"But it would be so much more fun to do it together, don't you think?"

John chuckled, "Oh, yeah, sorting underwear and socks, that's the domestic bliss I've dreamed of."

"I think I must be losing my mind."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"Because the idea of you sorting my underpants suddenly seems incredibly erotic."

John laughed and met Sherlock's hungry mouth with his own, figuring the laundry could surely
wait another hour or two.

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Fever and desire never mixed well. At least that was John's excuse for what happened next, how he
completely lost his resolve to hold off having sex with Sherlock until he was more sure of their
relationship.

They both stumbled up the stairs, desperately shedding their clothes, Sherlock more aggressive
with his touches and kisses than he'd ever been before.

Both stripped bare, Sherlock had John on his back, John's legs bent, raised, and spread wide,
totally exposed and completely vulnerable.

"Sherlock, wait."

But Sherlock didn't wait, took his cock in his mouth and John swallowed all protests, words fleeing
like refugees from a firestorm. Sensation flooded over him, John's body screaming for release far
too soon. Sherlock sucked and licked John's cock and balls like he was starving. John's hands
tangled in a mess of black curls, Sherlock's head bobbing. Strong hands held down his hips, but
then one hand slipped between John's legs and a long, spit-slick finger teased his hole, just barely
touching before suddenly pushing in.

John grunted in release a few seconds later, a starburst flashing bright colors like exploding bombs
behind his lids, his cock twitching, releasing a deluge of nothing but pure pleasure all though his
belly. He arched and shuddered as Sherlock continued to suck the tip of his cock while fucking his
ass with his finger. Every muscle tensed to the edge of breaking, not able to handle even one more
rush of heat. He remembered only one word, one glorious name as John panted and moaned,
"Sherlock!"

His partner gave a few final licks and then climbed his body, pushing John's legs flat on the bed. He lay across John, chest to chest, belly to belly, crotch to crotch. Sherlock rubbed his own erection against John's spent cock, releasing with only a few desperate thrusts, the eyes squeezed shut, his face contorted with coming. A few seconds later he slumped, his weight solid, pure muscle, and pushed John hard into the mattress.

Despite the pressure and discomfort to his chest, John wrapped his arms around Sherlock's sweaty body, kissing the side of his jaw. He held him close, afraid he'd be up and away as soon as he came to his senses. The great Sherlock Holmes trembled in his arms, his face wet with tears. John whispered, "Are you all right?"

"Good god, you're going to kill me."

"But what a wonderful way to go, yeah?"

Sherlock whiskered his face against John's shoulder, his voice incredibly sexy, all out of breath and still panting. "I can think of nothing more enticing than to die in your arms."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Sherlock chuckled. It was the most glorious sound John had ever heard. "Thank you."

"I think I should be the one saying that. That was fantastic."

"I told you I was good."

"You didn't lie."

Then John said quietly, "I thought we were going to wait."

Sherlock lifted his head, his eyes studying John carefully. "Do you regret what we just did?"

"No, god no. It's just not how I thought it would happen."

Rolling off John, Sherlock jerkily reached down and picked up the pajama bottoms from the floor and proceeded to wipe himself off before doing the same for John. His face was suddenly sullen and he was quiet, too quiet. John frowned at the unexpected change. "I'm not saying I didn't like it, I'm not."

"But you would have preferred that we waited for hearts and flowers, perhaps some romantic poetry or music in the background?"

"Don't be a prat. That's not what I meant and you know it."

"I really don't."

John sat up, sitting naked next to Sherlock, their backs resting against the headboard and pillows. One thing the army taught a man was to not worry about modesty. Plus, considering what they'd just done, it'd be stupid to cover up at that point. "I just meant that I wanted to take it slowly and maybe return the favor. Look, I've never done it with a bloke before. That thing you did..."

"Fellatio."

"No, not that, the finger thing, it was...unexpected."
Sherlock looked puzzled. "But you liked it. I could tell."

"I did, yes. I just wish you'd asked first."

Sherlock stared at him briefly and then snorted, a big grin on his smug face. "My mouth was full at the time."

John choked back his own giggle. "Yeah, it sort of was." John traced a finger along Sherlock's lower lip. "God, what a gorgeous and talented mouth you have."

"I can show you more of my genius if you like."

John shifted, put his hand to the back of Sherlock's neck and drew his face closer, his fingers tangled in dark curls. He kissed him, his tongue sneaking in between parted lips. He could taste himself there and he loved it, loved thinking about how willingly Sherlock wanted to please him. He pulled back and nodded, "Brilliant."

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John was right about the laundry. It was incredibly simple and downright tiresome. How in the world could someone do such an activity on a regular basis and not go insane with boredom? Sherlock much preferred their previous arrangement. He wore the clothes and they just reappeared clean and folded without any effort on his part. It was the perfect system.

Intellectually, he knew that was unfair to John, but his partner seemed far more suited to such mundane tasks. He rarely even complained about it, just did it like it was the most natural thing in the world. Sherlock didn't understand John's attitude at all.

"Sherlock, dear, is that you?"

He turned to see Mrs. Hudson in the laundry room doorway, staring at him in surprise. "Unfortunately, it is."

"Well, this is a bit of a shock. I don't believe I've ever seen you down here before."

"You haven't and, if I have my way, you won't ever see me here again."

She smiled in apparent understanding and patted his arm gently. "A bit of a domestic, dear? John go on strike and make you do your own laundry for a change? Well, jolly good for him I say. Do you good to share the workload a bit more." Before he could argue, she continued. "You know, people just like to be appreciated for their efforts, Sherlock."

Mrs. Hudson sometimes meddled, but she often had quite a bit of wisdom when people bothered to listen. "I do appreciate John."

"Actions speak louder than words, dear. You can't expect him to do all the housework, do his doctoring, and then run around all night with you. It's a bit much for anybody, even a fit young man like your John."

Sherlock refused to acknowledge the whine in his own voice. "But John likes doing laundry and taking care of the flat." He didn't say John liked taking care of him, but he figured Mrs. Hudson knew how to read between the lines. "He wouldn't do it if he didn't want to. It's not like I force him to do anything against his will."

"Oh, we all do a lot of things for the people we care about, dear. Sometimes we do things we never
thought we'd ever do."

Sherlock chuckled and held up one of the bloodstained shirts. He'd been spot cleaning the thing the way John had shown him earlier. "Like laundry?"

"Exactly."

As she turned to go, Sherlock asked, "Was there something you wanted?"

"John and I have our little chats and tea when he comes down, but since he's not here..."

"I wouldn't mind some tea, Mrs. Hudson."

"Oh, that would be lovely, Sherlock. I'll put the kettle on. Mind you don't let that last load sit in the dryer too long or your things will get all wrinkled."

"Yes, ma'am." As she left, Sherlock grinned. Well, that explained why John didn't hate the laundry as much as he should have. Free tea with Mrs. Hudson went a long way to make the whole ridiculous cleaning business bearable.

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John woke with a strangled cry. He sat up quickly and gulped for air, drenched in sweat, his heart racing. After a few moments he finally realized he was stretched out in bed, not the scorching desert. He swung his legs over the side of the mattress and dropped his face to his hands. After a few moments he focused and recognized the sound that woke him, the beeping of his cell phone.

He quickly found his trousers, retrieved the phone from the pocket, and answered. "Yes?"

"Dr. Watson?"

"Yes."

"Dr. Carl Reynolds here."

It took a few seconds for the name to register. When it did, John said, "Yes, I remember."

"I've talked to a few people about you."

"Have you?"

"Yes, and I liked what they had to say. I'd like you to come for an interview. Three this afternoon would be convenient."

"Fine, that's fine, yes."

"Good. I'll see you then. Good day."

The man hung up before John got a chance to say another word. He put his phone down and fell back across the bed, his arms outstretched. He was still groggy from the pain pill he'd taken and he could tell the antibiotic was messing with his stomach, making him slightly nauseated. He probably should've eaten before he took it. Closing his eyes, he wondered whether to even bother with the interview. As much as he'd love to have an A & E job, there was no way he'd let it interfere with his work with Sherlock.

A pile of clothes landed dangerously close to his head. "You, John Watson, have been keeping
"Have I?"

"Yes. You've been having clandestine liaisons with our landlady."

John smiled at the thought of one of Mrs. Hudson's lovely teas. "Did she have those buttery pecan scones?"

"She did. Of course, I didn't eat any, far too sweet."

"That's disappointing."

"You'll be pleased to know that I brought you my share. They're wrapped and on the kitchen table. You can have them later with your tea."

John groaned in disappointment. His scones would taste of rot before he could eat them. "Oh god, please, not with the fingers!"

Sherlock totally dismissed his concern with a quick wave of his hand. "Oh, don't worry. Those have been cleared out."

Opening his eyes, John studied Sherlock for an extra moment to gauge the truth. Sometimes Sherlock fibbed when it was expedient, but this time he seemed truthful. "Cleared out? Really? Since when?"

Sherlock shrugged. "I gathered all the data I needed."

"Sick of the stink, too, yeah?"

"Entirely." Sherlock busied himself putting away John's clothes, making sure everything was placed precisely in the proper drawer or hung up neatly in the closet. "By the way, did you know that Mrs. Turner's tenants are going away on holiday next week?"

"Really? Where?"

Sherlock sat down next to him on the bed and smirked. "John, do you seriously sit downstairs and gossip every week about the neighbors?"

"Not every week. Besides, you never know when the information might come in handy."

"So, the fact that Kevin and Barry are going off to Paris for a romantic weekend will help us solve a case how?"

Instead of answering, John sat up and leaned against Sherlock's side, keeping his eyes closed and drinking in the heat of his lover's long, lean body. "It's about time those two got away for a bit. Mrs. Turner was worried that they were going to split up a few months ago. She actually lost sleep over it."

"Who knew soldiers could be so horribly romantic?"

"Who knew consulting detectives could fold so neatly? Have you indexed my sock drawer yet?"

"Oh, please, like you have enough socks to index."

"True." After a few seconds, he added dreamily, "Two miracles in the same day."
"Two miracles?"

John teased. "Sex and laundry. Who are you and what have you done with the real Sherlock Holmes?"

"Is it so bizarre that I'd want to please the person I care about?"

John frowned at the unexpectedly serious tone. He opened his eyes and stared over at Sherlock. "It's not bizarre. I didn't mean it that way. It's just surprising, that's all. You don't usually give a toss about pleasing other people."

"You're not just other people, John. Believe me, I would not fold under garments for just anybody."

"Oh, now I do feel special."

"You should."

"And the sex part?"

Sherlock cocked his head to one side and studied him before he answered, "You're the only one I've ever wanted. It makes no logical sense whatsoever, but it's true."

"Love isn't logical."

"So it would seem."

John reached around Sherlock's waist and hugged him. "Thank you."

Sherlock returned the embrace briefly before he asked, "So, who was that on the phone?"

John glanced over and checked the clock. It was already one. He needed to get cleaned up fast so he stood up and stepped to the dresser to get some clothes. Showing up nude probably wouldn't win him any favors toward getting the job. "Dr. Reynolds. He's giving me an interview for a position."

"A position? What kind of position?"

"A & E at Royal London. Sarah put in a good word. They used to date."

"Does that woman try to date every doctor she meets?"

John shook his head, growing very weary of Sherlock's constant sniping about his friend. "Don't be that way."

"What way?"

"Mean about Sarah."

"It makes no difference to me if she sleeps with every physician in England as long as she keeps her predatory advances away from you."

John stepped over to Sherlock, who was still sitting on the edge of the bed. He stood between his legs and took his face between his hands. "Shut up, you jealous berk." John kissed him soundly and pulled back. "I need to clean up for this interview. It's at three."

"You're hot."
Sherlock rarely used slang, but then Sherlock was doing a lot of things he didn't normally do, so he went with it. "Thanks. I think you're hot, too."

"No, I mean, you're hot as in your fever seems worse." John touched his own face. That would explain the blurry way the world looked. Sherlock said, "I'll get the thermometer."

"Don't bother. It'll be fine."

"I'm taking your temperature, so sit back down and stop arguing."

"Bossy man." John did as he was told. He really did suddenly feel a bit off, like the desert heat was creeping in around the edges again.

"Here." Sherlock handed him the glass tube.

"We really need to invest in a digital one of these." John reluctantly stuck the thing under his tongue. Sherlock crossed his arms as he waited impatiently.

After the longest three minutes in history, Sherlock removed it, wiped it off, and asked, "What's normal?"

"How can you recognize any patch in London just by a soil sample and not know what's a normal body temperature?"

Sherlock spoke with annoyed persistence. "John, stop being irritating and just answer the question."

"Thirty-seven degrees Celsius."

"It's 39. How bad is that?"

"It's not dangerous. I'll take some paracetamol to bring it down. After the interview I'll rest, I promise."

Sherlock left the room and returned with two pills and a glass of water. "Take them now. If it's not down in the next hour, you'll reschedule."

"And how would that look if I had to reschedule our first meeting? I doubt he'd be happy about that."

After John took the medicine, he put the glass down on the bedside table and Sherlock sat beside him. He asked, "Why should rescheduling make a difference in his opinion of your qualifications?"

"Sarah said he was a stickler for attendance."

Sherlock's tone became brittle again. "Sarah said?"

"Don't start. She was trying to be helpful. Anyway, I don't want to get off on the wrong foot."

"The man's a doctor. Surely he'll understand if you're ill."

"He'll think I'm unreliable and a slacker."

"Then he's a fool and you don't need to work for a man like that anyway." Sherlock hesitated before he added, "Besides, how will it be if you work there when I need you on a case? They might not let you leave when I need you."
John met Sherlock's worried gaze. "You know I'll always put you and the cases first."

"I would imagine this Reynolds character won't like that much."

The pounding in John's head got louder and more painful. He was just too damn tired to argue. "You know what? Call him and cancel. I don't care. I'll work at the clinic. It's mind-numbingly boring but it's flexible."

"John..."

"No, Sherlock. My head hurts, I ache all over, and I'm going back to sleep now." He stretched out on the bed and pulled a blanket up over himself. He closed his eyes as he rubbed his face into the pillow. "Call Reynolds and let him know. His number is on my phone."

"You really want this job?"

"I'd be lying if I didn't say I was disappointed, but you're right. Your work comes first."

Sherlock quickly corrected, "Our work."

John smiled at that concession. Sherlock would never have said that even a few months earlier. "Yeah, our work."

Sherlock's fingertips teased John's hair as he whispered, "Sleep." A soft kiss touched John's cheek before he drifted off thinking, tender Sherlock, miracle number three.

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When he woke up, it was dark. John frowned and glanced at the clock and did a double take. It was almost midnight and he'd managed to sleep nearly eleven hours with no nightmares. He hadn't felt so rested in weeks.

John sat up, his body stiff, but a lot less painful than before. Touching his face, he realized his fever was also gone, which was great news. The urgency to urinate hit him, so he got up, pulled on fresh pajama bottoms, and headed downstairs to go to the loo. Shortly after that he went looking for his partner.

Sherlock lay on the sofa, wrapped in a white sheet, looking very much like a half-finished mummy. He was stretched out, his fingers steepled in front of his face. Flames from the fireplace lit the room with a soft, flickering glow. John apologized, "Sorry about that."

"About what?"

"Sleeping the day away."

"You obviously needed it."

John settled in his chair across from the sofa. "I guess I did."

"Besides, we've got no case right now, which is massively boring, but rather fortunate. It gives you time to fully recuperate." Sherlock sat up and looked at him. "How do you feel?"

"Better, thanks." John's eyes crinkled, but worked hard to cover his amusement. "Okay, I have to ask, why the sheet?"

"It helps me think."
"Does it?"

"It does."

"And what are you thinking about that requires a sheet?"

"I have a proposal."

"Yes."

Surprised, Sherlock asked, "Yes?"

"Yes. I should've said it earlier. I want to be with you, too, so, yes, I accept your proposal."

His eyes brightened as Sherlock patted the seat beside him. "Come over here, please."

John obliged and settled beside Sherlock. A strong arm stretched over his shoulders and pulled him in closer. "You're sure? No conditions this time?"

"No conditions, well, other than I really would like to be consulted more before body parts show up in the kitchen and bathroom."

"Easily done."

John grinned. "I can't believe we're really doing this, you and me, it's just not something I ever expected."

Sherlock lowered his mouth to John's and kissed him not with passion but softly, rather sweetly. John found he liked it. Then Sherlock whispered, "I never for a moment ever imagined I'd find someone I could trust and care about. I thought love was dead to me."

John pulled away just enough to stare at Sherlock, stunned at full meaning of the words. "You've never loved anyone? Never?"

"I told you before, John, there's never been anyone I could trust or consider worthy of affection. Until recently I thought I was unworthy of love and acted accordingly, making sure everyone would agree with that assessment."

"You're saying you acted like a knob because that's what everyone expected. If they wanted to treat you like shit, you'd give them a bloody good reason, yeah?"

"Crudely put, but insightful." Sherlock swallowed hard before he added, "No one has ever treated me the way you do."

John's heart squeezed like a fist, the air thinner because of his lover's confession. How had Sherlock survived for so long, remained so stubbornly vital in a world without warm emotion and caring? His hate for Mycroft cranked higher and he wanted to pound the man into the sand. He closed his eyes to hide what he was feeling, but Sherlock saw right through his reaction. "You do understand now why I find my brother's company so difficult."

"I do, yeah, but what about your mother or other relatives?"

Sherlock sighed and leaned away, his head resting on the back of the sofa. "Other than a few scattered cousins, aunts, and uncles, there's really only Mummy. She was never deliberately cruel. She did what had always been done in our family, relegate my care to a long string of nannies and then later send me away to school. I rarely saw her except on special occasions and even then our
meetings were more obligatory than emotional."

"That sounds horrible."

"It was the same for Mycroft. He flourished, while I, well, as you can imagine, resented it. I was a bit difficult growing up. I went through nannies and tutors like you went through first dates when we met."

John ignored the jab at his pathetic dating history and focused on what was important. "That had to be hard on you."

"Intellectually I understood why I was treated the way I was. However, I do believe my emotional development was somewhat stunted. I found relationships and empathy difficult. Also, because I was insatiably curious, appropriate boundaries were often crossed in order to appease my thirst for knowledge. Even now, I forget about the victims involved and focus only on the crime itself, not the emotional impact it causes. I fear that's one of my greatest failings."

John reached out and laced their fingers together and squeezed encouragement. Sherlock had never been so forthcoming. His words made John incredibly thankful for his own family. They might have had their problems, but he'd never really doubted their love for him. Even with all his troubles with Harry, he knew she still loved him and he loved her. Sherlock had never had that. "Then we're a good match, you and me. Empathy is sort of my thing."

Sherlock smiled at him and nodded. "Yes. You've taught me to care about things I never thought worth caring for before. I find it fascinating. I find you completely enthralling. It's one of the few things I can't explain."

"I can."

"Can you?"

"You love me."

Sherlock brought their clasped hands to his lips and kissed each of their paired fingers. Then he said, "I've heard that word love a million times and never once truly understood it until now." His smile faded a bit and his expression turned serious.

John asked, "What? What is it?"

"This feeling, it makes it difficult to think clearly. You're in my thoughts and my dreams constantly. I'm always worried about losing you. It's incredibly distracting."

"That's normal. I do the same."

"But how does one function with this relentless flood of feeling? How does one control it?"

John shrugged, not sure how to explain something so alien to the man he loved. "I don't think you can control it. It's just something you get used to. I mean, it's called falling in love for a reason. There's no real safety net, you just have to go with it. It's something that becomes part of you."

"And this is how you feel about me all the time?"

"It is, yeah, for a while now if I'm honest."

"But you never said."
"But you knew."

"I did, yes, but I ignored it. Nobody ever stays with me for long. I've found it best not to get too attached. With you it was different from the start. No matter what I did or what happened, you stayed."

"And I always will. I'm stubborn that way."

"I'll confess, in the beginning, your obdurate nature was one of your most irritating traits."

"Takes one to know one."

Sherlock snorted and conceded that point to John. "Yes, obstinacy has always been one of my consistent character traits."

"Nothing wrong with standing one's ground when you know you're right."

"No, there's not." Sherlock hesitated and then asked, "So, you're okay with our engagement now?"

"I am, yes."

Sherlock kissed him again and then rested his forehead on John's. Quietly, he said, "Thank you."

John had never been more certain of love in his life or more frightened of what he would be willing to do to keep it.

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John finished up the leftover sesame chicken and jam-smothered pecan scones when Sherlock interrupted. "I called Dr. Reynolds."

Licking his fingers clean, John shrugged, not really caring since he wouldn't be taking the job anyway. "Yeah?"

"An atrocious man, blatant in his homophobia, no doubt the result of his own unresolved sexual yearnings for a male colleague. I'm sure it's put a strain on his already troubled marriage, which translates to bullying in the workplace. You're lucky to have escaped dealing with him."

John wasn't even sure where to start. "He dated Sarah. How could he be married?"

Sherlock gave him his famous don't be dull look. "Does it really surprise you that your precious Sarah would date a married man?"

"In her defense, married men cheat all the time without telling the woman they're married. You can't just assume she knew."

Sherlock grudgingly admitted the possibility. "Perhaps."

"And even if she did know, it's none of our business."

"God, you're so blind when it comes to that woman."

John ignored the complaint and asked, "And what about the homophobia bit? How do you reckon that?"

"As you know, it's much easier for me to collect data visually, but my auditory deductive powers
are a close second in their perfection."

"Perfection...yeah, of course."

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. "You're teasing me."

"I'm not...well maybe a little, but that's only because I know it's true. Now, go on. Tell me how you got all that from one short phone call."

Sherlock reddened slightly, pleased with the praise as he continued to explain. "When I identified myself in order to cancel the appointment, his tonal quality shifted substantially. He automatically assumed we were more than flat mates."

"Which most people do and we are."

"But that's not the salient point. The point is that once he made that conclusion, his voice took on a particularly nasty tone of disapproval."

"Well, a lot of people are bigots, no news there. How does that explain your notion that he's repressed?"

"Statistics show that the vast majority of men who discriminate against homosexuals are, in fact, latently homosexual themselves. Since he's in a profession which by its very nature is predominantly male-oriented, he's likely to have been attracted to male colleagues and refused to act on it. This is most likely due to the societal and/or familial pressure against such relationships. As to the bullying, aggression is often the external manifestation of sexual repression or other unresolved internal conflicts. Men of authority are particularly prone to this type of hostile behavior. I'm sure you experienced similar instances in the military, men who overcompensate to sublimate their urges by resorting to hyper masculinity."

"You mean you think all the super butch guys are really trying to hide the fact that they're gay?"

"It's true for a higher percentage than one might think, yes."

John's mouth fell open just a little bit, but then he smiled in admiration. He knew at least four commanding officers who fit that description, men who bullied during the day and fucked subordinates at night. He was engaged to a genius. "That's amazing."

"Is it?" Sherlock's lips quirked up, pleased with himself. "Just basic deduction."

"So, lucky miss for me then?"

"Indeed."

John got up and cleared away the plate and containers for his late night supper. When he sat back down again, he settled next to Sherlock. "I guess I'm stuck doing the surgery for a while yet."

"Not necessarily."

"Sherlock, we've talked about this. I have to pay my own way."

Standing up, Sherlock paced, his energy suddenly cranked up to what it was during a big case. "I know you're unhappy at the surgery."

"No super deduction needed for that conclusion."
"No, but I might have a solution, one that would be satisfactory to us both."

Intrigued, John asked, "What?"

"Remember Seb Wilkes?"

John crossed his arms and frowned. He remembered all too well the bastard from the bank who'd tried to shame Sherlock about his university days in front of John. He'd hated him on the spot.
"We're not working for that big git again. Don't even ask."

"No, we're not, but if I remember correctly, you were the one who took his rather substantial check and put it into my account."

"Well, yeah, since you can't be half bothered to worry about something as silly as money for services."

"Exactly!" Sherlock clapped his hands in excitement like he'd just solved the crime of the century.

"Exactly what?"

"You can handle the money."

John still didn't understand. "What money?"

"Money from the cases."

"But we don't charge for cases."

"But we can. Don't you see? You always said that we should and you're right. I don't know why I didn't think of this before. From now on, you can be the one to collect it. It's perfect!"

Stunned, John asked, "But you don't care about the money."

"No, but you do. If we start charging, you can take the money and pay yourself. You won't have to work at the surgery." Sherlock smacked himself in the forehead with the heel of his hand. "Oh, I'm so blind. I don't know why I didn't see it before."

John had to admit it made sense. "So, you're saying you'd be okay with charging a consultant fee, one that we'd split fifty-fifty?"

"You can have all of it if you want, but if that wounds your masculine ego too much, you can set up separate bank accounts. Fifty percent each sounds reasonable."

John rubbed the back of his head, patently ignoring the slam against his pride. It certainly would solve a lot of his financial problems and he wouldn't be completely dependant on Sherlock. "You're sure about this?"

"Absolutely." Sherlock plopped down beside him, very proud of himself, and slapped his knees. "I don't want you working in a place that is 'mind-numbingly boring' as you put it. I can't stand the idea of you suffering that way."

Remembering the wall shooting and the extra nicotine patches when Sherlock had no cases, John teased, "You're the expert on suffering from boredom."

"I am. I can't abide the thought of you doing something you hate just to pay the rent which you insist on paying despite my protests."
"I don't hate hate it."

"Hate hate?"

"I mean, I can do it if I have to."

"But you don't have to. That's what I'm trying to explain."

John reluctantly agreed. "It would make life a lot easier."

"And we could focus on the cases. Of course, I suppose we could ask the Yard for a fee, but I doubt this is the best time to approach that possibility."

"No, probably not, not with the banning and all. I don't know if I'm even comfortable asking Lestrade for money. He might tell us to piss off permanently if he actually had to pay us."

"That's an excellent point. Then we should focus on the private cases."

"So what does one charge for solving a murder or kidnapping?"

"I suppose that would depend on who was murdered or kidnapped and resources available. I'll leave all that to you. You should probably start right away. Come up with some sort of scale that normal people can understand." Sherlock waved his hands in dismissal, like worrying about money was way too much trouble.

"That's a lot of responsibility."

Sherlock met his gaze, his eyes bright, his face flushed with anticipation. "I trust you."

John drank in those words, realizing that for Sherlock trust was just as important as love. "I trust you, too."

Sherlock answered with a breathtaking kiss, one that led them both back up to John's room, which had by default become their room. John was happier than he could ever remember being, all because of Sherlock.

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Sherlock stood in the doorway of his brother's office, watching smugly as Mycroft finished his call. As soon as he hung up from cancelling the security alarm, Mycroft rolled his eyes. "You could ask for an appointment like everyone else."

"I'm not everyone else. Besides, you'll thank me when your PA gives you the list of four immediate security breaches I discovered. Seriously, Mycroft, it shows a careless disregard to the safety of State secrets to hire such incompetent workers. Common criminals could do a better job."

"I assure you, they're the best in the business."

"Not better than I am."

"Of course not. Few are." Giving a long-suffering sigh, Mycroft asked, "Why are you here, Dear Brother?"

Sherlock stepped inside and closed the door before taking a seat in front of his brother's desk. He glanced around the room as he removed his leather gloves and scarf. The office was totally banal in its posh decor, totally boring with the dark paneling, accents of deep red and green, and far too
much leather in the seating. There were degrees on the wall, but not a single personal item in sight, no family pictures, no books, no mementos. However, there was a wet bar containing both liquor and a tea kettle. So, Mycroft did make some concessions to comfort, not surprising.

Mycroft was always so predictable in what he wanted people to see, someone with prestige and power. To Sherlock it just showed a serious lack of imagination not to have at least one skull sitting around, if for nothing else but a conversation starter. It was, after all, one of the first things John noticed and asked about at Baker Street.

Back to the subject of his visit, Sherlock refocused his thoughts. "I want to make a will."

Mycroft's eyebrow arched to new heights. He was a hard man to surprise, but Sherlock was pleased to have managed. "A will?"

"And I need to make some changes to my estate. I want John's name on the deed to the house in Sussex as well as my other properties and accounts. It should be effective as soon as possible."

Mycroft's lips pursed with obvious disapproval, but his voice stayed annoyingly calm. "Ah, I see the good doctor has said yes to your proposal."

"He has."

"I should congratulate you..."

"But you won't mean it, so why bother?"

"You can't blame me for having my concerns. We're talking about a substantial amount of money and property."

"John is going to be my legal partner. I want to make sure that what's mine is his."

"How very conventional of you. However, I would highly recommend a prenuptial agreement be drawn up before you officially marry."

"I don't need one. John is never going to leave me and if does, none of it will matter anyway."

"Very well." Mycroft gave up far too easily before he threw the next verbal punch. "Have you told Mummy?"

Sherlock bristled, sitting up straighter in the chair. "She doesn't have a say in my personal life."

"She won't approve of your choice any more than I do."

"I'm aware of that, but she won't stop me." Impatiently Sherlock snapped, "Why are you bothering to state the obvious? I need you to set up an appointment with the lawyers so I can make the will. You can do the paperwork for the other."

"And if I refuse?"

Sherlock laughed, knowing full well Mycroft was bluffing. "You'd lose your access to a resource to fix whatever mess your top professionals can't handle. Do you really want to risk that? I think not."

Mycroft sat back in his chair, his eyes narrowed and then shook his head in frustration. "You've always been so ridiculously contrary."

"And you've always been an obnoxious and pretentious bore."
At a stand off, Mycroft finally relaxed and then consented to Sherlock's request with a slight nod. "I'll set up the appointment for this afternoon. Please try not to expire before then."

"Even if I do, I expect you to honor my wishes about John," Sherlock insisted.

"He'd never accept it."

Sherlock hesitated, knowing that for once his brother might be right. "Perhaps not, but I expect you to try to persuade him. You're good at that."

"I'll do my best." He said the words far too weakly to be even slightly convincing. Then Mycroft asked, "Does John know your background?"

His lips formed in a thin line of displeasure. Mycroft was never opposed to bringing up issues he'd just as soon leave buried. "He knows about the drugs. He found out about my old habits that first night when Lestrade resorted to that ridiculous drugs bust to get my attention."

"I'm not talking about the drugs, Dear Brother. I assume if you're going to marry this man, you've either already engaged in sexual activity or will soon do so. Does he have any idea about the scope of your promiscuous behavior only a few years ago?"

Sherlock had to take a few calming breaths before he answered. John would be proud of him for not reacting impulsively and ripping his brother's head off right in the heart of Great Britain's national security center. "He does."

"Then he really is rather open-minded, more than I expected considering his provincial upbringing. I applaud his progressive attitude." Mycroft paused and then got that crafty, I know something you don't know expression. Sherlock hated that look. "As a gesture of full disclosure, I assume he's told you his history as well?"

"I'm fully aware he's slept with women on three continents, Asia, Africa, and Europe. I could care less."

"I'm not talking about the impressive number of his sexual conquests. Even though I must say he was definitely quite the ladies man before meeting you."

Sherlock frowned, not wanting to fall into his brother's trap, but needing clarification. "Stop playing games and just say what you mean."

"I'm referring to his army record."

"He's a war hero, shot in the line of duty. He was a doctor and a soldier. What more is there to know?" Sherlock didn't add that he knew whatever happened during Jon's service still haunted him, still wracked him with guilt and made his life hell when he wasn't kept busy.

"Oh, Dear Brother, that's being exceedingly modest. He was much more than that."

Sherlock flashed back to the way John killed the cabbie with a single expert shot from a remarkable distance. He also knew John didn't fight like a common soldier, so his special training was obvious. "I assumed as much. I don't need the details."

"But you really should know all there is to know about the man with whom you wish to share your life."

"He told me his work was classified."
"That's never stopped you from ferreting out information before. Why now? Are you afraid of what you might discover?"

Sherlock stood up, determined not to let Mycroft goad him any longer. "I don't have a problem with whatever John did during his service to his country. He's a good man and, regardless of your personal feelings, I fully expect you to show him respect and accept him as part of the family. Feel free to pass my feelings along to Mummy."

Sherlock put both hands on the desk, his arms outstretched as he leaned forward, his voice flinty. He stared into his brother's eyes, making sure Mycroft knew he was dead serious. "If you ever disrespect him, ever cause him harm in any way or allow harm to occur that you could have prevented, I will disown you completely as my brother. Make no mistake about that." Sherlock let the words sink in before he smoothly added, "I might even have to end you."

"Sherlock..."

"Do...you...understand...me?"

After a few seconds of shocked silence, Mycroft nodded and said, "I do. I had no idea your feelings were so..."

"Real?"

"Intense."

"I would die for John Watson and he for me. More importantly, he plans to live for me and I for him."

Sherlock stood up straight, pulling on his gloves and wrapping his scarf around his neck. "You should be so lucky as to find someone like John." He looked around the office as he made his point. "There's more to life than these power games and intrigue, much more."

"I do hope this thing between you and John works out." Mycroft's voice choked up and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair obviously rattled. Sherlock met his brother's stare without sympathy or regret as Mycroft continued. "I'm not completely heartless, regardless of what you might think. I've always only been concerned with your best interests."

"What you thought was best for me nearly led to my destruction."

"You still blame me for cutting you off, for what happened later. I assure you..."

Sherlock quickly held up a hand. "Don't. Just don't. Take care of the paperwork and contact me about the lawyer as soon as possible." As he walked out the door, Sherlock paused and added, "You really need a love life, Mycroft. It would do wonders for your diet."

&&&&

John made his excuses to Sarah, noting her eye rolling, and promised to make up the hours later, honest. Then he ran out of the surgery and grabbed a cab. He worked hard to control the panic he always had when he got a worrying text from Harry, especially one that told him she needed to see him right away, 999. She hadn't answered when he called her back.

By the time he got to her apartment, he'd managed to scroll through far too many possible scenarios in his head, everything from an overdose to finding his sister in the tub, her wrists slashed and bleeding out, or with her already dead, choked on her own vomit. It was the last one that scared
him the most.

John knocked several times, hoping he wouldn't have to break the damn thing down to get inside. Harry opened the door, dressed in her raggedy blue terry dressing gown, a beer in one hand and her deep blue eyes puffy from crying.

"About fucking time you got here."

John saw nothing obviously wrong other than her half-sloshed condition. His voice breathless, he asked, "What's going on? Why'd you call me?"

"Does something have to be wrong to get you to come see your big sister?"

Harry was fine, not dead, just drinking like usual and making a right pest of herself. John didn't know whether to be pissed or relieved, and settled on being glad she wasn't dead. In exasperation, he complained, "You sent a 999 text."

"It's the only thing you'll answer."

"Bollocks."

"When was the last time you called or came by?"

Guiltily, John admitted, "Yeah, yeah, I see your point." He sighed in relief and looked around the place, still huge, expensive, and cluttered with Harry's stuff. Clara had been more than generous in the divorce settlement. It was probably the only reason Harry hadn't ended up living with their mum and on the dole. She hadn't held down a decent full-time job since Clara left her.

John reached over and pulled Harry into a hug and then drew back with his hands on her shoulders to study her more carefully. "You really okay?"

Harry waved off the concern and plopped down on the sofa, tucking her feet under her while he remained standing. He didn't really want to stay longer than he had to. "Rough patch, same old shit." She drank more of her beer and said, "I'm sorry about scaring you. I wanted to see you, that's all."

John didn't say it was okay, because it wasn't, but he understood why she might feel neglected. He'd been so caught up with Sherlock, he'd really not made any time for his sister in months.

"How's Mum?"

"Pissed that you call her even less than me."

"I call."

"Not enough. She's getting older, Johnny. She won't be around forever." She hesitated and then added, "None of us will." Then she polished off the drink and tossed the can toward the bin, missing by several meters. "So, what's new in your life? Still running around with the crazy flat mate, solving crimes and saving the bloody world?"

"You might say that, yeah."

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. Harry might be half-drunk, but she knew him like only an older sister could. "Johnny? What's that look?"

"What look?"
"That one. It's the look you get when you...good god, don't fucking tell me you're falling for the bastard."

"Sorry, but yeah, I have, sort of." John cleared his throat and announced, "Actually, we engaged."

"You're engaged?"

"Yeah."

"Since when?"

"Last night."

"To Sherlock Fucking Holmes? Are you a masochist or just plain mental? I mean, you've obviously lost your fucking mind if you said yes to that arsehole."

John took a deep breath to stay calm. Even after years of practice, dealing with his sister tested his limits. "How can you say that? You don't even know Sherlock."

"And whose fault is that? Who doesn't even return my calls anymore, much less invite me over to meet the man you've been fucking? How long has this been going on anyway? Jesus motherfucking god, I don't fucking believe you."

Harry got up and jabbed an accusing finger into his chest as she demanded, "Oh, and just when did you go queer, Little Brother? Was it in the army or have you been hiding it behind all those skirts you've been chasing since you could get your dick out?"

"Harry, it's not like that."

"What's it like then? All those times Mum and Dad raked me over the bloody coals for being a lesbian and here you are as gay as me?"

"Nobody's as gay as you, Harry."

His sister paused and then cracked up laughing. "You've got that right. If there's pussy to be had, I'm having it!" She slapped him on his bad shoulder, suddenly in good humor. John winced, but just rubbed away the pain as she asked, "Want a beer?"

"No, but tea would be nice, thanks." He couldn't afford to booze it up if Harry was on a binge, not when he might have to stick around to make sure she was okay later.

Harry shrugged and motioned with her head for him to follow her to her kitchen. It was larger than the whole flat at Baker Street, with stainless steal appliances, everything done in black and white. It would've been a showcase if it weren't littered with old takeout boxes, dirty dishes, liquor bottles, and an overflowing trash bin. Harry opened the refrigerator and got another beer. "Help yourself."

As he made the tea, Harry's good spirit vanished as quickly as it had come. Her moody disposition had always amazed him, fun and full of life one minute, morose and sorry the next. She could rage and attack and then turn around and be full of I'm sorry all in the same breath. It was like walking on eggshells all the time, never knowing what would set her off. Wearing Moriarty's bomb didn't scare him half as much as watching his sister self-destruct as surely as if she wore those explosives herself. He really didn't know how Clara had stayed with her for as long as she had.

Harry interrupted his dark thoughts as he tidied the kitchen while waiting for the water to boil. "So, Sherlock, huh?"
"Yeah."

"I read your blog, you know. Sounds like an absolute tosser."

"He can be. He's also a genius."

"You always did like the brainy types. Usually they had tits and a pussy. Though, I guess it might work out since he sounds like a complete twat."

John cleared out the sink and ran hot, soapy water so he could wash the dishes. "He's been called worse."

After a few minutes of watching him work, Harry said, "I've got a dishwasher, you know."

"I know."

"You always did like cleaning up when you were upset. I remember when Dad used to come home smashed and tore up the place. You'd have it sorted by daybreak like nothing ever happened. Helped Mum make sure the place was spotless so he wouldn't complain about a mess and start a another row."

John refused to think about his father staggering home, yelling abuse and breaking anything his mother valued. Sober, his dad was a regular bloke, worked hard, went to church, and played with his kids, but with a few drinks, he hated his life and everyone in it, especially his mum. He didn't like to remember, so he mostly didn't.

"I don't like cleaning. It just needs doing. And I'm not upset."

"You hate mess, always have. Even as a little boy, you'd clean up your room, everything in its place, all your toys put away and your books in alphabetical order."

"Unlike your room which was an absolute pigsty."

"Organization is overrated."

"Not if it means you can find your books or clothes so you can be to school on time."

Harry took a long pull of her drink, and then tilted her head, studying him with unfocused eyes. "You always hated being late."

"And you never showed up on time."

"So, I guess this Sherlock bloke, he's a neat freak and always shows up on time like you, yeah?"

John choked back a laugh, realizing that many of the patterns of his youth had somehow translated to the present. Not that knowing made any difference. He never had any real intention of changing Sherlock. He loved him just the way he was, aggravating or not. Plus, it wasn't exactly the same thing. Sherlock was sober, unlike his sister, who refused to clean up even to save her marriage.

John made the tea as he finished up the dishes before he finally answered her question. "No, he's messy as hell, does all kind of smelly experiments with body parts, slime molds, and other nasty shit. It can be a real nightmare sometimes just walking through the flat."

"You write about it on the blog, but I thought you were exaggerating."

"Not a bit."
As he finally sat down at the table across from his sister with his cup of tea, she asked, "Then why him?"

John took a few sips before he put the cup down. "Because he's the most brilliant, exasperating man I've ever met. He drives me half mad with his bloody rudeness, his total disregard for his own safety, and his lack of any kind of common sense. Then he'll turn around and do something that's so utterly amazing that it takes my breath away." He swallowed several times before he finished, not sure if he could ever do justice to the glory that was Sherlock. "I've seen him bring down murderers, pedophiles, kidnappers, and terrorists, people nobody else could stop. He does it all with clues nobody else can see much else figure out. I've never known anybody like him because there's nobody else like him in the world and never will be."

"Jesus, you really are in love."

"Yeah, I really am. Oh, and one more thing."

"What's that?"

"He loves me, too."

His sister grinned and lifted her beer as John raised his teacup. They clinked their drinks together lightly as Harry said, "Well, fucking cheers then."

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Later, John had her tucked into bed, the duvet up to her chin. He kissed her forehead and turned to leave, but she grabbed his hand, squeezing so tightly that it hurt. The words were slurred. "Stay a bit longer, Johnny. Please."

He couldn't say no, so he pulled up a chair and sat down beside the bed. "Go to sleep. You'll feel better after some rest."

"Why don't you ever tell me to stop anymore?"

He hid his surprise at her question before he asked, "Would it make a difference?"

"I don't know. It might."

John's chest tightened and he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his eyes stinging. "Do you think I don't care enough, is that it?"

"You used to be on me to quit all the time."

"Harry..." John fought back the anger and the hurt, the memory of all the times they'd butted heads about her drinking. "I love you, but I'm tired of fighting. You'll either quit or you won't. Nothing I say or do seems to matter."

Tears fell down Harry's face as she reached out for his hand again. When he took it, she admitted, "I know. Clara said the same thing."

"Then stop."

"It's not that simple."
John knew that was the truth. He'd seen it first hand far too many times not to realize how fucking hard it was to change old habits. As a doctor, he'd taken courses about addiction, grew up as the son and brother of alcoholics. At school, mates got hooked and dropped out, lost scholarships and bright futures. In the service, soldiers destroyed their lives because of it, getting arrested, their money all gone, and their families losing everything to try to save them. They blamed bad luck or the war, but it was always more complicated than that. In his head he knew all the facts about addiction. In his heart he just weighed down with the disappointment and anger he'd carried with him most of his life.

His grip tightened as he tried a different approach. "I can find you a program if you'll go."

"Programs are shit. They never work."

"You haven't tried."

Harry jerked her hand away and sat up in the bed, pushing her tangled brown hair out of her eyes. "You don't think I've fucking tried to stop?"

"I know you have, but you need help. This isn't something you can do alone."

"Lots of people manage."

"Lots of people fail."

Harry crossed her arms and worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "Did you hear the news?"

"What news?"

"Clara's engaged. You could have a fucking double wedding."

Well, that explained the 999 and the crying earlier. "Fuck."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

"I'm sorry, Harry."

She closed her eyes, tears falling freely as her weeping turned to sobs. John reached over and handed her the box of tissues from the bedside table. She blew her nose and then tossed the used tissue on the floor. John picked it up and put it in the bin. After a few more moments, she spoke quietly. "I always thought we'd get back together. I used to dream about it."

"That's only natural. You were together for a long time."

"Six years on and off." She threw the box across the room in a fury and it bounced off the wall. "Six fucking years and what does she do? Leaves me and takes up with that slag Lisa Dentworth. Bitch!"

John knew better than to argue, but he defended Clara anyway. "She stayed a lot longer than most people would have."

"What's that supposed to mean? I mean, fuck you, Mr. High and Mighty, I'm a doctor and a war hero, Mr. I've got a bloody boyfriend now! You're got no fucking right to judge me. You just don't understand."

Calling on all his patience, John repeated himself. "You need help, Harry."
"What's the bloody point? Everybody leaves me. Now even you have somebody and who do I have? Nobody." Harry fell back down in the bed, her face buried in the pillow, and bawled.

John retrieved the box of tissues and then sat on the edge of the bed, his hand on her back, rubbing circles of comfort. He felt like a complete shit for a brother. How did he let it get so bad? "You have me, Harry. You'll always have me."

She cried out the words. "It's not enough."

Sighing, John agreed and gently massaged her shoulders until she fell asleep. When she was finally snoring quietly, he stood up. He didn't want to wake her, didn't want to leave her like she was. Like so many times before, he had no clue what to do about his sister.

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Sherlock was in the kitchen working, but looked up from the microscope at John's arrival. It only took a few seconds before he stated coolly, "You've been to see your sister."

John hung up his jacket and dropped down into his chair, mentally exhausted. He knuckled his fists against closed eyes. "Yeah." He didn't want to talk about it, so he changed the subject. "What experiment is it this time?"

Moving from the kitchen to the living room, Sherlock stood by John's chair. "I'm doing a comparative study of beetles' wings." He paused and then asked, "How is Harriet?"

John bit into his thumbnail, chewing at the worn cuticle. "She's fine."

"John..."

"You already know how she is, so why ask?" The words came out a lot angrier than he'd meant. "I'm sorry. I just, she's just, well, you know."

"I do."

John looked up and met Sherlock's level stare, wanting to let him show off a little, make up for being a prat. "So, impress me. How did you know I'd gone to Harry's?"

"You went to the surgery to give notice, but you came home early, obviously upset. You wouldn't go to her place for just any reason, not during a workday, so she must have sent an emergency message to lure you there. A false alarm is an unfortunate behavior for one who might at some later point have a real crisis. Also, I can smell the lemon-scented chemicals you used for cleaning, a brand you certainly don't use at the surgery. You no doubt scrubbed Harriet's apartment and set it to order. Cleaning is something you do almost obsessively when you're distressed. There's also the lingering odor of beer, not your usual brew, so you didn't go to the pub, but hugged her or had close contact. You stayed until you were sure it was safe to leave, likely putting her in the recovery position, using a pillow against her back so she wouldn't roll over."

Hard facts, but still impressive, Sherlock got it nearly all right. "Amazing as always, except for that last bit."

"You didn't put her in the recovery position?"

"No. She was awake when I left." John remembered Harry's face all creased from the pillow, her eyes still bleary, but more aware than she had been. "I made her some tea and toast, not that she cared."
"I always miss something."

"Not much, though."

Sherlock tilted his head as he studied him a few seconds longer. "You didn't give notice."

"Wrong again."

"Wrong? How am I wrong?"

"I did give notice."

"You're no longer going to the surgery as of today?"

Sheepishly, John shrugged, picking at a loose thread on the seam of the chair. He didn't want to see the look of disappointment in his partner's eyes. "All right, all right, I didn't exactly quit straight away like we planned. I couldn't. I couldn't just leave her in the lurch like that, not after all she's done for me. So, I gave her two weeks to find a replacement."

"What's she ever done for you other than give you a couch to sleep on and listen to your rants about me when you storm out after a fight?"

John ignored the pissy tone and said, "She gave me a job when nobody else would."

"Only because she wanted to sleep with you."

"That's not true. I was, am, more than qualified."

"Please, she was attracted to you. Having you at the surgery in a secondary position only feeds into her need to dominate you."

Sherlock rolled his eyes and John just wasn't in the mood for some kind of hissy fit about his friendship with Sarah. "She doesn't dominate me, Sherlock. I leave that to you, thanks."

His words hit home like he knew they would.

Sherlock turned and stormed back to his microscope, the temperature in the room suddenly very frosty. After a few moments, regret set in and John said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did."

"Well, yeah, I did, but not in the way it sounded."

Sherlock snorted, his words heated. "You think I'm overbearing and insensitive, that I don't take your feelings into account when I make decisions, and that I don't care what you want, that what I want comes first."

"How'd you know?"

Sherlock's head jerked up, and then his expression relaxed when he saw John smiling. "You're teasing me again."

"Yeah, pretty much. Leave the bug wings alone and stop being such a dick."

"But you like my dick."

John's ears pinked up at Sherlock's silky, sexy tone. "Yeah, I do." John got up and moved to the
sofa and Sherlock joined him. He pulled Sherlock's head down for a quick kiss and said, "I didn't mean it in a bad way."

"In my experience, domination doesn't usually have a positive connotation."

"I just meant that how I feel about you dominates my life, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I love you."

"I do know that."

"Then why take the piss about Sarah?"

"I don't know."

"You're jealous."

Sherlock pulled away and stared John down. "I am not jealous of that woman. Being jealous would indicate that I had some reason to be threatened by her and that would be ludicrous."

"It would be, yeah, but you are jealous."

Sherlock crossed his arms and complained huffily. "If you persist in insulting me, I'll go back to my beetles' wings."

"Jealous and just a little bit childish." John paused and smiled, dragging Sherlock closer and then flicking out his tongue to lick his ear playfully. John pulled back, his voice suddenly husky. "You're the only one for me, you big idiot."

"Of course I am." The tension melted away and Sherlock captured John's mouth with his. The discussion part was pretty well over for the night.

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John woke up in Sherlock's arms, alert right away. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

"I heard something."

"It was the phone. Bloody Mycroft. Go back to sleep."

Relaxing slightly, John yawned and then snuggled in closer to Sherlock, who was still holding John and using his other hand for reading his phone. Sometimes John hated that damn thing, especially when Sherlock played with it most of the night. "What's he want this time?"

"He's just sending me confirmation about some documents."

"Documents? State secrets or conspiracy plans?"

Sherlock chuckled. "My brother would never send anything classified over the phone, John. He would bring those himself, so thank god it's nothing like that. I hate when he shows up unannounced. I've been considering booby-trapping the door, but I can't seem to get around the threat to Mrs. Hudson."

"No killing the landlady who brings us tea and scones."
"Agreed. I'll figure out something."

John kissed the warm shoulder and then took a deep breath. "Siblings can be a pain."

"You are the master of understatement."

"What I meant to say was that my sister wants to meet you."

Sherlock's body tensed up and John opened his eyes. The bedroom was dark, but not completely. A light filtered up from downstairs, so he could see the worried frown on his lover's face before Sherlock said, "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Look, if I can put up with being kidnapped, the least you can do is have a meal with my sister."

"A whole meal?"

Suddenly annoyed, John sat up and leaned back against the pillows as he pulled up the sheet. " Bloody hell, Sherlock, she's my sister."

"So? I can most certainly guarantee such a meeting would be an unmitigated disaster."

"That doesn't mean you can avoid her."

"Why not? You do." Sherlock saw the flash of John's angry expression and immediately backpedaled. "That didn't come out as I intended. I just meant..."

"I know what you fucking meant."

"I'm sorry."

John frowned and then shook his head, waving off Sherlock's rare apology. "No, you're right. I do avoid her. Seems like she always wants a row and it just better to steer clear of the whole situation."

"I understand. Believe me I avoid Mycroft every chance I get."

"I told her about us. That might have been a mistake. Now she's demanding to meet the Great Sherlock Holmes, the man who turned her bird-chasing brother queer."

"Most studies show that one's sexually is more flexible than once believed. Given the right mixture of attraction and circumstance, nearly everyone can be tempted to reevaluate their normal parameters."

John ran his finger up Sherlock's arm and felt the slight shiver in response to his light touch. "So you're my right mixture of attraction and circumstance?"

Sherlock kissed him and then drew back with a smug smile. "So it would seem, yes."

"You've still got to meet my sister."

"I don't see why. She'll despise me. She probably already has some preconceived notion and she'll no doubt harbor a resentment because I've stolen your attentions."

"She already thinks you're an arrogant twat."

"A twat?"
"You miss the arrogant part?"

Completely affronted, Sherlock ignored John and asked, "Why does she think I'm a twat? In colloquial terms that would imply I'm a fool, and I'm not."

John chuckled as he explained. "Twat also means..."

"Ah, a woman's genitals."

"Right."

"So, since you've only been with women before, she was making a rather sophisticated allusion."

"I don't think calling someone a twat would in any way, shape, or form qualify as sophisticated."

"Perhaps not. Still, the fact remains putting your sister and me in the same room for any length of time will end in serious histrionics."

"Don't worry. I'm used to your drama."

Sherlock gave him the evil eye. "I wasn't talking about me."

"I know."

Suddenly laughing, Sherlock cupped his face. "Did I ever mention that I love your sense of humor."

"I like yours, too."

"I've been told that I don't have one."

"Then they're not paying close enough attention."

Sherlock slowly moved his long fingers across John's lips, his voice softer. "I'll meet your sister, but in a restaurant, not here, preferably some place that doesn't serve drinks. She'll be less likely to make a scene with temporarily enforced sobriety."

"You don't know my sister. She'll be bitchy as hell if she can't take the edge off."

"Perhaps. Still, for your sake, she'll at least try to behave as long as we're not alone."

John kissed Sherlock's fingertips before he said, "Thanks. I'll set it up."

"Not anytime soon, I hope."

John grinned and put both hands behind Sherlock's neck to drag him down and across his body. Dark curls tickled his face as the bare flesh of their chests and bellies pressed together, his skin heating up as he whispered, "No, no time soon."

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Sherlock typed in the last of his email and hit send. He'd worked less than an hour and finished ten undemanding cases, child's play really. He was proud that John's simple system seemed to be working rather well. Each case only took a few minutes to solve and, with a quick Paypal click, the recipients of the solutions paid nominal fees. It all added up to more than enough to make up for the loss of John's income when he finished with the surgery. Once they started taking on serious
cases together, John could stop worrying so much about money and paying his own way. He could finally give Sherlock his complete and undivided attention. It was the perfect plan really, having John all to himself without any mundane medical distractions.

The knock on the doorframe came as no surprise. "Come in, Lestrade."

"You didn't even look up. How did you know it was me?"

"You arrived over ten minutes ago, but you've been sitting outside in your car, ambivalent about your actions. I assumed you'd eventually decide to come inside. You have a case for me?"

Lestrade's eyes narrowed and he asked, "Why are you wearing a sheet?"

"It's comfortable."

"That or you're just too damn lazy to get dressed like a normal person."

"Normal is boring. Besides, you came to me. What does it matter what I'm wearing in my own home?"

"You're right. It doesn't. Sorry."

Sherlock got up with as much dignity as one could muster wearing a white sheet, wrapping it around himself tightly. If it was good enough for the palace and John, it was good enough for Lestrade. "The file?"

Lestrade handed him the folder. "Happened a couple of days ago, a teenager beaten and left behind an abandoned building. We've gone round and round with the family. My money's on the uncle, but he's got a pretty solid alibi and the mother's so drugged up, we can't get a thing from her."

"Why the uncle?"

"He's a ex-con with a violent temper. Has a list of priors that fit the bill."

Sherlock sat on the sofa, fanning the pictures out across the table, scanning quickly through the notes as Lestrade continued to stand and wait. Within a couple of minutes, Sherlock said, "Do another interview with the stepfather. He's your man. He's punishing the mother for some preconceived personal slight."

Lestrade scratched his head and frowned. "What? How do you get that?"

"I think you'll find with a more thorough background check that another boy died a few years ago during his previous marriage. He had a different name then. " Sherlock closed his eyes and touched his forehead as he went through his memory. Finally, he opened his eyes, having secured the retrieved data, and said, "Eric Benson."

"How in the hell could you know that?"

"I remember the case from the newspaper. I thought it was suspicious at the time, but here wasn't enough evidence to support further investigation. This is a pattern for him. The earlier death was ruled accidental. This time he apparently got too angry, likely because this boy was older and fought back."

Sherlock scooped up all the materials and slotted them into the folder. He handed it to Lestrade and sat back, his arms folded. Self-satisfied, he enjoyed the astounded look on Lestrade's face. The
man was just so easily impressed. "Anything else, Inspector?"

"I think that will do, thanks."

"Given that I've just saved you and your team weeks of legwork, when may John and I return to active fieldwork?"

Lestrade didn't answer right away, but instead sat down in the chair across from Sherlock. He asked, "How's John doing?"

"He's fine, more than fine. He's excellent, in fact."

Lestrade suddenly studied him more closely and his eyes widened. "Oh, my god, are those love bites and scratches on your neck and shoulders?"

Sherlock didn't even try to hide them, though he really hated when his skin pinked up. He should be able to control such traitorous biological reactions. "Yes, and to answer your next question, John and I are now in a romantic relationship."

Lestrade shook his head, smiling but slightly irritated. "You realize you just lost me twenty quid."

"How so?"

"There's a pool."

Annoyed, Sherlock asked, "A pool as in gambling?"

"Yeah, and I bet that you'd never in a million years end up shagging somebody, especially not John."

Sherlock frowned, not really sure what to make of the inspector's statement. "First of all, my sex life is nobody's business. Second, why would you think especially not John?"

"Well, I thought he was still trying to date that doctor he works with."

"They only had one date and they're just friends."

"What about all those other women he chases and all the flirting? I mean, I know you can't always tell about people, but I never had him pegged for gay."

"I suppose technically he's bisexual, but labels are meaningless."

Sherlock paused and asked, "And me? Did you have me 'pegged for gay'?"

Lestrade's expression suddenly became more serious. "You forget that I knew you back before you cleaned up."

Sherlock pulled the sheet up a little further. "I didn't forget. I never forget."

"I guess if I'm honest, I'm surprised that you'd have sex with anyone after all that. You never seemed to show any interest in it, so I just figured it wasn't something you did anymore, that that whole thing put you off sex completely."

Sherlock fought back the flood of memories from the years before, the time when his body was just a tool for getting the drugs he needed. He took a deep breath and blocked them out, locked them away again before he spoke, his voice strained. "John is the first person I've ever wanted to be with in either a romantic or sexual sense. He's different."
Lestrade nodded in understanding and said, "I'm glad you found somebody, I really am."
Sherlock met caring brown eyes. "Thank you. I supposed I should add that we're engaged."
"Engaged as in to be married?"
"Yes."
"Damn."
"What?"
"There goes another twenty."
Testily, Sherlock asked, "What was the bet this time?"
"That John would find a nice lady friend, get married, and have a houseful of kids."
Sherlock shook his head in frustration. How could they possibly predict that John would ever leave him? Didn't they have eyes? "Do you people have nothing better to do than waste your time making frivolous and, I must say idiotic, wagers? I mean, this explains so much about why criminals are allowed to run amok in our city."
Instead of addressing his rant, Lestrade just got a stupid grin on his face. "Congratulations."
"Thank you."
"You know, maybe since he's got something to officially lose now, he won't be so foolhardy and ready to throw himself in front of a bullet."
"Are you saying you think it's time to lift your impetuous ban and allow us back at crime scenes?"
It took several long moments before Lestrade reluctantly nodded. "Okay, we'll give it another shot. Next thing that comes along and I think it'll suit you, I'll call you in. Just tell him to keep the heroics to a minimum."
"I'll do that."
As Lestrade left, Sherlock didn't add that to ask John not to be a hero would be the same as asking his lover to give up breathing. That was never going to happen, not if Sherlock had anything to say about it.
&&&&&&
"Are you sure about leaving?"
John looked up from reading the applications. Sarah stared at him waiting for answer, her expression a cross between hopeful and sad. While he wouldn't miss all the routine cases of flu and backaches, he would miss seeing her at work every day. She'd been a good friend, especially when he just needed someone to listen to him moan when things got to be too much with Sherlock. She'd always been a good sport about it, too. She let him rant on about his infuriating partner when most women would've thrown him out on his ear.
"I am, yeah. I do appreciate everything you've done for me, but it's time to move on."
"You're such a good doctor, especially with the kids. Won't you miss medicine?"
"I will, yeah, but I can't do both medicine and solving crimes anymore, so my time with Sherlock has to come first."

Sarah sighed and settled back in the chair on the other side of his desk, obviously disappointed but accepting. "I had to ask."

"I know."

"I hope this doesn't mean I'll never see you again."

"God, no. I mean, Sherlock's bound to piss me off at some point. Hope I've still got a standing invitation to kip at your place when I need to."

"My sofa is your sofa." She paused and nodded, "I appreciate you at least giving me some time to get a replacement."

"It's the least I can do. Stevens would be rubbish fulltime. You'd spend more time looking over his shoulder than working your own cases and he only half-arse does his paperwork now. I hate to say it, but he's a lousy GP." John handed her another folder. "This Sharon Blake looks promising."

Sarah nodded, but didn't look at the file. Instead she put it in front of her and said, "Carl called me."

"Did he?"

"He said you didn't show for the interview for the open position."

John studied her a moment, the worried creases of her face making her look tired and rundown. She was working too hard and his leaving wasn't going to help that. They were understaffed and overworked, a chronic state for the NHS. That wasn't going to change anytime soon no matter who she hired to replace him.

John explained, "You were right when you said it wouldn't be a good fit. I didn't see the point after I'd thought about it. Plus, I was feeling lousy that day. The antibiotics are doing the trick, by the way, thanks."

"I'm glad you're better." She paused before she added, "He was pissed off." She shook her head, avoiding his eyes. "I don't know what the hell I ever saw in that man. He's such an obnoxious, self-important prick." She got up and poured herself some tea and held up the pot. "Want some?"

"No, I'm fine. I hope he didn't give you a hard time. I know you and Mike both put in a good word for me. I feel bad about that."

She waved a hand of dismissal. "It's fine. You're better off." She sipped her tea before she confessed more. "I didn't know he was married when I dated him."

"That bastard!"

Sarah shrugged, obviously over the idea of being lied to. "Yeah, he was, is, a bastard. When he called, he said some nasty things about you being gay, and I told him to piss off."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I knew he was a liar, but I had no idea about the bigot part. I was shocked that he had the nerve to think that I'd listen to that kind of bollocks and not say anything."

"But you might have to work with him someday. Best not to make enemies."
"Sod him. He's a throwback, anyway. I'm glad you didn't take that job. You probably would've ended up knocking him on his hairy arse and getting hauled in for an agro."

"That bad, huh?"

"Pretty rotten, yeah." She put down her teacup, composing herself before coming back to sit down at the desk. "I think you're right about Dr. Blake. I also like Dr. Carrington. I'll set up interviews tomorrow."

"You want me to sit in?"

"No, that's fine. Just another joy of my job." She straightened up the files, that part of their meeting over. She asked, "So, have you two set a date yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Is it going to be a civil ceremony or in a church?"

John hadn't really thought about that side of it, the actual wedding planning part. His mind pretty much dreamed more about the honeymoon bit. "I figure it'll be civil. Neither of us are religious. I hate to think what sacrilegious shit Sherlock would get up to in a church. It really doesn't bear thinking about."

"Yeah, I can't imagine Sherlock going in for a big church wedding."

"It's going to be small, just a few friends and family."

"Not so small that I'm not invited, I hope." When John hesitated, she said, "Look, I know Sherlock doesn't like me, so I understand why he wouldn't want me there and why he's making you quit."

She added more bitterly than he expected, "I know he's been jealous of me from the start."

John covered his mouth with his hand, not quite sure what to say. He had hoped she hadn't picked up on Sherlock's disdain, but he had always known Sarah was smarter and more observant than Sherlock gave her credit for. He cleared his throat and finally said, "Sarah, he's not making me do anything. And, you and I, we're just friends. I hope you don't think..."

"Sherlock still has his doubts, and I totally understand that. You're a sweet man, John, and I like you, probably a lot more than I should."

John wanted to stop her, but she held up a hand to keep him from interrupting. "I hope he understands that I'd never act on those feelings. More importantly, I hope he knows you wouldn't do anything, either, even if I threw myself at you. Some men are like dogs, men like Carl, and then there are the faithful few like you. Your heart belongs to Sherlock and I respect that."

How the hell had he been so fucking clueless? All the months working together and he'd totally missed what Sherlock had been talking about. Sarah really did care for him as more than a friend, really wanted more than he could give. He wanted to give her a hug or take her hand, but he kept still, knew she would see it more as pity than as compassion.

John finally spoke quietly. "I'm such an idiot."

Sarah avoided his eyes. "I thought about not telling you, but I thought you had a right to know."

"I'm so sorry."
"I know. I'm sorry, too." She stood up and gathered the folders, trying hard to keep herself together. "Forget I said anything. Honestly, I still just want to be friends."

"Sure, sure, nothing's changed on my end." But he knew it was a lie as soon as he said it.

As she rushed out, she spoke over her shoulder, "I'll let you know about the interviews."

John sat still for a very long time, his left hand covering his eyes. He beat himself up inside for being such an oblivious fool. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." He was blind as well as stupid.

Worst of all, how could he hide his new knowledge from Sherlock so his partner wouldn't spend hours gloating, saying I told you so. Well, one thing was for sure, he had to find another sofa to use when Sherlock forced him into the night after being too much of an arrogant bastard to handle.

God, it was going to be a hell of a long two weeks.

&&&&

Slammed with a slew of cases of food poisoning, back spasms, and bloody lacerations, John didn't get a break until late afternoon. He was dying for a tea break around three and headed to his office, only to have more unannounced patients show up screaming for his attention before he could even take a sip. By the end of the shift, he'd been without tea or food for eight hours and he was ready to head for a crime scene just to get some downtime.

In his office he grabbed his black jacket, hoping like hell that Sherlock wasn't in a stroppy mood when he got home and that he could make water boil faster. Neither wish seemed all that likely but it didn't hurt to look forward to an hour or two of peace and quiet with a bit of fanciful thinking.

Reaching into his pocket as he headed out to the street, he pulled out his cell phone and checked his messages. He hadn't had a spare minute to read them all day. He scrolled through and saw the first twenty were from Sherlock, but then he stopped walking. He recognized Harry's number and he clicked the text to see the 999 come up. It was from earlier that morning, right before the big rush of patients. "Shit, not again. I don't have time for this."

He was seriously tempted to ignore the text and just go home, but he couldn't. It was Harry. She might be a needy pain in his arse, but she was his sister. He couldn't take the chance that this time she might really need him. He made the call, but only got her voicemail. He left a message. "Harry, what's going on? Call me back and let me know you're okay."

After he hung up, he had to decide whether to grab a cab and go to her place or go home to Sherlock and wait for her call. Sighing, he scrubbed his face with both hands. Finally, he shook his head and sent a text to Sherlock that he'd be home later after he checked on his sister. Bloody cow had better have a damn good reason for dragging him across town during rush hour.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John both have difficult pasts that affect their evolving relationship. When John prevents a mugging, it sets off a dangerous chain of events that not only impacts him, but his whole family. In the end there's a wedding and a honeymoon, but will there really be a happy ending?

Chapter Two

Lestrade drank his coffee as he scanned through the latest reports from his team. The brew was cold and bitter, but at least it kept his eyes open while he worked his way through all the paperwork that kept him busy long past his quitting time.

He shook his head at a report that was laced with far too many unsubstantiated conclusions. He was definitely going to have to talk to Anderson about getting to the point and sticking to just the facts. He'd just finished reviewing the latest autopsy when Donovan knocked and came into his office, breathless. "Sir, I think you're going to want to see this."

"You got a body?" When she shook her head, he added, "Then I'm not interested. I'm leaving in just a few minutes. Save it for tomorrow."

"I don't think this can wait." She handed him a paper and pointed at a name. "This just showed up on the latest hospital A & E report. She was brought in this morning, a Jane Doe. She's just been identified by fingerprints."

"Harriet Watson?" It took a second to make the connection. He suddenly went cold. "Don't tell me..."

"Yeah, I ran a search. She's his sister."

"Fuck." Lestrade pinched the bridge of his nose, wishing like hell there was some mistake. "Why were her prints in the system?"

"A couple of drunk and disorderly charges. Otherwise, no other record."

"Shit."

"You know I hate the Freak, but he might want to be on hand when Watson finds out what's happened. It's not going to be pretty."

God, he knew that was right. "Thanks." He held the paper with both hands, reading the few details listed, and as she opened the door, he called to her back. "Good catch."

She turned around. "I just thought you should know."

"Yeah, thanks."

As soon as she was gone, he sent off a text to Sherlock. "Meet me at St. Mary's A & E. L."
He hadn't made it to the elevator before he got a ping back. He read, "John? SH."

He typed in, "His sister. L."

"Condition? SH."

"Assaulted. Serious when admitted. L."

"On way. Don't text John. SH."

Lestrade got behind the wheel of his car and typed before he started the engine. "He might be next of kin. L."

"I'll handle it. SH."

Lestrade didn't type anything back, just thought, better you than me, mate.

When she didn't answer the door, John entered Harry's apartment with the emergency spare key she'd given him just the day before. He called her name several times, but got no answer. Checking around, everything seemed in order. She had managed to empty a few more bottles and cans since he had cleaned up the place. Thankfully, there was no evidence of a struggle. Still, she was nowhere in the apartment and her purse was gone.

Standing in the middle of her sitting room, John scratched his head, trying to decide what to do next. He hated shit like this, worrying, wondering, not having a clue what was going on. "Harry, what the hell are you playing at? Where the fuck are you?"

Checking his phone again, he saw there was still no text or call from his sister. He wondered if he should call Clara. Sometimes when Harry got really upset, she'd call her ex and beg to come over. He just wasn't sure if Clara still returned the calls.

Before he got a chance to ring Clara, his own phone rang. He answered quickly without looking. "Harry?"

"No."

Sherlock never called when he could text. Shit. John stiffened, his body on alert. "What is it?"

"Don't be alarmed. I'm at St. Mary's A & E. Your sister been hurt, but she's in stable condition."

John didn't bother asking for details. He'd find out all that soon enough. "I'm on my way." Shutting his phone, he stood perfectly still for a few seconds to calm himself, pushing away the fear and the anger that welled up, all the what ifs clamoring for attention in his head. His main goal was just to get to his sister's side and make sure she was okay. Anything beyond that would come later.

"Looks like she's going to be okay."

Sherlock hated generalities, especially about matters of such urgency. "Surely you can be more precise than okay."

Lestrade motioned for Sherlock to follow him over to a quiet corner of the waiting room, away from the other officers and the staff. "They roughed her up, but if they'd wanted to kill her, she'd be
dead. Looks to me like this was done to send a message to somebody. Anybody we know?"

Sherlock reacted to the first part of the comment, the only part he could afford to analyze at the moment. "They? Did she recognize her attackers?"

"She's not saying much, but it looks like more than one person worked her over, one to hold her, one to do the beating."

"How do you know that?"

"Remember Garrison and Keaton?"

Sherlock flashed back to the first time Lestrade had found him drugged and beaten, left in an alley after a rather unfortunate disagreement about price for product. The two men had worked him over to impress the importance of payment upon request. They hadn't damaged him so much that he'd be out of commission for longer than a few weeks, but it was a difficult time. It was hard to support a habit when buyers were scared off by damaged goods. It happened shortly before his first failed attempt at ending his addiction. "I do remember, yes."

"Then you know I know what that kind of beating looks like."

"Yes, yes, all right. I bow to your expert opinion, but why is she not talking? I thought you said she was conscious and alert?"

"She refuses to make a full statement to the police."

"Why?"

"She's asking for you."

Sherlock stood straighter, caught off guard. "Me? Not John?"

Lestrade leaned in closer. "She specifically said to keep John out. She'll only talk to you."

"Are you sure there's not a serious head injury involved?"

"You trying to be funny?"

"I assure you that's not my intention."

"Good, because it doesn't take a genius to figure out why she'd want to talk to you and not John, not once you get a look at her."

"How extensive are the injuries?"

"They look worse than they are, but I'm sure she's not going to see it that way. She's going to hurt like hell once she sobers up and the drugs wear off."

"I take it she was under the influence when she was found."

"Three times the legal limit." Lestrade looked at him carefully and added, "You don't seem surprised."

"John's sister is a functioning alcoholic, so, no." Sherlock ignored Lestrade's surprised expression and asked, "You said you thought you knew the reason she would ask for me instead of John. Explain."
"Think about it. What do you think John's going to do when he sees what someone did to his sister?"

Sherlock closed his eyes, forcing down his fear of the firestorm of violence he could imagine his partner inflicting on any person or persons who caused harm to Harriet. He gave a little head nod. "I see your point."

"You and I both know he's going to lose his shit unless we can find the arseholes who did this first. So does she. She needs you to make sure he doesn't get himself in trouble by going after them himself."

"I concur."

"Then get in there and find out what you can, the sooner, the better."

Sherlock hesitated before he stated, "John's on his way here. He won't take kindly to being denied entrance to see her once he arrives."

"I'll put him in cuffs if I have to."

Sherlock snapped angrily, "You'll do no such thing."

"I might not, but I can't stop hospital security from throwing him out if he makes a scene."

"Tell him I've got a plan."

"A plan? What plan?"

"I'll convince her to tell me everything about her attackers."

"Good luck with that."

"I assure you that once I explain logically..."

"You're going to try to use logic with a drunk?"

Sherlock stopped and realized Lestrade had a valid point. He knew from experience, logic didn't really work very well with someone under the influence. "Perhaps a direct approach would work better."

"How direct?"

Sherlock ignored the DI's question and walked away. He headed to the cubicle where Harry lay on a gurney, waiting to be admitted. Lestrade pulled the officers away from the area while the nurse left them alone.

The first meeting with John's sister was nothing like Sherlock expected. He fought down his own violent impulses once he saw her. Sherlock recognized the genetic likeness to John in the bone structure of the part of her face that wasn't distorted from swelling and bruises. A cast encased her left wrist and a dark line of stitches ran across her left cheekbone and under her lower lip. Her light brown hair, still matted with blood, squashed flat against the pillow and fanned out around her head. The small space reeked of blood and alcohol, and not all of it antiseptic in nature.

An IV was hooked up to her right arm, wires ran from her chest to a monitor by the bed, and she wore a nasal cannula for oxygen. She looked tiny under the blankets, much smaller than John, nearly a head shorter, and incredibly vulnerable. He suddenly felt very protective of a woman he'd
never met before, but one who was now an important part of his family.

John could never be allowed to see her in such a state without Sherlock there for support, never.

Sherlock stepped closer to the bed and said her name firmly, loud enough to break through the haze of drugs running through her system. "Harriet."

One eye was swollen shut, but the other opened and took a moment to focus. The iris was dark blue like John's, but the pupil was pinpoint. Despite the sutures and the obvious pain, she smiled weakly. Her words came out slurred, but recognizable. "Sherlock Fucking Holmes. So you're the lucky bastard who stole my Johnny's heart."

Sherlock brought her right hand to his lips for a kiss. "At your service."

"Where is she?"

"Calm down."

John snarled, "Don't fucking tell me to calm down. Sherlock said she was here. So, where is she?"

John attempted to step past him, but the older man blocked his path and grabbed John's arm. Lestrade said firmly, "Stop."

John froze, stared down at the hand, and then looked back up to meet dark eyes. His voice was icy and determined. "Let go."

"I'm trying to tell you that she's okay but that she doesn't want to see you yet."

"Get the fuck off me."

"John..."

Jerking away, John wiped a shaking hand over his face, working hard to figure it out. Hospital air always thinned in the waiting room, made it hard to catch his breath. Lestrade's words finally registered. "Why doesn't she want to see me? I mean, I know we argued, but..."

"It's nothing like that. Sherlock's with her right now."

Brow furrowed in confusion, he asked, "What? Why?"

"Let's sit down and I'll tell you what I know."

His lungs were suddenly too tight to take in enough air. John cleared his throat, gulping a few times, and he put a hand on his chest. He recognized Greg's comfort the victim voice and he hated it, hated that it was directed at him of all people. His own words came out breathy and pleading. "I need to talk to her. I need to know she's all right."

"I understand. Just sit down first before you fall down. You're white as a sheet."

John let Lestrade guide him to a chair and he put his head down, his eyes squeezed shut. Lestrade's open hand rested on his back between his shoulder blades. He'd never live it down if he passed out before he could find out about Harry. After a few moments, his vision cleared and he straightened up. "I want to talk to her doctor. I'm next of kin. I have the right to know what's going on."
"You do and you will, but you have to calm down first. You won't do her much good if we have to put you in a bed, too."

Lestrade made sense, but that didn't mean John had to like it. Usually calm in a crisis, he found himself unexpectedly confused. He was apparently great with dealing with other people's disasters, but not his own, not when it was his only sister who was hurt. "You're right." He took several deep breaths and then said, "Her doctor?"

"An Allison Collier, but she's busy with another patient. I can tell you that your sister's stable, that's the main thing. She's got a mild concussion, severe bruising of the face and torso, two cracked ribs, and a broken left wrist. She's got a few loose teeth and a split lip, but no broken jaw. There's no internal bleeding, no signs of sexual assault."

"Jesus Christ." The words huffed out. The very idea of someone raping his sister was nearly too much to consider. The rest of the injuries were relatively superficial, but they'd hurt like a son of a bitch before they mended. Still, she was alive and not critical. Relief washed over him and made him suddenly weak.

"They're going to admit her for a few days." Lestrade paused. "I'm sure the doctor will talk to you about other things she might need done while she's here and some aftercare."

John's frown deepened. "Like what?"

"Your sister was three times the legal limit for alcohol when she came in."

Realization dawned. His sister would need detox support to avoid alcohol withdrawal and possible serious side effects, including seizures or DTs, while in the hospital. They'd likely do liver function tests, too, probably should. "Yeah, okay. I'll talk to the doctor about that."

"Good, that's good." After a few moments, Lestrade said, "The men who attacked her, John, they could've killed her, but they didn't. It seems like they just wanted to rough her up. Does your sister owe any debts or have enemies that you know about?"

John sat back, his mind reeling with the suddenly real possibility that Miller had attacked Harry to get back at him. How the hell had Miller found out about her? Or maybe it wasn't Miller. Maybe it was somebody else that he'd pissed off while working with Sherlock. It could be any one of hundreds of arseholes that lurked in the dark. Hell, it could be fucking Moriarty himself for all he knew. He answered Lestrade, but his mind continued running down a list of possible suspects. "No debts that I know about, no enemies."

"Says she's unemployed, but she's got a nice address. How's she afford a place like that?"

"Her ex is a lawyer."

"Got money from the divorce, did she?"

"Yeah. Generous settlement."

"So, you've got no idea why someone would come after your sister, work her over just enough to make her suffer, and then take off? There's no grudge against her personally that you can think of?"

"I told you no."

"You're telling me fuck all."
John snapped to attention, but didn't meet Lestrade's intense stare. Sherlock never gave the man enough credit for being on the ball. "I don't know anything."

"And if you did, you probably wouldn't tell me."

John changed the subject. "Why is my sister talking to Sherlock instead of you about the case?"

"Guess she reads your blog, thinks he can solve the thing before we can."

"Could be."

"Or there's another reason."

"Which would be?"

"She's giving him the message the bastards left for you."

John cracked his neck sideways. "You think this is about me?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Why me and not Sherlock?"

"She's your sister."

"Could be a simple robbery."

"Could be, but if it is, I'll eat my badge."

Sherlock stepped into the waiting room. "Now that's a spectacle I'd pay to see."

John jumped up, his heart racing again. "Sherlock! How is she?"

Sherlock placed his hand on John's shoulder and squeezed, his voice calm and reassuring. "She's being transferred to her room. You can see her shortly."

"Room? Why not a ward?"

"I thought it prudent. Don't worry about the money. I'll cover it."

For once John didn't let his pride stop him from accepting a generous gift, especially one that might make his sister more comfortable. "Thanks. But how is she?"

Sherlock kept his hand in place, but glanced over at Lestrade. "Greg, would you excuse us? I need to talk to John alone."

"I need a statement."

"And you'll get it, in the morning. You've got her clothes bagged for evidence?"

"Yeah, we do."

"Then I suggest you process those for DNA and trace evidence. You'll also be receiving copies of the CCTV from the area where she was attacked. These aren't masterminds. I'm sure they weren't careful enough to hide from the cameras. When Ms. Watson is more comfortable and less under the influence of narcotics, she'll make her statement."
Reluctantly, Lestrade nodded and agreed. "All right, but first thing in the morning, yeah?"
"Fine."

As soon as Lestrade and the other officers stepped away to the elevators, Sherlock leaned in and whispered, "You never told me about wanting to be Dr. Who when you were eight and making your own sonic screwdriver."

Startled, John looked at him and then shook his head, torn between wanting to hug his sister or murdering her in her bed. "What the fuck did she tell you?"

"Many things, John, many things. However, I'll save the extortion for later. Right now we need to get upstairs and make sure your sister is protected."

Serious once again, John asked, "You think she's still in danger?"

"Possibly. Chances are they won't attack her in the hospital, but I can't be completely sure. They were foolish enough to assault her in broad daylight and steal her purse. That should make them much easier to track. I've already called about having her locks changed and her credit cards canceled."

"Shit, you've been busy."

"Yes, well, we need to move on this quickly before the police get too involved and hinder our efforts to apprehend them ourselves."

"You know who they are then?"

"Oh, yes."

Like a thirsty man who could hardly wait for a drink, John had to know. "Is it Miller's brother?"

"Yes, and another man named Lenny."

John faced heated, his throat dry as he spat out, "Bastards!"

"Their intent was to send you a message and to punish you for what you did to Miller's brother."

"Then it's our turn to punish back."

Sherlock shook his head. "No, not yet."

"Sherlock..."

"John, I understand your desire for revenge, but you cannot go after these men alone. That's what they want, to lure you into an ambush. We need a plan."

His left hand fisted, John seethed, but kept his anger in check. Sherlock was right. Going off half-cocked wouldn't do anything but make John feel a lot better. That said, if he ended up in jail, there would be nobody to keep Sherlock on the other side of the bars. The idea of his partner in prison forced a nod. "Okay, but it had better be a plan that includes me beating these sons of bitches into bloody pulps at some point."

"I think that might be arranged."

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Standing outside Harry's room, Sherlock touched John's shoulder, his voice calm, but tight. "You should prepare yourself."

"Lestrade told me what they did. I know it'll look worse than it is."

"Even so, it is, well, startlingly graphic."

John nodded, mentally steeling himself for seeing his sister's brutalized face. As he stepped inside the room, he saw her in the bed, hooked up to an IV pump and monitor. He moved closer and the air whooshed out of his body as he gasped, the world suddenly as silent as a dead soldier. War should have readied him, but his heart stuttered when he saw his sister's swollen face, the bruising extensive, one eye shut, the other blacked. "Oh, dear god...Harry." The words came out like a whispered prayer as he bowed his head to beg for forgiveness. His eyes squeezed shut as his hands gripped the raised rail of the bed. "I'm so sorry."

Harry stirred and coughed a few times. "Johnny?"

John reached out and took her right hand. "I'm here."

It took a few moments to focus, but then she managed to croak, "Doctor said I'd be okay."

"I know. You will be. I promise." Still holding her hand, he reached out and touched her cheek lightly. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

"Don't be a twat. Not your fault."

"If it weren't for me..."

"Shut it." He did, but then she added, "I don't blame you."

"I know, but..."

"No fucking buts. It's not your fault."

Taking a deep breath, John did his best to lie through his teeth. "Yeah, okay."

"You're the worst bleeding liar on the planet."

John saw her heart rate increasing, so he shushed her. "You need to rest, not worry about me."

She closed her eyes for a few seconds and her readings settled back to a more normal range. She licked her swollen lips and said quietly, "I don't want Mum to know about this."

John shook his head in protest. "She'll have to know, Harry. You can't keep something like this from her. She'd kill us both."

"I know. It's just, well, you know how she is."

"I do, yeah."

"This will be just the fucking ammunition she'll need to get me home and at her mercy."

"She loves you."

"She loves you, too, but when you got shot, did you come home to Mum or me? No." Her voice tightened and became harsher. "You didn't even tell us you were home for two fucking months.
How do you think that made us feel?"

"I'm sorry."

She squeezed his hand. "I know." She sighed and then groaned. "God, I feel awful. My head's fucking killing me."

John didn't offer to get the doctor or ask about more pain medication. He could already see from the IV pump that she was receiving all she could get. "You're going to feel that way for a while. No way around it. I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that. I know you're sorry. Shit."

John bit his tongue and licked his lower lip, his habitual sorry caught in his throat. He decided to change the subject. "Harry, what about Clara? Do you want me to call her?"

Harry turned her face away and shut her eyes again. "No reason to. She won't come. She's engaged, remember?"

"She still cares about you. She'd want to know."

"Better not. I don't want her to see me like this."

"Sure. I understand that."

John hated bringing it up, but he knew he had to hear about it directly from her. "Harry, I need you to tell me what happened, tell me about the men who did this to you."

She shook her head, stubborn to a fault. "No."

"No?"

"No, I told Sherlock."

John glanced over at his partner who had remained silent the whole time, which was completely out of character. Suddenly angry and a little bit paranoid, he argued, "Yeah? You don't even know Sherlock. Why would you tell him and not me? I'm your brother for fuck sakes! Don't you trust me? Don't you think I can find these bastards and put them in their fucking graves? Nobody touches my sister and gets away with it, nobody!" His rage exploded, unrestrained and ready to burn the world down around him.

"John, please, calm yourself." Sherlock's voice sounded glaringly out of place in the small room, but jarred him back to himself.

He shook his head and crossed his arms, working desperately to control his anger. His guts knotted, his insides all spiky and hot. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine, Johnny, not when you're like this," Harry reached out her hand again. Reluctantly, John took it. "You told me that Sherlock was the most brilliant man you ever met, right?"

"Yeah, I did."

"You've got to trust him to do this, to make sure you don't do something so bloody stupid that you end up in prison for the rest of your life or worse."

John protested, "That's not going to happen."
"I'm your sister. Don't fucking kid yourself that I don't know you."

John swallowed down the rage and frustration, the desire to rip somebody's head off, the need to do something to cancel out the injustice of having his sister hurt because of him. Shame heated his cheeks. "Harry, they can't get away with this."

"They won't." Sherlock stepped closer to the bed, his baritone voice a welcome interruption. "I assure you, as I have Harry, that they won't be getting away with anything. However, your sister is correct in asking me to help mitigate your efforts somewhat, to make sure that in pursuing retribution, you don't end up either deceased or imprisoned."

"God, he does talk pretty."

John shrugged at his sister's praise of his partner and agreed, "Yeah, he does."

"And he's right."

"I usually am."

John held up a hand and grudgingly admitted, "All right, so I've got a temper."

Harry chuckled and then clutched her side. "God, don't make me laugh."

Sherlock aimed his words at Harry. "Has he always been so explosive?"

"Wouldn't know it to look at him, but, yeah, always ready for a go since he was little. Didn't matter if the bloke was twice as big, either." She smiled the best she could with a stitched lip. "Won most of the time, too."

"I find it one of his most appealing features, though it can be rather challenging when it's aimed in my direction."

John interrupted, miffed at the teasing, not quite ready to give up the fight. "I'm right in the room, you two."

She squeezed his hand. "Believe me, I want these guys as much as you do, but I don't want to lose you in the process."

"You won't."

"Promise?"

John hated to say it, but he owed Harry. "Yeah, I promise."

Sherlock answered, suddenly more serious. "I need you to stay with your sister while I follow a few leads."

Harry protested, "I don't need a babysitter, Sherlock. Take him with you. I need you to keep an eye on him for me."

Sherlock turned on the charm. "I don't want to frighten you, Harry, but I haven't arranged for security yet."

"Security?"

"While I don't imagine these men are stupid enough to break into a hospital, I don't want to take
that chance. It's one of the reasons for the private room. It's far easier to secure than a ward bed."

"You really think they might come back?"

Sherlock spoke quickly to calm her fears. "If they do, there's no better person to keep you safe than your brother."

Harry relaxed and agreed with a nod. "Yeah, I know that."

John's irritated glare met Sherlock's calm gaze before he said, "Listen, Harry, I need to talk to Sherlock before he leaves. I'll be right outside."

"Okay." She closed her eyes to rest.

In the hallway John leaned in close. "You bastard."

"John..."

"No, you listen to me. You and Harry think I'm some kind of maniac because I want these bastards, but I'm not."

"I don't think that."

"Then why cut me out? Why leave me here while you run off and investigate on your own?"

Sherlock studied him for a few moments before he leaned in for a quick kiss, just a brief brush of the lips. When he pulled back, he spoke softly. "John, I meant what I said. Nobody could protect her better than you. At the moment, that's what she needs. It's what you need."

His anger diffused by the kiss, John still complained. "I hate when you think you know what's best for me."

"No, you don't."

"See, right there, always presuming you know me."

Instead of continuing the bickering, Sherlock touched his cheek gently. "These men are idiots. They've left a trail a blind man could follow. Our only puzzle will be how to make sure the justice system works better this time."

John captured Sherlock's hand on his face and kissed his palm. "Well, if you won't let me kill them, the least you can do is let me help arrest them and have a front row seat at their trial."

"Oh, John, there won't be any trial."

"No trial?"

"By the time we're done, they'll both be begging for a safe prison cell."

"Intimidation?"

"Promises."

John had never been so in love in his life.

&&&&&&&
After she checked Harry's vitals, Dr. Collier motioned for John to follow her to the hallway. She was an efficient looking woman with small features. Her long dark hair was pulled back into a bun which accented her high cheekbones. She wore no jewelry except for a gold wedding band and had black reading glasses perched on her head.

Outside the room she clutched Harry's file to her chest and said, "Dr. Watson, your sister has given me permission to talk about her case with you directly. We need to discuss her treatment plan."

"I see you're already treating her with IV ethanol and benzodiazepine."

Collier's eyes widened slightly, surprised at his observation. "I keep forgetting you're a medical doctor."

"I was a trauma surgeon, an army medic, and now a GP. I'm aware of the suggested treatment for detox to avoid seizures and other side effects from alcohol withdrawal."

"Yes, well, that should help while she's here. My concern is for when she's released."

"I can take care of her at home or hire a nurse to come in."

"I'm not really talking about her recovery from the physical injuries. Those should heal without complication. However, I'm sure you understand that she needs to be placed into a rehabilitation program. Her liver function is already seriously impaired. I can show you the blood work which indicates serious abnormalities."

John leaned back against the wall, arms crossed, head down. His left shoulder ached and the fresh pain in his leg reminded him of the early days right after being sent home. He knew it was stress, but knowing it didn't make it hurt less. Her words about Harry weren't a big surprise, but they were still hard to hear. "I want to see the results."

"I'll give you a copy. You must realize that she has to stop drinking to survive."

John knew that, knew it with all his heart that his sister would be dead soon if she didn't stop. He just didn't have a clue about how to make her want to quit. "Have you discussed this with my sister?"

"I have."

John studied her pinched expression and said, "Let me guess, she told you to sod off."

"Close enough. It's not unusual for an addict to be hostile when faced with the possibility of intervention, especially from a stranger."

"It's not any better coming from family and it won't do any good if we force her."

"Might keep her alive long enough for her to decide living is better than killing herself."

Collier hesitated before she added, "I know this is difficult. I'm sure you're aware that there are support groups for family members of alcoholics. This is not just your sister's disease, you know. You're as affected as she is."

How many times had he heard the same pitiful lecture? More times than he could count, and there was always the same empty result. None of it applied to him. He didn't need to listen to a bunch of fucking whingers going on and on about how life was so unfair and how their father or whomever was fucking up their lives. He made his own choices. They had nothing to do with his father or sister, nothing. Just the thought of relying on such a group made him want to wrap himself in
Semtex again and take out an enemy camp as he exploded into the hereafter.

John bit his tongue to avoid saying that out loud. He knew statements like that tended to give a guy a free pass to the psych ward upstairs. Instead, he simply kept his face a neutral mask and said, "I'm fine. I'll talk to her about it."

Collier didn't look fooled, but she didn't call him on it. Instead, she just said, "I'll get those test results to you."

"Thanks."

As soon as she walked away, John stepped back into the room. He turned off some of the extra lights, hoping to let Harry sleep for as long as she could. Despite all the drugs pumped into her system, her discomfort would only get worse before it got better as they reduced the pain medication. It wouldn't do her much good to add narcotics to her list of addictions.

Sometimes it was hell being a doctor, knowing what was going to happen and why, but not being able to fix it. Sometimes he just wanted to wipe his mind clean, start over and be as ignorant as the rest. Life would be so bloody easy.

John settled into the uncomfortable chair, shifting and trying to find a position that didn't hurt his shoulder so much. Despite his best efforts to keep quiet, Harry groaned several times. Her voice raspy, she asked, "Water?"

John cranked up the head of the bed and got her a cup with a straw. He guided it to her mouth and she took several long sips. He wiped her mouth gently with a tissue. "How are you feeling?"

"Like somebody tried to stomp my fucking brains out."

John put the cup of water down and tenderly brushed back the hair from her face. "It'll get better."

"This reminds me of that time I was in that wreck a couple of years ago. Remember?"

"I remember you wrote me about it. Ran off the road coming home from Mum's, yeah?"

"Yeah, did a number on myself and the car. Took two bloody months to get over that mess."

John could imagine she'd had a few drinks at home and then a lot more at the pub on the way back to London. But he didn't ask, didn't really want to dredge up the past when the present was bad enough. "I know it hurts, but try to think of something else. Better yet, go back to sleep for a while. Your body needs rest. Don't fight it so hard."

She took a deep breath and groaned a few more times, her eyes pinched shut from the pain. "God. Can't they give me something stronger?"

"They're giving you enough to put down an elephant."

"Then why do I hurt so much?"

"Harry, I think you know why."

Frowning, she tried to puzzled out what he was saying, but still didn't get it. "I don't understand."

"Your tolerance is so high, the stuff they're giving you doesn't manage the pain like it would for anybody else."
"But that doesn't make any sense. Booze isn't the same as painkillers."

"Harry, you've been using booze as a painkiller since you were twelve. Now your body's paying for it."

Angrily, she snapped, "I didn't cause this mess."

"No, but you've beaten yourself up pretty well over the years, especially since Clara left."

She cried and complained, "Don't judge me. You don't know what it's like."

John didn't want to argue, didn't want to give voice to the thunder rolling around in his head, not when she was lying in a hospital bed. Then again, he might not have another chance to get her attention. He tried hard to keep from shouting, but the words came out in a rush. "You don't think I know what it's like to hurt all the way down to your toes, to wonder if it's worth getting out of bed or even waking up ever again? You don't think I know what it's like to want to put a gun in your mouth and pull the trigger or jump off a bridge, or better yet, step in front of a bullet just to make it all end? You don't think I know about bone deep pain, the kind that rips your throat out before you can scream for mercy? You don't think I know about that, Harry? Well, you're wrong. I understand completely what it's like to want to throw your life away because it's more trouble than it's worth to keep living. Believe me, I know exactly what that's like."

Stunned, Harry didn't speak right away. Instead she just stared, her eyes wide and her face drained of color. Finally, she reached out her hand and whispered, "Johnny, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I just don't want to lose you." Tears streamed down his face, his words choking in his throat. "I want you to get help. Please."

"Was it therapy that changed it for you?"

"No."

"Then why do you think it'll work for me?"

"I don't know, Harry, but something has to change. You can't go on like this. You're going to die if you don't stop."

"All that stuff about killing yourself, was that because of the war?"

"Partly, and partly because they threw me out, sent me home with nothing to do and nothing to live for, completely useless to myself or anyone else."

"What stopped you from doing it then?"

"Sherlock."

She nodded in understanding, but then asked, "So, what about all that crap about getting better for yourself? How is you living because of Sherlock any different from me needing Clara?"

"Maybe it's not. Maybe it's just as fucked up. I just know it works for me. But this isn't about me, Harry." He beat his forehead with the fist of their hands clasped together before he pleaded. "You've got to give yourself a chance to keep going until you find what makes you happy. Whether it's somebody like Clara or for yourself, I don't know. I just know I'm a selfish bastard and I want you alive and healthy. That's not going to happen if you keep drinking."
John saw fear flash across her face. Her voice trembled. "I don't know if I can do it."

"You can."

"You don't know that."

"No, you don't know that. I know that you can if you want to. You're a stubborn bitch once you make up your mind."

Harry closed her eyes, squeezed his hand, and whispered, "I'm tired."

"I know. Sleep. We'll talk later."

"Don't push me, Johnny."

"I won't, but I won't give up, either."

"Little brothers are a fucking pain in the arse."

"So are big sisters."

"Bastard."

"Go to sleep, Harry."

John held her hand until she relaxed and then placed it in the bed beside her. He settled into the chair and dropped his face to his hands. His sister was enough to drive any man crazy.

John was no stranger to sleepless nights. In medical school, he would go for three day stretches, catching naps on spare gurneys between the influx of patients. During the war, battles raged for weeks and soldiers needed tending. It didn't matter that he hadn't slept for days on end and that he often worked on autopilot, his body numb and exhausted but still following orders.

The hardest part about sitting by Harry's hospital bed all night wasn't the lack of sleep, the bitter coffee, or even listening to her groan in pain. The most difficult thing was just sitting there, knowing he wasn't her doctor and he could do nothing to make any of it better.

Nurses came in off and on all night, checking her vitals, adjusting her IV, making sure Harry was as comfortable as she could be. They were all polite and kind, all good nurses. Nurses were the backbone of the NHS, he knew that. He had dated more than a few in his time, all fine women. Thinking back, there were some he really should have treated better. Youth didn't excuse everything he'd done, but that was another life, a life before the war, before part of him got ripped out and buried in the desert.

Morning light filtered through the window blinds just as he heard a familiar voice outside the door. He got up quickly before she could barge inside. He went into the hallway, right into his mother's arms. "Mum!"

"Oh, John!" She hugged him tightly before busy hands made desperate little touches to his hair and face as she pulled away. "What's happened to Harry?"

"She's going to be fine, Mum. Honestly. You shouldn't have come."

She looked at him like he'd slapped her. "Not come? She's my child. How could I not come?"
"I'm sorry. I just meant there's nothing you can do here."

"I can sit with her. A girl needs her mum at a time like this." His mother stared at him, really seeing him for the first time. "John, you look so tired." Her hand cupped his face and he held it there with his own, grateful for her touch.

"I'm fine."

"You don't look it." Fingertips traced the recent scar over his eye before she checked him out all over. "And you've lost weight. You're getting way too skinny."

"Mum, don't fuss." Then he asked, "How did you even get here?"

"Oh, that nice man brought me here."

John frowned. "What nice man?"

"Mr. Holmes. I believe he said he was your flat mate's brother." She leaned in a little, whispering as she added, "Would you believe he wanted me to ride in a helicopter?"

"A helicopter?" Mycroft Holmes fetched his mother all the way from Lincoln. John could hardly take it in. "I'm sure that didn't happen."

"Of course not. No, we came in his car instead. The man must live on the telephone. He was texting and using it most of the three hours it took to get here. She looked down the hall and waved her hand. "He's around here somewhere. I thought he was right behind me."

"Never mind." John put his hands on his mother's shoulders. She was about the same size as Harriet, just a little bit shorter. She seemed to have gotten so much smaller while he'd been away in Afghanistan, greyer, too. Despite the obvious aging, she still had strong eyes, alert blue eyes that saw far more than he wanted her to see sometimes. "Look, Mum, before you go inside, you should know that despite how bad she looks, she's really going to be okay."

"Oh, I know, dear. Mr. Holmes explained all that."

"Did he?"

"Yes, he said those nasty men would be punished, too. I get the impression that he's some kind of fancy policeman."

John has to stop himself from giggling at the description of the one of the most powerful, dangerous men in Great Britain, possibly even the world. "You might say that, yeah."

"He also said something about wanting to get to know your family better. I thought it a bit strange, but Harry did say you and this Sherlock person were good mates now."

"We are, yeah." John didn't have the energy to explain his relationship with Sherlock to his mum, not at that moment, not standing in the hospital hallway as he tried to prepare his mother for what she was about to see.

"I just don't want you to get too upset when you see her, that's all."

She studied him a little harder and then nodded. "You wouldn't lie to me."

"No, of course not. She's going to be fine."
"Then I can handle whatever she looks like."

"All right then."

As he turned to lead her inside, she put a hand on his arm. "I want to see her by myself, John. You take a break. Go down and get yourself some tea and something to eat."

"I'm fine. I don't need..."

"John, you need a break. That's an order."

John knew that tone all too well. She only used it when she'd had enough and wouldn't take any more disobedience. "Okay, but I won't be long."

"Take as long as you need." Then she opened the door and went inside. He stood there for a few moments more, hearing the sadness of her voice as it joined with Harry's cries, a mother and daughter reunion brought on because of his own carelessness.

As he stepped away and walked to the end of the hallway, he saw Mycroft standing there waiting, umbrella in hand, his face as dark as he had ever seen it. Mycroft spoke first. "Perhaps we should talk."

"About?"

"Your sister's treatment."

John took a deep breath, not in the mood for Mycroft's interference. He shook his head. "Not now. I'm going for tea."

"There's a small cafe not far from here. We could walk or take my car."

"The cafeteria downstairs is fine."

"It's a bit noisy for what we need to discuss."

Normally, John would have told him to piss off, but considering he had brought his mother into town personally, he owed him. He hated owing people, especially men like Mycroft Holmes. "Cafe it is then."

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John drank his tea and then asked, "Have you heard from Sherlock yet?"

"He should be calling you soon to ask you to join him."

John's mood brightened. "Then he has the men?"

"Not quite, but soon. He'll explain when he calls." Mycroft looked at his watch. "That should be in another hour or so."

"Good."

"I hope you appreciate how much effort has been put into all this, the manhunt and retrieving your mother. There have been quite a number of resources used in order to put things right, resources not available to the average citizen. Then again, it's not everyday that my brother actually comes to me for help."
John knew it cost Sherlock a lot to bring in Mycroft, but he also realized that he wouldn't do it if it weren't necessary. "I do appreciate it. Thank you, especially for being so kind to my mother." John hesitated, carefully gauging his words, not wanting Mycroft to get too big a head for being decent. "That was...unexpected."

"Well, it would have been a lot faster if she had been willing to return in the helicopter."

"She's afraid of heights."

"So I was told after the fact."

John suddenly had a feeling someone in research was going to get a serious reprimand for missing that little detail about his mum.

Mycroft sipped his tea and fiddled with the biscuit on his plate. If John didn't know better, he could be fooled into thinking Mycroft was actually nervous. "What is it? My mum rattle you that much?"

The older man straightened, offended by the notion of being upset by an elderly woman. "On the contrary. I found your mother interesting."

"Interesting? How so?"

"Well, she does like to go on a bit."

John smiled at that and shrugged. "Yes, she does like to talk."

"And her main topics seem to be your sister and you. She's apparently been quite worried about your sister since the divorce." He paused and then said, "However, she's quite proud of you, you know. She went on and on about you being a wonderful doctor and a war hero."

It was John's turn to be nervous, his face pinking up as he imagined his mother prattling on about him to Mycroft of all people. "She's my mum. She'd be proud of me no matter what. It's what mum's do."

"Is it?"

Mycroft looked at him somberly, and for the first time John realized that it wasn't just Sherlock who had been damaged by emotionally distant parents. John said, "It's what they're supposed to do. Doesn't mean it always happens."

"You're actually a very lucky man. She's a kind woman, your mother." Smiling, he teased, "She offered to knit me a jumper for Christmas."

John grinned and thought about all the jumpers his mother had made him over the years. "I'll bet you'd look quite dapper in one of her red jumpers."

"Perhaps." Mycroft shifted uneasily in his seat and then refocused, uncomfortable with the unexpectedly friendly conversation. "I wanted to talk about your sister."

"What about her?"

"I understand that her doctor is recommending a rehabilitation center once she's well enough to be released from hospital."

John pushed down his anger. He knew it was useless to be upset about Mycroft getting private medical records. He did what he always did, mettle. "Yes."
"Have you decided on a place yet?"

"I still haven't convinced her to go."

"Sometimes you have to step in and do what's best."

"She's not a child. She's a grown woman. I'd never do that."

"Not even to save her?"

"It would be a waste of time to do it against her will."

Mycroft took a few moments before he spoke, his voice a bit strained, obviously not comfortable with the topic. "When Sherlock went to the rehabilitation center, he didn't go willingly, not at first. However, I'm convinced that had I not intervened when I did, he would not have survived much longer."

Mycroft had never talked about that time and neither had Sherlock. "How did you get him to go at all?"

"He overdosed on cocaine, his drug of choice." Just the thought of Sherlock overdosing, nearly dying, left John chilled. He listened intently as Mycroft continued, "Being unconscious, near death, he had little choice in the matter. Believe me, once he awoke, he made his displeasure known to one and all."

"I'll bet." John could well imagine Sherlock was one hell of a pissy patient.

"Still, once the drugs were out of his system and he could think clearly again, he realized that there were other things he could do with his life rather than throw it away. I won't say it was easy, because it wasn't. I must credit Detective Inspector Lestrade to some degree for giving him the motivation to continue his sobriety."

"Because of the cases?"

"Yes. So, you see, I do understand your dilemma. Being the sibling of an addict can be quite torturous."

John sat back, his arms crossed. "I know she needs to go. I'm doing everything I can to convince her."

"There's a private rehabilitation clinic in Hampshire. I've made arrangements for your sister to be admitted once she leaves here."

John bristled. "That's overstepping. I appreciate it, but even if I convinced her, I could never afford a private place like that."

Mycroft eyes narrowed and then he shook his head, smiling in bemusement. "He hasn't told you yet, has he?"

"Hasn't told me what?"

"Sherlock's put your name on all his properties, including stocks and bonds, savings, even family money. You can easily afford her treatment."

John's mouth opened in shock. "He what?"
"You're a wealthy man, John. I'm sure if you want a detailed accounting, I can send you the papers or give you the name of our accountant."

Stunned was putting it mildly. Of all the things Sherlock could do to surprise him, doing something so outlandishly generous was top of the list. He really wasn't sure how he felt about it, being rich because of Sherlock, and it wasn't like he could return the favor. Half of his assets would hardly pay rent and buy a fancy night out. John wished Sherlock had discussed it with him first. Then again, he wouldn't be Sherlock if he didn't do whatever the hell he wanted, thinking John would just go along with it. He swallowed his pride and asked, "When did he do this?"

"Right after you said yes to his proposal."

John met Mycroft's sardonic gaze. "I never asked him to do that."

"Oh, I know. I quite sure it's all his doing. I do know my brother. Once he gets an idea in his head, there's little that will stop him."

"On that we agree."

"As to your sister, the arrangements have been made as a personal request from me. Even though you can well afford it now, it won't be necessary. The director owes me a rather large favor. All you have to do is get her there."

"That's more than generous."

"I've even made arrangements for your mother to stay in a cottage near the clinic. Your sister will need her support while she's in treatment."

John was tempted to believe that he'd been wrong about the man, that he really did have a heart. Still, he couldn't quite bring himself to change his opinion yet. "Thank you. I'll do everything I can to not let your favor go to waste."

"From what I gather, her condition, should she continue to drink, could become critical soon. I do hope you're successful in convincing her to take advantage of this opportunity."

John picked up his teacup, the liquid cold, but finished it off. All he could do was try. He hoped Harry was as tired of being drunk as he was tired of watching her drink.

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The text from Sherlock came in just in time to keep John from committing murder. His mother and his sister had been going back and forth between arguing and weepy apologies since he'd returned from the break. It was just like old times, times he'd rather not remember much less repeat.

As he checked the message, he smiled.

"Have packages. SH."

He sent back, "Where? JW."

Sherlock sent him the address of a warehouse about twenty minutes south by cab. He stood up and made an announcement. "I've got to go for a while. Try not to kill each other before I get back."

Harry complained, "You can't leave me here with her."

His mother pointed a finger at her daughter. "Harriett Watson, you'd best watch your tongue. Just
because you're in a hospital bed doesn't mean I can't make you regret it."

"See what I mean? She's impossible. Don't go."

Harriet pulled her sheet over her head like a little girl and his mother rolled her eyes. "John needs a break. We'll be fine without him for a bit."

Harry huffed sulkily and John got out of the room as fast as he could. How he could love his family so much and yet couldn't bear to be with them more than a few hours didn't make sense. Life didn't make sense. It just was.

By the time he got to the warehouse, it was midmorning. Rain had set in and he pulled his collar up against the cold. He texted, "Where are you exactly? JW."

Sherlock gave him exact instructions and John found his partner standing in the door at the back. John hugged him and then kissed him thoroughly. "God, I've missed you."

Smiling, Sherlock returned his kiss, his voice suddenly breathy. "Long night?"

"Not as long as yours. Do you have them?"

"I do." Sherlock guided him to a storage room that had been converted to an office. There was no heat, but he flipped on a light. Monitors were on the wall and Sherlock touched a button. On one of the screens John saw Miller and another man sitting down and chained to a table.

John noted the blood on their clothes and their bruised faces. He seriously regretted he hadn't been the one to do the damage. "They put up a fight?"

"A bit, not as much as expected. Mycroft loaned me a few of his men. Apparently brute force works better than logic with certain elements of our society."

"I hope you didn't have to promise Mycroft too much in return for his help."

"Help on two future cases. It was a small price to get this resolved quickly."

"Still, I don't like being in debt to your brother."

"It was well worth the price this time."

John couldn't take his eyes off the men sitting there, ordinary thugs, men who'd harmed his sister for no real reason other than to get back at him. His hands fisted and he bit his lower lip. He wanted nothing more than to show them the same treatment they'd given Harry. But he held his anger in check, tamped it down to a controllable level. "What's the plan?"

"That depends on you."

John frowned. "Me? Why?"

"Well, I've shown them the evidence not only for the crime against Harry, but to at least ten others assaults and robberies that the police haven't solved over the last year. I've made it quite clear that their best choice would be to make a deal so that their sentences would be concurrent rather than consecutive. They know that if we choose, we can call Lestrade right now and they'll be going away for quite a long time, fifteen years minimum."

"And why wouldn't we choose to do that?"
Sherlock put a hand on John's shoulder and turned him to look at him. He traced a finger along his jaw as he spoke quietly.

"I thought you might like to make a deal."

"Deal? What kind of deal?"

"I want to show them the footage of you with Miller's brother. Then I want to give them a choice."

John's eyes widened in understanding. "You want them to choose between going to the police with the evidence or fighting me, winner takes all. They go free if they can beat me."

"That was the plan, yes."

John took a deep breath and smiled. "You're a cunning man, Sherlock Holmes. I like it."

"John, are you sure? If they choose to fight, it'd be two against one. They could win and go free."

"You don't think I can take those bastards?"

"Normally, yes, but you've been injured. Your chest wound isn't completely healed."

John put both hands on Sherlock's face and studied the concern in those pale blue eyes. "I love you."

"I love you, too, which is why I now think we should call Lestrade and wash our hands of these whole business."

"No. " John kissed Sherlock, their tongues wrestling. They pulled apart only for air. John caught his breath and then spoke huskily. "Let them make the choice. I've fought far more men in a lot worse shape than I am now and with none of the motivation."

"And if they choose to simply be arrested and go to prison. Can you let it go without the blood sport?"

"I have to admit, I'm hoping they'll take option B."

"I can see that."

John frowned at Sherlock's worried expression. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Then why the look?"

"What look?"

"Like you think I'll regret it if I have to fight."

"No, it's not that."

"Then what?"

"If you do fight, you can't kill them."

John stuttered, not sure how to feel about Sherlock recognizing his darkness even when he tried to hide it from himself. "What? No, of course not. I wouldn't do that."
"You're sure?"

"I'm not saying I wouldn't want to, but I won't unless there's no other option."

Sherlock nodded, reluctantly accepting his answer. "Then I suggest we go in and show Miller and his cohort some interesting footage."

John had never seen the CCTV video of him fighting off the men who attacked Mrs. MacPherson. It was surreal to see himself in action, like it wasn't him, like it was some other man beating and kicking the bastards into submission. John stood in the corner of the small room, arms folded, watching himself as well as the reactions of the two prisoners. He could see the men flinching back from each blow or kick on the screen. Deep down it pleased him to see the alarm building.

When it finished, Sherlock clicked off the screen. "You've seen what happened. You've seen that Dr. Watson came to the woman's aid and in no way initiated the contact. It was your brother and his friend who did that."

"Bloody hell, was that for real?" Miller's eyes flicked back and forth from the dead screen to John. "I assure you it was quite real." Sherlock added, "We've given you the proposal. You can fight Dr. Watson two against one. There will be no weapons of any kind. If he wins, you two will still go to prison. If he loses, you go free."

Miller asked, obviously not believing a word of it. "Go free?"

"Yes."

"No charges at all?"

Sherlock nodded. "Correct."

The young man beside him tugged at Miller's arm. "I'm not fightin' him, no way."

Miller yanked away. "Don't be a pussy, Lenny."

"I ain't no pussy, but I ain't no fool, neither. No fuckin' way I'm fightin' that guy. I'm not takin' a beating or getting killed for nobody. I should've never let you talk me into this mess. This is all your bloody fault."

Sherlock smiled derisively. "Well, then the odds just got better for my friend. If you choose to fight, it'll be one on one."

Miller stared over at John, deflated by the sudden lack of backup. "Look, mate, you have to understand."

John spoke for the first time since the video finished, his voice low and angry. "I understand you're a fucking coward who beat up an innocent woman."

"Joe told me that it was all on you. I mean, he nearly died for fuck sakes. What was I supposed to think?" He thumbed at the screen. "But he didn't tell me about some old lady. If I'd known that, I would've let it go."

"But you didn't."
"Listen, I could've killed her, but I didn't. I made sure to pull my punches, that should count for something. I made a mistake, all right?"

John shook his head, his face grim, his heart pounding. All the pain in his leg was gone, his body urging him into combat. His words were harsh and threatening. "No, it's not all right. I didn't fight a fucking war so that some punk could beat up my sister because he was pissed at me. If you want to come at me, then you come at me, not my family, you bastard."

Miller actually shrank away from John who had stepped forward. He held up his hands in surrender, the chain linked to his wrist cuff rattling. His eyes were wide, his voice shaky. "You're right. I'll admit it. We shouldn't have done it."

His own eyes narrowed, John sniffed the air. The small space reeked of sweat and sheer terror. It was all he could do not to jerk the man up and beat him against the wall, to smear his brain against the concrete. He spoke through clenched teeth. "I want you to fight, just me and you."

Shaking his head, Miller glanced over to Sherlock before looking back at John. His nerve and voice broke. "I'm not fighting a crazy man. I'm not stupid."

Sherlock chimed in. "That's debatable."

Miller spoke quickly. "We'll take the deal."

"I assure you that if you recant, we will track you down and make life very difficult."

"Yeah, we fucking get that, okay. Jesus. Now can you call the police and get this maniac away from me?"

John stood there, his chest tight, his eyes narrowed and focused in on Miller's neck. It would be so incredibly easy to snap it, to make the man dead and paid up for his crimes, too fucking easy. It was Sherlock's strong hand on his arm that brought him back to his senses. "John, step away."

John blinked several times, clearing his mind of the stream of images, all the dead enemy soldiers littering the crowded ground inside his head. Without speaking, he nodded and went outside. Leaning back against the icy block wall, he squeezed his eyes shut. So close and yet so far away, his mind wanted to linger in the huts of Afghanistan. It wanted to stay deployed but he fought hard to get himself back to the present, to the world with Sherlock, the only anchor he had to another reality, one where he spared others and still stayed alive.

In his head he was a doctor, he helped people, cured them, sewed them up when they were blown to bits. In his heart he was a soldier, a man who killed other men, the enemy, anyone who hurt his family, friends, or fellow soldiers. The friction between them made lightning strikes in his gut, made him explode with the energy of confusion. Was he a doctor or soldier? How could he be both? He had no idea who he was anymore or how to contain the power of the blast he felt building inside his belly.

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It took hours for Lestrade and his team to arrive, take statements, gather the evidence, and take Miller and his partner into custody. John stayed out of the way as much as possible, too concerned that a snide comment might set him off, make him forget the deal and finish off the men he hated. Then all of Sherlock's work would be for nothing.

Standing to the side in the far corner, he saw Donovan head his way. He was exhausted and in no mood to put up with her cheek. She stepped up and asked, "Is it true?"
"Is what true?"

"That you're going to marry the Freak."

John pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his brow with his left hand before he said, "I'm tired and it's none of your business."

"Then it is true."

"Sally, I'm serious. I really don't want to get into this right now."

Something in his tone must have convinced her to back off. She nodded, but then said, "I'm sorry about your sister."

"Thanks."

"I mean, I'm not sure how I would handle it if someone came after one of mine. I think I might lose it."

John studied for her for a moment. "What's your point?"

"No point. I'm just saying, I guess I understand why the Freak decided to do it this way. Confessions are always a lot easier to process than going the long way round. Following procedure takes time. It's hard to be patient when it's personal."

"The confessions will hold up."

"I hope so." Donovan glanced over as Miller and Lenny were being led away. "I'd hate to think they'd get off on some technicality like being kidnapped and coerced to confess under duress."

John stood straighter and stepped just a bit closer, his voice low. "You think that's what happened here, that we kidnapped these thugs and forced them to say they did something they didn't do?"

Sally's chin came up. "I didn't say that."

"But you implied it."

"I just..."

"Need to shut your mouth and listen. Sherlock just brought in the men who beat my sister and closed ten other cases you couldn't be bothered to do fuck all about. He broke no laws and the cases are airtight. You should be thanking him, not making insinuations."

Her dark brown eyes studied him and then she gave a quick nod. "All right."

"Good, and another thing, stop calling him the Freak."

"Why should I? It's a free country."

"You do it one more time in my earshot and I'll file a complaint."

"You'd do that?"

"In a heartbeat."

"Why?"
"Because he's the man I'm going to marry and maybe he doesn't care about your disrespect, but I do."

Donovan pursed her lips and then shrugged in defeat. "Okay, I get that." Then she added, "You know you just cost me twenty quid, right?"

"Twenty quid for what?"

"I bet it wasn't true, that you weren't really going to marry the Fr...I mean, Holmes."

"There's a betting pool? About Sherlock and me? Seriously?"

"Yeah."

God, some people really would gamble on anything. John's lips thinned into a tight grin. "Who won the money?"

"Would you believe Anderson? He said you two were together from the start."

John's grin got a little bigger. "He's wrong. We haven't been together that long, less than a month."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Then I guess he doesn't get the money after all. It'll go to Molly Hooper at Bart's." The irony of Molly winning the bet about their love life wasn't lost on him, but he didn't comment.

She thumbed in the direction of the door. "I've got to go. We'll be in touch if there are any hiccups in the processing."

"There won't be."

"Just sayin', that's all."

As she left, Sherlock came up to stand by John's side. "Was Donovan harassing you?"

Instead of answering the question, he asked, "Did you know there was a betting pool on us getting together?"

"I did, yes. Lestrade lost."

"How much, and why didn't you tell me?"

"Forty quid at last count. I didn't really find out until recently and then the attack happened. There hasn't been time to talk about much else."

John nodded, suddenly a bit faint and his legs wobbly. With the adrenaline gone, his whole body wanted to sag. "I think I need to sit down for a minute."

Sherlock put a hand on his arm and led him to a chair, his face filled with concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Give me ten and then I need to head back to the hospital."

"You need to go home and go to bed."
"I can't."

"Why not? Harry's safe and you're exhausted. You should rest and then go back to the hospital tonight."

John closed his eyes for a moment, seriously tempted, but he knew he couldn't, not yet. "My mum's at the hospital."

"Yes, I know. Mycroft told me."

"I can't leave Harry and Mum alone for too long."

"Why not?"

"They'll tear each other apart. Worse, when Harry gets fed up, she'll tell her about us."

Sherlock expression shifted, just slightly, but enough to show his disappointment. "You don't want your mother to know about us?"

John snorted in amusement. "Don't be an idiot." He reached out and took Sherlock's gloved hand. "I want to be the one to tell her. I don't want her to find out because Harry's pissed and trying to deflect attention from her own troubles."

Relieved, Sherlock nodded. "Then let's go and you can introduce me to your mother."

Taking a deep breath, John stood up, still holding onto Sherlock. "Are you ready for this?"

"You invaded Afghanistan and I've taken down master criminals. How hard can it be to meet your mother?"

John laughed for the first time in days. "You haven't met my mum."

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As they neared the door to Harry's hospital room, Sherlock grabbed John's arm to stop him. "I fear we might be too late?"

"What? Why?"

"You don't hear that? Your mother is bemoaning the fact that she might never be a grandmother."

"Shit."

"Perhaps now would be the appropriate time for a strategic retreat."

"You mean run and hide until we come up with a better game plan?"

"I believe that's what I said."

Before they had a chance to leave, the door came open and his mother stood there, small and frail, her face puffed up and red from crying. She had her hands on her hips and didn't look the least bit happy. "John Hamish Watson! How could you?"

Deflated, John hated the idea of upsetting his mother. "Mum, I was going to tell you, but there just hasn't been time."
She waved away his excuse, frustrated and angry. "How could you get engaged and not tell me?"
His mother smacked him on his chest, but not hard, just enough to get his attention. Then she
turned to Sherlock. "So, you're the one, the Sherlock Holmes everyone's talking about."

Sherlock bowed his head slightly. "Please, call me Sherlock."

John's mother eyed him up and down and then settled her gaze on his face before smiling. "Well,
Sherlock, I can see why he fell for you. You are a fair piece of gorgeous. Bet you're smart as a
whip, too. He likes clever, my John."

Sherlock's face lit up with one his best charming smiles. "Thank you. He does seem rather fond of
me."

"So, what are your intentions?"

"I assure that my intentions toward your son are completely honorable."

"They damn well better be. He's a good boy, my John. He's a doctor and a war hero, you know."

"I do know that, yes."

John blushed, embarrassed by his mother talking about his personal life in the middle of the
hallway with nurses walking by giggling their arses off. "Mum..."

"Hush, I'm talking to your fiance." She focused back on Sherlock. "So, when's the wedding?"

"That's entirely up to your son."

Both his mother and Sherlock's heads swiveled at the same time. They stared at him, as if waiting
for him to set a date right that second. He shook his head as if waking from a dream. "Wait a
minute. I..."

His mother interrupted. "If you want to get married, John, you should go ahead and do it. No need
to dither. Life's just too short to waste time. You're already living together. Might as well make
honest men of one another."

"Mum, would you stop? Jesus."

"I agree, John, we really shouldn't live in sin, as it were. It's up to you to guard my virtue and
reputation."

John glared at Sherlock who was obviously having way too much fun at his expense. "Like
anything I could do would rescue your reputation."

His mother smacked him lightly again. "Now, stop that. I'm serious. We need to set a date." His
mother expression became sober. She tenderly brushed back John's hair from his forehead with her
fingertips as she spoke quietly. "I mean, I don't understand why you suddenly decided to turn gay,
John, but I'm sure you had your reasons. If you're going to be with a man, you should do it the right
way."

John knew it took a lot for his mother to be so open-minded. He'd seen all she'd gone through when
Harry had first come out. She'd checked out every book in the library on homosexuality and spoke
to church and medical counselors about what to do. It took years for her to fully accept Harry for
what she was, her biggest complaint being that Harry and Clara never wanted to have or adopt
babies.
So, he truly appreciated her being so understanding this time around when it was his turn to ruin her plans for grandchildren. He drew her into a hug and kissed the side of her cheek. "I plan to." He drew back and looked her in the eyes. "But first we have to get Harry sorted."

From inside the room Harry shouted out in annoyance. "Harry can sort her own shit, thank you very much. Don't use me as an excuse, you sorry sod."

John closed his eyes and prayed for patience. "Let's get out of the hallway and talk about this in private."

Sherlock hesitated and then said, "Perhaps I should wait out here. It's family business."

John shook his head and took his arm. "Uh huh, you don't get off that easily. You are family now."

His mother nodded in agreement. "Yes, oh, and that nice brother of yours, too."

"Nice brother? Mycroft is the nice brother?"

His mother tutted at his tone. "Now, don't be like that, Sherlock. He was so very kind and brought me all the way from home to be with Harry in his own car. He was quite lovely."

"I assure you..."

"Yes, he's a very nice brother." John cut Sherlock off. He gave him a quick wink before they entered the room, his hand guiding his mother inside. John joked to his mother. "And he said he's really looking forward to you knitting him that jumper."

"Really? I'm so glad. Oh, he's going to look smashing in red."

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow and John leaned over to whisper. "I'll explain later."

"No need." Sherlock smiled and whispered back. "I think we should impress upon her how fond he is of Christmas motifs. A reindeer would be outstanding."

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After an hour of nearly constant bickering, crying, and swearing, John put his hands up in the air in defeat. "I give up."

"Good, because I'm sick of hearing your shit. It's my life and what I do with it is none of your fucking business."

"Listen..."

Before he could finish, Sherlock touched his shoulder and gave a suggestion. "John, perhaps you and your mother should go have some tea. You haven't eaten all day and you're tired. I think we could all use a break. Calmer heads and all that."

"But..."

Harry chimed in. "Yeah, go on, piss off. Just leave me the hell alone." She turned her head away and covered her face with her good arm, looking so much like the little girl he used to fight with when they were kids. Only this time it wasn't about who got the best toys or who had to do what chores. It was about saving her life.

John didn't want to leave yet, but his mother said, "It might be best to let her rest."
He needed to finish, talk some sense into his sister, but Sherlock and his mother were right. They weren't getting anywhere and his head was killing him. He needed tea and food, in that order. Outside the door, Sherlock said, "You two go on down to the cafeteria. I'll join you shortly. I'd like to chat with Harry on my own for a bit."

His mother frowned in surprise, like she couldn't imagine what Sherlock could be playing at. "She's not going to listen to you any more than to me or John. You see how she is."

"I do, yes, but I'd like to try."

His mother shrugged and took John's arm. "Fine. Maybe you can talk some sense into her."

Sherlock gave John a quick nod and then went back inside, quickly closing the door behind him. John wasn't sure what to think. Sherlock's expression seemed to indicate a plan, but John was far too exhausted to figure out what it could possibly be. His mother tugged at his arm. "I'm hungry and you must be starving."

"I am a bit, yeah."

In the cafeteria, his mother got chicken soup and a tuna sandwich. He got spaghetti with marinara that didn't look too much like hospital slop and a small salad. They both ordered large cups of tea, trying to get his bearings. So much had happened in the last few days and his body was complaining about the abuse, twinges all over, when a shooting pain in his left shoulder suddenly caught him off guard.

When he flinched and his breath hitched, his mother asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, just tired." He rubbed the offending shoulder and then rolled his head to ease the tense neck muscles.

"You've been up all night and today, too. You should go home and rest. I'll stay with Harry."

"Harry will be fine with neither of us here tonight. You need to rest, too."

"I wouldn't want to leave her."

"I know, but the danger's gone now. She doesn't need guarding."

"It's not about guarding her. I want to be here if she needs me."

John looked up into his mother's blue eyes and remembered all the times as a child when he'd been sick or injured and how those same blue eyes were there watching over him, making sure he had everything he needed to get well again. "You're a wonderful mother, you know that, yeah?"

Her cheeks colored with delight and she smiled warmly. "Thank you."

"I never realized how lucky we were to have you, not when I was younger. I do now." He pushed his food around on the plate, hungry, but not really able to eat. His stomach was still tied in knots. He needed Harry to get better, to go to rehab. The case wasn't over until she agreed. Then he froze. When the hell had getting his sister help become a case? When had he started to think so much like Sherlock? He snorted to himself and shook his head in disbelief. There was no way he was telling Sherlock just how much being with him had changed the way he thought about his life and the people in it.
"What is it, dear?"

"Nothing." He changed the subject. "I hope Sherlock can convince her."

"I don't know what he can say that we haven't." She ate her soup and nibbled at her sandwich. "He's an interesting man, though. I can see why you fell for him."

"Interesting?"

"Different. Oh, I can see he's attractive, but it's more than that, isn't it? He's got clever eyes, the kind that look right into you. He's the kind of man who could see and keep all your secrets."

John knew his mother was intuitive, had a way of knowing things she couldn't possibly know with just a look or conversation. He always thought he got his gift for reading people from her. Still, she was right on the mark and it surprised him. She'd only just met Sherlock and she saw what he'd seen since that first day. "What an odd thing to say."

"But I'm right."

"You are, yeah. He doesn't just see, but observes, and I trust him with my life."

"Oh, I sussed that out right away. He watches everything, but especially you, dear. I've seen that look enough to know."

"What look?"

"The look of love. It's like he's wearing a flashing neon sign."

John couldn't help but chuckle. "And me? Am I wearing a flashing neon sign, too?"

"Maybe not neon, but you've certainly got the look of a man who's in love." She paused and her expression softened and became a bit sad. "But there's something else, something I hadn't noticed before today."

"Yeah?"

"I don't want to upset you."

"Why would you upset me?"

"It's nothing. I shouldn't have said anything."

"Mum..."

"No, I'm just tired and worried about Harry." She waved him off and asked, "Do you really think Sherlock can help?"

John wasn't sure what she was going to say, but it bothered him that she obviously didn't feel comfortable telling him what she thought she saw in his face.

But he didn't have time to think about that. At that moment he had to focus on Harry. He had to decide whether he should tell her about Sherlock's background. It was Sherlock's story to tell, yet she might understand that Sherlock had insight into Harry's condition if he explained at least part of it. "Sherlock is a recovering addict, but he's been sober for six years."

Her eyes widened in alarm. "Addict? Sherlock?"
"I was surprised, too. But maybe he'll be able to relate to her better than we can because of it. He's actually been through it."

She put her spoon down and leaned in, her voice very low. "When you say addict, what do you mean exactly?"

"Cocaine."

"Oh, dear." She dabbed at the edges of her mouth with her napkin, taken aback by the news.

"Like I said, he's been clean six years."

"I know, John, but once an addict..."

"He's fine now. He'll continue to be fine." He lowered his gaze to his plate, the red sauce more like blood splatter than food. He shoved the dish away, his appetite completely gone. He closed his eyes as he spoke, pushing away the swarm of dead faces in his head, the wounds and mutilations that flooded his internal vision all played out with background explosions and machine guns firing. The war was over and he was back in London, safe, talking to his mother, safe, not a captive, not a soldier. He wasn't going to do this here, not now.

"John?"

A hand touched his arm. Startled, he jerked away. "What?" It took him a moment to realize his mother was standing beside him instead of sitting at the table. "Mum?"

She studied him and then patted his cheek, her face clouded with concern. "You need to go home and rest. You're not yourself."

He didn't understand. His words came out angrier than he intended. "What? Who am I if I'm not myself?"

"Let's go upstairs. Sherlock can take you home."

"Mum, I'm not a child. I don't need anyone to take me anywhere."

"I know that, John, but you scared me just then."

John frowned and heard the distress in his mother's voice. "Scared you?"

"For just a moment you weren't here."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course, I was here."

"No, you weren't. You were somewhere else, somewhere horrible." She paused and tilted her head, her gazed fixed on him. "The war I think."

John sucked in his breath. He never wanted anyone to see him like that, when he went inside himself, fought the war in his head, especially not this mother. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right, dear. I understand."

Suddenly angry again, he snapped, "Understand? How can you possibly understand when I can't understand it myself?"

"It's like your Grandfather Hamish."
John only had faint memories of his grandfather, and those were all done up in black and grey, no color or sound, like an old silent film, grainy and unclear. "What's Grandfather Hamish got to do with anything?"

His mother sat back down across from him before she spoke, her words soft and full of sorrow. "My da was a wonderful man and I loved him very much."

"Of course you did. He was your Da."

"But he'd been in the war, my da. I remember when I was a teenager how he would sometimes get that same look you just had, like he'd gone away to some place full of terrible things. He never talked about it." She stopped and looked up, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Do you remember your Grandfather Hamish at all?"

"Not well. I was little when he died."

"You were five when he shot himself."

The words punched his breath away. "Shot himself?"

"Yes." She frowned in surprise. "You didn't know?"

"No, I mean, I guess I should have, but I don't remember."

"I suppose it's not surprising. You were so little and we never talked about it. Harry knew, though. I'm surprised she never mentioned it."

John knew about the devastation to a family because of suicide. He'd seen it in his practice and in the army. Yet, he had no memory of his grandmother or mother reacting to his grandfather taking his own life. "Did he leave a note?"

"No. Mum always thought it was the war, though. She said he was never the same when he got back, said he was shell-shocked. I mean, I didn't know him before. I just always thought that's the way a da was supposed to be."

John shook his head to clear it. His grandfather had suffered PTSD in a time when they were just beginning to even treat it. The poor man had suffered, hurt so much that he'd killed himself. Well, fuck. It was just another shitty thing to find out to make the day brighter. "I had no idea." He met his mother's gaze. "I'm sorry. That had to be hard for you."

"It was harder for Mum. She kept saying how she wished she'd have done more, maybe forced him to go in for treatment. Maybe he wouldn't have done it if she had."

"The treatment then, well, it wasn't very good. I'm sure she did everything she could."

"But the guilt, it was harder than the grief."

"I'm sorry."

She waved off the apology. "John, I'm telling you this because just then, for that few minutes when you wouldn't answer me, you reminded me of him."

An icy cold washed over him as he understood what she was really saying. "I'm not him, Mum. I'm not your father. I'm not going to shoot myself."

Her voice broke. "No, but you might do something to get yourself killed all the same."
"That's not true."

"That's not the way Harry tells it. She showed me your blog, all that running around, working with the police, doing dangerous things."

"That's not about killing myself, Mum. That's about making things safer for everyone else."

A tear ran down her cheek. "You became a soldier for the same reason."

John stiffened in his chair, finding it harder to take in air. "I can't be a soldier anymore, but I can still help make a difference in the world."

His mother hesitated before she asked, "Are you sure that's all it is? Not something else?"

He reached out for her hand and squeezed it in reassurance, his voice hoarse, but level. "I'm sure."

She bit her lower lip and then nodded in acceptance. "All right. I just think you might want to get some rest, not let yourself get so rundown. It's easy to get blue when you're tired."

"I'm not blue. I mean, Sherlock caught the men who hurt Harry and I'm engaged. I've got everything in the world to make me happy, well, except for Harry refusing to go to rehab."

"I'm not blue." He repeated himself.

"I believe you, John."

But he could see in her eyes that she didn't. It made him tired all over to know that he worried his mother. He decided retreat was his best option. "I suppose we should go upstairs and see if Sherlock has managed to change her mind."

"Well, if he has, he deserves a medal."

"I'll take that medal, Mrs. Watson."

They both turned to find Sherlock standing a few feet away and wearing a smug smile. John asked in stunned amazement, "You did it?"

"I did."

His mother asked, "But how? What did you say?"

Sherlock held up a hand and shook his head as he stepped closer. "My conversation with Harry is confidential. All I will say is that she has agreed to be moved to the clinic in Hampshire just as soon as Dr. Collier releases her. I've been told that should be sometime tomorrow afternoon. The clinic will be able to make modifications in her treatment plan due to her physical injuries, so there's no reason to wait. I've made arrangements with Mycroft for the transfer."

His mother clapped her hands in delight and then jumped up to wrap her arms around Sherlock's middle, resting her head against his chest. "Oh, thank you, thank you so much!"

Sherlock stood there with his arms held out to the side, befuddled and not quite sure what to do. When he looked at John with confusion, John smiled back and moved in for Sherlock's very first ever group hug.

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John sagged down onto the sofa, his eyes closed, his muscles so heavy he had no idea if he would
make it up to their room for the night. Sleeping on the sofa suddenly seemed like a much better idea.

"Tea?"

Opening only one eye, John watched Sherlock take off his coat and head to the kitchen. "Tea? You want me to make it?"

"I'll do it."

"You don't make tea."

"Stop blithering and relax. I'm brilliant. I can manage tea. I don't know why you and Mrs. Hudson persist in the notion that I can't make the most basic of English infusions."

"Because you rarely do?"

Huffily, Sherlock asked, "Do you want tea or not?"

"Sure, okay. Tea sounds good."

Sherlock busied himself with the kettle and the cups, clearing away one of his experiments to make room for the preparations. He was far too wound up and there was no way he was going to bed anytime soon. John feared it was going to get a lot worse if he didn't figure out the problem. He really wasn't in the mood for violin music all night.

With a slight groan, John struggled to sit up and leaned his head back against the cushion. He blinked several times as the room swam back into focus. He really was more tired than he thought.

He cleared his throat before he spoke. "Thanks for Harry."

Sherlock snapped, "Don't keep thanking me."

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. It's just you and your mother have thanked me a total of twenty-eight times, far more than is warranted."

"We're grateful."

"I understood that the first time you said it. Repetition is boring. Why is that such a difficult concept to grasp for you people?"

"And that's what you're pissed about, being thanked?"

Sherlock kept his back to John as he waited for the kettle to boil. "I'm not angry."

"Could've fooled me."

"Not hard to do in your present state of exhaustion."

A surly Sherlock after the day he'd had was just too much, so John stood up, ready to be done with it. "You're right, I am tired. Maybe I'll skip the tea and go straight to bed if my gratitude is too much for your genius to handle."

Sherlock turned around to face John, his face suddenly gloomy and only slightly contrite. "Don't. I just...well...this whole business with your sister has been very unsettling on many levels."
John dropped back down again on the couch, but leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, scrubbing his face with both hands. His eyes felt like sandpaper, his mouth like cotton. "I get that."

They stayed silent for a few more minutes while Sherlock finished the tea. John had nearly dozed off when his partner put the cup in front of him on the coffee table. "Drink this and then you can go to sleep." Sherlock settled down beside him and sipped his own tea.

Nodding, John picked it up and drank, the heat against his tongue warm and familiar. Sherlock had actually gotten much better at fixing tea just the way he liked it, hot, strong, and no sugar. John wanted to wait until morning, but he couldn't. He just had to ask. "So, how did you do it?"

"Our conversation..."

"Is confidential. I know, I understand that, but what did you say that made her change her mind? I have to know."

Sherlock finished his drink and then stood up again, pacing while he spoke. "I don't like talking about my own history with drugs, but I felt it was appropriate to reveal some aspects to your sister. She did seem to respond better, thinking that similar experiences might give us a connection. Whether that's actually true or not, I don't know. I do know that your sister is a very bright, but incredibly depressed person. I think the breakup of her marriage was a tipping point in her life. She's been on a self-destructive spree since then."

"I know that."

"Did you also know that she wants to be a professional photographer?"

John remembered all the photos she'd taken over the years, all the pictures his sister had sent him while he was Afghanistan. "I know she enjoys putting a camera in all our faces at holidays. I had no idea that she actually wanted to do it for a living. She never said."

Sherlock finally stopped going back and forth and stood still in front of the window, looking out over the city. "I stopped taking drugs, not because I no longer wanted them, but because to do the work, I had to be fit. Lestrade would not let me work with him if I wasn't sober and my other cases weren't challenging enough to keep my interest."

John remember Mycroft making a similar statement, that it was Lestrade who'd really motivated Sherlock to change and to get clean. It would seem he owed the Inspector quite a lot more than he ever imagined.

Sherlock's final words triggered his realization. "So, are you saying that if you didn't have the work, you would use drugs again?"

Sherlock turned and met his worried gaze. "No, not anymore, not since I met you. Before then, well, that might have been a strong possibility. But you're missing the most important point of this story."

"Which is?"

"Which is, I promised Harry that if she finished the program, I'd find her a school to study photography which could lead to an internship and eventually a job."

"Can you do that?"

"I can, yes. I have several contacts who can get her a placement and even a scholarship. I'm
actually quite well connected in the art world."
"That's bloody brilliant."
"You approve of my tactics?"
"I do. You're a genius."
Sherlock finally smiled. "I keep telling you that."
"I do love you, you know."
"I do know, yes."
John teased, "But I'm repeating myself. Are you going to get pissed if I keep saying it?"
Sherlock's expression softened. "Some things are worth repeating."

Sherlock read through the list of over one hundred possible cases. While he'd been busy hunting down the fools who had assaulted Harry, there were several people who had written to enlist his help in situations that actually showed promise. He might not be bored without the police after all. Nothing would suit him more than to finally have an interesting case to help him delete the nastiness of the Miller brother from his memory.

As he clicked to open an email, he heard the first strangled scream. He stiffened and waited. Sometimes John's sleep disturbance would only last a few minutes and he would settle down rather quickly. A crash from upstairs had Sherlock on his feet in seconds, hurrying to check on John.

As he entered the bedroom, Sherlock saw the bedside table overturned, the lamp and alarm clock shattered. John groaned and thrashed in the sheets, calling for his men to take cover. A whole list of commands followed as John ordered the soldiers in his dream to stay down or apply pressure to imaginary wounds. Then John suddenly jerked sideways and rolled over, pulling himself into a tight ball, screaming in agony.

Startled by the dream's unexpected intensity, Sherlock kneeled beside John and reached out to wake him, only to find himself suddenly punched and kicked off the bed. Bright stars filled his field of vision as Sherlock shook his head to clear his sight. It was the first time John had actually hit him while asleep. John was a lot stronger than he looked and sleep didn't change that. Sherlock held the side of his throbbing face, completely helpless to do anything except watch.

John continued to struggle, to battle people restraining him, shouting profanities, curses that even Sherlock had rarely heard before. A low growl was soon followed by pitiful whimpers.

John suddenly sat up still asleep, his eyes open. He held out his left hand, aiming a gun that only he could see. The index finger twitched as he kept pulling the phantom trigger. After emptying the clip, John shuddered, dropped his arm, and fell back, suddenly very still.

Sherlock heard Mrs. Hudson's door open downstairs and quick footsteps on the stairs to their apartment. Confident that John was safe for the moment, Sherlock left to run interference.

She rapped lightly on the door as he arrived to open it just a crack. "Sherlock?"

She stood there in her flowery pink cotton dressing gown, her kind face etched with worry. He tried
to reassure her. "It's fine, Mrs. Hudson. Go back to bed."

"Are you sure he's all right, dear? I heard a crash this time."

"It's nothing. I'm sorry we woke you." He adored Mrs. Hudson, but sometimes having someone live so close was a terrible inconvenience and intrusion into privacy. John would be mortified that she knew about his problem. "Now, please, go back to bed."

Mrs. Hudson's eyes widened as she looked at him for the first time. "Oh my, what happened to your face?"

Sherlock rubbed his cheek, his skin still hot and tender from John's fist. "Just an accident. Think nothing of it."

Her lips thinned, but she nodded, going along with his explanation, knowing full well it was a lie. "You should put some ice on that eye, dear. It'll be black by morning, but it'll keep the swelling down."

"Thank you. I'll do that."

Before she turned to leave, she whispered, "I can make some tea if you'd like to talk about it."

"No, thank you. I'll see you in the morning."

Mrs. Hudson nodded and then turned to go back to her own apartment, talking more to herself than to Sherlock. "I should give him soothers tomorrow to help him sleep better, that poor man."

Sherlock shut and locked the door before turning to lean his back against it, his head down. His face hurt, but his heart ached even more.

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Sunlight filtered in through the curtains as John rolled over and groaned into his pillow. His whole body ached and he didn't want to get up. How he could still be so tired after sleeping all night, he had no idea. He'd sent a text to Sarah before going to bed and let her know he wouldn't be in again today. He drifted for a few more minutes but his bladder complained loudly enough to get his attention.

John reached out a hand and found the other side of the bed cold and empty. He didn't remember Sherlock coming to bed at all last night. Considering everything that his partner had done the last few days, it didn't surprise him. Sometimes it took a while for Sherlock to come down from the high of solving a case.

John sighed and rolled over in the other direction to look at the time and frowned in confusion. The bedside table top was clear, no lamp or clock. He opened his eyes wider and looked around, but didn't see them anywhere. Maybe Sherlock needed them for an experiment, but that didn't seem likely. Still, one never knew when it came to Sherlock. He used the oddest things for his experiments. John had given up worrying about what would disappear next.

His bladder became more insistent, so he got up and stretched. He absently rubbed his sore left fist. His knuckles were bruised, but he didn't remember hitting anything, especially not those bastards who'd hurt Harry. He still regretted that they'd been such fucking cowards. It would've been beyond satisfying to beat their stupid faces in.

John pushed that thought away as useless and got up, his right foot stepping on something sharp.
"Fuck!" He sat back down in a hurry and discovered a piece of white glass sticking out of his heel. As he pulled it out, blood dripped all over his hand and the sheets. "Shit."

Sherlock came into the bedroom and handed him a wet flannel. "I thought I got it all up."

John cleaned his foot without looking up and asked, "Thanks. Got what up?"

"The broken lamp base. I must have missed a few shards." Sherlock dropped a pair of John's shoes on the bed beside him. "No bare feet until I go over the floor again more carefully."

God, he must have been tired not to hear all that in the night. "When did you break the lamp? And what happened to the clock?"

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?" John slipped on his shoes with no socks and turned, seeing Sherlock for the first time that morning. He froze. "What the fuck happened to your face?"

Sherlock's hand went up, his fingers rubbing his swollen left eye and bruised cheekbone. "A slight miscalculation."

John got up from the bed and walked around to Sherlock who flinched when John gingerly touched his injured face. He asked accusingly, "When did this happen? Did you go out again without me? Tell me you didn't do that, Sherlock. We've talked about this."

Sherlock studied him for a moment, his grey eyes bright, but slightly hooded. "No, I didn't go out."

"Then how..." Something in Sherlock's stoic expression gave it away. "Oh, shit." Realization hit and it was all John could do to make it to the loo before he threw up.

Sherlock sat on sofa, his arms crossed, being stubborn and far too rational. "I don't see why you're so upset. It was totally unintentional."

"That's not the bloody point. Jesus, Sherlock. I fucking punched you in the face." John ran a shaky hand through his hair, still trying to believe what had happened. He was having a very hard time with the idea that he could actually hurt the man he loved, but the evidence was right in front of him, black eye and all.

Sherlock absently rubbed his face and shrugged. "It was partly my fault."

"How do you figure?"

"When you have these episodes, I know better than to touch you without taking precautions. You always react violently."

John stared in horror at his words. "This has happened before?"

"Only three other times. You've never hit me before. I'm usually a lot faster at stopping you, but last night I was fatigued. I should have anticipated the severity of your reaction and stayed at arm's length."

John shook his head in dismay and paced the sitting room, his mind racing. How the hell could this happen? He had absolutely no memory of any of it, none whatsoever. It was all blank and never in
his life had he been so afraid of the nothingness that filled his head when he tried to recall what he
had done. "I don't fucking believe this. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't see the point."

"How the hell could you not see the bloody point?"

"John, if I thought for one moment that being aware of previous incidents would stop this, I would
have told you. However, we both know that it would have only made you feel even guiltier. It was
unnecessary. I'm fine. I've been hurt worse at one of Mycroft's atrocious dinner parties."

"You never go to his parties and stop trying to minimize what happened." John had an
overwhelming desire to shout to get through to the most stubborn man in the known universe, but
he knew that was useless. Yelling made Sherlock shutdown, not listen. So, instead, he worked to
keep his voice even, to match Sherlock argument for argument.

"What would you have me say, John?"

"You should at least be angry or upset, not so accepting that you're sleeping with a complete bastard who beats you in his fucking sleep."

Sherlock took a long breath before he spoke, obviously weighing his words carefully, the way he
often did when he had a particularly difficult suspect. John hated that tone. "If I thought for one
moment that you would seriously injure me, I wouldn't be sleeping with you."

John pinched the bridge of his nose, still frustrated with Sherlock's casual manner. How could
Sherlock act like it was the most normal thing in the world to sleep with a madman? "How do you
even sleep at all when you have to be on guard all the time?" John turned, suddenly even more
concerned. "Please tell me that's not the reason you avoid coming to bed so often."

"It's not. You know me, John. When I do sleep, I'm a very light sleeper. I'm usually very aware
when one of these incidents starts. I have more than enough time to leave, find a way to wake you,
or block your attacks."

"So what happened last night?"

"Like I said, a miscalculation. It was my own failure, not yours, that resulted in my injury."

"Bollocks. Don't go blaming yourself for this."

"I'm not, not completely. I'm just saying that after close observation, I usually recognize when I can
wake you and when I can't."

"And last night?"

"You were...more volatile than normal. I would assume it was triggered by the extreme emotional
stress of the last few days."

Deflated, feeling completely out of his depth, John sagged down in the chair opposite Sherlock. "I
don't understand."

Sherlock frowned. "Don't understand what?"

"I always thought I woke up from the nightmares. Now you tell me I've hit you and I have no
memory of any of it. How can I do a thing like that and not know about it?"
"Ah."

John looked up and met Sherlock's intense gaze. He could hardly stand seeing the black eye knowing he'd caused it. He squeezed his eyes shut and asked irritably, "Ah? Fucking ah? That's all you've got to say?"

" Actually, it's not. I've been documenting your dream patterns for some time now, almost from the time you moved in. You do wake up when you have a nightmare. What you had last night would be considered a form of parasomnia rather than an actual nightmare, specifically REM sleep behavior disorder. Apparently..."

John held up an impatient hand before Sherlock could continue. "Hold on."

"What?"

"You've been documenting my dreams?"

"Yes."

"And I'm just now learning about this?"

Sherlock shifted and avoided John's stare, uncomfortable with his tone. He looked like a boy who'd just been caught reading something he shouldn't. "You sound upset."

"Because I've got a boyfriend who documents my nightmares like I'm some kind of science project he cooked up? Why the hell would I be upset about that? I'm just another experiment, yeah?"

Sherlock leaned forward, his face suddenly serious and drawn. "It's not like that at all. You misunderstand my intentions."

"Then explain it."

"I thought by objectively observing, I might be able to solve the problem."

"Solve the problem? How to you solve a problem when the problem is me?"

"No, you have a problem, John. It's not the same thing as being a problem. I just wanted to fix it. I couldn't do that without data."

It was so like Sherlock, John couldn't stay mad about it. And, it wasn't like Sherlock didn't have a reason to want to fix him. The man might want to get a full night's sleep without getting clobbered some day.

"I just wish you had told me."

"I thought it might skew the data if you were aware of it before I had any usable results."

"Skew the data? Right. So, now I know. I guess we're both skewed."

Sherlock ignored his feeble attempt at humor. "You still sound angry."

"I'm not mad at you."

"Well, there's no reason to be angry at yourself. It's quite obvious you can't help having a sleep disorder."
"If only I could." Suddenly too weary, John sagged back in his chair, his left hand to his face. He chewed away the last of his thumb cuticle before he spoke. "I have no idea what to do with this."

"With what?"

"With knowing that I hit you. I swore I'd never do that."

Sherlock frowned, obviously puzzled. "Of course not." His eyes narrowed and Sherlock asked, "John, was your father abusive?"

"I don't want to talk about that right now. I don't have the energy to dig up the past."

Sherlock didn't say anything, just stared at him and waited. It was so totally unlike him, John has to ask, "What?"

"I'm surprised I never made this deduction before. It's really quite obvious. And why did your mother tolerate such behavior? Was he an alcoholic like Harry?"

"I said I wasn't going to talk about it."

"Genetic predisposition would explain quite a lot about your sister's behavior if he were."

"He was."

"I thought as much. I would wager he was a binge drinker as well, so the violence only occurred when he was under the influence. Your mother is old-fashioned, doesn't believe in divorce, so she stayed with him despite his offensive behavior."

"Would you stop, please."

"I'm just..."

"I know what you're doing. You're dissecting my life like I was a case. I'm not a case, Sherlock. I'm your partner. I know what it was like growing up like that. I don't have to hear it from you, especially not after I did the one thing I promised I'd never do."

Sherlock complained as he repeated himself. "But it wasn't on purpose."

"That was his excuse, too."

"It's not the same thing."

John stood up and walked over to get his jacket. He'd dressed earlier, but hadn't bothered to shower or shave. "Maybe not, but it feels like it."

Sherlock still wore his pajama bottoms and dressing gown. "Where are you going?"

"Out."

"But where?"

As Sherlock stepped closer, John waved him off. "Stop. I don't want to touch you right now. I don't have that right."

"John, don't be an idiot."
His face heated as if he'd been struck. The words sliced out of his throat. "But I am an idiot. I'm an idiot for thinking I could ever have any kind of relationship without buggering it up completely." Before Sherlock could interrupt, John held up a hand. "I don't trust myself right now and neither should you."

Sherlock crossed his arms, his lips thinning into a disapproving line. "You're wrong about this. You're being entirely unreasonable."

"I have to go."

Sherlock's expression grew concerned. "But you're coming back."

"Now who's being an idiot? Of course I'll be back, but I have to clear my head."

"Then think on this. I love you, John Watson, and we'll fix this."

John didn't answer, couldn't. He went down the stairs, ignoring Mrs. Hudson's cheery good morning as he rushed out. He couldn't bear another second at Baker Street. He didn't know if he ever could again.

The spirit of his father's drunken life haunted him, mixed in with the ghosts from a war that was never ending inside his head. There was a limit to how much torture he could stand, how much he would take before cutting himself off from the one man he could never bear to hurt. Sherlock might be able to live with the threat of nightly violence, but he couldn't. Something had to change, something had to make it possible for them to be together without that kind of threat. What that was, he had no idea.

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At the crime scene Lestrade took one look at Sherlock and gave a low whistle. "Good god, what the hell happened to you?"

Sherlock shrugged off the question and focused instead on the corpse of the young lady lying at his feet. He rattled off his observations and conclusions in rapid succession. "Barely out of her teens, obviously a student. Massive blunt force trauma to the back of the head seems to be cause of death, but we'll need an autopsy to be sure there weren't other factors. Time of death about six hours ago. Her clothes look wrong. Did the killer dress her after the murder? Possibly. Check for sexual assault. Have we found the murder weapon yet? You're probably looking for a large bat, cricket most likely."

Lestrade frowned, not pleased at being ignored. "I asked you what the hell happened."

"It's irrelevant. Now, have they found the murder weapon or not?"

"It's not irrelevant to me." Lestrade stepped closer, suddenly suspicious. "Did John hit you?"

Anderson walked up with his pad and stood by the body, taking notes as he talked. "Well, if he smacked him around, I'm sure the doctor had a good reason. We all know what Mr. Know-it-all is like. I'm surprised it hasn't happened sooner. I know I'd like to get in a few good licks myself." Two of the technicians off to the side sniggered, amused by the notion of socking Sherlock.

Lestrade snapped angrily at Anderson and gave an threatening look at the other workers. "Shut up and go do your job."

"I'm just saying..."
"Fuck all. Now do what you're paid for and do it over there," Lestrade waved him away to the outer edge of the scene and turned back to Sherlock, his voice a whispered hiss. "Now, I need you to tell me the truth. Did John do that?"

Sherlock's lips twitched to suppress his smile, but his eyes twinkled with amusement. "Your concern is unwarranted. This was the result of my own miscalculation."

"How so?"

"In addition to chronic nightmares, John has a sleep disorder called parasomnia."

"Para...what?"

"It's similar to sleepwalking, where he acts out in his sleep with no memory of it on waking."

"So, sleep boxing then?"

"Not normally, but last night, yes. I shouldn't have tried to wake him."

Lestrade's eyes narrowed and then he nodded in understanding. "How long has this been going on, the nightmares I mean? Is that a recent thing?"

"Since his return from Afghanistan."

"So all along then."

"Yes."

"Blimey."

"So, as you can see, I'm not an abuse victim. There's no need to be so protective. However, I might suggest more sensitivity training to your support staff."

Lestrade sighed and shook his head in disgust. "Tell me about it, mate. I swear, you'd think we were still living in the dark ages, the stuff they say and do sometimes."

Sherlock's words came out pissy. "Oh, but it's Anderson we're talking about. That explains so much."

"Nobody deserves to be a victim of violence no matter how difficult he might be."

"Are you saying you think I'm difficult?"

"Oh, sod off and let's focus on the case."

"Gladly. I need that bat."

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John wandered into his sister's hospital room, hands stuffed deep into his pockets, his shoulders hunched over. It had turned stormy outside, so his clothes were damp and the chill still lingered. "Well, you look like hell, Little Brother."

"Good morning to you, too, Harry." The battered eye wasn't quite as swollen and her skin was less bruised. The yellowing had already started to lighten around the edges of the blue. The area around her stitches was more pink than red, with no sign of infection. He could see she was healing and
that was one more worry to lose. "Where's Mum?"

"She's downstairs getting some tea. You just missed her." Harry hesitated before she said, "I mean it, Johnny. You look a right sight. You and Sherlock have a domestic?"

Suddenly defensive, John straightened and crossed his arms tightly over his chest. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, you haven't shaved, your eyes are all bloodshot, you're limping, and, no offense, but you're a bit ripe. So, it's probably a row."

"Not a row, not exactly."

"What's that mean, not exactly?"

John stepped closer to the bedside. He didn't want to dump all his problems on Harry. She didn't need anything else to worry about. He leaned on the rail, his hands resting on the cool metal. "It's nothing. I'm dealing with some things, that's all."

"What kind of things?"

"Harry..."

"Seriously, Johnny, what things? You know you can tell me. I won't tell Mum if you don't want me to. Secrets are us, just like old times."

John lips quirked up in a small smile, remembering how he'd kept his sister's secret about being a lesbian for years before she finally got caught snogging with Katrina Bassington one Sunday after service. And she'd stayed mum about his love letters to Jane Lessing, and only teased him a little bit about never sending them because she already had a boyfriend, a naff wanker who didn't deserve her affection. It was definitely a case of no accounting for taste. But Jane was only eleven at the time, so he gave her a pass.

Of course the biggest secret they both kept was the one about their father. "Yeah, we were good about secrets, you and me."

Harry reached out and touched the back of his hand affectionately. "So, what happened?"

"I hit him."

Harry blinked several times and looked at him closely, shocked. "What? I don't believe that, not you."

"I did. I didn't mean to, but..."

She fussed. "But what, you got pissed? That's no excuse and you know it. I mean, I know he can be a real tosser and you've got a temper, but..."

John shook his head. "No, it's nothing like that. I was asleep."

"Asleep? I don't understand."

"Me, neither."

"Johnny..."
"I have nightmares sometimes."

"And you get violent?"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, I apparently don't remember them all. I thought I did, that I woke up, and they were getting better because I wasn't having them as often. But now I find out that I'm having some I don't even remember. How crazy is that?"

Harry's brow furrowed and she shook her head, like it was too hard to believe. "That's really fucked up."

"Yeah, I know."

"Maybe you should be going to the loony bin instead of me."

John protested, "It's not a loony bin, Harry. Don't say that."

"Might as well be. The doctor said I might be there for a two months or more. She says my problem is pretty bad, like I don't fucking know that already."

John tried to reassure her. "Mum's going to be there. She'll have her own cottage while you in treatment."

"I know. Like I said, loony bin."

"Harry..."

She quickly changed the subject back to him. "So, nightmares, huh?"

"Yeah."

"About the war, I'll wager."

"Yeah, mostly."

"Did you hurt him?"

"Black eye, bruised cheek."

"Is he mad?"

John shook his head and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself from the anxiety rising in his chest. "That's the weirdest part. He's not upset at all. He blames himself. Says he's been observing me and collecting data, like I'm some kind of experiment." John covered his mouth, thinking back and wondering about the other times he'd been out of control and Sherlock just sat there and watched his misery play out in some kind of bizarre pantomime. It was humiliating just to think about. "He should've told me."

"Maybe, but he's your guy, Johnny. You know what he's like. He uses science when he doesn't know anything else to do."

Surprised by her insight, John had to agree. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Maybe he can help you figure it out."

"Maybe."
"Or maybe you're too fucked up to be fixed."

The tease didn't really work and John rubbed his brow to calm himself, feeling pissed off mainly because it might be too close to the truth. "That's not funny, Harry."

"Sorry. It's just I don't know what to say. Maybe you should go back to therapy."

"Maybe."

"Or maybe you should join a gym."

John looked up and met her gaze, wondering what she was on about. "A gym? Why a gym?"

"Clara used to have nightmares sometimes, usually about her cases. She had to be around some really nasty arseholes. The ones involving kids were the worst. Motherfuckers deserved to be put away forever, but she always had to make sure they had a fair trial, blah, blah, blah, lawyer speak for making deals."

"Yeah, I can see how that might be disturbing."

"Anyway, when she worked out at the gym, it helped. She slept better and didn't wake up screaming nearly as often."

John ran a hand through his hair and nodded. "That's not a bad idea, actually."

"I have them from time to time, good ideas that is."

Turning the conversation back to his sister, he asked, "Why didn't you tell me you wanted to be a photographer?"

She didn't seem shocked that Sherlock had told him about their deal. "No point, really."

"Why?"

"I mean, I couldn't afford to go to school and it's not very practical, not like being a doctor or lawyer."

"But if it's something you wanted to do, I could've helped."

"I know, and I could've tried on my own. I just didn't have the drive like you or Clara. I'm not like you. I'm not as strong as you are, as she is."

"That's bollocks." John reached over the rail and took her hand. "You can do it if it's what you want. Sherlock will keep his word, too. He'll make sure you get the chance to try it if you really want it."

"I do."

"So, after you're clean, you can start again."

She squeezed his hand and closed her eyes. "Starting again is fucking scary."

John squeezed back. "I know, but you can do it."

"Thanks."
After a few moments, she opened her eyes. Still holding his hand, she said quietly. "Don't fuck it up with Sherlock. As bonkers as he is, he's a keeper."

John smiled and nodded. "Yeah, I know."

His mother stepped into the room, holding two cups. "Oh, John, I didn't know you were here. I would've brought you a cuppa, too."

"That's okay, Mum, he can have mine."

"Thanks, Harry, but I can get my own later."

His mother frowned, looking first at Harry and then at John. "Did I miss something?"

John stepped over and gave his mother a quick kiss on the cheek. "We were just having a chat before she has to leave."

Pulling back just a bit, she glanced at him with a disapproving stare and sniffed. "John, you need a shave."

John rubbed his stubble and shrugged in agreement. "I know. I've been a bit busy. I'll do it in a bit, once you two are off to Hampshire."

His mother wouldn't be put off. "You know they've got shaving kits down in the gift shop. I could run down there while you have a quick wash up in Harry's loo. It's no bother."

John laughed and took a deep breath of relief, glad to know that some things never changed.

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His mobile chirped and Sherlock looked down. "Where are you? JW."

He typed back quickly. "Morgue. Boring case. SH."

A few seconds later he got a reply. "Need me? JW."

Sherlock smiled to himself. "Always, but not for this. Home, one hour. SH."

"On my way. JW."

Molly asked, "Is that John?"

"It is."

"Tell him hi for me and that I'm sorry about his sister."

"I'll tell him later."

Molly nodded without looking up as she worked quietly on her sample. "You know, my brother used to have somnambulism."

Sherlock turned his attention to her with heightened curiosity. She had hardly reacted when he had first explained about his injury. Now it would seem she wanted to be helpful. They were still waiting for results on a tissue sample, so he decided to listen. "How old was he?"

"He was eight when it first started. We had to lock the doors or we'd find him out in the garden
digging, playing with the dog, or just riding his bike. He got up to all sorts."

"Riding his bike?"

She put the slide under the microscope as she spoke, "Oh, yes, some somnambulists can do quite complicated activities while still in a low conscious state."

"Did he ever hurt himself or someone else?"

"He fell out of a tree once and broke his arm, but he was never violent. Actually, I did a paper on it when I was at school. I can send you a copy and some references if you'd like. It's really quite fascinating."

"How old was he when he stopped?"

"He had just turned twelve. It was like someone flipped a switch and turned it off."

"Did he ever start again?"

"Not that I know about, no. Most children grow out of it."

"But John's not a child."

"I know that." She looked up, her face still pleasant, but neutral. "You know, it's not unusual for a man with John's background to suffer from a sleep disorder."

"I assume you're referring to his army career."

"Not so much the army part, but the injured bit where he was sent home. Trauma can be a causative factor." When Sherlock didn't respond right away, she added, "You know I've read that they've had some success with certain medications, especially in cases linked to PTSD."

"John won't take sleeping pills."

"I'm not talking about sleeping pills, Sherlock. I'm talking about certain blood pressure medications, beta blockers in particular, that will sometimes stop the nightmares. Stop those, and the parasomnia should go away as well."

Intrigued, Sherlock asked, "But John doesn't have high blood pressure. It's usually lower than normal."

Molly shrugged. "I'm not an expert. I just read about it, that's all. Wouldn't hurt to look into it."

Indeed, research was rarely wasted. "Send me your links."

"Sure." Molly changed the subject, holding out a whole new set of slides. "I think I'll be able to get DNA from the samples under her fingernails."

"Send the results to Lestrade. I already know it was the boyfriend's best friend James."

"Well, this should prove it then."

"Exactly." Sherlock stood up, suddenly energized and took her by her shoulders before giving her one of his best smiles. "You've been very helpful, Molly."

Her cheeks flushed bright red. "Have I?"
"You have." He kissed her quickly on the right cheek and then took off. He had research to do and he really wanted to make up with John.

&&&&&&&&

"How was your sister this morning?"

"Better." John put his teacup down, his bare feet rubbing on the carpet. "How'd you know I went to see Harry?"

"You're shaved so I assume your mother demanded that you maintain some level of basic hygiene." John shook his head in amusement. "You only just met her and you know her so well."

"So, they've left?"

"A little bit ago, yeah. I sure hope it works this time."

Sherlock tilted his head as he studied him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm better, thanks. Come sit down."

Sherlock slipped off his coat and flung it over the back of the desk chair. He settled in next to John on the sofa. He closed his eyes and rested his head on John's shoulder, snuggling in closer. His right hand was on John's chest, his fingers rubbing his breastbone. His voice rumbled through John's skin sounding sulky as he complained. "I don't like it when you leave."

"I know. But it wasn't about you. It was about me."

"But you said everything is about me."

John snorted and then ran his fingers through Sherlock's wonderful dark hair. "Most of the time, that's true." He kissed the top of Sherlock's head and whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Me, too."

"What are you sorry about?"

"I should've told you about collecting the data."

"Yeah, you should've."

"I just wanted to analyze it first, come up with some kind of working hypothesis."

"I take it you haven't."

"Not, yet, though there are some interesting patterns."

John pulled Sherlock around to face him, touching his fingers gently to his bruised face. Tears stung his eyes, but John refused to cry. "We'll look at it later, okay?"

Sherlock frowned. "John?"

Fingers like spiders inspected every inch of Sherlock's face, along his lips, his cheekbones, ghosting along his jaw line. "What?"

"You're crying."
"No, I'm not. Don't be silly."

Sherlock reached up with his right index finger and wiped away a tear from John's cheek. Keeping his eyes fixed on John, he licked it off with the tip of his tongue. John's breathing hitched. He pulled Sherlock in and mouths met, lips opening quickly. Tongues tussled as Sherlock fell back on the sofa, pulling John's body with him. John lay on top, chest to chest, groin to groin, his legs between Sherlock's knees. By the time he pulled his head back, John gasped for air. He was far too old to come in his jeans. "We need to take this upstairs."

Sherlock grinned, his face flushed with desire. "I'm not really sure I can move."

"We're not teenagers anymore, Sherlock. We can't be snogging and getting off on the sofa."

"Why not?" Sherlock's greedy mouth came at him again, his tongue aggressive and hard, his teeth nipping his lower lip. He bucked his hips up into John's crotch and pulled back just enough to say, "I really want to do it here."

John's head dropped forward and he groaned into the crook of Sherlock's neck. "But the stuff is upstairs."

Sherlock bit the side of John's neck. "We can do that later. Right now, I want your mouth. God, I need your glorious mouth."

John could hardly move, but he lifted his head and stared into starving grey eyes, the pupils blown wide with lust for him, John Watson. It was the biggest turn on he'd ever had, to have that need aimed in his direction. He didn't bother to answer, just pulled himself up and off the sofa. It was like he was moving underwater, his muscles stretched too tightly under his flesh. Sherlock watched his every move as John stripped, taking off his top first and then his jeans and boxers in one go. His erection bobbed out, darker than the rest of his skin, his bush thick and a bit darker than his light brown body hair.

John undid Sherlock's slacks and slipped them off, throwing them aside along with his underpants. He could see how much Sherlock wanted him, his cock and balls hard and ready. "Sit up."

With John's helping hand, Sherlock sat up with a grunt. "John, please."

"Spread your legs."

Sherlock kept his eyes glued to John's gaze and opened his thighs. He used his own hand to stroke himself.

"Don't touch yourself, not unless I tell you." John used his command voice, the one he knew Sherlock favored. Grey eyes got even darker and Sherlock ran the tip of his tongue along his lower lip. He didn't say a word, but put his hand on his upper thigh, waiting.

"You want me to suck you off?"

"I do." The words came out a breathy plea.

John had never been much for games, but he liked to pleasure Sherlock, the man who had taught him so much about making love to another man, things he never dreamed about. Even so, there were still things he could teach Sherlock. Patience was one of those things.

John kneeled between Sherlock's long legs. The cool, pale flesh was so unlike his own. Sherlock had almost no hair on his upper legs, the skin smooth and so sensitive to touch, he shuddered with
just a kiss to the inner thigh.

Running his hands up and down those thighs, Sherlock put his head back and groaned, his hands reaching for John's head to guide him to his target. "No, not this time. Just let me do this my way."

"Oh, god, your way takes forever. You're killing me."

John voice grew husky as he wrapped a palm around Sherlock's twitching cock, Sherlock's pubic hair tickling the edge of his hand. "But my way is good, yeah?"

Sherlock swallowed and nodded, robbed of speech as John's tongue flicked out and licked away the precum from the tip of his cock. Sherlock hands gripped the edge of the cushion, holding on for dear life, his face already contorted with need.

John kissed the cock several more times, but then went back to the thighs, licking one side and then the other, the shivers and tension warning him he really didn't want to make this go on much longer, not this time. Between kisses he whispered, "Move to the edge."

Sherlock shifted further down, his ass exposed. "That's beautiful." First John played with the balls, rolling them carefully, alternating pressure. Then using one spit-slick finger, John teased the hole just as he took Sherlock's cock in the other hand, dropping his mouth over the tip. Sherlock head slammed back and then rolled from side to side, his breaths harder and louder as he panted. Using his lips and tongue to regulate pressure, John swallowed Sherlock's cock in deeper and fingered his hole at the same time. Sherlock arched up, his whole body shaking, and cried out, "John! God, John!"

This time John didn't pull away when Sherlock's hands grabbed his head. He let Sherlock pull his hair as he gulped down the tangy liquid. Sherlock's body collapsed back, his breathing labored, his eyes like slits.

John stood up, his knees aching, and smiled at the sight of Sherlock half-naked and totally spent. It was all his doing and he loved the heady mix of love and power.

Sherlock finally opened his eyes, his voice still rough. "God, I've created a monster."

Only half hard, John pushed back the curls from Sherlock's sweaty forehead. He really couldn't believe how much he loved this man. "You think you can make it upstairs now?"

Sherlock's half smile turned wicked. "I'd like to see you stop me."

"You forget I was a soldier."

"You were a doctor."

"I had bad days."

Sherlock reached out, took John's hand, and kissed it. "I hope this isn't one of them."

"Let's go upstairs and find out."

&&&&&&

Stretched out on his back, the bottom of his legs hanging off the side of the bed, John looked up at Sherlock and waited. Sherlock grinned again and then stretched out on the bed on his side, lining himself up with John. He kissed and then nibbled John's ear as his hand rolled John's right nipple.
Pleasure went all through his chest, heading south. "Oh, that's good."

"What do you want, John? Tell me." Sherlock moved his mouth along the edge of John's jaw and down his throat, alternating between kissing and sucking. He'd stop and then bring a bit of flesh up between his teeth, nibbling, and then moved further down until he captured the left nipple. He suckled one and rolled the other, sending delicious waves of heat to John's brain and all over his body. Sherlock lifted his head. "John?"

"You talk too much."

Sherlock laughed, that deep throaty one he saved just for John. "Then you just want me to keep doing what I'm doing then?" He squeezed the right nipple for emphasis.

John sucked in his breath, his cock fully hard again. "God, yes."

Sherlock licked all the way up and down John's chest, along his neck to his ear, then down to his belly button. "I want to fuck you."

John shuddered, regretting that he'd ruined his chances for that earlier. "You can't be hard yet. Not even you are that fast."

"There are other ways, ways I think you'll enjoy."

Drifting on nothing but heat and joy, he didn't care what Sherlock wanted to do. He trusted him. "How?"

"I have a toy."

Sherlock's hand roamed, his fingers trailing down the middle of John's belly, sending tiny quakes up his spine. Fingers teased John's cock and John struggled to find enough air. "What kind of toy?"

"I think you'll like it."

John grabbed the back of Sherlock's neck, dragging his face closer. "Do it." Then he kissed him, deep and hard, while Sherlock stroked his cock. John pulled back and gasped. He knew he wouldn't last long at this rate. "Hurry."

"Now who needs patience?"

"Sherlock..."

"Hush. Let me do this." His lover bent down and kissed the tip of John's nose, trailing his tongue all the way down his chest, belly, and then to his cock. Then he stood up and went to the closet, pulling out a box. Inside was a dildo, a bit smaller than Sherlock's actual cock, made of flesh-colored silicon.

John swallowed hard, knowing what his partner intended. "You've done this before?"

"Yes." Sherlock studied him, his eyes still dark with desire. "Do you trust me?"

"I do."

"Then shift up on the bed and relax."

John nodded and followed directions. Then he watched Sherlock go to the bedside table and get the condoms and lube. "Roll over on your side and pull your legs up. It'll be easier."
As he turned over, John closed his eyes. Pushing down any doubts he might have about what was going to happen. The bed dipped and Sherlock moved in behind him. A tongue licked all the way up John's spine and he shivered. Sherlock then moved into a comfortable position where he could spoon in close. He could kiss John's neck and use his slick fingers to push his cheeks apart and enter him, one finger first, then another. Pushing in and out, Sherlock continued to kiss John's skin, his cheek, throat, and his shoulder. Fingers pushed in deeper, and John groaned as his balls tightened and his cock throbbed. Sherlock whispered in his ear. "I love you. Tell me to stop if it hurts."

His throat dry and achy, John nodded and barely managed to speak. "I trust you."

Fingers went deeper and touched that magic spot, sending bright flashes through his brain, his whole crotch lit up with wave after wave of coiled fire. John choked back his scream. "God, soon, or it'll be too late."

Fingers slid away and the dildo thrust slowly back and forth inside him. Jesus, it stretched him to his limit, white light behind closed lids, flashing, thrumming, his blood rushing to his ears and the world exploding as his body arched. Sherlock wrapped his arms around his chest, holding him, letting the flames engulf him, eating him alive, taking the skin from muscle, flesh from bone. The whole world crackled around him as he came.

John screamed out a whole string of curses as Sherlock shoved the dildo even deeper and then bit his shoulder. Nothing but pleasure swamped his soul, nothing but Sherlock holding him kept him from shaking apart.

After a few minutes, Sherlock slipped down behind him, removing the toy, and then kissing both ass cheeks. Another shudder ran through John's body. "Oh, my motherfucking god, you're going to fucking kill me."

"But what a magnificent way to go."

"Jesus, Sherlock. What the fuck was that?"

"That, John, was just a sample of what I'm going to do to you as soon as I'm hard again. I'm going to fuck you into a world of bliss and then you're going to fuck me. We're going to keep at it until one of us collapses."

John took a deep breath, his head still spinning and his heart pounding in his chest. He didn't know whether to be thrilled or afraid of Sherlock's promise. He wasn't as young as he used to be. "Jesus, I'm fucked."

Sherlock slipped the condom off the toy and threw it in the trash bin. He got up to wash his hands and returned with some warm flannels. Sherlock rolled John onto his belly and pushed his legs apart. He cleaned John's ass as he teased. "You say that now. Give it twenty minutes."

John never believed all that crap about feeling boneless after sex. Apparently, he'd just never had the right partner. He could hardly lift his head to speak. "I never knew you to be an optimist."

Sherlock kneeled between John's spread legs and then draped himself over John's back like a human blanket. For such a skinny man, Sherlock was really heavy and seriously hot. "What are you doing now?"

"I thought we could take a short nap and when we wake up, I'll fuck you or you can fuck me, your preference."
"Fine, but I'm not a mattress, Sherlock."

Sherlock took a deep breath before tickling the back of John's neck with his tongue and teeth. Then he slid over, off of John and onto his back. He turned his head to meet John's gaze. There was a flicker of sadness and despite the after glow, John caught it. "What? What's wrong?"

Sherlock sighed and then stared up at the ceiling, his voice still thick and a little dreamy. "I don't want to spoil it."

John reached out and took his lover's hand. "It's okay. What is it?"

"It's stupid."

"Sherlock..."

"I never knew it could be like this."

"What, sex?"

"No, love. Sex is part of it, yes, but it's more than that. All these years wasted because I shut down that part of my life over something so ridiculous as my uncle being an asshole."

The wonderful heat suddenly chilled a bit. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, I just wish I'd met you earlier in my life."

"We are what our experiences make of us."

"Dull."

John ran the back of his fingers up and down Sherlock's arm, just teasing the skin. "But nevertheless true. We are what we are because of our history. If we'd met sooner, we might not have appreciated what we have now."

Sherlock was quiet for a moment and then said softly. "Sentiment, John. It's so ridiculous." He smiled when he said it and reached out to cup John's cheek. "Thank you."

John shifted over, his body cooling down too quickly. He cuddled, finding warmth in Sherlock's arms, but still shivering. Sherlock drew up the sheet and blanket to cover them both as he swore into John's ear. "Sleep. You're going to need your strength, Dr. Watson."

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Shagged out, John stood in the kitchen drinking tea with a big goofy grin on his face the next morning. John had always thought he knew a lot about sex. He'd been with plenty of women, but Sherlock, Sherlock was a shag master, a man who just didn't seem to have limits. John didn't mind learning all his tricks and then showing him a few of his own. It was like being sixteen again but knowing what was what and having a steady boyfriend instead of being constantly on the pull. It was a win-win as far as John was concerned.

Sherlock left to go to see Lestrade a few minutes earlier and John had to get to the surgery in another hour, so he had time for some breakfast. As he slipped the bread into the toaster, he heard the door open. He called over his shoulder without looking. "Sherlock?"

"Good morning, John."
Frowning, John turned and looked into the smug face of Mycroft Holmes, his soon to be brother-in-law. "Sherlock's right."

"About?"

"We need to booby trap those stairs."

"How droll."

"You really should knock. It's only common courtesy."

Mycroft rolled his eyes, making a big show of rapping on the doorframe with the handle of his umbrella.

Impatiently, John said, "I don't suppose it's any coincidence that you waited until Sherlock left to visit."

Mycroft stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "I wanted to speak to you alone."

"Obviously." The warm glow of thinking about his night with Sherlock dimmed. John asked more out of habit than politeness. "Tea?"

"Thank you. Two sugars."

John didn't comment that Sherlock had his the same way. Instead, he clicked on the kettle and searched for a clean cup. A rattle of crockery accompanied his words. "What's this about?"

"The situation with your sister is regrettable."

"Yes." John leaned back against the counter, crossed his arms, and waited.

"She and your mother have settled in Hampshire without incident."

"I know. Mum called last night. Thank you for that."

Mycroft sat down in the chair so that he could watch John as he prepared tea. "I thought you should also know that the men responsible are now incarcerated and will remain so for ten years each. The deal was struck and sealed as of last night."

It was a relief to hear it out loud. "That was fast. I didn't even know that was possible."

"The prosecutors for the Crown were highly motivated to move swiftly."

John nodded, thinking just how motivated Mycroft could make people when he wanted. He had hoped for longer sentences, but ten would do. "Thank you."

Mycroft shrugged it off. "You should also know that the original brother, Joe Miller, has moved with his family to Manchester. The other man from the original incident, Jones, has also left London. Apparently, he has family in Liverpool. You should have no more trouble on that front."

John didn't have to ask if Mycroft had a hand in their moving plans. Frankly, he didn't care how he did it, just that it was done. "That's good then."

"Yes, I thought you'd be pleased."

There was an extended period of silence until the kettle clicked off and John spoke as he poured the
hot water. "Why are you really here, Mycroft?"

It took a moment for the answer to come, as though Mycroft struggled to find the right words to avoid sounding like a complete prat. For Mycroft that wasn't easy. "I do realize how difficult my brother can be. No one has a keener notion of that than I do."

John froze, barely controlling the urge to stomp over and punch the man sitting in his chair. "Fuck. You think I hit him on purpose."

"The evidence would suggest..."

"I didn't."

"John, I understand the temptation."

"I'm sure you do, but that's not what happened, and if you'd bother to talk to your own brother, you'd know that."

"My brother wouldn't appreciate my asking."

John had to admit Mycroft was right about that. Reluctantly, John explained, pushing down the shame of his admission. "I was asleep and he tried to wake me. I might not be a soldier anymore, but old habits die hard."

Mycroft studied him a long moment, searching for any evidence of a lie. Then he nodded. "I see."

John handed him the teacup before he returned to the kitchen to retrieve his cold toast. "Just for curiosity's sake, what were you going to threaten me with if I had abused him?"

Mycroft sipped his tea. "I daresay it's rather a moot point."

John sat on the sofa and nibbled his crust. He should be angry about Mycroft assuming he'd been an abusive fucker, but he wasn't. He was actually glad Mycroft cared enough to bother. Sherlock certainly wasn't giving him any encouragement to give a shit one way or another. Still, he was glad Mycroft hadn't decided to make John disappear or get shipped back to Afghanistan in the tail end of a supply plane without asking first. "Look, I appreciate you coming over to kick my ass for beating up your brother, I do. However, we both know that if Sherlock finds out, he's going to be pissed at you on my behalf. I don't think either of us want that, so let's just forget we had this part of the conversation, yeah?"

"That would seem wise."

"Good. Now drink your tea and leave because I've got work and I have to get a shower."

"It would seem I owe you an apology."

"Accepted."

Mycroft put his empty cup on the coffee table and stood up. "I can see why my brother is so taken with you. You really are quite fascinating."

John wasn't sure whether to be complimented or creeped out. "Yeah?"

"You never seem to react the way one might predict. It's rather an appealing quality, especially for a man like Sherlock."
"You don't think love has anything to do with it?"

Mycroft sniffed and made a face like John had just farted in front of the Queen. "Love, it's so common. I thought my brother would be above all that. I did try my best to convince him about the perils of such distractions."

"Apparently it didn't work."

"No, not when it comes to you."

"Look, Mycroft, I'd love to sit around and talk shit all day, but I do have to go to work."

"You really don't. I don't know why you still bother." Mycroft stopped and then looked at him a bit harder as he made his own deduction. "You still haven't talked to my brother about the money."

John straightened, his shoulders stiff, suddenly wishing Sherlock had been an only child. "That's between Sherlock and me. Stay out of it."

Mycroft reluctantly lifted his shoulders in a slight shrug. "As you wish."

As soon as he was gone, John dropped his head back against the sofa, all the earlier good feelings drained away. What was it about Mycroft that made him such an emotional vampire, sucking away all the positive energy in a space?

He was right, though. John needed to talk to Sherlock about giving him half his money and estate. He just wasn't sure how to bring it up or how to defend his objections, arguments that were growing weaker every day. Sherlock hadn't done it to buy his love, that much he was sure of. Plus, if he were honest and positions were reversed, he'd do the same for Sherlock. He just didn't happen to be heir to a fortune to give away.

John wondered what it must have been like to grow up so wealthy and entitled. It was so alien from his own upbringing. He had a hard time seeing himself as anything but middle class, the washed up soldier stuck with just a pension and who needed a flat share to stay in London. Still, it explained why Sherlock had no concept of a sensible budget or how to pay bills.

They definitely needed to talk about money, but later, after John got used to the idea that he actually had some to talk about.

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John hit the ground running at the surgery, seeing twenty patients before he had a chance to take a breather. In his office, he was drinking tea and going through the backlog of his records when Sarah knocked and stuck her head in. "Could I have a word?"

"Sure."

Once she was inside, she stood there a few moments before taking a seat. "You've been avoiding me."

Sarah was far too keen for her own good. "I haven't."

"You have."

John sighed and then confessed. "Maybe a little."

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."
"I know that."

"But I still managed it. I'm sorry."

John met her worried gaze and shook his head. "Don't be. I'm flattered. I just don't want to cause you any more grief than I already have."

"I know that." She paused and then sat back. "Look, I've interviewed several people for your position and they're all rubbish."

Surprised, John asked, "All of them?"

"Yes. I interviewed one man who I swear must have bought his degree online."

John was secretly pleased that he wasn't so easily replaced, but the lack of viable candidates did cause its own problems. "I'm sure you'll find someone before I leave."

"I was hoping you'd reconsider."

"I can't."

"Is it because of me, because of what I said?"

John needed to tell the truth, but it wasn't easy. "Partly, but it's not just that. Working with Sherlock, it's what I want more than staying here."

"And you can't be a doctor and still work with him?"

"Apparently not, not the way it is now."

Sarah stood up, obviously displeased but accepting of his answer. "All right then. I'll keep looking."

As she turned away, he said quietly, "Sarah, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You know who and what you want. That's more than a lot of us get."

When she closed the door, John squeezed his eyes shut and tried to erase the sadness he saw in her face. He helped put it there and he knew without question that if he didn't leave soon, he'd be tempted to stay.

He picked up the phone. After a few rings, Mike Stamford answered. "Mike, I need a favor."

&&&&&&

At the end of his long shift, John walked into the pub where his friend had suggested they meet and looked around. He saw Mike already there and drinking a pint. The other man lifted a hand and motioned John over to his table.

As he sat down, he could tell that it wasn't Mike's first drink. John said, "It's a bit early to get pissed."

"I got here early and I'm celebrating. Want one? It's on me."

It had been a really tiring day, so he nodded. "Sure, thanks. What are we celebrating?"
"Hold on. I think you're going to like this." Mike waved the waitress over and ordered. When she'd stepped away, he sat back and said. "I'm glad you rang this morning."

"Yeah?"

"Carl fucking Reynolds called me the other day." Mike took a long drink before he continued his rant. "What a fucking moron. I had no idea, John, I really didn't."

"I hope it didn't cause a problem for you, me not taking the job."

"No problem for me. Might be for Reynolds."

John frowned as the waitress served their drinks and walked away. As soon as they were alone again, he asked, "What are you talking about?"

"You wouldn't believe the barmy message he left on my machine. I don't know what the guy was taking, but he dropped himself into the shit, that's what he did."

"I don't follow."

"After I got his big tirade about gays ruining the medical profession and destroying the world, I took it and went to confront him to let him know what I thought about his bullshit."

"You didn't have to do that, mate."

Mike face reddened even more, and he leaned in. "Listen, it's not just about you, John. Men like Reynolds, they make us all look like bigoted prats. Anyway, I nosed around and turns out that there have been at least three harassment complaints. They've been hushed up by the hospital solicitors, but it's not right."

It didn't surprise him that Sherlock was right on the money about the man. However, it bothered him that the hospital was protecting a doctor who abused his power. But he knew how things worked, how some doctors covered for friends to get some kind of an advantage. Reynolds must have dirt on somebody or he would've been fired after the second complaint. "You're right, it's not."

"Anyway, I sent the tape to a bigwig at the hospital. Told him a copy would be sent to the papers if something wasn't done and I don't mean some sweep it under the rug cover up. I mean, something where the guy either gets fired or has some kind of supervision."

John was gobsmacked. He knew Mike from years ago, the guy who just wanted to get along and not make waves. Apparently, he didn't know the new Mike, his friend the crusader. "That's impressive. Have you heard if anything's happened?"

"Rumor is that his head is on the chopping block even as we speak." Mike lifted his glass and waited for John to lift his to match. When he did, Mike said. "Here's to running arseholes like that out of power."

Happy to oblige, John clinked his glass to Mike's. "Cheers!"

The cool liquid burned down his throat and into his belly. The day was looking brighter all around. "So, did you have any luck with the thing I called about?"

Nodding, Mike clumsily pulled folded sheets of paper from the jacket hanging on the back of his chair. "I did. There's this bloke David Grimley. He's been looking for a job and I think he'd be pretty good. If not him, there's Winnie Lacey. She's a really sweet girl. She's not got a lot of
experience yet, but she's a hard worker and I think she and Sarah would get on." He handed the papers to John. "The contact info and CVs are there."

John took the papers, glancing down at the numbers. "Thanks."

"No problem." Mike drank some more before he said, "I can't believe you're giving up medicine. What a waste of God given talent."

John tucked the list away. "I'm not giving it up completely."

"No? Sounds like it. I know Sherlock's work is dangerous and you seem to like all that running about and chasing criminals, but people still need good doctors."

"I know that."

"There are other places you could work, John, places that are flexible enough that you could still be with Sherlock and be a doctor, too. Or you could go into research, set your own hours."

John drank some more of his ale before he answered, trying to think of a way to say it without sounding like some complete tosser. "There are just other things in my life right now. I can't be a good doctor and do those things, too."

"So, you think eventually you might start doing locum work again?"

"I don't think so. I need something different."

Mike finished off his drink, nodding, his face all flushed. "Sherlock's lucky."

"I think I'm the lucky one."

"That, too." Mike's eyes didn't focus all that well and he put both hands palm down on the table. "I need the loo."

"You able to make it on your own?"

He chuckled and wiped his sweaty face with his sleeve. "The day I can't hold me own is the day I quit drinking. We're not there yet, mate."

John bit his tongue not to say they were close enough. "I'll wait here, get you a cab home."

"Sure, okay. Cabs are good."

"Yeah, they are."

Mike got to his feet unsteadily and nearly overbalanced the table. "Maybe I'm a little bit more pissed than I thought."

"I'll go with you."

"Thanks. You're a good mate." Mike draped an arm around John's neck and giggled all the way to the loo.

"You smell like ale and sick. I don't like it."
John walked over and gave Sherlock a quick kiss on his temple. Sherlock scrunched up his nose in disgust and pushed him away gently. As he went into the kitchen, John said, "Evening to you, too. How was the case?"

Sherlock ignored his question. "You've been drinking and someone's been ill. I thought you were working."

"I went for a drink with Mike after the shift. He says you're lucky, by the way."

"There's no such thing as luck. It's an irrational explanation for logical events."

"So says the man who's lucky enough to have me."

Sherlock's hard expression shifted to a grin. "Ah, he was saying I was lucky to have you as a lover."

"Yeah. And I told him I was the lucky one. Irrational? You tell me."

Sherlock went back to typing and teased, "You've always been a sentimental fool."

John snorted, amused at how Sherlock never wanted to admit to any feelings but proved that he had them with nearly every word and action when they were alone. In public there was a whole other Sherlock by his side, one that made him sometimes wonder if he were marrying two men instead of one. He smiled to himself. It actually sounded like quite the bargain.

"So, how is Mike? I assume he's the one who drank too much."

John returned to the sitting room and settled on the sofa. "He did and he's fine. I put him in a cab home."

"Did he call you?"

"No."

John drank his orange juice and didn't answer. Sherlock looked up again, suddenly more interested. "Sarah's told you she's having trouble finding a replacement. You asked Mike to get you some names."

John's eyes twinkled. He loved when Sherlock did that, seemingly pulled information out of thin air. It was brilliant and always amazing. "Yeah. He got me two good ones, too. I'll give them to Sarah tomorrow." Sherlock huffed and turned back to his laptop, his shoulders hunched over. "What?"

Sherlock answered while he typed. He was the ultimate multi-tasker. "She's trying to delay your leaving."

John took a deep breath and admitted, "Yeah, I do realize that."

Sherlock stopped typing and turned, studying him closer. "She's said something?"

John rubbed his forehead, his slight headache growing worse. He really didn't want to give Sherlock any more ammunition against his friend, but it was useless. He could never hide anything from Sherlock anyway. "Yeah, she did."

"Ah ha!" Sherlock jumped up, actually leaping in the air, and clapped his hands. He pointed at John and grinned, his glee barely contained. "I told you!"
"Stop being an arsehole."

"But I was right, I told you all along..."

"I know what you told me. I'm an idiot, okay? You were right, I was wrong. So, you want to put out flyers, post it online, what?"

Dismayed by his reaction, Sherlock complained, "You're angry. Why are you angry?"

"I'm not angry. I'm tired and I've got a headache."

Sherlock sat down beside him and put one hand on the back of the sofa. He put his other hand on John's shoulder, tentatively, not sure if John wanted his touch. "Why are you upset that I knew about her true feelings and you didn't? I did try to warn you."

John captured Sherlock's hand and then brought it to his mouth for a quick kiss. He settled their hands against his chest. "I know you did. You just didn't see her face when she admitted her feelings. I don't like hurting people I care about."

Sherlock tilted his head, as if processing and translating the words from an alien language. "You care about her?"

"She's still my friend."

"But you don't love her."

John met Sherlock's worried gaze. "I love you, not Sarah."

Sherlock leaned in and sneaked a kiss before he leaned back and pulled John into a hug. He rested his head on top of John's head as he spoke softly, like he finally understood what John had been trying to say. "It must be torture to work with you and only have you as a friend but wanting more, knowing you'll never have it."

"Yeah, I get that." And he did. He'd felt like that about Sherlock for a long time before they both finally gave in and confessed the truth.

"Have you ever had unrequited love, John?"

"Sure."

Sherlock shifted, moving John around so they could face one another. "Who was she?"

"There were several shes actually."

"Really?" Sherlock seemed shocked.

"Yeah, starting with my first crush. After that there was a whole string of girls in high school and uni."

Sherlock's face clouded as he struggled to understand. "But you really didn't love those girls."

"No, but I thought I did at the time."

Sherlock frowned, his lips suddenly a thin line. "And this happened often?"

John didn't have to be a mind reader to figure out what Sherlock was thinking. "I was a kid,
Sherlock. Everybody goes through a phase where you think you'll die if so-and-so doesn't love you back. You grow out of it." John put his palm on Sherlock's chest, spreading his fingers out to cover his lover's heart. "I love you. That's not going to change."

Sherlock shook his head, still confused. "I never went through such a phase."

"Well, you're not like everybody else." John hesitated before he asked, "You've told me before you never loved anyone else, but didn't you ever just think about being with someone before me?"

Sherlock shook his head, his eyes darker as he met John's stare. "No. There was no one." Sherlock wet his lower lip with the flick of his tongue. "I didn't go through the same things you did, John. I don't know why I'm different, or why it matters, not now that we're together. You know this about me, yet you still love me."

"I do, yes, and I like that you're different."

"Then why ask?"

"Because I want to know you."

"You know me better than anyone."

"Do I?"

"I've told you things I've never told anyone else. I've done things with you I've never done before. You're the first and only for me, John." Sherlock hesitated just a moment and then added one more confidence to the list, his words breathy and intense. "I don't think I could survive if you ever left me."

Sherlock's heartbeat was steady underneath John's hand. "I'm never leaving." He leaned in and kissed the man who magnified love to a nuclear level, an explosion so strong that it totally destroyed any doubt just as it created new worlds of hope in John's own heart.

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"I want to get married."

"I told you yes already." They lay side-by-side on their backs in their bed, naked under the sheet. Sweat cooled on John's body and he wanted nothing more than to just curl up and drift off to sleep.

"I mean, I want to do it as soon as possible. It takes fifteen days from when we first give notice of our intention to form a civil partnership. We could have the service on the sixteenth day."

John groaned and then rolled over onto his side, resting his head on his upraised hand. "We can't."

"Why not?"

"I want Harry to be there."

Sherlock frowned in disappointment as he considered John's answer. "But that would mean we might have to wait months."

John looked down into Sherlock's frowning face. "I know."

"But I don't want to wait that long."
"I don't want to wait, either, but Harry..."

"Will understand."

"No, she won't."

Sherlock turned his head and looked up. "Harry is a hopeless romantic. She'd be the first one to insist that we go ahead without her."

"She might say it, but she wouldn't mean it."

"Why in the world would she say something she didn't mean?"

"People do that all the time."

"I don't."

John dropped back onto his back, frustrated with Sherlock's attitude. It wasn't like he wouldn't love to be married, too. He moved to sit up and leaned back against the headboard. He pulled the sheet up to cover himself.

He knew his sister and if he did something like get married without her there as a witness, she'd never forgive him. "Look, I think we've already established that you're not like everybody else. I just don't want to hurt her feelings."

"You weren't at her wedding."

"I figure being in Afghanistan is a pretty good excuse."

"Would you have gone if you could?"

"I think so. I liked Clara and she was good for Harry. I was hoping..."

"That Clara could save your sister when nobody else could?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"You're incredibly sentimental for a man of science."

"Some say I'm a dreamer." John wasn't surprised that Sherlock didn't get the musical reference. Modern pop songs would never qualify as necessary data to someone so focused on facts. It was a shame really because John always got a lot of inspiration from music.

Sherlock shifted, resting his head on John's lap who then ran his fingers through Sherlock's curls. It was like stroking a cat, soothing to both the animal and the owner. John chuckled.

Sherlock asked, "What?"

"Nothing."

"You were thinking of something amusing."

"I was thinking of how you remind me of a pussy."

"I don't understand. How is that funny?"

John tugged gently on Sherlock's hair and then rubbed his scalp with his finger tips. "It is, sort of.
If you purred, you'd be just like the ginger tom we used to have when I was little. He'd curl up in my lap for hours if I would pet him."

"Lucky pussy."

John laughed and then took a deep breath. "I'd love to get married right away, too. I just don't know how we could pull it off with her in rehab."

After a few moments, Sherlock sat up and scooted next to John. He clasped their hands together as he spoke. "What if we went ahead with a small ceremony to make it official. We could have a small reception afterward. Then when Harry is released, we could have a larger reception, one that she could even photograph if she wanted."

"Photograph, huh?"

"Yes."

"What about the honeymoon?"

"While it's customary to only go on one, there's nothing that says we can't have two. I'd very much like for one of those to be in Sussex."

John squeezed Sherlock's hand. "I like the way you think."

"So you've said."

John leaned over and kissed him, slow and deep. Then he pulled back and whispered, "How about a preview of the honeymoon?"

"I've heard rehearsals are important to such traditional rituals."

"Let me show you a rehearsal plan I think you'll like." John pulled Sherlock down on his back and rolled on top. He pushed Sherlock's legs apart and kneeled between them as he continued to kiss along his lover's pale throat.

His voice breathy and his eyes filled with black, Sherlock asked, "Does this mean you agree to go ahead with the ceremony?"

John gave his answer with a kiss that made Sherlock shudder in his arms.

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John made tea and toast the next morning while Sherlock worked on his laptop. "I want to see the data you've been keeping."

Sherlock didn't look up. "Be more specific."

"The stuff about my nightmares. I want to see it."

Fingers paused at the computer. "I'll need to organize it a bit first." Sherlock started typing again almost immediately. "I can have the charts and tables prepared by tonight."

"Sure. Okay."

John poured the tea and stepped into the sitting room, still curious. "You said before there were patterns."
"Did I?"

"You did."

Sherlock took the cup John handed him and sipped as he considered the question. Instead of answering, he asked, "How have you slept the last two nights?"

"I haven't seen any more black eyes, so you tell me."

Sherlock finished his tea and then said, "My primary observation is that you are less likely to have nightmares or episodes of parasomnia after you've had sex."

John did a spit take with his tea. He hurried and grabbed a towel to clean up, completely disconcerted. "What?"

"I said..."

"I heard what you said. How can us having sex be connected to that? We really haven't been doing it that long."

"If by doing it, you mean having sex, no, we haven't. However, you've had sex with yourself on numerous occasions since that first day you moved in. There's a definite correlation between that activity and whether or not you have bad dreams."

John was shocked, truly and utterly gobsmacked. "What the fuck, Sherlock? Are you telling me you've been keeping a wank watch, too?"

"Not a watch, no, though that might have proven to be quite informative as well. However, you aren't exactly quiet, John, and you have particularly musky scent when you orgasm from masturbation."

John sat in the chair and covered his face with his hands, utterly mortified. "Jesus. I don't believe this."

"I have the pertinent data to support such a conclusion. On those nights when you haven't had some sexual activity, you're far more likely to have a sleep issue."

"You're serious. You actually kept track of when I wanked?"

"Yes, do try to keep up, John."

"I'm finding it difficult."

Sherlock finally noticed the dark flush of John's cheeks. "I don't know why you'd be embarrassed. As a physician, I'm sure you're aware that such activities are completely normal for most men."

"I know that. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"A shock."

"Why?"

John couldn't believe that Sherlock didn't get it, didn't understand why he might be upset at knowing that the man he fantasized about most of the time had been listening to him jerk off.
"Why didn't you say anything about it?" Before he could answer, John raised a halting hand. "No, don't. I get it. It would skew the data."

"Exactly."

"You're an idiot."

"What? Why?"

"You don't just listen to your flat mate having a wank and keep a record. That's just...just being a perv."

Instead of being insulted Sherlock just lifted an eyebrow and smirked. "Some would say what we do together is perverted, John."

"That's different."

"How? One man's perversion is another's pleasure."

John's eyes narrowed. "Are you saying you got pleasure from listening to me get off?"

Sherlock's cocky smile disappeared as he tried to defend his actions. "I was doing it for purely scientific reasons." He didn't sound the least bit convincing.

"Really? All science, was it? So, you're saying it didn't turn you on at all to hear me groaning. You didn't get just a little bit hard from visualizing me touching myself while I thought of you?"

Sherlock's head jerked up and he met John's teasing gaze. "You thought of me while you masturbated?"

"I did."

"All the time?"

"Most of the time."

"What percentage?"

"Sherlock, you're missing the point here."

He refused to be sidetracked. "Who else would you think of instead of me?"

Sighing, his arousal potential suddenly lost, John headed back to the kitchen for more tea. The next cup needed to be a lot stronger. "Nobody."

"But you said..."

"Sherlock, I was thinking about women when I first moved in, not my flat mate, or at least I tried to."

Sherlock moved into the kitchen behind him. Sherlock had very little respect for personal space before they got together. Now as a couple, Sherlock often stood just inches away. A lot of times he even made contact, a hand, a foot, some press of flesh to keep that connection. "When did it change? When did you first think of me and touch yourself, John?"

John really didn't want to confess that part, not right away, so he turned around, feeling incredibly
stubborn. Sherlock's eyes were piercing and bright. "Figure it out."

Sherlock's nose twitched and his lips lifted into a smile. "A challenge?"

"If you guess, I'll forgive you for being a perv."

"But I don't want to be forgiven for being something I'm not. I'm a scientist. I needed the data to help you with your problem."

John snorted and spoke, his words dripping with sarcasm. "Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, mate. It's completely okay to keep track of your flat mate's wank times."

Sherlock had stopped listening. Instead, he was leaning back against the counter, his one arm across his middle. His right index finger tapped his mouth as he considered the problem. John could almost see the playback going on inside his head. He remained silent and busied himself with fixing some breakfast.

After a few minutes, while John was eating toast and raspberry jam, Sherlock smiled, his deliberation finished. "It was when I rescued you and Sarah. Before that, you focused mainly on women. You would occasionally visualize me, but would panic and go back to women. However, after that night it changed."

Sherlock was bloody brilliant and a little bit scary in a genius sort of way. "How the hell could you know that?"

Sherlock sat down at the table and poured himself a drink while he explained. "When you're stressed or we haven't had a successful end to a case, you often have bad dreams. However, that night you didn't. You masturbated before you went to sleep. You wouldn't have been thinking about Sarah because you felt guilty about the danger we put her in."

John corrected snappishly. "Danger you put her in."

"Regardless, I do believe that for you, the near death experience caused arousal rather than fear." Sherlock looked him right in the eye with a seriously smug expression on his face. "So, once we were home, you excused yourself and masturbated. I don't know why I didn't make the connection at the time."

"God, you're an arrogant sod."

"But I am correct."

It was hard to chew with a big grin on his face. "Yeah. It was one of the best wanks in a long time."

"There are bad wanks?"

John laughed and nearly choked on the last of his toast. He shook his head in amusement and then said, "So, what you're saying is that all I have to do if I want to stop having bad dreams is have a good shag?"

"Or a wank."

"Which is never as good as a Sherlock shag."

Sherlock grinned conceitedly. "Is that your professional opinion, Doctor?"

John took Sherlock's hand and squeezed, suddenly serious. "All kidding aside, is it as simple as
"I'm sure it's not. Human psychology is complex and I don't know if I've collected enough data to
totally substantiate such a conclusion. However, it is, indeed, a factor."

"True science takes time and dedication."

Sherlock kissed their clasped hands. "I've been told I'm very dedicated."

"Closer to obsessed really."

"Semantics. Boring." Sherlock reached over, tracing his fingertip along John's lower lip. "Will you
give me time to complete the study?"

John nipped Sherlock's fingertip but not too hard and then grinned. "Absolutely. Do you have
anything in your charts and tables about how long the sex effect lasts?"

"Sex effect?"

"Yeah, like if it has to be right at bedtime or if it can be in the morning and have the same effect on
my dreams?"

Sherlock's eyes brightened at the suggestion. "I haven't considered that as a possible variable."

"Then I think it's high time we gave it a test run."

Sherlock tilted his head, his expression playful. "You do realize that the results will be entirely
negated should we decide to have more sex later tonight."

John wrapped his fingers around the back of Sherlock's neck, drawing his face within kissing
distance. "Then I guess we'll have to make the sacrifice for science and have repeated trials."

"Oh, I like that idea."

"I thought you might."

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When John got out of the shower later, he wore only a towel into the sitting room. Sherlock lay
stretched out on the sofa wearing nothing but his white sheet. Next to the blue dressing gown, it
was starting to be one of John's favorite outfits. It was a shame that he still had a job and couldn't
take advantage of such easy access to the goods.

Sherlock interrupted John's musings. "Your mother called."

A worst case scenario raced through his head. "Is Harry okay?"

"She's in the middle of detoxification therapy. Of course, she's not okay."

"I just meant..."

Sherlock cut him off with a raised hand. "I know what you meant."

"What's wrong?"

Sherlock sat up, leaning back against the armrest and his feet still stretched over the sofa cushions.
"I don't like thinking about it."

"About what? Your own detox?"

"It was not a good time in my life."

"I guess not."

"Your mother says she can't see Harry during this stage so she's going back home for a few days to arrange someone to watch over her house and her cat."

"I thought Mrs. Jamison was doing that."

"I'm just relaying the message."

John lifted Sherlock's legs and sat down. Then he let Sherlock's bare feet rest in his lap. "You want to tell me what's really bothering you?"

Sherlock didn't hesitate before he answered. "I don't want you to go back to work."

"It's just until the end of next week."

"I realize that, but I still don't want you to go."

"I gave my word."

His answer was short and snappish. "I know."

"I have to keep my word."

Sherlock's lips pursed and he crossed his arms in that stubborn posture that was all too familiar. "While I appreciate that you're a man of your word, John, that doesn't mean I have to like it when it means you'll be with her instead of me."

John massaged Sherlock's left foot between his hands, his voice even. "Do you trust me?"

Sherlock's expression quickly shifted to bafflement as if John were asking some kind of nonsensical question that had no connection to the topic. "Don't be absurd. Of course I do."

"Then you need to trust me on this. Nothing will ever happen between Sarah and me. Nothing will ever happen between me and anyone else ever again. I'm with you now and for always."

Sherlock relaxed and John could actually feel the tension ease from the foot in his hands. "Thank you for that declaration, but I did know that."

"But you like hearing it all the same."

"Oddly, yes."

"Why oddly?"

"I'm usually more confident in my own knowledge. However, when it comes to you and the predatory nature of others in regard to stealing you away from me, well, I don't seem to be able to control this increased state of wariness."

"It's called being jealous."
"It's confusing and I don't like how it makes me feel."

"I've never given you any reason to be jealous."

"Again, I know that. You're the most faithful, honest person I've ever met. It's not that I don't trust you, but..."  

"But what?"

"I'm not a woman."

John's hands stilled as the words sank in and he stared at Sherlock in complete confusion. "What?"

"I'm not a woman, John."

"I heard that part, but what's that got to do with being jealous?"

Sherlock pulled his feet out of John's lap and sat up, leaning forward as he spoke, not daring to look at John as he explained. He hesitated before he finally confessed his feelings, his face grim. "You've only ever been attracted to women. What if the novelty of being with me wears off?"

Understanding dawned and John didn't know whether to be amused or furious. He went with what showed up first. "Is that what you really think about me? That all it would take to lure me away is a pretty face, a pussy, and some tits?"

"There's no need to be vulgar."

"Oh, I think there is if you really believe that you're a novelty in my life." John got up and shook his head in frustration and anger before going upstairs. "You're an idiot, a complete and utter git. I really don't believe the rubbish that comes out of your mouth sometimes. Jesus."

As he stormed up to their room to get dressed, Sherlock followed close behind. "John, I'm sorry."

"I've got to go to work."

"I really didn't mean it the way it sounded. I know I'm not a novelty in your life."

"Then why on earth would you say such shit?"

Gloomily, Sherlock sat down on the edge of the bed as John dressed. "This is all new to me. You, me, this whole business of being together."

"I get that."

"Most of the time I'm more than confident about our relationship and your feelings for me."

When Sherlock stopped talking, John sat down beside him and pressed him for more. "What about the other times when you're not so confident?"

"I'm not easy, John."

"God, tell me something I don't know."

"I understand that my obsessive need for control, my lack of social skills, and my drive to do the work, it can be difficult."
"I'm not complaining."

Sherlock scoffed. "You complain all the time."

John guiltily agreed. "True, but I know that's who you are. Nobody's perfect. I still love you."

"But it would be so much easier for you to have a normal life with some woman, someone who could give you children and a home."

"I've got a home and I don't want children."

Sherlock met his gaze, obviously still unconvinced. "But you can't deny that at one time you wanted a family."

John knew he couldn't lie, not about something so important. "Well, maybe once, but not now."

"But with a woman..."

"Sherlock, stop. What's this really about?" John pushed back a curl from his lover's forehead. "This isn't like you. What's brought on all this bollocks about kids?"

"Your mother was talking about how she would never be a grandmother."

His mother wasn't noted for her tact, but he found it hard to believe she would be so insensitive. "My mum said that on the phone?"

"No, at the hospital. I overheard her, remember?"

"But that was ages ago."

"I know, but I was thinking about it. I know you'd make a wonderful father and now that will never happen, not with me."

John took Sherlock's face between his hands and brought it in close to his own. "I love you. I don't want a wife and kids or anything that looks like normal. I can't live my life because of what others want for me. I want what I have with you." He kissed Sherlock gently and pulled back. "What do I have to do to convince you?"

Sherlock captured the hands holding his face. He turned his head and kissed the palm of each before he whispered, "This is a good start."

"Then let me repeat, I love you, so stop being a jealous, insecure prat."

Sherlock smiled in relief, his hands running over John's short hair. "These are all new feelings. I find them difficult to navigate."

"Then let me guide you."

Letting their foreheads touch, Sherlock whispered, "I can try that."

"Good." John gave him one more kiss and stood up. Disaster averted, he said, "Now, I have to go to work. Call Lestrade and get a case. You're driving yourself barmy with too much time on your hands."

Sherlock grumbled, "But there are no interesting cases right now. It's like all of London is against me having a good murder to solve."
John didn't have the energy to say a bit not good to that kind of complaint, so he ignored it. "Well, find something to keep you busy until I get back."

Sherlock nodded absently and then said, "Your mother asked me what size Mycroft wears. She said she was going to buy the yarn to start on his jumper while she was home. She also mentioned someone called Rudolph in regard to the Christmas motif. I found it difficult to follow."

John buttoned his shirt, a small grin on his face. His mother was a champion talker. Half the time he just nodded and listened along even though he didn't have a clue what she was on about. This time, however, he understood all too well. "That means she wants to make the reindeer have a red nose."

"Reindeer don't have red noses."

"Rudolph does. It's a song, Sherlock"

"Really? What an odd choice."

John finished with his belt buckle before he added, "You do realize that my mum has this thing about knitting matching jumpers, right?"

Sherlock's eyebrows lifted. "Matching jumpers? Are you saying she'll make one for you, too?"

"No, I'm saying she'll make one for you."

Alarmed, Sherlock stared open-mouthed. "What? Please tell me you're joking."

"I'm not. Harry and I used to get matching jumpers every birthday and Christmas."

"Oh, that explains so much."

"Oi! Watch it. She's my mum."

"Well, you just have to call and tell her not to, that's all there is to it."

"You call her. Tell her you made a mistake about what kind of jumper Mycroft wants."

"You call her."

"He's your brother."

"She's your mother."

John cupped the back of Sherlock's skull and drew him in for a goodbye kiss. "I'll give her a call from work."

"Oh thank god."

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John rubbed his chest through his shirt, his bullet wound itchy and a little irritated from removing the stitches. He still had a couple of sutures left under his arm, but he'd ask Sherlock to remove those later. The scar was raised and still a bit irritated, but it had healed better than he thought it would after the infection.

He picked up a chart and headed to the exam room. He stopped right outside the door and stared at
the name. As he walked in, he smiled. "Corporal Toby Mason, I never thought I'd see your ugly mug again."

The man's face lit up with recognition. "Captain! What are you doing here, sir?"

"I work here."

"Yeah?" He looked suddenly confused, like he was seeing a ghost, something he couldn't explain. "But you got sent home on a stretcher."

John teased and tried to reassure the man at the same time. "I am home and, as you can see, I'm fine."

Mason's expression sobered, "Yeah, but your wound, sir, it was bad, about as bad as I've ever seen. We all thought you were a goner. You nearly bled out and the three others in your team died in route back to the infirmary."

John closed the door behind him and put the chart on the counter beside the exam table. Thinking about the worst day in his life wasn't something he wanted to do in front of others, so he tried not to. Sherlock had his mind palace, but John had his mental landscape, too, mostly full of sand and dangerous places. There were some paths in that desert he rarely took if he could avoid it. He refocused on the present. "I'm not a sir anymore, Toby, just a doctor. So, what's your problem today?"

The man ignored his question. "Seriously, you look good, sir. I'm just a little surprised to see you, that's all."

"I think I've surprised a lot of people including myself."

"I'll bet. Anyway, I'm glad to see you."

"Thanks. So, why are you here?"

"I think I might have busted a rib."

"Why not go to A&E?" John took Mason's blood pressure while he talked and marked it down as normal on his chart.

"This place was closer. I just need it checked out before I go back to work."

"Sure. Lift your shirt for me."

John turned to put on latex gloves and when he looked back, he saw Toby's chest and abdomen. Several bruises covered the well-toned muscles, but the largest was in the middle of his chest along the midline. "Jesus. What have you been doing, mate?"

"Boxing. I own a gym and I've got this new guy, Winston, for sparing. The bastard's a lot faster than me. He packs quite a punch, too."

John pressed along the ribcage and found the tell-tale slight give of a cracked rib. "I don't think it's broken. You'd need an X-ray to be sure."

"X-rays take too much time. I left my assistant in charge of the gym and he's a rookie. I need to get back."

Using his stethoscope, he listened to Mason's heart and his lungs, which sounded completely
normal as well. John took his pulse while he asked, "Any shortest of breath or weakness? Any light-headedness?"

"No, I feel okay except for the bit of pain where he hit me."

"Sharp or dull?"

"Sharp if I move too fast or lift my right arm. Otherwise, it's okay, just an ache."

"You should take it easy and find a different sparring partner. No boxing for at least two weeks. If you suddenly can't breathe, get to the A&E right away or call 999."

"Two weeks?"

"Minimum."

Mason grudgingly nodded, "Yeah, okay, I'll do that."

"I'm serious, Toby. You could get a punctured lung if it's a spontaneous break. That could happen with just one lucky punch in the right place."

"Right. Makes sense. Thanks." Toby got off the table while John wrote on his chart. He pulled out his wallet and took out a card. As he handed it to John, he said, "Here's the address and number of my place, TM's Gym. You should come by. We can catch up and you could work out. I know you used to be a real monster on the heavy bag."

John flashed back to his days at the camp, working out his aggression and frustration on the punching bag, working up a sweat, which was way too easy in that heat. He nodded, "Yeah, maybe. Thanks."

"It's nothing fancy, not like some of the newer places, but I like it. Some of the other vets work out there, too. We sometimes get together after a workout to just talk and lift a pint." Toby's face clouded over. "It's not easy coming back. Everything's different after you've been over there. You know what it's like."

John nodded in sympathy. "I do, yeah."

"Anyway, it was really good to see you again, sir." Toby reached out to shake John's hand and then clapped him on his shoulder.

"Like I said, I'm not a sir anymore."

"You'll always be sir to me, Captain. A man saves my life, I call him sir. Call me old-fashioned."

"I was just doing my job, Toby."

"It was more than that, sir. A man can tell when someone is just putting in time and when someone loves what he does. You loved it over there, sir, going on patrol and rescue missions, keeping us alive when we got hit or captured. You can't convince me that you didn't." When John didn't answer, Mason added, "I hated it over there sometimes, wanted to come home nearly every minute especially when we were being attacked, but now that I'm back, I miss it, miss the action. Is that crazy or what?"

John had heard the same story from nearly every vet he knew. He heard it in his own head countless times. "Like you said, it's takes time to adjust."
"Yeah, especially if you get sent home like we did."

John lifted his chin and studied Mason closer. "Why did you get sent back?"

"IED, nearly lost my right foot and got concussed. The wound wasn't as bad as yours, but it ended my fitness for duty. I'm fine now. The pension's not enough to live on, but I had some inheritance and bought the gym with that. Between the two, I get by."

"I'm glad you're doing okay."

"What about you, sir? Working as a GP, that's got to be different from being in action."

John knew the man didn't mean to be intrusive. A comrade was always a comrade even off the battlefield. So, he explained. "I work with Scotland Yard sometimes. That helps."

"Yeah? Doing what?"

"My partner is a consulting detective."

"Your partner?"

"Sherlock Holmes. You might have read about him."

"Fuck, you're that John Watson? Seriously, you're the bloke with the blog that talks about all those murder cases?"

John stood a little straighter, not really sure if Mason thought it was a good thing or not. "I am, yeah."

"Blimey, sir." Mason shook his head in disbelief. "That guy Sherlock sounds right mad."

"Seems that way to me, too, sometimes, but he's really quite brilliant."

Mason studied him a bit longer, a flicker of sudden awareness in his eyes. "When you say partner, you mean like you two just work together, right?"

John figured there was no reason to dance around it. "That and we're also engaged."

Mason's brown eyes widened in surprise. "You're gay, sir?"

"Bisexual apparently."

There was one long moment and Mason smiled. "Well, good for you, sir. I think we both know life's too fucking short to waste time with labels. You find the right person, you go for it, yeah?"

"That's my feeling."

"I have to say I'm surprised, though."

"Why's that?"

"Well, you were always so good at pulling birds. Never figured you'd go the other way, but what the fuck do I know?" Mason clapped his shoulder one more time and then stepped to the door. "Come to the gym, sir. I think you'd like it. I'll give you a discount."

"How much is that?"
"Free."

John shook his head. "I couldn't do that. You've got to make a living."

"When I was captured, you rescued me, sir. I thought I was dead and forgotten and then there you were, taking out the bastard who had a fucking knife to my throat with just one shot." Mason's voice grew hoarse as he fought back emotion. "It'll always be free for you, sir."

John remembered that day vividly. It had been one of his most successful missions, one of the few that was actually in a public record. He and his team had rescued five captured soldiers and killed 10 enemy combatants. He didn't lose any sleep that night. Gun hungry, his left hand twitched at the images of death and victory mixing in his head. John cleared his throat and nodded, "Thank you."

Their eyes met in an unspoken understanding, the one that vets always recognized. They had survived while their friends had perished. It was an eternal link, one never to be broken even when they were sentenced to remain civilians, no longer fit and useful. They'd done their service to Crown and Country, long live the Queen.

As Mason opened the door, he added, "Bring your bloke, too. He'd get an eyeful when you work out. Nobody hits the heavy bag like you, sir. It's like you're trying to take out the enemy all on your own."

John ignored the comments about his prowess with the bag. He didn't like to think of how many times he'd bloodied his fists after losing patient after patient to the war. Instead, he pasted a smile on his face. "Thanks, Toby. Take care of that rib."

"I will. Later, sir."

As soon as he was gone, Sarah stepped up. "I take it you know Mr. Mason."

"Yeah. We were in the war together."

"I figured that since he called you sir."

He shrugged like it was no big deal. "A lot of people called me sir."

John avoided her keen stare. "Do you miss it, being in the army and being called sir?"

He picked up the next folder and lied. "Not a bit."

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The slap came out of nowhere. "You're an utter bastard, John Watson! I thought you were my friend."

John held a hand to his stinging cheek and stared into the furious face of his sister's ex-partner. "I'm sorry, Clara."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"She told me not to."

Clara pushed her way into his office and paced, shaking her head both in anger and frustration. "I don't believe that. Why wouldn't she want you to call me? This is exactly the sort of thing she'd use to get my attention."
John waved off Sarah who had headed toward them, obviously worried about the assault. He mouthed that it was okay, and then closed the door behind them. "How did you find out?"

"Your mother, of course."

"Of course." John gestured to a chair. "Sit down."

"I don't want to sit down. I want bloody answers."

Clara was a striking woman. She was tall and slim with long dark hair and incredibly attractive features. John loved her intelligent brown eyes the best, but usually the intensity of her stare was aimed at someone else, usually his sister. It was no wonder she was such a successful solicitor. She was downright intimidating when she wanted to be. "Ask. I'll tell you what I can."

She studied him a moment to gauge his sincerity and her features relaxed. She settled into the chair in front of his desk and said, "The men who attacked her, they were hardened criminals. Why would they confess?"

"Guilty consciences?"

"Don't be glib with me, John. I want to know what happened."

He asked cautiously, "As Harry's ex or as a solicitor?"

"Does it make a difference?"

"It might."

Her eyes narrowed and he could see her carefully considering her answer. She sniffed as if smelling something unpleasant. "I saw the pictures. I don't really care if the confessions were coerced. Does that make me a bad person?"

"I think that makes you human."

"Perhaps, but I think it would be incredibly hypocritical of me to take some moral high ground considering how I feel about those bastards. Whatever was done merely streamlined the process of having them sent to prison. There was enough evidence against them without their cooperation. It was a solid case without outside interference. That said, I must say I was shocked at the speed of the process. It's rather unheard of in my business. It's almost like there was something else at work, something not in the record."

John remained quiet, knowing she needed time to process her own justification for her feelings. Plus, anything he might say would only add to her suspicions. He certainly didn't want that. He wanted that whole chapter finished. He didn't need a bulldog like Clara asking too many astute questions.

After a moment she changed the subject. "Your mother said you were seeing someone named Sherlock Holmes."

"It's a bit more than that. We're engaged."

"Really? Is he the same one in the paper who's always solving high profile crimes that baffle the police?"

"He is, yes."
"Well, I've seen his picture. He is quite dishy."

John smiled, happy to agree. "He is."

"Even so, I have to say I'm surprised. You were always such a ladies man. There was hardly ever a skirt you wouldn't chase. You even flirted with me once or twice."

John shrugged. He was getting tired of hearing that about himself. It always made him sound a bit desperate. Maybe he was at that time. Maybe he'd blocked out that hopeless feeling when he was so busy trying to find the right one to love.

He turned the conversation around and aimed it at Clara. "I heard you were engaged as well." Her gaze dropped to her hands. He didn't need Sherlock's deductive talent to know what that meant. "Trouble with Lisa?"

"How do you know her name?"

"Harry told me."

Clara sighed, lifting a hand to her mouth, wrapping the other around her middle. She didn't meet his eyes. "It didn't work out."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

Irritated, John sat a little straighter in his desk chair. "What do you want from me, Clara?"

"This rehab she's in, it's expensive and very exclusive. How did she manage getting in without my help?"

"Sherlock's brother has contacts."

Her eyebrows lifted and her eyes widened in sudden realization. "Oh my god, I'm an idiot. I didn't make the connection. Sherlock's brother must be Mycroft Holmes."

"Yes."

"Jesus. He's, well he's..."

"Hard to describe?"

"I was going to say powerful, dangerous, manipulative, filthy rich, and as politically well connected as they come. I think he's an earl or something, too."

John hadn't heard about the title of earl, but it didn't surprise him. "So, you have met him."

"Wow."

John teased, "That's very articulate for an educated woman like yourself."

"Mycroft bloody Holmes. What are you thinking getting mixed up with the likes of him? He's dangerous."

"Only if you're against him. Besides, I'm not with Mycroft, Clara. I'm with Sherlock."
"I know, but it's rather a package deal, one with the other."

"As Harry is with me."

Clara paused and then nodded. "Point taken." More relaxed, she asked, "So, Sherlock, I've read about him in the papers. Is he really as eccentric as he sounds?"

"Yes, but he's also a genius and I'm never bored."

She tilted her head and smiled. "You always liked smart."

"What about you, Clara?"

"What about me?"

"What happened with Lisa?"

She bristled again. "That's none of your business."

"You're right, it's not, but I'd still like to know."

Clara stood up and walked over to his bookshelf, running her hand along the edge of the top one, bringing up dust with her fingers. "You need a better cleaner."

He knew she was biding time to decide what to share and what to keep to herself. He could be patient. "I'll get on that." Then he waited.

Finally she said, "Lisa was jealous."

"Did you give her reason to be?"

"Of course not. You know me better than that. No, she was jealous of me helping Harry, supporting her like I did, like I do. She said I still loved her."

"Do you?"

She turned and glared at him like he'd insulted her mother. "Of course I do. I'll always love her, but I couldn't live with her, not when she was drinking."

"She was drinking when you two met and through most of your marriage."

"Stop it. You know what I mean. She was functional, but then toward the end, it got to be too much. It was constant. When she's sober, there's nobody like her. She's kind and sweet, with a real sense of humor. But then she'd turn spiteful and accusing and it was like living with two people, one I loved and one I hated. I couldn't take it. Nobody could. You can't possibly blame me for leaving."

"I don't." John commiserated. "I've known her a lot longer than you have. I know what she's like."

Clara sat down again, her shoulders slumped. "Lisa said she wouldn't stay with me unless I cut Harry off and I couldn't."

"That's because you're a good person."

"I'm a sentimental sap."
"No, you're not. You don't desert the people you care about just because it gets tough. Alcoholism is a disease, not a choice."

Clara lifted her head and met his gaze, suddenly more determined. "I want to see her."

It was John's turn to sigh. "She's in the middle of detox. Nobody can see her, not even Mum."

"But when she's better, when she can have visitors, I want to see her then."

"That has to be up to her."

"You can get her a message, though, right?"

"I can."

"Will you?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Don't be thick, Clara. She's in a vulnerable state. If you go in there and still just want to be friends, knowing how she feels about you, it could be too much."

"I don't want to just be friends, not if she's willing to get treatment and work at staying sober. I've always supported her in that."

John rubbed a hand across his face, knowing it was like delivering dynamite to a delicate glass house, but also knowing his sister would never forgive him if he didn't leave it up to her to decide. "When she can have calls, I'll let her know."

"Thank you." She stood to leave. "In the meantime, I'll go to the apartment and clean out the fridge so it won't be a stinking mess when she gets back. I'll let the landlord and doorman know that they won't see her for a while, too."

John had no idea why he hadn't thought of that himself. "Thanks."

"Do you think she'll need anything else, any clothes or books?"

"Let's just wait and see, yeah?" John got up and came around from behind the desk.

"All right." Clara took his hand in hers and then gently cupped the cheek she had slapped. "I'm sorry about hitting you."

"It's okay. I probably deserved it."

She frowned. "Why would you say that?"

"I probably should have called you sooner. I wanted to, but Harry didn't want to get her hopes up."

She leaned in and kissed the abused cheek. "Let me know what she says, yeah?"

John nodded and walked her out. Sarah, the nurses, and several of the waiting patients watched her leave with suspicious expressions. They'd all witnessed the slap and probably all had their own ideas about why he'd been hit. He was either a devil or a saint in their tiny, judgmental minds. Sarah stepped over first. "Should I even ask?"
"She's my sister's ex-partner. I didn't tell her about Harry being hurt."

Sarah nodded in understanding. "I can see why she'd be upset. Still, she shouldn't have slapped you."

"It's fine."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Who's my next patient?"

"Actually you're done for the day."

John checked his watch. "I thought I had another two hours."

"I've got one of the people whose name you gave me coming in for a trial, Dr. Lacey. She's seems very keen. I think she might be the one."

John wasn't about to argue. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure. I'll see you tomorrow."

Taking off his lab coat, he grabbed his jacket and headed home, home to Sherlock and away from prying eyes and stresses he didn't need.

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"Well, Dear Brother, I'd love to say I'm happy to see you, but I do have other things to do rather than to deal with your mundane affairs."

Sherlock sat on a hard wooden bench, his arms crossed, wanting to smack that smug look off Mycroft's face. The level of imaginary violence against his brother had increased tenfold since he'd been seeing John. He wondered if there was a connection. Impatiently, he snapped, "Just do something."

"What, pray tell, would you have me do?"

"Make them let me register. That's what this place is for, isn't it? Why do they have to have such incredibly stupid rules? It's boring and just another example of idiotic bureaucracy. It's all about making more money and has nothing to do with serving the public."

"It's just procedure, Sherlock. You can't register your notice about the partnership without John present. You both have to provide the documentation required and pay the fees. It's really not that difficult."

"I'm sure it's quite simple for people like you, people who do nothing but paperwork all day long. How dull."

Mycroft rolled his eyes and took a longsuffering breath. "People do this sort of thing all the time. Why can't you simply follow the rules for once in your life?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes dramatically. "Oh, you'd like that wouldn't you."

"I would, indeed, though I must confess I'd be shocked if it ever happened."

Sherlock bit his lower lip, wanting to say piss off in glorious John fashion, but he couldn't. He
knew that Mycroft could make the whole fight with the register officer go away with just a few calls. He needed that to happen because John hated unnecessary complications. "The man at the counter told me I was banned from registering here even if I had the fees and paperwork."

"Ah."

"He's a public servant. He can't ban people."

"Actually, he can." Mycroft held up a hand before Sherlock could protest. "I'll talk to him and let him know that your partner is far more reasonable and will accompany you next time. I'm sure he'll lift the ban given the right incentive."

"Why can't you just take care of the whole thing, get us registered and save all this bother?"

"I could, but I won't."

Mycroft was so infuriatingly obnoxious. Frustration boiled up inside of Sherlock, his whole body tense. "Why not?"

Mycroft sat down next to him on the bench, lowering his voice as if he were explaining to a child. "I've been fixing things for you my whole life, Sherlock. I don't mind when it's something serious, something I know you can't handle on your own. This, however, is different. This is something you and John can do together and I want you to realize that if you'll just trust John, he can lead you through this sort of bother."

Sherlock frowned and looked sideways to examine Mycroft's expression. "Trust John to lead me? That's a big shift from your previous stance."

Mycroft shrugged nonchalantly. "I've had time to reconsider your mate. I can see why you fancy the good doctor."

Sherlock hid his shock. It wouldn't do to give Mycroft any hints about what he was feeling. "Can you really?"

"On the surface he seems rather ordinary, but he's really not, is he? He's delightfully unpredictable, which is such a rare thing."

"And loyal."

"Yes, an admirable quality in a partner. In a soldierly way, he's also rather attractive. Not our usual sort, but certainly a clever addition to the family. I might have been a bit hasty in my previous judgments about his suitability."

Sherlock turned and faced his brother, his face contorted in anger. His words came out in an irate hiss as he poked a finger at Mycroft's chest. "You'd better not be thinking what you're thinking."

Mycroft studied him for a mere fifteen seconds before throwing his head back and laughing. "Oh, Sherlock, please."

"What?"

"I'm not attracted to John."

Miffed that his conclusion was so obviously wrong, Sherlock snorted. "Of course not. I knew that. But, wait, why the sudden change in attitude? That's not at all like you."
"For one thing I admire a man who can deal with you on a daily basis and apparently thrive on it rather than end up with a long prison term."

"Oh, very amusing."

"I'm not kidding, Dear Brother. Your John is a fascinating character. I suggest you amend your behavior so you can keep him around for a while. He rather suits you."

Peevishly Sherlock griped as he crossed his arms again. "I don't need to amend my behavior. John likes me just the way I am."

"As I said, fascinating." Mycroft stood up and explained, "John was an army captain and a doctor. He understands about paperwork. This is rather his area. Bring him with you next time."

Sherlock had to admit he hadn't thought about John in quite that way before, proficient in bureaucratic details. It could definitely be an advantage.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll talk to the registry agent so you can return at another time."

Grudgingly, Sherlock nodded, knowing John would want him to say it even if he didn't mean it. "Thank you."

Mycroft lifted one eyebrow. "John has been a good influence on you."

"Piss off."

"And has also rather expanded your vocabulary, I see."

As his brother walked away, Sherlock groused to himself that Mycroft might be right but he didn't have to be so damn self-satisfied about it. He wondered if he could call John and have him tell his mother to go ahead with knitting the atrocious Rudolph jumper. It might be worth wearing one himself if he could see Mycroft forced to endure such embarrassment, too.

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Walking into Toby's gym was like returning to the gym on base in Afghanistan. The place reeked of male musk and sweat, blood and leather. All it needed was a sandy floor and it'd be a perfect match. It was all a bit heady and made John sweat despite the chilly rain he'd left on the street.

"Captain! You came!"

John shook the outstretched hand Mason offered and returned an eager grin. "I got off a few hours early. I thought I'd check it out." He looked around, scanning the large room with the boxing ring in the center. The place had weightlifting and exercise equipment, treadmills as well as speed and heavy bags for practice along the walls. "I reminds me of the one on base."

"I know. I set it up like that. Makes the other vets more comfortable. It's efficient. Plus, don't fix what ain't broken, right, sir?"

John nodded, but his eyes settled on the heavy bag. If he had some gloves and gym clothes, he'd work out. Maybe next time, since he had no doubt in his mind he'd be back. He had no idea how he'd missed knowing the place was in the neighborhood, just a few miles from the flat. It was the perfect location.

"Let me give you a quick tour, sir."
John started to protest that everything was pretty self-evident, but he didn't. He went along with Mason.

"This out here is only half of it. Follow me."

When John went to the back, he saw that there was a whole other section, one he never expected. There was a whirlpool, steam room, massage tables, and behind that were the lockers, showers, and a place for equipment storage. "This is a really nice set up, Toby. I'm impressed."

"We just put in the sauna about two months ago, sir. Seems to be a hit."

"I can see how it would be."

"Look, sir, I can give you a locker now if you want. That way when you come back, you can just stow your gear right off. We provide the towels and the gloves if you want to work out. If you want to box, I can get you a partner."

"Thanks, I'd like that, the workout part, not the boxing."

John was tempted to bring up the joining fee again, but he figured he wouldn't insult Mason again. He knew what it was like to want to pay back others for saving his life and how it felt like a punch in the gut when they turned him down.

Mason showed him the empty locker. "We can give you a lock or you can bring your own, sir. It's up to you."

"Yours will be fine."

Nodding, Mason handed him a lock and a paper with the combination. "Broadbent and Morgan are due in anytime now, sir. You could stick around. They'd love to see you."

"Owen Broadbent and Dave Morgan, really?"

"Yes, sir."

He remembered calling them the Three Musketeers because they'd always been thick as thieves on base. "You guys do stick together. Did they get invalided back, too?"

"Yeah, Owen got hit in the chest, Dave in the back. They're doing okay now, not great, but okay."

"I'm glad to hear it, Toby."

"Like I said, sir, it makes it easier. We all know what we've been through. We stick together, make sure we've got what we need."

Nodding, John closed the locker. "I understand that, I do. I'd like to see them again, catch up. I'll be back another day when I've got time. I think that punching bag has my name on it."

"You could work on it now, sir. I've got some spare gym clothes if you'd like to try it out."

"It's tempting."

Toby laughed and wouldn't give up. "Come on, sir, you know you want to. I'll even wrap your hands like I used to."

And so John gave in, falling back into a training pattern he knew all too well.
"Where the hell have you been?"

John walked into the flat, not in the mood for a stroppy Sherlock. "Why?"

"You've not been answering my texts."

"I was busy. Besides, I didn't have my phone on me."

"Why wouldn't you have your phone?" Sherlock stepped closer, his frown transforming into curiosity as he leaned in and took a big sniff. "You've been sweating in excess."

John moved away and hung up his coat. He didn't expect the third degree every time he was a minute late, but he should have. He knew how Sherlock was, and accepted it as his nature most of the time. Other times, he wanted to just tell him to back the fuck off. "It's called exercise."

Sherlock stood straighter and huffed. "When does working at the surgery provide the opportunity for exercise?"

"It doesn't."

"Did you walk home?"

"Not hardly." John walked upstairs to change. He should've showered at the gym, but he'd lost track of time, especially after the other soldiers had arrived. But he knew how Sherlock was when he ran late, so he'd hurried, just not enough.

His hands, arms, and shoulders still burned from the workout. He smiled as he stripped off his shirt. As he unzipped his trousers, Sherlock moved in behind him. He wrapped his arms around John's middle and slowly licked the side of his neck. His voice sounded husky and a bit drunk. "You smell wonderful." He ran his hands along John's shoulders and arms.

The heat of Sherlock's exploring touch and his tongue flicking his ear went right to John's groin. Still, he protested, "I need a shower."

"No, not yet." Sherlock's words came out like a low growl.

Turning him around, Sherlock pushed him down on the bed and proceeded to finish undressing him. Then he quickly stripped down himself, staring at John the whole time. "You're gorgeous when you're dirty like this."

John cock hardened even more at the words. He loved seeing Sherlock look at him with his eyes turned dark with arousal. Sherlock's erection made it clear that Sherlock was more than happy to see him. "You like me all sweaty, is that it?"

"Your sweat has aphrodisiacal powers."

"Does it?"

"Oh, yes." To prove his point, Sherlock shoved John's bare legs apart and kneeled between them. Then he dove in and upward to bury his nose in John's left armpit.

Squirming, and fighting the giggles, John groused, "That tickles, you pervy git."

Sherlock moved his nose away and then licked down the middle of John's belly. Arching up, John
wanted Sherlock to take him in his mouth, suck him off, make it count. He captured the sides of Sherlock's head with his hands and tried guiding it to his aching cock. Sherlock pulled away, smiling. "Not yet, John, not yet. There's no need to rush."

"Stop teasing and suck me off." John offered a bargain. "I'll let you do me afterward."

Playing with John's nipple, Sherlock shook his head. "You told me that I needed to practice patience."

"God, I'm a fucking idiot."

John's breath hitched as Sherlock dipped in and sucked on his right nipple, using his tongue like a rasp and then teasing the tip with his teeth. "Jesus!" Suddenly desperate, John took his own cock in his hand, wanting to stroke himself, only to find his arms pulled away and forced over his head. Within seconds, Sherlock, like a magician, slipped metal around both wrists and had him cuffed to the headboard.

Ambushed and stunned, heat drained from John's body as his brain went offline. He closed his eyes and sank within himself as Sherlock covered his body with his own, the solid weight like a gravestone.

It took him several seconds to muster and fight. "No!"

Sherlock lifted his head from kissing his partner's nipple, startled by his panicked reaction. "John?"

"Take these fucking things off me and get off. Now!" John bucked his hips to emphasize his point. His wrists jerked hard against the metal, his skin already red.

Surprised, Sherlock rolled off and unlatched the cuffs quickly. John sat up immediately, furious, wanting to punch something or someone into a bloody pulp. "Don't ever do that again. Do you hear me, Sherlock, never again. I mean it."

John's whole body trembled as he squeezed his eyes shut, fighting off the flood of hateful images and sensations. For a few seconds he'd been back in the desert chained to a pipe, Danny Bailey's screams and terror all around him, his own blood filling his mouth. He beat his head with his fists. "Fuck!"

Sherlock sat naked on the bed behind him, but didn't touch him. "John, what's happening?"

Nauseated, John struggled to find his voice as he wrapped his arms around his middle. "Why did you do that, use the cuffs without asking first?"

"I thought you would enjoy it."

"Sherlock, you can't do that."

"John, they're not real cuffs. They can slip right off." Sherlock proceeded to show him the trick, like it excused his actions.

John didn't look or listen, just ran to the loo. He fell to his knees, suddenly dizzy and sick. When he finished heaving, Sherlock stood naked in the doorway as he handed him a wet flannel. "Are you all right?"

John shook his head as he wiped his face with the warm cloth. The room was still spinning. At the back of his mind, the world was shadowy and there were still too many screams, too many echoes
pulling at his head. He held up a hand as Sherlock stepped forward. "Don't. Give me a minute."

Sherlock halted and nodded. "I'll make us some tea."

John would've smiled at the gesture if he hadn't been fighting so hard to remain in the present, blocking out the sound of bombs and gunfire, screams and death rattles. He fell sideways and leaned his forehead against the cool edge of the tub. The stabbing pain in his leg suddenly returned. It cut through him just as it had that first day when he'd found himself shattered but alive, waking in a hospital bed two weeks after he'd been shot. He relived that moment, recalled the overwhelming terror of having his life ripped apart, of being less than he had been. He'd wanted to die that day and many days after that. He'd survived, but it had been a near thing.

John hugged himself and groaned, tears running down his face as he curled up tighter into a ball. Being in two places at once, past and present, Afghanistan and England, it was tearing him apart, but he had no idea how to stop it.

He also had no idea how long he was lying there. He heard his name almost like a distant chant and it snapped him back. God, he was cold.

"John?"

He whispered, his voice hoarse, "I can't get up."

Sherlock had dressed and was kneeling beside him, hesitating, not sure how to touch him. John reached out a hand. "I don't know if I can stand...my leg."

Sherlock nodded in quick understanding and let John use his arm as a brace to get to his feet. His right leg was useless. Leaning against Sherlock, he slipped on his robe and then they went into the sitting room. John sat on the sofa and Sherlock kept his distance by sitting in the chair, staring at him.

Words were difficult, but John finally managed to speak. "You said you'd make tea."

"It's cold now. I can reheat it."

John frowned and asked, "How long was I...whatever I was?"

"Twenty minutes. It was disturbing."

John scrubbed his face in shame at the loss of time and control. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't, not once I realized what was happening." When John didn't answer, Sherlock said, "I wasn't sure before that you actually had PTSD. I think this rather confirms it."

John shrugged, sick of labels, especially that one. "Does it matter what you call it?"

"Flashbacks, nightmares, the psychosomatic limp, they're all classic symptoms, John."

"Yeah, all right."

After a few moments of silence, Sherlock got up and put the cups in the microwave. John shuddered and asked, "Please tell me there are no eyeballs anywhere near my tea."

"Don't be ludicrous. I put those in the freezer for safekeeping yesterday." The microwave finally dinged and Sherlock brought him his drink.
John had to shift it quickly to his right hand because his left trembled too much. Half of the hot liquid spilled out over his lap. The cup crashed suddenly into the wall, shattering into a hundred tiny pieces. Fucking traitor of a body made him want to scream.

Sherlock stood there, impassive, just watching. John snapped, "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Staring at me like I'm some kind of failed experiment, like a beetle wing or a piece of decomposing flesh."

"Is that what you think? That you're an experiment to me?"

John did believe that sometimes, but he knew it wasn't true, not really. John knew he didn't always have the best judgment when it came to reality. "No, of course not." His head fell back against the sofa, eyes squeezed shut. He needed the war inside him to stop before he lost his damn mind, what little was left of it. "I hate this."

"I know."

When John opened his eyes, he saw Sherlock still standing there, still waiting. "You can't restrain me."

"I realize that now."

"I should've said."

"I should've deduced it."

"How?"

"On previous occasions, you've shied away from any kind of bondage even in the mildest form. I should have thought about the connection to when you were in the army." He paused and added, "I'm assuming that you were captured at some point during your service."

John's mouth went dry like he'd swallowed a mountain of sand, the grit from the dust blasting his eyes bloody. Talking about any of the war was not something he was up to at that moment. He didn't think his heart could take it. "I was, but I can't talk about it."

"Classified?"

"Something like that. Plus, I'm completely knackered. I need to sleep."

Sherlock cautioned, "There's a high probability that you'll have nightmares or an event."

John stretched out on the sofa, the Union Jack pillow under his head and his right leg screaming with the unwelcome movement. His chest tight, he put his left arm over his eyes to block out light. "I don't care. I have to sleep now. I'm sorry."

A throw covered him soon after and Sherlock's shuffle to the kitchen was the last thing he heard before falling back into a cold dark place that was far from empty.

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"Sir, it's all right."
John rocked back and forth for comfort as he held the beaten young man in his arms. No, that wasn't right, was it? He didn't remember ever holding Danny, ever touching him at all after he'd been tortured. Still, he tried to reassure him that there was still hope. "They'll be here soon, Danny. You just have to hold on."

"I can't, sir, but it's okay. I know you did everything you could."

John opened his eyes to see Corporal Bailey dressed in his dress uniform, no wounds or blood anywhere. They weren't in the enemy camp anymore, either. Danny sat on a window seat overlooking a nearby ocean, smiling at the view. John asked, "Where are we?"

"I'm from Dover, sir. This is my gran's place. I love it here."

Confused, John stood up from where he'd been lying on the floor of the unfamiliar sitting room. He tested his right leg and it held. All the pain was gone, and all the sunshine and light warmed his body. He could smell the salty sea air and it made him long to go sailing on the open ocean. He'd done that once with his father when he was ten and it was his favorite memory of his da.

Danny watched him and his smile grew wider. "I'm at peace, sir. You should be, too."

"I don't understand."

"I know. I don't understand it, either, but I'm here. It's my little bit of heaven."

John closed his eyes and listened, hearing the gulls and wind with an undertone of ocean waves. He'd been to Dover once. It was a lovely place with long stretches of deserted beach. When he opened his eyes, Danny had moved closer. "Sir, you have to let me go."

John captured the young man's upper arm and squeezed. "This isn't real. You're not real. You're dead."

"I am, but you're not. Let me go. I'm ready for another life."

Studying the sincere face carefully, John saw something he'd never seen before, serenity. He still didn't understand, didn't get it. He had no idea what was happening and he shook his head in confusion. "There is no other life."

"You're wrong, sir."

John nearly cried out, wanted to fall to his knees and weep, a tiny flash of hope growing. "I want to be wrong."

"I can't be completely free until you let me go."

"I don't know how to do that."

The world shifted and turned murky again. John stood alone in an empty concrete cell, his body heavy, the light all gone. "Danny?"

Silence and then an explosion of gunfire and pain rained down over him. He fell forward, covering his head, as he jerked awake, gasping for air. "Fuck!"

Shivering, he pulled the blanket up around him to his neck and buried his face in his hands. When he stopped shaking, he lifted his head to see Sherlock standing at the end of the sofa, watching over him, his bright eyes sadder than he'd ever seen them.
"Who's Danny?"

John looked up from drinking his tea, not surprised that Sherlock knew the name. "He was a man I served with."

"I gathered that. I also assume he's dead."

"Yes."

"John, I don't want to pry."

"Then don't."

Sherlock didn't say anything else. He gave him a stony stare and then took his cup to the kitchen. He returned and sat back down in front of the laptop, his back to John.

John rubbed his aching leg and gave in. It was late and he was too tired to fight. "I'm sorry."

Sherlock turned, his face tense and his words sharp. "I know you were more than a regular soldier, John. You don't have to shield me from that. I won't think less of you no matter what you did during the war. I've told you that before."

John bit back a retort, one that said Sherlock knew nothing about his real service, nothing he hadn't told him. But he didn't shout back. He wasn't being fair to himself or to Sherlock. "I suppose Mycroft told you all about me."

"No."

That was surprising. "No?"

"John, the only thing I know is what you've told me and what I've deduced."

John put his cup down on the table and pulled his feet up on the sofa. He didn't usually do that, but he wanted to curl up. His leg felt better that way and it was warmer. The cold still plagued him and made all his muscles nearly too heavy to move. "All right. Out with it. What have you deduced then?"

Sherlock took the empty spot on the sofa as an invitation and moved closer to John. "Doctors don't usually go on patrol, but you did. I also know from the way you fight that you had special training in marital arts and defense. You're an expert marksman, a sharpshooter. You could easily have been a sniper. You've said some of your missions were classified, so you were likely involved in black operations, missions not known to the public. That would explain the medals in the hidden compartment of your duffle, medals that aren't listed on your army record."

"You went through my duffle bag?"

"It wasn't locked."

"You can't lock a duffle."

Sherlock became defensive. "If you didn't want me to find them, you should have found a more secure location. I don't see why you have to hide them at all. You should be proud."

Weary, John didn't want to argue about that, about Sherlock being so fucking nosey. There was no
point in complaining about something he already knew. "I am proud, thanks. Anything else you deduced?"

"You're a doctor at heart, wanting to heal rather than harm. I would think your mission caused a great deal of inner conflict."

John didn't say only sometimes. Instead, he asked, "What else?"

Sherlock's tone softened. "From the patterns and condition of your scarring, you've been tortured on more than one occasion."

They had never really discussed why he had so many scars. John supposed it was too much to hope that Sherlock wouldn't notice or analyze every single one without telling him. "How do you know some were caused by torture and not by just a regular injury?"

Sherlock sighed, like he did before he explained simple forensics to an idiot like Anderson. "You and I both know that certain types of torture leave specific patterns, like the row of cuts on your inner upper left arm, the burns on your lower back, and the whip marks across your spine. Those are wholly different from the scars left by compound fracture of your leg from rugby as a child or the bullet wound through your left shoulder. Your whole life could be catalogued by the scars, John."

John gave him a weak smile. "That's brilliant and impressive even for you."

"I don't take pleasure in it, not in knowing this."

"Neither do I."

After a long moment of silence, Sherlock said, "I understand why you don't want to talk about it."

John didn't know what was more unsettling, Sherlock's accurate deductions about his service or his empathy for his silence. "Do you?"

"Yes. When you have been cruelly treated and you have no control or recourse, it's painful. I'm not talking about physical pain. That goes without saying. However, there's a deep psychological pain. It stays with a person no matter how you try to repress or deny it."

Sometimes his love for Sherlock was staggering. It swelled his heart and stole away his breath. "You're talking about what happened to you, about your uncle and the drugs."

Sherlock met his gaze before he answered, "There are many kinds of wars, John. Some are more successfully fought than others."

"Some are fought in a castle and some on sand."

"Exactly." Sherlock reached out and waited.

John took his lover's hand and squeezed gently. Then he saw the bruising on his own wrists. At first he'd wished the day had never happened, but hearing Sherlock talk about his own war somehow made it worth the effort.
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John both have difficult pasts that affect their evolving relationship. When John prevents a mugging, it sets off a dangerous chain of events that not only impacts him, but his whole family. In the end there's a wedding and a honeymoon, but will there really be a happy ending?

Chapter Three

When he got up the next morning, John found Sherlock standing by the window. He was in his white sheet again and John stepped in behind him, wrapping arms around his lover's waist. Sherlock covered John's hands with his own. John nuzzled his back with his whiskery cheek. "You didn't come to bed last night."

"I was thinking."

"Do I want to know about what?"

"Not really."

"And the violin, you were playing through most of the night. Mrs. Hudson won't be happy."

"She's used to it. Frankly, I think she actually likes it. I think you do, too."

"Depends on what you're playing. Last night, I didn't mind it. It actually helped me sleep."

"That was rather my intention."

John placed a hand over Sherlock's heart. It was racing. John frowned and then moved to look at Sherlock's right arm covered with five nicotine patches. "Jesus, Sherlock, you can't keep doing this."

"They help me think."

Sherlock didn't resist as John ripped them off and tossed them away. He just stared and quirked a smile. "I can just put some more on, you know. I have plenty."

"I know that, but I'm hoping you won't. You can't substitute nicotine for food and sleep."

"I'll sleep and eat when it suits me. Right now it doesn't."

"You're too thin."

"You worry too much. I don't have the same metabolism as you do. I don't need as much food and sleep as most people, including you." Sherlock cupped John's face. "You slept well last night. I'm glad."

"I don't remember any dreams, so that's a good thing, at least I think it is."
"You slept soundly and without incident. Your leg seems fine again as well."

"Yeah, I know." John dropped his forehead against Sherlock's chest in relief. He had been afraid that he'd have to start using the cane again, but when he woke, his leg was back to normal, or as normal as it got since he’d started his life with Sherlock. "Thank god." After a few moments, John said, "I wish I didn't have to go to work today."

"Then don't."

"Just one more week after today. It's not that long."

"But I need you here. We have things to do."

John lifted his head. "Like what?"

"We need to gather documents and go register our partnership. We also need to go to Bart's. Molly called. She has some fresh toes and ears that she's saving for me."

"Toes and ears? Lovely."

Sherlock added, "Then we need to go shopping."

"What? You never go shopping."

"Never is such an absolute, John. Don't be absurd. I go shopping."

"When it suits you."

"Well, of course. Why would I go any other time?"

"For milk and food maybe?"

"Don't be so prosaic. No, we need to go shopping for our rings."

John stared, his mouth slightly open. "Rings? As in wedding rings?"

"Do try to keep up, John. You know I don't wear jewelry, but this is one instance where I will compromise. I want to wear your ring on my finger and I want you to wear mine on yours."

Gobsmacked, John wasn't sure how to respond. Sherlock frowned and asked, "Don't you want to wear my ring?"

John closed his mouth and then spoke, his throat tight with emotion. "Of course I do. I guess I just never thought..."

"Well, then it's good that I can think for both of us," Sherlock teased and then ran a finger along John's jaw. "We could have simple platinum bands with our own inscriptions. If you'd prefer something else, I'm open to discussion."

"Platinum? That's pricey, yeah, more than gold?"

"It is, but money isn't an issue. We have money."

John pulled away from Sherlock's embrace and headed for the kitchen. It was too early in the morning to be having a discussion that had been put off for too long. He needed tea, the stronger the better. "You have money."
"John, we're a couple. What is mine is yours."

"I notice you don't say what's John's is Sherlock's." John tried to keep calm, but he found it difficult. "Could that be because I've got next to nothing to give you in return?"

"That's just stupid."

John's hands fisted. "I'm not a charity case, Sherlock, and stop calling me stupid just because I disagree with you about this."

Sherlock stepped closer, adjusting his sheet so he wouldn't trip. It would be hard to make a point flat on his face. He was obviously trying to decide how to proceed and having some difficulty in being diplomatic. John saved him the trouble. "I know about you signing over half your estate to me."

"Bloody Mycroft. He should mind his own damn business."

"You should've told me."

"I wanted to wait until after the ceremony."

John turned and leaned back on the counter, his arms folded. "You don't think it's something we should've talked about before you did it?"

Sherlock's answer was less than convincing. "No."

"You knew what I'd say so you did it without discussing it first so I couldn't stop you."

Sherlock sighed and then sat down at the table. He moved the microscope out of the way so he could rest an arm on the table. He traced the grain of the wood with his fingertips. "You're right of course."

It was so rare that Sherlock admitted John was right about anything, that he couldn't help but tease him. "Blimey, I should write this date on a calendar."

"My slight was unintentional."

"No, it wasn't."

Sherlock seemed to take pride in John's refusal to accept his easy lie. That didn't keep him from still trying to make his point and get a pass for what he'd done. "True, but, John, it's traditional for spouses to share their properties."

"But we're not spouses yet, not legally."

"But we are partners in everything that matters. The legalities, those are just details." Sherlock paused and didn't look at him while he spoke quietly. "I want Mycroft and Mummy, all my family to know just how serious I am about you. The sharing of property and accounts, that's really the only thing they'll take seriously. A simple declaration is next to useless as a persuasive tool."

Sherlock swallowed hard before he looked up at John, his words more earnest. "More than that, I want you to know that I already think of you as my life partner, not just a flat mate and friend, but my husband."

John shook his head and smiled, completely captivated by his lover's explanation. How could he argue with someone who said such incredibly wonderful things? He just couldn't stay mad at a
Sherlock stood up and stepped closer, leaning in, his long legs spread to either side of John's shorter ones. They stood chest to chest. Sherlock captured John's face with his hands before he explained, "That part about you not having anything to give me, that's what I called stupid, not you. Never you. You give me a reason to keep breathing every day. You give me everything, John, everything that means anything." And then he kissed him, captured his mouth and truly plundered, pushing John back hard against the counter.

When they pulled apart, John took Sherlock's hand and guided him upstairs. There was no way he was going to work, not after Sherlock's declaration. It was like he was falling in love all over again, falling for the one man who understood him and still wanted to keep him.

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"It's fine, John, honestly."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely. Winnie wanted to work today anyway and this will give her a much better idea of what's expected."

Sitting at the kitchen table, John sipped his tea, phone to his ear. He asked, "She's working out then?"

"I think so. She did very well yesterday. I like her."

"That's good then. I'm glad."

"Have a good day and enjoy yourself. I'll see you Monday if you survive." Sarah disconnected and John could almost see her winking at him from the other end of the call.

"It's fine then?"

John looked up into Sherlock's face, his mouth puffy and red from their previous lovemaking. He made a note to himself to be sure to shave before they did it again. "Yes, I'm all yours for the day."

Sherlock's grin lit up the room. "Fantastic. First thing, we need to get is your passport."

"My passport?"

"Yes. It's apparently the preferred document for identification at the register's office."

"Sure, okay." John could tell by his tone and manner that Sherlock was hiding something. "You found out about needing the passport online then?"

"Not exactly."

"How exactly?"

Sherlock buttoned his shirt, his dark curls hanging down in his face and still damp from the shower. "It was ridiculous, really."

"What was?"

"The man obviously has a Napoleon complex. Short men often try to overcompensate by being
petty tyrants."

John's teacup stopped halfway to his mouth. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, I didn't mean you, John."

"I should hope not. I'm a lot taller than Napoleon."

"Almost certainly, by several centimeters at least."

"At least. So, who exactly are we talking about?"

Sherlock rarely looked sheepish, but he managed it as he avoided John's question. "It doesn't matter. We just need to get our passports and get registered. Then I thought we could have lunch and shop for the rings. I know just the establishment. One of the senior staff owes me a favor and he has access to the highest quality merchandise in the city."

"Not so fast. Who's this short bloke you were nattering on about?"

"John, really, it's not important."

"Then why are you not answering my question?"

With a heavy, put upon sigh, Sherlock finally answered. "Well, if you must know, I went to the register's office yesterday."

"On your own?"

"Obviously."

"And?"

"And we both have to be there."

John sat back and shook his head in amusement. "Let me guess, you threw a hissy fit when they wouldn't let you do what you wanted."

"It's a ridiculous policy, nothing more than bureaucratic nonsense, and I'll have you know that I don't throw hissy fits. I merely pointed out, rather forcefully, how ludicrous such a policy might be."

"Oh, I'm sure you did."

Sherlock protested, "I did!"

"And then?"

"I was banned."

"Banned? As in you can't go back?"

Sherlock finally confessed with a casual shrug. "It's only temporary. The ban has been lifted. You just have to go with me this time and do most of the talking."

"Most?"

Sherlock amended his earlier statement. "All."
"Mycroft's doing?"

Suddenly testy, Sherlock grumbled, "Why do you assume I called Mycroft?"

"Because that's what you do when you make a mess that involves the government. That's his specialty."

Sherlock reluctantly agreed. It obviously pained him to make the admission that he'd asked his brother for help. "It is. I hated doing it but it was the most expedient course of action."

"You know if you're not careful, you're going to end up working for him fulltime. All these favors add up."

"Bite your tongue."

John teased, "I'd rather you do that, thanks."

Sherlock quirked his head a bit to the left and studied him a few moments. "You seem much better today."

"I am, thanks. Our little shagfest this morning helped."

Sherlock's smile got bigger and his voice husky. "Shagfest? I like that term."

"It fits."

"Indeed."

John put down his cup and stared at his lover. "So, I guess I should go get that passport."

Sherlock patted his right trouser pocket. "I have mine already, so, yes."

"So we're really going to do this then, announce to the world that we're a real couple?"

Sherlock's smile transformed into a frown. "Do you want to wait?"

"No. I just, well, it's not something I ever expected to do."

"Nor I, but I'm pleased."

John stood up from the table, pulled Sherlock in close to his body, and met his intense stare. "Me, too." Then he sealed his words with a kiss and a promise.

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"See, that wasn't so hard." John grinned as he looked at the documents in his hand.

"You're a genius at this sort of thing."

They walked out of the register's office together. John folded the paperwork and put it in his jacket pocket. He smiled with pride at Sherlock's compliment. The years of filing out forms in the army finally paid off. "Lots of practice. I think you're right though."

"About?"

"The guy definitely has a complex about something. He was giving you the evil eye every time he thought you weren't looking."
"I noticed. The moron no doubt resents Mycroft's interference. However, we have the documents and now we only have to wait the required fifteen days, which is incredibly inconvenient. After that, we have a year to pick a date."

"That's plenty of time to decide."

"You know what I want, John."

John nodded, remembering Sherlock petitioning rather forcefully to have the ceremony as quickly as possible. "I do, but we'll talk about it later. Right now I'm starving. Where do you want to eat?"

"I know a place not far from here, Giancola's."

"Italian?"

"What was the first clue?"

"Prat."

Sherlock chuckled and hailed a cab. Inside, they sat very close, their body's humming with excitement. It wasn't everyday that they announced their intentions to be together forever to the world.

Sherlock started to say something when his cell phone rang. John grumbled, fearing the it'd be another aborted chance to have a quiet meal, or any meal for that matter. "That better not be Lestrade."

"He usually texts."

"Not always."

Sherlock answered the phone and listened. After a moment, his face flushed with excitement and he said sharply, "Excellent. We'll be right there."

As he hung up, he called to the driver and gave him a different address across town. He turned and smiled. "We've got a case, John."

"But..."

"Three bodies, all killed the same way in a locked room. Lestrade is completely stumped."

Knowing the Italian feast was no longer an option, he shrugged. "Well, if he's stumped, there's nothing else for it."

"I knew you'd agree." Sherlock rubbed his hands together in anticipation of the challenge. His eyes sparkled with glee. "This should be good, very good, I can just feel it."

"Three people are dead, Sherlock. Remember that first, yeah?"

Sherlock sobered, but not much. "Right, right, I need to feign concern and comport myself in a more appropriate manner at the crime scene. Thank you for reminding me."

John corrected him, fighting to control his annoyance, both at their change in plans and Sherlock's indifferent attitude toward the victims. "There shouldn't be any feigning."

"I'm sorry, John, but that's the best I can do." He took John's hand in his own before he asked, "Is it
enough?"

It wasn’t like John didn’t understand his partner, didn’t realize his true feelings, or lack of them, when it came to the dead. There was no point in judging him for something Sherlock couldn’t control. "It'll do for now."

Sherlock squeezed his hand and then spoke to the cabbie. "Hurry!" John could hear the echo of Sherlock saying the game is on in his head.

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The scene wasn’t quite as gristy as it could’ve been. It was an unfurnished banquet hall decorated in dark reds and gold, a large wide open space of a room with a high ceiling. All the doors had still been locked when an employee of the hotel first found the bodies. Each victim lay face up on the crimson carpet, their throats slashed. There wasn't much blood, so John knew that the wounds were postmortem. There were three people, one woman, a young man, and a much older male. The two men shared similar facial features, so even though there was no confirmed ID, John thought they were likely related.

The two men had been incapacitated first with a taser, but not the woman. All three had been stabbed through the heart with what had to be a very long, thin instrument, possibly a fencing sword and then the throats were cut. He'd given his preliminary findings to Sherlock who was still walking around each body and then carefully checking different parts of the room. Sherlock studied every inch, running his hands along the walls and the locked windows, barking insults at the technicians or detectives who got in his way. Sherlock never took notes, because he didn't have to. He just put it all away in his head, analyzing all the facts until they fit together. It really was an amazing process to watch when John wasn't too distracted.

John stood to the side, his instincts on alert. Something wasn't right with the scene. Ever since he'd entered the room, he'd felt it, like someone was watching, someone who wasn't part of the dozen or so police and support staff accounted for in his mental sweep. He kept scanning, but found nothing, nothing that he could pinpoint as the problem. Still, he wasn't satisfied. Someone had slipped in, killed three people, and left without being seen. It was possible, just possible, that the killer was still present and hiding. John just had to figure out where.

"You okay?"

Lestrade's words interrupted his thoughts. John answered, "Fine. How do you think he got out?"

"That's what Sherlock's here to figure out."

"Yeah." John stayed vigilant in his watch, but looked at Lestrade who was studying him. "What?"

"Sorry to mess up your day. Sherlock mentioned you registered officially. Congratulations by the way."

"Thanks." John shrugged. "And it's fine. He needed a case. It's been a while."

"I know. This one had his name all over it. I still can't figure out why the woman didn't scream or how whoever did it caught both men off guard."

"He likely had two taser guns to take out the men at the same time. That only left the woman to deal with. The woman was too frightened to scream or he threatened to kill her or the men if she did. I'd wager she died first and then the men."
"You're sure it's a he?"

"Pretty sure. Not many women would do it like this, stab and then slice their throats afterward. No, this definitely feels like a man's work."

John kept his eyes on Sherlock and the room, so he didn't notice Lestrade stepping closer until the older man had snatched up his left arm and pulled his sleeve back to reveal his wrist. His whispered words hissed between clenched teeth. "What the hell is this?"

John jerked away and pulled his cuff back down, careful not to cause a scene. He didn't need Sherlock coming over and getting in the middle, possibly revealing the true cause. He was ashamed enough that Sherlock knew about his flashbacks. He didn't need all of Scotland yard to find out and think he was some kind of mental case. "It's not what you think."

Lestrade guided him to just inside the outside double door, and spoke quietly, his version of being discreet. "What I think is Sherlock has a black eye and now you've got suspicious bruises on your wrists. I've seen bruises like that before."

Pulling himself up straighter, John tamped down the anger rising inside him. He understood that Lestrade might be concerned, but he was jumping to the wrong conclusions. Besides, even if they had been the right conclusions, it was really none of his business. "Sherlock told you about how he got the black eye."

"And your bruises?"

"Not your concern."

Lestrade's eyes narrowed, but then he gave a quick nod. "You're right, they're not. But you're forgetting that I know Sherlock. I know he's had certain preferences in the past. You don't have to go along with them, not to the point of being hurt."

John met Lestrade's worried gaze, his voice even. "Sherlock didn't hurt me."

Lestrade hesitated, but then raised his hands in a backing off motion. "It's your game, mate. Play it the way you need to."

After several seconds, John said, "It's complicated."

"It always is."

Just as John was going to say something else to defend Sherlock, a flicker from the far corner of the ceiling caught his attention. It was just a play of light from a small seam from one of the panels. He leaned in closer and whispered, "I think there's someone up above us in the ceiling."

"What? Where?"

"Don't look around. Whoever it is can see us. He's been watching since we got here. There's movement in the far east corner near the windows, third panel from the rear exit."

Lestrade looked at him like he was talking in a foreign language, but finally said, "You're serious."

"You need to get Sherlock and your people out of the room in case he has a gun. I'll move to the corner and behind the curtain. I'm pretty sure that's a blind spot."

"How can you know that?"
John didn't answer, just put a smile on his face. Then he turned enough so that if anyone saw him from above, he'd just see two men chatting. "Trust me on this." John reached into his pocket and got his phone, pretending to answer a call. "Answer your phone, Inspector. There's a bomb threat. Everyone has to clear the space."

After a few seconds, Lestrade reluctantly agreed and pulled out his own phone. After thirty seconds, he hung up and called out, his eyes still on John. "Listen up. There's been a bomb threat called in. We need to clear the area. Leave the bodies and equipment. We've got less than five minutes. Bomb squad is on the way." When Sherlock stood up to protest, Lestrade held up a hand. "It's been confirmed. Move it."

Sherlock's eyebrows furrowed and his suspicious gaze met John's steady eyes staring back. John gave him a slow nod and was pleased that for once Sherlock didn't argue about it.

Sherlock didn't hesitate, just went with the others. When the crowd of people crossed the room toward the door, John moved in the other direction, passing through the crowd of people, using the confusion for cover. Sherlock's eyes followed him, but he didn't ask any questions or draw attention to John's actions. He was incredibly grateful that Sherlock trusted him enough to go along with a plan for once. When the technicians were in the hallway, Lestrade was in a huddle with the others. He spoke out loudly before he closed the doors, "Head downstairs and away from the building!"

John had to stifle a laugh and thought that it was a good thing Lestrade was a copper and not an actor. Once he was alone in the room, John waited. Less than two minutes later he heard rather than saw the panel being shifted. From his position, he saw the young man lower himself with a thump. He was dressed in electrician's outfit, with the name of Murray's Electrical on the back. In one hand he had a long workbag like someone might carry tools. As the man stepped to a wall panel on the far side of the door, John stepped out from behind the curtain.

"I don't think you've thought this through, mate."

The man whirled around and saw John, shocked. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gun and pointed it. "Fuck."

"You've got no place to run. The cops are right on the other side of the door. They'll hear the shot."

"Then the bomb was a fake?"

"Yeah." John studied the man, watched the confusion shift to a decision.

"You're coming with me."

"And go where?"

He pointed to one of the wall panels. "There's a passage behind there down to the basement. From there I can get outside."

John had to admit that he hadn't thought about a secret passage, especially not in a hotel. "Clever. I take it you've worked here before."

"Shut up. No questions."

"At least tell me why? I mean, maybe the men did something, but why the girl?"

"She cheated with my brother, was going to marry the bastard. My dad, he was going along with it."
I couldn't let that happen."

"So, you killed your father and brother over your ex-girlfriend?" He thought to himself as tragic as it was, Sherlock would call it boring. "You'll never get away with it."

"Just shut up." Even more agitated, the man motioned with the gun for John to walk ahead of him. "Move it and hurry up."

Stepping around and over the bodies, John moved just in front of the young man, hands in the air. There was a sound at the door which was just enough distraction for John to swing around and knock the gun from the murderer's hand. After a few quick blows, the man was not only down on the floor, but unconscious. It was quick and efficient, just like it used to be. John stood up, retrieved the gun, and walked over to the door. When he opened it, Sherlock smiled in approval. "I assume you've disabled the culprit."

"I have, yes." John turned his attention to a wide-eyed Lestrade. "He's all yours."

Sherlock beamed and clapped John's shoulder in approval. "Excellent!"

"Could we go get something to eat now? I'm starving."

Lestrade and Donovan rushed past him into the room. Lestrade called over his shoulder. "Send me the bill. It's on me. I'll get statements later."

Sherlock smirked, his eyes gleaming with pride. "Well done, John."

"Thanks."

As they walked away, Sherlock asked, "How did you know about the hideaway in the ceiling?"

"I invaded an embassy once. It had the same layout."

"An embassy? Should I ask where this embassy was or is this one of those classified situations?"

"You're catching on."

The rush of adrenaline made John proud that he'd finally solved a crime before Sherlock did. It wouldn't happen often, he knew that, but it didn't have to. It just let everyone know that he wasn't just the sidekick anymore. He was finally a full partner in the whole Holmes and Watson union.

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Instead of Italian, they had Chinese. It seemed to be the tradition growing between them. End a successful case, have some sesame chicken and egg rolls to celebrate.

"I don't know why I didn't think of the ceiling. It was obviously the most logical hiding place."

John dipped his egg roll in the sweet and sour sauce. "You would've seen it eventually. He might have shot you, though, so I'm glad you didn't."

Sherlock had barely touched his food, but he did eat a dumpling. After a moment of silence, he said, "You were hyper vigilant the whole time we were there, far more than usual. Why was that?"

John shrugged. "It's hard to explain. It just felt off."

"What does that mean, felt off? Felt off how?"
"I could feel someone watching me." John held up a hand to stall Sherlock's interruption. "Someone not you."

"But how does one feel such a thing?"

"It's called instinct."

"I don't believe in instinct other than the instinct for survival or the need to procreate in the lower species."

John didn't really expect Sherlock to comprehend something he didn't fully understand himself. "I've always had it. I know when someone is watching. It saved my arse more than once in the Army."

"Surely it's more likely you've observed something subconsciously instead of having some imaginary sixth sense."

John tried very hard not to take offense, but it was difficult. "Look, whatever causes it, it's not imaginary."

Sherlock considered his words carefully and then nodded. "Perhaps it's like my ability to easily observe what others fail to see. You're able to note danger others don't."

John wiped his mouth and hands on the napkin and drank the rest of his tea. "I don't know how or why I can do it, I just know that I can."

"I believe you."

"Thanks."

"I must say, your performance today was very impressive. Lestrade will be more than happy to have us back at crime scenes now that you've proved yourself so useful."

John winced at Lestrade's name, a reaction that Sherlock didn't miss. "What is it?"

John fiddled with the cuff of his right sleeve. "He saw the bruises on my wrists. He came to the wrong conclusion."

"Did he?"

John glanced up at the surprised tone and saw the flush to Sherlock's cheeks. John said, "You're embarrassed."

"I'm not."

John went through the conversation with Lestrade in his head and then said, "Lestrade mentioned that he knew about your preferences. What was he talking about?"

Sherlock's voice turned icy. "I think it's fairly self-explanatory."

"You like cuffing people?"

"I neither liked or disliked it. It was years ago."

John closed his eyes, willing himself to be calm, finding it nearly impossible to fight the growing panic. "So, is it something you want to do with me then?"
"No."

"No? Then why use the cuffs like you did?"

"It was a miscalculation. Considering your reaction, it won't happen again."

"But if it's something you enjoy..."

Sherlock raised his hand. "John, stop." He leaned in, keeping his voice low. "This is not the time or place to have this discussion."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We need to discuss this sort of thing, just not in public. I could care less what people overhear, but you might not like having them hear what I have to say."

John frowned in confusion and concern. "So you're saying I might be disturbed by what you tell me about this?"

Sherlock answered honestly, his gaze meeting John's. "Perhaps. I'm not sure."

"That's not much of an answer."

"John, you must realize that while I can usually predict how others will react on just about any topic, you're different. You're the most unpredictable man I've ever met. It's one of your most endearing qualities."

The hateful pressure in John's chest eased somewhat. "Endearing? You think I'm endearing?" He kidded, "What else do you like about me?"

"Don't fish for compliments, John. It's undignified."

"Sure, okay, but you're saying if I were to go fishing, I'd catch a big haul, yeah?"

Sherlock hid his smile behind his teacup and changed the subject. "We'll discuss sexual proclivities and compliments about your sterling character later. Do you feel up to going to look for rings or would you like to save that for tomorrow?"

"Sure, I'm game."

Sherlock put his cup down, his face filled with a mix of amusement and pride. "You most certainly are."

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"Jesus, Sherlock. This is fucking Tiffany's."

Sherlock frowned as he looked at him and asked, "Why are you whispering?"

John shifted uncomfortably beside him, his hands stuffed in his pockets. Every bloody clerk in the store, male and female, had their eyes glued on Sherlock. They no doubt wondered why the hell he was there with some short bloke in worn out jeans and a secondhand leather jacket. "When you said you knew a guy, I pictured a small out of the way place, not fucking Tiffany and Co. Good god. The rings will cost a fortune."

"We talked about the money, John."
"I know, but..."

"We can go someplace else if you're uncomfortable here."

Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, John shook his head. "No, it's okay. Hopefully, the guy you know will give you a good deal."

Sherlock gave him a brief nod and then took charge. He stepped up to the main counter. "I'm looking for Charles Steinman. He's expecting me."

The young man looked up with appraising gaze and obviously liked what he saw. He barely looked at John, just kept his eyes on the prize. "Who shall I say is asking?"

"Sherlock Holmes."

At the mention of his name, several customers also turned and trained their sights on Sherlock. The young clerk leaned in. "Charles has been waiting. He's got the rings you requested, sir."

"Take us to him."

As the clerk motioned for them to follow, John leaned in closer and said, "You called ahead?"

"Of course. There's no reason to go through the whole selling spiel when we know what we want."

Inside a private salesroom, an older man met them. He extended both his hands to take Sherlock's right in between his own. "Mr. Holmes, I'm so pleased to see you again, especially on such a delightful occasion." He turned to John and put out one hand to shake. "You must be Dr. Watson. I'm honored."

Still uncomfortable, but warming up, he shook and said, "Thanks."

Sherlock interrupted, impatient to get started. "Charles, the rings, please."

The man smiled wider. He wore a dark blue designer suit and had gray hair. He still looked tanned and fit for someone in his late sixties, not like a man who spent his days indoors working with jewelry. He motioned for them both to sit. "I'll think you'll be pleased with the selection. Let me show you what I have."

Sherlock and John both sat in front of the tray that contained about twenty different wedding bands, all platinum. Sherlock immediately picked up a smooth, solid band, rounded on the edges, not too wide, but not too thin, either. John smiled because it was exactly the one he liked as well. It was simple, but elegant. "This one." He held it up for John to see more closely.

"Yeah, I like it, too."

The salesman nodded with a grin. "Excellent. You both have sophisticated taste."

Sherlock asked, "How long would it take to get engraved?"

"It normally takes two weeks, but for you I'll speed it up to one."

John touched Sherlock's sleeve. "Shouldn't we at least ask the price?"

Sherlock sighed and relented. "My partner is a stickler for pricing, Charles. What kind of deal are we getting?"
"Normally, each ring runs about 1,700 pounds with sizing and inscriptions. I can sell the pair for $2,800 pounds. I'd make no commission. I wouldn't do that for anyone else, Mr. Holmes."

John took a quick breath, thinking about how much money they were spending, but swallowed down any protest. They weren't having a big wedding, but they'd have really beautiful rings. Sherlock met his consenting gaze and then nodded. "Done. We'll pick them up in a week."

"All I need is to size your ring fingers and get your inscriptions." Charles handed them both an ordering form. "You've chosen the Lucinda platinum band, 6mm. There's more room than with other rings, but you're still limited to no more than 25 characters including spaces on a single line. It's wide enough that you could go to a second line if you wish, but the font will be very small."

Sherlock nodded in understanding and then wrote something down, keeping the paper turned away so John couldn't see it as Charles measured his ring size. John asked, "What are you going to write?"

"You'll see it later."

John smiled at Sherlock's playfulness. "So, it's a secret?"

"Until we wed, yes, though it really isn't a secret."

While Charles measured Sherlock's finger, John wrote his own inscription. It was hard not to be sappy when trying to summarize his feelings for Sherlock in less than 25 characters.

Charles gathered the order forms and stood up. "I'm so happy for you both." He actually winked at John. "I never thought I'd see the day when this one would be shopping for wedding rings."

Sherlock chimed in. "That's only because I hadn't met John yet."

John couldn't help but beam as they walked out together, knowing that the wedding was really happening and wasn't just some wish in the dark after sex. Sherlock wanted him in the full light of day and the urge to kiss his lover in the middle of Tiffany's and claim him for his own was nearly overwhelming.

Sherlock must have sensed what he was thinking, because he reached down and took John's hand, something he rarely did in public.

"Let's go home. We have things to discuss."

"Seriously?"

"Do I sound like I'm joking?"

John sat on the sofa and ran a hand through his short hair, totally flabbergasted about what Sherlock had just told him. "No, of course not. I'm not suggesting..."

"It was mutually beneficial at the time."

"Being a slave is mutually beneficial?"

"You're shocked."

"No, I'm not shocked." John sat back and thought again before he confessed, "Okay, yeah, I'm a little shocked. I know you said you sold yourself for drugs sometimes, but..."
"Many times, John."

"All right, all right, I get it, many times. You don't have to keep fucking saying it." John wished he'd never started the damn conversation anyway. He really hated the images it created in his head, ugly thoughts of how he'd like to track down the bastards who'd touched Sherlock that way and make them pay. The violence inside his head was far scarier than the reality around him sometimes. It made the war look like a summer picnic.

John cleared his throat several times before he could continue. "It's just I'm having a hard time imagining you as a slave. Taking orders isn't your strong suit, is it?"

"I can take orders when necessary. I left the crime scene today after that bomb scare, didn't I? That was despite the fact that it was obviously a fake."

"You did, which I appreciate, thanks. But we're talking about something completely different here. Sexual slavery, Sherlock, that's just not something I ever thought about in connection with you."

"It's existence is far more widespread than you might believe."

John closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He'd traveled to many parts of the world where children, both boys and girls, were sold for sex and labor as commonly as fruit in an open market. It made his gut hurt and his hands fist at the injustice of it. Evil was rampant and he often felt overwhelmed by the urge to blow up the darkest holes where it lurked unchecked. He spoke through clenched teeth. "Oh, I know it exists. You don't have to tell me that."

"You've had experience with it before?"

John opened his eyes and met Sherlock's curious stare. "Yes." When Sherlock opened his mouth to ask another question, John held up a hand. "I don't want to talk about it. Let's get back to you. How did you become a slave?"

Sherlock shifted in his chair, avoiding John gaze. The whole story had a biting edge to it. The words came out clipped. "It was about six months after Mycroft cut me off. I ran up a rather substantial debt with one particular supplier. I was making headway, but then he sold the debt."

"Sold it?"

"Yes, to a collector."

John gambled more than once in his life and lost a few paychecks. He knew about those kind of collectors first hand. He'd only gotten some bruises and aching ribs, but Sherlock obviously got in a lot deeper than he ever did. "Good god."

"God had very little to do with that transaction. I obviously couldn't pay the money. The man became my master. He kept me alive and well supplied as long as I submitted."

The horror of what he was hearing filled John with dread. For a man like Sherlock to have been trapped in such a situation made him cold all over. "How long did this go on?"

"Two months give or take a day or so. It's difficult to keep a calendar and be precise when one is under the influence."

"And Mycroft? He never stepped in to stop it?"

"As far as he was concerned, I was making my own choices."
"But you weren't, not really. He could've paid off the debt, kept you from being abused like that."

Sherlock closed his eyes briefly. He crossed his arms, his voice tight and icy. "I did ask, once, after a particularly rigorous scene, one in which I had a rather vivid moment of clarity. I knew if I didn't leave soon, I might not survive. Despite opinions to the contrary, I did not have a death wish. However, Mycroft never came to get me and I never asked again."

John seethed, wanting nothing more than to pound Sherlock's brother into the ground. "That bastard."

"To be fair, he swears he never got the distress call I placed."

"Do you believe him?"

"At the time, no. Now, I'm not quite as sure." Sherlock shrugged. "I'll never know absolutely. Mycroft is a master of deception even to me."

John would leave dealing with Mycroft for another time. "How the hell did you get free?"

"The man who owned me was killed during a poker game and I left the scene before I was turned over to whomever inherited his assets. In fact it was Lestrade's case and for a short time I was the primary suspect. Luckily for me, the real killer was incredibly stupid and easily apprehended."

"Jesus, Sherlock, how can you discuss it so calmly?"

"John, you fail to understand that at the time I really had no other choice. I had debt and I still needed the drugs. So, rather than trying to escape, I went along with it."

"You were an addict. You didn't really know what you were doing."

"You're wrong. I knew exactly what I was doing. I just didn't care enough to figure out an escape plan."

John got up and paced several times before he sat back down again, the frustration like a scarlet ooze of hate in his head. It was all spiky and painful, like the inside of his skull was bleeding. It was a lot to process, a lot more than he ever imagined. "So, you like beinguffed or restrained?"

"Not particularly, no."

"But..."

"That was then. I'm sober now."

"But you liked it then?"

Sherlock took a while longer to answer, his words more measured and calculated. "I did whatever I had to do to get drugs." He paused and finally said in most frigid voice. "I would have degraded and humiliated myself, or anyone I cared about, to get high. I would've stolen, cheated, even facilitated a murder if I had to in order to get what I needed. That's what an addict does, John." His final words were like a slap. "None of this should be news to you."

John couldn't take his eyes off Sherlock. He knew that kind of bare bones confession cost him. Just admitting to such a weakness was very difficult for a man like his lover. "But you don't need any of that now, no drugs, no bondage, nothing like that now?"

"No."
John swallowed hard, not wanting to ask the next question, fighting hard to keep it inside, but he couldn't. "But what if that changes?"

Sherlock literally jerked back like he'd been punched, his eyes bright, but slightly shiny. The pain was obvious despite the tightness of his features. "I believe that I can maintain my sobriety, John. As long as I have the work, I can manage. That's the best I can offer you. I do hope it's enough."

One day at a time, that seemed like the most important phrase John had ever heard in his life. Even so, it hurt just a little to know that solving crimes came before he did in the scheme of keeping Sherlock sober. Still, if work was what he needed, he'd be damn sure Sherlock got it. "I can live with that."

"Can you?"

"Of course. I have to. I love you. That will never change."

Sherlock actually sighed in relief, like he's been half holding his breath the whole time. "I feared the revelation of my full history might be too much to overcome."

"Nothing is too much, Sherlock, not if we're honest with one another. The past is the past. We can't change any of it. I've done things, too, things I don't like talking about or can't talk about."

Sherlock stood up, came over, and sat beside John on the sofa, reaching out to take his hand. "I find your capacity for forgiveness to be enthralling."

Their fingers laced together and John brought them to his mouth for a kiss. "There's nothing to forgive. I'm not a priest and I'm sure as hell no angel."

After a deep and all too brief kiss, Sherlock pulled back and said, "We should probably discuss any of our further preferences upstairs."

"Is that your sly way of asking me to get naked in the bedroom?"

"Most assuredly."

John squeezed Sherlock's hand and then shook his head with a smile. "Preferences first, then we get naked."

Sherlock eyes twinkled and then he nodded. "Very well. I have very few limits."

"I've noticed."

"I doubt the few I do have will ever be an issue between us, but I suppose they need to be said. I don't do infantilism, scat, bestiality, furry costumes, water sports, or fisting. I tried the last two once and vowed never to do them again. The others I witnessed and refused to participate. It was worth the hefty punishments to avoid them."

John nearly choked on the list and it took him a long moment before he could speak. "You were punished for not doing things you didn't want to do?"

"What part of being a slave didn't you understand?"

"No, I get it. Fuck." John took another deep breath, fighting back anger, grateful that the bastard who'd hurt Sherlock was already dead. It would save him the trouble of tracking down the son of a bitch and defining punishment in a whole new way.
John brought himself back to the subject at hand. "So you tried fisting?"

"Yes. I was the giver, not the receiver. The recipient seemed pleased but I found it unpleasant and difficult. My arm reeked for nearly a week regardless of what cleanser I used."

John didn't even know what to say to that so he moved on and asked, "And water sports?"

"Well, while some find urinating on a partner erotic, I found it rather annoying and messy."

John was fascinated by the fact that Sherlock seemed almost clinical about his experiences. John had thought of himself as a man of the world, especially when it came to sex. Apparently, he'd had a severely vanilla education. "People actually dress up in furry costumes and have sex?"

"Cats and dogs seem to be the most popular, though rabbits are a close third."

"I don't even want to think about what happens in a person's life that they end up needing that to get off."

Sherlock shrugged. "I'm sure there are a myriad of studies on the subject. Fetishes can be rather extreme and, for a psychologist, a rather fascinating field of study. The human psyche is incredibly elaborate and complex, especially when it comes to sexuality."

John thought amen to that. "Anything else I should know about?"

"I won't share you."

John's brow lifted. "Why would you?"

"Having multiple partners seems to be popular in many circles. I would prefer that we remain monogamous and not bring someone else into our bed."

John barked a laugh at Sherlock's serious expression. "You really think I'd be comfortable with anyone but you in my bed?"

Sherlock relaxed and smiled. "I just wanted to be clear. You're the one who wanted to be specific."

"I did, and I do."

"Well, then, I wanted to make it plain that I don't share, ever."

John leaned over and kissed him and pulled back, their lips just a few inches apart. "Neither do I."

"Good. Then we agree."

"We do."

"Your turn, John. What are your limits?"

"Well, all you've mentioned for sure. I also don't like any kind of restraint, cuffs, leather, chains, nothing like that."

"Understood."

John heard a subtle shift in Sherlock's tone and asked, "What?"

"Well, it's just that you've been tied up or handcuffed before when you were kidnapped, and you
never reacted the way you did with me."

John sat back into the sofa, but still kept holding Sherlock's hand, not willing to give up their connection. "I'm not sure why that happened, but I have a theory."

"Which is?"

"When I was with people who wanted to hurt me, I was in soldier mode. I had to function. With you, I'd relaxed, trusted you, and then you surprised me. I suppose I didn't have enough time to adjust. I didn't get to take the mental steps I needed first to protect myself."

"So, it was the element of surprise, the betrayal of my trust, that caused the flashback?"

John frowned and squeezed Sherlock's hand. "You didn't betray my trust. You didn't know. I didn't even know it could be that bad."

Sherlock studied his face carefully as if he was looking for a lie. When he was satisfied with what he saw, he nodded. "It won't happen again."

"Agreed. I also don't like blindfolds."

"Understandable."

"I don't like pain, so no needles, clamps, whips, or paddles."

Sherlock didn't meet his eyes, but he nodded. John asked, "Do you like that sort of thing?"

"It's what I've had in the past. It's what I'm used to."

"And you enjoyed it, got off on it?"

Sherlock puzzled over the question and then shook his head. "Actually I didn't. I've had a lot of sex before you, John, but I never enjoyed it before now."

John squeezed his lover's hand, sad that he'd been without love for so long, glad that he could change that. "Now is what's important."

"Agreed."

"As to pain, I've had enough in my life. I don't want it in the bedroom."

Sherlock's expression softened and he eased closer, his voice a low whisper. "I would never hurt you on purpose, John."

"I know that."

"Is there anything else?"

"Not that I can think of, no."

"Good. I think it's time we go upstairs and celebrate our registering our union and buying rings."

They kissed and headed upstairs where Sherlock proceeded to shag John stupid and happy at the same time.

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"I've been doing research."

"That's nothing new." John kept reading his magazine. He was way behind on his medical journals. He might not be practicing soon, but that didn't mean he didn't want to stay current.

"It's about your nightmares and parasomnia. Apparently, doctors have had limited success in suppressing them with certain medications. Molly sent me some links for verification."

John closed the magazine, suddenly irritated. He didn't need everyone in the world knowing about his fucking problems. "You talked to Molly about my nightmares?"

"Not specifically, but when I explained about the black eye she mentioned her brother suffered somnambulism when he was a child."

John relaxed slightly. When he thought about it, it seemed reasonable that Molly, when given the facts, would try to offer some sort of remedy. It was very much like her. What was weird was that Sherlock listened. "I'm not a kid, Sherlock. I don't just walk around in my sleep."

"I know that. You have a complex sleep disorder. That's all the more reason to try to find an answer."

John pinched the bridge of his nose. He hated talking about it, hated dealing with something that was like living with an enemy combatant that only came out at night. "I still don't like you talking about it with others."

"I was only trying..."

"I know what you're doing. You don't think I've looked into taking medication for it?"

Sherlock still sat at the desk with his laptop. "You're upset."

"Good deduction."

"I was only trying to help."

Taking several deep breaths, John worked hard to look at it from Sherlock's point of view. Having a nutter in the house could be a hazard. More reason to fix it. The problem was, there really was no pill to take for it. "I know that. I'm sorry. It's just that I've tried taking beta blocker meds and they didn't work for me. In fact, I nearly passed out a few times. It drops my pressure too low. Worst of all, it didn't really help with the nightmares."

Sherlock shrugged, obviously disappointed. "I thought it might be an avenue to investigate."

"I know and I appreciate it."

Sherlock moved over to sit beside John, tossing the magazine out of the way first. He wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer. "You are going to get better."

"You can't promise that."

"You're already showing signs of improvement."

"A blowjob a day keeps the nightmares away?"

Sherlock smiled and squeezed him closer. "Well, it's certainly more pleasurable than other remedies one might pursue."
"True."

"And if my calculations are correct, we're not limited to fellatio."

John dropped his head against Sherlock's chest and curled into him. "Care to start the treatment plan early?"

Sherlock pushed him down on the sofa, kissing him along his neck several times before he lifted his head. He grinned, "I've always favored a preventative approach."

John pulled him in closer and agreed by returning his kiss. "Let's go upstairs and go for the full daily dosage."

When John woke up the next morning, he found the bed cold and empty. He heard angry voices from downstairs and frowned. Hearing Sherlock fight with his brother was definitely not the way he wanted to start the weekend. Grudgingly, he got out of bed, pulled on his old jeans and t-shirt, and headed downstairs to referee.

He called from the doorway, "What the hell is going on?"

Sherlock, dressed in his blue dressing gown and pajamas, stopped midsentence, his face stormy. "Mycroft is just leaving."

Mycroft turned to John. "I was just telling my brother that I'll be sending a car for the both of you at noon. I recommend that you convince him that it would be best to do as he's told for once."

Sherlock barked, "Fuck off."

Mycroft continued as if Sherlock hasn't said a thing, simply focused his attention back on his brother. "You had to know this was coming. You can't file with the register about a civil partnership and not expect certain people to actually notice. That is rather the point."

"It's none of her business."

"Well, it is actually. She is our mother."

John held up a hand for quiet. "Wait. This is about your mother?"

Sherlock's face clouded over as he complained, "We've been summoned."

"Summoned?"

"Mummy wants to see us."

Mycroft interrupted. "It's not completely unheard of for a mother to want to see her son when he's decided to make such a drastic change in his marital status."

"But to what end?" Sherlock stepped closer to Mycroft, his voice fierce. "What have you told her?"

"Nothing she couldn't find out from other sources." Mycroft cleared his throat, uneasy with Sherlock in his space. "You have to go see her, make it clear, as you did with me, that you won't allow for interference in your life, not about this."

Sherlock and Mycroft stood there, their gazes locked and then Sherlock stepped back and nodded.
"Agreed. However, John doesn't need to be subjected to what will no doubt turn into an inquisition about his life and family."

Mycroft shrugged. "Perhaps, but I think that should be John's decision."

Both men turned simultaneously and stared at John, waiting for an answer, one he wasn't sure about. He'd invaded Afghanistan. How hard could it be to meet Sherlock's mother? Still, he needed more information to make the right choice. "I need to talk to Sherlock alone first."

Mycroft took an extra few moments before he turned back to Sherlock. "I'll send the car. I expect you, Dear Brother, to get in it."

Sherlock didn't answer, just turned his back on Mycroft and stepped to the window. Mycroft shrugged and then said to John. "I do hope you decide to accompany him. It would be beneficial to all parties. Good day."

As soon as he was gone, Sherlock grumbled pitifully. "I wish they'd just leave us alone."

John stepped over and wrapped his arms around Sherlock's waist. Tension tightened all his lover's muscles and his heart was still racing from the confrontation. John did his best to calm him down with a little reason. "It's not unheard of for the mother of a groom to want to meet who he's going to marry."

"If only it were that simple."

"Why isn't it?"

"You don't know Mummy. There are always ulterior motives, usually so she can connive and manipulate to get whatever she wants."

John sighed in resignation and pulled away. It was too damn early for such a serious conversation. "I need to go to the loo. Then I'll fix tea and we'll talk about it."

Sherlock huffed. "Tea isn't the answer to everything wrong in world, John."

"If only."

"So, explain again why you don't want me to meet your mother."

Sherlock drank his tea before he answered, calmer than he had been, but still wound up as he spoke quietly. "I like your mother."

John smiled at the unexpected statement. "She likes you, too."

"She's very protective and maternal. She's what a mother should be."

"She is, that's true."

"I've told you a little about my own mother, but I haven't told you everything."

"I know you told me that she was emotionally unavailable to you when you were growing up and that you were raised by nannies instead of her. That doesn't mean she didn't have feelings for you, Sherlock."
"Oh, she certainly had feelings. She made it quite clear on several recent occasions that I was a disgrace to the family. I don't doubt that there will be more of the same if I see her today."

As bad as his own childhood had been when his father was drinking, John was grateful that his mother had always been there for him, always supported him with kindness. "You think part of that will be because of me?"

Sherlock's head lifted as he stared at John, the sadness etched in his features. "She's never approved of me being homosexual. She'll no doubt direct disdain in your direction."

"So what? Are we just going to let her dismiss us, malign what we have together? If she wants to see us, we should go and put in an appearance. Still, that doesn't mean we have to stay if she starts being abusive."

"So you want to go?"

"Want is too strong a word. I guess I think we should go simply out of respect. I mean, who knows, maybe she's changed and wants to make amends."

"I think that would be a miracle on par with Moriarty giving up being a master criminal."

John closed his eyes, pushing away unwanted images of wearing a bomb vest and Sherlock's confusion over what to do about it. He didn't want to think about that bastard ever again. "Please don't bring up Moriarty." John opened his eyes and saw Sherlock staring at him. "What?"

"We've never really talked about what happened that night."

"And we're not going to, not today anyway. Today we're focusing on one disaster at a time."

"So you admit that meeting my mother will be a disaster."

John groaned in frustration. "I won't go if you don't want me to."

"I don't want you to suffer, John. She can be quite scathing in her attacks."

"I've fought a war, been tortured and shot, so I think I can handle an old woman. I mean, I get that she's not likely to welcome me into the family with open arms and kisses." Sherlock smiled wryly at that last statement, but John continued, "I don't want you going alone. We're a team now, and she and everyone else had better get used to it."

Sherlock snorted and grinned wider. "Dear Mummy has no idea whom she's up against."

"I'm hoping it's not an all out war between us, but if it is, I'm ready."

"Well, not until you put on a suit."

"A suit? Really?"

"It's either that or your uniform. That might impress her, an army doctor with medals."

"I don't think so. The blue suit will have to do."

"You don't like wearing your uniform. Why?"

"I don't need to impress her with the part of my life that's over."
Sherlock nodded, his eyes bright. "I understand. The blue suit it is." As he stood up, Sherlock added, "Also, you'll need an overnight bag. Likely we'll need to stay until tomorrow."

John groaned. Things were getting more and more complicated by the minute.

"Close your mouth, John."

Shaking his head in amazement, John obeyed and whistled. "Blimey. Is this really your house?"

"One of them. My mother lives here most of the year."

"So, you grew up here?"

"Sadly, yes."

The chauffeur shut off the engine, got out, and opened the door for them to exit. As the driver got their bags, John stared at the manor house. It was massive, like a mansion in one of those old pictures in history books. He had no doubt it had been built several hundred years ago, but had obviously been updated over the years with new outside light fixtures. He was hoping the plumbing and heating were just as modern throughout.

John stopped the chauffeur from heading inside. "I'll take those."

"I'm more than happy to carry them in, sir."

"My arms aren't broken."

"As you wish, sir."

John took both the bags as Sherlock watched. John asked, "What?"

"Being part of this makes you uncomfortable."

"Having a man wait on me when I'm fit, yeah, a bit."

"You have a definite bias against the wealthy."

John snorted. "I'm marrying you, so I'd better get over that nonsense, yeah?"

Sherlock grinned and then turned to the driver. "Are you going to be staying on to take us back tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir. I've been instructed to provide chauffeur service as well as additional security for the weekend."

A brow lifted and Sherlock asked, "Additional security? Is trouble expected?"

"Not that I'm aware of, sir."

Sherlock accepted the answer and dismissed the man. "Very well, thank you."

He waited until the car pulled away to go to the estate garage before John asked, "Why would Mycroft want security at your mother's place?"

"A precautionary measure, I would assume. My mother has her own security team."
"You mother has her own security?"

"There are far too many people in the world who would love to have a stranglehold on my brother and his access to power. The best way to do that would be to threaten our mother."

John had never considered such a thing before, but then he'd never been connected to someone so wealthy or close to the royal family before, either. "So the security thing only happened after Mycroft came to power?"

"No. Mummy's always been a bit security-conscious, ever since Mycroft was kidnapped when he was twelve."

John's eyes widened. "He was kidnapped?"

"Yes, but only for a few hours. He was quickly recovered. Still, since then she's been more than a bit paranoid about anything like that happening again."

"I can see why."

Sherlock asked, "Are you ready to go in?"

John looked out over the green fields surrounding the place before he answered, "It's a beautiful day out in...where are we again?" He knew they'd been in the car at least two hours, but he had no real notion of their actual location.

"Gloucestershire in an area commonly called the Cotswolds."

"It's really nice land. Anyway, we could go for a walk, put it off, but it seems to me we'd just be delaying the inevitable."

"True." Sherlock gazed across the open countryside with an expression of fondness. "I wouldn't mind a walk later. Despite the people here, the land is quite pleasant."

"We'll fit it in before we leave then."

Sherlock moved closer to the house and John followed, the gravel crunching under their feet. The door opened and a gray-haired butler stood there, his voice beyond posh. "Master Sherlock, welcome home."

"Thank you, Baylor." Sherlock motioned with his head toward John. "This is my fiance, Dr. John Watson."

The butler actually bowed. "Welcome, Dr. Watson."

"Thanks, Mr. Baylor."

Baylor and Sherlock both looked at him, but neither corrected his mistake, even though John realized he must have said something wrong. Baylor spoke quietly, his voice like one of those butlers from a show on the BBC. It was a shame his name wasn't Jeeves. He looked like a Jeeves. "May I take your bags, sir? Your rooms have been prepared."

Sherlock stood a bit straighter, not happy. "Rooms?"

"Yes, sir. Your mother has requested..."

"I don't care what she's requested. We'll only need one room. Mine should be sufficient."
John gave Baylor high points for not looking shocked or even confused about what to do when caught in the middle of the obvious power struggle between the two. "As you wish, sir."

Baylor took their bags and then John and Sherlock walked through the hallway into a much larger space that he assumed was the main sitting room. The furnishings were mostly antiques, very ritzy antiques, the kind one saw in museums. He was afraid to sit down. He might end up owing his entire savings to replace it.

Sherlock interrupted his thoughts. "In the future, simply call the man Baylor. That's what we've called him since I was a child."

"He's been here that long?"

"As was his father."

"Really? Jesus."

"What?"

"It's just I've read about it, you know a servant whose father was a servant and so on as far back as the history book goes. I just never met anyone who lived like this before."

Sherlock stepped over and looked out the window that overlooked a garden. With spring, it was just starting to turn green again. "I suppose from your perspective it is all quite grand, but it was how I was raised, John. I didn't really know anything different until I left for boarding school. Even then it was an extremely sheltered and privileged existence."

"And you hated every minute of it."

Sherlock took a moment before he answered. "Not every minute. There were some good times here when I was small. I had one particular nanny I liked, Mrs. Winthrope. I will also confess that I don't dislike Baylor."

"What was different about Mrs. Winthrope?"

"She liked science. She took me on walks and pointed out the biology behind the grass and trees, the insects, and other creatures. I remember one walk in particular. It was early fall when I was about six. We happened upon the carcass of a fox."

John grinned in amusement. "You would remember that."

Sherlock shrugged, but continued his story, his voice still a bit dreamy as he spoke quietly. "Anyone else would've turned away, but she didn't. She pointed out that dying and the decomposition aided by various organisms in the air and soil were all part of nature's solution to having a constant supply of minerals and vital materials returned to the earth." Sherlock's face suddenly looked a lot sadder.

"What's wrong?"

"I was so taken with the carcass that I wouldn't shut up about it for days."

"That's normal. Kids always like to talk about what they learn."

"Perhaps, but Mrs. Winthrope was fired after that and I never saw her again."

"And you think it was because she did something your mother thought was inappropriate for your
age?"

"More likely it was my father's doing."

John's head came up and he went on alert. Sherlock had never mentioned his father, ever, not since he'd known him. "Your father?"

"Yes. He thought it was unseemly that I should be exposed to anything so dire as death or science."

"Well, he probably thought he was doing the right thing. You were only six."

Sherlock turned, his grey eyes suddenly dark like thunderclouds. "I was a genius, John. Even then it was obvious. He stifled my scientific interest every chance he got. He was...well, he always made my life difficult."

"I'm sorry."

Sherlock closed his eyes, obviously trying to control the stampede of emotions about his father. Returning home had awakened far too many demons. When he opened his eyes, they were still dark, but his features were more composed. "This is just like mummy. She summons us here and then makes us wait. And what is that nonsense about two rooms? It's ridiculous."

John didn't want to defend his mother, so he didn't speak. He just walked over and touched Sherlock's face, his fingertips tracing the side of his cheek and then his jaw. He pushed back a dark curl. "Take a deep breath. We'll be gone first thing tomorrow. You can do this."

Sherlock hesitated and then captured John's hand. "We can do this."

"Yes." Relieved John asked, "Well, if we're going to be waiting long, I think I need to find the loo. It was a long ride out from London."

"I'll show you."

Sherlock, still holding John's hand, led him out into the corridor and down past several more doors until they found the stairs.

John asked, "I figured there would be guest loo nearby."

"There is. We're going to our room. It's an en suite. John recognized the twinkle in Sherlock's eyes and the sudden huskiness of his voice. John's face heated as he resisted. "We can't, not until we see your mum. I mean, what if we're in the middle of shagging and she shows up?"

Sherlock kissed John's hand and grinned devilishly. "Then she can wait until we finish. It would serve her right."

John had to admit that the naughty factor of shagging in Sherlock's old bed was a big hit with his growing erection. "All right, all right, you bastard, but this is your idea if we get caught."

Once they were on the second floor, Sherlock opened one of the six doors along the hall. It was obviously a bedroom, but it was twice as big as Baker Street. Before he had a chance to gape, Sherlock spun him around and pushed him up against the wall inside. As Sherlock closed and locked the door with one hand, he ravished John's mouth. By the time John came up for air, he barely managed to speak. "We need to undress first. This is the only suit I brought."
Reluctantly, Sherlock pulled back. "Take it off then, but do it slowly. I want to watch."

"Did you pack supplies?"

"I did."

"Good."

Sherlock watching him take off the tie and shirt gave John gooseflesh. The pupils were dark and Sherlock's breathing was already labored with desire. John got his shoes and socks off before he slipped out of his trousers and underpants in one go. Sherlock stepped up and kissed him again, harder this time, his tongue savage as he took over. John was pushed down on his back on the bed while Sherlock kept his eyes trained only on John. By the time Sherlock was fully naked, John was harder than hard.

"God, Sherlock, you're bloody gorgeous."

Sherlock smiled, his lips quirked up. "Do you have a problem with me fucking you here on my childhood bed?"

John snorted in amusement and stroked himself while he answered, "Some detective you are. Does it look like I have a problem?"

"Good point." Sherlock retrieved his overnight bag and got out the condoms and lube.

John's mouth watered, knowing full well part of the excitement was the taboo of where they were doing it, but also knowing how good it would be once Sherlock was inside him. His cock twitched in his hands in anticipation.

"Hurry. I don't think it's going to take long."

Sherlock rolled on the condom as John turned over on his belly. Sherlock commanded, "No, on your back. I want to see your face while I do it."

John got on his back again. They'd only done face-to-face once before and it had been harder for him to come. Reluctantly, he nodded. He didn't want to spoil the mood. Besides, maybe the second time it would be different.

Even as aroused as Sherlock was, he still saw the change in John's expression. "You'd prefer me to do it the other way?"

"Not if you want to do it this way."

"We'll compromise."

"How's that?"

"I'll fuck you from behind now and you'll fuck me face-to-face later."

John cracked a big grin. "That's assuming we have enough energy."

Sherlock smirked. "Oh, I have no doubt we'll have the energy and I'll certainly have the inclination. Now, assume the favored position."

John got on his belly and then up on his knees. Sherlock moved in and kneeled from behind, his fingers slicked up. He eased one finger inside him while using his other hand on his hip to help
John keep his balance. Sherlock finger fucked John while he leaned in and kissed each butt cheek, using both his lips and tongue. Then he would nip, teasing the skin between his teeth, leaving tiny marks with each bite. John shuddered with anticipation. More fingers eased inside, stretching him, the heat coiling in his groin like a huge snake ready to strike and release.

Sherlock removed his fingers and put himself into position, his cock pushing in a little bit at a time. Once completely inside, Sherlock draped himself over John's back. Sherlock whispered his name like a prayer. "John." Between kisses and heaving breaths, he added, "I love you."

John was beyond speaking but he nodded and hoped Sherlock knew he returned the same feeling. Sherlock bit the back of his neck and then kissed the scar on John's shoulder. John hissed in delight as Sherlock pulled out and then thrust inside him over and over. With each stroke, pleasure spread like golden heat all over his skin. His whole body floated in a sea of passion. Using his own hand, John pumped his cock in rhythm with Sherlock's. With every push and pull, John fucked his own hand.

Eyes squeezed shut, John's world turned into fire, a blast of bright colors spreading across the inner sky of his mind. His gut clenched and released, his coming like swallowing the sun. He arched up and back, groaning as Sherlock gave a few more quick thrusts, his arms wrapped around John. Both shuddered and shook, John struggling not to collapse, to keep riding the wave of coming exploding inside him.

Finally, he fell forward, Sherlock's arms still around his waist, his body heavy and pressing John down. Sweat trickled between them as Sherlock's breathing roared in his ears, long labored drags as he tried to get air into his overworked lungs.

It took several long minutes before John finally whispered, "I love you, too."

Sherlock answered by kissing the back of his neck and then rolling over. "That was...was..."

"Bloody amazing."

"Yes."

Sherlock was still breathing hard when a knock came at the door. Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut. "What?"

Baylor's voice answered, "Your mother would like to see you in her drawing room, sir."

"Me, or both of us?"

"Just you, sir. I'm supposed to serve Dr. Watson tea."

Sherlock groaned in displeasure. "Tell her I'll be there in about thirty minutes. I'm taking a shower."

"Very good, sir."

Sherlock kissed John again and complained as he removed and disposed of the condom. "Well, at least you get tea."

John put a hand at the back of Sherlock's neck and laced his fingers through the sweaty curls. "We could go together."

"No, I need to talk to her alone anyway, set some ground rules." He kissed John's nose. "I'm hoping..."
it won't be long."

John teased, "So, you're leaving me to contend with cleaning up the wet spot?"

Sherlock laughed, but the humor didn't really reach his eyes. He sat up on the side of the bed. "I'll
tell Baylor to have the maid replace it when you go down for tea."

John didn't want to think about some strange maid cleaning up their mess. He must have made a
face because Sherlock added, "Baylor is very circumspect as are the other servants. This isn't the
first ejaculate to be found on a spread in this house. Don't worry. They won't think less of you or
gossip about it, well, not any more than most servants gossip about anything."

John groaned, but then shrugged. The thought of maids gossiping about him and Sherlock
shagging didn't do his nervous gut any favors. Still, he played it off as nothing important. "I wasn't
worried."

"You were."

"All right, maybe a little. So, where will I be having tea if not here?"

"I'll tell him to serve you in the conservatory. You can see the garden from there."

"Conservatory?"

"Yes? Problem?"

"No, I just have to keep reminding myself that this isn't a period piece on the BBC."

"Believe me, it's all quite real." Sherlock took one more deep breath and stood up, but then paused.
"You know we could shower together to save time."

John laughed and shook his head. Sherlock had tried that ploy before and it always meant he was
late for work. "Nice try."

Sherlock shrugged and headed to the bathroom. Once there, he threw a towel at John and said,
"You know these old houses, the plumbing is atrocious. I can't guarantee you'll have hot water
when I'm done."

"I'm used to cold showers. Army, remember?"

Sherlock huffed in disappointment. A few seconds later the water turned on. He put his head
around the doorframe again, using his best pouty face for effect and said, "Last chance."

Well, hell, who could say no to that? In for a penny, in for a pound.

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After Sherlock left to see his mother, John dressed and made himself more presentable. Sherlock
had left quite an impressive love bite just along his lower neck and the collar, even with the tie,
barely covered it. If John moved his head just a little bit too much to the right, it was obvious.
Bastard did it on purpose.

Baylor knocked at the door. "Master Sherlock has requested I show you to the conservatory for
your tea."

"Okay, right. Thanks."
John followed him downstairs and ended up in one of the prettiest conservatories he'd ever seen. There were ferns and ivies along the wall of high windows. White wicker furniture with blue and yellow pillows finished the look. He could see right out into the garden which seemed a bit wild and more like a cottage garden than a formal one like he had expected. Perhaps there were other gardens on the grounds, but this one was like one out of a children's picture book. All it needed were secret doors and some fairies to complete the look.

A few minutes later Baylor appeared with a large silver tray. "May I serve, sir?"

"Of course." John sat at the small round table while Baylor put the tray down and poured the tea. On the tray were also small half sandwiches, an assortment of cheeses, and some almond cookies. "What kind of sandwiches are these, Baylor?"

"Chicken, sir."

It looked and smelled delicious. It'd been a long time since a quick breakfast of tea and toast. "Thanks."

John helped himself by filling a small plate while Baylor stood there with his hands behind his back. John asked, "So, Baylor, do you like being a butler?"

"Sir?"

"I mean, Sherlock told me you'd been with the family for a long time. Do you enjoy the work?"

Baylor eyebrows lifted and he looked confused. "My grandfathers and father were all butlers. I've been here thirty years. It's what I do."

Perversely, John asked again, "But do you enjoy being a butler is what I'm asking."

Baylor tilted his head slightly and it took him several long moments to answer. "I don't suppose I've ever thought about it, sir."

"Never?"

"Well, it was always assumed that I would be a butler, sir. There really wasn't much to think about."

John marveled at the mindset that said that one didn't question one's career path. He just didn't understand it. He'd always been a big believer in free will especially about making such an important choice. One of his grandfathers had been a farmer, the other a shopkeeper. His father was a factory worker. It never entered his mind to follow in any of their footsteps. Still, he'd liked to think if he had, he would've done so because it would be what he wanted out of life and not what he felt obligated to do.

John decided to end Baylor's misery. "Well, you do it well."

The man's expression brightened. "Thank you, sir."

As John sipped his tea, Baylor just stood there still waiting as if he needed permission to leave. John asked, "Is there something else?"

"No, sir." Baylor hesitated and then bowed just a bit at the waist. "If you need anything, please ring the bell."
John noticed the small silver bell on the tray. "Sure, okay."

Baylor left the room and John shook his head. He spoke quietly to himself as he noshed on the rest of the food. The chicken was as good as any he'd ever had before and the bread freshly baked. "Yep, just like the BBC only with flavor."

"You look well."

Sherlock hadn't expected a pleasant greeting, but he didn't show his surprise. He merely answered succinctly and with a lie. "As do you, Mummy."

Sherlock hadn't seen his mother in over two years. Time had not been kind and she had grown quite frail. She seemed to have shrunk in on herself, everything a bit smaller than before. Even her usually strong voice seemed weaker and he noticed a definite tremor in her hands. Her normally bright blue eyes had dulled and he had no doubt that she was taking powerful pain medication. He knew the signs of illness and his mother had several including the slight jaundice to her skin and the distended abdomen despite her overall gauntness. It was difficult to believe that she had once been one of the most powerful women in England.

"You must be wondering why I asked you here."

"Not really, no."

"Oh, yes, ever the detective. So, tell me what you think I want."

"You wish to dissuade me of my decision to marry."

She coughed into her handkerchief and then cleared her throat several times. "You must excuse me. I have a slight cold." Sherlock accepted the lie and waited before she said, "You're right, of course."

"Of course."

"But I see just from looking at you that any argument I could give you would be entirely wasted."

"Yes, it would."

"You always were an obstinate child." She motioned to a chair beside her. "Sit down. We should talk."

"I'd prefer to stand."

"Sherlock, please."

His eyes widened slightly in surprise. He couldn't remember his mother ever using please to get anything from him before, at least not with that layer of desperation in her tone. He hesitated, but then obliged. He heard the raspy wheezing of her lungs. "You're ill."

She closed her eyes briefly but finally answered with a slight nod. "Yes."

"Seriously ill."

"Yes. Lung cancer."
"Ah." After a few seconds, he added, "I'm sorry."

"Are you?"

To his surprise, Sherlock answered in all honesty, "I am. It's not an illness I would wish on anyone, especially my own mother."

"Thank you for that. I often wondered if you still considered me your mother. We've never had an easy relationship."

Sherlock shrugged. There was no denying the truth. "No, we haven't."

His mother coughed again only much harder. She reached inside a pocket and pulled out an inhaler, giving herself two quick puffs. "Excuse me. It's tiresome, but it does seem to help."

"You should be using oxygen."

"I have it in my room. I didn't want to use it here before I spoke with you."

"That's just useless vanity. Don't you have a nurse?"

"Normally, yes, but I sent her home. Baylor is doing double duty for the weekend, poor man."

"You should have him bring the tank down so you can be comfortable."

"Perhaps later." She studied him more closely. "I meant what I said, you do look well, better than I've ever seen you as an adult. Is that the result of this relationship with your doctor friend?"

Sherlock relaxed slightly. "He's much more than a friend, Mummy. And, yes, John does like feeding me and making sure I get enough sleep. It's his nature to care for people."

"But he was also a soldier. That's rather an odd choice for a man who cares for people."

"He took care of the injured during the war."

"Oh, he did much more than that, Sherlock."

Sherlock had no doubt that she had read John's file, secret or not. Stealing himself for the attack, chin jutted in defiance, he snapped, "What of it? He was a hero by any standard used."

"Yes, he was. Mycroft says he's a man of honor."

Surprised, Sherlock asked, "Mycroft said that?"

His mother smiled and nodded. "He was actually quite defensive about my questions into your young man's background."

"That's rather surprising."

"I thought so as well. Mycroft is rarely so adamant with me, but he insisted that this was a good match, that the doctor was the only person he'd ever met that would suit you. Do you think that's true, that Dr. Watson is the only one who could finally make you happy?"

Stunned, Sherlock couldn't believe Mycroft would come to his defense especially to stop his mother's interference. "He is."
His mother cleared her throat several times, coughing up phlegm. It took a long moment for her to speak, her breathing labored. "I'm glad."

"I should get Baylor to bring your oxygen."

She shook her head and held a hand to her chest. "In a minute. You were right about me wanting to dissuade you in this. It's no secret that I've never understood the point of being homosexual." She held up a halting hand to stop his protest. "However, I can see that you're determined. I know you don't believe this, Sherlock, but I have only ever wanted the best for you over the years. I was never your enemy."

"It felt like it."

"I know. I tried to give you the best advantages, but I somehow failed to give you the most important one, a show of affection. I've never been good with that sort of thing. Of course, your father was no help."

The less said about his father, the better. "What are you trying to say, Mummy? Do you accept John as my partner or not?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No, not really."

"Then yes, but I do want to meet him." She fell back against the sofa, her face suddenly very bright red as she struggled to breathe. "But later. I have to rest first. I wouldn't want to become his patient at our first introduction."

Sherlock stood up. "I'll call Baylor."

"Thank you. Sherlock?"

"Yes?"

"We need to talk about the affairs of the estate. There are matters that need tending and Mycroft can't do it all on his own. Well, he could, but he shouldn't have to. You'll only have one another once I'm gone."

Sherlock nodded, his eyes stinging with unexpected tears. "I understand."

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"What's wrong?"

"Walk with me."

John stood up, concerned with Sherlock's unnerving expression. Dark and disturbed didn't quite cover it. He followed behind quickly as Sherlock headed outside without waiting. John soon made up enough ground to walk side-by-side despite Sherlock's much longer stride. After about fifteen minutes of silence and enough distance from the house, John reached out and took Sherlock's hand. Sherlock squeezed it in return but remained silent. They walked a while longer before he finally said, "She's dying."

John staggered, but was pulled along as Sherlock continued walking. "What?"
"Lung cancer, advanced. I have no idea why Mycroft never mentioned it."

John tightened his hand and his hold on his partner. "Good god, I'm sorry."

Sherlock finally halted and turned, his face flushed from the exertion and his eyes slightly red and a lot lost. "I've hated and resented her for so many years and now she's dying. What am I supposed to do with that?"

"She's your mum, Sherlock. No matter what differences you've had, you still love her."

Sherlock shook his head several times like he was confused. "It makes no sense."

"Yeah, I know. Family, yeah?"

"Indeed." Still holding John's hand, Sherlock walked again, slower this time. "This was...unexpected."

"I'm sure." No wanting to push too hard, John asked, "Are you all right?"

Sherlock snapped irritably, "Of course I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Okay." They walked another ten minutes before John asked, "Are we going someplace in particular?"

"I walked these fields hundreds of times as a child. They seemed vast and unending. I could walk for hours and never see another soul."

"That sounds lonely."

Sherlock stopped and stared at him. He touched John's face gently and then leaned their foreheads together. He whispered. "It was, but it was easier than being in that house."

He lifted his head and then led John to one of the outcropping of trees where there was a small empty shack at the edge of the open field. The wood of the outbuilding was weathered a dark grey, the windows were all broken, and the door was barely still on its rusty hinges. Bits of old farming equipment littered the floor and pinpoints of light came through holes in the roof.

Beside the building was a huge oak tree and beneath it was a bench on the outside of the west wall. Sherlock scrubbed off the debris with his bare hand before they sat down together in the shade. There was a definite chill in the air.

John waited, knowing Sherlock had more to say. After a few minutes, he finally spoke. "I used to come here to think about my experiments. It was one of the few places where I felt in control. I would stay here until dark and no one but Mycroft would ever come looking for me. When he left for school, there was no one who cared enough to bother. Security or my nanny would eventually come, but never Mummy or Father."

"I'm sorry."

Sherlock leaned back against the side of the shack and pulled his feet up on the bench. He took John's hand in his own, fisting them together on his knees, resting his chin on top. "It was a long time ago."

"But it still makes you sad."

"Caring is not an advantage."
"Sounds like something Mycroft would say."

"Surprisingly he's not always wrong."

"Look, I know being here brings up a lot of bad feelings, but having feelings, that's better than numbing yourself."

Sherlock rubbed their hands against his face, his whiskers rough on the back of John's hand. "If this were just a few years ago, I'd be doing exactly that, numbing myself to this flood of hateful emotions."

John knew all too well about triggers. He leaned in and turned Sherlock's face in his direction. "But you're not alone now."

Sherlock's eyes met his. "No, I'm not."

"And you never will be again."

Sherlock closed his eyes and took a deep breath, his voice rough with emotion. "If you ever left me..."

"I won't."

"I drive people away."

John used his free hand to cup the top of Sherlock's head and then comb his fingers through his hair. "I'm not leaving."

"But..."

"Shut up." John leaned in and kissed him. When he pulled back, Sherlock released John's hand only to draw him into a tight hug.

Then just as suddenly Sherlock sat back. "I need to be alone."

John searched his face and his heart ached at the incredible pain he saw there. "I don't want to leave you alone right now."

Sherlock met his gaze, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "I'll meet you back at the house before dark." Sherlock stood and walked away, moving across the open field, his head down as he stepped along a solitary path only he could see.

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"Where is Sherlock?"

"He took a walk to clear his head." John studied the tight lines of Mycroft's face. The man had carried his mother's secret for far too long. "Why didn't you tell him?"

Sherlock's brother had obviously just arrived. They were both standing in the entrance hall. Mycroft straightened, his lips in a hard thin line. "She asked me not to."

"And you always do what your mother asks?"

"When I can, yes."
John argued, "You still should've told him."

"If he had bothered to come see her, he wouldn't have to be told." The words came out snappish and with more emotion that John usually heard in Mycroft's tightly controlled voice.

"I'm sorry."

Surprised at the change in John's attitude, Mycroft exhaled loudly. "Yes, well...thank you."

"This must have been a difficult time for you."

Mycroft eyed him with a quick suspicion, but then relaxed slightly. He shrugged and motioned toward the den. "Let's sit down and have some tea. It was a long ride from London. Sherlock will no doubt be gone for a few hours yet."

"He said he'd be back before dark."

Mycroft sounded doubtful. "Perhaps."

John sat down in one of the two leather chairs which faced one another in front of the fireplace. Mycroft took the other one. John asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. She's had the best doctors. There's nothing anyone can do except make her comfortable at this point."

Baylor appeared as if by magic with the tray. As he poured and served them tea, both men were quiet. After the butler was dismissed, Mycroft said, "I'm not quite sure what Baylor will do once she's gone."

"Sherlock said he's been here a long time."

"His whole life. He's always been devoted to Mummy as was his father, both good men."

"So I gathered."

Mycroft studied him, his brow lifted. "You don't approve."

"It's not my business to approve or disapprove."

"You think we represent and perpetuate the class system which you reject."

John frowned. It was bad enough Sherlock read his mind half the time. He didn't need it from Mycroft, too. "I never said that."

"You don't have to. It's in your tone."

His temper flared, but John held it in check. He wouldn't be baited. Mycroft would love nothing more than a heated debate about classism to distract him from what was important. "What will happen to Baylor and the others who work here? Do you plan to keep the place? It must be expensive to maintain."

"More than what it costs to run some small nations, yes. As to the servants, I'm not sure. Sherlock and I will have to discuss it. Of course, Baylor will be given a full retirement if he chooses, but the others, well, I just don't know yet."

John sat very still, letting the words sink in about Sherlock inheriting even more property. "You
know he doesn't care about all this."

Mycroft put down his teacup and pinched the bridge of his nose, obviously very tired, more tired than he'd ever allowed John to witness before. John waited and Mycroft finally spoke. "But he needs to care. Difficult decisions have to be made. I want to be fair to both of us. Our entire heritage is at stake."

Mycroft leaned forward in his chair, his voice earnest. "You have to help me with this, John. He'll listen to you."

"It'll depend on what you want me to help you do."

"I don't want him to just give it all away like he did with our uncle's estate."

Frowning John asked, "Did you sell that already?"

"Of course. He gave away his two million pounds to veteran's charities. Didn't he tell you?"

Flabbergasted, John shook his head. "No. Did you say two million pounds? That means that the castle sold for four million?"

"Yes."

"Jesus, that's a lot of money. And he gave it all to veterans?"

"Yes, so, you see why I'm concerned about him selling things off and just giving away the family's wealth."

John looked up and then quirked a smile. "I actually think it's grand."

"What?"

"I mean, all this could do so much good for people who really need it."

Mycroft sat back with a dismissive huff. "Oh, you would say that. You're a socialist at heart."

John ignored the jibe and said, "Listen, whatever Sherlock decides, it's up to him. He can keep it or give it away. It makes no difference to me."

"You surely cannot be that naive."

"No, I'm not.‖ John took a deep calming breath and finished his tea before he spoke again. "Let's not argue. This is going to be a difficult weekend for both of you. I think we should all try to be civil."

After several long minutes of silence, Mycroft glanced at his watch. "If you're hungry, I'll ask Cook to ready our supper. Apparently, Mummy had her meal taken to her room earlier."

"You don't think we should wait for Sherlock?"

Mycroft got up and stepped to the tall window at the far end of the room and looked out over the field. "If he's back before dark, I'd be very surprised."

Reluctantly, John had to agree and despite all that had happened he was hungry. "All right. Thanks."
As Mycroft turned to leave, John said sadly, "This isn't exactly the weekend we'd planned."

"No, it rarely is."

"So, you're Dr. John Watson."

"Yes, ma'am."

Sherlock's mother lay propped up against a mountain of white pillows in her huge four poster bed and was covered by a pristine matching duvet. With her condition being so advanced, he was surprised it wasn't a hospital bed. Then again, perhaps she preferred the comfort of her own bed to the practicality that a motorized one would provide. Many people did, especially near the end.

The light was low and it was difficult to see anything else in the room. The slow hiss of her oxygen filled the silence between them. After a few moments, she motioned for him to move closer.

"Come and sit down. I don't see as well as I used to."

Once he situated himself in the chair by the bed, he saw the extent of her illness. As a doctor, he ticked off in his head all the medical details that let him know that she was at an advanced point in her terminal illness. There would likely be only one or two months more before she passed away. It was also obvious from her pinpoint pupils that she was taking heavy duty narcotics for pain, most likely by way of a transdermal fentanyl patch which would slowly deliver relief from the agony of the disease that riddled her body.

When John worked in oncology wards during training, he'd always thought he'd much rather take a speedy bullet to the brain than go through what cancer patients did every day. He shut down his negative memories quickly and focused back on Sherlock's mother.

When she spoke, she struggled to be precise but her words were shaky and slurred. "When Mycroft was born, we knew within the first year he was bright. He was using whole sentences and far surpassed the normal parameters of intelligence by the age of two. By five he was reading and composing essays. By seven he played entire piano solos. He had a gift for so many things, it's difficult to enumerate them all. He was such a charming boy."

She paused to take a deep breath and wet her dry lips with her tongue. "After Sherlock was born, he did everything twice as fast as this brother. He was reading and writing at two, violin by five. Despite that, he didn't speak until he was nearly four. We had specialists from all over the world examine him. All said that he might be autistic, but they just weren't sure. Then one morning he came down to breakfast talking normally, or as normally as he ever did, about how exposure to light caused the wallpaper in his room to fade faster than the paper in the shadow and asked if we had ever noticed such a phenomenon and what might be the cause. He was such a small boy, but he always used such big words. It was quite extraordinary."

That sounded so like Sherlock, John couldn't help but smile. "Sherlock's nothing if not extraordinary."

Mrs. Holmes met his gaze and nodded. "Yes. After that breakthrough, he would have long sessions of chattering nonstop mirrored with days of no talking at all, as if he were saving it all up for one go. However, at six I worried about his growing preoccupation with death and the macabre."

John had always wondered when that had happened, when Sherlock became more interested in the dead than the living. It didn't surprise him that it started when he was so young. "Many children
become fascinated by that sort of thing."

"True, but not to the exclusion of all else. Nothing thrilled him quite as much as finding bones and rotting animals in the fields. He had a nanny who encouraged his interest, said he had a gift for analysis and critical thinking far beyond his age. I terminated her employment as soon as I was aware of her negative influence."

"Mrs. Winthrope."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "He told you about her?"

"Yes. He said that she was his favorite nanny." John didn't mention that Sherlock felt guilty for getting the woman dismissed. That would be telling and he didn't think Sherlock would appreciate it.

"He had so many, I'm surprised he remembers any of them, much less one he had for such a short time."

"Sherlock doesn't forget, not unless he chooses to do so."

Her gaze met his and she nodded solemnly. "It's rather a curse more than a blessing in his case."

"It can be, but it helps him in his work."

"His work." She spat the words out. She wore a tight frown as she complained, "I don't understand how, with all his advantages, he would choose to deal with something so common as crime. I offered him real power and he just threw it back in my face. He's always been ungrateful and defiant. Murders, rapes, theft, it's all so petty and distressing."

John tried to hold his tongue, but he couldn't. This woman had no idea about the importance of her own son. "He's utterly brilliant at solving crimes. It's because of Sherlock that serial killers and others can't hurt anyone else. His work is important. Please don't suggest that what he does is meaningless because it's not."

She smiled for the first time since he'd arrived. "Such passion when you say his name. You must love him very much."

"I do."

"I find your relationship hard to understand. You have no history of homosexuality and yet you've become involved with my son romantically."

John felt no compulsion to talk about his sexuality, so he didn't. Instead he simply said, "We were friends before we became partners."

"Sherlock doesn't have friends. No matter how intellectually advanced he was, he never quite understood about social skills and how to relate to people. He just never seemed to want to make the effort, like it wasn't worth his time. Of course, he can mimic normal behavior when it suits him. It caused all kinds of problems when he was at school."

"I suppose being a genius, it's hard to worry about common courtesy. He's more concerned about the work."

"Don't make excuses, Doctor. I haven't even mentioned his drug use and his wanton sexual behavior. I was mortified more than once with the reports of his self-destructive behaviors."
John straightened and argued, "He's sober now. I don't think you should hold any of that against him."

"How can I not?"

"Because he's your son."

"If only it were that simple."

"It should be."

"We don't live in a vacuum. You know how difficult it is in the world if you don't know the social rules."

"I do, yes."

"And yet you more than tolerate Sherlock. You love him."

John kept it simple. "Yes."

Mrs. Holmes coughed a few times before she spoke again, her energy obviously fading. "When I first learned of your relationship, I wanted it ended. However, Mycroft assured me that you were a good man. In fact, he called you a man of honor and said that you're the best thing that's ever happened to my son, that you'd kill or be killed for him."

John couldn't believe he'd heard right. "Mycroft said that about me?"

"He did and from what I know now, I have to agree."

John swallowed hard, not sure how to respond, but he finally said, "Thank you."

"I have a favor to ask."

Cautiously, he asked, "What's that?"

"There are forces in the world that will try to use or destroy him. He's a target because of his brilliance and now his wealth. Mycroft does what he can, but he has his own worries. I want your promise that you'll do everything you can to protect Sherlock against those who want to hurt him."

John didn't hesitate to commit himself. "I would do anything for Sherlock."

"Yes, I rather think you would." She closed her eyes, her breathing slowing down, but still labored even with the oxygen.

John stood to leave. "Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?"

The words were a raspy whisper. "Everything that can be done is being done, but thank you, Doctor. Just take care of Sherlock."

"I will."

After a few seconds of silence, John left the room, knowing full well it was a promise he'd spend his whole life keeping.

&&&&&&&
John was on his third glass of wine as he stared out the window of the den. It was dark and he saw very little, but he hoped to see Sherlock coming home soon. He didn't relish going out in the middle of the night with just a torch and determination to hunt down his missing partner.

"Keeping watch won't bring him home any sooner."

"I should've stayed with him."

Mycroft folded his newspaper and put it on the side table. "He needs time to himself. He's always been like this."

John turned and returned to the chair by the fire. "Will security be an issue when he comes back?"

"They've been apprised of his presence as well as yours." Mycroft took a sip of his whiskey and asked, "When did you realize about the security?"

John didn't mention what their driver had said. He was pretty sure that the man wasn't supposed to reveal his added guard duties for the weekend. "I spotted the cameras in the hallway and along the outside of the building. Plus, there have been at least two sweeps of the perimeter since supper."

"I'll have to direct them to be more discreet in their patrols."

"They're fine. Most people wouldn't notice, especially since they're not wearing uniforms. A regular guest would just think they were locals or a regular servant."

"Which is the intent."

John finished his drink and put his glass down. It was too early to go up to his room on his own, but he really didn't want to just sit and worry about Sherlock, either. "I guess I should thank you."

Mycroft's eyes narrowed. "For what?"

"For telling your mother that I was good for Sherlock."

"Ah, she mentioned that?"

"She did. I appreciate it."

Mycroft stared at the fire instead of John. "I must confess, I thought it was a horrible idea at first."

"I know. What changed your mind?"

"Sherlock told me that he'd choose you over the family, over me. He's never done that before, not with any sincerity. His passion for you is impressive."

He turned his attention back to John. "I was wary of your character at first."

"My character? Why?"

"I read your file."

John's gut clenched. He had some idea about what was in his military jacket, but he didn't like to think about all the notations that would be there about his covert missions, the times he'd killed and been captured. He kept his voice level, as if sitting there with someone who knew his secrets wasn't like having his chest ripped open and exposed to starving vultures. "Not surprising."

"I thought that perhaps having someone with psychological issues might not be someone best
suited for my brother, not with his own history of instability. Surely you can understand my original concern about such a relationship."

Reluctantly, he nodded. "I suppose. And now?"

"Now, I see the positive changes in Sherlock. I attribute those to you."

"You shouldn't. They're mostly down to him."

"You underrate your influence. Sherlock doesn't have friends. I suppose the closest he came was with Lestrade, but that was more a mentoring relationship rather than a friendship. With you it's been different from the very beginning."

"It went both ways." John studied his hands and then the fire. He remembered Sherlock's brilliance at that first crime scene, how he'd had months of suicidal thoughts all banished with one adventurous night with Sherlock. It was worth killing a thousand killer cabbies to keep that.

Mycroft interrupted his musings. "I'm well aware of how you saved his life that first night."

It didn't surprise him that Mycroft knew one of his biggest secrets. He added one more. "And he saved mine."

Mycroft didn't pretend not to understand the reference to John's depression before meeting Sherlock. "Indeed. It would seem you've both been good for the other."

"Yes. Just out of curiosity, what would you have done if your mother had insisted that you try and break us apart?"

"It's rather a moot point now."

"True, but I'd be interested in knowing what you would have done."

Mycroft stood up and went to the bar, pouring himself another drink. "Would you like some more wine? It's a Chateau Margaux 2000, an excellent Bourdeaux."

"No, thanks." John wasn't used to wine and three glasses were more than enough to give him a heady buzz. It wasn't safe to get too loose, not with Mycroft in the house.

When he sat back down, Mycroft rolled the tumbler between his hands. "I regret to say that, had Mummy insisted, I would have no doubt done whatever I needed to do to end your influence on my brother."

A chill ran up his spine as John realized the full impact of what the bastard was confessing. He had the power and the means to do whatever he wanted with impunity. The new knowledge was like a punch to the chest. "You would've had me assassinated and made it look like suicide."

Mycroft gave a casual shrug. "Or you would've disappeared to some secret detention center. I realized early on you aren't a man who responds well to standard bribery and you're far too dangerous to use threats against your family. That rather limited my choices."

John face heated and his hands fisted with anger. "Bloody fucking hell. And people call Sherlock the sociopath."

"There's no reason to be vulgar, John. As it turns out, none of it was necessary once I realized that you were beneficial to my brother rather than a problem."
John was shocked and yet he wasn't, not really. He'd always known the cold-blooded nature of the man sitting in front of him. John snapped angrily, "Lucky for me you decided to let me live then, yeah? Do you have any bloody idea how fucking insane that sounds?"

Mycroft remained calm, sipped his liquor, and said, "As someone who is joining our family, I feel it only fair to warn you that we are a ruthless group. Sherlock is no exception. He gets what he wants regardless of the means."

John stood up and fought the urge to deck his future brother-in-law. "You're a complete and utter bastard. It's no wonder Sherlock despises you."

"I'm not telling you anything you don't already know."

Walking to the door, John spoke over his shoulder. "Piss off."

As he headed upstairs, John prayed Sherlock would come back soon so they could leave, the sooner the better. He hated to think of what shit he'd be in if he ended up killing the son of a bitch who so casually threatened his life.

&&&&&&

"John?"

He sat up like a shot and turned on the bedside light. Sherlock stood just inside the bedroom door dripping water all over the fancy carpet. "Bloody hell!"

John threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. He stepped over and shut the door. He ran a hand through his lover's wet curls. Sherlock's cheeks were flushed and freezing. "What the hell? Why are you soaking wet?"

Sherlock didn't look up at him, but just mumbled, "It's raining."

"Right then. Let's get these clothes off, yeah?"

"I'm not in the mood for intercourse, John. I'm sorry."

John kissed Sherlock's forehead and said, "You idiot, it's three in the bloody morning and you're about to crash from hypothermia if I don't get you dry and warm. Take your clothes off and I'll get some towels."

Sluggishly, Sherlock obeyed and started stripping down. When John returned, he finished taking off Sherlock clothes and handed him a towel. He hurriedly hung the wet things on the shower rod to dry. Then he led a naked, shivering Sherlock to the edge of the bed. He towel dried the hair and body quickly before he pushed Sherlock under the covers.

Then John took off his own shorts and tee shirt and crawled in naked beside his partner, drawing him into his arms. Skin to skin contact was the best way to warm up a body safely. "Just relax. I've got you now."

Sherlock's whiskery face nuzzled into John's shoulder and he drew John even closer. "You're warm."

"And you're fucking freezing."

Sherlock's whole body shuddered to prove John's point. "I miscalculated my return."
"We'll talk about it in the morning. Just go to sleep."

John counted at least fifteen minutes before Sherlock's teeth finally stopped chattering and he relaxed. Long legs and arms wrapped around him, trapping John down under the covers. Sherlock rolled them both over and lay on top of him. John spit curls out of his mouth. He didn't mind sharing his body heat, didn't mind being used as a personal heater, but he drew the line at being smothered by hair. Soft lips kissed the side of his neck. John grumbled, "I thought I told you to go to sleep."

"I can't sleep."

John sighed as Sherlock nibbled at his ear. "I thought you weren't interested in shagging."

"I changed my mind."

John's laugh was swallowed whole when Sherlock shifted and kissed him properly. His tongue probed and took lazy tours inside his mouth. After a few minutes, Sherlock's cock rubbed against John's groin as the taller man rocked against him. Sherlock lifted his head and shifted downward under the covers, his tongue leaving a wet trail down the middle of John's belly.

Fisting his hands in the sheets, John arched upward as Sherlock captured his cock in his mouth, using his tongue to add pressure and his hands to roll John's balls. Pleasure rolled over John in waves as he struggled to hold off coming too fast. Sherlock knew John's body better than a crime scene, knew exactly how to touch, lick, and fondle to get a result and he used it at that moment to make sure there was no escape. Orgasm coiled in John's gut and as Sherlock sucked him down to the root, John came with tight, bright shudders that tore up his spine, made him hold his breath as the world exploded inside his body.

After John's final jerk came stillness, a languid peace seeping all through his muscles. After a few finishing licks, Sherlock moved back up beside him, stroking his own cock and waiting, watching, keeping his eyes locked on John. After a few moments, John rolled over and opened his eyes. He took a good look at his partner. Sherlock's lips were swollen and wet. John leaned in and kissed him, the taste of his own come still lingering on Sherlock's tongue. "Thank you."

Sherlock's hungry look stared back at him, his hand moving a bit faster on his own cock. His breathing was raspy and uneven. "Reciprocity would be appreciated."

"If you can say reciprocity, you're not turned on enough."

Sherlock closed his eyes and threw his head back in frustration. "John, please."

"Mouth or hand?" John lowered his voice even more. "Or do you want to fuck me?"

Sherlock trembled at John's invitation, but shook his head. "No time. Mouth, hand, I don't care."

John wanted to see Sherlock come, so he moved his hand down and took over the stroking. He let Sherlock set the rhythm, which got more and more forceful. Sherlock's eyes were squeezed shut and his face was contorted with concentration. John used his other hand to trace his fingers along Sherlock's mouth, teasing his lips. The hungry mouth opened and John let his fingers be sucked inside. Matching the thrusting into his hand, John fucked Sherlock's mouth with his fingers, pushing in and out. Sherlock cried out and came quickly, shooting come all over John's hand and stomach. Teeth bit down on John's fingers, but not hard enough to break skin, just hard enough to bruise.

When Sherlock opened his mouth again, John removed his fingers and rested his forehead against
Sherlock's. He chuckled and said, "Ouch."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. That was bloody amazing."

"Your fingers are undamaged?"

"They're fine."

"That was dangerous, John."

"Your point?"

Sherlock closed his eyes and sighed. "If I'd bitten your fingers off, you wouldn't be so smug."

"It might be worth it to see you come like that again." John kissed Sherlock and rolled over on his back. He quickly cleaned himself off with the towel. Then he said, "Come here."

Sherlock scooted in closer to John's side and rested his head on his chest. John's right arm wrapped around Sherlock and he used the other to pull up the sheets and blankets that had been kicked aside earlier. Then he switched off the light. Once they were cozy, John closed his eyes. "Will you sleep now?"

"Probably not."

The answer didn't surprise him. John knew it might be a while before Sherlock would sleep again. "You had me worried going off alone like that. You didn't answer my texts."

"Would you believe my phone died?"

"No."

"I should have answered. I meant to. I just kept walking in circles, going over all the paths I walked when I was a child. It's not the same now."

"Are you really okay? You seemed a bit out of it when you first got back."

"I'm fine."

John squeezed his arm a little tighter around his partner. "Wrong answer."

Sherlock kissed his neck and whispered back. "I'm not sure."

"Better."

"Why is it better that I'm not sure about how I feel?"

"Because it's honest. I need you to be honest with me about this. I can't help you if you're not."

"I don't know if you can help with this at all, John."

"I can help by being here. Whatever you need, I'll give it if I can."

"It's complicated."

"Of course it is. Your family is seriously fucked up. It explains so much."
Sherlock smiled against his chest. "You met Mummy."

"I did, yes."

"I hope you're not scarred to badly."

"I fought a war and survived. It's fine."

Sherlock's voice suddenly lost its humor. "She dying, John."

"I know."

"Why don't I feel worse about it?"

"I don't know. But he could guess. It didn't take a genius to see that his mother favored Mycroft or that every other word was laced with criticism of Sherlock. "You feel what you feel. There's no right or wrong here."

"Philosophy, John? Not really your area."

John kissed the top of Sherlock's curls. "Listen, I'll follow your lead. You want to stay and take care of business, we'll stay. You want to go home as soon as we can, I'm with you on that, too."

There were a few seconds before Sherlock answered. "I need to talk to Mummy one last time and then we'll leave."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." Sherlock hesitated. "Mycroft will want me to stay."

"Fuck Mycroft."

Sherlock lifted his head, his palm resting over John's heart, and stared at him in the dark. "He's made you angry."

John drew Sherlock back against him. Sherlock didn't need him ranting about his snake of a brother. That could wait. "Not now."

For once Sherlock let it go. John closed his eyes, pushing away the growing anger he had for Mycroft and the poisonous life he represented to the man he loved. Sherlock didn't need to be drawn into the trap of his brother's deceits. It was John's job to make sure Sherlock remained free from the demands of familial history that Mycroft would weld against them both soon enough.

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"Did you sleep well, Dear Brother?"

"You know I didn't."

"Security did report your damp arrival. I'm sure John appreciated your late, or rather early, return."

Sherlock poured his own tea from the silver set on the sideboard and then sat down at the dining room table. His shirt was still slightly damp from the night before, but it would dry soon enough. He sat down and gave his full attention to his brother. "What did you do to John while I was out?"

Mycroft put away his reports and stared back. "I didn't do anything to John."
"He was angry when I got home. You must have done something."

"Surely you must have noticed that it doesn't take much to anger your partner."

Sherlock spoke between sips. "I should warn you that he's a dangerous man to piss off."

Mycroft kept an insipid smile on his face, but his eyes narrowed. "Is that a threat?"

"You of all people know I don't make idle threats. I make observations. Your biggest problem is that you underestimate people like John."

"On the contrary, I do believe I know exactly how dangerous your fiance can be."

"Good." After a few moments, he added, "Why didn't you tell me about Mummy?"

"Would you have come more often to see her?"

"No."

"Then there really was no point in you being told."

Sherlock couldn't really argue with that, so he finished his tea and put the cup down. "I plan to see Mummy once more today. After that John and I are leaving. I have work to do in London and I don't plan to sit here and wait for her to die. I'll leave that to you."

Mycroft sat back in his chair and rubbed his face with his right hand, clearly disappointed. "That's cold even for you, Dear Brother. She is our mother."

"I'm well aware of who she is, and what she is. I don't plan to be part of that."

"It's part of who you are, who you're meant to be."

"I won't be dragged in. Her dying doesn't change that."

Mycroft sighed heavily. "She'll try to manipulate you, try to make you promise you'll join me in the work."

"I know that."

Mycroft studied him, his lips pursed and his face lined with fatigue. "You're a much stronger man than I am if you can resist her, especially on her deathbed."

His brother rarely complimented him on his ability to defy his mother's master manipulations. More often his obstinacy was a subject of chagrin and frustration. Sherlock wondered what had changed. "Did you ever want to do anything else or did you just buy into the plan from the beginning?"

Mycroft got up and poured more tea, taking his time to add the sugar before he answered. When he sat back down, he spoke quietly. "As you well know, I was groomed from the beginning to apprentice with her and Father in their dealings with the government. As the eldest son, it was my duty to do so."

"But is it what you wanted to do?"

"Why are you asking me now? What difference does it make? I'm doing what our family has always done. We've always been an integral part of the government."
Sherlock didn't hide his contempt. "The secret government."

"Even so, we perform a vital part in keeping the world safe. With your intelligence and talent, you could do much greater work than hunting down common criminals."

"I'm not interested."

"So you've said countless times."

Sherlock eyed his brother and pushed harder. "You still haven't answered the question. Is it what you really wanted to do, or do you do it because it's what Mummy wanted after Father died?"

"I did answer. Not all of us have the luxury of doing what we want with our lives. Some of us put duty first."

Sherlock nodded sadly. His brother, like most of the people in his family, had been sucked in by obligation and tradition. They'd been forced into a kind of servitude that made Sherlock's gut clench with deep-seated anger. He despised the idea that such operations existed even though he accepted the necessity of their reality. As John would say, he'd dodged a bullet by escaping when he did.

After a few moments he said, "You have no children."

"Not yet, no."

Sherlock's brow raised in surprise. "I wasn't aware you were seeing anyone."

"I'm looking into surrogacy."

Sherlock snorted in amusement. "Good lord, I'm sure Mummy would be thrilled about that."

"Mummy doesn't know and you're not to tell her. If I want an heir, that's the only way to have one. You know my proclivities, which don't include having sexual intercourse with women. If you won't join me in the work or produce your own heir, well, I have little choice."

"You always have a choice, Mycroft. You just keep making the wrong one. I mean, would you seriously bring a child into the world for the sole purpose of keeping power in the family line?"

Mycroft's right fist hit the table angrily. It was one of the few times Sherlock had seen his brother's rage up close. The last time had been when Mycroft had found him nearly dead in an alley one night. The less he thought about that incident and the resulting broken bones in his brother's right hand, the better.

Mycroft barked, "You have no idea what I've given up for this family or for this country. You have no right to mock me. I won't have it."

"If you're looking for sympathy because you've chosen to make that sacrifice, you won't find it from me."

"Of that, I have no doubt." Mycroft fumed a few seconds and then took several calming breaths. He straightened his tie and brushed off a stray crumb from his waistcoat. "I do wish you would refrain from antagonizing me so early in the day. It's not good for my blood pressure."

"A better diet, more exercise, and a new job would help with that."

"Oh, shut up."
"Make me." Sherlock barely kept himself from sticking out his tongue. Old habits were hard to break.

A voice called from the door. "Still as mature as ever then?"

Sherlock smiled fondly. "John, come join us. I'll have Cook send in breakfast."

"Only if you'll have some, too."

"I'm not hungry."

"You didn't eat all day yesterday. You're eating something today."

John's command tone meant business. Sherlock had no idea why, but he loved that side of his partner. "Some toast then."

"And eggs. You need protein."

"Perhaps."

Mycroft made a face and interjected, "You two are disgustingly domestic."

John got his cup of tea and stood behind Sherlock, one hand possessively squeezing his shoulder. He leaned down and kissed the top of his lover's head. "You're just jealous."

John didn't see the flash of light in Mycroft's eyes, but Sherlock did. John was a more keen observer of human nature than Sherlock was sometimes. Mycroft was jealous of not only their relationship but about how Sherlock had a man like John and Mycroft had nobody. All he had was a dull job and commitments that he didn't even want. For the first time in his life, Sherlock actually pitied his brother.

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"I need you to stop being so selfish and do the right thing."

"No."

"Surely you won't deny me my dying wish."

Sherlock sat back in the chair by his mother's bedside, his arms crossed stubbornly as he studied the woman who most influenced his life. Her cheeks were a bit more flushed and her words were less slurred than the day before. He saw a bit more strength in her eyes. "Does that ploy ever really work?"

"You are insufferable. I don't know how you could be my son."

"I am what you made me, Mummy."

"If that were the case, you'd be working in concert with your brother and not making a spectacle of yourself pretending to be a detective." She took a long breath and then added, "You've always been such a disappointment, Sherlock. You had so much potential as a child and you just squandered it away like some common peasant. I don't understand it."

The harsh words no longer carried the sting of previous years. He'd grown a hard protective shell that he always kept in working order when visiting relatives, especially Mummy Dearest. "I am a detective, and a very good one, the best, in fact. I'm actually quite brilliant."
"So your Dr. Watson claims, but then he's besotted so his opinion is suspect."

"I know what you want me to do, but as we've established, that's not going to happen."

"What would your father say?"

"He's dead so he won't be saying anything."

"Don't be disrespectful."

"You first."

His mother remained mute for a full minute before she finally spoke again. "Mycroft's work will keep him primarily in London. When I'm gone, I'd like for you to move here."

"You can't be serious."

"Why not? It's your home. You could keep the servants. There's plenty of money to run the house. You and John could be comfortable here. You could still do that detective thing you do. There are murders in the country, too, you know."

"Don't be ludicrous. I haven't lived in this house full-time since I was eight and even then I hated it."

"Hated the house or hated me?"

Hesitation prefaced his answer and his tone softened. "I don't hate you, Mummy."

"But you don't like me, either."

"Feelings are rarely absolute or quite so well defined." He thought of both the love and hate he felt for his brother as proof, but kept the comparison to himself.

"No? What about your feelings for John?"

Sherlock's heart raced with emotion. "What's your point, Mummy? Of course I love John. He loves me in return. He also doesn't spend every waking moment pointing out how much I've disappointed him."

Sherlock stopped himself from shouting or saying something even worse. He heard John's calming words in his mind, that solid, familiar voice whispering a 'bit not good'. He cleared his throat and said, "John is the best man I've ever known and he loves me for who I am. He doesn't try to change me. We work well together and I'm actually happy for the first time in my life. As a mother, I would hope that you would want that for your son."

"Happiness is subjective and short-lived. I want my sons to be useful instead."

"One doesn't have to overthrow governments to be useful, Mummy."

"It doesn't hurt. This world would be a very different place if your family hadn't been guarding freedom so closely for the last century. You take it for granted."

"Perhaps, I do, but isn't that the whole point of freedom, that we should all have choices?"

She huffed and shook her head. "This is pointless."

"So it would seem."
She coughed several times and then fell back harder against her pillows. Rubbing her forehead as if she had a headache, she said, "You need to at least help Mycroft deal with the probate. You can decide what shared property to keep and what to sell off. I've made my will so that everything that isn't given to charity or put in trust for benefits for the servants is to be divided equally between you."

"I'm surprised that you didn't favor Mycroft in that."

"I would have if he had bothered to have children."

"When would he have time? He's too busy trying to control the free world."

His mother's voice faltered. "He thinks I don't know." When Sherlock didn't respond, she added, "I always knew you'd end up being homosexual. The signs were just too obvious when you were a teenager and never showed any interest in girls. I had, however, hoped Mycroft would outgrow it."

"It's not really something one outgrows, Mummy."

"No, I suppose not. Still, one does want for grandchildren before the end."

"It's rather too late for that."

She caught her breath before she hissed, "God, how can you be so cruel?"

Sherlock repeated himself. "I am what you made me, Mummy."

"If I was cruel, it wasn't intentional. I wanted you to survive so I had to be strict. You have no idea how dangerous the world is, Sherlock. With your gifts and your wealth, you'll be a target for evil. Your life will be in constant danger."

Sherlock thought about the bomb jacket, the cabbie, all the criminals who'd tried to kill them just in the last year. "I know a little about danger."

"Too little. You must be ever vigilant. They will come after you even more now than before."

"They can try."

"I've asked John to help protect you."

Sherlock hid his surprise. "Why would you do that?"

"He's a soldier, one of the elite. He's an asset that you can use."

"He's my partner, not an asset. I didn't pick him to be my bodyguard."

For the first time since he'd sat down, she smiled. "I rather think he picked you."

Sherlock conceded she might be right. "He's a most obstinate man."

"So it would seem."

She paused and then changed the subject. "Before you leave at least promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Come to my funeral. What would people think if one of my sons didn't even bother to show up?"
Sherlock swallowed hard, his eyes stinging. "Do you really think I'd wouldn't come to your funeral?"

"I know you don't care for rituals or crowds. You obviously don't care what others think, so, yes, I consider it a strong possibility."

Sherlock could just imagine the group that would show up, or at least send condolences, to the service. There would be presidents, prime ministers, leaders and royals from around the world. Even the queen would no doubt send a representative. It would likely be one of the biggest social events of the year even though few, if any, media would be allowed to announce more than a standard obituary. Even in death she would maintain the lie that she was simply a rich widow who dabbled in international financing.

Sherlock hated the thought of being forced to stand in the church and by the graveside, showcasing his grief for strangers. He hated the thought of Mycroft doing it all on his own even more. There was only so much his brother should have to endure alone. "I'll be there."

"With John?"

"Of course."

She paused and asked almost timidly, "Do you know if Mycroft has anyone?"

"You'd have to ask him."

"That's a no then."

Sherlock stood to leave and hesitated by the bedside. She reached out a hand and he reluctantly took it. He could remember exactly how rarely she'd actually touched him in his lifetime. Her small hand was incredibly delicate and cold to the touch. It was an alien sensation. She squeezed and said, "Help Mycroft when you can."

Without thinking, he leaned down and kissed her on her forehead. She smelled of lavender and death, her yellowed skin dry and thin beneath his lips. "Goodbye, Mummy."

"Be safe."

"Why is there a helicopter landing in the field out front?"

Sherlock continued packing away his laptop. "Likely the parade is starting."

John turned from the window and asked, "Parade?"

"The news is out about my mother's condition. There are a lot of important people who will want to see her before it's too late. There's always one last deal to make."

John looked puzzled. "What kind of deal?"

Sherlock zipped up the bag. "Mummy still has plenty of power and influence. Granted, Mycroft does most of the tedious day-to-day work, but she's never given up her role completely."

John shook his head to clear it. His mind was going off in all directions, taking dark paths he really didn't want to go down. He'd worked in covert operations long enough to know that there were always powers behind the powers. "What are you saying exactly?"
"We need to go now, John. I'll explain more later, but I don't want to be stuck here because of some overzealous security guards."

"Why would we be stuck here?"

Sherlock put his hand at the small of John's back and edged him to the door. "Now, John. No more questions. Please."

John met Sherlock's gaze and registered the undercurrent of anxiety in his words. It came down to trust and Sherlock had that in spades. "Yeah, okay." He picked up his own bag and they both headed downstairs.

Their driver met them there and pointed toward the rear of the building. "We're leaving through the back way today, gentlemen."

Sherlock nodded, "Of course."

John had done enough security work to realize that whoever came in on the helicopter was coming through the front door. He took in the tense features of both the driver and Sherlock and kept his mouth shut. He'd ask later, or maybe not. Maybe it was better he didn't know what the hell was going on at Holmes Bloody Manor. He seemed to know fuck all anyway.

Once settled in the back of the sedan, Sherlock turned his face to the window, his teeth worrying the edge of his right thumb. When Sherlock had that dark look on his face, it was better to just let him sulk and keep his questions to himself.

John knew how hard it would be if his own mother were so ill. His heart ached at knowing it would happen at some point, but he hated thinking about it. For Sherlock that time was the present.

Sherlock had said nothing about what was said between him and his mother. He had just returned, packed, and said they were leaving, all very stoic and cold. There were no tears, no acts of sorrow, just efficient directions about returning to London and calling Lestrade about getting a new case. John couldn't help but wonder if Sherlock would react the same way if it were John who was ill. He hoped not, but with Sherlock one could never be sure. Emotions were often too much for him to handle, so he didn't, not directly.

Sherlock's voice interrupted his thoughts. "I would be distraught if it were you."

John faced his partner and marveled once again at his brilliance. "How did you know that's what I was thinking?"

Sherlock took his hand and kissed it. "I nearly always know what you're thinking."

"It's bloody spooky when you do that."

"You like that I read you so well."

John didn't hide his smile. "I do, yeah."

"Mummy wanted us to move out here."

Horrified, John opened his mouth to protest, but saw the sparkle in Sherlock's eyes, and relaxed. "Don't wind me up like that."

"She did ask. I, of course, said no."
Relieved, John shifted in his seat. He wondered why they didn't take a helicopter back to London instead of being stuck in a car for hours. "Why would she want us to move out in the middle of nowhere?"

"I'm sure part of it was to keep the property in the family. With Mycroft based and living mainly in the city, it'll likely be sold now. It's too costly to maintain and remain empty."

"What's the other part?"

"To keep us safe."

"Safe?" John once again wondered if Sherlock's mother had any notion of who her son really was, what he was like. Obviously not if she thought safety was his primary concern. "I don't get why it would be safer here than back at our place. More boring maybe, but not safer. You find trouble anywhere you go,"

"Is that a compliment?"

"Just an observation."

"An astute one." Sherlock sighed and returned to looking out the window, but obviously not concerned about taking in the pastoral view.

"Why do I feel like you're not telling me something?"

"I've told you all I can at this juncture. When we get home, there are things we need to discuss."

"And we can't discuss those now?" John checked his watch. "We've got at least an hour and a half of nothing to do."

Sherlock turned in his seat and looked at John. He lifted his hand and traced a long finger along John's jaw and then cupped the back of his head. His voice was suddenly husky and sexy as hell. "Oh, I'm sure we could think of something."

Heat went straight to John's cock, but reason kept his head a bit cooler. "Sherlock, we're not alone here."

Sherlock waved a dismissive hand at the back of the driver's head. There was a glass partition between them. It blocked sound, but not the view. "Oh, he doesn't care. He's seen far worse."

"Maybe so, but we can't snog in the backseat like teenagers."

Sherlock grinned and leaned in closer, his warm breath tickling John's ear. "You body's response doesn't match your words, John." A hand slipped down between his legs and John cursed his traitorous cock. He was already half hard and Sherlock had just started the job of seducing him.

Through clenched teeth, John reached down and restrained the hand from groping him even harder. "Stop it. I don't want to do this here."

"Liar." Sherlock kissed the side of his neck and then suckled the skin.

"Oh, fuck."

Sherlock growled under his breath. "You like someone watching."

John gave a lame protest. "No, I don't."
"Your body says otherwise." John released his grip on Sherlock and allowed his lover's hand to rub and fondle his crotch. The suit was definitely going to need cleaning when they got back.

Sherlock's mouth took over and John's head fell back, exposing his neck. Nips and licks made their way across his skin and finally Sherlock's mouth met his. Tongues wrestled and Sherlock came up for air only to whisper. "I want to fuck you."

John groaned in frustration. "Not a chance, you idiot."

"Why not?"

Breathing heavy, but keeping his voice low, John complained, "This might be a luxury car, but it's not really big enough for that, not with your bloody long legs. Plus, the supplies are packed away, so forget it."

John's hands trapped Sherlock's face between them. "We'll do it as soon as we get home. For now, we'll just snog a little, enjoy ourselves, but not too much, not yet. Yeah?"

Sherlock dropped his head to rest against John's chest, sounding downright pathetic. "I can't wait that long. I need to come now."

John closed his eyes, knowing that he'd probably never be able to look the driver in the face again. Still, he'd probably never see the man again anyway, so what did it matter? He pushed Sherlock back against the seat and moved to unzip his trousers. "I can take care of it."

Sherlock's pupils were huge and the thin bright blue-grey line around them glowed in the dark. His breathing stuttered as John touched his erection through the thin cloth of the underwear. John put an open palm on Sherlock's chest to hold him upright. Sherlock's heartbeat raced like a jackhammer against his hand. Shifting in his seat, he kept his eyes on Sherlock as he slipped the elastic down so he could grab the leaking cock.

He wrapped his free hand around the hot fresh. John smiled at the hiss of air and little whimper as Sherlock reacted to his touch. He loved how responsive his lover was, how much he craved being with him.

As he bent down, he licked the tip and Sherlock moaned with pleasure. A hand went to the back of John's hand, guiding him, pushing him down, but not too hard. It was just enough to translate the urgency.

Rounding his mouth, he took in first the head and then sucked gently, before sliding it deeper into his throat. Sherlock's hips thrust up, but John controlled the movement and slowed the push. He lifted his head and said, "No. Let me do it."

Sherlock nodded between his short, panting breaths. John could see the effort Sherlock took to keep his eyes open, to watch as John gave him pleasure. For Sherlock seeing John suck him off seemed to be as important as the touching.

With a grin, John went back to work, his lips stretched around the hot flesh of the cock, the veins pulsing, the balls rolling in his hand. Sherlock's black bush tickled his nose, but he ignored the urge to stop. Instead, he just kept sucking and licking, using his tongue to change the force and pressure of his actions. Sherlock moaned louder and one hand went to John's shoulder, while the other pulled at his hair.

The balls drew up tighter and John made sure to have just the tip in his mouth as Sherlock came, an involuntary thrust pushing the cock to the back of his throat. A bitterness swamped his tongue and
John fought down the urge to pull away and breathe. He waited for the last pulsing to stop before he lifted his head. He took a deep breath before he swallowed. He used the back of his hand to wipe his mouth and then shifted up straighter to sit beside his partner.

Sherlock’s head lay on the back of his seat and his eyes were closed for once. His labored breathing gradually slowed and he finally opened his eyes, watching as John proceeded to cover up his spent cock and zip his trousers.

Sherlock grabbed the back of John's neck and drew him in for a long kiss. When he pulled back, he said, "Return the favor?"

He ignored his own painful erection. Sherlock was exhausted and needed to rest. He usually slept better after coming. "Not now. Later. When we're home and alone."

Sherlock nodded, his eyes drooping. He rested his head on John's shoulder and snuggled in, his body slowly relaxing. Within a few minutes, John heard soft snores. He hoped Sherlock would sleep the rest of the way home.

John glanced up just as the driver smirked in the rearview mirror. Bugger.

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Just a few miles from home and while sitting in traffic, Sherlock's phone chirped a text. He pulled it out of his pocket and then frowned. John asked, "What?"

"It's Lestrade. He's sent a warning."

John sat up straighter. "A warning? About what?"

Sherlock kept reading and then cursed under his breath. "Such idiots." He turned to John and asked, "Did you bring your gun with you?"

"It's in the bag."

"Good. At least there won't be a gun charge added in."

Frowning, John was still confused. "What's going on?"

When the light changed to green, the car moved again and Sherlock tapped on the glass. The partition lowered and the driver asked, "Yes, sir?"

"Let us off a block from our flat. Keep our bags. I'll call my brother when it's safe to deliver them."

"Yes, sir."

When the partition was back in place, John asked again. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Apparently there was an anonymous call saying we had a rather large cache of drugs in the apartment."  

"And Lestrade couldn't just ignore that as a prank?"

"Well, he might have if he'd been the one to receive the call."

John groaned. "Let me guess. It was Dimmock. He hates you."
"He's there with the drug squad now, searching."

John hesitated, his gut clenched with uncertainty, but he had to ask. "And will they find anything?"

Sherlock met his worried gaze and held it for a few seconds longer than he needed to in order to make his point. He shook his head, obviously disappointed in John's doubt. "I don't have anything that would be considered illegal, no."

Reaching out, John took his hand and squeezed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. I trust you."

Sherlock shrugged, playing it off as unimportant. "It doesn't matter. What matters is who called and what they'll find. Obviously if there is something to find, it's been planted."

"So, what do we do, wait and see what happens or just walk in and possibly be arrested?"

Before he could answer, the car pulled over and parked. They were in walking distance of the flat and they could see three police cars parked outside the building. The partition slid down again.

"Sir, I could drive you to a safehouse if you'd prefer."

"No, this is fine."

The driver hesitated as if he wanted to argue, but didn't. He just nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

Once they were out on the sidewalk, they waited until the car drove away. Sherlock's phone chirped again and he glanced at it. His frown shifted to smile. "Well, that's fortunate."

"What?"

"Apparently, they didn't find anything."

Tension eased a bit, John let out a sigh of relief. "That's good then."

"It still doesn't explain who called or why they would bother."

"Maybe it was someone who just wanted to make trouble."

"Obviously, but why? What would be the point of calling if there weren't something to find?"

"I don't know but I guess we should go find out how much of a mess they made. They last time they turned the flat over, it took a week to get everything back in order."

Sherlock ignored John's complaint and said, "I need to hear that call first."

"I'm sure Lestrade can get you a copy."

Sherlock was typing into his phone and finally looked up. "We need to go to the Yard. Cleaning the flat is unimportant."

"They won't process the call any faster with you there. We'll go after we've seen what they've done."

Sherlock grudgingly relented as he finished typing the last text into his phone. "If we must."

"We must."

"Tedious."
John took his arm and tugged. "Come on. I'll let you tease Dimmock about being an idiot."

"I thought you told me I should stop insulting the police."

"I'll let it go this once."

"How generous." Sherlock's tone was suddenly lighter.

As they came to the front of the building, the officers were just filing out. Dimmock saw Sherlock and sneered. "Well, looks like you dodged another one."

"Another what?"

Dimmock stepped right up and stared into Sherlock's face, waving a finger, his tone aggressive and accusing. "Oh, shut up. I know you do drugs and just because we didn't find any this time doesn't mean that you don't have them hidden away somewhere. It's just a matter of time before I bang you up like you deserve."

Sherlock tilted his head and smiled, the kind of smile that made John's skin crawl. It was the look Sherlock got right before he attacked and tore people apart with their biggest secrets and fears. "You're a fool. If you persist in this campaign of harassment, I shall file a complaint against you. I would think someone with your ambition would realize having such charges lodged would certainly hinder your chances of advancement."

Dimmock snapped back, "I was just doing my job. We got a phone call and then a warrant. It's nothing personal."

"It was a warrant issued without just cause. Any fool can make a phone call. Did it not occur to you that there are dozens of criminals who want nothing more than to cause me difficulties?"

Still on the defensive, Dimmock argued his case. "Yeah, well, with your history, it wasn't hard to get the warrant. That's not my doing. That's on you."

Sherlock took just one step closer and for a moment John worried that Dimmock might get a punch in the nose. Of course, he was probably just projecting because he would've liked nothing more than to deck the arsehole. Instead, Sherlock leaned in and whispered something in the man's ear. All the color drained away from Dimmock's face and he jerked back. "You faggot bastard!"

Sherlock gave a hardened smile and didn't say another word, but Dimmock backed away in a hurry, glaring the whole time. He called out and told the others to clear off.

Once they were gone, John asked, "What the hell did you say to him?"

"Just that his girlfriend was having sex with his brother and if he hurried he might be able to observe their fornication firsthand since they were currently having intercourse in his bed."

Shocked, John stared. That was harsh even for Sherlock. "How the hell could you know that?"

"I don't. However, his reaction would suggest I'm correct that he's already suspicious of her infidelity."

John ran a hand through his hair. "Jesus, Sherlock."

"What?"

"One of these days, you're going to say the wrong thing to the wrong person and he won't walk
away."

Sherlock reached out and touched John's cheek with affection. "If that ever happens, I assume you'll be there to protect me."

John gave a small snort of resignation that Sherlock knew him all too well. He turned his head, kissing the palm cupping his face. "There's no place I'd rather be. Now, call Mycroft and get our bags back. I'll go see what damage those bastards have done."

Sherlock typed into his phone as John headed inside. Halfway up the stairs, he heard a familiar voice. "John, dear?"

He turned and apologized, "Mrs. Hudson, I'm sorry about all this disruption."

The older woman waved a hand of dismissal. "Oh, no worries, dear. They just barged in and were going to break the door down, but I let them in with a key instead. I hope that was all right."

"It was. Saves us from having to repair it."

She crooked her index finger, motioning him to step closer. When he did, she said, "I need you and Sherlock to come inside my place for a bit, dear. I don't feel comfortable talking about this in the hallway."

Sherlock stepped in and automatically recognized Mrs. Hudson's worry. "What's wrong?"

John explained, "She wants us to visit."

Sherlock nodded with quick understanding. "Very well then, Mrs. Hudson, lead the way. Please tell me you have tea."

"Of course, dear."

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Mrs. Hudson's loveseat was a tight fit for two people, but John and Sherlock managed. John sipped his drink and waited until Mrs. Hudson finally relaxed and spoke quietly. "You know how much trouble I have sleeping."

John nodded, sensing Sherlock's impatience with the older woman's tendency to tell stories much longer than necessary to get to the point, and urged her to continue. "Yes, you've told me."

"Well, I hadn't taken one of my soothers last night, so I just tossed and turned. I've got a bad hip, you know."

Sherlock cleared his throat and John jabbed him in his side to keep him quiet. He ignored Sherlock's glare and asked, "Did something happen last night that made it harder than usual to get to sleep?"

"Yes, dear. I heard creaking upstairs."

Sherlock stiffened beside him and then leaned forward. "Creaking? Interesting."

"Well, I knew you two were away, and I just thought I was hearing things the first time."

Sherlock prompted again, "But you weren't."
"No, dear. There was definitely someone there."

John asked, "Did you call the police?"

"The police? No. I wasn't quite sure what to do."

Sherlock's eyes narrowed. "You waited until the noise stopped and then you went upstairs. I assume you found something."

"I did, yes." She got up and fetched two small packages wrapped in brown paper. "One was on the kitchen table, the other in the skull. I checked everywhere else, too. I was very careful not to disturb anything private."

A bit of color came to her cheeks and John realized that she had probably seen their chest of sex toys. He bit back his own embarrassment, knowing that the drug squad had probably seen the same thing. Well, hell. He scrubbed his face and swallowed hard before he managed to speak. "It's fine, Mrs. Hudson."

Sherlock reached out and took the packages, intrigued and obviously fine with the whole idea of their sex life exposed to any and everyone. "Marvelous!"

John suddenly realized something else, something he should've thought of first. "Mrs. Hudson, that was very dangerous. There could've been someone still up there. You could've been hurt."

"I was very careful, dear. It was totally quiet for least an hour before I went up. I didn't even turn on a light in case someone was watching. I used my torch instead."

Sherlock nodded, totally pleased. "You did just the right thing." He held up the packages and smiled. "By retrieving these, you've also saved us a lot of trouble."

Mrs. Hudson smiled, quite happy with her accomplishments. "I'll leave it to you to dispose of whatever it is."

Sherlock stood up to leave and he stepped over, kissing Mrs. Hudson on the cheek. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, dear."

"John, let's go."

Standing, John followed Sherlock out the door. He heard Mrs. Hudson behind him. "Be careful, dear." He stopped and turned before she continued. "If someone is trying to frame Sherlock, he might try again."

"Yeah, I was just thinking that myself."

She patted his face and motioned with her head toward their flat. "You'd best go along now. There's no telling what mischief he can get up to on his own."

John rolled his eyes before he followed Sherlock upstairs. "Tell me about it."

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"Those fucking wankers!" John surveyed the disaster left by the drug squad with anger and dismay. Books shoved off the shelves littered the floor, the kitchen cabinets had been emptied into the sink, and drawers were pulled out and the contents dumped into dozens of piles around the flat. All the items from the refrigerator and freezer lay scattered on the table and the door left ajar. Bits and
pieces of Sherlock's microscope looked like an unfinished puzzle. Even the cushions from the sofa had been unzipped and the inner pillows yanked out. All the items in the bathroom were poured out on the floor or emptied into the tub. Sherlock's bedroom door was wide open and, while it had been a mess before, now it looked like an explosion of papers with his mattress and sheets ripped off the bed.

John couldn't bring himself to go upstairs to their shared bedroom for fear of what he'd find. Instead he just stood in the middle of the sitting room surveying the damage, shaking his head, hands fists on his hips. It was like dealing with his father's drunken rampages all over again, everything torn apart and left for him to fix and clean up. "Just utter bastards. They didn't need to do all this."

"It does seem rather malicious."

"Malicious my arse. Bloody Dimmock must have fucking loved this."

When Sherlock didn't answer, John turned and watched his partner putting the pillows back in cushions of the sofa. John joined him and within a few minutes they at least had a place to sit. As Sherlock settled down on the sofa, John continued to put things back in their place. He started with the body parts in the kitchen that needed to go back into cold storage before the stink got any worse.

While he worked, he kept a nervous eye on Sherlock who had put the packages on the cleared off coffee table. Sherlock sat there eyeing them closely, his elbows on his knees, his hands fists under his chin. After a few moments, John asked, "What are we going to do about those?"

Instead of answering, Sherlock reached out and unwrapped the larger of the two packages. Inside was at least a half kilo of white powder sorted into small plastic bags, the kind of bags that sold in the back alleys and clubs all over London for a great deal of money. John heard the hitch in Sherlock's breathing. John asked, "Is that what I think it is?"

"If you're thinking it's a small fortune in cocaine, yes."

"Shit."

"Indeed." Sherlock opened the other package and John saw his partner stop breathing and go a sickly white.

Concerned, John hurried back into the living room. "What?"

Sherlock held up the black leather zippered kit for John to see. Then he opened it and John chest got suddenly tighter. There were several syringes and rubber tubing. "Fuck. That's drug gear."

"Yes."

"Bastard."

Sherlock put it back down on the table carefully, his hands not quite steady. He spoke quietly as he confessed. "It's more than that, John."

"What? What do you mean more?"

"It's my personal gear, what I used before."

John frowned and suddenly found it a lot harder to breathe. "How can you be sure?"
Sherlock gave a short snort and fingered the small case carefully, almost lovingly. His voice was strained and a bit hoarse. "When you've used something like this as often as I have, you know it when you see it."

John moved to sit beside Sherlock and watched as his lover struggled to remain calm and in control. John asked, "So you're saying that this is the exact same gear kit you had when you used before."

"Do try to keep up, John. That's exactly what I'm saying." The words came out sharp and cutting.

"But how is that possible? When was the last time you saw it?"

"The night I overdosed and Lestrade found me. It was right before I was admitted to rehab that last time."

The picture became all too clear. "So that means that..."

"Whoever left this here either knew me during that time or he got this from someone who did."

John wanted to snatch up the cocaine and gear and toss them as far away as possible. He wanted to take Sherlock in his arms and protect him, erase all the terrible memories he knew were racing though his mind even as they sat together in safety.

Instead, John forced down the rising panic and stayed focused. "But those are fresh needles."

"Yes."

"Somebody wants you to use."

"Perhaps, but then why call the police?"

"A backup plan. Even if you avoided arrest, you might not resist using again."

Sherlock’s fist went to his mouth and he squeezed his eyes shut. He swallowed several times before he spoke. "There was a time in my life when that might have been true. There was a time when I might have done just about anything to have access to this much cocaine."

"And now?"

"Now, I...I don't know. It shouldn't still have this much power over me."

"But it obviously does."

"It's difficult. I don't know."

John took a deep breath. "Well, I do." He got up and retrieved a paper sack and held it out. "Put them both in here."

Sherlock looked up and met his determined gaze. "No. We should keep it for testing. I can analyze it and see how it's been cut. That will help me find the distributor."

"Fuck that. Put it in the bag."

"But..."

"No, buts, Sherlock. We're not keeping it here. It's too dangerous."
Sherlock's eyes flashed in anger. "You don't trust me."

"You don't trust yourself."

Sherlock leaned back like he'd been smacked, his eyes never leaving John's gaze. Finally, he relented and picked up the cocaine. He dropped it into the bag. When he didn't move to add the kit, John insisted. "The kit, too."

"I might be able to get prints."

John repeated himself with more emphasis. "The kit, too."

"You're being unreasonable. Besides, it's mine. I should be able to keep it."

"Sherlock..."

"You're overreacting."

"I swear to fucking god..." John hated waiting, but he despised seeing Sherlock's hesitation more.

"Oh, all right." Sherlock finally picked up the leather case and zipped it closed. He ran his palm over the leather and brought it to his face for a quick sniff, like he was losing a long lost part of his life all over again. It took all John's strength not to snatch it away, to keep the growing sickness inside his gut from spilling out.

Reluctantly, Sherlock put it in the bag. "Now what? You can't just throw it away."

John folded down the paper edges just as a knock came at the door. Their gazes locked as John called out. "Who is it?"

"Stevenson, sir, the driver. I'm here with your luggage."

Relieved, John recognized the voice. He stepped to the door and opened it. "Just in time."

"Sir?"

John handed him the bag and used his best captain's voice. "Take this to Mr. Holmes. Don't stop or let anyone else see it. Don't look inside. This is vital. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good man."

John went down to the landing and got their bags as the driver left with the incriminating package. John came back upstairs, set the bags down, and locked the door behind him. All the while he knew Sherlock hadn't stopped fuming and glaring in his direction. Sherlock never liked having his hand forced or being told what to do. There had to be exceptions and what had just happened with the drugs reminded John of that all to clearly.

"We need to talk."

Sherlock shook his head. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Oh, I think there is."

Standing up slowly, Sherlock lips drew into a thin, tight line and his eyes narrowed. "I'm going to
the Yard. I need to listen to that call."

"You're not leaving, not yet."

Sherlock straightened to his full height, shoulders back in defiance. "Do you plan to stop me?"

John considered his options. He knew strong-arming wouldn't work. Sherlock had to want to stay. He shook his head and gave him a reason. "No, I won't stop you, but I might not be here when you get back if you leave."

Sherlock stepped up to him and looked down into his face, wearing that horrible grin he got before he went in for the kill. "Oh, we both know you're not going anywhere, John, not for long anyway."

John stood his ground and forced the words out. "Don't do this."

"Don't do what, tell the truth? Isn't that what you want to talk about, truth? Well, you couldn't begin to understand my truth."

Sherlock clicked the lock open and leaned down to whisper his final blow. "Now be a good little house husband and tidy the place before I get back. You know it's what you do best, clean up the messes the rest of us leave."

John stood frozen and mute, sucker punched by the preciseness of the attack. Sherlock didn't wait for a response and walked out of the flat, down the stairs, and away.

Eyes stinging and fists clenched, John struggled between hurt and anger. The hurt won the first round as tears ran down his face. Anger arrived soon after as he went upstairs to pack.

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"What are you doing here?"

"I want to hear the call that sent the drug squad to my flat."

Lestrade ran a hand through his thick grey hair and shook his head. "I can't."

"It's public record."

"Not this time."

Sherlock frowned. "Explain."

"The call didn't go through 999 or any of the other official lines."

Awareness dawned and Sherlock said, "It went to Dimmock directly."

"Yes."

"But if he used it to get a warrant, I should still be able to hear it."

"I agree, but he's making it difficult, saying it was a confidential informant. He's not giving it up. I tried."

Lestrade stepped closer, more guarded. "And what the hell did you say to him at the scene? He's been acting fucking crazy since he got back."
Sherlock shook his head. He had no time for chitchat about an imbecile like Dimmock. "It's irrelevant. I need to hear that call."

"Why? They didn't find anything so what difference does it make?" When Sherlock didn't answer right away, Lestrade's eyes widened in understanding. "Okay, let's go into my office. I don't think we need to be talking about this in an open space."

Once behind closed doors, Lestrade stared at Sherlock with the same intensity he gave to a new victim. "I take it from your reaction that there was something they could've found."

"It was planted during the night. Mrs. Hudson retrieved it before Dimmock arrived."

"Good old Mrs. Hudson. What was it exactly?"

"A rather substantial amount of cocaine." Sherlock refrained from telling Lestrade about the gear. That was a private matter, a clue meant only for him.

"And where is it now?"

"It's gone."

"But where?"

"It doesn't matter. What I need to know is who put it there."

Lestrade studied him an extra moment, like he was figuring out a puzzle in slow motion, and then asked, "Where's John?"

"Not here obviously."

"Sherlock..."

The words came out heated, spilling out before he could contain them. "Shut up about John. He's being entirely unreasonable and overbearing, like he has the right to tell me what to do, to give me ultimatums. I won't have it!"

Lestrade scrubbed his face with one hand and grumbled, "Okay, what the fuck have you done now?"

"I've done nothing. This is John's fault."

"Don't give me that. You did something or John would be here. Tell me what really happened."

Sherlock turned his back to Lestrade and stared through the glass into the bullpen. All the people milled around or sat at desks. They were all idiots working on crimes that any simpleton could solve. He sometimes wondered why he bothered.

Lestrade stepped closer. "Please tell me you didn't deliberately ruin the best thing that's ever happened to you."

Still angry and only a little afraid, Sherlock snapped sharply, "Like some washed up soldier barking orders is what I really need in my life."

"Fuck. You didn't say that to him, did you?"

"And what if I did?"
"Then you're a bigger fool than I ever took you for and that's saying something."

"Oh, shut up. This is between John and me. You've got no say in the matter."

"Well, if I did, I'd say he's a bigger man than I am to put up with your shit."

Sherlock hesitated and then met Lestrade's disapproving gaze. He complained, "He can be so incredibly annoying and controlling."

"Good god, have you met yourself? You're the most annoying and controlling man on the planet. Holding his ground and looking out for you is something you should respect, not criticize. Everyone should be so lucky to have that kind of devotion."

Intentionally hateful, he snapped, "I really don't think you're the right person to give me relationship advice. You can't even keep your own wife."

Lestrade didn't take the emotional jab as badly as he might have since no punch was thrown. Instead, he barked back, "Piss off. Hell, John's better off without you, you prat." Lestrade moved back to his desk and sat down, slamming the desk drawer shut.

Sherlock hesitated. Lestrade rarely seemed so confident in his positions. "Why would you say that?"

"Because you're a cruel and heartless bastard, that's why. People shouldn't have to take your abuse just because they love you."

Surprised, Sherlock asked, "You really think I abuse him?"

Lestrade sat back and took a long, deep breath. "You really don't see it."

Sherlock accessed Lestrade's grim and determined features and paused, not sure how to react, but feeling for the first time like he might have missed something crucial. "It's never been my intention to hurt John."

"Doesn't mean you don't do it time after time. You don't get your way about something and you go on the attack. It's not a fair playing field, not when the other person loves you and you've got all the advantage, know all the scabs to rip off to make him bleed."

Sherlock studied the man who'd helped him over the years and he suddenly understood. "You're not really talking about John and me. You're talking about your wife and how you keep going back despite her infidelity and bad behavior."

"See what I mean. I say something you don't like and you have a go at me, find the one thing to hurt me and throw it back in my face. Well, it's not going to work, not this time. I stand by what I said. John's better off leaving if you can't treat him the way he deserves."

Sherlock shook his head, knowing what Lestrade couldn't possibly understand. "John will never leave me."

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that, mate. A person can only take so much."

"You're wrong. He loves me. He won't leave."

"Listen to yourself and ask yourself this question, wouldn't you leave if he treated you like you treat him."
A sudden cold chill ran down his spine. "John's different. He won't leave, he can't."

"And why's that?"

"Because he's mine, that's why."

"Jesus."

Unlocking the door to Harry's apartment, John walked in and dropped his duffle and a single bag in the middle of the floor. He'd get the rest of his things from the flat later when he was sure Sherlock was gone.

If he never saw the son of a bitch again, it would be too bloody soon. He was a fool for falling for that whole marriage and be my partner for life line. Sherlock was right about one thing, he was a complete idiot.

Stepping into the kitchen, he checked the cabinets for something to drink. Whiskey, vodka, it really didn't matter, just something hard that would help ease the pain that chiseled around the edges of his cracked heart. When he didn't find anything, he went to the bedroom and checked the back of the closet. If he knew his sister, and he did, she'd have a secret stash somewhere Clara couldn't find it.

John discovered the whiskey bottle in the fifth shoebox he opened. Taking it back to the sitting room, he slumped down on the sofa. He drank directly from the bottle, the burn of the first drink just the beginning. It took several more swallows to get the edges to blur and the ache to back off to a manageable level.

His cell phone buzzed for the fifth time since he'd left the flat and he ignored it again. After drinking some more, the chirp of a text came through. Sighing, he took it out of his pocket to read the blurry message. "Where are you? SH."

"Piss off and clean your own fucking flat."

He dropped the phone beside him just as another text came though. "Ignoring me is childish. SH."

"Bastard."

Within seconds, another one said, "Come home. SH."

Instead of answering, he switched off the phone. He didn't want Sherlock using the GPS to track him down, not that he believed for a moment that if he wanted, Sherlock couldn't find him. Arsehole was a brilliant tracker.

And there was the crux of the problem. Sherlock was brilliant and inspiring, a man who took his breath away. John fed off Sherlock's energy, off his dangerous and foolhardy courage. He loved Sherlock more than any person in his life, which is why he had to leave him, take off and never look back.

It was either that or wear a bomb vest the rest of his fucking life, wondering when the blast of venom Sherlock usually turned at the rest of the world would be aimed at him again.

Lestrade was dead wrong about having no sense of self-preservation. He did want to live, at least for the moment. It didn't matter that his fucking heart barely limped along. It would have to do
until he could rebuild it or at the very least wall it off and say fuck it. There would be no more opening himself up to that kind of pain again.

John took another gulp, drinking too fast and choking. After he caught his breath, he tried to think of what his life would be like after Sherlock, how he would survive alone. He couldn't imagine it anymore than he could imagine living with someone who could use his own history against him or treat him like he was some fucking servant. There were only so many excuses he could make for the man who had kept him from offing himself months before, only so many times he gave him a pass for being a complete wanker.

He finished off the rest of the drink and then stretched out on the sofa. Closing his eyes, he let himself be pulled down into sandy memories, the ones that trapped him in a desert that was safer than his own flat.

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"Where the hell is he?"

"Calm down. We'll find him. He's probably just gone somewhere to cool off."

Sherlock whipped around and stared daggers at the inspector, not believing a word of it. "He's not answering my calls or texts."

Lestrade looked around at the huge mess that was Sherlock's flat. "Bloody hell, did the drug squad do all this?"

"Yes, yes. Now focus."

"Did you check to see if his clothes are gone?"

"Why would his clothes be gone?"

"Don't be daft. Just think about it."

Sherlock's eyes widened and he charged up the stairs. Their bedroom was a bigger mess than downstairs. Not only was the mattress off the bed and all the drawers emptied, the box of sex toys had been tipped over. All their private things had been touched and defiled by strangers. Sherlock decided right then to burn them all. If he couldn't find John and bring him back, he might burn everything he owned.

The closet door was standing wide open. John's duffel bag was missing as were several of his favorite jumpers and jeans.

Lestrade's voice came from behind him. "Good god."

Sherlock shouted, "Get out!"

"Sherlock..."

"I said get out. Please."

"I'll be downstairs."

As soon as he was alone, Sherlock sank to the floor, his back to the wall. He grabbed John cream cable knit jumper and burried his face in the thick wool, breathing in his lover's scent. He choked out a whisper. "John."
He couldn't lose the only man he'd ever loved, the only one who had ever given him pleasure or made him truly smile and kept his interest. John Watson was his own living puzzle and the thought of pushing him away made him sick inside. His head swam and he knew that without John, there would be no reason to even bother with the work or to stay sober. There was no point in even breathing without John.

When he finally lifted his head, Lestrade stood in the doorway, his brown eyes knowing far too much about what Sherlock was thinking. The older man said, "I'll help you find him."

"He shouldn't come back."

"Probably."

"He's safer away from me."

"No doubt."

"Then why would you help me find him?"

"Because I don't think either of you poor bastards can survive alone anymore."

John jerked awake on the sofa, explosions and the sharp bark of gunfire still echoing in his ears. As he gasped for air, his stomach rebelled and he ran to the kitchen sink to vomit up all the sand he had swallowed in his sleep.

Dry heaving finally over, his throat raw, he steadied himself and then dropped to the floor. He used a shaky hand to wipe his clammy face and then struggled to block out the lingering images of the bloated corpses that littered his dreams. The lingering reek of rotted flesh and the buzzing swarm of flies gave it all that much more power even when he was awake. It was all he could do to keep from retching again.

After a few minutes his breathing settled and he cursed himself for being so weak, so incredibly unable to free himself from the shackles of the invisible war inside his head. Others managed, why couldn't he? He had no clue where to even begin.

Still a bit wobbly, he managed to get to his. He braced himself against the counter as he rinsed out the sink and then drank a whole glass of water. He waited, willing it to stay down. Battle drums pounded in his temples, but he ignored them. He needed a shower to rinse away the stink of his own sweat.

John showered until the water ran cold and then dried off. He dressed in jeans and a grey tee shirt and then sat on the edge of his sister's guest bed, his head still fuzzy. He needed a plan of escape. He couldn't stay at Harry's for long. Sherlock would find him eventually.

First things first, he needed to sort out the money. He wanted nothing of Sherlock's. He needed to get his own account separate and then withdraw untraceable cash. As much as he hated the thought, he also needed to leave London, start over somewhere else. He'd have to eventually decide where to go, the US, Canada, Australia, maybe even back to Afghanistan. He couldn't be a government soldier, but that didn't mean private contractors weren't looking for men with experience. He didn't have to decide right away, but soon.

A knock interrupted his thoughts. "Shit." He glanced at the bedside clock. It was six o'clock in the fucking a.m. on a Sunday morning. It couldn't be anybody he wanted to see.
John put his head in his hands and waited. He didn't want to talk to Sherlock, didn't want to face putting a final end to the one good thing in his life.

The knock came again, only stronger and more persistent. Taking a deep breath, he stood and went to the door. When he opened it, he was surprised to see not Sherlock, but Lestrade.

John snorted bitterly. "So, he couldn't even be arsed to come himself?"

"He doesn't know I'm here."

"Am I really supposed to believe that?"

Lestrade held his ground. "Let me in, John. We need to talk."

"How'd you find me?"

"I cheated and used the CCTV."

John turned and limped back into sitting room. He shoved the bag with his laptop out of the way and sat down on the sofa. "If you're here to tell me to go back, forget it."

"I'm not here for that."

"Then what?"

Lestrade still stood, taking in John's appearance with that same assessing look he gave all his corpses, cataloguing everything with a copper's keen eye. "You look rough. You get wrecked last night?"

"It's none of your business."

"You're right, it's not." Lestrade sat in the chair opposite John. "Listen, first off, I wanted to make sure you're all right."

"I'm fine."

"Far from fine, mate. I've seen three day old corpses that looked better than you."

John didn't want to think about how awful he looked. It didn't matter. "Why are you really here?"

"I don't blame you for leaving. He's a bastard. Everybody knows that."

"I remember the warnings."

"Which did fuck all to stop you from sleeping with him."

John closed his eyes and prayed for calm. He had no intention of explaining himself to Lestrade or anyone else. It was nobody's business but his own why he fell in love with Sherlock, the mad bastard. When he opened his eyes again, Lestrade still stared. John said, "It's my own fault, I know that."

"Nobody's blaming you, John. They'll blame Sherlock."

"As they bloody well should. You've got no idea what he's like."

"Oh, I think I have a clue. He's obstinate and obsessive, arrogant and cruel, and completely self-
absorbed and self-destructive. He's also the most brilliant man I've ever met and I'm never bored."

John gave a short bark of a laugh, but the joke was on him. "So we are talking about the same man."

"We are." Lestrade leaned forward, his hands together. "I've known him a long time, John, too long really. I've seen him at his worst, when he was as close to dead as a man can be and still take a breath. He's been through a lot."

"Don't make excuses for him. I know what he's been through."

"You know what he's told you. You weren't there to actually see it, see how people used him, how the drugs totally took away any inkling of the man you know as Sherlock Holmes today."

"You probably saw hundreds of young men like him on the streets."

"Nobody's like him, John. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Even drugged up and brutalized, he was special. There was just something about him that made him shine in the dark. I can't really explain it, but it was there."

John picked at the cording on the edge of his sister's sofa as he admitted, "You don't have to tell me he's special. I knew that the minute I met him."

"But you never saw him as he was before, John, not when he was using. It was about the saddest thing I've ever seen, and believe me, I've seen plenty."

John asked about something he had to know and knew Sherlock would never tell him. "What about that last night, the night he overdosed? He said you saved him. How did you even know where he was?"

Lestrade lifted a brow and frowned, like he expected John to already know the answer. "His brother called me."

John shifted and stared at the inspector. "Sherlock never mentioned that."

"Because he probably doesn't know or doesn't remember. I got the call and showed up at the same time as the ambulance. I talked to his brother a couple of times at the hospital and he let me take the lead in convincing Sherlock to go to rehab before it was too late."

John didn't have to ask why Mycroft did that. He knew Sherlock would have naturally resisted any help from his brother. His long list of resentments against Mycroft lessened by one. "Look, you've been his friend a long time, I understand that."

"I'm not his friend, not really. He doesn't have friends, not until you."

"Everybody keeps saying that."

"Because it's true. I'm telling you, until you came along nobody touched him, literally or figuratively. He didn't do sex or show any interest in men or women, not after he got clean. Didn't he tell you that?"

Reluctantly, John nodded. "He did, yeah."

"You should believe him. Plus, nobody dared to stand up to him or make him do anything he didn't want to. If they tried, they were shot down, still are, but not you. From the start it's been different
with you. I'm damned if I know why."

John was damned if he knew why, either. When John didn't say anything, Lestrade pressed harder. "Listen, he's every nasty name in the book when he's on a tear or in one of his moods, but he's never been in love before. As smart as he is about everything else, he's right thick when it comes to relationships. He's never had one, not a half healthy one anyway. Maybe you could give him a break on the learning curve, yeah?"

"A learning curve would suggest he was trying. He only tries when it suits him."

"But he did help your sister when he didn't have to. The old Sherlock wouldn't have bothered."

John warned, "Leave my sister out of this."

Lestrade sat back and took a deep breath. "Fine, but I'm telling you, I've never seen him do anything like that before. It really wasn't about being self-serving. I've never seen him take an interest in family of any kind."

John thought about meeting Sherlock's mother, how she talked down about her own son. Then there was Mycroft, the one who never stopped playing games or manipulating. Or there was that bastard of an uncle who molested him. When John thought about it, it was pretty obvious that Sherlock didn't have a lot of positive role models growing up. Family and love were alien concepts. "If you met his family, you'd know why."

"I met his brother. It explained a lot."

"True. He makes Sherlock look like a bloody choirboy."

"He wasn't so bad, or at least not as bad as Sherlock makes out. I just think neither of them have a clue about being normal because they're not."

John had to nod at that. "Not even close."

Lestrade waited and then asked, "So, what are you going to do? Are you really going to leave him?"

So it was finally down to the hardest question of his life. "I honestly don't know. I should. I've got enough money that I could relocate and start over."

"You could, but there's no place on the planet you could go where he couldn't find you."

"I know that, but I don't know if he'd even want to. When he's done with a person, he's done."

Lestrade shook his head. "You're fooling yourself if you truly believe that. He can't function without you, not anymore."

"I'm not sure I believe that."

"It's just something to think about." Lestrade stood up. "You might also consider how you'd survive without him as well."

"I'll manage."

"Really? I notice you're hung over and your limp is back."

"Piss off and don't worry about my fucking limp. I'll be fine."
"John, I'm only going to say this once and then I'll leave."

"Don't do me any favors."

"I've never met a more codependent pair than you two. Whatever he said or whatever he did, he's sorry. He might not say it, but he is. He needs you, and from where I sit, you need him just as much. Even if you decide to leave, you need to work this out first and leave on good terms. Don't leave like this, running away and hiding. It never works."

"Who died and made you God?"

"Nobody's died yet, and I sure as hell would like to keep it that way."

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"You hit that bag any harder, sir, you'll either break your hands or the bag."

Breathing hard and his heart rate running at a strong pace, John threw one last solid jab and then hugged the leather bag to keep it from swinging away. "I'm about done."

"I see that, sir." Mason reached out and took one of John's wrapped hands and winced, the tape and gauze soaked red. "You should've used the gloves."

"It's not the same with the gloves." And it wasn't. John needed the burn from the punches, craved the combination of pain and power that channeled like fire up his arms into his shoulders and brain. He got out of his head when he fought the bag. Each hit took away a touch of anger, a hint of ghosts. He could never wipe them all away, but it did help to keep them all under control. He'd missed working out, missed it more than he ever realized until his fists had pounded away some of the resentment and a hell of a lot of the rage over the last hour.

Mason studied him an extra moment, but didn't comment any more about the gloves. Instead, he said, "You want me to clean these up for you, sir? I've got the first aid kit in the back."

"I can do it. Just show me where it is."

Once in the backroom, John sat down at one of the therapy tables as Toby Mason put the kit in front of him. He put a bin beside John for the used wrappings. He also handed him a bottle of juice. "You should drink that down. You'll get dehydrated working out like that, especially after a bender."

John didn't react to the accusation, just focused on cleaning up his bloody hands. He wiped them clean and added the antiseptic. The blood continued to seep out over the bruised knuckles, so he wrapped them in gauze once again.

Toby just sat back and watched, sipping on a power drink. After his left hand was wrapped, John said, "You don't have anything better to do than keep an eye on your old captain?"

"It's Sunday morning. It's usually slow."

"I noticed. I would've thought there'd be more people in on a weekend."

"It'll pick up this afternoon. Most people go to church or sleep in, especially when it's pissing down like today."

"You're here."
"Yeah, well, I pretty much live here."

"Why's that?"

"I like to be here when people need to drop by."

John met his gaze. "People like me, you mean?"

"Yeah, and the others. Owen just got back with his wife, but that's always a rocky proposition. Still, it's been pretty quiet the last few weeks, but that's not always the case. Hell, sometimes it's hard to keep up."

John shrugged, knowing too well how life could change drastically with just a few wrong words and hurt feelings. "You should go back to school. Get a degree in counseling. You could help a lot of people."

"I help who I need to help, sir. I got all the degree I needed in Afghanistan."

John snorted at the irony. War was a training ground for a lot of things, understanding human nature just one of many. "Yeah, I supposed you did."

"What about you, sir? You seem down, like something bad has happened since the last time you were here."

John liked Toby well enough, but he didn't want to get into a big thing, talk about his feelings about fucking up with Sherlock. He finished off his right hand before he answered. "I'm fine. I might be leaving London, though."

"Why's that?"

"I just think it's time to move on."

"So, you and your bloke, you're taking off then?"

John closed up the kit and shook his head. "No, just me."

Toby sighed. "You two broke up then, yeah? That's what that attack on the innocent bag was all about?"

John held up one of his injured hands. "To be fair the bag gave nearly as good as it got."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"It's fine. Everything's fine."

"No offense, but is that why you smell like a brewery, sir?"

Anger flared up and John snapped, "What I do is none of your business, Corporal."

"That's true. It's just I worry about you, sir. I thought you had a good thing with this new bloke."

How did John explain about how good it was, how he would never ever have a chance to have it that good again without sounding completely pathetic? "He's an arse."

"No doubt. The men and women who try to live with us after we've been over there, they can't understand what we've been through. I figure the only thing to do is stay alone or hook up with
another vet. Problem with that, sir, is that we're all pretty damn hard to live with."

"So, what are you saying? You think I should put up with his shit?"

"I didn't say that. I just mean that it's a lot harder to work it out than to leave sometimes, that's all. Vets, we tend to be leavers, not stayers. I guess that's why I'd go back to war in a heartbeat if they'd take me. Is that what you're thinking, going back as a private contractor maybe?"

John hated to think he was really that transparent or that part of the problem with Sherlock was of his own making. "I don't know. I haven't decided."

"Well, let me know when you do, sir. I've still got a few contacts."

"Thanks. I'll think about it."

Toby suddenly shifted the conversation. "You want to go get some coffee, maybe some breakfast? There's a nice shop not far from here."

"No, thanks. Maybe another time."

"If you're still here."

"Yeah, if I'm still here."

&&&&&&

John shouldn't have been surprised to see Sherlock standing outside Harry's apartment door, but he was, just a little. He really did think Sherlock was done with him for good, but apparently he was wrong. Maybe he'd been wrong about a lot of things. "Lestrade grass me out?"

Instead of answering, Sherlock complained, "Your cell phone is turned off."

"Maybe that was a hint that I didn't want to be bothered by a hundred and one fucking texts."

"You could have been kidnapped again."

"Kidnappers don't usually let a bloke pack."

Sherlock straightened and crossed his arms, looking as sulky as ever. "Yes, I finally realized that."

There was an awkward silence and John moved to unlock and open the door. He didn't invite Sherlock in, but he followed anyway. Once inside, the door closed, Sherlock sniffed and scrunched his face. "Whiskey and sick. What a lovely bouquet."

John gave a quick warning and a glare. "Not today, Sherlock."

Sherlock just kept talking. "I take it Harry had a stash."

Suddenly tired and his muscles aching, John really didn't want another row. "What do you want?"

"What did you do to your hands?"

John glanced down at his bandaged knuckles and shrugged. "I was working out."

"Without gloves? Why would you hurt yourself intentionally?"

"Let me repeat, what the hell do you want, Sherlock?"
"I want you to stop being an idiot and come home."

Heat rushed to his face and his hands fisted automatically. So much for Sherlock saying he was sorry for being such an arsehole. "No."

"Look, John, I realize..."

"Shut up."

"John..."

"I said shut up."

"You're being irrational."

"What part of shut up do you not understand?"

"How can we possibly resolve our differences if I don't talk?"

John threw up his hands in frustration, his voice taking on a hard edge. "Oh, now you want to talk? You weren't too keen yesterday when you ran off to the Yard."

"I told you, I needed to hear the anonymous call."

"Did it help? Did you figure out who tried to frame you with the bloody cocaine?"

Sherlock groused irritably, "I wasn't allowed to listen to it. Dimmock was being his usual obstructive self. I hate dealing with idiots."

"I know the feeling."

Sherlock had enough good sense to look regretful and hung his head, not meeting John's angry gaze. "I know I was wrong to say what I said."

There it was, finally, the perfect opening to get a few things off his chest. "First off, I am not a house husband and never will be."

"I know that."

"And it's your bloody flat, too. I'm not your fucking servant. I know that's a hard concept for you to grasp since you were raised by houseful of staff to pick up after you and wipe your sorry arse, but I'm not going to play that role. Are we fucking clear about that?"

Sherlock actually sounded contrite as he answered softly, "Yes."

"Just yes? Is that all you've got to say to me? Because if it is, you can bloody well leave now."

Nervously, Sherlock ran a tongue along his lower lip. "I said I was wrong."

John crossed his arms, feeling incredibly stubborn. "Try again."

Sherlock just stared and shook his head looking bewildered, which was a very peculiar look for his partner. "I don't understand why you're so angry."

Eyes stung and John took a deep breath before he explained, "And that's the sad part. I know you don't. I honestly thought you cared, that we had a chance together. We can't have that if you don't
respect me."

"But I love you."

"That's not enough. There has to be respect, too."

Sherlock frowned in confusion and took a step closer. John put up a cautionary hand to stop the move for a physical connection. He knew his own limits. One touch and he'd be a goner and he couldn't afford that, not with so much at stake. "Don't."

Disconcerted, Sherlock shook his head like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "John, how can you possibly think I don't respect you?"

"You wouldn't have said what you said if you thought of me as an equal."

Sherlock stood there, his eyes focused on John, but obviously going back over their last conversation in his head. He swallowed hard, summoning up the courage to say something he rarely said. "I'm sorry."

"Are you?"

"I never intended for you to ever think that I didn't respect you, John. I've chosen you as my partner for life. You've chosen me. How is that not equal?"

His resolve weakening, John shook his head to clear it of the murky emotions clouding his thinking. "It just doesn't feel like it when you treat me like shit, Sherlock. Words and actions have consequences. Besides, it's not just about using my own history against me. It's the other thing."

"What other thing?"

"What would you have done if I hadn't been there when you opened those drugs?"

Sherlock eyes widened slightly and he rubbed a hand over his face. "You think I would jeopardize my sobriety and my life after all this time?"

"You didn't see your face. You were tempted."

Sherlock voice grew tight and the words heated. "Well, of course I was tempted. I'm an addict. I'll always be an addict. We've talked about this."

"But I'd never seen it, not up close like that." John tried to find the words, but it was difficult. "Your face, it was like you really wanted to use, like you could just see yourself high again. You were right on the edge, looking for any excuse to use."

"And it frightens you, this part of me?"

"Yes."

"So it isn't really about me being cruel as much as you're not sure you can deal with marrying a drug addict."

John had never really put it into those words in his head before, but it was a stunning realization, one it took Sherlock to bring into focus. "Yes."

Sherlock straightened to his full height, keeping his eyes on John. "I can't change my past or my nature any more than you can. I thought you loved me."
John couldn't deny the truth. "I do."

"Then it's up to you to decide what you can and cannot handle. Until you do, it's probably better for you to stay here. I would appreciate it if you'd let me know your plans once you decide."

Panic grew in his heart and John stepped closer, his hand on Sherlock's arm. "I don't want it to be over, I don't. I just need some more time to think about things, about us."

Sherlock stepped away from John's reassuring touch and held up a hand. "Don't touch me until you're sure. I don't need your pity, John."

Shocked by the reaction, John shook his head. "I don't pity you. I never have."

Sherlock searched his face and then gave a quick nod. "Thank you for that." As he stepped to the door, he turned and said, "At least keep your phone on. Your mother called, rather disturbed that she couldn't reach you. Your sister can have visitors and phone calls now. She's finished with the actual physical detoxification."

"Thanks. That's good to know. I'll call her."

Sherlock hesitated and then added, "She also asked if we were all right. I wasn't sure what to tell her. I'm still not. It's an unsettling feeling."

Sherlock's eyes lifted and his gaze met John's. "I hope you know I want you back."

"I do know that."

"Good. I don't want there to be any misunderstanding. I don't want to go on with my life or my work without you, John, but I would understand if you thought living with me was too difficult. I know I'm not an easy person to love."

John's heart raced and ached at the same time, his chest too small to hold all the emotion rushing through it. He stepped over to Sherlock and removed his hand from the doorknob. He cupped his lover's cheek and then ran his fingers through his long curls with the other. He whispered, "You're the easiest man in the world to love, Sherlock Holmes."

Their foreheads met and Sherlock choked out the words. "You're not leaving?"

"Not on your life." Long arms wrapped around him and pulled John into the tightest hug he'd ever had, relief fueling a rush of tears he couldn't stop, didn't want to stop.

Sherlock lifted his face and smiled the most brilliant smile John had ever seen. "Let's go home."

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"Did you do all this yourself?"

"Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade helped."

John was glad to see the flat was back in order, books shelved, skull on the mantle, the mess cleared away. It was actually a little cleaner than usual, Mrs. Hudson's doing no doubt. "Must have taken a while."

"Most of the night, yes. Apparently it takes longer to clear up a mess than make one."

"Welcome to my world."
John dropped the duffle next to the door and the smaller bag with his laptop and gun on the desk. He'd take them upstairs later. As he turned, he found Sherlock right there, in his space, his pupils dark and his cheeks flushed. He knew that look, but he wasn't sure if he was ready for makeup sex yet. As much as he loved Sherlock and was glad to be home, he still felt a bit uneasy about how close he had come to leaving and losing everything.

John needed a distraction. "You want tea?"

"No, I want you."

Sherlock wrapped him in his arms and drew John closer. Sherlock lowered his face to John's shoulder and sniffed. "I love how you smell when you've exercised and haven't showered."

"You're saying you like my stink?"

"I am, yes."

John smiled, but he still tried to push him away. "Slow down. We're in no hurry."

Sherlock took another deep breath and reluctantly lifted his head. He looked half dazed with arousal, but he managed to sound coherent. "You're still not sure about me."

"Oh, I'm very sure about you, Sherlock. It's just, well, I'm not in the mood."

"That's a rather anomalous reaction."

"Is it?"

"Yes. You always like sex. Even though you tend to wait for me to initiate it, you always comply."

Suddenly defensive, John denied the charge. "That's not true. I initiate plenty."

"I could show you the data to the contrary."

He probably had charts to prove it. God, being with a man like Sherlock was unnerving. "Never mind, I'll take your word for it."

Not giving up his quest, Sherlock asked, "When do you think you will be in the mood for sex again?"

John stepped away and went into the kitchen. He flipped on the kettle and kept his back to Sherlock. "I think I'm just tired. I didn't sleep much last night."

Sherlock moved in behind him, his arms wrapping around John's middle, obviously still very horny. "I read on the internet that makeup sex is supposed to be extraordinary. Perhaps we should test the hypothesis." He kissed the back of his neck to try to win him over.

"I think I should limit your access to the internet."

"Has it been your experience that makeup sex is any more erotic or satisfying than regular sex?"

John frowned. "I'm not talking about my makeup sex with other people."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not."
"But..."

"Sherlock, stop it." John turned around, not sure how to explain how inappropriate such a conversation would be. "That's private."

"I tell you about my past, but you can't tell me about yours?"

"Are you telling me you really want the details of how it was with the women I slept with after we had a fight?"

Sherlock studied him a minute, analyzing the question carefully. "You're right. I don't really want to hear about that. I just want you to fuck me. I thought if you talked about it, it might increase your arousal and make for more effective intercourse."

"You're out of your fucking mind, you know that, right?"

"So it's been mentioned."

Sherlock moved in for another kiss and John stopped resisting. Instead, he went for it, his tongue and his own erection deciding to join in. When he pulled back, panting for breath, he whispered, "I want you to fuck me instead."

Sherlock's eyes were darker than night and he nodded. "That would be an acceptable alternative."

"Good, because I really want you to fuck me." He hooked Sherlock's neck with his left hand and drew him in for another long session of tongue wrestling and general groping.

By the time their faces parted, John was so hard, he didn't know if he could make it upstairs. For the first time since he'd been in the flat, the kitchen table was actually cleared of all the shit that passed for science. He saw no point in missing the opportunity to act out a particularly beloved fantasy. "Fuck me here."

Sherlock licked up the side of his neck and nibbled at his ear. "Here?"

"Here."

Husky with desire, Sherlock's voice shook. "The condoms are upstairs."

John cupped the sides of Sherlock's face with both hands and held it still, his gaze suddenly intense. "Do me without a condom."

"But we agreed..."

"Please."

Sherlock didn't bother to answer. Instead, he unzipped John's pants and used both hands to lower them along with his underwear. His erection popped free, ready for action. Sherlock pushed John face down across the table, using one hand to hold the back of his neck before running his fingers down John's spine. A hard shudder wracked through him and John nearly came from just Sherlock's touch. He was already close, too close, but what a rush. "Hurry."

"Lubrication preference?"

"There's butter or olive oil."

Sherlock feathered kisses over John's shoulders, down his back, and then his butt. His butt cheeks
parted and Sherlock's tongue licked him and then pushed inside. John gasped at the sensation of Sherlock fucking him with his tongue. The rub of whiskers against tender skin only ramped up the nearly overwhelming sensation. John beat his head against the table when fingers took the tongue's place. "Jesus."

John nearly cried when Sherlock stopped long enough to take a bottle from the cabinet. He opened it and dribbled the oil over John's cheeks before putting it aside on the counter. Using his fingers again, Sherlock slicked his ass and pushed inside with two long fingers several times before he draped himself over John's back and whispered into his ear. "Say you're mine."

As soon as John moaned a yes, Sherlock pushed his cock inside with a quick, jerky thrust, repeating the action until he was buried completely. The heat and pressure from stretching burned up his spine and John gripped the side of the tabletop. "God, fuck me."

"Say it again, John, say you're mine." The words ran together, all breathy and full of heat.

"I'm yours, always."

Gripping John's hips, Sherlock pulled out and rammed back in, shaking the sturdy table that held them both. John's ass stretched to the limits, forced him to bite his lower lip to swallow his own scream, to keep himself from cursing a world that would let him live without Sherlock.

The table rocked with the motion of Sherlock shoving his cock inside him. John's body took every bit of it and yelled for more. He wanted Sherlock to fuck him like he'd never fucked him before because he could and because John needed to belong, need to give himself up to have the freedom to come.

His own cock rubbed against the edge of the table, the friction like a bullet held hostage in an enemy's gun. He needed to shoot but he couldn't, not until Sherlock went first, shuddered his release inside him. Hammering in and out, Sherlock pace got suddenly faster and then he jerked hard and arched upward, a throaty scream as a final accent.

John closed his eyes, let his mind spin through the firestorm. He shoved his cock against the edge of the table, but it wasn't enough. He groaned in frustration, trying to rock harder just as Sherlock's hand mercifully fisted around him. With just a few pumps, John's gut exploded in pure pleasure, the waves hitting him like a tsunami whipping through every cell, sending him over the edge into a nova so bright it burned all his edges, all his needs into one.

All the tension gone, John muscles relaxed as Sherlock lay collapsed across his back, his cock still inside John's ass. After a few more moments, Sherlock withdrew slowly, using one hand on the table beside John's hips to brace himself.

John didn't want to move, didn't know if he had the strength to lift himself off the table. Maybe he'd just stay there and be a perpetual experiment. Sherlock's hands moved lovingly over his back. "John?"

"I like makeup sex."

Sherlock laughed and it was the most beautiful sound in the universe."

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Two hours later, naked and with Sherlock wrapped in his arms, John was happy to know that makeup sex was nearly as good the second time round as the first. They lay in bed while Sherlock teased lazy circles around John's nipple, occasionally flicking his tongue out to lick it. Meanwhile,
John savored the bliss and wound a dark curl around his fingers. He thought about how close he'd come to losing all that made him happy. It wasn't about the sex, although that was part of it. It was about intimacy, too, about a deep connection to his very heart and soul that words couldn't explain. He'd read about such epic romances, but until Sherlock he thought they were all make believe and bollocks. Now he knew better.

Even before the war, trust issues dogged him, made it difficult to get close to the women in his life. Now he had Sherlock, a man with a whole catalog of his own personal issues, trust just being one of many. Yet somehow it worked, well, at least most of the time, and that was better than he had ever hoped for.

"You're thinking too much."

John tugged at the hair, but not too hard. He kissed the top of Sherlock's head. "You're one to talk."

Sherlock rubbed his cheek against John's chest, his stubble a bit rough, but not painful. John wasn't used to having a whiskery Sherlock, but he didn't mind it, didn't mind it at all. Sherlock lifted his head, his eyes more blue than grey in the low light. "You're wondering if you made the right decision."

"No, I'm not. I'm being grateful I made the right one."

"I'm grateful, too." Sherlock dropped his head again, his open hand resting over John's heart. He admonished, "Don't leave like that again."

"Don't give me a reason to."

Sherlock didn't answer with words, just kissed his belly and lay still, too still. John squeezed his shoulders and asked, "What's wrong?"

"It's difficult."

"What?"

"Knowing what to say, guarding what I say for fear of making you leave again."

"I'm not asking you to do that. I don't want you to change who you are. Just don't be a prat all the time, that's all. Don't use my weaknesses against me just because you don't get your own way."

"I'm not sure I know how to do that."

John sighed, wondering how to explain it without sounding like a twit. "Have you ever heard of the Golden Rule?"

"What does a precious metal have to do with our conversation?"

"It's not about the metal. It's about treating others the way you want to be treated. I treat you with respect, and I expect the same."

"And where does the gold come into it?"

"Forget the gold."

Shifting so that they lay face-to-face, John propped his head on his elbow. "This is something you should've learned when you were a kid, but obviously didn't. People matter. Their feelings count as much as yours do."
Sherlock rolled his eyes, but kept his hand resting on John's waist. "I don't care about other people, John. I only care about you, well, and maybe Mrs. Hudson, but that's in a totally different context."

"I should hope so."

"I just mean that one of the things I like most about you is that I'm comfortable with you. I can be myself when I'm with you. I don't want that to change."

"It doesn't have to. We just have to be a bit more careful. This isn't just about you, you know. I had just as much to do with what happened as you."

"You were rather bossy."

John snorted, "Pot, kettle." Sherlock looked totally confused again, but John continued. "I just mean it's ironic that you, of all people, should call anybody bossy."

"Lestrade said much the same thing."

"Take the hint. Anyway, I'm just saying I could've handled it better than I did. I know you're under stress because of your mum and then someone tries to frame you. It's a lot to deal with and I didn't help with how I reacted. I'm sorry."

Sherlock's index finger traced along the edge of John's ear. "I'm not afraid of hard work."

John frowned, not understanding. "Sorry?"

"Relationships are hard work. I never realized that before."

"Oh, well, yeah. That's why so many fail."

"I don't want us to fail, John."

"We won't."

Sherlock's hand trailed down John's side, ghosted over his hip and then came back to rest on his waist again. "Were you really going to leave London?"

"Did Lestrade tell you about that?"

"No."

"Then how did you know?"

Sherlock rolled over on his back and stared up at the ceiling, hands behind his head. "This is one of those things that might make you angry."

"What?"

"I checked your browser history."

"You what?" John shifted and moved to sit up in the bed, pulling the blanket with him. "When did you have time to do that? We've been fucking nearly nonstop since I got home."

"When you went to wash up after our first intercourse and you didn't answer the question. Would you really leave London and go back to Afghanistan as a private contractor?"
"Not so fast. You checked my browser history? Really?"

"I needed to know."

John heard the vulnerability in the tone more than the words and decided that the discussion about privacy was a lost battle for another time. "I did consider it, yeah."

"But why Afghanistan? I don't understand."

"And you probably won't even after I explain it."

Sherlock moved and sat up next to him in the bed, pulling the blanket over his lap, too. "Try."

"It's where I felt most needed and alive. Nothing compares to it except working with you. If I couldn't have you, I wanted that rush back again."

"Even after you were wounded, after you've suffered with all the nightmares?"

"Even after all that, yeah. I didn't want to go back to being numb and useless, to maybe eating my own gun because I'm too f*cked up to do anything else."

Sherlock moved even closer and draped an arm across John's shoulders to pull him in. "I do understand, John. Had you left me, I might have done much the same thing. My battleground would be here in London, of course, and not the desert, but there would have been a war nonetheless, one that I might not have wanted to win with quite as much fervor as when you're with me. It would be far too easy to make a mistake and walk off a building."

John turned his head and met Sherlock's gaze and quirked a smile. "You do know we're f*cked up, right?"

"Indeed."

"And it doesn't bother you?"

"Not in the least."

"Good, that's good then."

Sherlock used one hand to capture John's chin and turn his face before he leaned in for a kiss, a kiss that sealed the deal that if they were f*cked up, they'd be f*cked up together.

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"Go away."

"I received your package."

Sherlock glanced up from his laptop to see his brother standing in the doorway. He shrugged, resentment still lingering. "John sent it, not me."

"So I surmised." Mycroft cleared his throat before he continued. "Mummy's actually doing a bit better. I haven't seen her this well in months. I thought you'd like to know."

"She loves being the center of attention. I take it she and the Queen caught up on old times?"

"They had a nice visit, yes, but Mummy told me she most enjoyed seeing you and John this
weekend."

"As she would. However, I must confess I am glad she's improved regardless of the reason."

"I'll pass those sentiments along."

After a long silence, Sherlock closed down the window on his screen and turned to focus on his brother. "What did you find out about the package?"

"Other than an inordinate amount of high quality cocaine?"

"Obviously. I'm sure you had it analyzed."

Mycroft sat down in John's chair and looked around. "Where is your partner?"

"You know where he is. I'm not an idiot. I'm aware of your increased surveillance."

"Someone's tried to frame you for a serious crime. I thought it appropriate."

"It's a shame it wasn't in place the night of the break in."

Mycroft smoothed down his left lapel. "Actually, it was."

Sherlock frowned. He must have been distracted if he hadn't noticed. "Since when?"

"Since early last month."

"Rotating monitors?"

"Yes."

Sherlock grudgingly admitted, "Most effective."

"Apparently."

"So, who broke into the flat?"

Mycroft reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a snapshot. He handed it to Sherlock. "The quality isn't very good, but it's adequate to make an identification."

Sherlock's chest tightened and his skin crawled at the memories stirred up by the image. He struggled to keep his voice even as he said the hateful name. "Montgomery Hatcher."

"Yes."

"I was told he was dead."

"He fooled a number of people."

Sherlock handed the picture back and stood up, stepping to the window. He pushed down the loathing slowly creeping into his belly. When he didn't speak, Mycroft said, "I believe your civil union announcement might have triggered his desire for revenge."

Sherlock turned, realization burning his chest. "We need to find him immediately. If he's free, he'll eventually try again, or worse, go after the one he sees as his rival."

"John. Yes, I know."
"Do you have leads?"

"I have something better."

Sherlock cocked his head to the side and studied that familiar smug expression. He let out a sigh of relief and grinned. "You have him."

"I do, yes. Consider it a wedding gift."

"Good choice, much better than a silver service for twelve."

"I thought so."

Sherlock's relief settled and he said, "I should talk to him."

"No."

"No?" Sherlock's immediate reaction was to argue, but instead he waited for an explanation. John would be pleased with his effort to improve his patience.

Mycroft stood up and straightened his suit jacket before fussing with his tie. "No. It's settled. He won't bother you or John again."

Sherlock grew wary. "What did you do?"

Mycroft stared at him, keeping his expression neutral. However, his tense tone betrayed his true feelings. "This man abused you during a time when you were most vulnerable and then tried to murder you in a most heinous way. When you've finally found some happiness, he reappears in an attempt to harm you again. I couldn't allow it."

Sherlock's eyes narrowed, but he wasn't horrified, just the opposite. "You've had him eliminated."

"I prefer the term neutralized. The man refused to heed warnings and tried to escape. Officially, it was appropriate. Personally, it was satisfying." Mycroft stood stiffly, waiting for some kind of rebuke, but it never came.

Sherlock simply said, "Thank you."

Mycroft's brow lifted in surprise, but then he nodded. "You're welcome."

"Don't tell John."

"Don't tell John what?" John stood in the doorway with three heaping bags of groceries.

Sherlock stepped over to take one off his hands, wondering how the man he loved could have such terrible timing. "Mycroft was just saying..."

"Don't lie to me, Sherlock. Whatever you were going to say, forget it. Just tell me the truth."

Mycroft cleared his throat. "On that note, I believe I'll leave you two alone."

As soon as Mycroft was out the door, Sherlock headed to the kitchen with John right behind him. Once the sacks were on the table, John asked again, "What is it you don't want me to know?"

"Mycroft has had the flat under security surveillance for the last month."
"I knew that."

Sherlock halted and stared. "What?"

"I thought you knew about it."

"Well, I didn't."

"I'm surprised. They were using a rotating monitoring system, but it was still pretty obvious. You must have been distracted."

Sherlock snorted in amusement. John was getting so much better with his observations and deductions. "Perhaps."

"Don't deflect. What were you two talking about that you didn't want me to know?"

Sherlock flipped the switch on the kettle. John always wanted tea after shopping. "He caught the man who put the drugs in the flat."

John took the tins out of the sack, storing things away as he talked. "And? Why should that be a secret?"

"He's dead now."

As he was putting a can of beans in the cabinet, John's hand stilled halfway. "Dead?"

"Yes."

John put the can back down and turned around, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the counter. He processed Sherlock's words and then met his worried gaze. "And you were afraid I'd be upset with that news?"

Sherlock hedged a bit and picked at a cuticle, avoiding eye contact. "Perhaps there was a bit more to it than that."

"Like the fact that Mycroft probably had him killed?"

"Yes."

John licked his lower lip and rubbed his chin as he considered the situation. After a few moments, he finally said, "I'm not sure what it says about me that I don't really care if he's dead or how he got that way. I'm a doctor. I'm supposed to care about things like that."

"But you're also a soldier and you know that some people are an enemy to society."

"We have a justice system to decide that kind of thing."

Sherlock stepped in closer but didn't touch him. "We both know that sometimes that system is broken. Other than the surveillance pictures, there was nothing we could use officially."

Sherlock bit his lower lip, wishing he didn't have to say the next words, but he also knew that he was at a turning point in their relationship. He couldn't afford to tell any more lies, even lies of omission. "I knew the man, John. He would not have given up. He would have continued to come after me as well as you."

"Me? Why?"
"Because of me."

John studied Sherlock several long seconds and then blinked when he had the answer. "He supplied you with cocaine before."

"Yes. A lot of it."

"In exchange for sex."

"Yes, a lot of it."

John shifted, his body rigid, still not comfortable with that part of Sherlock's past. Sherlock doubted he ever would be. "But why come after you now?"

"Everyone thought he was dead. There was a fire and a body."

"But he obviously wasn't."

"Apparently it was a ploy to avoid paying off his substantial debts."

"And now years later he shows up and decides to leave a shitload of cocaine at our place and just happens to have your drug gear kit?"

"The fire was the night of my overdose."

John's eyes widened. "Let me guess. He's the one who gave you the overdose."

"Before he set the fire. I was supposed to die in the fire with him."

"Jesus. How the hell did you get out?"

Sherlock shook his head, the few sketchy memories of that night too fragmented and chaotic to be of any use. "I have no idea. Lestrade found me in the alley. I don't remember how I got there."

"Meanwhile, this berk supposedly died in a fire meant for the two of you?"

"Yes."

"Good god." John scratched his head in confusion. "But why now? Why would he come back now and start trouble?"

"Mycroft believes it was because of the announcement of our union. Montgomery was always obsessively possessive."

"That's putting it mildly since he was willing to burn you alive rather than let you go free, the sod." John hesitated before he asked, "Montgomery? That was his name?"

"Yes. Montgomery Hatcher."

John stepped into Sherlock's space, cupping his cheek and meeting his gaze. "I think we owe Mycroft a fruit basket at the very least."

Sherlock's lips twisted into a grin. "He said it was a wedding present."

"Better than a gravy boat."

Sherlock's lips moved against John's mouth, taking in the taste of tea, the hint of a chocolate
biscuit. He pulled back and whispered, "I love you."

John nodded in acceptance and whispered, "Don't ever lie to me, Sherlock. I might not like what it is you have to tell me, but I need to know. Ignorance doesn't keep us safe."

"I promise."

"Good enough."

Sherlock sank into John's embrace. Honesty, how hard could it be?

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"This can't be right."

Sherlock continued to look through his repaired microscope and adjusted the slide of his latest tissue sample. "What?"

"There's close to 44,000 quid in the Paypal account for services rendered."

Sherlock lifted his head and did a quick mental calculation. "That sounds about right. That's minus the tax, of course."

John sat back and shook his head, shocked. "Are you telling me that you've made this much money just solving online cases?"

"Yes."

"Bloody hell, that's brilliant."

"Your system of payment is really quite simple, but effective."

"But when did you do all this? I mean, I just set it up a few weeks ago. How could you solve that many cases and where have I been?"

"In my spare time, I'm a dazzling detective, and you've been busy with your sister and me."

John smiled so hard, his face hurt. "You're incredible."

Sherlock went back to his microscope, his cheeks slightly flushed from the praise. "I'd rather have a real case, but those will do for a distraction."

"Some people do crosswords..."

"Boring."

"And some people solve cases."

"Not some people, John. I solve cases, with your help, of course."

John frowned after he thought a bit more. "But I didn't help with these. I don't really deserve half. You should keep all the money."

When Sherlock didn't answer right away, John asked, "Did you hear me?"

"I'm counting."
"Counting what?"

"I've adopted a system whereas I count to ten in order to counter the original impulse of calling you an idiot."

John choked on his laugh. The idea of Sherlock counting to ten to keep from saying what he thought was hilarious and just a little bit adorable.

"What's so funny?"

"Where did you get the idea of counting to ten before saying anything?"

"On the..."

"Internet, right. Listen, unless we're really arguing, you don't have to count to ten with me before you say what you really think. Maybe with the others, but not with me. If you think my idea is bollocks, just tell me why."

Sherlock frowned, obviously processing another unfamiliar rule about their relationship. "So you're saying that I should only be circumspect about what I say when we're arguing. Otherwise, I'm allowed to say whatever I like and be myself?"

"Yes."

"But that seems contrary to what you told me about being more respectful of your feelings."

"You're probably right, but if you have to count to ten every time you want to talk to me, it's going to be a very stilted conversation."

Sherlock paused and then nodded. "Understood."

"So you were calling me an idiot. Why?"

"Because while you might not have actually worked on these particular cases, you did set up the webpage and payment system. You also write the blog that attracts most of the customers. In essence you're as much a partner with that part of the business as you are when you physically go with me to crime scenes."

John considered the words. "You're right. We are partners."

"So, you'll keep your half of the money?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now maybe you can call that Sarah person and quit the tiresome job you no longer need."

John chuckled. "Nice try."

"Not nice enough if you're still going in this morning."

"It's just one more week. After that, I'm all yours."

"You're all mine now."

John glanced up, the huskier hint to the words a quick thrill. Ever since he'd admitted that he belonged to Sherlock during sex, it was like a mental stroke to hear those words at other times.
However, if he ever went back to counseling, he'd never tell Ella about it. She'd likely consider possessive behavior to be seriously unhealthy and give him a lecture about codependence. Sod her. If it was up to her, he'd still be using a cane and thinking about blowing his brains out.

"I am yours, yeah."

"Then..."

"But I'm still going to work."

"Dull."

"Yeah, well, maybe while I'm gone you can start thinking about our wedding."

Sherlock gave up on his experiment and moved to the doorway between the living room and the kitchen. He leaned against the wall, his arms crossed, and stared at John. He wore only his blue silk dressing gown and pajama bottoms. It was a mouth-watering sight. "I've thought of little else since you accepted my proposal."

John signed off his account and closed his laptop, focusing all his attention on Sherlock. "We need to decide what we want, the whole when, where, and how we want to do it. And what about the honeymoon? Are we taking one?"

"In the morning of the first day we're eligible, we'll marry at the register's office unless there's some place you'd rather do it. It'll be a simple ceremony with Mrs. Hudson, Lestrade, and any friends you want as witnesses. We'll have a small reception at Angelo's and we'll honeymoon at our house in Sussex during the following week."

John's mouth fell open in surprise but then he smiled. "So, you have thought about it."

"Yes."

"Our house in Sussex?"

"I put it in your name, too."

"You're mad." John teased, "I could be a gold digger."

It was Sherlock's turn to smile. "That was suggested."

"Bloody Mycroft."

Sherlock sobered. "He's changed his mind about you. He's been rather a champion of our relationship recently."

"And that surprises you?"

"It does. He was adamantly against me being involved with someone who didn't further his agenda."

"Which I definitely don't."

"I can't tell you how tedious it is to be set up with boring people just because of their money and titles. Of course, that was more Mummy than Mycroft. I don't think he really cares as long as I don't give away the family fortune."
"And he seriously thought that's what I was after?"

"In the beginning, not now."

John hesitated before asking. "Do we invite him to the ceremony? You have your differences, but he is your only brother."

Sherlock considered carefully before he answered, "I suppose it might buy me a favor."

"That's not why you invite someone to your wedding, Sherlock."

"I can't see any other reason to have him there, but I will ask him."

John paused. "What about your mother? I know she's ill, but do you think we should at least ask her?"

Sherlock answered quickly. "No."

"You're sure?"

Sherlock's expression darkened. "I'm sure."

"Why not?"

"She wouldn't come even if she were healthy. She doesn't believe in civil partnership rights. She's been dead set against them for years. She still believes sodomy to be a crime against nature. She merely tolerates us because she can no longer have us locked away or burned at the stake."

"That's harsh."

"But true."

"I see." John pretended to mark a name off a make believe pad with names. "She's off the list then."

Sherlock asked, "What about your mother?"

"Oh, she'll be there. Try keeping her away and see what war breaks out. Harry won't be, though. I asked last night when I called and she's fine with missing it."

"I thought you said she wouldn't be."

"That's what I thought, but I think she genuinely wants us to go ahead. Besides, Clara went to see her and she's focused on getting back together. She's not going to worry about us, not with Clara on her mind."

"Then you have no problem with doing it right away, as soon as it's legal?"

John got up and stepped over to stand in front of Sherlock. He drew his face down for a quick kiss and then whispered, "No problem at all. The sooner the better."

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"I'm not getting married in a morgue, so forget it."

"I said St. Bart's, not the morgue. I do have some sense of decorum."
"Since when?" John was putting on his jacket, getting ready to leave for work. "So, when you say St. Bart's, what are you suggesting?"

"They have a small chapel. I thought that it might be more appropriate than the register's office."

"You don't strike me as a chapel person."

"But you are."

"I haven't been to church since the last funeral I attended when I got back from the war. So, where do you get that notion?"

"I actually thought it might please your mother. So, you're saying you don't want to use the chapel?"

John walked over and hugged Sherlock before kissing him. "The chapel is fine. I'd marry you just about anywhere."

"Just about?"

"No morgues, cemeteries, or crime scenes."

"Now you're mocking me."

"A bit, yeah."

Sherlock kissed him back and then drew himself to his full height before he complained, "Besides, Lestrade ruled out the crime scene notion out of hand. The man has no imagination."

John barked a laugh. If Sherlock was kidding, he did it well and with a straight face. "He puts up with you, so he must have some."

"It's very limited. He's better than anyone else at the Yard and he has shown improvement over the years. Still, he's hindered by far too much pedestrian thinking."

"Even so, are you going to ask him today while I'm gone?"

Sherlock hesitated, a rare flash of doubt in his eyes. John added, "I'm sure he'll say yes. He's your best friend."

"You're my best friend."

"It's hard to be the groom and the best man at the same time."

"Not in your case since you're both."

"Flatterer."

Sherlock hugged him harder, kissing him with escalating passion. His hands roamed down John's spine and to his backside, and John pulled away from the obvious grope. "No you don't. I have to get to work."

Sherlock's eyes were dark and his voice thick with arousal. "You could be late."

It took a lot of self-control, but John said, "You'll just have to wank or wait until I get home tonight. It's a full shift all this week."
"What if there's a crime? I might need to call you."

"Then call, but there's no fucking at crime scenes, so that won't do you any good, either."

"Tease." Sherlock kissed the side of John's neck and then released him. He was still grumbling when he sagged down on the sofa, sporting an impressive erection that tented the front of his pajama bottoms. "Leaving me in this condition is tantamount to a crime. I never used to have this problem, not until you came along. It's like you jumpstarted my libido and now I can't control my own body. It's incredibly inconvenient."

"Sherlock, I have to go or I'll be late."

Sherlock rubbed himself, doing his best impression of a horny man trying to guilt John into staying. Sadly, it was working, because just the sight of Sherlock in such a needy, sexy state made him hard, too. He took off his jacket and kneeled between Sherlock's legs, thinking thirty more minutes wouldn't hurt.

"So, what do you think?"

John looked up from his stack of folders and said, "About what?"

Sarah stepped into his office and shut the door behind her. "About Winnie. Isn't she great?"

"She seems nice, very competent. I really haven't had a chance to get to know her that well yet."

"She's really wonderful with the children."

John had noticed that, too, that she seemed to brighten most when the children came in. They used to ask for him and now they were asking for the pretty new lady doctor instead. John tried not to be too jealous, but it was difficult. Kids were his favorite patients. "Yes, she's very good."

"She's also brilliant with paperwork."

John had reviewed her notes on his patients, and he couldn't fault that, either. "Yes, she's done a good job."

"Why don't you sound happy about that?"

"I am happy."

"You're not."

"Sarah..."

"All right, maybe I'm just projecting. It's hard knowing this is your last week here. I'll probably never see you again after you leave."

John met her gaze and shook his head. "That's not true. We're still friends."

"But it won't be the same."

"No. You won't be my boss anymore."

"I never have been, not really, not since that first week."
John teased, "Could've fooled me." It didn't work. She was still frowning. "Are you okay?"

"I will be. Having Winnie here helps."

"You've become friends then?"

"Yes, she's very nice. We've been for drinks a few times. Her boyfriend is friendly, too."

It was the way she said boyfriend that made him perk up. Maybe he had been around Sherlock too long, but he noticed body language now more than he used to. What she was saying didn't match how she wasstanding. "What is it, Sarah?"

Sarah looked down at one of his medical journals and flipped the pages, but wasn't really reading. "What makes you think there's anything to say?"

Something flashed in John's mind and he frowned. "Please tell me you haven't made a play for the boyfriend."

Sarah looked up in alarm. "Why would you say that?"

"Tell me I'm wrong."

She closed her eyes briefly and settled in the chair in front of his desk, obviously ready to confess. John wondered if this was how Sherlock felt when he read people and knew what they were going to say or do before they did it. He had to admit that he really didn't like the feeling very much.

John said, "Has anything happened yet?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. We've just been talking on the phone. He called me that first night after he joined us for a drink."

"Bastard."

She looked up, her eyes pleading her case. "No, he's not. He's a lovely man."

"Who just happens to be cheating on his girlfriend."

"We haven't done anything yet."

"But it's a thin line between what you're doing on the phone and actually taking the next step."

"He wants me to meet him at his place tonight."

"Are you going?"

"I don't know."

John sat back and sighed. "I thought you liked Winnie."

"I do."

"Not enough to stop yourself from wrecking her life."

"You don't understand."

"I think I do. You hate being alone."
"You don't know what it's like, John. You've got somebody."

"But I've been alone, Sarah. I know what it's like and I do understand, believe me, I do. I'm trying hard not to judge you about this."

"Doesn't sound like it."

John leaned forward, his hands clasped together on his desk. "It's just that there are some lines we don't cross. Fucking over a workmate, somebody you've befriended, well for me, that's one of them."

"You're right, of course. I shouldn't do anything."

John took a moment to study her before he said, "But you're going to."

"God help me, probably."

"And what about Winnie? How will you handle having her here if you cheat with her boyfriend?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you better figure it out, because I'm one of the worst liars on the planet. Sherlock can vouch for that."

"I'm not asking you to lie."

"You want me to pretend I don't know something important and still work with the woman, a very nice woman, whom you're fucking over. How do you expect me to handle that?"

Her tone took on a hard edge. "I don't expect you to do anything, John, other than your bloody job."

John made a sudden decision, one that he hadn't foreseen making. He stood up. "You know what, I quit. I've finished all the paperwork, and you really don't need me. I think it's best I leave now before our friendship is completely ruined."

Angrily, Sarah stood up. "I think it's a bit too fucking late for that. You're free to go. Like you said, we don't need you here anyway. We'll do fine without you just like we've been doing for months."

John took off his white coat and hung it up while she stood there and watched. Her lips were tightly pressed together and her eyes suddenly shiny. He turned and spoke quietly. "I hate ending it like this."

Her words came out filled with spite and venom. "You're a hypocrite, John Watson. You talk about being so fucking moral, but I know for a fact that you'd break every law in the book if it meant you could protect your precious Sherlock. How dare you judge me, you arsehole. I thought you were my friend."

"I'll bet Winnie thinks she's your friend, too."

John didn't even try to block the slap. He deserved it for so many things that had happened between them. He truly regretted losing Sarah's friendship.

He noted the quick horror on her face after she'd hit him. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"Just don't jump into this thing blind."
"I'm not, I'm really not. He really seems to like me. Don't I deserve a little happiness, too?"

John sighed and nodded, reaching out and squeezing her shoulder gently. "You deserve all the happiness in the world, but it won't be with a guy who cheats on his girlfriend. Winnie's the loser here, Sarah. Even if you don't get involved with this man, he's obviously willing to lie to Winnie. She's already lost the game with this one. Protect yourself and protect her by calling him on it."

"I can't."

John squeezed her shoulder again and drew her into a final hug. "Take care." He kissed her on the cheek and pulled away. "I'll miss you."

Sarah sniffed and brushed a tear away. "You're a good man, John. Sherlock's a lucky bastard."

"So I keep telling him."

"I do hope you'll be happy with him."

"I will be."

Before walking out the door of the surgery for the last time, John said goodbye to all the nurses and Winnie. Sherlock was going to be ecstatic that he'd finally have John to himself fulltime.

On the street, John pulled up the collar of his jacket against the wind and headed home. He stopped after a few blocks, the hair on the back of his neck pricked with a familiar sensation. He was being watched again. He looked around, but couldn't find anyone suspicious. He continued walking, more on alert, knowing without a doubt he was being tailed. No matter how many times he turned or where he looked, he couldn't catch who it was. It was a professional then, someone who had to be very good to hide that well.

John hailed a cab and took it to the gym. He had some unexpected spare time and he wanted to shake the feeling of being followed. He'd talk to Sherlock about it later, try to figure out what was going on. Maybe it was related to a case, maybe not, but something wasn't right. He told the cabbie the address to the gym and then shook off the quick chill that settled over him.

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"I didn't call." Lestrade looked up from the reports he was reading as Sherlock approached.

"I'm well aware of that, Lestrade,...Greg. Crime seems to be taking a respite."

"If only." Lestrade gave a delayed response, quirking a brow at the use of his first name. "I didn't even know you knew my Christian name."

"John told me."

"Figures." Lestrade sobered. "You two back together then?"

"Yes." Sherlock hated talking about his personal life in what was commonly called the bullpen. Police officers never knew when to mind their own business. Despite their general deficiencies in other crime-solving skills, they were notoriously nosy. "Could we speak in your office?"

"Sure. Come on."

Once inside, Lestrade shut the door and sat down. He rubbed his hands over his face several times. "Don't mind me. It's been a long shift."
"You do look fatigued." Sherlock hesitated before adding. "I wanted to thank you for helping me clean up the flat. You didn't have to do that."

"You're welcome. I'll admit part of it was because I felt a bit guilty."

"About?"

"About the drug squad being such wankers. You could've filed a complaint, probably should have."

"You said part of it was because of guilt. What was the other part?"

Lestrade fiddled with a pen on his desk as he answered, "I like to think we're friends of a sort and friends help one another."

"I see."

Lestrade looked up and studied him with dark brown eyes before he relaxed. "I believe you do."

"Actually, I'm here for that very reason."

"What reason?"

"I like to think that over the years we've formed an effective working relationship in addition to the personal one."

Lestrade looked at him with suspicion, like he was waiting to hear the punch line to a bad joke. Apparently he wasn't accustomed to Sherlock's version of sincerity. "Yeah, okay."

"It's been brought to my attention that it's customary for a groom to have a best man. I'd like you to perform that duty, that is if you're so inclined."

Lestrade's eyes widened in surprise. "Are you pulling my leg?"

"Why on earth would I want to pull one of your lower appendages?"

Lestrade waved off the question. "What about your brother?"

"What about him?"

"Shouldn't he be your best man?"

"I don't even like my brother. Why would I ask him to perform such a function?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

"How else would I put it?" Impatiently, Sherlock asked, "Will you do it or not?"

"I'd be honored."

Sherlock relaxed, not that he was seriously worried about Lestrade's answer. Still, it was gratifying nonetheless to have a positive response. "We haven't decided on all the details yet, but we'll know within the next day or so."

Lestrade looked at him and smiled. "I'm really glad you and John worked things out."

Sherlock took a deep breath and looked down at his hands. He hated thinking about how close he'd
come to losing John. "Yes."

"I can't imagine either of you without the other."

Impulsively, Sherlock confessed, "Neither can I."

Lestrade got up and walked around his desk, suddenly energized. "Okay, then, I've got a stag party to plan."

"Stag party?"

"Yeah, you know, the last hurrah a single man has before he swears off all others and sticks with just one woman, or in this case one man."

Horrified at participating in such a barbaric ritual, Sherlock protested, "You wouldn't."

"Oh, it'll be fun."

"I think not."

"John will love it. Who's his best man going to be? We can coordinate together and pool our resources."

Sherlock rolled his eyes. Surely Lestrade was jesting. As he studied the older man, his gut clenched at his realization. "You're not joking."

Lestrade's eyes twinkled and he rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "It's my duty as your best mate to make sure you have a great night of partying. Wonder where I can order up a bloke in a cake."

"Good God, tell me you're not serious."

"Well, maybe not about the bloke. I don't think John would appreciate that, but we do need to have a bit of a bash before you two go off into wedded bliss."

Sherlock groaned, but immediately started planning a way out of showing up at such an atrocious social event. He might give in to some customs, but there had to be limits. John would understand.
Chapter Summary

It's finally time for a wedding and honeymoon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Four

"Glad to see you back, sir."

John focused on his punches and gave a few more jabs. Sweat soaked his thin white vest and his workout shorts weren't in much better shape. He looked like he'd been standing out in the rain. "Thanks."

"I see you're using the gloves today, sir. I'm sure the bag appreciates it."

John stopped working the heavy bag and took several long breaths before he answered. "I promised I would."

"Promised who?"

"Sherlock."

Toby Mason smiled. "I take it you two patched it up then, yeah?"

John checked the straps on the left glove before he threw a few more solid punches. "Yeah. We're fine now."

"So, no more leaving town then?"

"No, well, not until the honeymoon. I'll be away a week then."

"Good to hear it, sir." Mason moved behind the bag and steadied it while John continued his workout. The slow burn in his upper arms and shoulder muscles distracted from the worry about being watched and followed earlier.

"If you don't mind me saying so, you still seem a bit worked up about something."

"It's nothing."

"You're not throwing those punches like it's nothing, sir."

John stopped and stepped back. He didn't answer the question, because he wasn't really comfortable talking about his suspicions. Mason was a good man, but he really didn't know about John's life now. He didn't want to risk getting him involved in something dangerous.

"So, how are your ribs?"
"Oh, they're fine, sir. Hardly any pain at all now."

"That's good. I'm glad." John took off his gloves. "Think I'll use the dumbbells. My shoulder's still a bit stiff." He swung his left arm up and around, rotating it several times to stretch the muscles.

"I can give you a heat treatment and massage. Might help, sir."

"Thanks, but I got things to do when I leave here. Another time."

"Anytime, sir."

John handed Mason the gym's gloves and then stepped over and picked up a medium weight dumbbell with his left hand and began doing curls and a few squats. Toby was still standing there watching, so John said, "I quit my job today."

"Quit? Does that mean you've got another job lined up, sir?"

"I'm going to be working with Sherlock fulltime. I was supposed to work until the end of the week, but something came up and I just needed to leave."

"I know that feeling, sir. Sometimes when it's over, it's over."

"Exactly."

His shoulder complained after only ten curls, so John switched the dumbbell to the right hand. He'd either have to reduce the weight or cut back on repetitions with that arm and rebuild the strength. It was incredibly frustrating, especially since his left was his dominant side. Prewar he could've handled twice that much weight for hours, no problem.

Toby's question pulled him back to the moment. "Does this mean you're going to stop being a doctor, sir?"

"No, I still have my license."

"But you're not going to use it?"

"For now, no."

"Excuse me for saying so, sir, but that seems like a big waste of talent."

John stopped moving the weight. "You think so?"

"I do, sir. You ever thought about working with just vets? They could use somebody with your skills."

John shrugged and started his routine again. "I've thought about it. I might eventually get to that point. Right now, I just need to focus on other things."

Obviously disappointed, but understanding, Mason nodded. "I get it, sir, but if you ever change your mind, let me know. Sometimes returning vets just need a friendly ear. It doesn't hurt if that ear belongs to a medical man who's been there and seen it firsthand. But you know what that's like."

Tentatively, Mason reached out and touched the scar on the back of John's left shoulder without asking. "Hell, you're a man who's been through it."
John jerked away, uncomfortable with the unexpected contact. Even Sherlock touching his scar without asking still unnerved him. He gave a tense warning. "Don't do that."

"Sorry, sir. Does it still hurt much?"

"Not as much, no."

"Good. I'm glad. Anyway, I still think you could help a lot of soldiers."

"I don't think I'd be the right man for the job, not yet." John picked up a towel and wiped away the sweat from his face. "I know you mean well, Toby, I do. I just think it's too soon." He swallowed a few times before he confessed, "It's hard enough to deal with my own issues. I'm not ready to be handing out advice to anybody."

"Just thought I'd mention it." Mason thumbed over his shoulder toward the back of the gym and said, "Well, I've got some dirty towels to wash. I'll talk to you later, sir."

"Later then."

As Toby walked off, John frowned. He had the nagging suspicion that he'd missed something important during that chat. He just didn't know what.

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"You wouldn't have to do anything except be there."

"Oh, I think I can manage a bit more than that." Mycroft sat at his desk. Once again Sherlock was struck by how his brother looked so at home in his office. Considering how much time he spent there, it was probably just as well.

"Such as?"

"You do realize that the first day you can officially perform the ceremony is a Sunday."

"Yes."

"The register's office isn't open on Sunday."

Sherlock frowned. He hadn't really considered such a possibility. "Why not?"

"I assume it has to do with the general consensus that government offices should be closed on Sunday due historical religious considerations."

Sherlock never liked religion which he considered to be pablum for the masses. He definitely didn't care for it when it kept him from doing what he wanted. "Well, that's inconvenient."

"I'm fairly certain I can convince a register officer to perform your ceremony and sign the certificate. With the right incentive, many people can be persuaded to give up their day off."

"You mean pay them off."

"Of course."

Sherlock nodded, glad that Mycroft would make his plans work after all. "That will certainly makes things easier."
Mycroft asked, "Would you like some tea or coffee?"

Sherlock shook his head. "No, I just wanted to invite you personally."

"I'll be there."

"Good." Sherlock stood by the door a bit awkwardly but then sat down in the chair across from his brother. "How's Mummy?"

"I talked to her this morning. She's actually doing a bit better."

"John thinks I should invite her."

Mycroft pushed a button on his desk and spoke brusquely, "Tea for one, please." Then he turned his attention to Sherlock. "I'm sure you told him about her position on civil unions."

"I did."

"And?"

"And he said he'd take her off the list. Still, I thought I'd mention it. She's welcome to come should she decide to change her mind and be supportive."

Mycroft hedged. "Well, she is quite ill."

"Otherwise, I'm sure she'd fabricate some other excuse."

"Probably. She is what she is, Dear Brother. There's really no point in belaboring the matter."

"True."

An assistant delivered the tea, already prepared with sugar, to Mycroft. He sipped it and once satisfied, he waved for the assistant to leave. "Thank you."

When the woman was gone and the door shut, Sherlock asked, "Where's Anthea today?"

"She's on a short personal leave. Her sister is delivering her first child."

"She has a sister?"

"People have lives and families away from their jobs, Sherlock."

Curtly, Sherlock said, "I know that." It was odd he had never really thought about Anthea in that context. In his mind she had always just been an extension of his brother.

Mycroft changed the subject. "I do appreciate you not taunting my security force today."

"I wasn't in the mood to put in the effort. Maybe next time."

"I'm certain they'll be prepared." After a pause and more tea, Mycroft asked, "Is there something else?"

Sherlock leaned forward, his words tight as he got to the real reason for visiting his brother. "Before he was killed, did you interrogate Hatcher?"

Mycroft sat back, his eyes studying him without blinking. Sherlock shifted in his chair, forcing himself to ignore the scrutiny. It was an old trick Mycroft often used to unsettle him as a child. He
was well beyond that. Finally, Mycroft answered, "I did."

"Do you have video?"

"Yes, but you're not going to watch it."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not necessary."

Sherlock argued, listing his arguments carefully. "But I think it is. Hatcher was many things, but he wasn't clever. How did he manage to not only plan his own disappearance, but remain undiscovered for nearly six years? He had to have had help. Then there's the question of the cocaine. How could he afford to give up so much? Again, it lends itself to the conclusion that he had an accomplice, or worse, a benefactor. I need to know who that might be."

When Mycroft didn't answer right away, Sherlock knew he was right. "Did he tell you who it was before he was killed?"

"No."

"But you do agree there was someone else involved."

Mycroft let out a heavy sigh. "I do, but he wouldn't give us a name."

"How hard did you try?"

"It should have been more than adequate to extract the information we wanted. He simply refused to break."

The idea of torturing the man who had abused and nearly killed him didn't bother Sherlock. He wondered how John would feel about it. He also wondered when he had started gauging his personal responses by what John would think. He supposed that was part of the process of becoming an actual couple. Somehow it pleased him, but he couldn't explain why just yet.

"Too bad. I wish I could've been there to see it."

"The point is, Dear Brother, he didn't tell us a name. Considering this man was an unmitigated coward, I can't imagine him doing it to protect a partner."

"No, I'm sure if he didn't tell you, it was out of fear not loyalty. That means that the person is powerful. Hatcher was a follower, not a leader by nature."

"Indeed."

Sherlock paused and then asked the big question. "Do you think it's Moriarty?"

"There are other master criminals besides James Moriarty."

"But few who are obsessed with me."

"I think you underestimate how annoying you've been to the criminal element. There are any number of kingpins who would love nothing more than to have your head on a spike, metaphorically speaking, of course. Still, Moriarty has remained rather more persistent than expected."

Mycroft leaned forward before he asked, "Have you shared your suspicions with John?"
"No. They are only suspicions, nothing more."

"You should tell him anyway. You and I both know that Moriarty, or whomever this person is, will have read your announcement about your marriage. John is now officially your biggest weakness."

Sherlock shook his head, affronted by the characterization of the most important person in his life. "He's my strength."

"Perhaps, but if Moriarty should move against you, he'll do it through John."

"He can try. Kidnapping John the first time, well, that was unexpected. We're on alert now. It won't happen again."

"It's easy to let down one's guard when one is distracted by romantic bliss. I've warned you about such things in the past."

"John is quite capable, remarkably so."

"He's at risk as are you. You should tell him."

"I take your warning, Mycroft." Sherlock stood up and added, "I need you to keep security on John's sister and mother as well."

"Already done."

"Good. Don't tell John. I'd very much like for him to enjoy our honeymoon without having to worry about this."

Mycroft sat far back in his leather chair and steepled his fingers in front of his upper chest. "That's a mistake."

"It's mine to make."

"Indeed. Meanwhile, I'll maintain surveillance and increase security around your flat."

Sherlock disliked depending on his brother for such favors, but when fighting against someone like Moriarty, he used whatever tools he had. "I'll contact you later about the wedding plans."

"Have you contacted the Halloways about getting the house ready for your stay?"

"I have, yes."

"Good. You need to be thinking about how much security you want there before and during your visit."

Sherlock hated the notion of dragging the problems of the city to the country, but he saw no other option, not while Moriarty was at large. There was very little chance to put an end to his threat before the ceremony or honeymoon. "I'll trust you to do that."

Mycroft nodded. "Of course."

"Please try to make it as unobtrusive as possible."

"I always do."

Sherlock stopped at the door and added, "Tell Anthea congratulations about becoming an aunt."
Mycroft sat up straighter, obviously surprised by the anomaly in his behavior. "I will."

Sherlock smiled and left the office, proud of himself. Apparently, being courteous wasn't that hard as long as he didn't have to do it on a regular basis. That was John's territory, not his. Thinking about John made him grin bigger and head off to make arrangements at St. Bart's.

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John pushed the pint across the table to rest in front of Mike Stamford. "Thanks for coming."

"No problem." Mike sipped the pint and wiped away the foam on his upper lip. "Any excuse to leave early, mate. What's this about then?"

"You know Sherlock and I are getting married."

"Yeah."

"I want you to be my best man."

Mike's eyes sparkled and he smiled after he took another drink. "Excellent! That's brilliant."

Relieved, John smiled back. "Then you'll do it?"

"Was there any doubt? I mean, I introduced the two of you. I should at least get something out of it."

"Thanks."

"So, who's Sherlock asking to be his best man?"

"Detective Inspector Lestrade. I'm hoping he'll say yes."

"Why wouldn't he?"

"I'm sure he will, but you never know."

"Well, they've been mates for a long time, so I'm sure it's fine."

"True."

Mike lifted his glass for a toast. "Here's to a long and happy union!"

They clinked glasses and John grinned. "I'm glad you're happy about this."

"Hey, any excuse for a party."

"Well, it's just going to be a small ceremony and then a reception at Angelo's."

"I love Angelo's. His five-cheese ravioli is the best in the city."

"So, good food, but not a big party."

"Don't be thick. I'm talking about the stag. I need to get with this Lestrade bloke and make some arrangements."

Caught off guard, John held up a hand. "Hold on. I don't think Sherlock wants a stag party."
"Well, he's not the only one getting married, is he? I mean, if he doesn't want to participate, fine, we'll still have a bash without him, his loss."

"Listen, I don't want one, either. I mean, not the traditional kind anyway. Maybe a few drinks at the pub, some darts. Forget the girls in cakes or strippers. And I don't want dirty movies or pranks. I'm not a kid anymore."

Mike's sat back and crossed his arms, disappointed. "What fun is that?"

"It's not that I don't appreciate the idea, but it's just not something Sherlock or I want."

"Killjoy."

"You can always bow out, if you want."

"Oh, bugger that." Mike waved a hand and went back to his drink. "If you don't want a big stag, that's fine. It'll save on the budget anyhow. Still, we have to do something."

"Yeah, that's fine. A few drinks the night before will be plenty. I'll warn you, Sherlock might not even come for that. He's not exactly social by nature."

"That's a fact." Mike hesitated and asked, "But you are. How does that work between you? Is this one of those opposites attract things?"

"I'm not sure. It just does."

Mike watched him and then grinned slyly. "Bet the sex is bloody fantastic." All around them, heads turned to wait for John's answer.

His face heated, John shushed his friend. "Not so fucking loud."

Mike leaned in a little, his voice a whisper. "Don't mind them. I just figure he'd have to be a sex machine to make you switch teams."

John was shocked by what he was hearing on so many levels. It was hard to keep his voice level. "You're a doctor. You know better than that."

"Better than what? You were straight, now you're not. How do you explain that?"

John drank several swallows of his own drink before he answered. "I can't. I won't say I never noticed men before. I mean, I was out in the desert for years with nothing but men most of the time. So, I did occasionally think about what it would be like."

"But never acted on it? Not even once? That's pretty remarkable. I've read studies that most men in those conditions will have battlefield flings. Nothing wrong with that."

"I know that. I just never did."

"But then you met Sherlock."

John smiled like a big goof and nodded. "Yeah, I did."

"When did you know? Was it right away or did it take time? Who made the first move?"

John snorted. "When did you turn into a girl?"
"Oh, come on, that's not very politically correct. Besides, men talk about this stuff."

"Listen, I'm not going to talk about my sex life with you or anybody else."

"So, it's no different from before then."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when you were going out with everything in a skirt, you wouldn't talk about it then, either."

John suddenly felt defensive. "Is that a problem?"

Mike grinned and then waved at the waitress for another round. "No, it's just that since I have no real sex life, I live vicariously through others. You're no help at all, mate."

Relieved, John shrugged. "Sorry about that."

"It's all right. Besides, gay sex isn't that big a turn on."

"Speak for yourself."

After the waitress left them their drinks, Mike lifted his glass again. "Here's to one of the best blokes around, John Watson."

"Thanks."

"And just so you know, I think Sherlock is one lucky bastard."

"I'm lucky, too."

"Yeah, you are. He's a mad sod, but he's nothing if not brilliant."

"And never boring."

"That, too. Cheers."

"Cheers."

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"You're home early." Sherlock moved in behind John and kissed the back of his neck. They were in the kitchen as John finished making tea. "You've also showered and you've been drinking."

"Finished with the inventory yet?" John turned in his arms and kissed Sherlock properly. Then he pulled away and moved with his cup into the sitting room.

Sherlock studied him from the doorway, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed. "What's happened?"

There was no use in putting off telling Sherlock about the job. "I quit."

"Why?"

John put his cup down. "Sarah and I had a disagreement."

Sherlock stepped closer, impatient and his arms still crossed. "What did she do?"
"Nothing yet. It's what she'll likely do that bothered me." Before Sherlock could ask, John held up a hand. "It doesn't matter. She and I both decided that it was best to part ways a few days early, that's all. It's fine."

It took all of thirty seconds before Sherlock started his deduction. "There's a new doctor at the surgery, a woman, so she wouldn't be her romantic aim. I assume the woman has a boyfriend or husband. You objected to Sarah's impending affair. Therefore, you resigned in a display of moral indignation."

John chuckled in amusement. "You really are brilliant."

Sherlock beamed. "Sarah does seem to go out of her way to make her life more difficult with a total disregard to the damage she does to others. I believe the popular parlance would be she has issues."

"That she does."

Sherlock sat down beside John, grinning ear to ear. "You're free from work then."

John teased, "Not completely. I still work with you."

"It's not the same thing."

"No, it's definitely not."

Sherlock drew him in for a hug and a quick kiss. "So, I take it you went to the pub to celebrate, but when did you shower?"

"At the gym. I went to work out first and then I called Mike. He's agreed to be my best man."

"Excellent. Lestrade did the same." Sherlock paused and complained, "He said something about a stag party. It sounded appalling."

Still in Sherlock's arms, John put his hand over Sherlock's heart. "I told Mike to forget it and I'll tell Lestrade the same. Drinks maybe, but no stag with strippers or porn."

"Strippers and porn? Good lord, do people actually do that? To what end?"

John didn't want to get into a discussion about raunchy sex among mates. Instead, he explained, "It's tradition, like it's the last night a guy can fuck around with impunity before he's married and committed to just one person."

"But being engaged still requires one to be faithful."

"I agree."

"So, have you ever been to one of these parties?"

"A few, yeah."

"What did you think?"

If he wanted a sex party, it would be with Sherlock, not a bunch of strippers. John had never been one for anonymous sex, and fucking a stranger the night before his wedding, it just didn't make sense. "That I'd never have one no matter who I married."

Sherlock hugged him closer. "I'm glad we agree."
"Now, we just have to convince Mike and Greg not to overrule us and throw one anyway."

"I'm sure we can convince them that it would be in their best interests to abort any such plan."

John studied Sherlock's determined features and smacked him lightly. "You're not allowed to threaten our friends."

"I wouldn't threaten. I'd just point out that I can be notoriously fiendish given the right motivation."

John snorted and then relaxed in Sherlock's arms. He dreaded what he had to say next. "I was being watched and followed today."

The arms tightened around him. "What?"

"You heard me."

Sherlock pushed John away far enough to meet his gaze. "You didn't see who it was?"

"No, so it's a pro job." John sat up straighter. "Add to that, I noticed there was more surveillance on the flat. What's going on?"

Sherlock sighed and pursed his lips. "I wanted to hold off telling you until after the honeymoon."

John frowned, anger slowly building up inside. It was the same damn thing all over again. Sherlock continued to keep things from him. He didn't think of him as an equal partner able to face whatever mess was going on. John barely controlled the rush of temper and demanded, "Tell me."

"Mycroft and I think a criminal with a grudge against me was helping Hatcher hide."

John understood right away. "Which means that Hatcher had help in planting the cocaine."

Standing up, John paced the room several times before he finally stopped and asked, "So, how much danger are we in?"

"There's no way to know that."

"How long have you suspected?"

"Since I found out Hatcher was involved."

"And you didn't think to tell me, to let me in on your conclusions?"

"You're upset."

"Well, of course, I'm upset. Not only do I find out that we might be targets, but you're keeping secrets again. What did I tell you about that?"

"I was going to tell you."

"Yeah, after the honeymoon. That's weeks away. What if something happens between now and then and all because I don't know fuck all about what's going on?"

A few seconds later Sherlock nodded and agreed, "You're right."

John ranted like he hadn't heard Sherlock's words. "I mean, what happened to being honest? Omission is just as bad as flat out lying."
"I said you were right, John. I wasn't sure until after I talked to Mycroft today. Even so, I should've expressed my concern. It was wrong of me to keep it from you."

"Damn right you were wrong." His anger fizzled with such a quick capitulation. Sherlock usually fought even when he was obviously wrong, but not this time. It was hard to stay angry when his genius gave in so fast. "So, you admit that you were being a total prat?"

"Yes."

"Well, okay then. Just don't let it happen again."

Sherlock held out a hand and John took it before sitting down again. Sherlock pulled him into a hug. "Your safety is my utmost concern. I acted foolishly."

John closed his eyes and waited for the rest of it. "So, what else don't I know yet?"

"Mycroft has sent a security team to guard your sister and mother."

John stiffened. "You really think that's necessary?"

"Until we know the level of the threat, yes."

"And being followed today, that wasn't one of Mycroft's men?"

"No. We have surveillance and security around the flat, not beyond that. I could ask for more if you think it's necessary."

"No, I don't need a bodyguard. I just need information."

"I had hoped we could postpone confronting whatever conspiracy is being aimed in our direction. However, I'm afraid that's not be possible."

"You're saying that whoever's behind this might act before the wedding."

"Mycroft has a team investigating. I have the homeless network on high alert and looking for clues. So far we've found nothing to help reveal who's behind it or what the actual plan might be."

"Fuck." John pulled away from Sherlock and leaned forward. He had his elbows on his knees and his hands fisted in front of his face. "We need to warn Lestrade, too. Whoever this is knows who you're close to. He'd be on the list. I assume Mrs. Hudson already has security when she leaves the flat."

"She does, yes."

"I hate this."

Sherlock's hand rested on John's back. "I wanted to spare you."

"I'd rather know than not know. It's just, I hate that some arsehole has put us on guard during a time when we should just be able to enjoy planning our life together." John stared at Sherlock as a terrible thought occurred to him. "You think it's Moriarty?"

"I did at first, but now I'm not so sure."

"Why?"
"If it were Moriarty, he would have made a move already, not just use Hatcher to plant the drugs or follow you. He's an exhibitionist. He loves to taunt or boast and he's done neither. In fact, I haven't had a text from Moriarty in months."

"So, there might be a new player, someone else who wants to hurt you."

"Unfortunately, that's not a short list."

"Well, we have to start somewhere. Did Mycroft give you any clues about where the drugs came from?"

"No, not yet."

"Okay, what about Hatcher? Where the hell has he been all these years? If we could track down where he was, we might find out who helped him."

"That could be dangerous."

"And living in limbo isn't?"

Sherlock considered him a few moments and then grinned. "You're saying turn it around and go after the man who is coming after us."

"Yes."

"Excellent."

John asked, "But where do we start?"

"We start with calling my brother and going through Hatcher's effects."

"How will that help us?"

"Clothes tell a story, John. It's time we find out what Hatcher's clothes can tell us about where he's been for six years."

"And then?"

"Then we track down his keeper."

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Music, if he could call it that, filled the room. It had gone on for hours and was like listening to nails on a chalkboard. John normally loved hearing Sherlock play, but not like that, not with wild screeches and sounds that were more noise than melody. After the last note, Sherlock stood still, the bow poised in midair. John asked, "You all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Sherlock put the instrument back in its case and John stepped closer but didn't touch. "It's not your fault."

"Of course it's my fault. Inez would still be alive if I hadn't sent her out uninformed about the dangers of working on this case."

"You had no reason to believe..."
"I had every reason to believe it could be deadly, John. I might as well have killed her myself."

"You're not accountable for what other people do, Sherlock. She chose to do the work and the killer is responsible for her death, not you."

Instead of answering, Sherlock turned his back and stared out the window. It had been four tough days since the search began. They still only had a handful of clues and the nicotine patches were running low. John had rarely seen Sherlock so frustrated and closed in on himself.

John said, "You shouldn't stand in front of the window like that. There could be a sniper."

"No, it won't happen like that."

"You can't know that."

"I can. If he'd wanted to shoot me, he could've done it a dozen times over. No, it'll be something else. He wants to hurt me first and then kill me personally."

"How can you be sure it's a man?"

"The probability that it's a woman is minuscule."

"Because most master criminals are men?"

"No, because the people who bear grudges against me are men."

"Maybe you should make a list."

"I have."

"I mean write it down so Lestrade, Mycroft, and I could go through it, too."

"Unnecessary."

Exasperated, John complained, "Sherlock, you're not in this alone. I don't know what else to do."

"Just trust me."

John frowned. Sherlock's voice wasn't right. It was tight, almost pleading, and incredibly sad. John replied, "Of course I trust you." He stepped next to Sherlock by the window and put his hand on his arm. "What is it?"

"Irony, John. In her death, Inez has given me far more than she could have if she had lived."

"I don't understand."

"The way she was killed, her throat sliced at a certain angle and with a specific kind of blade, and the way she was hung up for display, I've seen it before."

Stunned, John whispered, "What?"

"I'm actually surprised that Lestrade didn't remember. He nearly arrested me for a murder identical to this one."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I told you that when I was a slave, my owner was killed during a poker game."
"And you said the killer was an idiot and arrested."

"Yes. That's the one."

"This can't be the same killer."

"It's not. It's his brother."

"How can you know that?"

Sherlock pulled away and paced, his head down, his hands moving like he was directing a symphony. John stood and waited. From experience he knew, Sherlock had to tell him in his own way and in his own time. "After I saw Inez at the scene, I suspected, but I couldn't be sure. I didn't want to believe that after all this time it could be true. Then I checked the records. The man who was convicted of the murder was killed in prison two months ago."

"Then it couldn't be him."

"I never suspected it would be. I believe it's his brother, Karl Stanley. He's the head of one of the biggest prostitution and drug syndicates in the city."

John's mouth went dry. "And you're sure?"

Sherlock stopped walking back and forth and met John's worried gaze. "I'm as sure as I can be with the evidence. Stanley's brother, David, was the one arrested. David was a hedonist and didn't really do more than bleed funds from his brother's business. He was also a sexual sadist. He enjoyed using a blade on his victims. That's why he was so easy to convict for the murder."

Still confused, John asked, "But why wait all this time to get revenge?"

"I'm not sure. I assume it's because Stanley didn't mind his brother being in prison. It actually was more convenient than having him draw attention to the business. Stanley was also a close friend of Hatcher's and one of the few people Hatcher didn't owe. I assume that's why Stanley helped him disappear like he did."

"I still don't understand."

"It's a matter of honor that Karl take action against me. He sees me as the reason his brother died in prison."

"Why not kill the man who killed his brother instead?"

"Oh, that's already been done. The man was knifed in the shower. That report came through this morning."

John took a deep breath, processing all the information. "How long have you known this?"

"I've been formulating the details since the crime scene with Inez."

"And why couldn't you tell me?"

"It's difficult."

"I don't understand."

"This is something I need to handle alone."
John shook his head, suddenly furious. It was just like Sherlock to pull that kind of shit, to take off and do everything on his fucking own. "Not on your life."

"John, I need to do this."

"Not alone." The air sucked out of the room and John stepped over to Sherlock, wrapping his arms tightly around his middle. "Never alone."

Sherlock's tense body relaxed slightly and strong arms eventually returned the embrace, drawing John in even closer. "You know I'm right."

It was hard to speak, his tongue lazy and too big for his mouth. "No."

"John..."

"I said no and I meant it. I won't lose you."

"And I won't risk losing you, either."

"Stalemate." John took several deep breaths. "We're either in this together or we're not. I can't be left on the sidelines while you go off to play hero."

"I'm no hero, John."

"No, you're an idiot if you think I'm going to let you tackle this bastard on your own."

Sherlock hugged him tighter, his voice thick with emotion. "This is why I didn't want to tell you. I had it all planned out in my head."

"I refuse to go to your funeral. So, you'd better come up with a plan B, one that includes us taking that bastard down. Better yet, come up with one that will put his arse in the ground."

Sherlock pulled back and John witnessed a magnificent smile. "John, you're a genius!"

As Sherlock went for his cell phone, John choked back a tear. He knew in his heart that it had been a near thing, that Sherlock had almost gone off on his own to sacrifice himself to save them all. Sherlock Holmes was the idiot hero, his one true love.

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"Karl Bleeding Stanley. You're out of your fucking mind."

"You know I'm right." Standing in Lestrade's office, Sherlock studied his friend's anxious features, noted the fatigue lining his face and the dark circles under his eyes. "You've known since you saw the girl."

Lestrade ran a nervous hand through his thick, grey hair. "I was hoping I was wrong."

"You're not wrong. He's the one behind her murder. He's the one who's had his men following you and John."

Lestrade looked up, startled. "How did you know about... Oh, never mind. It all makes sense now. Stanley's after you and to get there he wants to leave a trail of bodies, preferably of people you care about. Am I right?"

"Yes. Inez was the first only because she stumbled upon evidence of his involvement."
"And the way he killed her, that was a message to everyone else to stay out of his business. It's his trademark. This isn't some street dealer, Sherlock. This is one of the biggest criminals in the country and we've never been able to pin anything on him, the bastard."

"That's going to change. By the time we finish, he'll either be in jail or dead."

Intense brown eyes studied him and Sherlock defiantly stared right back. He had a plan and Lestrade wasn't going to keep him from doing what he needed to do to stop Stanley. Lestrade finally said, "Do I want to know?"

"I need your help."

"Is it legal?"

"I suppose that would depend on your definition of legal."

"Fuck."

Sherlock stood a bit taller. "We can do it without you. My brother will be involved as well. Still, having you oversee the details involving the police would make it go smoother."

"And your brother is all right with this plan?"

"He will be once I tell him."

"Bloody hell."

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"I forbid you."

Sherlock smirked. "Like that's ever worked."

Mycroft huffed his complaint. "You don't understand the difficulty this causes."

"I understand completely. If Stanley thinks I'm dead, he'll come out in the open. He'll want to be sure."

"He could send someone."

"No, he'll want a front row seat at my funeral."

Mycroft pinched the bridge of his nose. "Sherlock, for this to be effective, you've got to make everyone believe you're actually dead, including Mummy. Do you have any idea what that will do?"

"Very little I would assume. I've been pretty much dead to her for some time."

"That's just cruel and patently untrue."

"Help me or I'll do it myself."

"What does John say about all this?"

"It's going to be a double funeral."

Mycroft's eyes grew wide with dismay. "You can't be serious."
"It's the only way. He's a terrible liar. He'd never convince anyone that he was grieving."

"But what about his mother and sister?"

"We're still arguing about that. He wants to tell them."

"Well, of course he does. You can't let them believe that he's dead. That's just inhumane."

"When have you cared about being humane?"

Mycroft snapped back, "Since you decided to make them part of our family."

Sherlock reluctantly yielded. "Very well. They can be told, but they can't come to the funeral. I don't know how they would be at feigning their grief."

"You really are a cold-hearted bastard sometimes."

"You're one to talk."

Mycroft paced his office twice and then turned to face Sherlock. "I have an alternative plan, one that won't require you to fake your deaths. It should be just as effective and require a lot less paperwork once it's over."

Leave it to Mycroft to worry about the paperwork angle. That said, he might have a point. "I'm listening."

"Instead of you two dying in the wreck, you and John will be admitted to hospital in critical condition. Wouldn't Stanley be more likely to come there and expose himself rather than going to the morgue or funeral? After all, the chance to actually kill you himself would be far more enticing than just verifying your death."

Sherlock frowned and considered his brother's proposal. It would save him from having to fool his mother and friends into thinking they were dead. It might be considerably more charitable to take a less severe course of action. Still, it would be tricky. Any leak in security would spoil the whole thing. "I assume you would help make the arrangements."

"I will, yes."

"Lestrade can help. He's could be useful."

"Yes. I'll coordinate with him."

Sherlock made up his mind. For once in his life, Mycroft actually turned out to be keener at understanding the criminal mentality than Sherlock expected. "I'll talk to John, but it should work."

"We can start first thing in the morning. The sooner this Stanley person is stopped, the sooner I can get back to focusing on my actual job."

"And I can get on with marrying John."

"Well, let's hope you get the chance."

Sherlock tilted his head, analyzing his brother's words and tonal qualities. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were developing feelings."

"Now, you're just being insulting." Mycroft waved a hand of dismissal. "Go home and bother John."
I have work to do."

Sherlock grinned and stood up. The next best thing to solving a crime was annoying his brother. "I could stay and help you with the details."

"Not if you want me to get anything done and still be ready in the morning. Now go before I change my mind."

Sherlock noted the flicker of a smile and realized that despite a schedule stuffed with paperwork and meetings, his brother enjoyed danger and fieldwork as much as he did. Of course, Sherlock would enjoy it a lot more once Stanley was put away or put down, whichever they could manage. Stanley would pay for killing Inez and so many other crimes. He would see to it. If that meant an execution instead of an arrest, Sherlock could live with that.

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John had to admit that lying in a hospital bed beat being stuck in a coffin, but not by much. He lay practically naked under the sheet, pretend IVs taped to his arms, leads to monitors with fake readings stuck to his chest. He had a miniature earpiece in his left ear, so he could hear the status of the guards. He listened to Mycroft, and Lestrade as they coordinated the operation, the extent of which was very impressive. What he couldn't do was talk freely to Sherlock who was in a similar condition in the other bed. In his partner's words, for verisimilitude sake, they needed to pretend to be as near to death as possible in order to lure Stanley in to make his move.

The news of their car crash had swamped the local news and internet. However, information about their critical condition was closely guarded. If Stanley wanted to find out about Sherlock, he'd have to come in on his own. Or at least that was the plan at the moment. It had been six hours since their arrival and so far nothing had happened other than being bored and uncomfortable.

John lay very still as the technician, a woman not in on the plan, actually took blood from his right arm. Apparently, it was important that as few staff as possible knew the reality of their situation. All the doctors and nurses attending to them in the critical care unit were Mycroft's agents, but not the lab techs. It was a major oversight John would discuss with Mycroft later.

He understood why all the attention to detail was important, he did. However, he drew the line at using a catheter and his bladder was next to bursting. As soon as the woman left with his blood, he muttered under his breath to Sherlock. "I have to piss."

"You should have thought of that before."

"I didn't have to go before."

"You'll just have to wait. Mind over matter, John."

"Easy for you to say."

"Not at all. I've needed to urinate for nearly two hours now and you don't hear me complaining. Now, be quiet."

John fumed for a few more minutes, working very hard to ignore the growing urgency of his bladder. Finally, he said, "I could use the urinal if we had a nurse."

Sherlock sighed heavily and gave in. "Mycroft, send in one of yours."

After a moment, John heard Mycroft answer, "You'll have to wait. We've just had a sighting in the
car garage. Stanley is on his way inside."

John tensed, the need to go suddenly forgotten. The game was on. "Are they sure it's Stanley?"

Mycroft answered, "Yes. He's not even trying to disguise himself. Apparently, he's arranged for one of his minions to be admitted in the unit next to yours. Unfortunately for his man, his injuries aren't make believe."

Lestradaed added, his voice strained, "He's on the elevator. Be prepared within the next few minutes. He's checking security. If we're lucky, he'll see what we want him to see, which is you're both unprotected."

Mycroft chimed in, "He's also paid off two of my agents to enter without obstruction. He's been very thorough so far. Be prepared, Dear Brother."

Sherlock whispered to John, "He'll likely go to you first. Be ready."

John left hand tightened on the grip of the gun, the one Mycroft had issued to him legally. He was more than ready to blow the bastard away at the first sign of the blade or any other weapon. Sherlock was convinced he'd strike with a knife. John wasn't so sure and was prepared for other options.

The intensity of the waiting reminded him of the desert, of the hours of just crouching in the blistering heat while the enemy made up its mind when to attack. War was 24/7 and waiting was a huge part of that equation. It was nerve wracking and exhilarating at the same time. John went on alert when he heard the door open and saw a short man in a brown suit walk in.

It was show time, finally.

Dark-haired but balding, Stanley stood at the end of Sherlock's bed first. With one eye slightly open, John could see him check the monitors for both men. The readings said they were close to death's door and barely breathing. It took all his control not to shoot Stanley when he smirked and started talking. "Well, it seems the London traffic has nearly done my job for me. What a shame, too. I wanted you to be awake and aware of what I plan to do to your partner. It won't be nearly as much fun if you can't watch."

John wasn't quite sure how Sherlock managed to remain so eerily still, but he did. The man's expression shifted and became hawk-like as he moved to John's bedside, the knife drawn and in his right hand. He didn't even bother to talk, just moved to slit John's throat. It was the easiest shot John ever made. Stanley eyes went wide in shock. As the knife suddenly sliced downward, John shot a second time, but not before the razor's edge cut open the inside of his right forearm.

Stanley's body slumped to the floor and John bitched, "Well fuck."

Sherlock was up and out of bed in a heartbeat, his face pale when he saw the gaping wound. He pushed the dead body aside and grabbed up his own sheet, using it to staunch the blood. As a crowd of men rushed into the room, Sherlock snapped at John, "You idiot! You were supposed to shoot him before he had a chance to hurt you."

"I love you, too. Can I piss now?" The world went a little dark around the edges, but John was sure he saw Sherlock smile.

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"Well, that was a damn sight more exciting than a stag." They were sitting in the local pub and
Lestrade raised his pint for a toast. "I'm glad the bastard's dead. Sad to say, there'll be another in his place before he's buried."

John nodded in agreement and clinked his glass in commiseration. "No doubt."

Crime never ended and the police walked in legal quicksand far too often. Sherlock had the right idea, skirt the official edges and get the job done with as little red tape as possible.

The news went out that the accident victims previously reported as Holmes and Watson were misidentified. John's blog nearly crashed from all the well wishes and oh my gods. He felt bad about the deception, but only a little. He had to admit that it was nice that so many people worried about them. It was all worth it to get rid of the man making their lives miserable.

Lestrade interrupted his thoughts and motioned to the bandage. "How's the arm?"

"Fine."

Sherlock protested, his voice short and accusing. "It's not fine. You had to have surgery and have twenty stitches."

John patted Sherlock's arm, aware that his partner was still upset about his miscalculation with the knife. Sherlock could take a thousand risks and think nothing of it, but let John do just one little thing out of line and he made a hell of a fuss. "But it's fine now, Sherlock. It was just minor surgery."

"Vascular surgery, John. Don't minimize the damage."

"Well, it's over now and it should be healed soon enough. I've had worse." John didn't elaborate. He didn't have to. Sherlock had a whole mental catalog of all his injuries. He changed the subject. "So, Lestrade, how did you like working with Sherlock's brother?"

Oddly, Lestrade shifted nervously in his chair, looking at John, but avoiding Sherlock's gaze. "It was good, very enlightening. He knows what he's about, that's for sure."

Sherlock's eyes narrowed with suspicion and he asked, "Did he ask you to quit the Yard and come work for him?"

Lestrade frowned and shook his head. "No, nothing like that."

Sherlock studied his friend for less than ten seconds and sat up straighter in surprise. "Dear God, tell me you said no."

John looked back and forth between Sherlock and Lestrade, completely lost. "What? What's happened?"

Unconvincingly, Lestrade said, "Nothing."

Sherlock countered, "My brother has made an advance."

Still not taking it in, John asked, "Advance? What kind of advance?"

Lestrade made it clear for him. "He asked me out."

Shocked, John asked, "On a date?"

"Yeah."
Sherlock huffed in irritation. "Surely you're not entertaining such a suggestion. What about your wife?"

"As you well know, my wife has been gone for months now."

Sherlock's expression softened. "I did know that, yes, but I thought you had continued your efforts to win her back."

"Yeah, for all the good it did, which was sod all."

John was still processing what he'd heard, still stuck on the unbelievable part. "Mycroft's gay? Since when?"

Sherlock snapped, "All his life. He did, of course, try to appease Mummy by dating women, but it was all a farce."

"Jesus, does your mum know?"

"Of course, she does. She's not as oblivious as he thinks. I don't know why he continues to delude himself into believing otherwise."

John covered his face with his left hand. The woman who hated homosexuality had two gay sons. Karma was a bitch after all. He turned his attention back to Greg. "So, you're bi then?"

"Yeah, same as you, I guess."

John frowned, still blown away with the thought of Lestrade being desperate enough to consider going out with Sherlock's brother. "So, you're seriously thinking about dating Mycroft?"

"You don't think I should?"

Lestrade aimed the question at John, but Sherlock answered quickly, "Definitely not."

"Why not?"

"Because he can't be trusted."

"He saved your ass on more than one occasion. Besides, it's my choice."

Sherlock glared, not the least bit persuaded. "You're my friend, not his."

Lestrade sat back with a short laugh. "So if I'm your friend, I can't be his?"

"Exactly."

John had seen that determined face on his partner before and it wasn't pretty. He put a hand on Sherlock's arm. "You can't tell him not to do it."

"Why not?"

"Because it's his choice."

"It's a ridiculous choice." Sherlock turned his fierceness back on Lestrade. "What in the world could you possibly see in my brother?"

"He's brilliant for one. He's got eloquence and charm. He powerful, but not overbearing. He listens
and he understands what I do, knows how hard it is. I like him."

"Dear god, you're going to date my brother."

"I haven't decided."

"Yes, you have."

Lestrade let out a big breath, one he seemed to have held for a long time. "It's mad, I know."

John chimed in. "I don't trust Mycroft, not in general, but he did help my sister and mum and he's kept us alive more than once."

Sherlock looked in his direction and mumbled, "John, stop."

"Let me finish." John focused on Lestrade. "I just think if you do date him, do it with your eyes open. For everything he says, there's a reason, some kind of manipulation to get what he wants. If he's decided that's you, you have to be bloody careful not to walk into a trap. On the other hand, if you want to do it and you don't, you'll always wonder what you missed."

Lestrade took a long drink of ale before he answered. "This might all be a moot point. He might've just been taking the piss."

"My brother doesn't take the piss, I assure you, Lestrade. If he wants to date you, he will be incredibly and annoyingly persistent. You must make your position clear and deny him."

"You don't understand."

"Of course I do. You're lonely." Sherlock ignored the pain that flitted across Lestrade's face and worked harder to make his point. "He knows about your wife. He knows you're vulnerable right now and he's using that. He's always found you attractive, but you've not been truly available until now."

Lestrade latched on to the most important part of the statement. "He's thinks I'm attractive?"

Sherlock closed his eyes and sighed in frustration. "John, please tell him this is a horrible idea."

"It is a horrible idea, but it's up to Greg, not us."

Sherlock groused, "You're not helping."

Lestrade complained, "He's being a good friend, that's what. You, on the other hand, don't appreciate your own brother."

"That's because I know him better than you do." Sherlock paused and then put on his most sincere face. "He's not who he appears to be, Lestrade. He's more dangerous than you could possibly know."

"You don't think I know that already? I know who he is and what he is."

Sherlock's eyes narrowed with a quick and incredible focus. "You can't possibly know."

Greg leaned in, his voice just above a whisper. "I know that he's more than just a low level government official. He's got power, Sherlock, a lot of power. I'm not stupid. I know about your family and what they do. I've known for years."
Even John sat up with that announcement, suddenly curious. "What is it you think you know?"

Sherlock’s hand went up as a warning to Lestrade. "Don't answer that question. If you want to date my brother, do it, but just know I don't approve."

"You've made that bloody well clear."

John interrupted. "Wait, I want to know what he knows about your family."

Sherlock eyes actually shifted to the side, avoiding John's gaze. John asked again, "Sherlock, what's this about?"

"We'll talk about it later."

Lestrade gave a low whistle. "Are you telling me he doesn't know."

"Shut up, Inspector. We'll be going now."

John complained as Sherlock physically pulled him up and out of his seat by his left arm. "Hang on." He wasn't about to be manhandled in public, not when the conversation took such an interesting turn. "I want to hear what he has to say."

"We're going home, John."

Standing his ground, John shook his head. "I don't think so."

Sherlock dipped closer and whispered in John's ear. "I'll tell you everything, but not here, not now."

John relented. "Okay." He turned and said, "Lestrade, we'll talk later."

His friend's worried expression made John wonder what the hell he knew that John didn't. Whatever it was, it made Sherlock more than a little antsy and disturbed. So, it was definitely something big, something Sherlock feared would change his feelings, like that could ever happen.

It wasn't like he hadn't wondered about Sherlock's family, especially after meeting his mother, but now he wasn't sure he really wanted to know. Ignorance was bliss, but knowledge was power. Would Sherlock's secret strengthen their lives or destroy them? As he followed his lover out of the pub, his heart filled with dread and hope at the same time.

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"Enough with the tea, Sherlock. Just tell me."

"You don't understand."

Sherlock paced the room and hadn't sat down since they returned home. He even made the tea, no doubt to delay what had to be said. John stated calmly, "You won't be telling me anything I don't suspect."

That stopped Sherlock in his tracks as he stared at John warily. "What is it you suspect?"

"Well, you've taught me a few things about observing since we've been together."

"I should hope so."

"And Mycroft's able to do a lot of things that he shouldn't be able to do such as arrange an
operation like the one we just had, or get a placement for Harry overnight, or have access to my top secret records. Like Lestrade said, he's got power."

Sherlock relaxed slightly and nodded. "Yes, more than he should have."

"And it's because of your parents?"

"John, what I'm about to tell you is something I rarely talk about."

"Are you ashamed of it?"

Sherlock looked surprised by the question. "What? No, not ashamed, just uncomfortable. It's not something I ever wanted to be part of despite the constant pressure from Mycroft and my parents."

"You say parents. So your father was involved, too?"

"Oh, yes. He died when I was twelve on a mission."

John stiffened at the word mission, the word that had guided some of the best and worst moments of his life. "What kind of mission?"

"One he shouldn't have undertaken." Sherlock took a deep breath and paced again, this time not as frantically. "I should start further back to give you some perspective about how entrenched my family is with this business."

"All right." His mouth suddenly dry, John wet his lower lip. "Go ahead."

Sherlock stood still and crossed his arms before he told his story. "What you're about to hear is classified and only known in certain circles, one of which is the royal circle. The other is includes the backrooms of government."

Suddenly more uncomfortable, John asked, "Do I even have clearance to hear this?"

"You're going to be my husband, so if you don't have it now, you will have. I'll make sure of it."

"And Mycroft can do that, too?"

"Oh, yes, he can do just about anything. I did tell you that he ran the government and was one of the most dangerous men. I just didn't say which government."

A sharp pain stabbed just over John's left eye. He rubbed his forehead harder to ease the growing tension. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Over a century ago it was decided that there were things that needed doing in order to keep peace and a balance of power in our country, things that the public shouldn't know about. My family was involved from the beginning, making sure certain deals happened and others didn't. Alliances were formed around the world as the organization and purpose expanded. This is presently an international effort, not just here in the United Kingdom. By the time my father came to power, he had connections that make prime ministers and presidents envious. When he married my mother, she was one of his top agents out of France. She moved up in rank and power with the union and even further with his death."

Just the prelude sounded like bestseller spy fiction, but knowing Sherlock, John knew damn well it was real, every farfetched word of it. He pushed away and ignored the immense implications that jabbered in his head. "You said he died on a mission."
"He wasn't an agent like my mother. While he was an effective negotiator and administrator, he had no real talent in the field. He didn't follow the protocol of sending more experienced representatives and was assassinated while trying to expand the underground out of Russia. My mother then stepped into his position. She's run it for decades, grooming Mycroft to take over. He has nearly complete power now and will have it all with her death."

John could hardly form the words. "What you're talking about is a secret government."

"Yes."

"But how is that possible? The public..."

"Believe what they're told. You worked Black Ops, John. You know how it works. The people in power decide what is exposed to the public and what isn't. You've got a duffle bag of secret medals to prove it."

"My god." John wiped his face with both hands, stunned by the magnitude of what Sherlock had told him. "And you said the royals know?"

"The Queen is a good friend to Mummy. Who do you think came in on that helicopter the weekend we were there?"

"Jesus."

"I'm not saying it's positive or negative, John. It just is. I've managed to stay out of it despite my family's constant harassment to join, but it's difficult. You see the type of classified cases Mycroft brings me. He does it hoping that I'll see the bigger picture, as he refers to it, and join the family business. It's something I have no desire to do. I'd rather stab my eyes out with hot pokers than sit behind a desk and be an overblown administrator like Mycroft."

"And all your wealth, did that come from manipulations of the market?"

"No, not that I'm aware of. Most of the original founders were wealthy. They've mostly managed to maintain that wealth by keeping the status quo."

"I see."

"Do you?"

"Yes, and I think you'd better get me that clearance as soon as possible." John shook his head, but it didn't really help ease the aching. "Poor Mycroft."

Sherlock lifted his eyebrow in surprise. "Why poor Mycroft?"

"The poor sod never had a chance."

Sitting down next to John, he took his hand. "He really didn't. Mummy can be quite forceful."

"I know that's right."

"It's just I've always wanted to think he had choices. Perhaps I was wrong."

"We always have a choice, but sometimes they're hard to see when we're blinded by conditioning started at such an early age."

"That's true."
"But that conditioning didn't take with you. Why not?"

"From the beginning I was a disappointment in that regard, or any regard really."

John cupped Sherlock's face with his hands, an incredible sadness washing through him. He fought down the growing rage against Sherlock's parents. "They were wrong, dead wrong. You're extraordinary. It's their loss if they couldn't appreciate it."

Sherlock finally relaxed and dropped his head to John's shoulder. "I wanted to tell you as soon as I realized my feelings, but I was fearful of what you might think."

One hand rested on Sherlock's back and the other ran through Sherlock’s curls as John kissed his neck. He whispered, "I think you're brilliant and damn lucky to be out of it."

Arms went around John as Sherlock hugged him. He lifted his head and then kissed him. John returned the favor, their tongues wrestling for dominance. Heat rushed through his body and John pulled back. "Let's go upstairs."

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"You told him."

"I had to."

Mycroft sat behind his desk and glanced at his watch as though he were late for a meeting. "I suspect you're right."

"I need to have his security clearance rating upgraded."

"Already done. I did that right before you came to see Mummy. I'm actually rather surprised you waited this long to inform him of the crucial details of our family situation."

Sherlock ignored that last bit of the statement and asked, "Did you manage to arrange the register for the ceremony?"

"I did, yes. It's set up for one on Sunday."

"Good."

When Sherlock didn't stand to leave, Mycroft asked bitterly, "Is this about Lestrade?"

Relieved that it was his brother who brought up the inspector first, he said, "Yes."

"My personal life is none of your business just like yours is none of mine."

"You've been meddling in my business for years."

"And how did that make you feel, Dear Brother?"

Sherlock halted formulating what argument he was going to give next and considered the question carefully. Perhaps they were, indeed, at a turning point in their relationship. Maybe if Mycroft finally got a personal life, he'd leave John and him alone. "I don't want you to hurt him."

"I don't plan to hurt him."

"You should also know that he thinks he knows about us."
Mycroft leaned forward, frowning. "Knows what about us?"

"I haven't asked, but he's not stupid. He's seen what you can do over the years. I'm sure he's put things together. Chances are he doesn't know the extent of your power, but he knows it's more than any lower government official should have." Sherlock paused and added, "If you are going to embark on a relationship, you should increase his security clearance as well."

"It's just a meal, Sherlock."

"I know you and I know Lestrade. You're not just a meal people. It will be more if you want more."

"And does Greg want more?"

"Possibly. He's vulnerable because of his wife's adultery and desertion. I don't want you taking advantage of that."

Mycroft considered him with amusement. "You act sincerely concerned for his welfare."

"He's my friend."

Mycroft scoffed in disbelief. "You don't have friends, not real friends."

"I do now."

Mycroft sat back in his chair again, obviously absorbing and processing his statement. "You've changed since you met John."

"I have, yes."

Uncomfortable, Mycroft avoided Sherlock's gaze. "It's not easy for me to admit that I envy what you have with John. Someday I'd like to think I might have the same with someone who might understand my position."

"And you think that someone might be Greg Lestrade?"

"Perhaps. I'd like to get to know him better."

"I'm sure you've had him vetted and have his file. You probably know when he was toilet trained and what he gave his mother for Christmas when he five."

"That's not what I mean and you know it. Besides, we're both single men in need of companionship."

Sherlock didn't want to think of his brother and Lestrade in that context, but he understood all too well what it meant to have someone to talk to, someone who wasn't a complete moron. He stood up. "Just know that if you harm him, I'll make your life miserable."

"More than you already do?"

"Oh, much more. I'll make it my mission in life."

"I'll take that under consideration."

Still not happy, but knowing he could do little to prevent it, Sherlock nodded and advised, "Go easy on the drink and avoid talking about his wife. Maudlin doesn't suit him."
"Understood."

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"You need a new suit."

"What? Why?"

"For the wedding."

John folded his newspaper and put it on the side table. "What's wrong with my blue one? I just got it back from the cleaners yesterday."

Sherlock hedged and didn't look up from his laptop. "Normally it would be perfectly fine. However, I'd like you to have a new one for the wedding."

Watching Sherlock as he tried to be diplomatic made it difficult for John not to laugh. Obviously it was something important to Sherlock, so he'd consider it. "You have one in mind?"

"Yes, I'm having several delivered so you can choose which one you like best. I also have a tailor's assistant coming later in the day to make any alterations on the one you select."

"You're pretty sure of yourself."

"I assumed you would be amenable. You've needed a new suit for a while."

John complained, "If it were up to you, I'd have a whole new wardrobe."

"I didn't say that."

"But it's true."

Sherlock shrugged. "Possibly, though I do like a few things you own."

"Like the things you bought me."

At the end of his patience, Sherlock declared, "I'm sorry, John, but your fashion sense, well, it's atrocious. You dress like an old man. You're attractive and your clothes should emphasize that."

The old man comment hurt, but John ignored it and focused on the attractive part. John teased, "What do I care? You like me with or without clothes."

Sherlock grinned in agreement, his eyes suddenly brighter. "Good point."

Back to the subject at hand, John asked, "What if I just want to go pick one off the rack?"

"Why would you?"

"Well, for one thing, I can buy a whole suit for what you're likely to pay for my shirt."

Sherlock closed down his computer and turned to focus on John. "It's not about the money."

Still feeling a bit stubborn, John argued, "I know, but you bought the rings. I should be able to buy my own suit."

"Well, you could, but I'd still want to go with you."
"I'm starting to feel insulted. You don't trust me to pick out my own clothes."

"It's easier if there's an objective eye."

"Yeah, right." John paused before he said, "I could just rent one and save a lot of trouble."

"Rent one? Seriously? You want to wear rental garb for our wedding?"

Sherlock looked so appalled, John put him out of his misery. "Of course not, though millions of people do, you know."

"That doesn't mean you should."

"All right, all right. If you want to help me pick out a suit, that's fine."

"So, you're saying you don't want to look at the ones I'm having delivered first?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"You do realize that if we do this your way, you're going to be required to actually go shopping. You hate shopping."

John frowned and scratched his head. "I hadn't really thought about that."

"It's not about picking just the right suit, John. There are all the accoutrements involved such as the undergarments, the shirt, the cufflinks, the shoes, and tie."

"I'm going to wear my Royal Army Medical Corps tie."

"Even so, it will be quite an investment in time. Dealing with sales staff alone will take hours, maybe even days to finish."

John hated dealing with sales staff, especially the posh kind and he was pretty sure that's what Sherlock had in mind. "And if I let you have one delivered, I don't have to do any of that?"

"No, I've already selected three of the best options. All you need to do is try them on and choose."

"No shopping for me then?"

"Correct."

"God, you're good."

Sherlock feigned innocence, like he didn't know what John was on about. "What?"

"You planned this."

Sherlock have a quick laugh. "Well, of course I did."

John sighed, but he wasn't really upset. He was used to Sherlock getting what he wanted, well, mostly. He didn't really mind, but it wouldn't do to let Sherlock get too cocky. "I'm not sure how I feel about you manipulating me like this."

"You don't mind, not when it's something you don't have strong feelings about."

"You think you know me pretty well, yeah?"
"I do, yes."

God, Sherlock was an arrogant sod. Sometimes it was just so annoying that he had good reason to be. "So, what I'm thinking right now?"

"That I'm arrogant with good reason."

John snorted. "You really are brilliant."

"I know."

The two piece Spencer Hart navy pinstripe made of fine wool fit John perfectly except for the length of the legs and arms. It was an easy alteration. Along with that, Sherlock had selected a blue silk shirt that would complement his Medical Corp tie. The stylish leather shoes were by Yves Saint Laurent and the platinum cufflinks had been specially made to have the Medical Corp emblem. Staring at his reflection in the full-length hall mirror, John had to admit that he looked damn good.

"And they say clothes don't make the man." The assistant was on his knees measuring John's inseam and having far too good a time with his hands. Luckily, Sherlock had gone to the loo.

John looked down, a bit pissed. "Do you mind?"

"This is an excellent selection, sir."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd finish your measuring without manhandling the goods."

In his early twenties and ginger-haired, the man flushed with embarrassment and stood up, marking down the measurement on his pad. "I'm sorry, sir. Sometimes one does have to be a bit personal when doing this job. It's important if you want a good fit."

John gave the man the benefit of the doubt and turned his attention back to the suit. He smoothed down the satin-lined lapel. "You think you can get it done in time?"

"Oh, no problem. There's really not much to do. We should have it back by tomorrow morning."

Sherlock spoke from behind them. "Excellent. I suggest you leave now. I'll call the store and have someone else come by for the suit and then deliver the finished product."

"But, sir, I..."

"You touched Dr. Watson inappropriately."

The young man's face got even darker, nearly as red as his hair. He came back on the defensive. "I was just doing my job."

"As you probably have done countless times and gotten away with it, but not this time."

Flustered, the young man took off out the door and down the stairs. John stared at Sherlock and shook his head in dry amusement. "Was that really necessary?"

"Groping a client is unprofessional."

"It could've been an accident, though I have to admit, it did feel like a grope."
"Go with your instinct, John. The man had designs that had nothing to do with fashion."

"I don't even know how you saw that. I thought you were in the loo."

"I was, but I witnessed enough to know what he was up to. He was certainly bold considering he knew I was in the flat."

"Imagine what he might have gotten up to if I'd been alone."

"Or if you'd been so inclined."

John snorted at such an outlandish suggestion. "He was barely out of his teens."

"Maybe so, but he wasn't blind." Sherlock stepped closer, his voice a bit deeper and his eyes darker. "You look magnificent. I knew you would."

John glanced back at the mirror, admiring the fine fit of the outfit. "It does look nice. You've got good taste."

Sherlock ran a teasing finger along John's jaw. "I certainly do and I'm not talking about the suit."

John shuddered at the touch. "You're a sweet talker."

Sherlock moved in behind John, his arms coming around to unbutton the jacket. John could feel Sherlock's erection against his backside. "I think it's time we took the suit off now."

John dropped his head back against Sherlock's chest, his own arousal growing. "I agree. Need any help?"

Sherlock nuzzled John's neck. "I think I can manage." Slowly, Sherlock slipped off the jacket and the shirt. Then when John toed off the shoes, Sherlock grinned and took the trousers down. John leaned back against the wall as Sherlock actually took time to hang up the clothes. He came back and drew John into his arms. "I'll call the store. They're usually very prompt about pickup and delivery."

John licked the side of Sherlock's throat and whispered, "Not too speedy, I hope."

"Not if I don't call them first."

"Good idea. I think I might want to take my time."

"Please do."

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John fiddled with his latest medical journal, opening and closing it several times before he gave up and tossed it on the table. Then he emptied the last drop from his tea mug and changed the channels about twenty times, going from one station to another without really paying attention to what was playing. Finally, Sherlock looked up from his microscope. "What is it?"

"What's what?"

"What's bothering you? You've been agitated since the phone call from your mother."

"I have not."
"John..."

Holding up one hand and scrubbing his face with the other, John admitted the problem. "Harry's coming to the ceremony and bringing Clara."

"I thought you wanted her to come."

"Of course I do."

"But you're still concerned."

"Well, yeah. I think it's too soon for her to leave rehab."

"I assume it's only briefly, just enough time to attend the ceremony."

"And the reception."

"Ah."

"I know she'll be there with Clara and Mum, but maybe we should rethink serving wine."

"I'm perfectly fine with that."

John met his gaze and smiled in relief. "Thanks." Then he continued, "I know the others might be upset, but..."

"There's nothing that says we have to serve alcohol at the reception."

"Most people expect it."

"Most people understand about alcohol addiction. If they know you, they probably know about your sister. It's not a problem."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely."

"I guess I should call Angelo and tell him there will be two more guests and to strike the booze from the menu. We're up to ten guests now." John made no move to pick up his cell phone.

Sherlock stepped into the sitting room, not satisfied with John's answers. "You're still nervous."

John stared out in front of him, not looking up. Sherlock saw way too much sometimes, things John really didn't want him to see. "We're getting married."

"Obviously."

"I mean, really and truly married."

"It's a civil union, but the legal rights amount to the same thing."

"I know, but..."

"But what?"

"Aren't you nervous?"
"Why would I be nervous? If it were up to me, we'd already be married. This ludicrous notion of waiting for fifteen days is an archaic nuisance."

John finally looked up. "So, you're not the least bit nervous, no cold feet or doubts that we're doing the right thing?"

Sherlock moved closer, frowning, suddenly unsettled. "Are you having doubts?"

"No, of course not."

"John..."

"Well, maybe a little." He had to force himself to say the next words. "I just worry that you'll get bored and then what?"

Sherlock grinned and reached out to play with John's hair. "You underestimate your appeal and my fascination."

"Fascination or obsession?"

"Semantics. I'll never grow bored with you, John. You're like a crime scene, full of hidden clues I've yet to uncover."

John frowned, not quite sure how to react. "You're comparing me to a crime scene?"

"I love crime scenes."

"I know, but..."

"But what?"

"Well, a crime scene? Really? That's what you think of when you think of how you feel about me?"

Sherlock sighed, at a loss to explain. Suddenly defensive, he said, "Insecurity doesn't suit you."

John snapped back, "It's normal to get cold feet before a wedding."

"But neither of us are normal. That's part of the appeal."

John relaxed as Sherlock caressed his face, his long fingers gently touching his skin. "You're right. Still, I can't help but worry sometimes that you'll find someone more interesting and want to upgrade."

Sherlock shook his head in disbelief. "Upgrade? You're not computer software."

"No, but I sometimes feel like an antique."

Sherlock scoffed, "Don't talk nonsense."

John didn't listen, just kept revealing his fears. "What happens when you keep fighting crime and I'm too old to jump across rooftops or go barreling down dark alleys. What then?"

"Then I'll likely be too old, too. It'll be time to retire and raise the bees."

"Bees?"
"I did tell you that was my plan."

John kissed Sherlock's lips gently and pulled back, their gazes locked. "I didn't think you meant it."

"I did, just like I mean this. I love you, John Watson, now and forever more."

Kissing led to John standing and pulling Sherlock over to the sofa for a frantic snog. Hands roamed as John pressed Sherlock down on his back, his tongue and lips making a map of Sherlock's neck and chest. Short of breath, John lifted his head. "I love you, too."

"I know."

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John protested, "But, Angelo, we don't want flowers."

"But you have to have flowers! It's a wedding reception! We need them all around and, of course, there are the centerpieces. My cousin, he's got his own shop. It won't cost a thing. It's all on me. All I need are what colors you prefer." The chef used his hands the whole time he spoke, like if they were tied down, he couldn't emphasize each and every point.

John shook his head in frustration. Before he could say anything else, Sherlock interrupted, "No flowers. John's allergic."

"Allergic?"

John confirmed it. "Yeah. I'd like to enjoy your delicious food, not sneeze my brains out."

The chef sighed, his voice full of regret. "Well, that's different, and how horrible, but of course, I understand completely. I've got an aunt who's allergic to flowers, poor woman. She can't even have a garden. Once...." Sherlock cleared his throat and Angelo got the hint to get back on track. He waved his hands in front of him in a wiping out motion. "No flowers. That's settled. So, you have ten guests now, yes?"

John answered, "Yes, and remember, no alcohol. I suppose we'll have tea and coffee, or soft drinks if they like."

"It's a shame you can't have the wine. Still, I have two uncles who can't even be around even a little bit of drink or they get totally wrecked, so it's best to err on the side of safety, yes? Family, what can we do?"

Sherlock answered, impatient and growing testy. "The menu, have you finished it?"

"I have. You told me to surprise you and I will."

Sherlock patted his shoulder. "I'm sure it will be excellent as always. You've not disappointed me yet."

"And I never will. Anything you want, all you have to do is ask."

John said, "We appreciate all you're doing, Angelo. Closing the restaurant and making all the food, it's incredibly generous."

"Without Mr. Holmes, I'd be in prison for life or worse. There's nothing I won't do for him and now you also." His face suddenly got brighter. "Oh, what about music? Will there be dancing? I can move the tables out of the way to make a nice dance floor."
Sherlock looked startled at the unexpected question. "Dancing?"

John teased, "Yeah, dancing, Sherlock. People dance at their own wedding."

"Not our wedding."

Angelo's disappointed face made another appearance. "No dancing?"

Sherlock pursed his lips in distaste, his voice earnest. "If John wants to dance, he can dance with Lestrade or his mother, not me."

John chuckled. "I think I'll pass. Just play what music you usually play. I like it. It reminds me of when we first came here."

"On your first date! Oh, yes, I remember like it was yesterday. It was so wonderful to see Mr. Holmes eat with company for a change. I was so worried he'd be alone forever."

Sherlock rolled his eyes dramatically as John said, "Well, he didn't exactly eat, but he did introduce me to your cooking."

"Then all is well." Angelo nodded even harder as he continued, "And the last bit of business is the cake. Not to brag, but I am one of the best pastry chefs in the city."

John grinned, "Oh, I know."

"So what kind of cake would you like to have? Do you want it to have a traditional look with the figurines on top or..."

Sherlock interrupted and asked, "Figurines?"

"Yes, you know, the bride and groom, though in this case I would use two grooms."

Sherlock stared at John despairingly and John got the message, loud and clear. "No figurines. I was hoping for your Italian cream cake."

Angelo beamed. "Excellent." He pinched his fingers together at his lips and blew a kiss. "It will be the best cake I ever made."

Sherlock stepped to the door, obviously anxious to leave. There was only so much wedding planning a stroppy consulting detective could take. John lingered and said, "I'm sure it will be. One more thing."

"Yes?"

John reached out to shake hands. "Thank you. You're a great friend."

With no hesitation, Angelo pulled John into a bear hug and sobbed tears of joy against his shoulder.

"Did you order something?"

"No."

Sherlock continued reading his fifth newspaper from the tall stack in front of him while John thanked the postal worker for the package. As soon as John shut the door, he frowned as he read
the return address on the box. "Are you sure?"

Sherlock looked up, finally curious. "What is it?"

"I don't know."

"Well, open it."

"You open it. It's addressed to you."

Sherlock took the package, read the labels, and sighed heavily. Instead of explaining, he said, "I need to go out for a few hours."

"Where are you going?"

"Just out."

"I'll come with you."

"No."

"No?"

Sherlock continued to hold the package at arms length, making no attempt to open it. "I need to deliver the contents to someone and I'm not sure how she'll react."

Completely baffled, John wondered who the hell she was. "She?"

"John..."

He knew he sounded pissy, but he harped anyway. "Don't John me. Just tell me what's in the package and why you're going somewhere to see some woman when we're supposed to be going out with Mike and Greg later."

"I'm not going to participate in that ridiculous stag tradition, John. I've already told you that."

"It's not a real stag. We're just going down to the pub for a few rounds with some mates. There won't be any porn or strippers, I promise."

"Custom has it that you're supposed to drink more than a few rounds, though I'd prefer you didn't. I want you sober and not suffering from the aftereffects of overindulgence on our wedding day or, more precisely, our wedding night."

John smiled at the mention of their wedding night, but then countered, "I don't plan to get drunk."

"You never do, but Lestrade and Stamford are both bad influences on that front. At any rate, I trust you to have the party without me. I have something else I have to do."

"What's more important that coming with me tonight?"

Sherlock put the box down on the coffee table. "I had Inez's ashes sent here. I plan to deliver them to her daughter."

All irritation gone, John stood very still. That certainly explained the grim expression on his lover's face. "You paid to have her cremated?"
"I owed her at least that much."

John sat down beside Sherlock and took his hand. "I'm sorry for being a prat, but I still don't know why you want to do it alone."

"Inez was estranged from her daughter, but she often talked about her and what caused the problems between them."

John should have been shocked that Sherlock took time to get to know so much about the members of his homeless network, but he wasn't. These were people nobody bothered with and didn't care about. Sherlock might have used them as a resource, but they were more than that to his partner, much more. He actually respected them as individuals, knew their history, their personal details. Sherlock had a connection with the network that he failed to have with most other people.

"You're worried that her daughter will reject the ashes?"

"Sentiment is complicated. It's often difficult to predict how people will respond to grief in particular. I thought it would be something her daughter would appreciate based on what Inez told me."

"Then that's all the more reason for me to come with you."

"While I appreciate your sincere wish to support me, this isn't your problem."

"I know that. It's just that I've been around enough grieving families to know that you just never know how they're going to react. Logic goes out the window. What we might see as a kindness, she might see as an intrusion. I really think I should be there just in case she reacts badly."

Sherlock studied him a long moment and squeezed his hand. "I'll endeavor to have you back promptly so you can still go out with your friends."

"They're our friends. Tell me the real reason you don't want to come with us tonight."

"It's not the reason you think."

Frowning, John asked, "How do you know what I think?"

"John, please."

"Okay, okay. I understand that you think that being social is boring and dull, but I enjoy it. I like people."

"I know you do. However, being boring is only part of the reason for my lack of participation."

Sherlock kissed his hand. "Drinking in excess, it's troublesome for me."

"Troublesome?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"It's a trigger for me."

John's eyes widened in surprise. "Really? I thought you only did cocaine."

"Not exclusively." John watched Sherlock struggle to find the right words. He didn't meet John's
gaze as he confessed, "I also periodically used morphine and alcohol. I find pubs problematic. I don't avoid them, because I know one can find useful information on cases, but I don't find them easy places to be."

John's mouth went dry as he thought of all the times they'd gone into pubs for their work. He knew it had to be difficult even for a man as strong as Sherlock. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I'm saying something now."

John shook his head, still confused. "But you drink. I've seen you have a few glasses of wine at dinner. You always seem fine."

"But you've never seen me inebriated. I always stop at two and that's deliberate."

John readjusted his view of Sherlock's addictions, adding new worries to his collection. "I guess I understand that, but what about me drinking? Will that bother you?"

"You don't drink that much or that often, so no, not usually."

"Not usually? So that means it has sometimes. When?"

"You were angry and came home under the influence."

John snorted at the vague description. Sherlock was usually far more specific. "That doesn't narrow it down. I've done that several times since I've lived here, and with good reason."

Sherlock took a moment before he finally answered, "It was the night after I called you limpy and you strenuously objected."

"Oh, yeah, the limpy night, I remember." John studied him and wondered about the difference. He asked, "So why was it a problem that night and not other times?"

"I don't know."

"No idea?"

"I just know that I was very tempted to use that night. I believe Mycroft refers to it as a danger night."

John racked his brain to remember the details more clearly and then he blinked several times in surprise when he recalled something very important. "I don't think it was me going out and drinking that bothered you that night."

"What do you mean?"

"That was the night after you and Mycroft argued about selling your uncle's castle."

Sherlock stilled and then slumped back against the sofa with the sudden realization. "Yes, it was." He closed his eyes as he said, "How stupid of me. I didn't make the connection."

John lovingly teased his fingers through Sherlock's curls. He kissed his cheek and then drew back. "It's not stupid to want to forget about that kind of thing."

"But it was so long ago and I was a child. It's incredibly annoying. How tedious."

"I know. It's like having an armory in your head, little grenades and time bombs rolling around
everywhere, ready to go off when you least expect it."

Sherlock turned his head and opened his eyes. He focused on John, a small smile on his face. "That's a particularly apt analogy."

"I have them from time-to-time."

"I still don't want to go to the stag."

"Not a problem."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely. Besides, how can we talk about you if you're there to object?"

Sherlock suddenly seemed genuinely intrigued. "Talk about me? Really?"

John ignored the question and stood up. He pulled Sherlock to his feet and said, "If we're going to deliver this, we should go now."

Sherlock face grew solemn as he picked up the box. "I'll get my coat."

"Well, that could've gone better." John entered the flat behind his glum partner.

Sherlock put the box on the desk and took off his coat, hanging it up instead of just dropping it anywhere. When he didn't respond to his comment, John asked, "You okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you were pretty much called a bastard and every other name in the book for trying to do something nice for a change."

"She has every right to be angry with me."

"No, she doesn't."

Sherlock pinched the bridge of his nose and stood in front of the window. "It's not up for discussion."

"Do you have a headache?"

"I'm fine."

John wasn't really in the mood to go out anymore. "I should stay home."

"No. You go and have a good time."

"But..."

"Honestly, John, I need some time alone. I need quiet."

Startled at the vehemence of the plea, John agreed without an argument. "Oh, okay."

John stared at the box a few extra seconds. "So, what are you going to do with her ashes now?"

Sherlock still didn't answer, so John stepped over and put his hand on his arm. "Sherlock?"
He covered John's hand with his before he spoke. "I'd like to take them with us to Sussex. She would've liked it there. There's a particularly pleasant spot near a stream where I'd like to spread them in her honor."

Sentiment influenced his friend far more than he ever admitted. Sherlock might fool himself and a dozen others, but not John. "That's sounds like a good plan."

"You don't mind?"

"Of course not. She was your friend."

After a brief silence, John changed the subject. "Speaking of Sussex, how are we getting there tomorrow?"

"I've hired a car. It will be here tomorrow to take us to Angelo's and then to the house later."

"You mean you've hired a driver, too?"

"Just for tomorrow. We can rent a car for the week when we get there."

"I could drive us."

Sherlock turned and smirked. "Do you really think we could make it all the way to Sussex without you being distracted? We would end up in a ditch and never hear the end of it, especially from Mycroft and Lestrade."

John couldn't imagined Sherlock keeping his hands to himself for the whole drive. He rather liked the idea of getting a head start on the honeymoon. Some of their best moments had been in the backseat of a moving car. "Good point."

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"Cheers!" Greg and Mike joined their voices as they lifted their glasses.

Greg added, "Here's to the bravest man on the planet."

John grinned, knowing what they'd say, but asking the question anyway. "And why am I the bravest man on the planet?"

Mike and Greg did a chorus, just like they had done five times before. "Because you're marrying Sherlock Bloody Holmes!"

John laughed and raised his own glass. "You don't know what you're missing." He took a sip and then put it down, still wearing a huge smile.

Mike gave Greg a nudge with his elbow. "He's a mad bastard in public. I don't want to think about what he gets up to in private." Mike stuffed his face with more fried chips, his third helping. John hated to imagine what his arteries looked like or how his heart would manage a few years down the line. John might not be a practicing doctor anymore, but it was hard to cut out the rundown in his head of health risks, especially when it came to his friends.

His friends were ordering up their fourth round of drinks and John still nursed the first one. "You know, I do expect you two to be able to stand up tomorrow without passing out during the ceremony."

Greg, already a bit glassy-eyed, gave a lopsided grin. His words were slightly slurred. "Never fear.
We coppers have hollow legs."

"And hollow heads to hear Sherlock tell it." Mike guffawed at his own hilarious joke. He held up a hand for another serving of chips.

Greg's happy face melted away as he defended the good name of the force. "Granted some of my lot are pretty dim. Take Dimmock for instance..."

"No, thanks." John failed to keep the contempt out of his voice. "And Anderson's no better."

"True, but I still have to work with the wankers. Sherlock doesn't make it easy. He's an arrogant sod and doesn't mind letting everyone around him know that he knows more than we ever will."

John became defensive. "If it weren't for Sherlock, your job would be a lot harder. He's solved some of your biggest cases."

Greg nodded and wiped the foam from his upper lip with the back of his hand. "He's brilliant, I'll give him that. But then you know what's he's like."

Nobody knew Sherlock like John did and he was happy to keep it that way. "I do, yes."

Greg patted John on his shoulder. "I don't know how you do it, mate, but thanks."

"Do what?"

"You make him easier to deal with."

"Do I?"

"Before you, well, let's say there were weekly wagers on how long it would take before one of my guys took out a hit."

Mike chuckled and then covered a big burp. "He brings out the best in people, our Sherlock."

John shrugged and said rather smugly, "I wouldn't have him any other way."

"That's good because he's not likely to change just because you put a ring on his finger." Greg looked befuddled and slightly panicked for a minute, patting down his pockets before he asked, "Did he give me the ring yet?"

"No, we're not giving those out until tomorrow right before the ceremony."

Relieved, Greg took another big swig. "Good, because my life would be useless if I lost the bloody thing."

Mike joined in. "I'll drink to that." And he did.

John glanced at the clock. It was only ten and his two best friends were already on the wrong side of sober. "Maybe it's time for a cab."

Both shook their heads. Greg protested first. "You need to at least find someone for a final dance before you join the ranks of the poor married sods of the world. You do know that Sherlock doesn't dance, right?"

"I do know that. Why is that? He'd be a great dancer."
Greg stilled, the humor and color drained from his face. "Fuck. I shouldn't have said that. It's nothing."

John leaned in and insisted. "What? You can't say something like that and not tell me."

"Seriously, John. If he wanted you to know, he'd tell you. It's not for me to say. Me and my big gob. Fuck me."

Uneasy, John let it go, playing it off as not important. In the back of his mind, he knew he would have to talk to Sherlock about it later. "All right then. I think it's time to call it a night. I'll pay for the cabs."

Mike waved off John's attempt to hand him money. "No, we're fine. We'll make it home on our own, right, Greg?"

John asked again, "You're sure?"

Greg nodded, "We're sure." Greg stood up and gave John a big hug and whispered in his ear. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say anything about the dancing. I'm an idiot."

John patted him on the back good-naturedly and pulled away. "It's fine." But he knew in his heart it wasn't.

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"You're sober and home remarkably early."

"Greg and Mike were getting sloppy. I decided it was best to end it before I had to ship them home in body bags, especially Mike. He's going to be in for a world of hurt in the morning."

"I did warn you."

"So you did."

Sherlock glanced up from his microscope and frowned. "What's wrong?"

John punched the Union Jack pillow a few times and then settled on the sofa. His left hand rubbed and worried his chin as he shook his head. "Nothing."

"Your tone and body language say differently. Did something unexpected happen?"

John thought he might as well ask. He was lousy at hiding anything from Sherlock. "Why don't you dance?"

Sherlock suddenly stood up straighter before carefully removing the slide from the microscope. He put it his specimen box for further examination later. "Lestrade said something."

"He did." John sat and waited. It took several long minutes before Sherlock finally came out of the kitchen and sat down beside him. John said, "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"It shouldn't come as a surprise to you that I'm a very good dancer."

"But you said you don't dance."

"Not now, no." Sherlock leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together. "It was a long time ago."
John sighed, his chest too tight, and closed his eyes. He hated the images forming in his mind. He said quietly, "You danced for the customers."

"I did, yes. Exotic dancing was like advertising and I was particularly talented."

"Jesus."

"I did enjoy dancing while I was doing it. I found I could close my eyes and lose myself in the physical nature of it. Unfortunately, those respites only lasted as long as it took for someone to choose me for his nightly companion. I never danced long."

John put a comforting hand on Sherlock's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"I'm surprised Lestrade said anything."

"It was an accident."

"Drinking too much has that effect."

"If it's any comfort, he's sorry. I could tell the second he said it, he wanted to take it back."

"Like so many things, that's not possible."

John reached out, took Sherlock's hand, and then drew him into a hug. Sherlock's head rested on his chest. He spoke quietly, willing all the comfort he could muster into the body of the man in his arms. "It doesn't matter to me what you did then, only what you do now."

"You say that, but is it that easy to dismiss my past?"

"It's not easy. I'm not saying that. I hate that you went through it, but I'm not judging you for it."

Sherlock lifted his head and met John's gaze, his eyes wide with amazement. "You mean that."

"Of course I do."

"I mean, you really mean it. Listening to your heart, I know you're telling the truth."

John frowned and realized the full impact of what Sherlock had just said. "You really thought I judged you because of your past?"

"I wasn't sure. Nobody has ever dismissed it as completely as you have."

"I'm not dismissing it or forgiving it. It's not my place to do either." John pulled Sherlock's head back down, holding him close. He rested his chin in the nest of Sherlock's curls. "We can't change the past. We can only learn from it and hope to avoid repeating it."

"I'll never repeat it, John. I'd rather die first."

John hugged Sherlock tighter and whispered, "I know."

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John straightened his tie and admired the finished look in the mirror. He struck an exaggerated pose and grinned like the sexy men in the fashion magazines. "Well, fuck me. I would."

"As would I." Sherlock moved to stand beside him in the hallway. "You look remarkable, John."
John turned and gave Sherlock his best full-body onceover, starting from the top to the bottom, and then back to the glorious face. The man was decked out in a Spencer Hart suit much like his own. He wore a dark purple silk shirt and a navy tie. He could strut down any runway in the world and be a rock star. John let out a low wolf whistle. "You're bloody gorgeous."

Sherlock turned toward the mirror, checking out both their reflections. "I must admit we make a striking couple."

"We do." John reached into his pocket and handed Sherlock a small red box. "Here, this is for you."

Sherlock frowned, unsure. "What is it?"

"Open it and see, you big git."

Sherlock didn't hesitate. Inside was a silver skull tie pin and Sherlock actually laughed. "How appropriate."

"Well, I couldn't afford platinum like the cufflinks you gave me, but I thought you'd appreciate the sentiment."

Sherlock huffed lightly. "I don't do sentiment, John."

"Bollocks. Want me to put it on for you?"

Sherlock quirked a small smile and didn't bother to argue about sentiment. Instead, he held out the box. "Please do."

John replaced a diamond pin with the skull, smiling as he smoothed down the tie. "It looks right."

Sherlock glanced down. "It does. Thank you." He took a deep breath and reached out, taking both of John's hands in his. "Are you ready for this?"

"I am."

"No more cold feet?"

"My feet are burning up, Sherlock."

"Metaphorically speaking I presume."

"Don't be a prat." John kissed him briefly and then pulled away. As he walked to the sitting room, he asked, "Is Mrs. Hudson riding to the ceremony with us?"

"No, I sent her along in a taxi. Your mother says she, Harry, and her ex will be there within the hour. Clara is driving them down from the rehab center."

"Sounds like things are coming together."

"It would seem so."

John studied Sherlock for a moment. "You asked me if I'm ready. What about you?"

"Oh, I've been ready from the day I met you."

"Then I guess we'd better not keep our guests waiting."
Molly kissed John's cheek and then used her thumb to wipe away the smear of bright red lipstick. "You two look fabulous."

"Thanks."

"I've never seen you in a designer suit before."

John looked down at his fancy outfit and shrugged. "Probably won't again anytime soon. Sherlock picked it out."

She smiled shyly. "He's got good taste. You look very handsome." She stepped in closer. "I sincerely hope you'll both be happy."

He took her right hand and kissed it. He knew how infatuated Molly had always been with Sherlock. It meant a lot to him that she gave her blessing to their union. "Thank you."

"Take care of him."

"You know I will."

Molly patted his cheek and walked away just as his mother walked up. She wrapped him in a big, warm hug. "Oh, John, I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks, Mum." Behind his mother he saw Harry and Clara in a huddle at the door, giggling and whispering together like teenagers. "I see you brought the whole crew."

"I did." His mother pulled back, beaming. "She's doing so well, John. I'm so proud."

"Me, too, Mum." He bit his tongue not to add cautionary words about it being early days. It wasn't the place for that kind of negative thinking.

"I like that you're having the service here instead of in some cold office."

"Sherlock thought you'd like it so he arranged it. His brother helped, too. Normally we couldn't do this on a Sunday."

"Sherlock's brother is very helpful, isn't he? He's such a nice man."

"He can be, yeah." John glanced around and saw Mycroft chatting up Greg, who didn't look a bit fazed by a night of heavy drinking. Mycroft was definitely on the pull. He really hoped Greg knew what he was in for. "Look, I need to find Mike. He's my best man."

"You go ahead. I'll usher Harry and Clara to their seats."

Before he could head to the loo to see if Mike was functional, Mrs. Hudson touched his arm. "Don't be nervous, dear. It's going to be a wonderful ceremony."

"I'm not nervous."

"Good. Where's Sherlock, dear? I haven't seen him."

John scanned the room. "I don't know. I should go find him."

She patted and then pinched his left cheek with affection. "I'm sure he's around here somewhere,
dear, though I do hope he's not in the morgue. He gets so distracted. I love the dear boy, but he'll be late to his own wedding if he's not careful."

"I'm sure it's fine. I'll be right back."

As she walked to the front pew, he headed out the back. If Sherlock had scampered off to the morgue to find a fresh corpse, he'd kill him.

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"We have a bit of a problem, John." Sherlock stood in front of the loo door.

"Let me guess. Mike's ill."

"It would seem so. I'm not sure he'll be able to manage his best man duties."

"I'll check on him."

"Be careful. He's had projectile vomiting twice and he's moved into the dry heaving stage."

"Fuck. That's not good."

John stepped inside the washroom and wished he hadn't. The stench was overpowering. "Mike?"

The moan came from the last stall. John sidestepped a couple of pools of vomit and saw Mike sitting on the floor, his back against the wall. It was a tight fit, but his friend sat there with his eyes closed and his head tilted back on the tile wall. He still had one hand clutching the toilet seat and he was actually green. That didn't bode well for a quick recovery. John kneeled beside him, careful not to ruin his suit pants. "You look horrible."

"I feel horrible." His skin was pale and clammy, but his respirations only slightly depressed.

John took his pulse, which was steady. "Have you been able to keep anything down at all?"

"No, not this morning. I should've called, but I thought I could make it."

"Don't worry about it. Let's just get you fixed up. You need an A&E or can you handle going home? You need fluids to rehydrate."

"If I could go home, that would be grand. I've got something I can take for the nausea. I promise to drink plenty once I can manage."

"You wait here. I'll get you a cab."

Mike grabbed John's arm before he could leave. "I'm really sorry about this."

"It's fine."

John went out and found Sherlock still standing there, waiting impatiently. He never had a lot of sympathy for self-inflicted pain. Sherlock read the situation from John's face. "Ambulance or cab?"

"Cab. He says he just needs to go home. I think it'll be okay."

While Sherlock called the cab, John turned back to go clean up his friend.

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John stepped up to Mycroft and pulled him aside, away from his ongoing conversation with Greg Lestrade. When they were alone, he said, "I have a favor to ask."

"A favor?"

"Yes, my best man is ill. I was wondering if you would stand up for me."

Mycroft's eyes widened slightly, but he hid his surprise well. His voice was neutral. "This is unexpected."

Uneasy and a bit nervous, John shrugged. "I'd understand if you didn't want to."

"No, I'd be honored."

John handed him the ring box. "We'll be starting in a few minutes."

As he turned, Mycroft touched his arm. "Thank you for thinking of me."

"We're going to be family. We need to start acting like it."

"Agreed."

"Sherlock's putting Mike in a cab. As soon as he's back, we'll start. Might want to tell Greg."

"I will."

As he turned, he saw Harry's big smile as she waved to him and gave him a thumb's up with her left hand. It was still in a cast, but she didn't seem fazed by the fact. She looked so much better than the last time he'd seen her in the hospital. It wasn't just the fact that the bruises and cuts were healed. It was her eyes. She looked happy, truly happy. He prayed it stayed that way.

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"I'm Register Officer Daniel McGillian. We're gathered here today to witness the civil union of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson. All that is required by law is that both men sign their certificate along with their witnesses to make this official. However, Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson have both said they wanted to make public vows. We'll begin with Mr. Holmes."

John and Sherlock stood side-by-side at the front of the small chapel. They were flanked by Mycroft on one side, Greg Lestrade on the other. Sherlock turned and faced John, his voice strong and without hesitation. He took both of John's hands in his own. "I wanted to have the service here at St. Bart's because this is where I first met you. I knew when you entered the room that you were special, different from all the others. I wasn't sure why, but it soon became apparent that you are to be my life's mystery, a man who will always hold my interest."

John smiled, his face flushing bright red as Sherlock continued, "I ask you now to share my life, which is no easy task. You know me better than any other and yet you remain by my side. You allow me to see things from a different perspective. You give me tolerance and love, humor and pleasure, and a thrill beyond crime scenes. I pledge to be faithful and to be the best adventure of your life."

John fought against the sting of tears. He refused to cry at his own wedding, absolutely refused. Besides, he could hear his mother in the front row sobbing already. He cleared his throat, his gaze locked with Sherlock's. His voice was hoarse as he strained to keep his composure. "I had nothing to live for before I met you. I'd lost anything of value in the desert. I was useless and without
purpose. You changed all that when you included me in your work. At first I thought it was just about the work, but it soon became more, much more. You became the center of my world, a brilliant star to guide me out of darkness. You gave me my life back." Sherlock smiled and winked at him. John thought he would lose it right there. He held it together, but just barely. "I pledge to be faithful and to remain by your side for the rest of our lives. I love you, Sherlock Holmes."

With the last words, John heard sniffs and evidence of weeping from the small crowd. He didn't dare look out at the people. Instead, he reached over to Mycroft, who handed him the ring. He took Sherlock's left hand in his own. "You are mine and I am yours. The inscription reads, 'I believe in Sherlock' and symbolizes my faith in our life together." He slipped the ring on Sherlock's long, elegant finger and it looked perfect.

John glanced up and Sherlock smiled wider. Greg handed him John's ring. Sherlock's voice sounded like a wonderful song. "I am yours and you are mine. The inscription reads, 'My blogger, My friend, My life.' and symbolizes my faith in you and our life together." Sherlock slipped the ring on John's left ring finger.

Sherlock then touched John's chin and lifted his head slightly as he leaned in for a kiss. It was sweet and chaste, nothing like their previous kisses, but it was incredibly moving. John drew back, a tear running down his face. "I love you."

"And I you."

Daniel McGillian spoke, his voice thick with emotion. "Now if you would each sign the certificate along with your witnesses."

Sherlock signed first, then John along with Mycroft and then Greg Lestrade. McGillian looked to the crowd and announced. "I now pronounce you officially and legally joined as civil partners."

A cheer went up in the room and people stood up clapping. John looked out on the group, seeing the ladies dabbing their eyes with tissues, everyone smiling. Slightly dizzy, he said loudly, "Now, please join us at Angelo's for our reception."

They all swarmed around, slapping shoulders, shaking hands, and laughing. The whole time John kept his eye on Sherlock who was tolerating all the attention pretty well. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was actually enjoying it. Sherlock looked up while he was talking to John's mother. He smiled and lifted his left hand, wiggling his fingers. John chuckled and did the same.

It was official. They were a couple. A couple of what would soon be determined.

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Harry flitted around the restaurant taking picture after picture, almost to the point of John snatching the camera away. Clara had bought it for her as an incentive to stay sober. He liked Clara, but he wished for once she'd waited until after Harry had been clean for a while longer.

The food was nearly ready and he hoped he had posed for the last shot of the day. He knew Sherlock's patience was wearing thin, too. Finally, she called it quits when Angelo motioned for people to be seated.

Angelo put two big platters of antipasti down on the long table and announced, "I've made Bruschetta Pizzaiola, Arancini Di Riso, and Fiori De Zucchine. I'll come around and gather your menus to see what each of you have ordered for the next two courses. Please enjoy!"

John stuffed one of the piping hot risotto croquettes in his mouth. It was delicious. He wanted to
try one of the fried zucchini flowers when Harry leaned down and said, "I need to talk to you."

"Can't it wait?"

She hissed in his ear and squeezed his bad shoulder. "No, I really need to talk to you. Now!"

John glanced over at Sherlock who was sipping coffee, his eyes locked on the pair of them, but
making no comment. His mother was talking a blue streak on one side and Mrs. Hudson sat on the
other, nodding and chiming in.

John excused himself and got up. He followed Harry to the front of the restaurant, away from the
others. He asked, "What's going on?"

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Getting married?"

"Don't be a fucking smartarse. Why'd you tell this guy not to serve any wine or beer?"

John studied her angry face, and forced himself to stay calm. "Why do you think?"

"You think I can't handle myself around booze, that you have to coddle and protect me?"

"I didn't want to add to the temptation. Can you blame me?"

"You don't trust me to handle myself."

There was no use denying it, so he didn't. "You're right, I don't."

"Well, fuck you, Johnny. I wasn't going to drink, but now I wish I could."

"Oh, please, any excuse."

"Shut it."

"You shut it." John stepped right up to her even though she took a step back when she saw his
angry face. He kept his voice low. He didn't want the others to hear what he had to say. "Listen, do
you think you're the only one with issues with alcohol? You're not."

"What are you talking about?"

"None of your business. Just know I didn't do it only for you." He bit his lower lip and said, "I love
you, Harry, but I just wanted to have a nice wedding without drama. Is that too much to ask?"

"Apparently." Sherlock's voice interrupted as he came from behind.

John turned, his face flushed with embarrassment. "I guess you heard us."

"It didn't take extraordinary hearing to do so." Sherlock focused his full attention on Harry. "John
and I both decided not to serve alcohol. I'm sorry that displeases you."

Anger suddenly gone, she sighed. "No, I'm sorry. I just took it the wrong way. It's good it's not
being served. I just thought..."

"That he didn't trust you."

"Yeah." She ran a hand through her hair, obviously discomfited. "I'm sorry. Look, just forget I said
anything."

John agreed. "Done. Now could we go eat some of Angelo's food before it's all gone? I'm starving."

She nodded. "Sure."

Harry headed back to the tables, but John remained behind with Sherlock, staring after her. He whispered, "I love her, but she's such a bitch sometimes."

"It's partly the effect of the withdrawal, John. She's used alcohol as a crutch for so long, she doesn't know how to handle the flood of emotions that aren't dulled by the drinking. It can be difficult to adjust."

Harry had been a pain ever since she was a little girl, long before she started drinking. Still, she was trying. He needed to be more patient. Besides, Sherlock obviously knew what he was talking about. "Could be."

Sherlock kissed his neck. "Let's get back before people start to talk."

"Only if you promise to eat something."

"I'm eating."

"Drinking coffee is not eating."

"I'm waiting for dessert." With that Sherlock pinched his arse before settling his hand at the small of John's back to guide him back to the table. John vision of the Italian cream cake took a wild swerve to the obscene.

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"The gazpacho is delicious," Molly said.

John looked up from his salad. "It always is."

"Do you and Sherlock eat here a lot?"

"Yeah. We ate here the first night we met."

"So, it's a sentimental choice. That's brilliant." Molly wiped her mouth with a napkin and said, "Which did you get for your main entree, the Tunnu a Palirmitana or the Lasagne al Forno? I chose the Tuna."

"Lasagne. It's Angelo's signature dish. He knows it's my favorite."

She nodded and leaned over, whispering. "So, did you and your sister make up?"

It was obvious that Molly and the rest had seen and heard the fight between him and his sister. "Sorry about that. Yeah, we're fine."

"That's good. I have a sister."

"Do you?"

Her face darkened. "I should say I had a sister. She died in a car accident when I was much
younger. We used to fight, but we always made up." She paused, her voice weak and a bit heartsick. "I miss her."

John took her hand and squeezed it, his chest tight. He knew how devastated he'd be if he lost Harry. I didn't matter that they were always bitching at one another. He still loved her. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." She patted his hand. "I shouldn't have brought it up." She straightened in her seat and glanced over at Sherlock who pointedly kept his attention elsewhere. "Are you and Sherlock leaving from here for the honeymoon?"

"We're going back to the flat to change and then we'll leave. He's got a house in Sussex. We'll spend a week there."

She frowned before she said, "That's odd. That doesn't sound like Sherlock."

"How's that?"

"I mean, I suppose they have murders in the country, too, but it just seems out of character."

John snorted, remembering how he had thought much the same thing in the beginning. "It's the bees."

"Bees?"

"He loves bees. He's got hives there. Now that it's spring, they'll be more active."

Molly looked at him like he had two heads, but then she smiled, her eyes twinkling. "He's really extraordinary, isn't he? He's just full of surprises."

John grinned and caught Sherlock's curious eye as he replied, "Oh, he's full of something all right."

Lestrade drank his black coffee and made a face. It was obvious that he would've preferred something stronger, like a beer or even champagne. "So, who decided on this crazy seating arrangement? Why aren't you and Sherlock sitting together?"

"My mum. Notice none of the couples are sitting together, not even Harry and Clara."

"Yeah, I see that. It's different."

Lestrade made eye contact with Mycroft who sat next to John's sister and was obviously bored out of his mind. Greg grinned and Mycroft smiled back. John couldn't believe they were actually making eyes at one another in public like that. Good god, John pushed away the unwanted images crowding his head. He refused to think of those two together romantically, sexually, or any other way they could manage.

"Bloody hell, you two get a room."

"What? Nothing wrong with a little flirting. It's a wedding."

"Well, just save it until after we leave, all right?"

"You used to be the nice one."

"I'm still the nice one compared to Sherlock."
Greg conceded the point. "True. So, when do you cut the cake?"

"Should be any minute."

"It's weird."

"What?"

"You two. When you came to that first crime scene, I never in a million years figured it'd end up like this."

"Nothing's ending." In John's mind it was all about a beginning, a start to a whole new rest of his life.

"You know what I mean, you two together. Sherlock's just not the type to be with anybody, especially long term." Greg playfully ogled John and said, "Then again, you weren't dressed like that at any of my crime scenes. You were hiding your true colors, Dr. Watson. You're a good looking man, fit, too. Those baggy jumpers were hiding the goods."

"Jesus, if I didn't know better I'd think you were chatting me up."

Greg nearly choked on his coffee. "Good god, don't even kid about that. Sherlock would kill me and nobody would ever find the body."

"Very true." Sherlock sneaked in behind them, totally unconcerned about Greg's comments as he squeezed the older man's shoulders. "John, Angelo is bringing the cake out. Are we going to cut it together or just have him serve it?"

John stood up. "We'll cut it, but only if you promise not to smash cake in my face. I've always thought that was a terrible waste of good cake."

"I agree."

John patted Greg on the shoulder. "Save the chat up for Mycroft. He's a sucker for flattery."

Greg grinned wider. "I noticed."

Sherlock took John's hand and guided him to a cart in front of the main table where Angelo had placed a large Italian cream cake next to several small tubs of lemon gelato. Despite his full belly, John's mouth watered. Sherlock leaned in and whispered, "I'm fond of your mother, John, but if we don't leave soon, I can't be held responsible for my actions. She's hasn't stopped talking about how best to achieve domestic bliss this whole time."

"I know. I'm sorry. We've only got the cake and the presents left."

"Let's not open the presents here."

"Why not?"

"It's considered bad form."

"Is it?"

"We'll take them with us to Sussex and open them later."

"Okay, that's fine with me."
John turned his attention to all the people staring at them, waiting for the big show. As they moved to cut the cake, Harry got up with her camera, ignoring his warning glare. "Come on, Johnny. Don't be like that. It's traditional to get a shot of you two cutting the cake."

John pushed down his irritation. He knew his sister meant well. After all, she was making an album for their wedding present, so he couldn't really complain. "Sure, okay."

Hands together, Sherlock and John posed as they cut the first slice. Pictures were snapped and everyone clapped. John put all the pieces out on plates. He motioned for everyone to come up. "It's self service, so mix and match. Oh, and you can sit where you want when you go back to the table."

John waited for his mother to protest, but she didn't. She just smiled sweetly, got her cake and gelato, and then went back to sit next to Mrs. Hudson who already had her dessert. Everyone else paired up, Mycroft with Greg, and Molly moving to sit with Harry and Clara.

When they sat back down, John was finally sitting next to his groom. Sherlock nibbled a bit of the cake while he held John's right hand under the table. John couldn't stop smiling the whole time he devoured his cake and gelato.

"You need to call Mike tonight and check to make sure he's okay."

Lestrade agreed, "Sure. It must have been the chips. I didn't have any and I'm fine."

John shrugged. "Could've been, but you have a lot higher tolerance for booze than Mike. He's always been bad about drinking, even in school."

"Don't worry about him. You just go and have a good time, well as good a time as one can have in the middle of bloody nowhere."

John grinned. "I'm not going for the view, at least not of the countryside."

Greg chuckled, "No, more like view of the backside."

"Crude, Lestrade, very crude." Sherlock moved in beside John, a lazy smile on his face.

Greg complained, "You've got to stop doing that, sneaking up on people. It's creepy."

"It's not sneaking or creepy. You're just not paying attention."

"He's right, Greg. You really don't pay nearly enough attention to your surroundings. That could be an occupational hazard for a man like you." Mycroft stepped in next to Lestrade, smiling that greedy grin he had when he wanted something people might not want to give. Checking out Greg's expression, it seemed like he wasn't opposed to giving up whatever Mycroft wanted.

"I pay attention well enough, thank you." Greg boldly stared back into Mycroft's eyes and it was Mycroft who flushed pink and looked away first.

John was amazed. It was like watching a bloody BBC animal documentary about mating rituals of the horny policeman and the older brother. Sherlock beat him to saying what he was thinking.

"You two are nauseating."

Mycroft bristled. "You're just jealous."
"You're just obnoxious."

Lestrade stepped in. "Enough. You and John need to head out. It was a good wedding. Let's not spoil it with a fraternal tiff."

John agreed and touched Sherlock's arm. "Let's go. The gifts are in the car and everyone else has left except Mrs. Hudson. She's still talking to Angelo. She's trying to convince him to give her the recipe for his Lasagne al Forno."

"Well, if anyone can, she can." Sherlock turned his attention back to Greg. "I'm going to be unavailable for the next week. I do hope you'll be able to handle the more interesting cases while I'm gone."

Lestrade didn't take offense. "I think I can manage. It's only a week."

Before Sherlock could argue, John added another command. "And no texting about cases while we're gone."

Sherlock frowned. "That's a bit extreme, John. Surely if he needs help, he can text."

"No."

"No?"

John's stubborn tone meant there would be no argument. "We'll be on our honeymoon. Crime can wait a week until we get back. Then we can solve all the murders you want, I promise."

Sherlock's expression softened. "Quite right." Looking strangely content, Sherlock headed out and John followed.

Behind them, he heard Greg chuckle before he said, "I never thought I'd see the day when Sherlock Holmes could be ordered about. Fuck me."

Mycroft replied huskily, "Gladly."

And then Greg Lestrade actually giggled.

Sherlock had already stripped naked and lay on their bed while watching John slip off his trousers. John shook his head and teased, "No you don't. I know that look. We're not shagging until we get to Sussex."

"Actually, I had something else in mind."

Intrigued, John tilted his head. "Oh, really? I think you're not dressed for a reason and it has nothing to do with waiting."

Sherlock licked his lips hungrily, his eyes still tracking every one of John's movements as he neatly hung up his suit next to Sherlock's. "I do want to wait, but I have a plan to increase our anticipation of the events which should occur soon after our arrival."

John had been half hard through most of the reception and seeing his new groom undressed and in a similar state wasn't helping change that. "If I anticipate much more, I'll be coming before we get started."
Sherlock chuckled. "It wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing to orgasm now. We have a full two hours of driving ahead before we get to the house. That's more than enough recovery time."

John protested, "But the driver's waiting."

"And he's getting paid to wait as well as drive."

"He'll know what we're doing."

"He's also paid to be discreet. Besides, we're married. It shouldn't matter how long we take."
Sherlock voice lowered to an unbelievably sexy level. "We've got time, John."

Still suspicious, John asked, "Time for what? A quick shag? I'd really rather hold off and do it right once we're there."

"Understood." Sherlock reached down under the bed and brought out a blue gift bag. "As you know I threw away all our adult toys after the raid."

"Burned them you mean." John shuddered at the thought of Dimmock and the others handling their private things. He hated every one of those fuckers. "Naff wankers."

"Indeed." Sherlock pushed the bag in John's direction at the end of the bed. "I've replaced a few, which are in our luggage, but this one I kept out. I wanted you to have it now."

John wasn't sure what Sherlock had in mind, but it wouldn't hurt to check out the contents of the bag. He'd developed a fondness for Sherlock's toy collection. When he pulled out the object, his mouth fell open. "Is this what I think it is?"

"We've used one before."

"Not one that looked like this. Jesus, Sherlock. Is this for me or for you? Because if it's for me, I don't know. It looks uncomfortable." John examined the object more closely, wincing at the larger size, and hefted it across his open palm. "It's a lot heavier, too."

"I bought it for you to use. It's battery operated with a remote."

John met Sherlock's smoky gaze and knew exactly what he was thinking. "And you've got the remote."

"Oh, yes."

Licking his lips, his cock suddenly a lot harder, John said, "So, you want me to wear a vibrating butt plug with a remote that you control all the way to Sussex."

Sherlock smugly stared at John's erection. "Don't tell me that the thought doesn't excite you. Reliable evidence would suggest otherwise."

"God, you're a mad, romantic bastard."

"You'll do it?"

John groaned at how easily manipulated he was. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but, yes."

Sherlock grinned and reached for the lube.

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Stop doing that." John threw his head back against the seat and hissed at the intensity rushing up through his middle. He shuddered with the ripple of pleasure skirting through every muscle of his arse and groin. Every vibration was like a kiss to his nerves, all warm and tingling, tensing to a delicious tightness he could barely describe. He was grateful he wore a baggy jumper to pull down over his constant erection. If he didn't come soon, Sherlock was a dead man. John might set a record and end up being a widower the same day he got married.

"Why? You like it and I like seeing you like it."

John complained, his voice breathy. "Ever heard of too much of a good thing?"

"Twaddle. There's no such thing as too much of a good thing."

"Trust me, there is."

Sherlock sighed and reluctantly removed his finger from the button. "Very well."

"Thank you." Looking out the side window, John asked, "How much longer?"

"We've got another hour."

"Dear god." John squeezed his eyes shut and willed his cock to behave. He needed to think of something else, anything to take his mind off wanting to unzip and finish what Sherlock had started. He was crazy to agree to this. His arse ached and throbbed from the stretching. All he wanted to do was to throw Sherlock down on the bed, his pale arse in the air, and fuck him into next Thursday. John didn't think he would last long when he did it, but that was all on Sherlock and his mad scheme to drive him crazy in the backseat of a fucking hired car.

"I don't know why I agreed to this."

"Yes, you do."

"You think you know me."

"I do." For the first time Sherlock showed concern. "If it's too uncomfortable, we can remove it."

Disgruntled at the thought of losing the full sensation before coming, John shook his head. "No, not yet."

"But if it's painful..."

"It's not painful, not exactly. It's different. I have to get used to it."

Sherlock took his hand and squeezed it before kissing his cheek. "You can shag me senseless as soon as we get to the bed."

John met his gaze and promised, "Oh, I intend to."

"You won't last long enough to make me come. So, I'll remove the plug and finish inside you."

An involuntary shiver went through John. "Sure of yourself, yeah?"

"Very."

"God, can't he drive any faster?"
"There's safety to consider."

"Fuck safety."

Sherlock grinned smugly and pressed the button again. John bit his lower lip and fought back a climax, knowing full well that it would all be worth it if he didn't die of sexual frustration first.

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The driver dropped the last bag in the hallway. John waited and looked around while Sherlock gave the guy a handsome tip. As soon as the man was gone, Sherlock asked, "Would you like a tour first?"

"There's only one room I want to see and I think you know which one that is."

Sherlock gave him an insufferably self-satisfied smile, one that John would wipe off his face soon enough. "Do you want me to deduce it?"

"Deduce this." John made an obscene gesture. "Get naked and on the bed before I fuck you right here over the back of the sofa."

Sherlock smirked and headed off to the back of the house, stripping off his shirt as he walked. "The back of the sofa, John? Really?"

John found walking difficult. The plug and the erection seemed to be in competition to keep him stimulated and make his legs rubbery. Seeing Sherlock bend over to remove his trousers only compounded the effect. "I hope you have lube and condoms in your pocket."

"As a matter of fact, I do. A man must always be prepared."

"Especially if a man has been driving his partner crazy with a vibrating butt plug for two fucking hours." John kicked off his shoes, took off the jumper, and was unzipping his jeans as fast as his hands would allow.

Sherlock was already on the bed, naked, his leaking cock jutting out. "It would seem the plug has been very effective. I don't know why you're complaining."

"I'm not complaining. I'm horny and about to explode. Now hand me a condom and get yourself ready. I don't think I can wait much longer."

"We don't have to use condoms."

"I want to."

"If you're sure."

"Sherlock..."

"All right, all right." Sherlock slipped to his knees on the rug and opened the packet, expertly rolling the condom onto John's cock. "I've stretched myself already."

"When?"

"I've been wearing a plug since before the reception."

Shocked, John stared at Sherlock's matter-of-fact expression and laughed. "I guess I should be glad
I didn't know that."

"Why?"

"Because I would've come just thinking about you wearing it the whole time. No wonder you could hardly sit still."

Sherlock smiled and stood up with a long stretching motion, his arms up over his head. Then he pulled out the lube from the same pocket of his jacket that had the condoms. "You do the honors." He pulled two of the pillows from the head of the bed and draped himself over them, his ass raised in the air.

"God, you're beautiful."

"Prove it."

Still wearing his own plug, John pushed Sherlock's long legs apart and kneeled between them. He carefully removed Sherlock's plug and put it on some tissues on the bedside table. He dribbled the lube over Sherlock's hole and then spread it around before he shoved in two fingers. Sherlock was more than ready.

John put more lube on his own erection and then pushed inside with in two quick thrusts. Sherlock moaned in response and shoved back. The heat wrapped around him, John pumped and got his rhythm in concert with Sherlock's movements. His whole gut caught fire, flames of pure pleasure sweeping through his body, up his belly and his spine. Eyes squeezed shut, a flash of bright colors, reds, greens, and yellows flickered in his head. His breath caught as the rolling thunder shuddered through him, his back arched as he came, his hands gripping Sherlock's hips. He cried out as coming rocked him to his core, every muscle held hostage to the wave of pleasure that blasted through him from his brain to his toes, every cell a firework. With a long breath, he croaked hoarsely, "Oh my god!"

John collapsed on top of Sherlock, dizzy with aftershocks rippling though his belly and crotch. He'd never come so hard in his life. Sweat poured down his face as he swallowed hard and kissed the side of Sherlock's neck. "I love you."

Sherlock took a deep breath beneath him. "My turn."

Floating in a world of nothing but good feelings, John carefully pulled out and rolled over on his back, his arms flung outstretched from his body. "Whatever you want."

"I want to observe your face while I come."

"Do it."

Sherlock moved to kneel between John's legs and then he positioned them over his shoulders. They'd tried that position before, and John took a long time to come. It didn't matter this time, so he lay back to enjoy watching Sherlock do all the work.

Taking care, Sherlock removed John's plug and put it beside the other one. Adding more lube, Sherlock said, "I want to do this without a condom."

Still in the haze of serious afterglow, John nodded. "Do whatever you like."

Sherlock's smile broadened. "Be careful what you say, John. There are many things I could add to that list that might frighten you."
"Everything you do frightens me and I love it. I love you."

"And I you." Sherlock lifted John's bottom a little higher and put pillows beneath his ass to keep it elevated for easier access.

Completely exposed and vulnerable, John wallowed in the thrill of having so much trust in a man so many people could never trust, should never trust. Sherlock leaned in for a kiss, his mouth capturing John's with a savage hunger that shocked even John. Whiskers rubbed his lips raw, but he didn't care. He only wanted more.

Sherlock pulled back and then fingered John's ass, his gaze locked with John's. "I'm going to fuck you, fuck you like you've never been fucked. You're mine and nobody else can have you."

"No one ever will."

As Sherlock pushed inside roughly, John closed his eyes against the sudden rush of pressure. Sherlock snapped, "Open you eyes. Look at me while I fuck you. I need to see your eyes when you come."

John obeyed and stared up into Sherlock's determined gaze, his grey blue eyes nearly black with arousal. Sweat ran down Sherlock's face and his body was shiny with perspiration. John reached up and teased Sherlock's nipples between his fingers, just little tweaks and twists, not too hard, but hard enough. Sherlock's breath hitched and he pumped even harder and faster, all the time his eyes locked with John's.

John's body rocked with the piston action of Sherlock pounding into him, his ass stretched to the limit. He bit his lower lip not to call out or urge Sherlock to slow down and take it easy. Sherlock needed this, needed him to take all he had to give and then some.

The strokes got suddenly irregular and Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut as his body jerked, great spasms of coming taking his body out of his control. He groaned loudly and arched upward, his hands grabbing John's thighs even harder, his nails leaving marks. His whole body stilled with coming, every line stretched and caught up in the release.

He finally dropped John's right leg from his shoulder, withdrew his cock, and rolled over on his back beside John. He gasped for air, his lungs struggling. John lay there and took his own deep breaths, waiting for Sherlock's breathing to return to normal. John shifted onto his side, propping his head on his elbow and watched the bright flush fade slowly from Sherlock's normally pale skin. He rested a hand on his lover's chest, feeling the racing heartbeat gradually slowing down.

He'd done that, given Sherlock so much pleasure, so much joy. There was no better contentment than feeling the power of such a gift, such love for another person.

After a few minutes, Sherlock grabbed John's hand from his chest and brought it to his lips. He kissed it.

John chuckled and pronounced, "You'll live."

"You know the French refer to orgasm as the little death or la petite mort. I now understand why. It's as near to death as one can be and not go over the edge. It's not surprising that so many men die of heart attacks during intercourse."

John teased, "But what a way to go, yeah?"

"Indeed."
"Still, I'm not done with you yet. We'll have to make sure you stay fit and trim so that doesn't happen."

"And how do you propose we do that, Dr. Watson?"

"Plenty of exercise."

"And repetition, no doubt."

"No doubt."

John sat at the kitchen table a bit sore, but a good sore. His face heated at the sexy memory of how he got that way. He ran his left thumb along the hard edge of his new wedding ring, touching the smooth metal on his ring finger. He took it off to see the inscription again, his chest a bit tighter as he read Sherlock's words to himself. Such a declaration both surprised and warmed him. Sherlock never failed to fill him with wonder, amazement that such a man would pick John of all people to be by his side. He slipped the ring back on and smiled to himself, newly committed to making sure Sherlock never regretted his choice.

As he sat there with his morning tea, he took in the surroundings. It was an old-fashioned kitchen, full of natural wood and a grey stone floor. The appliances were once top of the line and, even though they were still in good condition, they were a little out-of-date. The crockery and cookware could've filled the pages of some culinary magazine. Whoever had designed and furnished the place had definitely loved good food and cooking.

What John liked best were the windows that let in so much natural light. There was one over the kitchen sink and another one at the back. It faced out to the yard which backed up to a field edged with woods. Right outside the door was a bricked patio, wooden chairs, and a table for outside dining. No traffic noise and the sound of birds made it incredibly peaceful.

The rest of the house met his approval as well. There were two bedrooms, the master and a guestroom. He could see the spare room as a future lab for Sherlock when they eventually retired and left the city. The master had an en suite bath with modern plumbing and fixtures. The second toilet was in the hallway between the living room and the den. There were hardwood floors throughout the house with various throw rugs to ward off the chill in the colder months. Stone wood-burning fireplaces were in the master and the main sitting rooms, and John could easily see himself lazing there with Sherlock on winter nights when they'd given up crime fighting twenty years from the present.

Of course, that meant they had to survive that long. There were no guarantees and John wouldn't take one if it were offered. Half the thrill in his life was from the unknown, living on the edge with Sherlock. Still, it was some comfort in knowing that there was a reward in store if they both managed to dodge the bullets long enough.

Sherlock and he had gone out just the night before to scatter Inez's ashes by a nearby stream. There was no ceremony or words, just a moment of silence and a cold reminder that life could be cut short without notice, no going back and doing it over. They needed to make the most of what time they had together. It might be cliche, but that didn't make it less true.

"You seem rather pensive this morning."

"A little, yeah." John tilted his head to the side just enough for Sherlock to kiss his cheek before his
new husband stepped to the counter to pour his own tea. "It's lovely here."

"It is." Sherlock turned and leaned back against the counter, one hand across his middle while he sipped his drink. He wore his blue silk dressing gown and nothing else. The sash was loose and the folds fell open. Sherlock was never shy about his body. John was glad they didn't have nosy neighbors anywhere close by or they'd get quite the unexpected show.

Sherlock said, "I've always preferred it to the larger estates."

"Tell me about it."

"About what?"

"How did it come to be yours?"

"My father left it to me. He'd gotten it from his sister and she'd requested that it be passed on to me. Mycroft and Mummy had no interest."

"You came here with him when you were little?"

"God, no. My father could've cared less about a place like this. No, I came here with my Aunt Celia and her husband James. He's the one who taught me about the bees."

"That was your father's sister?"

"Yes." Sherlock's expression clouded and he waved a hand. "She died years ago. James is in a home somewhere, dementia."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? You never met them."

"No, but they were obviously good to you."

Sherlock finished his tea as he considered the comment. "They were. They were really the only ones in the family to make time for a nuisance like me. They were childless, you see, and so Father let them borrow me during the summers when I was quite young. It's ironic really."

"What's ironic?"

"Well, the people who should most have children often don't have them. Those who shouldn't, those people like my parents, they breed and take no joy in it."

"I guess I never thought about it like that."

"Few do."

John sat back, his left arm over the back of the kitchen chair. "So, your Uncle James is responsible for your love of bees?"

"I don't love bees, John. I just find them interesting."

"Well, that's a love of sorts."

"I suppose. They're just fascinating creatures, so organized and efficient. I watched them for hours as a child. My uncle would often have to come out to the apiary to bring me back inside. At night I
would actually dream about their flight patterns."

"Their flight patterns?"

"They've got very complicated movements, very precise patterns. They actually do different dances in flight depending on what they need to signal to the hive. Remarkable evolutionary progress, really."

"I didn't know that."

"I've got several books here if you're interested. The Hive and the Honey-bee by L.L. Langstroth is particularly informative."

John chuckled and shrugged, knowing he'd have to bored out of his mind to read a book about beehives anytime soon. "Maybe later."

Sherlock rolled his eyes in amusement. "Which means never."

"Never is a long time. I might surprise you."

Sherlock teased, "You often do."

"I try." John asked, "Why didn't you become a beekeeper?"

"I actually wanted to be apiarist at one point, but crime won out. Observation is one thing, action another."

"And when did crime win out exactly?"

"When I was eight. I saw a boy, Timothy Cathbert, who was being bullied and beaten at school. I didn't rest until the culprits were identified."

"Were they punished?"

"Not by the school, no." Sherlock didn't look up as he poured another cup of tea and John didn't pursue it, didn't ask by whom. He already knew the answer. Even at eight, Sherlock knew how to turn the system against those who would abuse it.

"Was the boy okay?"

"He was fine. Grew up to be a pompous barrister."

There was a lull in the conversation and John asked, "Would you like to open our wedding presents?"

"Why? I already know what's in them."

John frowned. "You can't know what everyone gave us."

"Of course I can. People are always so predictable about such things."

John's mood picked up. "I'll bet you can't."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Let's make a wager."
Sherlock suddenly showed interest. "What kind of wager?"

"If you can't guess every present, then I get a blowjob."

Sherlock's eyes twinkled with amusement. "And if I can, which is a given, then you'll open one of the new toys I bought."

Sherlock always found ways to up the ante. Cautiously, John asked, "That depends. What is it?"

"I'm not telling you until after I win the wager."

"How can I say yes if I don't know what I'm in for?"

"Trust me."

John smiled and nodded, "I always do."

"Well, that was incredibly simple."

"Mrs. Hudson's been collecting these recipes for decades. The fact that she's had them bound to give to us is a really sweet gesture."

"Neither of us cook, John. What's the point?"

John made a feeble protest. "I cook."

"You open cans, fix breakfast, and order take away. How is that in any way the same as cooking?"

John took offense. "I can cook. It's just damn difficult when there are eyeballs in the microwave and body parts in the fridge. The whole kitchen is a toxic waste dump. I need a bloody hazmat suit some mornings."

Sherlock was completely unfazed by his argument. "The fact that you've fixed less than a dozen meals in so many months indicates no real love for the culinary arts."

John wasn't ready to give up yet. "I cook more than you do."

"That's not saying much. I never cook. Thus my point about it being useless."

"It's not, or at least it won't be." John flipped through the pages and stopped when he saw the recipe for pecan scones. "We need to go to the shops while we're here."

"Why?"

"I've got a cookbook and a decent kitchen which hasn't been sullied by any of your experiments yet. I'll show you cooking if it kills me."

"Don't tempt fate, John."

"You don't believe in fate."

"I also don't believe that your time is best served by toiling in a hot kitchen when the bedroom is so close at hand."

John put down the book and grinned, suddenly convinced. "Good point."
Sherlock motioned toward the box holding the presents. "What's the next one?"

John reached inside and pulled out an envelope. "It's from Harry and Clara."

"Photo album from Harry, restaurant gift card from Clara."

"That's cheating. Harry told us about the wedding album."

"True, but not about Clara's gift."

John opened the card, one of those elegant ones with silver bells on the front. Inside was a 200 pound gift card. Score another one for Sherlock. John asked, "Okay, so what's the restaurant?"

"L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon."

John couldn't believe it. "There are hundreds of restaurants in London. How could you possibly know which one?"

"Clara's a woman who fancies herself a gourmand. L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon has two Michelin Stars. Plus, there's the color of the gift card."

"You recognize the color of the gift card for every restaurant in London?"

"Of course not. Mycroft gives those away as party favors to his employees at Christmas. Prat has no idea that they'd much rather have the money."

"Brilliant."

Sherlock preened by running a lazy hand through his dark curls, obviously soaking up the compliment. Mycroft wasn't the only one who could be swayed with flattery, especially when it was well deserved. Sherlock said, "That's two points to me, zero to you. What's the next one?"

John took out a package and checked the label. "It's from Mum."

"It's a coverlet. I'd say it was knitted, but she didn't have time to do one specifically for us, which she will have done by Christmas. No, this is different. It's something she already had, something she values and wishes to pass on."

John's heart beat a little faster as he ripped open the paper. It couldn't be. Mum would never part with what he was hoping was in the package. His breath hitched. He held the familiar material in his hands and lifted it to his face. It smelled of his childhood, the times when he came in from playing too hard to lay on his mother's bed to nap. His mum would cover him to keep him warm and safe while he slept. The colors were muted greens and blues in different patterns from scraps of worn cotton cloth, all sewn together and quilted with fine tiny stitches. There was a faint lavender scent mixed with cedar. "My gran's quilt. She made this during the war."

Sherlock expression softened. "It's one of your mother's prized possessions."

"It is." He picked up the card and read aloud. "This is for you and Sherlock. Keep it safe." His eyes stung and he blinked back tears, not embarrassed to show his true feelings in front of Sherlock. "I can't believe she would give this to me. Harry always wanted it."

"You mother knew who would treasure it most."

John sighed and then remembered a very dark night. "My father threw it away once. I found it and washed it." He turned the coverlet over and ran his fingers lovingly over an area in the back where
the thread didn't quite match the rest of the stitching. "I sewed up where he ripped it apart."

"You mother hid it until he was no longer angry."

"Yeah. He actually forgot he did it."

"It's a beautiful gift."

"It is."

John took a deep breath and then put it on the sofa. "Harry's going to have a fit."

"Don't tell her."

"She'll find out."

"Perhaps, but it doesn't have to be anytime soon."

John nodded. "True. Okay, that's three to zero." He reached in and brought out another card. "This one's from Mike."

"Gift card, probably from some coffee shop near St. Bart's. He knows you drink it on cases."

"So do you."

"True."

John opened the card and, once again, Sherlock guessed correctly. "That's amazing."

"Four to zero. I know exactly which toy I want you to open."

John laughed at Sherlock's confidence. "You haven't won yet. There are three more to go and they get harder."

Smugly, Sherlock shook his head, like he was insulted that John could possibly think he'd miss one. He waved a hand to motion for John to continue. "Please, these are simple. Next."

John picked up a blue card. "It's from Molly."

"It's a subscription."

"To what?"

Sherlock thought for a few seconds and said, "Forensic Science, Medicine, and Pathology, both paper and online accounts."

John opened the card and smiled in amazement. Half the fun was finding out how Sherlock figured out the mystery. "Tell me."

"We were talking about a particular article in the lab a few months ago. Thus, she remembered I often use that particular magazine for reference."

"You're incredible."

"Child's play. If one knows the person, one knows the likely options for gifts."

"Okay. Six to one. Next is Lestrade."

"This one is a little more difficult."
"Why? It's Lestrade. He doesn't shop. It's probably a pass to the cold case files or a free supply of Scotland Yard coffee mugs nicked from the break room."

"He might have thought about those, but, no, that's not what he chose. He made his selection more recently." Sherlock sat forward as he talked more to himself than John. "No, he wouldn't do that."

"Do what?"

"Lestrade helped me clean up after the raid."

"So?"

"He saw the mess in our bedroom."

John's cheeks pinked up. "Oh."

"No need to be embarrassed. He's not exactly straight or sexually unsophisticated. He saw nothing there that he hadn't seen before. He might even have a few toys of his own."

"Doesn't mean I like the idea of him seeing it in connection with us."

"True." Sherlock looked up and pursed his lips. "He knows me as I know him. He saw my reaction to the drug squad violating our privacy. I think he might very well have gotten us a gift card to an adult toy store."

John couldn't imagine such a thing. Sure, Lestrade was a man of the world, but for him to get them such a risque gift, well, that just didn't mesh with his vision of the inspector. "There's no way."

"Open it."

John did and then barked a laugh. He wasn't sure whether to be amused or scandalized. "That obscene bastard."

"I was right."

"Yeah. I swear, Lestrade is full of surprises, first Mycroft and now this."

"He's a complex man. He's certainly not the typical police officer."

John agreed, "No, he's not." He put the card down and shook his head. "I would never have guessed that one. Six to zero. One more."

"Mycroft."

"Yeah. So, what's your guess for him? Maybe he's given us a helicopter or our own cab."

"Don't be ludicrous. He'll have given us property of some sort."

"Property? What property?"

Sherlock sat back and put his fingertips together under his chin as he pondered his answer. "There are a number of possibilities."

"You're joking. Who gives property for a wedding present?"

"You forget how wealthy we are, John. We own several estates, both here in Great Britain and in
Europe."

"And you think he's going to just sign one over to you just like that?"

"I'm not sure about this one. Mycroft has been somewhat harder to read of late. His actions have been guided with sentiment slightly more than reason. Thus, he's more unpredictable." Sherlock tapped his index fingers together as he continued thinking. Finally, he said, "We have a manor house in Scotland. He's never liked it. I think he might sign it over to us to annoy me."

"A manor house in Scotland? Seriously? And why would that annoy you?"

"Who goes to Scotland, John? It's incredibly remote with difficult access. Besides, it's rundown and needs an enormous amount of renovation and modernization. One would probably need to spend its comparable value to make it livable."

"So, why does your family still own it?"

"Well, if he's signed it over to us, we won't much longer. We'll sell it."

Sherlock had no notion of how posh and arrogant it sounded to not appreciate such a generous gift. John shrugged, but said, "Well, if it is that, I want to see it before we sell it."

"Why on earth would you want to do that?"

"Because I've never really owned any property in Scotland. It might be an adventure to see it."

Sherlock smirked. "Oh, John, you'll be sorely disappointed if that's what you think."

"We'll see." He opened the packet and read the cover letter. He could hardly believe what he was reading. "Fucking hell."

"What?"

"Mycroft has paid off the mortgages to my mum's house."

"Really? That's unexpected."

"Why would he do that?"

"Well, obviously he wanted to make it easier for your mother financially. She took out that second mortgage because she was struggling."

"But to just pay it off like that, that's just..."

"Just what?"

"Too generous."

"Which certainly doesn't sound like Mycroft."

"No, it doesn't."

Sherlock frowned. "He must have something in mind for you, something he hasn't revealed yet."

"He's a crafty bastard to be sure. Still, this is really a great present."

"For your mother, yes."
"For me, too. I was going to give her the money as soon as I got some together."

"John, we've talked about this. My money is your money now."

"I know, I know, but it doesn't feel like it yet."

The words came out sharply. "When do you think it will feel like it, when we're old and grey? We're partners in all things now."

John glanced up and saw the hurt in Sherlock's face. "I'm sorry. It's not you. It's me. I've always had to work for everything I had. It's difficult to take in that I've got money now just because I married you."

"Some will say you'll earn every bit of it."

John got up from the sofa and stepped over to Sherlock's chair. He ran a hand lovingly through the dark curls. "Those people would be idiots."

Sherlock took John's hand and brought it to his face. With a heavy sigh, he closed his eyes. His words were soft, nearly a whisper. "I'm difficult, rude, overbearing, and erratic."

"You're also brilliant, impulsive, and the love of my life. Don't tell me that you don't know that by now."

"I do know it, but sometimes I forget."

"Then I think you need a reminder. I also think you owe me a blowjob."

Sherlock's eyes opened and he grinned. "Only one?"

"Let's start there and work our way up."

"Splendid."

John squeezed his hand and then pulled him to his feet, kissing him and then dragging him off to the bedroom. The blue dressing gown flapped in the breeze before falling off his shoulders onto the floor, totally forgotten.

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"I could get used to this." John put his fork down and patted his full belly. "Could we take her back to London with us?"

"I think Mr. Halloway would object strenuously if we absconded with his wife, John."

"Probably. I think that's the best lamb stew I've ever had."

Sherlock smiled and kept on reading his newest book on bees. "You're such a glutton."

"I'm not a glutton. I just appreciate good food, something you could do more regularly."

"I'm fit enough."

Remembering the strenuous sex they'd had only hours ago, John agreed with a laugh. "I'll say." For someone so thin, Sherlock had incredible strength and stamina, something John seriously appreciated.
John got up from the table and moved to sit next to Sherlock on the sofa in the sitting room. "So, Mrs. Halloway will be coming in every day with meals and supplies?"

"That's part of the arrangement. She and her husband maintain the place in my absence. When I'm here, she cooks. I did warn her that I would have someone with me who had a much hardier appetite than my own. She seemed quite pleased by the prospect."

"Her talent is wasted on you."

"True. Food has never really appealed to me much."

"Why is that?"

Sherlock finally looked up. "Is that a serious question?"

John considered his words carefully before he answered. He knew Sherlock was skittish about his weight. "Yeah, it is. You don't eat even half the recommended calories most days. You're underweight by at least a stone, possibly two."

Sherlock sniffed in disapproval. "More than half the general public is overweight or obese. I'm perfectly fine at this weight."

"You are as long as you're healthy. However, if you were ever seriously ill, you have no reserves. There's not an ounce of fat on you."

Sherlock put the book down and stared at him. "Do you actually sit around and think about such things?"

"I'm a doctor. It's what I do."

Sherlock reached over and cupped John's face with affection, his thumb rubbing his cheek gently before letting go. "I'm fine."

"I know, I just..."

"Worry."

"It's a doctor thing."

"It's a John Watson thing."

"Yeah, that, too."

Sherlock kissed him and pulled back, but his expression was suddenly darker. "Food is the enemy."

John went very still. "What? What do you mean food is the enemy?"

"When we were children, our food was constantly monitored and rationed. Mycroft developed an eating disorder. He would sneak food and binge at night. He became pudgy, not overweight, but fatter than was allowed. He was put on a very strict liquid diet and forced to do strenuous exercise until he lost enough weight to be presentable."

John bit his tongue to keep the curses from flowing. Some people should never be allowed around children. He was appalled. "You do realize how wrong that is, yeah?"

"Wrong how? They were making sure that he was healthy and wouldn't be bullied at school. They
were looking out for his welfare."

"But he was a child. Kids need to eat to grow up healthy" John hesitated, fearful of the answer. "What about you?"

"Oh, I was lucky. I always had a naturally higher metabolism. I was always quite slim and made efforts to keep it that way. It was just easier than dealing with the countermeasures."

"Countermeasures? You mean the diet and exercise?"

"Yes."

The way he said it, the slight hesitation made John suspicious. "What else did they do?"

"You're a doctor. Use your imagination, John. This is ancient history. Tedium."

Sherlock picked up his book again, flipping through the pages to avoid looking at John directly.

"I don't want to use my imagination. Did they do anything else to make sure you didn't gain weight?"

"Not to me so much as Mycroft." Sherlock wet his lips, suddenly anxious. "Why are you bringing all this up now?"

"I need to know, Sherlock. Please tell me my suspicions are wrong."

"It would depend on what those suspicions are."

"Don't play word games. Did they ever force you to purge?"

"If by purge, you mean vomit or take laxatives, sometimes."

"Oh my god."

"That was preferable to the enemas."

John got up, a hand scrubbing his face. His chest hurt as he thought about what had happened to both Sherlock and Mycroft. It was abuse, one more awful thing added to the long list of evils they'd suffered. "Please tell me your parents didn't know about this."

"Of course they knew. Do you really think any servant in our home would take such liberties without their knowledge?"

"Fuckers."

"John..."

"No, it was wrong."

"It was quite common for the time. People didn't want their children to be overweight, so they made sure they weren't. I simply made sure for myself. Mycroft, on the other hand, often had interference with his person in order to achieve that goal."

"Interference with his person? Do you actually hear your own words? Jesus." John swallowed hard and pointed a finger at Sherlock. "I want you to swear to me right this minute that you'll never make fun of Mycroft's diet or his weight again."
Sherlock sat up straighter, surprised. "Why are you so upset about something that happened years ago? It's not like it's damaged either of us."

"Sherlock, you don't eat for days at a time. When you do eat, you rarely find pleasure in it. How is that not damaged?"

"I eat to stay alive. What more is there? You're really overreacting."

John covered his mouth, not sure what he could say or if he should say anything. Sherlock was who he was, and his protesting likely wouldn't change that. Still, it was a good thing Sherlock's father was already dead and his mother was far away. He fisted his hands to his side. "I need to go for a walk, clear my head."

"It's starting to rain."

"I won't melt."

"I know that, but..." Sherlock must have seen something dark in John's expression because he added, "I'll take care of the dishes."

John took an umbrella from the stand and headed out across the field, his mind filled with rage and a desire to shoot a gun, take aim and shoot at targets that no longer existed except in the destruction they'd left behind.

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"Feeling better?"

John slipped the umbrella into the stand and sat down next to Sherlock. There was a fire going to fight off the chill. He rubbed his hands together and blew a warm breath between them. His clothes were damp, but not soaked through. It might be spring, but a shower still cooled things off quite a bit. "I'm fine."

"I wanted to go out to check on the hives, but with the rain, there's no point."

When John didn't answer, Sherlock nudged him. "You really don't have to be incensed on my account, John. I know my parents were horrible parents. I've come to terms with that."

"Have you?"

"Yes."

John watched the fire, his body achy and a bit tired. Walking in London wasn't quite the same as walking across the uneven ground of the fields. Still, he felt less likely to punch a hole in the wall than he had before. "I don't think we ever really come to terms with what happened to us when we were children, not completely."

"No?"

"We accept it, learn to push it down and forget about it when we can. We end up doing things out of habit and have no idea why. You don't eat the way you should because of how you were raised. I clean when I get upset because of my father. I just don't understand how people can do the things they do to their kids."

Sherlock reached over and took John's hand in his. "That's because you're a good man."
John continued talking as if he hadn't heard Sherlock's compliment. "I've seen things in the war, things that made my heart break. But I compartmentalized it, because that's what they train you to do. Women and children are tortured and killed. It's shocking but I numbed myself to the horror and blocked it out. I had to in order to survive."

Sherlock shook his head. "What happened to me as a child is nothing extreme like that."

"Maybe not, but we're supposed to be a civilized world. We claim it despite what happens in war. It's like war is the exception. But then I get home and I still see the atrocities that people inflict on their own children or other people's children. Pedophiles, rapists, and murderers are so common that they walk among us, hard to find because they blend in, use an urban camouflage that blinds us to their true identity. It takes someone like you to sort them out. You see past all their disguises, and see them for what they are, monsters."

John took in Sherlock's confused expression. He didn't see the connection to what John was saying and his own childhood. "What I'm trying to say is, that we expect the horrors to be out there, outside the security of family. Too many times abuse and neglect are behind closed doors, caused by those who are supposed to love us and keep us safe."

Sherlock reached out his arm and put it around John's shoulders. John didn't resist as his partner drew him in against his chest, wrapping him in a strong embrace. Sherlock whispered, "We do what we can."

"I know, but it never seems to be enough."

"It would be a lie to say that it ever will be. Still, we do more than most."

John rested his face against Sherlock's chest. Eyes closed, he said, "I know." John sighed. "I guess I'm still unsettled by what you told me."

"You asked."

"I did. I'm not sorry to know about it. I'm just sorry it happened."

"Like I said, it's the past. It doesn't bother me."

"I know and that's part of the problem." John lifted his head. "It should."

"I don't know why. Being bothered wouldn't change what happened, so what would be the point?"

"Maybe part of the point would be recognizing that not eating has a connection with what happened to you as a child. Maybe by doing that, you can change it, maybe even learn to enjoy food so you can eat properly."

Sherlock thought about it and then shrugged. "Perhaps, but it seems rather a lot of fuss over mere sustenance."

John tilted his head and took another tact. "You never liked sex before me, right?"

Sherlock nodded, but still looked perplexed by John's reaction. "That's true, but sex isn't the same thing as eating."

"Why not?"

"Well, there are fetishes that include buggering with various exotic fruits, but it's not really
something I think you would enjoy."

"I swear, sometimes, Sherlock..."

He put a finger to John's lips. "John, I understand what you're saying. You think that if I allowed myself to change past associations with food, I might come to like food as I did with sex. I'm not a complete idiot when it comes to psychological pathologies."

"You're anything but an idiot. However, you are a creature of habit and habits are hard to break, especially if they started so young."

"I suppose I could try harder to appreciate Mrs. Halloway's cooking."

"I could teach you how to enjoy it."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"You go to bed and I'll be there in a minute. I want to warm up the mashed potatoes."

Sherlock threw his head back and laughed. Then he hurried off to the bedroom.


Later, after the mess had been cleared away, Sherlock sat propped against the headboard with John leaning against him. Sherlock sported a self-satisfied grin. "Well, that was certainly a novel experience."

"You mean you've never licked mashed potatoes and gravy off a cock before?"

"Never."

"Glad to know I could offer something new to spice up our love life."

Sherlock kissed the top of his head. "I think Mrs. Halloway would be scandalized if she ever knew."

"Then we won't tell her."

"She might notice the stains on the sheet."

"I think she'll be more concerned with other stains."

"True." Sherlock relaxed. "I can see that this could definitely have some interesting extrapolations."

"Like Chinese dumplings on my stomach?"

"I was thinking more like eggrolls off your backside."

"With dipping sauce?"

"Of course."

"I'll kick start that appetite even if I have to serve Christmas dinner on my crotch."

Sherlock chuckled. "Now, there's an arousing image, the Christmas goose being rogered for the holiday."
"And I plan to dribble the sauce all over..."

"Stop." Sherlock kissed his forehead. "Before we have to invest in plastic sheets, let's go have the rest of that lamb stew."

"Really?"

"Surprisingly, I'm actually hungry."

"You're not just saying that?"

"Do I ever say anything to just appease you?"

"Good point."

As Sherlock threw back the covers, John headed to the kitchen, still naked. He stopped and turned when he heard Sherlock choking back a laugh. "What?"

"I missed a spot."

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"This is Mr. Thompson. He's the apiarist for the property."

John extended his hand and shook, the other man's grip firm and his larger hand calloused. Thompson was an older man, mid-sixties at least, but lean and healthy-looking. He had pale blue eyes and tanned skin that had seen far too much sun over the years. John wondered if he made sure to do a regular skin check for cancer, but kept himself from asking that out loud. "Nice to meet you."

"And you. Mr. Holmes told me you two were just married. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

Sherlock explained, "Mr. Thompson has been the apiarist here since I was a child. He and Uncle James worked together. He was just telling me that the bees are behind schedule this year because of the extended winter cold, but the activity seems to be increasing." Sherlock actually rubbed his hands together. "You're in for a treat."

"I'm sure." John tried to sound enthusiastic, but he didn't fool Sherlock.

"You don't have to stay."

"I want to."

"No, you don't."

"Sherlock..."

"It's fine, really. Mr. Thompson and I have a lot of catching up to do. He's going to show me some of the other hives. He's expanded the operation by twenty percent in just the last five years. It's astonishing."

"Well, if you're sure..."

"Go." Sherlock stepped up and gave him a quick kiss, too excited about the bees to put much
energy into it. He stepped back. "I'll be in later." And he was off, walking beside Thompson, leaning in to listen to all the details the man had to offer.

In a way John was sorry he didn't share the enthusiasm, but glad that Sherlock had someone else who did.

He watched his husband walk off and smiled fondly. The last time he'd seen Sherlock so happy outside of their bedroom was at their wedding and before that a crime scene. He thought that should bother him more than it did.

As he headed back to the house, he thought maybe it wouldn't hurt to at least read a book or two about the hobby that made his partner so happy.

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John put the book down, bored, seriously bored, like he was when he had to read Chaucer in Old English. He enjoyed reading science journals, but he'd never been fond of bugs, bees included. He'd been stung once and his hand had swollen three times its normal size. It took two days to return to normal and hurt like fuck. He rubbed his left hand absently at the memory.

Intellectually, he knew the importance of bees to the world, how agriculture depended on their vital role in pollination and food production. And he did love a good spoonful of honey. Still, he didn't fancy reading about beekeeping.

John decided to put his time to better use while Sherlock was busy with Thompson. While most of the gift givers would be happy with a thank you text, he knew his mum wouldn't. She had always required her children to handwrite their notes whenever they got gifts even if it was just a few quid from Gran.

John figured the den was the best place to look for anything he could use for the notes. The desk was twice the size of the one they had at home. Solid oak and at least a century old, it had plenty of drawers to look through. John found paper and pen, but no envelopes. He pulled out the bottom drawer, but it stuck halfway. He tugged again, but it was no use. Looking more carefully, he saw a cloth bundle jammed in at the very back.

Retrieving it, he put it on the desktop, wondering about the contents. He rolled it out and froze. "Fuck."

Hand to his face, John stared at the syringe, tubing, and packets. He didn't have to be on the drug squad to know what he'd found, an old stash. How old, he didn't know.

Wrapping them up again, he walked into the kitchen, his gut knotted. He ripped open the packets and washed them down the drain. Then he broke apart the syringes and snapped each one before dropping them along with the rest of it in the bin.

Sherlock had no doubt forgotten they were there. There's no way he could remember them being there and not destroy the evidence. It was an oversight like deleting information on the solar system and astronomy in general.

John cleaned the empty sink, wiped off the spotless counters, and got on his knees to scrub the floor that didn't need cleaning.

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"What are you doing?"
"I'm cleaning."

"Why?"

"Things need cleaning, Sherlock. Things get messy and need sorting out."

Sherlock stepped into the kitchen, his face etched with concern. John ignored him and continued to vigorously rub away at one spot on the floor, an uneven dark blemish in the stone. Sherlock said, "That's a stain from years ago. It won't come out."

"Maybe nobody's tried hard enough."

Sherlock bent down and took the wet cloth from John's left hand. "Get up. I'll fix some tea."

"I'm not finished."

"John, please, get up and sit at the table. Tell me what's happened."

Sherlock held out his hand and John reluctantly took it, letting him pull him to his feet. His knees and lower back ached from the long hours of scrubbing the stone floor. As he settled into the chair, Sherlock clicked on the kettle. John still didn't speak, just kept his hand over his mouth. It had turned red and smelled of bleach. Sherlock asked again, "What happened while I was out?"

Finally John answered, "I was going to write out thank you notes."

"Sounds harmless."

"I was looking through the desk in the den."

Sherlock stilled. "Ah."

"Ah? That's all you have to say?"

"I really meant to dispose of it."

John snapped, "So, you knew it was there."

Sherlock crossed his arms, his voice neutral. "I honestly forgot about it being there until just now."

"You never forget."

"That's not true. I do delete things I don't believe to be important."

"And having a stash of drugs in your country house, that's not important? How very convenient."

"You don't believe me?"

"I really don't know what to believe sometimes."

Sherlock bit his lower lip and sat down at the table across from John. "I'm clean and I plan to stay that way. Granted, the last time I was here, I wasn't quite as determined as I am now. I had the cocaine here just in case."

"Just in case?"

"Yes. But I didn't use it, not then, and certainly not now."
John stared at Sherlock, studied him, checked for any signs of deceit and found none. He hated the suspicion that rattled inside him, never still, never giving him any peace. "Swear to me that you didn't remember it was here."

Sherlock didn't hesitate. "I swear."

John let out a breath, one he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "I need you to be truthful with me, no lies."

"I know that. I promise you, I'm not using."

John swallowed down his fear, but it was still a live thing. He forced out the words, words he wanted to own as true. "I believe you."

Sherlock visibly relaxed. "I'm sorry you found the drugs. I'm sure that was a shock, otherwise the kitchen wouldn't be so spotless."

John shrugged. He tried humor, but his heart wasn't in it. "On the other hand, Mrs. Halloway won't have to do much work when she comes in tomorrow."

"Indeed." Sherlock met his gaze. "Are we all right?"

"We're find. I should have more faith in you."

"Faith is earned. I'd like to think I'm gaining your trust over time."

"I'm supposed to be the patient one."

"Most people who know me would've come to the same conclusion."

"I'm not most people. I have to trust you, and I do. It's just, I saw the drugs and I guess I overreacted."

"I'm sorry it happened."

"Me, too."

The kettle clicked off and John started to rise to finish making tea. Sherlock beat him to it. "I'll do it."

John settled back down in the seat, happy to let Sherlock do the work for once. He changed the subject. "So, you had a nice visit with Mr. Thompson?"

"I did." Then Sherlock was off, talking fast and furious about bees, hives, and patterns of flight. John listened, but only half-heartedly. His mind was still a bit fuzzy from the fear of nearly losing all he cared about. He really needed to work on his trust issues, and if anyone could cure him by repeated testing, it was Sherlock.

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"How's your mother?"

"Elated. I think she's ready to adopt Mycroft."

"Someone should. Your mother would be a good influence."
John didn't answer about Mycroft, just settled in beside Sherlock on the sofa. "This is a big deal for her. She can finally relax and enjoy retirement."

When John didn't say anything more, Sherlock asked, "What else?"

"What makes you think there's something else?"

"You're tense."

John accepted Sherlock's explanation, because it was true. He was still unsettled by the conversation with his mum. "Harry and Clara are engaged."

"You don't sound happy about it."

"It's too soon. Most doctors suggest waiting a year after rehab before making that kind of commitment."

"I'm aware."

"Then you know why I'm concerned."

"John, your sister and Clara are adults. Waiting, and the frustration caused by it, could be just as much a trigger as not waiting."

"But it could also be an incentive. They both need to do the work so that it's not a big clusterfuck like last time. Clara's incredibly codependent and Harry knows that. If Clara enables like she did before, Harry won't get better."

When Sherlock didn't comment further, John asked, "You think I'm wrong?"

"It's not for me to say."

"Well, that's a first, you not giving an opinion." He sounded snippy even to himself.

Sherlock's expression hardened slightly. "What do you want me to say?"

John knew he was being unreasonable about the situation, so he shrugged. "It's just I've been through this so many fucking times. It gets old."

"I'm sure Harry doesn't do it to make your life harder. She does it because she has a chronic disease."

John closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he opened them again. "As a doctor, I know that. As her brother, I worry."

Sherlock finally relaxed and kissed the top of John's head. "It's your nature."

"It's tiring."

"I imagine so. Why don't we go to bed?"

For the first time since their arrival, John really wasn't in the mood. Hours on his knees, scrubbing the floor until his hands and heart were raw left him exhausted. "Just to sleep."

"If that's what you prefer, that's fine, but I'd be more than happy to provide a distraction from your worry."
"As much as that appeals, I really am tired. If you're going to have any time with Mr. Thompson and the bees before we leave tomorrow, we should rest."

Sherlock eyed him a few extra seconds, but then said, "As you wish."

Waking up slowly, John groaned and buried his face into his pillow to avoid the bright morning light streaming in the window. The bed was empty beside him, and he cursed before lifting his head. Sherlock sat in the chair next to the bed, dressed and staring at him with that look he got when he came upon a fresh unclaimed corpse in Molly's lab.

John swallowed several times, but his voice sounded hoarse. "Morning." When Sherlock didn't smile or respond right away, he asked, "What time is it? Did I oversleep?"

"How do you feel?"

John started to say fine, but stopped and really thought about it. "Tired. I still feel tired."

"I don't wonder."

John shifted and sat up with a sinking feeling about what those words meant. His feet hit the floor, but he kept the sheet across his middle. "I did it again."

"Yes."

"What did I do this time? Did I hurt you?"

"Not me, no. My aunt's favorite vanity mirror will have to be replaced. Luckily, you didn't damage your hand. I checked."

John swallowed hard as he saw the shattered mirror, cringing at the thought that he'd been violent and out of control again. He examined his left hand. The bruising wasn't too bad, but punching something like a solid mirror would certainly explain the soreness. "I'm sorry."

"I assume finding the drugs triggered this episode."

"Might have; I don't know. I don't remember anything."

"Nothing at all?"

John's head came up and he met Sherlock's unnerving, analytical gaze. "No, nothing at all. What did I do beside break the mirror? Did I say anything?"

Sherlock reached down and got his laptop. "I actually filmed it this time. I transferred the file from my phone to the computer so you could see it yourself."

John couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You filmed me? Seriously?"

"I thought it might help you understand what's happening better."

John shut his eyes and worked hard to fight down the angry panic. He spoke through clenched teeth. "I don't want to see it."

"Why not?"
Sherlock was still watching him, still using that detached detective look, not the loving one he saved just for John. "I'm not a case, Sherlock. I'm not some mystery to solve. I'm your husband."

Sherlock jerked back like he'd been back-handed. "Is that what you think, that I'm treating you like a case?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Data allows me to understand. I was trying to help."

"I know that, but you can't just fucking film me when I'm unaware like that, when I'm off my head." John worked to find the words to explain, put it in terms Sherlock might understand. "How would you like it if someone showed you a video of when you were high, when you had no idea of what you were doing? How would that make you feel?"

Sherlock closed and put away the laptop. "I take your point. I'll delete the file. It won't happen again."

That was apology enough for John. "Just tell me what I did? Was it the same as last time?"

"No, not exactly. It started out that way, you called for help and commanded your men during an attack, but then it shifted. You were incredibly irate. You were yelling a long stream of rather vile curses at someone named Moran."

John froze, gooseflesh covering his skin. He hadn't heard that name since a year before he was shot. He had hoped to never hear it again. "Moran? I actually said that name?"

"You did, right before you punched the mirror. After that, you seemed to just collapse. Then I put you back to bed, and you were quiet the rest of the night."

Long seconds passed before John dropped his face into his hands. He pushed the heels his fists into his eyes, not wanting to see the images in his head. "Fuck."

"John, may I ask about Moran or is that too personal."

Even with his chest tight and his heart pounding, John heard the tone, knew Sherlock was struggling with understanding what he could and couldn't ask about John's past. "I'll always tell you everything I can, you know that."

"I don't know that."

"I'm sorry that I haven't made that clear enough. That's my fault."

Sherlock nodded, more calm than John would be if the situation were reversed. Sherlock asked, "Who was Moran?"

Mouth dry, still a little dizzy from the shock, John shook his head. "I need tea for this, maybe something even stronger."

Sherlock stood up and volunteered to help with that request. "You shower and I'll make it for us."

"Thank you."

As soon as Sherlock left, John got up and shuffled over to the shattered mirror, his reflection fragmented and deformed. He reached out and touched the edge of the broken glass, the pieces razor sharp against his fingertips. He was tempted to press harder, to slice the skin open and bleed
away the memories that still rose up and haunted him in his sleep.

John sniffed the coffee and took a sip to test a theory. "What did you put it this?"

"You said you needed something stronger. I thought Irish coffee might be appropriate, although I didn't add any cream and only used about half the sugar normally required to be authentic."

"Well, it's definitely stronger than tea." John would've preferred just straight whiskey, but he drained the cup and held it out. "Another."

Instead of questioning the judgment of getting sloshed so early in the morning, Sherlock simply obliged. As soon as he handed over the refill, he sat at the table with his own cup.

"Did you put whiskey in yours?"

"No. I thought one of us should be sober enough to drive home."

"We're driving ourselves this time?"

"I could get a driver if you prefer."

"No, that's fine." He took another sip and let the heat of the alcohol burn down to his belly. It eased the tension a bit, but not much. "I guess the honeymoon's over if we're not going to snog in the backseat anymore."

"John..."

"No, I'm kidding."

"Avoiding."

"That, too."

Sherlock drank his coffee and waited patiently, far more patiently than he would with a suspect. John put his cup down and ran a tongue over his lower lip. "I trained with Sebastian Moran. He was a brilliant sniper, the best, really. For a while I even thought he was a friend, but he turned out to be a sadist. I have no idea how he ever passed a psych evaluation. He took pleasure in killing and torture, really got off on it. People, animals, it didn't matter what he killed. He's one of the few men who ever truly scared me."

"You say he was a traitor. How so?"

"He went against a direct order on a mission, killed civilians, a woman and twin boys. I went in as part of the clean up, or, as it turned out, cover up team." John gripped the cup with both hands, the rage inside building again. "Bastard laughed, called me soft, called me naive and an idiot if I didn't think what he did wasn't ordered and sanctioned by the people in charge. Apparently, the people he killed were the family of one of the cell leaders we were after."

"Was he right?"

"I'm not soft or naive. I was, however, an idiot to think that he'd acted on his own. Killing the man's family brought him out in the open and he was eliminated along with the rest of his men."

"But you still confronted Moran about the murders."
"I did, yes. I was reprimanded for fighting, but Moran vanished after that. I heard rumors he'd been discharged for being unstable, but I also heard he'd been given similar missions elsewhere. I just know I didn't see him again, thank Christ."

John and Sherlock stayed quiet as John finished his drink. Finally, John said, "I don't know why I'd be dreaming about him after all this time."

"You said you thought of him as a friend for a while."

"Yeah, so?"

"You no doubt felt betrayed when you realized his true nature."

"I did, yes, but what's that got to do with...oh, my god, that's not how I feel about you. You can't possibly think that."

"Are you sure? Seeing the drugs yesterday, you must have felt betrayed."

"I did, but...but you explained. I was fine."

"Apparently not where your subconscious is concerned."

John ran a hand through his hair, frantically trying to find reason in a swirl of confusion. "I can't control that part of me, nobody can. Besides, that feeling was around a long time before I met you. My trust issues really have nothing to do with you, but with my father. That's where it all started. I'm sorry."

"You've done nothing to be sorry for."

"It feels like it. It feels like I've let you down."

Sherlock reached over and took John's left hand and kissed his bruised knuckles and then his ring. "You haven't."

Smiling, more relaxed, John whispered, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For understanding."

Sherlock wrapped long fingers around the nape of John's neck, drawing him in for a slow, deep kiss. As he pulled back, Sherlock said, "Will you come to see the bees with me today? It's our last chance before summer."

John smiled, pushing away the lingering concern about the dream. It was daylight, time for reality, not a bogeyman from his past. "I will if you promise not to let one of the little buggers sting me."

"I promise."

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"You promised." John complained and rubbed the anti-itch ointment over his right forearm. The sting hurt like a son of a bitch.

"I should have warned you not to swat it. Bees are harmless unless they feel threatened."
"It was a reflex."

"Killing one so close to the hive could have caused a swarm to attack in order to defend the colony. We'll wear protective clothing next time."

"No next time for a while, thanks."

Sherlock straightened and sighed. "No, we'll have to leave soon if we want to be back in London before dark. I've texted Mycroft and Lestrade that we're returning later today."

"I'm sorry we had to leave the hives early. I know you enjoy it."

Ignoring John's words, Sherlock reached out and took his injured arm in his hand, examining the wound and swelling. "This is an allergic reaction to the apis venom. We should be sure to procure an epi-pen for countering a possibly more extreme reaction before our return here. Otherwise, a future sting could be life-threatening."

Reluctantly, John had to agree. "I should've thought of that myself."

"I'm sure you would have." Sherlock caressed John's face before pulling away. "The car has been delivered. I'll put the bags in the boot."

John looked around and said, "I almost hate to leave."

"Almost?"

"It's been so peaceful."

Sherlock grinned as they spoke in unison. "Too peaceful."

John added, "It was still a nice break."

"But you'll be glad to get back to the work."

John teased, "Admit it. You missed it, too."

Grudgingly, Sherlock confessed, "I did. In future, I suppose we'll limit our visits to the weekend. Two days should be a sufficient respite. More than that, well, we both get a bit too anxious for a return to the city and the work."

"I thought it was just me."

"No, not just you. Though I do want to return this summer. I want to be here to help with the harvest."

"Serial killers be damned. I think, we can manage that."

"Honey fresh from the hive, John, it's indescribably delicious."

John quirked a lip in a flirty grin. "I can think of a great way to serve it, too."

Sherlock had the decency to actually blush before he said, "Thompson gave me a few jars to take back with us. Perhaps a demonstration would be in order on our arrival home."

John imagined dribbling honey all over his cock and Sherlock licking and sucking it off. "That can definitely be arranged."
The texts started about half an hour outside of London. John yanked Sherlock's phone out his hand. "No texting while driving." John checked it himself. "Lestrade says there's a case."

"Details, John."

"There aren't any yet."

Sherlock snapped, "Well, ask."

As he wrote the return text, John complained, "Keep your eyes on the bloody road. Traffic's picked up since we left the countryside."

"I'll have you know I'm an excellent driver."

Sherlock was a horrible driver, going too fast, changing lanes without signals, and tailgating anytime he thought a car might be going too slow. John didn't say it out loud, but only because he wanted to keep from having a row while Sherlock was driving. Being tear away at a crime scene apparently translated to being a maniac behind the wheel.

Another text came in with a chirp. "Lestrade says there are three separate murders."

"But obviously there's a link."

John read the next text. "No obvious link before the third one."

Sherlock slammed on the brakes before nearly rear-ending the car that had suddenly stopped for a traffic jam at the intersection. He punched the horn irately. "Idiot! His brake lights are out."

"At least you stopped before you crashed into his boot."

Sherlock ran a hand through his hair and groused, "We could be here for hours. We could walk home faster. I deplore driving in London."

"Next time we'll hire a driver."

"Indeed." Sherlock turned to John and asked, "What connection have they finally seen?"

"I'm waiting. I can only read what he sends." The text finally came through. "They all have failed marriages."

"Lestrade's an idiot. Half the people in England have failed marriages. There must be something more than that or he wouldn't bother telling us about it."

John warmed when he heard Sherlock use the word us instead of me. It was a transition he hadn't expected, but liked a lot. "Perhaps he doesn't want to put all his information on the phone."

Traffic moved slowly again and John glanced over at the strained features of his partner. "You want me to take over? You've been driving the whole way. You must be tired by now."

"I can manage."

"I know you can, but my arm is fine and I don't mind the traffic as much as you do."

Reluctantly, Sherlock agreed to the switch. "Next chance, I'll pull off. I can text and find out more
about the case without you as middleman."

Within five minutes John was behind the wheel as Sherlock and Lestrade texted back and forth feverishly about the case. Later, only a few block from 221B Baker Street, Sherlock grabbed John's arm and squeezed it tightly. "We need to go to the yard right away. I need to see those files! This is a good one, John, an excellent case."

John knew that eager tone, understood the thrill of heading out together and winning the war on crime one wild adventure at a time. It was their love song and they sang it best as a duet. "Tell him to call Molly. I want to see the bodies and the autopsy reports first thing."

Sherlock slapped his shoulder, grinning like a mad fool. "The game is on!"

And they would play it together to win their future.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for taking time to read this. This is the first Sherlock fic I've written and I hope it won't be the last. I've really enjoyed building a whole world for Sherlock and John.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!