A Matter Of Life and Death

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Summary

Sherlock is supposed to be dead. John is supposed not to know. But as Moriarty once pointed out, Sherlock has a heart after all.

Notes

Thanks to Lena and Zinelady for looking this over as it progresses!
Sherlock was dead.

John knew that. After only three weeks, he wasn’t about to forget. He’d seen him fall; he’d seen him buried; he’d cried on his grave. But somehow, coming back to Baker Street made him realise it all over again, as if the wound had just started to heal and was now painfully reopening. The furniture was all the same -- of course it was, it all belonged to Mrs Hudson -- with the same mismatched, peeling wallpaper and, standing in the middle of the living-room, John half expected to turn around and find Sherlock sprawled on the green leather sofa, whinging about being bored.

John remembered the last time they’d had sex there, Sherlock lying naked on his front with one of John’s jumpers under him to stop him sticking to the fake leather. They had talked afterwards, about John’s discomfort about, well, buggery as Sherlock called it. John had jokingly agreed to let Sherlock be on top some day. He also remembered agreeing to move to the south coast and cultivate bees or some other such nonsense. But mostly, he remembered that being the last time he was simply happy in Sherlock’s company, a few days before the Reichenbach case came their way and Sherlock became a celebrity.

And now, Sherlock was dead. Right.

“I don’t know what time the man will come to pick up the books,” said Mrs Hudson. “He said this afternoon, so I suppose you have time to take a good look. I would have started packing them up myself, but, you know, with my hip...”

“No, that’s fine,” said John, grabbing one of the cardboard boxes and eyeing the overcrowded bookshelves. He picked up a battered tome of Clarke’s Analysis of Drugs and Poisons. “I suppose Mycroft didn’t want any of these.”

“No. He sent people to take various items. I assume they took everything they wanted.” Mrs Hudson looked up at the stuffed bookcases. “I’m glad I found that bookstore. I didn’t really know what to do with them. It seemed a shame to just put them all in the recycling bin, but I don’t read books anymore, not since I got the Kindle.”

An awkward silence hung between them for a moment because Sherlock was the one who had given her the Kindle.

“Do you want me to make some tea?” suggested Mrs Hudson suddenly. “Or I could cook you some lunch.”

“No, that’s all right,” said John, though he hadn’t eaten all day, too nervous at the thought of coming back here. “Better get started, then, eh?” he added a bit more loudly than necessary. “I can see a few of mine in there. I’ll put ... his ... in the boxes for the bookseller.”

Mrs Hudson hovered behind John as he started pulling the books off the shelves built into the alcoves, sorting his into one pile and Sherlock’s into another. Most were Sherlock’s.

John remembered sorting books with Sherlock when they’d been dealing with the Chinese case. That really did seem like a lifetime ago, when John had just met Sarah and he wasn’t even sure he liked Sherlock very much. When had that changed? He didn’t know anymore. He remembered berating Sherlock for his lack of compassion when all those people had died in the block of flats because the old lady wanted to describe Moriarty’s voice. But then he’d been berating Sherlock for
his insensitivity right to the last time they were in the same room together, when Sherlock had appeared unconcerned about Mrs Hudson being allegedly hurt. Except that had been a trap, a ploy Sherlock had obviously devised to get John away from him.

“John, how have you been?” asked Mrs Hudson suddenly, breaking into his reminiscences. “You know ... after what happened.”

John cleared his throat and kept his eyes on the box he was filling. “All right. I mean, obviously, it’s ... But, well ...”

“I know. It must be absolutely awful for you. Knowing that he was feeling like that and that you didn’t even notice. That even though you were lovers and you lived together, you completely missed the fact that he was feeling depressed and your love for him just wasn’t enough—”

“You know what,” interrupted John. “A cup of tea would be brilliant. And a spot of lunch if you have something. I actually haven’t eaten today; skipped breakfast.”

“That won’t do your figure any good, you know,” said Mrs Hudson; he could tell she was grateful to have something to do. “I’ll be back in no time!”

John smiled at her and breathed a sigh of relief when she left. He looked around the room; at the headphones on the ... whatever it was on the wall -- an antelope? -- and the desk where Sherlock used his laptop, and the chair where he used to sit, and the sofa where they had made love ...

Was it love, though? John had been in love with Sherlock; he’d realised his feelings of friendship and admiration for Sherlock had turned into love even before they started having sex. But Sherlock had never said anything about that. His response to John saying “I love you” had either been to ignore the declaration or make some vague comment to the effect that he enjoyed John’s company too. John had dismissed it as the emotional reserve that came from Sherlock’s nature and upbringing. He had been certain in spite of this that Sherlock loved him too. But maybe he was wrong.

Maybe it was just sex and Sherlock really was a fraud who jumped when he was exposed. Maybe John had been taken in, and seduced even, by an extremely clever con man. But of course, that didn’t make sense, because Moriarty wasn’t something Sherlock made up -- John’s memory of the swimming pool the previous year was too vivid for him to accept that -- and John had bloody lived with Sherlock.

He couldn’t have been that wrong about him. Something else had happened up on the roof; Moriarty must have threatened Sherlock somehow, and Sherlock, brilliant Sherlock who always had an answer to everything, couldn’t find a way around it and had to jump. That had to be it. He was forced into it. But why say that he was a fake? Why lie to John? Why make him watch? Why ...

Why, why, why? John knew he was never going to have the answers he wanted, no matter what the inquest found or how much the papers dug up. No one would ever be able to explain to his satisfaction why Sherlock Holmes the bloody genius couldn’t find a way out of it. Why he didn’t try harder to find a way out of it when he must have known what this would do to John.

Feeling tears sting his eyes, John put down the books and gripped the sides of the cardboard box. He took a few deep breaths. He knew there was nothing to be ashamed of; Sherlock had been his lover, and he was perfectly entitled to grieve for a while before he moved on with his life. He just didn’t think it was fair to impose his grief on Mrs Hudson. Sherlock had broken her heart too, the bastard; he’d left them both...

“I couldn’t do it,” said a man’s voice suddenly.
Blinking back his tears, John realised that someone had entered the room behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a tall youth with short hair and tight jeans; presumably the bookseller Mrs Hudson had mentioned. John turned away to compose himself.

“Sorry, mate,” he said, returning to his sorting. “Mrs Hudson said you were coming over to get the books later. I’ve only just started sorting them out.”

“I was supposed to be boarding a plane to bloody Dusseldorf,” said the man in a surprisingly familiar voice. “I’d even checked in. But...” Puzzled, John glanced in the man’s direction again and noticed a small rucksack at his feet. He looked up slowly from the man’s trainers to his skinny jeans and tight purple t-shirt as the man continued to talk. “Mycroft gave me money, told me to lay low abroad for a while, then go after Moriarty’s network. Reckoned it might take two or three years before he could arrange for me to come back. I always wanted to live in Germany. But I can’t ... I just couldn’t do it.”

The voice was unmistakable of course, once John’s brain had parsed it correctly, but John still felt a shock of surprise when he raised his eyes to find Sherlock’s familiar face, somehow narrower and longer without the surrounding mass of dark curls. A million questions crowded into John’s mind, rendering him incapable of speech.

In any case, he wouldn’t have heard the answer to anything he might have asked, because the next moment, everything went fuzzy around the edges and then completely dark.
Chapter 2

When John came to, he was lying on his back on the floor in front of the fireplace with the Union Jack cushion under his head. Clearly whoever had left him like this needed a refresher about using the recovery position when someone was unconscious. But any thought of righting the lack of medical training in the general population flew out of his mind when he sat up and looked into the kitchen.

Sherlock was sitting at the table eating with gusto while Mrs Hudson fuss ed over him, patting his shoulder and head, even ruffling his short hair.

“You do look odd, though, dear,” she was saying. “You looked ever so handsome with your curly hair.”

“I am assured, Mrs Hudson, that it will grow back,” said Sherlock superciliously, though he looked pleased at all her attention.

The smell of baked beans on toast made John’s stomach rumble. He groaned and rubbed his head. Had anyone told him in the last three weeks that Sherlock was still alive, John might have planned some kind of speech about how much he had missed him and maybe pointing out what a crap stunt that was to pull on his unsuspecting boyfriend. He certainly wouldn’t have imagined that the first words he would say upon Sherlock’s return would be:

“Sherlock, are you eating my lunch?”

“Oh, John, you’re back with us,” exclaimed Mrs Hudson cheerfully. “Look! Sherlock wasn’t dead after all.”

“Yes, I see that,” said John, pulling himself to his feet and observing Sherlock warily. He knew it wasn’t a joke, because Sherlock wasn’t one for jokes, but it was still taking a while for his mind to adjust to a universe in which Sherlock had faked his death but had left John to grieve without telling him the truth.

“I’ll go and cook up another plate for you, John,” said Mrs Hudson. “Oh, I’m so happy!”

She gave Sherlock another motherly pat and bustled off. John sat down on the other side of the table. He watched Sherlock in silence for a moment, taking in the small mole above his left eyebrow and the scar at the corner of his bottom lip. He had kissed both in the months before Sherlock’s -- what? His disappearance? His fall? Sherlock gave him a bright smile and for all his misgivings, John’s heart flipped happily in his chest.

“I knew you’d be surprised,” said Sherlock, indicating the floor with his fork, “but I didn’t expect you to swoon.”

“I didn’t swoon,” said John ruefully. “I just haven’t eaten all day. I didn’t realise you’d come back from the dead to nick my food.”

“Well, obviously, Mrs Hudson’s food is the reason I came back,” said Sherlock just as Mrs Hudson came in with another plate of beans on toast and a mug of tea. She fussed over them both for a moment while John started his meal, then left them to “get on with it” as she put it, closing the door behind her as she walked out.
John used the food as an excuse to collect his thoughts. He could feel Sherlock’s eyes boring into him as he ate in silence.

“Don’t you want to know what happened?” asked Sherlock, sounding disappointed. “I jump off a tall building; you see my limp body on the pavement; you attend my funeral -- along with far more people than I was expecting, I have to admit, but I suppose that’s the other side of celebrity. And yet aside from swooning like a damsel in distress, you don’t bat an eyelid at my return. Don’t tell me you guessed, because that’s obviously not true. I know you’re not that good an actor.”

John decided to leave the question of his acting talent to another day. He ate slowly and looked up when he had finished one of his slices of toast.

“So,” he said, clearing his throat. “Let me guess. Moriarty threatened you with something big -- blowing up London, killing the queen, I don’t know -- and you had to jump and die to make him call it off. But you thought up a way around it and faked your death instead.”

Sherlock smirked. “Essentially, yes.”

“So what was it?”

“He had assassins poised to kill you, Lestrade and Mrs Hudson if I didn’t tell the world I was a fake and kill myself.”

“Oh. I didn’t think it would be that personal.” John was almost disappointed. “Right. Me and Mrs Hudson, I can understand. But Greg?”

“Moriarty knew from experience that I’m not interested in saving strangers. Not that I would deliberately let them die, of course, but... Even so, threatening the man I’m sleeping with and the woman who cooks for me was almost too obvious,” said Sherlock with a wave of his hand. John was still wrapping his head around this dismissive description of himself and Mrs Hudson when Sherlock added, “As to Lestrade... Moriarty must have had enough informants to know that-- I didn’t think it was that obvious,” he concluded suddenly with visible irritation. “I evidently underestimated the observation skills of the people around us, because I can’t believe Mycroft would have known, let alone told Moriarty when we had agreed on the script and that most definitely wasn’t in it!”

“The script?” said John, frowning at the familiar sensation that his head must be filled with cotton wool whenever Sherlock started showing how brilliant he was.

“Yes, of course I’d agreed to everything Mycroft told Moriarty. I obviously didn’t want my real secrets in the press!”

“Obviously. You planned it all with Mycroft...” John remembered how sincere Mycroft had seemed at the funeral; how easily he had looked John in the eye and said nothing about Sherlock being alive. “How does Greg fit into this?”

Sherlock sighed and rolled his eyes. “Moriarty wasn’t being subtle. He evidently realised that I used to have, well, a crush is probably the best way to describe it, though that probably imbues it with a far heavier sexual connotation than I was ever aware of at the time.”

“You had a crush... On Greg,” said John slowly. Clearly he must have banged his head when he fell over. “Sherlock, you didn’t even know his first name until we went to Devon.”

“He was a handsome man with a fascinating job. I didn’t need to know his first name. But that’s irrelevant.” Sherlock’s face scrunched into a frown. “To be honest, I originally hoped he’d only go after you. I had contingency plans if it was just you or even Mrs Hudson, but I’d never thought of
Lestrade, so I had to go for the full plan. I waited until you came back -- I knew you’d come back -- and then put the plan in action.”

“And you made me watch you so I wouldn’t notice the setup behind the ambulance station, people preparing to catch you and fake your death.”

“Yes,” said Sherlock, with the kind of pleased expression parents got when their toddlers did something completely ordinary for the first time. “I knew you would make the most credible witness. No one would believe I hadn’t died if my closest companion was grieving for me.”

John tried not to read too much into Sherlock’s dismissive depictions of their relationship, but it was bloody difficult not to draw conclusions. “You couldn’t have just told me?”

“No. You’re a terrible liar,” said Sherlock simply. “You couldn’t even look me in the eyes and tell me that Irene Adler was in a witness protection programme without your entire body language screaming that you thought she was dead. It was rather disappointing, actually.”

“Mycroft told me to say that,” said John ruefully.

“Yes, obviously.”

“So, you know she’s dead.”

“No, I know she’s alive. She saved us at the swimming pool and when Mycroft told me she was in danger in Karachi, I went to help her escape. I think he was testing me... Anyway, I didn’t come back to talk about Irene Adler.”

“Yeah, why did you come back?” asked John with irritation.

Sherlock sighed and stood up, walking over to inspect the contents of the cardboard box in the corner of the living room. John gulped down his last few mouthfuls and turned on his seat to look at him, waiting for a reply that didn’t come.

“I practically memorised that copy of Clarke’s,” said Sherlock, picking up the thick book. “But it’s all online now. You can throw away all my books if you want. It’ll be more convincing if you do.”

“Right.”

John rubbed his eyes with one hand; he hadn’t been sleeping very well recently. After the three weeks in the bedsit, it was surreal to find himself back at Baker Street with Sherlock. A very different-looking Sherlock, of course, and one who it turned out had put John through hell, but even so. It made the last few weeks feel like a bad dream.
Chapter 3

Sherlock moved back towards the kitchen, running his fingers over the mantelpiece and the skull as he passed the fireplace. “Mrs Hudson hasn’t been doing the cleaning.”

“No, you were dead and I moved out,” said John dully.

“It’s hardly surprising the place is a mess. The police have been here,” said Sherlock as if John hadn’t spoken, his hands now stroking the bare surface of the kitchen worktop. “But I see Mycroft’s people got here first.” He sighed in irritation and pulled a tile from above the sink. “They’re getting cleverer. Not that there was anything in there, obviously; I cleared everything out before I left. But I didn’t expect anyone to find this hiding place. You never noticed it and you actually lived here!”

John peered at the little hole in the wall and wondered what Sherlock had kept in there. He blinked as Sherlock walked past him with a sweeping gesture which would have been very elegant in a tightly tailored suit but looked faintly silly from a man in jeans and a skin tight T-shirt. The tight clothes made Sherlock look very gay and just a little like “Jim from IT” when they first met Moriarty.

Sherlock opened the fridge door, then immediately closed it again and leaned against the door, looking momentarily alarmed.

“I think I might not have cleared everything out,” he said, wide-eyed.

“I guess we know what your first job will be when you move back in,” commented John with a hint of amusement.

Sherlock shook his head. “I can’t move back in. I’m supposed to lay low. Dead, obviously,” he said, speaking with barely a pause between words though his eyes were scanning the room. Avoiding John’s gaze. “Even with Mycroft chivvying them on, it’ll be months before they even start the inquest and in the meantime, the Met has to finish investigating Lestrade and his team. Mycroft will ensure none of them are prosecuted, of course.”

“Not even Donovan?” asked John, raising an eyebrow.

“Why would Donovan be prosecuted?” Sherlock waved his hand and walked back towards the front of the flat. “Anyway. Irrelevant. I knew I would have to be away for at least two or three years, and I wouldn’t be able to contact you until the inquest was over and the press attention had died down.”

He stood by one of the windows and looked out through the net curtains. “You know you have two paparazzi outside right now, by the way. Hoping to catch a shot of Sherlock Holmes’s distraught boyfriend so they can hang some flimsy story on it. So far, they seem content with the valiant Hero hoodwinked by the arrogant public school boy. You have to be careful, though, John, they’ll turn on you. They always do.”

John half-smiled at Sherlock repeating exactly what John had told him before ... Sherlock jumped. On the other hand, the reminder of the press coverage hit a nerve.

“Right. At some point, they’ll decide I knew you were a fake all along, like some people on Facebook are saying,” said John. “Because I couldn’t possibly be sleeping with you and miss that.”

“They obviously don’t know you,” said Sherlock airily, moving back towards him. “I’m sure I could have taken you in and made you believe I was a genius. It’s like magic, all you need is someone who doesn’t know how the trick works, and once they’re impressed, you can use that to your advantage. It’s easy to fake these things.”
John gritted his teeth. “Is that what you did?”

“You think that’s what I did?” asked Sherlock. He stopped by the kitchen entrance, looking hurt.

“You told me you were a fake. In your ‘note’, when you were up on the roof.” John swallowed and looked down at his plate. “To be honest, I didn’t know what to think.”

Sherlock sighed in irritation; a familiar expression of his exasperation at John’s obtuseness. He began to pace the small kitchen. “It was obvious that Moriarty’s people would be listening in on my phone; I could hardly give the game away. No, I had to play it right to the end. He was the one who brought me to the attention of the press in the first place when I was quite content to remain out of the public eye. It apparently wasn’t enough to just kill me. He wanted me destroyed, and publicly, so that every person in Britain and beyond would believe that I was a fake. The first part of that plan, of course, was to make everyone in Britain know my name. I played along. The press would have turned on me sooner if I’d refused.” Sherlock closed his eyes. “God, it’s bad enough putting up with the idiocy of ordinary people on a daily basis, but collectively, their IQ appears to plummet even further. And all those idiotic women doing more to undermine all the hard work done to advance their rights than any male chauvinist pig could possibly hope for. Throwing themselves at me as if all a woman needs is some man. As if all I needed was some woman. You saw some of the emails I got! Believe me, I am very happy for them all to think I was just an ordinary man after all. And a dead one at that; even better.”

John drummed his fingers on the kitchen table and wondered if Sherlock knew about some of the fanmail he’d received after his “death”. Sherlock didn’t seem to realise that once you were famous, the papers and the Internet never forgot your name. “Sherlock Holmes” would live forever, whatever the real man did.

“Right, so you gave Moriarty what he wanted and in exchange, his people stood down?” said John dubiously after a pause.

“Evidently. You’re all still alive, aren’t you? I gave him what he wanted,” continued Sherlock. “In exchange, I got a dead Moriarty and nobody else got hurt.” John reacted to that but Sherlock forged on. “I don’t care what people think of me, John. Being dead certainly has its advantages with regards to tiresome fans, and Mycroft and I need time to dismantle what is left of Moriarty’s network to ensure none of them will come after you if they find out I’m alive. It will be easier to keep you all safe if I remain dead and away from you. You’re an obvious way to put pressure on me. I can’t come home until everything is done. That could be in three years. That was the plan.”

John raised his eyebrows. “So what made you decide to come home three weeks into your three year plan?”

Sherlock said nothing for a moment. Then he looked at John; he looked distraught. “ Aren’t you happy I’m not dead?”

“Yes.” John cleared his throat. “Well, a little pissed off that you put me -- us -- through all that. And to be honest, a bit dazed by it all. But... yeah, I’m happy. On the whole.”

Sherlock closed his eyes. “I shouldn’t have come back. You won’t be able to resist telling people.”

“Of course I will!” protested John.

“Not even Lestrade?” asked Sherlock with the rapidfire delivery he sometimes aimed at distraught witnesses. “What about talking about me with Mrs Hudson where you might be overheard. Will you continue to see your therapist? Even she will be able to tell you’re lying if you try to pretend you’re
still grieving when you’re not. What if Stamford asks how you’re holding up? Or Molly?”

“Molly signed your death certificate,” said John, side-stepping the questions because Sherlock did have a point. He couldn’t imagine having to continue pretending. “She must know.”

“No. I took her phone to arrange things with Mycroft’s people and made her promise to do whatever he said. Mycroft told her to sign the certificate, no questions asked. I didn’t think she would have been able to lie to you. It wouldn’t have been fair to force any of you --”

He sighed and rubbed the back of his head. John realised with a jolt that Sherlock was close to tears.

“I’d already checked in. This man -- mid-fifties, used to be a banker, now runs his own business, probably IT-related, I wasn’t paying attention, used to be married but left her and banking when he finally accepted he was gay -- this man was talking to me, asked me why I was sad. Chatting me up, of course, and then I was crying. It was strange. I realised I didn’t want to talk to him and I came back here. I don’t know why but I couldn’t stand the thought of leaving.” He sniffed and narrowed his eyes at John. “You’ve been so sad. I’d never seen you cry before.”

“Yeah, well, I was a bit upset,” said John. Now that it turned out Sherlock was alive, he felt a little embarrassed by it all. “The man I loved had just died.”

“Yes, of course. I knew it would hurt you. I just didn’t think it would hurt me. That makes no sense.” Sherlock was agitated and a tear trickled down his cheek. “I knew I wasn’t dead. I knew you’d find out eventually and then you’d be happy again ... but you were so upset. You were so unhappy and it just made me miserable. I haven’t been able to think of anything else. And today, all I had to do was go and follow the plan, but it -- I couldn’t do it.”

“You wally,” said John tenderly, his anger evaporating.

He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket. It was hard to believe he had been on the verge of needing it himself less than an hour ago. And now he was walking over to wipe a tear from Sherlock’s cheek.

“I think I might be in love with you, John,” said Sherlock in a strangled voice.

“Yes, I think you might be too,” said John, leaning up to kiss him.
They kissed gently for a moment before Sherlock broke away to bury his head down against John’s shoulder, hugging him tightly. John returned the embrace. It was hard to remember why he’d been so angry.

“What do you want to do?” he asked softly, breathing in the scent of Sherlock’s warm, thin T-shirt.

“I want to have sex with you,” said Sherlock without hesitation, moving his hands down to John’s hips. “I hated the thought of never seeing your penis again.”

John cleared his throat and backed away, laughing. “Much as my, um, penis and I appreciate that, I meant what do you want to do in general. Are you staying or leaving, or what?”

“I should go,” said Sherlock with a reluctant sigh. He wiped his cheek impatiently, trying to get back to his usual unemotional self. He looked towards his bedroom. “I’ll need some clothes. My case is either on its way to Dusseldorf or sitting in lost property at Heathrow. Either way, I’m probably better off not getting it back. I left my spare coat at Mycroft’s but the rest of them should be here. I can probably find something inconspicuous.”

“Your spare coat,” repeated John. “Trust you to have a spare coat.” He rolled his eyes and tried not to be too put out by Sherlock’s sudden interest in leaving just after his uncharacteristic expression of love. “Mrs Hudson may have given your clothes away to a charity shop, you know. She gave away your equipment.”

“Yes, I know about the equipment. Mycroft’s people got most of that back. Anyway, Mrs Hudson didn’t give away my clothes. Too intimate. She wanted you to do it.” Sherlock turned to his right, towards his bedroom. “You’d better keep packing the books. The bookseller will be here at three.”

“How did you know I would be here anyway?” asked John, still standing in the kitchen.

“Still no good at picking unhackable passwords, John. Or original ones.” Sherlock looked over his shoulder and winked at John as he headed for his bedroom. “No matter how ‘sherlocked’ you might be.”

“You... Bastard,” said John, though he couldn’t suppress a grin. Quite why he found Sherlock’s blatant disregard for his privacy charming, he would never know, but the conversation left him feeling happy that some things never changed.

“Pack up the books, John, it’ll give the press something to talk about!”

John hesitated a moment, but then did as he was told. Sherlock was right about the need to carry on doing what he would normally have done. On the other hand, he was also right about how hard this was going to be. If Mrs Hudson and Mycroft were the only people who knew, John was going to have to lie to a lot of people. All his own friends and family, his work colleagues, the numerous well-wishers who contacted him through the blog, and, through the journalists who doorstepped him every few days, the entire country. John considered the burden of secrecy that Sherlock had now placed on him as he packed away the books, not even bothering to sort them anymore.

After a while, it occurred to John that Sherlock was taking a long time to pick a few clothes, given his usual habit of either chucking some underpants and a pair of pyjamas into a bag, or more often than not, simply getting John to pack for him. John decided to investigate. When he heard no sound coming from Sherlock’s room as he approached, John thought with a sinking heart that Sherlock
must have left without saying goodbye. Though that was a disappointing thought, at least he knew Sherlock was alive.

“Sherlock?” he said as he pushed the door open, expecting to find an empty room.

He didn’t, though. John smiled. Sherlock was sprawled out on the stripped bed, fast asleep. John approached to get a better look, half afraid that the sight of Sherlock unconscious on his back might bring back the memories of the death that hadn’t been. John had been haunted by the sight of Sherlock in his familiar coat, his dark curls matted with blood, his pale eyes open and staring. He assumed that Sherlock was either a very convincing actor or had dosed John with the kind of psychotropic drug they’d been making at the Baskerville facility. Probably both, to make him see such a vivid image of his lover lying dead on the pavement.

But this time, Sherlock’s small eyes were closed and the curls were shorn and free of gore. He looked beautiful. Then Sherlock roused himself and his eyes fluttered open. He gave John a bleary smile when he noticed him standing by the bed.

“Eating and sleeping?” said John with a chuckle, coming to sit next to Sherlock. “I can tell you’re not on a case.”

Sherlock reached over to take John’s hand, tangling their fingers together. John thought about how miserable he had been earlier and lay down beside Sherlock. They kissed again, lying face to face on their sides. After a while, Sherlock lay on his back and gave John such a blatantly inviting look through half-closed eyes that John couldn’t help laughing.

“Oh, all right, you can get reacquainted with my penis since you missed it so much.” John rolled over in the opposite direction and sat up. “I’ll be right back.”

Sherlock’s bedroom was connected to the windowless bathroom by a frosted glass door; after John had realised that Sherlock fancied him, he had sometimes wondered if Sherlock had ever used that to his advantage when John was naked in there. Nothing had been moved in the bathroom since John had left three weeks earlier and the small room smelled damp and unhealthy. John got the lubricant out of the cupboard and returned to the bedroom.

“Get out, I’m not ready,” exclaimed Sherlock before John could fully enter the room. He was struggling to remove his jeans and underwear, his bare genitals bouncing as he hopped on one foot to get them off. “Out!”

Laughing, John closed the glass door again. He noticed a flannel curled into a little dry ball on the side of the avocado bath; he wet it and wrung it out to make it damp. If Sherlock had to leave again, he needed to make the most of this and he didn’t want to be interrupted by hygienic considerations.

“All right,” Sherlock called out. “I’m ready now.”

Sherlock was lying naked on the bare mattress. He wasn’t quite posing dramatically, but he was on his side and leaning up on one arm so that his front was entirely exposed. Holding the flannel and lubricant in one hand, John paused in the doorway to admire his lover’s lean body.

“God, I’m so glad you came back to tell me you were alive,” he said softly. He stripped rapidly and kneeled down on the bed beside Sherlock.

“Yes. I’m very glad I did too,” said Sherlock in a matter of fact voice, leaning up a bit higher to stroke John’s chest. “I realised that if I ever wanted to have sex again, I’d have to find another partner.”
John frowned, though Sherlock’s hand was slowly moving downwards. “Right. Because you wouldn’t be able to just not have sex until you came back.”

“I like sex!” Sherlock was looking down at John’s groin, where his long fingers were performing a thorough investigation. “And you don’t like being alone without someone to have sex with either, so you would probably have found someone else by then, which means that even if I did hold off, I still wouldn’t get to have you back.”

Sherlock dipped his head down to John’s lap. He sniffed deeply which John had always found vaguely disturbing, but also a mark of how much Sherlock liked every aspect of him.

“You, ah, you might have found someone else too,” pointed out John. “Like you said, you’d just need to find other partners.”

“Hmm,” said Sherlock vaguely; not that John’s mind was particularly on the conversation either.

John ran his hands over Sherlock’s bent back, stroking the soft, snow white skin speckled with light moles. Although they’d used a condom for anal sex in the early days, they’d always done this unprotected, which had bothered John’s sense of responsibility as a doctor; at least until Sherlock had randomly come home with blood test results which proved that amazingly, despite his chronic disregard for his own safety, he hadn’t contracted any nasty diseases.

John ran his fingers through Sherlock’s short hair and found that he missed the mass of curls that had almost made Sherlock look like a girl from some angles. But Sherlock wasn’t a girl. He was a beautiful, strong man and John loved him. John shifted his hips back and cupped Sherlock’s chin. Though he looked puzzled, Sherlock took the hint and straightened up, kneeling up on the bed to allow John to kiss him deeply.

“You look so different,” said John, leaning back slightly to look at Sherlock, trying to memorise every faint crease, mole and freckle.

Sherlock rubbed his head. “Yes, the haircut is a bit butch.” John laughed, because even with the short hair, ‘butch’ was not how he would describe Sherlock. “You like the long hair better,” said Sherlock, eyes narrowed as he observed John thoughtfully. “Your girlfriends always had long hair.”

“No,” said John. “The one with the dog had short hair. I think it was the one with the dog.” He kissed a mole on Sherlock’s shoulder and rested his lips on his skin. “And I don’t care about your hair. You’re beautiful. Strong and manly and beautiful.”

Sherlock didn’t say anything for a moment but John felt him tense beneath his lips. “Am I supposed to compliment you too?”

“Not if you don’t want to,” said John, trailing kisses up Sherlock’s long neck. “I know you like me.”

“I do want to. I just can’t think of anything to say.” Sherlock tentatively stroked John’s back and ran his fingers into his grey hair, then nuzzled John’s cheek. “I can’t live without you anymore, John.”

“See, that will do fine,” murmured John, hugging him close.

“You also have a very attractive penis,” continued Sherlock in exactly the same almost reverent tone. “And yes, I know I’m not supposed to say things like that,” he added almost immediately, pulling back slightly and rolling his eyes.

John chuckled and kissed Sherlock’s cheek. “Now is pretty much the only context you can say things like that.”
The grief John had felt since Sherlock jumped came back to him inexplicably and he lay back, pulling Sherlock down with him. He wanted this to be special.

“Do you want to go on top?” he murmured.

“No!” said Sherlock, his tone suggesting that he thought that was a ridiculous idea. He rolled them both over so that John was on top.

“Lazy sod,” laughed John, though he was a little relieved that Sherlock hadn’t taken him up on his offer.

He reached for the lubricant and made sure the flannel was nearby too. Sherlock was half hard now; John leaned down to kiss and lick him to full arousal, swallowing deeply until the tip of his nose was buried in the wiry, sandy hairs of Sherlock’s groin. A year ago, John would have scoffed at the idea of ever doing this to a man -- it was after all one of those things the lads used to joke about down the pub -- but he enjoyed the effect it had on Sherlock. The erstwhile detective was sprawled diagonally across the bed, his stomach and pectoral muscles rippling as his body tensed with the building pleasure.

“John, lie down on me,” he demanded, grabbing John’s shoulder.

John had usually asked Sherlock to turn around at this point, or Sherlock had done so without comment. But this time, Sherlock didn’t move from his position and John didn’t ask him to. He reached for the tube of lubricant and positioned himself between Sherlock’s thighs to lie on top of him as instructed.

For some reason John couldn’t fathom just now, they’d never had sex face to face like this. Sherlock had once remarked that John must find it easier to imagine he was a woman from behind. It was certainly hard to ignore Sherlock’s masculinity from the front, and maybe that had bothered him once upon a time, in that oddly carefree time before Sherlock died and John’s entire world fell to pieces. Now it just felt natural to be like this, making love to the love of his life.

Still moving slowly, savouring the moment, John ran his hands up Sherlock’s body, from his very prominent erection to his flat, lightly muscled chest, and further to his long neck, where his Adam’s apple bobbed as Sherlock swallowed. Sherlock’s pale eyes were fixed on John’s face, his hands on John’s shoulders.

“John, you’re very good looking and I want to live with you for the rest of my life,” said Sherlock seriously.

John laughed. “See, you can give compliments. Though now would actually be a better time to mention my penis.”

“It is -- ah -- an impressive penis.” Sherlock’s eyes glinted with mischief. “Definitively your best feature. Especially right -- oh -- now!”

Sherlock closed his eyes and groaned with pleasure as John sped up the rhythm. John kept his eyes on Sherlock as he moved, committing every expression on his face to memory, conscious that Sherlock would have to leave when this was over and, judging by what he had said, might not come back for months, maybe even years. Oddly, at the moment when the pleasure was most intense, John remembered how miserable he had been without Sherlock and tears rose to his eyes. He buried his face against Sherlock’s shoulder as he came, hips wedged between Sherlock’s hairy thighs, stomach pressed to his still tense erection. Sherlock just held him loosely while John waited for the moment to pass.
When he felt less fragile, John crawled off Sherlock and sat at the edge of the bed to clean himself off. He tried not to sniff; it was daft to be crying when Sherlock was alive and well. He thought it might be nice to get a hug, but he already knew from experience that for all his great intelligence, Sherlock was not very empathic and probably wouldn’t know what to do when his lover started crying while they had sex. Come to think of it, John wasn’t sure he would know what to do either.

“I don’t need people,” said Sherlock after an awkward pause. Glancing over his shoulder, John could see he was still lying on his back and looking thoughtfully up at the ceiling, apparently oblivious to John’s momentary distress.

Relieved that they weren’t going to have an embarrassing conversation about his breakdown, John wiped his face quickly and turned towards Sherlock, schooling his features into an expression of bemusement.

“Right,” he prompted, waiting to hear what odd thing Sherlock was going to say next.

“I don’t need other people. Lestrade, Molly, Mrs Hudson... I like them. I don’t want them to be hurt, but if they went away, or I suppose if they died of something normal, I wouldn’t... I wouldn’t feel the way you felt when you thought I’d died, and...”

He sat up and hugged his knees. John wasn’t sure whether to comfort him or just let him be, and he had just decided on the first option and started to move closer, when Sherlock leaned over and rested his head on John’s shoulder.

“You knew.” Sherlock’s voice was low and John could feel it vibrating against his skin. “When we first started this, you knew I’d find it hard and I didn’t believe you. All those crimes, all that passion, that hatred. I never really understood why people did those things. Why with 7 billion people on Earth anyone would care enough about one person to kill them or kill themselves or kill the other people they love. But now, with this... I’m starting to understand. You love me and I... I love you. It should make me happy and I don’t understand why it hurts.”

“What hurts? Me being--” John cleared his throat and half-shrugged. “That’s just, well, it’s been a tough three weeks.”

“I broke your heart,” said Sherlock softly, scrutinising him. “I’m... sorry?” He looked at John uncertainly, as if unsure if that was the right word.

John smiled and kissed him. “Okay, you’re forgiven.”

Sherlock’s lips curled into a smile. “That’s not what I meant though. I’m afraid... I don’t want you to die, John. I don’t want you to leave me either. I’m... well, frightened of those things, and I’m not usually frightened of anything. And that hurts. I tried to delete the feelings after my funeral when I
saw you crying, but I couldn’t. They wouldn’t go away.” Sherlock sighed with irritation. “And now I’m back here putting your life in danger.”

“Believe me, I’d rather my life was in danger and have you back.” John wrapped one arm around Sherlock. “I feel a bit like that girl in that film with Alan Rickman. What was it called?”

“You’re asking me?” said Sherlock with a frown.

“Right, Truly, Madly, Deeply. She missed him so much that he came back from the dead, but he didn’t really belong among the living—” John shook his head; that wasn’t really relevant, but he had seen the film recently and had fervently wished Sherlock could come back. And here he was, back, and alive and well too. “I don’t believe but I prayed for this, Sherlock. I missed you so much and here you are.”

“I missed you too,” said Sherlock, nuzzling his shoulder. “John, I never want to have sex with anyone else.”

“See, you do say nice things,” John pointed out with a grin. “I never want to have sex with anyone else either.” He remembered that they hadn’t both finished in their earlier tryst and rubbed his nose against Sherlock’s. “So let’s do that, right? Come on.”

He lay on his back and pulled Sherlock down with him again. Sherlock hesitated for a moment, then seemed to understand and reached for the tube of lubricant. John was initially thankful that he said nothing, though it did give the proceedings a gravitas that only made him feel even more nervous. Fortunately, Sherlock broke the silence when he awkwardly placed himself between John’s thighs.

“I’ve never done this before,” he said.

“Neither have I,” John reminded him, “so don’t get too carried away. Just be ...”

“Gentle with you? You aren’t a girl, John. There’s no physical barrier I’m about to pound through.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and the expression was just so quintessentially Sherlock that it made John laugh. He wanted to say something about mental barriers but the occasion didn’t really lend itself to the expression of complex emotions arising from social conditioning. Instead, he braced himself on Sherlock’s shoulders and grunted as Sherlock’s hips thrust forward.

It was awkward and uncomfortable, especially at first, but it didn’t hurt as much as he had feared. In fact, after a few strokes, he could almost see why Sherlock liked it. Given a bit more time and perhaps if he could get Sherlock to use a slightly different angle — oh, like that, yes — John could quite imagine letting Sherlock go on top again. The only thing he really didn’t like was being flat on his back, but maybe if he could ride Sherlock and set the pace sometimes, it would actually be quite enjoyable. The thought gave him a pleasant jolt of excitement that heightened the physical sensation and he groaned involuntarily.

On this occasion, though, he didn’t get a chance to suggest a different position or discover whether he really enjoyed it, because Sherlock started to speed up his rhythm, clearly giving in to the instinct to thrust. John found the pained expression on Sherlock’s face and his clear loss of control rather endearing. He grinned; God, he loved this man. He loved giving him everything and he decided then that from now on, he was not going to let him out of his sight.

Sherlock collapsed on top of John, his skin sweaty and his heart racing. For a moment, he was so still that John was afraid he might fall asleep where he was, but a gentle shove made him roll off. Sherlock lay on his back beside John and looked up at the ceiling with a shocked expression.
“Bloody hell, that’s exhausting! I don’t know how you do it. Let alone several times a night!”

“Practice?” suggested John with a laugh.

Sherlock glared at him. “I have no intention of practicing anything so pointless.” His expression cleared and he added, “How was it for you?”

John decided not to draw attention to the stereotypical phrasing. “It was okay, actually. I’m not keen on lying around, though, so we might try it differently if you want to do me again sometime.” John was surprised how easy it was to talk about it now. He’d actually cried on Sherlock a few minutes ago and all his hangups about gay sex paled into insignificance compared to the relief he felt at having Sherlock back.

“I’d rather you did all the doing,” said Sherlock. “Or most of it, anyway.”

John kissed the tip of Sherlock’s nose. “You lazy sod.”

Sherlock smirked at him and John kissed his impertinent mouth. When he pulled back, Sherlock’s expression was serious again.

“I have to go,” he said gently. “Moriarty still has people loyal to him. His second in command is trying to take over the empire. He’s an East End thug and he won’t pose the same threat Moriarty did, but Mycroft has reason to believe he was the man who was supposed to shoot you. I don’t think they were lovers, though Moran was fiercely loyal to Moriarty; some kind of clan or gang honour thing. He blames me for Moriarty’s death and assumes I shot him up on the roof, though I swear I didn’t, John. Moriarty shot himself out of sheer boredom and God knows, before I met you, I’ve felt the way he did.” He closed his eyes a moment. “Anyway, this Moran ... If he finds out I’m still alive, he’ll come after you.”

“Okay, bring him on. I’m a soldier, Sherlock,” said John gravely. “I can defend myself.”

Sherlock’s lips quirked into a smile. “I think even excellent soldiers have a poor track record against snipers. This Colonel Moran is ex-SAS, a crack shot. I’m sure you could give him a run for his money in a shooting competition, but if he comes after you, you won’t know what hit you.”

“Right.” John considered the situation. “Then it has to be a trap. Let him know you’re alive and I’m living here again, and then make sure you know where he’ll be shooting from. I’m sure Mycroft’s magic elves can make an obvious location available. The flat opposite or something; somewhere easy to catch him. Then I can be the bait and you can sneak up and catch him.”

Sherlock stared at him wide-eyed for a moment. Then he blinked. “John, that’s a stupid plan. There are dozens of ways that could go wrong!”

“I’m sure there were dozens of ways you throwing yourself off a building could go wrong, but if anyone can pull this off, it’s you!” said John, warming to the idea. “The point is, I’m not letting you go, Sherlock. I didn’t overcome a lifetime of prejudice and let you have me just now only to lie here and watch you leave. I’m not going to spend the next few years fretting over you being in danger God knows where, like some old fashioned little wife or something. And I’m not bloody lying to all my friends and family! I want you back in my life now and if you have to take on this guy Moran, then we’re going to take him on together, you and me.”

Sherlock parted his lips and seemed about to say something; John steeled himself for an argument, but then Sherlock smiled.

“He won’t stand a chance,” he said finally.
“You better believe it,” said John confidently. “Nobody comes between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson!”

Sherlock smiled happily and rested his head on John’s shoulder, clearly intending to go nowhere. John embraced him and they began to discuss plans for Moran. And for the rest of their lives.

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