Nature and Nurture

by earlgreytea68

Summary

The British Government accidentally clones Sherlock Holmes. Which brings a baby to 221B Baker Street.

Notes

Okay. So. I am insane. What happened was that hobbitts on Tumblr wrote the little comic that you can see here (http://earlgreytea68.tumblr.com/post/45650331985/ohmybenedict-all-misty-eyed-hobbitts-i), and my heart broke into seven million pieces. But I've already written a young Sherlock fic, so I felt I'd gone over that ground. "Too bad," I thought, "that I can't make it Sherlock's son, but I really can't see Sherlock having a kid."

But the idea wouldn't go away, and I found myself writing the first sentence of this fic, and then all of a sudden it hit me: WHAT IF THE BABY IS A CLONE OF SHERLOCK? Okay, it's one of the world's craziest ideas, but I am a bit taken with it now, I admit.

Anyway, I have no idea where this story is going to go, I'm kind of just letting it make its own path. But considering the story is 15,000 words and the baby has just had his first bath, I'm thinking that it's going to be a fairly lengthy little affair. I thought I'd start posting it, bit by bit, and take you on the journey with me. It might be a bit more meandering than many of my other fics, but hopefully it will be fun?
Thank you to hobbitts for permission to use the art in the icon, and to everyone on Twitter who helped name the baby, and to everyone on Tumblr who was supportive and encouraging while I was going crazy over this.


Translated into Chinese here: http://tieba.baidu.com/p/3139123607

Translated into Spanish here: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11215975/1/Nature-and-Nurture

Playlist here: http://8tracks.com/amiasinnerorasaint/puddle-experiments

Translated into 中文 here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/9477692

Translated into Korean here: http://blog.naver.com/sherlator_/221076155597
Chapter 1

The most ridiculous thing was that the child looked like Sherlock.

He was so tiny that he was still flailing around, not in control of any of his limbs, barely able to hold up his head on his own, and yet he looked like Sherlock, his hair in dark swirls on his skull and his eyes the pale blue-green-gray that John had almost grown immune to. And, when he screwed up his face and wailed his displeasure with the universe, John had to admit that the resemblance was complete.

Sherlock was staring at the small bundle of irritation in their sitting room with what was obviously shock, and John would have relished the unusualness of that look on Sherlock’s face, except that he was busy being shocked, too.

Mycroft held the baby away from him, distaste on his face, and the baby cried and cried and beat his fists and kicked his legs, and Mycroft said, “He never stops with this,” and Sherlock said, “Oh, my God, Mycroft, it’s obvious he doesn’t like you,” and reached for the baby and snatched him from Mycroft’s grip.

“How did you even get his DNA?” began John, delicately.

Mycroft, Sherlock, and the baby all turned a glare on him.

“From my hair, of course,” Sherlock informed him.

“And then you…made a baby from just that? You can do that?”
“They can do almost anything, John, didn’t Baskerville teach you that?” asked Sherlock, impatiently, and then turned back to Mycroft. “But you weren’t supposed to make a baby with my DNA. Not without my permission.”

“I didn’t. It just happened. Accidentally.” Mycroft looked as if he had bit into a lemon.

“Accidentally? You accidentally cloned me?”

“Do you really think that you would be my choice for the first ever human clone?”

No, thought John, staring at the baby in Sherlock’s arms, now contentedly gnawing on his fist, that was definite proof this was an accident. An accidental clone. What the hell.

“Well, what are we going to do with this?” demanded Sherlock, and the baby seemed to take offense to being called a “this” and wriggled about in Sherlock’s arms.

“Well, there are options,” replied Mycroft. “But once they’d told me what had happened, I thought it would have been…unfair for me to make a unilateral decision. He is, effectively, yours.”

“He’s a clone of me,” Sherlock pointed out.

“He’s a baby,” said John, and the baby seemed to look at him in relief. “He’s just a little baby.”

“A clone baby,” corrected Mycroft.

“And your point is?” asked Sherlock.

“You can’t just…You can’t just…You can’t just toss him out with yesterday’s smashed beakers and moldy petri dishes. He is a baby.” John looked at Sherlock. “He’s your son.”

“He isn’t. He is, actually, me.”

“What are your options?” John asked Mycroft.

“He’s the first successful human clone. The first known one, anyway. The government has a lovely facility where he can grow up, well-supervised and well-monitored.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” John started to interject, but Sherlock frowned and said, shortly, “No.”

John and Mycroft both looked at him in surprise.

“No?” echoed Mycroft.

“You’re not sticking him in some sort of hospital, Mycroft, where he’s going to be poked at and prodded at like an experiment for the entirety of his life, the way you did to me.”

“You grew up in an…institution?” John said, because he hadn’t known that.

“Of course not,” answered Mycroft. “He’s being over dramatic, as usual.”

“But I grew up being endlessly examined by specialists, over and over. ‘What does this ink blot look like?’ and ‘Maybe one more test of his brainwaves to see what happens whilst we do this to him,’ and ‘What’s the first thing you think of when you hear the word “blue”?’ Absolutely not. You already got to do that to one of me, I won’t let you do it to the next me, too.”

“What about adoption?” suggested John, because that seemed like a good option to him. Some
young childless couple, desperate for a baby to love.

“What couple would want to adopt the world’s first human clone?” asked Mycroft.

“He’s a baby, Mycroft. He’s a beautiful baby, and he’s the clone of a clever individual who—”

“No.” Sherlock’s voice was low and quiet and firm.

John looked at him. His head was down, close to the baby’s, the tip of his nose almost touching the tip of the baby’s tiny replica of that nose. “What?” asked John.

“No.” Sherlock looked up from the baby, straightening a bit, his face set into a stubbornness John knew well. “I’m going to raise him.”

John stared at him. “I…what?” Sherlock had never expressed any interest in children. He didn’t seem to dislike them any more than he disliked the rest of humanity, but John had never thought that he’d wanted one.

Sherlock met his gaze evenly. “He’s me, John. I’m not going to let him be raised by people who won’t understand him. I’m not going to let him—No. He’s staying here.”

There was so much underneath that proclamation, so much John wanted to unpack, so much suddenly being revealed about that childhood Sherlock never spoke of. But he looked at Sherlock, holding tight to the baby, and he looked at the baby, who was now reaching for the shiny, pearlescent button on Sherlock’s shirt of the day, and even though the whole thing was utter madness and he didn’t know how they were going to even begin to work a baby into the insanity of their lives, he nodded and turned to Mycroft. “Yes,” he said. “Right. The baby’s staying here.”

And Mycroft said they were being ridiculous, they weren’t equipped to take care of a baby, and it’s true that John’s mind was whirling with all the practical things Sherlock wasn’t going to think of, with cots and clothing and nappies and bottles, but he shoved Mycroft out the door because Mycroft wasn’t helping, and when John went back upstairs Sherlock was standing by the window holding the baby up to it.

“And there is your horrid brother Mycroft leaving. He always comes back. More’s the pity.”

“You ought to say ‘uncle,’ not ‘brother,’” said John.

“’Brother’ is technically correct,” replied Sherlock, not turning around.

“Sherlock,” John began, on a sigh.

“I’ll understand if you want to leave,” said Sherlock, abruptly, still facing the window. “After everything…A baby’s not what you signed up for.”

“I signed up for not knowing what I signed up for,” said John, honestly. “But I’m not sure you have any idea the responsibility of a baby. Sherlock, we could find someone to adopt him. An open adoption, you’d know everything about him, he’d—”

“They would try their best, John,” said Sherlock, softly, to the windowpane. “And they’d mean well. And he’d be so lonely…”

John thought again of all the things Sherlock wasn’t saying, he thought of the lonely little boy Sherlock must have been, he thought of the lonely little boy the baby could become. And he thought how neither of them needed to be lonely anymore, because now there were two of them. And it was
odd and unnatural but it was true.

John said, “He’s going to need a name.”

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While he was in the process of making a shopping list, the baby began to fuss. John reached for his jacket and stuck his head into the sitting room, where Sherlock was holding the baby away from him, looking stricken, while the baby made displeased noises.

“I’m going shopping,” said John. And then, “Why are you holding him like that?”

“He’s complaining,” Sherlock complained.

“Right.” John shrugged his jacket on. “Because he’s a clone of you. That’s pretty much what you do.”

“You are leaving me now? With…this?” Sherlock nodded his head in the baby’s direction.

The baby seemed to take offense and opened his mouth in a full-fledged wail.

“Oh, my God,” said Sherlock, staring at the baby in horror. “What is he doing? Why is he doing that?”

“He’s probably hungry. Or possibly his nappy needs to be changed.”

Sherlock turned his horror to John. “What?”

“Sherlock. What did you think was going to happen when you proposed taking care of this baby ourselves?”

Sherlock looked stricken. “I thought we’d do science experiments together in the kitchen and you’d complain when we got cigar ashes mixed in with the tea.”

John could envision that almost too clearly, Sherlock with a small version of himself beside him, the two of them caught up in their own little Sherlock world that only John ever got invited into. In the vision, the baby was older, four or five or six, and 221B was filled with hazy golden sunshine, and John suddenly realized that he actually wanted that vision. It had never occurred to him, ever before, that he might want to raise a family with Sherlock Holmes. Prior to this, he had always assumed that he would have either given up entirely on the idea or eventually buckled down and got back to dating. It was as if the two futures he had wanted had suddenly merged into one.

He realized he was staring at Sherlock in shock. Luckily, Sherlock was so concerned with the crying baby that he didn’t seem to have noticed John’s minor crisis.

“We don’t have to do this, you know,” said John, because now that it had occurred to him that he might want to do this, it was the most terrifying thing he’d ever encountered. “We can still change our minds.”

Sherlock’s face hardened into stubborn determination. “No,” he said, staunchly, and pulled the baby back into the protective curve of his arms. “I’m not going to change my mind.” He looked across at John. “Are you?” It was half-challenge, half-plea.

“I’m in for a penny, in for a pound,” said John, and looked at the unhappy baby. “But we’re going to need nappies and formula, and he’s going to need a name, so be thinking about that.” John turned
away from the doorway to find Mrs. Hudson standing at the bottom of the staircase, looking up it curiously.

“It sounds like there’s a baby up there,” she said.

“Indeed there is,” replied John. “Mycroft accidentally cloned Sherlock.”

Mrs. Hudson blinked at him. “What?”

John jogged down the stairs. “Just another day at 221B, Mrs. Hudson,” John told her, and stepped outside. He found himself whistling as he walked to the store. Sherlock was in their flat with a clone baby, and John was unexpectedly happy.

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The flat was quiet when John got back. John had learned to be suspicious of a quiet flat. It either meant that Sherlock was in the middle of one of his epic sulks, or that Sherlock had done something that he knew John would find so irritating that he was hoping that if he was quiet enough John might somehow forget he was there to yell at.

John tiptoed into the flat to find Sherlock sitting in his chair, showing the baby on his lap the skull. The baby was delighted by the skull. He kept reaching out to touch it tentatively.

“I would say he’s a bit young to start anatomy lessons,” remarked John, dropping the bags he was carrying on top of the desk, “but then again, he’s you. Did you see Mrs. Hudson?”

“Yes. She seemed to think Mrs. Turner might have a niece who might have a cot, or something. There were many uninteresting details concerning this cot, I’ve deleted all of them.”

“Excellent,” said John, in the way he said excellent to Sherlock that showed that he did not think it was excellent. “Well, little clone baby. I have fresh nappies for you and formula. Which will it be? I suspect it will be both.”

The baby cooed at John and touched the skull again, as if to say, Why are you speaking to me of practical things? I have a skull.

Two of them, John thought. I have two of them now.

“Yes, yes, I know that Daddy has an interesting skull and Uncle John only has boring things,” remarked John, taking the baby out of Sherlock’s arms. “Get used to it, kid.”

“I’m not his father,” frowned Sherlock. “You’re not his uncle.”

“He’s not calling us Sherlock and John.” John let the baby rest carefully in the crook of his elbow while he wrestled a nappy out of the box.

“Why not? They’re our names.”

“See this old bathrobe you never wear anymore? I’m using it as a changing pad.” John laid the baby on it, and the baby fussed about how dull John was, and John said, “What is your plan? Are you going to tell everyone who meets him that this baby is a clone? The first and so far only human clone?”

Sherlock was silent, and John knew he was considering the implications of this. Sherlock didn’t want this baby to be lonely, and setting him aside as The One Human Clone was an instant invitation to
loneliness, to uniqueness, to mockery on the playground.

“No,” Sherlock said, eventually.

“Then you have to be his father.” John was struggling his way through changing the nappy. He hadn’t done this in years. “It doesn’t make sense otherwise.”

“Why would you be his uncle?”

“I don’t know.” John was pleased that the new nappy seemed to be staying mainly in place on the baby. He set about resnapping the bodysuit the baby was wearing, which turned out to be trickier than one might expect. “Close family friend, ‘uncle’ seemed appropriate.” John succeeded in finishing the snapping, looked down at the baby, who smiled up at him. John smiled back at him and leaned down and kissed his chubby cheek, seized by a sudden stab of affection. He hoped Sherlock didn’t change his mind, because John was realizing he was already deeply in love here.

“Why aren’t you his father?”

“Because I’m not his father,” John pointed out, picking the baby back up.

“Neither am I.”

“Closer to it than I am.” John straightened, settling the baby against him. New nappy in place, the baby seemed much more content.

“Really? When you just changed his first nappy?”

“Here.” John handed the baby across. “We need to fix him a bottle.”

“I doubt he’s hungry.” Sherlock and baby followed him into the kitchen.

“So you didn’t eat, even as a baby?” John sighed. “Fantastic. I really have just doubled the number of fights I’m going to have over the course of a day. And I’m always going to be outnumbered, aren’t I?” John was studying the bottles, thinking how he ought to sterilize them, and wondering how the hell one even made a bottle from powdered formula anyway.

“Why can’t we both be his father?”

John was reading the directions on the formula. “What?” he asked, distractedly.

“He could have two fathers, couldn’t he?”

John pulled his attention away from the formula, looking at Sherlock, who looked earnest and serious. “Sherlock, why does it matter?”

“Because if we’re doing this together, we should do this together. And because if something happens to me, I don’t want Mycroft taking him.”

John regarded him for a moment, but Sherlock was looking down at the baby, hiding most of the emotion in his eyes. “Fine,” John decided. “We’ll do whatever we have to do legally to make sure that’s not the case. For now, it’s our first day with him. Let’s get him fed and put to sleep and not get too far ahead of ourselves.”

Sherlock sat at the kitchen table, looking satisfied, and split his attention between the baby in his arms and John making the bottle. The baby’s attention was completely taken up with John. He looked vaguely amused, as if John were a comedy act that had been provided expressly for his
benefit.

“You’re going to insist he call me ‘Dad,’ aren’t you?”

“Would you prefer something formal like ‘Father’?”

Sherlock made a face. “God, no. My father made us call him ‘Father,’ I hated it.”

More about that secret childhood, thought John, concentrating on his formula concoction. He filed that nugget away with the others. “Then Dad it is. Daddy, even.”

“He could call you ‘Papa,’” suggested Sherlock. “So he wouldn’t get us confused.”

John carefully filled the bottle. “We really don’t have to make this decision right now.”

“Do you not like Papa?”

John turned to Sherlock, holding the bottle. “I’ve honestly never thought about it, Sherlock.”

“We could trade. I could be Papa, you could be Daddy.”

John cocked his hip against the table and looked down at Sherlock.

“What?” Sherlock asked after a moment.

“Just…I never thought I’d be having this conversation with you.”

“You make my life unpredictable,” remarked Sherlock.

And John laughed. John laughed until he had to pull the other chair out because he couldn’t keep himself standing upright anymore. Sherlock and the baby sent him identical frowns.

“I can’t believe you think I’m the one who makes our life unpredictable,” John finally gasped out.

“Well, you are,” insisted Sherlock, sulkily.

“Here.” John wiped tears of mirth out of his eyes and handed Sherlock the bottle.

Sherlock looked shocked. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“You’re supposed to feed him.”

Sherlock looked almost panicked at the prospect.

“There’s nothing to it,” John promised him. “He’ll know what to do.”

Looking dubious, Sherlock carefully nudged at the baby’s tiny bow of a mouth with the tip of the bottle’s nipple. The baby opened his mouth and latched onto it and sucked, gulping down the formula greedily, his blue-gray eyes steady on Sherlock above him. Sherlock looked back at him, looking absolutely astonished.

“He was hungry,” said Sherlock.

“Told you,” said John, standing to retrieve one of the bibs he’d bought, since the baby was dribbling.

“He’s insufferable but we like him,” Sherlock told the baby.
“Shut up,” said John, and fully intended to give the back of Sherlock’s head a little warning nudge with his hand as he went by, but instead, somehow, he ended up simply sliding his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, which seemed more like a caress than anything else. But John didn’t let himself think about that, just as he didn’t let himself think about the fact that it was possible that Sherlock leaned his head ever so slightly into the pressure.
Mrs. Hudson rang with information about the cot she’d gone in search of. They could have the cot, they just needed to transport it.

John, who had been washing up after the feeding, stuck his head out of the kitchen to ask Sherlock his thoughts on how they should go about getting the cot.

“Make Mycroft do it,” Sherlock told John. He was sprawled on his stomach on the carpet, nose-to-nose with the baby, who was also on his stomach and working very hard to match the effortlessness with which Sherlock was holding up his head.

“Someone will show up there for the cot,” John told Mrs. Hudson. “Thanks so much for tracking one down for us.” John ended the call and watched Sherlock, now holding a finger farther and farther away from the baby, who was lunging for it with one unsteady arm. “What are you doing?” John asked.

“Trying to determine how much he can do,” answered Sherlock.

“And what are your conclusions?”

“He has a great deal of development still ahead of him.”

“And isn’t that the exciting thing about babies?” remarked John, stepping carefully over the baby on his way to the desk.

“Yes,” Sherlock decided, and he did sound cautiously excited.

John sat at the desk and watched Sherlock, sitting up now and coxing the baby into sitting up, too. He couldn’t do it on his own, but his balance really wasn’t bad. John thought that they had to ask Mycroft exactly how old the baby was. There were a lot of things they had to ask Mycroft. Like who the baby’s mother was. “You should ring Mycroft and tell him to pick up the cot.”

“No need. He’ll already be doing it.”

John sighed and turned to his laptop, deciding to make a list of the questions they needed answered. There was already a document open on the laptop. Jack. Jonathan. Ian.

“Were you using my computer?” asked John.

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” Sherlock answered, now making sure the baby was tracking his finger as he moved it up and down and all around.
“What is this?”

“What list of possible names. You told me to come up with some.”

“Jack,” said John. “Please tell me that’s not after Jack the Ripper.”

“It’s after you.” The idiot at the end of that sentence was implied loud and clear.

“After me?” John looked from Sherlock to the list. Jack. Jonathan. Ian. “Wait, these are all variations on John.”

“Of course.”

John glanced at Sherlock. He’d dipped his head forward, allowing the baby to grab at one of the curls that had fallen over his forehead. “Why are they all variations on John?”

“I thought we’d name him after you.”

John stared at him, then at the list, then at him. “Why?” he asked, because this had caught him completely off-guard. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected Sherlock to name the baby, but he hadn’t thought it would be after him. It seemed so…sentimental.

“It was my understanding,” said Sherlock, still not looking away from the baby, “that one is supposed to name children after people one wants the children to emulate. He’s already going to be a clone of me, I thought he could do far worse than to temper that a bit by emulating you.”

Sherlock spoke so casually, as if it wasn’t a stunningly touching thing to say to him. Sherlock didn’t say things like that. Sherlock just…didn’t. And John didn’t expect him to, which was possibly why he was knocked so completely sideways by it.

Sherlock looked up for the first time, away from the baby, directly at John. “Do you object?”

There was something about the idea of naming the baby after John. Something more. Something terrifyingly more. It was the same more that was sometimes in Sherlock’s smiles, sometimes lurking in the looks they gave each other after a successful session of sleuthing, sometimes rising suddenly in the space between them in the back of a cab, or in the space not between them when they collided in the crowded kitchen in the midst of experiments and tea. Neither of them ever mentioned it. By silent alliance, they always just let it dissolve. But naming the baby after him seemed somehow to make it concrete in a way that made John’s head spin. And John’s head was already spinning with the revelation that he was not only getting ready to raise a baby with Sherlock but that he wanted to. He couldn’t handle anything else at the moment.

“As you say,” John managed, after a moment, “he’s already a clone. Maybe he should have a name that’s entirely his own. Just his. Let him be his own person, no expectations on him. Isn’t that what you would have wanted?”

Sherlock smiled at him, one of those unclouded smiles that always made him look impossibly young. John wondered if the baby would have those same smiles, if they would be more common on the baby. He hoped so. He hoped the baby never stopped smiling with such unfettered delight.

“I would have liked that, yes,” agreed Sherlock.

“So something unique, then,” John suggested.

“No,” said Sherlock, looking back at the baby with a little frown. “Unique names are…No. He’s
“going to stand out enough as it is.”

“Alright,” John agreed, affably, because he could see Sherlock’s point on that. “A normal name, then. Just a regular, everyday, ordinary name.”

“Are there any you prefer?”

“You should name him.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s yours, Sherlock.”

Sherlock looked at him. “He’s ours.”

The baby seemed to recognize the stubbornness in his tone. He looked at John with Sherlockian disapproval written in miniature all over his face.

John looked at the pair of them and felt himself smile, inexorably, helplessly, a reflex that he could not deny. He said, “I’ll choose his middle name.”

The baby looked to Sherlock, as if waiting to see what Sherlock would think of this proposal. Sherlock nodded, and the baby seemed to decide that John had not done anything offensive and commenced to gnawing on his fist.

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Mrs. Hudson arrived with a cot, a small army of movers, and Mycroft.

Sherlock frowned at Mycroft, and the baby mirrored the frown. “What are you doing here?”

“You engaged my man-with-a-van services, did you not?” rejoined Mycroft, drily. “A cot, Sherlock?”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at Mycroft. “Put the cot in my bedroom,” he told the movers, gesturing toward his room, and then, abruptly, “Oh! But don’t touch the feathers, that’s an experiment.” Baby still in his arms, Sherlock leaped forward to disappear into the bedroom with the movers.

Mycroft turned to John. “You’re not helping,” he announced, sounding furious.

“I don’t need to help. You’ve got seventeen movers handling a cot, Mycroft.”

“I don’t mean with the moving, I mean with his foolishness.”

John had known exactly what Mycroft had meant, and he wasn’t interested in the conversation. He turned on his heel and retreated into the sitting room, picking up the detritus of baby as he went. The baby had already taken over the room, and he didn’t even have any stuff yet.

“He cannot take care of this child, John,” Mycroft insisted, keeping his voice low.

As if Sherlock wasn’t going to know exactly what they were talking about, anyway. “I don’t see why not,” John retorted.

“You don’t see why not,” Mycroft repeated in amazement. “You don’t see why not? They are setting up a cot in a room covered with experimental feathers.”
“He’ll keep the feathers out of the cot.”

“Oh, will he? Because he has such spectacular fathering instincts?”

“What he doesn’t know, he’ll learn, Mycroft, because he’s clever, or have you forgotten? He isn’t going to do anything that will harm the baby. It’s clear he already loves the baby.”

“Ah, yes, and Sherlock never hurts the things he loves, does he?” Mycroft looked across at him evenly.

John’s hands clenched into fists. He stood by the fireplace and told himself not to punch Mycroft.

Mrs. Hudson said, “Shame on you, Mycroft Holmes. You know that Sherlock would never—”

The baby suddenly started crying, and John looked past Mycroft and Mrs. Hudson to where Sherlock was standing in the sitting room doorway, baby nestled against him.

“Oh, the little lamb,” Mrs. Hudson cooed, bustling over to take the baby out of Sherlock’s arms. “What’s wrong, love?”

“Too many people in the flat,” John remarked, coolly, eyes going back to Mycroft. “It’s enough to make anyone cranky.”

Mycroft gave him that look that Mycroft gave him whenever he displayed free will and independent thought.

“There are a lot of legal things we need to get sorted for the baby,” John continued, because he had never been impressed by that look. “I’m going to draw up a list, and then we’ll be in touch.”

Mycroft inhaled slowly through his nose, and then exhaled sharply, and then turned and marched out of the flat.

Mrs. Hudson had quieted the baby, bouncing him up and down slightly and saying, “There, there, darling. There, there, little love.” She walked over to Sherlock and handed the baby back to him. “Don’t listen to him, dear. I’m sure you’ll be good at this, and John will help. I’ll go down and fetch us biscuits, we could use some.”

“Ta, Mrs. Hudson,” John said, watching her leave the sitting room.

Sherlock stood frozen by the doorway, holding the baby absentely. He fixed his gaze on John. “Do you think it’s true?”

“That you’ll be good at this? That I’ll help? Yes.”

“That I hurt the things I care about.”

“That’s not true, Sherlock.”

“But it is true,” Sherlock insisted.

“No, it isn’t.” John walked over to him. “Stop it. Don’t let him get into your head.” John considered, then swallowed past his own just-realized desire to keep the baby and forced himself to say, “If you don’t want to raise this baby, we don’t have to raise this baby. But I don’t want you to make that decision because you’re scared. If you want to raise him, we’ll do it, and we’ll do a spectacular job of it.”
“Why would you think that?”

“Because the only person who knows you better than you is me. So I think he’s in pretty good hands, all things considered.”

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The baby slept. Sherlock was astonished by this. He fell asleep in Sherlock’s arms while Sherlock had been reading the treatise on tobacco ash to him. Sherlock had been offended; John thought that had probably been fairly predictable, but bit his tongue and sat at the desk making a list of the things they were going to need for the baby.

Sherlock took the baby to the cot and stayed in there with him for over an hour. When he emerged, he said, in amazement, “He is still sleeping.”

“Good,” John said, reading up on the merits of different types of formula. “Hopefully he’ll sleep through the night.”

“The entire night.” Sherlock collapsed onto the sofa. “He sleeps a great deal for someone who’s me.”

“He’s a baby you. And sometimes even you sleep an entire night,” John pointed out. He looked down at his list and wondered if he was missing anything obvious. Toys? he added, wondering if Sherlock would want normal toys for the baby.

“Oh, Oliver,” said Sherlock, from the sofa.

“What’s that?”

“His name is Oliver.”

“Oliver.” John hadn’t expected Sherlock to choose a name so quickly, and he hadn’t even realized Sherlock was still thinking about it. He had expected to have to keep prodding Sherlock about the name, actually. “Oliver,” John said again, trying it out, and wrote it experimentally at the top of the list. Oliver’s Shopping List.

“Do you like it?” asked Sherlock.

John looked at it on the paper and smiled. “Yes,” he decided. “I do. Oliver Holmes. Where’d you come up with that?”

“It’s the most common name in the country at the moment. He’ll blend right in. And it’s Oliver Watson-Holmes, of course. We’re raising him together, remember?”

John glanced over at the sofa. Sherlock’s eyes were closed, so he couldn’t see the emotion that must be written all over John’s face. Sherlock kept insisting that they were doing this together, and yet somehow John continued to be surprised by how much Sherlock obviously meant it.

“What have you settled on for his middle name?” asked Sherlock.

“Well, if you’re going to give him the most common name in the country for a first name, I’m going to give him a unique middle name. There are disadvantages to having too common a name as well as to having too unique a name, take it from someone named ‘John.’ So I thought we’d balance him out.”

Sherlock opened his eyes, turned his head on the sofa to look at John. “You’ve been giving this
thought."

“I have indeed.”

“And what unique name have you decided upon?”

John grinned. “Copernicus.”

There was a moment of silence. Then Sherlock said, blankly, “Where did you come up with a name like that?”

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John woke to the sound of Sherlock’s violin, which was such a common occurrence that he rolled over and pulled the duvet tighter around him and prepared to doze for a luxurious few additional minutes, secure in the knowledge that Sherlock was absolutely fine because he was playing his violin.

And then he remembered, abruptly, that they had a baby now.

John opened his eyes and swung himself out of bed and headed downstairs immediately, thinking that the baby—Oliver—would need to be changed and fed. When he walked into the sitting room, he was treated to the tableau of Oliver, propped snugly into the corner of John’s armchair, watching Sherlock raptly as Sherlock waltzed around him. Literally waltzing in time to the music he was playing.

“We are learning about three-quarter time,” Sherlock told John, over the music he was playing, in lieu of good morning.

“Oh,” said John, dazedly. “Alright.”

“Oliver and I would quite like a cup of tea,” continued Sherlock.

“The baby doesn’t drink tea.”

“But the baby is me, and the baby approves of my drinking tea. Hence, we are united in our desire for tea.” Sherlock played a flourish on his violin and executed an elaborate turn around John.

“I didn’t know you knew how to waltz,” said John, stupidly, because it was the only thing he could think to say.

“According to Mycroft, I don’t,” said Sherlock, and stopped playing and swooped over to the baby, picking him up and saying, dramatically, “Oliver, Papa is being so slow with our breakfasts and we are both dying from want of tea and formula, dying.” Sherlock settled onto the sofa with a bit more care than he usually did for Oliver’s benefit, and Oliver sent John a baleful look, as if to say, Look at what you have done to him. He is weak with hunger.

John ignored all the melodrama. He thought he was going to have to get used to ignoring it from both of them. “You didn’t feed him?”

“I tried to. He didn’t want it. I don’t blame him. It smelled disgusting and tasted even worse.”

“You tasted it?” John headed into the kitchen, where the evidence that Sherlock had indeed made a bottle of formula was all over.

“Of course. Oliver wouldn’t have respected me otherwise.”
“I don’t think he would have cared. And babies like formula, it’s what they eat.”

“I don’t like formula, and the baby is me.”

“First of all—” John filled the kettle with water—“the baby is a baby you. Second of all, when d’you think you’re going to get tired of telling me the baby is you?”

There was a moment of silence while Sherlock appeared to consider this. “Probably never,” he decided.

“As I feared,” muttered John, under his breath, going through the automatic motions of making them tea and considering the formula issue. It was possible Oliver didn’t like the brand John had bought. Trust Sherlock’s clone to be picky about sustenance. It was also possible that Oliver had been used to breast-milk, although that raised even more questions about where Oliver had been before Mycroft had shown up with him. Had Oliver been torn from some poor mother who was grieving him at this very moment?

John finished making their tea and carried it into the sitting room. Sherlock’s eyes were closed, and his hands were balancing Oliver on his chest. Oliver was sitting up, wobbly but steadier than he had been yesterday, and was gnawing on a…rattle. “Where did he get a rattle?” John asked, in surprise, putting the tea down.

“Experiment,” Sherlock answered.

“Sherlock,” John said, a little appalled, because there was no telling where that rattle had been.

“I never used it in the experiment.”

John sat in his chair. “We need to talk to your brother.”

“Always a terrible idea. Oliver, tell Papa what a terrible idea that is.”

Oliver gnawed more energetically on his rattle.

“He agrees with me,” said Sherlock, lazily.

“Because he’s you?” drawled John.

“Yes.”

“Well, we have to. We don’t even know how old he is, Sherlock. And where has he been? Who is his mother? We need to know these things.”

“I did research online after you went to bed. I think he is between three and four months old.”

John tended to agree, but still. “But we need to know. Are you just going to pick a date fourteen weeks ago and celebrate that as his birthday for the rest of his life? And what about his medical history? We don’t even know if he’s up-to-date with his immunizations.”

Oliver made a protesting noise around the rattle in his mouth, looking disapprovingly at John.

Sherlock said, “You’re upsetting him.”

John sighed. “I am in for a lifetime of being the parent who does all the hateful things like make him eat his vegetables, and you’re going to be the fun parent who lets him explode things on the kitchen table. He’s going to hate me.”
There was a moment of silence, then Sherlock opened his eyes and turned his head on the sofa to look at John. “Not true.” Sherlock shifted Oliver so he could sit up, and then stood with him and deposited him in John’s arms. John took him, surprised, and was pleased when Oliver smiled at him and offered him the rattle, cooing. It meant absolutely nothing, not really, but still John felt a little bit better that Oliver didn’t cry immediately for Sherlock. “You do all the hateful things like make me eat my vegetables, and I still like you, and he is me,” Sherlock continued.

“I fail miserably at making you eat your vegetables,” John pointed out, rattling the rattle for Oliver’s benefit.

Oliver giggled, apparently delighted with John’s cleverness, and reached for the rattle.

Sherlock said, “You even make him laugh.”

Oliver cooed and gnawed on his rattle and John smoothed his hand over the dark cowlicks sticking up haphazardly in wisps on Oliver’s head, just the suggestion of the Sherlock curls struggling into being, like the suggestion of Sherlock that lingered everywhere else on him, and Sherlock perched on the arm of John’s chair, his leg warm against John’s bicep.

“Did you change him this morning?” John asked, desperate to say something prosaic enough to break the daydream quality of the moment.

“Yes. He was quite insistent upon it. He needs clothes, John. Something respectable, not that dreadful thing he’s wearing.”

Oliver was wearing nothing very remarkable at all, but it didn’t surprise John that Sherlock would disapprove of it. Sherlock’s taste in clothing was noteworthy, to say the least.

“Yes,” John agreed. “We need to go shopping for him. I made a list last night.”

“So let’s take Oliver shopping, then,” said Sherlock, displaying much more enthusiasm for shopping than John had ever seen him exhibit before.

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John showered first, and attempted to feed Oliver again while Sherlock showered. Sherlock was right: Oliver did not seem to care for the formula. He had eaten it readily enough the night before but he must have been too starving to be particular about what they gave him. Now he made a face up at John, offended by the contents of the bottle, a classic Sherlock sulk to the pout of his mouth.

“Well?” John promised him. “I’ll buy you something different today. But you should have a little bit of this now because I haven’t got anything else to give you. Please? For me?”

Oliver heaved an enormous Sherlockian sigh and consented to sucking down a bit of the formula, making sure that John understood what an enormous sacrifice he was making for him.

“Thank you,” John said, and shifted him against his shoulder and patted his back and kissed the soft down on his head.

Oliver was a warm, content weight against him, one hand caught up in John’s shirt as if to keep himself in position, so John left him there as he awkwardly picked up the kitchen with the hand not pressing Oliver to him. When Sherlock got out of the shower, he peered at Oliver and said, in disapproval, “He’s sleeping.”

“Morning nap,” said John. “What time did he wake up this morning?”
“Morning nap?” Sherlock echoed. “That implies there’ll be an afternoon nap, too.”

“There should be.”

“Well, this is dreadful timing,” Sherlock complained. “We were going shopping.”

“We’ll still go. He’ll be well-rested and in a good mood, hopefully.”

“Sleep has nothing to do with his moods,” said Sherlock. “He’s me, remember?”

“Yes. He’s you. Which means sleep has an enormous effect on his moods but he’ll stubbornly deny that to his last breath.”

Sherlock made a face, the same face Oliver had made upon tasting the formula in the bottle.

John ignored him and said, “Put on your coat and then take him so I can put my coat on.”

Sherlock obeyed, and John transferred Oliver over carefully, and Sherlock snuggled him against his coat. John pulled on his own coat and suddenly realized.

“We don’t have a car seat.”

“Do we need one?” asked Sherlock.

“I think so. I mean, babies need one, and we have a baby.”

“A sleeping baby. I’ll just hold him.”

John wasn’t sure that was what they were supposed to be doing but he didn’t know what else to do. They could leave the baby home, but it seemed as if Oliver should be with them for the shopping excursion, since they were getting the stuff for him. And anyway, if they left him home, one of them would have to stay home with him, or they’d have to impose upon Mrs. Hudson, and John liked neither of those ideas. What did other Londoners with babies do? John had never noticed anyone lugging car seats around town with them.

“Maybe one of those things you wear,” John decided, following Sherlock down the stairs.

Mrs. Hudson stuck her head out of the door and looked fondly at the baby in Sherlock’s arms. “And how is he doing this morning?”

“He’s sleeping again,” Sherlock said.

“What a good baby,” Mrs. Hudson cooed. “Have you named him yet?”

“Oh, yes,” John answered. “Oliver.”

“Oliver. What a beautiful name.”

John thought Mrs. Hudson would have said that no matter what they’d named the baby.

“We’re taking him shopping,” John told her. “The cot was very useful to have, but there’s loads of other stuff he needs.”

“Oh, of course. Babies have a way of taking up so much space for such little people, don’t they?”

John realized that he’d never actually discussed with Mrs. Hudson the fact that they’d suddenly
added a baby to their flat. He said, “Sherlock, could you go and get us a cab?”

Sherlock looked at him curiously, but said, “Yes,” and walked outside.

“Listen,” said John, turning to Mrs. Hudson, “I know it’s a big change. We’ll try to find a new place as soon as we can so we don’t—”


John hesitated. “You thought you were renting to two bachelors. I can’t imagine you expected to have a toddler running around up there.”

“That’s exactly what I was expecting, considering I rented to Sherlock, and he’s the equivalent of a toddler. And if you think I’d let either of you raise that beautiful baby anywhere other than right here where I can see him all the time, you’re absolutely mad. Now go shopping. We’ll have tea when you get back.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson,” said John, relieved, and kissed her cheek. “Really. I know this whole thing is insane—”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. Off with you.”

Sherlock was waiting in the cab for him, and lifted his eyebrows as John slid in next to him.

“She already told me in no uncertain terms that we weren’t to move and she was delighted to have Oliver around,” Sherlock said.

“Well, you could have told me that. I didn’t think it would occur to you to bring it up.”

“She brought it up, obviously.”

“Obviously,” agreed John, and looked at the sleeping baby. Twenty-four hours earlier, he had been making tea and there had been no baby. John had been worried that Sherlock would be teetering on the edge of a bored sulk, as there had also been no case. He had been wishing for a good murder to occupy Sherlock’s attention. Instead, he’d got a clone baby.

“You’re going to insist on buying him boring things, aren’t you?” asked Sherlock.

John looked up from Oliver to Sherlock, who was looking down at him. “Probably, in your view. Why? What do you want to buy him?”

“A chemistry set,” answered Sherlock, readily.

“Sherlock. I really don’t think—”

“Well, we can’t have him using mine,” sniffed Sherlock, indignantly. “If you think I’m going to share my chemistry set, even with myself—”

“Fine,” agreed John, openly amused at the idea of Sherlock being appalled over sharing anything with his own clone. “We’ll buy him a chemistry set, but only because we’re also going to spend most of the day buying him things that he actually needs.” John fixed Sherlock with a meaningful look.

“Fine,” said Sherlock, after a sulky moment, and John smiled and Oliver made a small noise in his sleep and snuggled closer to Sherlock.
Sherlock was not interested in John’s debate over whether Oliver might want to try some baby food, or whether this pushchair was superior to that pushchair, or whether they needed things like swings and playpens and child safety gates.

Sherlock was interested in the contraption that he located that allowed him to settle Oliver comfortably against his chest without having to hold him, because it left his hands free to sort through baby clothing and reject all of it as unacceptable.

“We’re not taking him to Savile Row,” said John, wondering if possibly they should get gates to block off Sherlock’s toxic kitchen as well as the stairwell.

“Well, you’re looking at things to prevent him from going places when he doesn’t actually go anywhere,” Sherlock pointed out, petulantly.

“But he’s going to start going places, sooner than you’d think,” John replied.

“But he’s wearing clothing now,” Sherlock rejoined. “And look at this clothing. This has dinosaurs on it, John. Dinosaurs riding bicycles.”

John glanced at it. “You don’t approve of that?”

“Neither does Oliver.”

Oliver, settled against Sherlock’s chest, was busy examining a small caterpillar stuffed animal that John had given him soon after he’d woken up. Oliver did not seem to know what to make of the stuffed animal. It had kept him occupied for far longer than John had thought it would. John wondered if Oliver had never seen toys before. Where had Oliver been? They really needed to talk to Mycroft, as soon as they got home.

To his surprise, Sherlock said, “Maybe we do need to ring Mycroft.”

John blinked at him. “Really? You think so?”

Sherlock glared at him. “Well, you were the one who originally brought it up.”

“I know, but I didn’t expect you to ever agree to it.”

“I must have baby clothes in storage somewhere. Baby clothes without dinosaurs with bicycles on them. Mycroft would know.”

“Allright, but in the time it takes for Mycroft to fetch us that clothing, Oliver is going to need things to wear. He can’t keep wearing what he’s wearing now, it’s disgusting. He needs something to sleep in and at least three or four more outfits. Pick out the least offensive. What about this?” John picked up a sleepsuit covered with cartoon puppies.

“John, do you wear things with cartoon puppies to bed?” Sherlock asked, solemnly.

“Of course not.”

“Then why would we make Oliver do that?”

“Because he is a baby. We can’t dress him in boxers and an old T-shirt.”
“Why not? It seems perfectly acceptable to me. He could sleep naked.”

“He’s not sleeping naked.”

“I sleep naked, and he is me.”

John had been halfway through the rack of sleepsuits, looking for the plainest set he could find. He looked up abruptly at that. “You sleep naked?”

Sherlock was peering distastefully at another bodysuit. “Of course.”

Of course. John had really never thought about what Sherlock slept in. Sherlock wore pajama bottoms and a T-shirt around the house sometimes, but that was more about Sherlock’s level of sulkiness and less about Sherlock having actually slept in the outfit. John had assumed Sherlock slept in whatever he wore that day, it just seemed like the type of thing Sherlock would do. It wasn’t as if he had a standard sleep cycle, anyway. John normally saw Sherlock asleep only when he came upon him napping on the couch in full-on suit, complete with dress shoes; he had never really thought beyond that. In his head, Sherlock sleeping in his bed was the same as Sherlock taking a nap, fully dressed.

But no. Sherlock apparently slept naked. And for some reason, this had tilted John’s worldview enough that he stood with one hand closed around a sleepsuit and stared at Sherlock open-mouthed. Sherlock slept naked. And why did he care? Except that he very clearly did. He could not get himself to just accept the words and move on. He was completely and utterly distracted by the entire idea of it.

He thought of Sherlock, wandering around the flat in a sheet as they Skyped, and he had thought that was just a one-time thing. No, apparently it was a habit.

“Here,” said Sherlock, pulling out a set of bodysuits, plain white and plain blue. “This is moderately tolerable, if you’re going to insist in putting him in…whatever these are. Even though it makes no sense. No adults wear clothing that snaps.” When John didn’t immediately take the offered bodysuits, Sherlock said, “John,” and shook the bodysuits a bit and looked at him.

Even Oliver looked up from his contemplation of the caterpillar, fixing John with the Sherlock look of why are you suddenly being an idiot.

John cleared his throat and shook himself out of it. He hoped he wasn’t blushing. He took the bodysuits and said, “Adults don’t wear nappies. And he’s not sleeping naked. He’ll be cold.”

“I’m never cold.”

“Can we please not talk about your sleeping arrangements?” John snapped.

Sherlock and Oliver gave him inquisitive looks. “Why does it bother you so much?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Yes, it does.”

“It doesn’t. It’s just that you’re being ridiculous and impractical and he’s a baby and babies don’t sleep naked, okay?”

“It bothers you that I sleep naked?” Sherlock looked like he was gathering a lot of data from what was going on.
John wanted to either crawl under a rock or hit Sherlock in the head hard enough to give him temporary amnesia that would cause him to forget the past five minutes and never remember it. “It doesn’t bother me. I don’t care what you sleep in.”

“I don’t sleep in anything.”

“Yes. I got that, Sherlock, thanks. I thought you hated repeating yourself. You’ve certainly repeated that you sleep naked enough, haven’t you?”

A woman pushing a pram past them looked at them curiously, and Sherlock glanced at her as she went past. John realized that it was possible he’d raised his voice. Even Oliver’s mouth had fallen open in an expression of fascination.

And then Sherlock did something even worse than push the issue. He dropped it. “Fine,” said Sherlock. “That cartoon thing is the least objectionable thing I can see for him to sleep in.”

“Wait,” said John. “You’re letting this go?”

“I thought that was what you wanted,” Sherlock pointed out, mildly.

“You never let things go. You don’t normally care what I want.”

Sherlock looked offended. “That’s not true, actually. I pay a lot of attention to what you want, and you know it. You don’t want me to discuss that I sleep naked, and I don’t want to have a row in front of Oliver, so, fine, we won’t discuss it.”

“It’s just that what you sleep in—or don’t sleep in—isn’t relevant to anything.”

“You’re the one who keeps bringing it up.”

“No, I am not,” John insisted, annoyed.

“Stop talking about it, John,” said Sherlock, evenly. “You’re straying into territory that you don’t want to, trust me on that.”

John blinked. “What is that even supposed to mean?”

“John,” said Sherlock, and just looked at him.

John looked back, feeling a little bewildered, and then thought of Sherlock, naked, sprawled out in bed, sharp and angular and long and hard and Sherlock was absolutely right, they needed to stop talking about this.

“What else is on your list?” asked Sherlock, doing him the favor of looking away from him, so that John felt like he could breathe again.

John looked down at his list, blinked it into focus. “Spoons,” he said.

“Spoons?” echoed Sherlock. “Don’t we already have spoons?”

“Of course we already have spoons.”

“I thought I’d left us a few after I used the rest to…” Sherlock trailed off and then hastily cleared his throat, and John narrowed his eyes at him and wondered which unknown experiment the spoons had been sacrificed to. “Anyway, Oliver can just use our spoons.”
“He should have baby spoons.”

“What are baby spoons?”

“They’re spoons, only smaller.”

“This is ridiculous. He’s not an imbecile, John. He’s me. He can surely handle a regular-sized spoon. In fact, I forbid any more of this nonsense. Oliver, can you handle regular-sized spoons?”

Oliver held the caterpillar out to John, cooing at him.

“That’s a yes,” announced Sherlock, definitively.

John sighed.
Chapter 4

Oliver fell asleep for his afternoon nap in the contraption Sherlock had him strapped in in the cab on the way home, his head lolling back against Sherlock’s chest. John watched Sherlock pull his coat up and tuck it around him, his face soft and fond as he settled it into place, and tried to think if he had ever seen Sherlock look at anything that way before. It was beautiful, John thought. The two of them were a beautiful tableau, and John felt amazingly honored to have been invited to be part of it. Sherlock, his coat settled, gave a contented little sigh John was sure he didn’t even realize and looked out the cab window, one hand resting casually against the baby. John thought there was so much that was utterly mad about what they were doing, but that it was hard to remember that when Sherlock and Oliver were radiating such rare contentment.

Sherlock went up immediately to put Oliver in his cot, leaving John to struggle with all of purchases, which was typical. Mrs. Hudson said, as he staggered to the staircase, “Shall I make us some tea?”

“That would be brilliant, Mrs. Hudson, cheers,” John said to her, and then, once he’d trailed into the sitting room, he dropped the purchases in a heap and collapsed into his armchair. The flat was that comforting sort of half-quiet of an inhabited home in the middle of a city, with outside noises combining softly with the scuffle of the rest of the inhabitants. John closed his eyes and thought of Sherlock in the other room, settling the baby, of Sherlock seeming so calm and gloriously content, and felt dangerously content himself. The brief agitation of the conversation about sleeping outfits swirled out of his brain.

He must have been dozing, because he didn’t hear Mycroft until he was already in the room, saying, “Just there, please.”

John sat up, suddenly wide awake, and turned to watch as Mycroft supervised the carrying into the room of a variety of boxes.

“What’s all this?” John asked.

Mycroft turned to answer him, just as Sherlock arrived in the sitting room. “Why are you here again?” he demanded, swiftly, keeping his voice low for the benefit of the baby sleeping in the other room.

“I believe that I was told there were legal matters regarding the baby’s existence that must be attended to, was I not?” responded Mycroft, mildly.

Sherlock was staring at the boxes. “What are those?”

“Can’t you deduce?” Mycroft’s voice was bland.

Sherlock glared at him and stalked over to the first box, pulling it open and pulling out…a stuffed animal. Some sort of bright blue and bright red blob of circles. John had no idea from his vantage point what sort of animal it was supposed to be. Sherlock stared at it, speechless.

Mycroft sat in Sherlock’s chair. “Have you given him a name yet?”

Sherlock continued to stare at the stuffed animal.

“Oliver,” John answered for him.

“Good name. Slightly common, but respectable. I lived in fear you’d name him
“We don’t need your approval on his name,” Sherlock cut in. “And what is this?”

“Gift for Oliver,” said Mycroft. “It’s the molecular structure of water. I thought you would appreciate that.”

Sherlock stared at Mycroft. So did John.

“Gift for Oliver?” John managed, after a moment.

Sherlock had moved, was pulling things out of boxes. Clothes, in the simple, straightforward colors that Sherlock preferred, nothing especially babyish or precious about them. A fuzzy blanket with the periodic table on it. Good-sized balls, too big for a baby to choke on, meant to resemble decapitated heads. A mobile for over the cot that was, of all things, of the solar system.

Sherlock sat in the middle of the detritus and stared at all of it. His expression was inscrutable but there was a stiffness to his posture that told John that he was slightly overwhelmed. John understood the feeling, because he felt overwhelmed, too. He had expected Mycroft to arrive with a fanfare of further disapproval, to regard them with dubious dismay. John had not expected him to arrive with presents.

John looked at Mycroft, and Mycroft read in John’s face the question that John hadn’t yet formed.

“He is…something to me, biologically speaking. Did you think I would be cruel to him?”

“But these are…” John trailed off, because he didn’t quite know how to say what he wanted to say. These are nice gifts, he wanted to say, which implied that Mycroft didn’t usually give nice gifts, but these were gifts that Sherlock would actually like, gifts that had been chosen with Sherlock’s taste in mind, except for the solar system mobile, and that was the sort of thing that could be regarded as an affectionate tease.

Mycroft studied his umbrella closely. “Well, if I brought you things you didn’t like, you’d toss them out the window, wouldn’t you? It’s much harder for you to disapprove of the molecular structure of water.”

John looked at Sherlock, still sitting on the floor, still staring wordlessly at all the gifts. He didn’t look like he was going to be able to speak any time soon. John had the feeling this was unprecedented, that Sherlock’s mind palace was probably in complete disarray trying to account for it. So John looked back to Mycroft and said, “Thank you. This will be useful.”

“As will this, I think,” said Mycroft, handing something to John.

Out of the corner of his eye, John saw Sherlock lift up his head to watch the proceedings. It was birth certificate information, proclaiming that the unnamed baby, a boy, had been born December 15, three months and two days earlier, weighing 2.9 kg, measuring 54 centimeters. The place of birth was listed as London, and the baby’s father was listed as Sherlock Atherton Holmes, also of London. There was no further information on the birth certificate. The space for the mother was blank.

“And I thought you especially would appreciate these,” continued Mycroft, and John accepted the small pile of papers.

The baby’s medical records, John realized, flipping through them.

“I assure you that he has received the most exceptional of care prior to his arrival here,” said Mycroft.
Sherlock had risen and walked over and was now leaning over John’s shoulder, looking through the papers with him.

“Where was he prior to here?” John asked, trying to sound casual about it, but he worried, about Oliver being somewhere where nobody cuddled him. Babies liked closeness, and Oliver was typical in his desire to snuggle in. John hated to think of him falling asleep all alone, without loving arms to hold him and make sure he knew he was safe.

“Classified,” answered Mycroft.

John felt Sherlock go still next to him.

“She’s our son,” Sherlock said, his voice lashing, “and he spent three months of his life without us, and you’re not going to tell us where?”

It was the first time Sherlock had referred to him as a son, and John wondered if Sherlock realized it, if Sherlock realized that it was inevitable that he was going to stop thinking of him as a scientific curiosity and start thinking of him just as a child. *His* child.

John glanced up at Mycroft, who was looking evenly back at Sherlock and responded, simply, “I can’t tell you.” Pause. “I can assure you it wasn’t Baskerville.”

As if that helped. “Who was taking care of him?” John demanded.

“John, I don’t see what—”

“He’s refusing the formula we’re trying to give him. Was he used to breast milk?”

“Breast milk is the preferred sustenance for an infant, and he was smaller at birth than the experts would have liked. They thought breast milk the most desirable thing to give him.”

“Who was breast feeding him?” John asked.

“No one,” said Mycroft. “You think we don’t have the ability to gather breast milk?”

“Who was his mother?”

“He doesn’t have one. He’s a clone.”

“I don’t mean biologically, Mycroft. Having a child is about more than biology. Someone had to carry him to term.”

“She was a volunteer. She was well-compensated and has no legal claim to the child.”

“I don’t care about legal claims, I care about *emotional* claims, Mycroft. It’s lovely that he’s here with us now, but I’m worried about the people who loved him before us, the ones you took him from.”

There was a long moment of silence. Mycroft looked stonily across at him, looking annoyed that John had brought this up. Then he said, flatly, “She has no emotional claim to him. In fact, I was told, reliably, that she refused to see him after his birth, referring to him as a ‘mutant freak.’ Does that answer your question sufficiently, John?”

John felt a throb of red anger toward whoever this unnamed woman was, who had rejected the wonder of Oliver when presented with him. Behind him, Sherlock straightened abruptly and walked over to the window, staring out it.
John glanced at him, then back to Mycroft. He cleared his throat and tried to sound perfectly clam
when he said, “What about the egg donor?”

Mycroft shook his head. “Another non-issue. She is deceased, and left the frozen eggs to science.”

“The baby was born,” Sherlock said, from by the window, without turning around, his tone flat,
“and the mother turned him away, and you gave him to experts who flew him in breast milk and
monitored everything about him and gave him the best care, and you didn’t tell me about him for
three months.”

There was a moment of silence. John looked from Sherlock to Mycroft and back again. Mycroft took
a deep breath through his nose and looked into the fireplace.

“You thought he was going to die, didn’t you,” Sherlock concluded, unemotionally.

There was another long moment of silence. John looked down at Oliver’s medical records and tried
to read them as objectively as he could.

“We haven’t had much success with human cloning,” Mycroft replied, eventually. “Before Oliver,
all of the babies have died before reaching the age of three months. It was probable the baby would
die shortly after birth, and what good would it have done you to have told you—So no. I didn’t tell
you. But he is now the longest-surviving clone we have managed, and his medical records are
spotless, and so I thought it safe to—”

“Put John’s name on the birth certificate,” said Sherlock, whirling from the window. “In the space
for ‘mother.’”

“But John is not Oliver’s mother.”

“Excellently deduced, Mycroft. But I want him on the birth certificate, and there’s nowhere else to
put him. If something happens to me, I don’t want there to be any question as to who should be
taking care of Oliver, not even for a moment.”

Mycroft glanced at John. John nodded his consent.

Sherlock continued speaking. “And his full name is Oliver Copernicus Watson-Holmes.”

“Copernicus,” echoed Mycroft, and looked at John with a ghost of a smile.

“Goes well with your mobile,” John agreed.

“Wherever you were getting his breast milk from, you’re going to keep shipping it to us,”
commanded Sherlock, clearly ignoring the conversation. “He doesn’t care for the formula and I’m
not going to force him to get used to it. We’ll give him what he likes.”

“Sherlock—” Mycroft began.

And then Oliver began wailing from the other room. Sherlock left the sitting room swiftly to attend to
him.

John stood, because Oliver would no doubt be hungry, and John had procured a different brand of
formula, so maybe he would drink a bit more of it. “The sooner you can get us the breast milk, the
better,” John told Mycroft. “You might find this difficult to believe, but it turns out Oliver is
shockingly particular when it comes to what he eats. I can’t imagine where he gets it from.”
Mycroft looked at him solemnly. “John,” he said.

“You kept him from him, because you knew he would love him as soon as he saw him.”

“I was trying not to hurt him, John. I don’t wish any of you ill, you know that.”

“Well, you left Oliver somewhere where you could take him away after three months and not have anybody miss him, which doesn’t seem entirely like wishing him well, Mycroft.”

“He won’t even remember that time, John. And what good would it have done either of you to get attached to a creature with such a limited lifespan?”

“He’s a baby, Mycroft,” said John in horror.

“He is now. He wasn’t before. Which was why you didn’t know about him before.” Mycroft stood. “I was protecting Sherlock and you know it. And now I see that you’ve gone and lost your head over this situation, so it turns out I was protecting you, too. So you’re welcome. Text Anthea with how much breast milk you’ll need and when, and anything else you might need, too. I really am here to help.”

John watched Mycroft leave their sitting room and tried to tamp down on the fury roiling through him. In the bedroom, he could hear the murmur of Sherlock’s baritone talking to Oliver, Oliver cooing in response. John closed his eyes and took a deep breath and then walked into the kitchen to set about making a bottle.

After a moment, Sherlock joined him in the kitchen, Oliver tucked in the crook of his arm. Oliver was still cooing enthusiastically. He seemed to be growing more verbal, John thought, and wondered if Oliver had had no one to talk to for the past three months, if he was delighted to have an audience for everything he had to say. John pushed the bottle into Sherlock’s hand a bit more curtly than he had intended.

“Fresh nappy,” Sherlock said. “I’m keeping a spreadsheet about this, you know, and I’ve changed more.”

“Yes,” John agreed, his tone short. “Here. See if he’ll take this. I’m going to Mrs. Hudson’s.”

Sherlock gave him a sharp look. “For what?”

“I think we should try giving him baby food, and I don’t trust any of our dishes until I’ve sterilized them. Hers, I trust. I’ll be right back.” John hurried out of the flat and down the stairs and paused at the bottom and took another deep breath and tried to get his emotions under control. He couldn’t do anything about Oliver’s first three months, but Oliver was here now, with them. Sherlock clearly loved him, and John obviously adored him, and Oliver would grow up knowing that, and his first three months would be irrelevant, nobody remembered their first three months of life.

After a moment, John felt able to knock on Mrs. Hudson’s door.

“Sorry about the tea, dear,” she said. “I saw that Mycroft had come for a visit and I thought perhaps you needed to talk to him about…you know.”

The baby clone they were raising, thought John, and then, “Yes. It’s fine. May I borrow a bowl, please?”

Bowl procured, John walked back up the stairs and into the kitchen, where Sherlock no longer was. He found him in the sitting room, in his chair, studying the baby very closely. Oliver, sucking at the
bottle, was returning the gaze.

“He’s eating,” said John, relieved.

“Yes,” agreed Sherlock, distracted. “I don’t understand…”

“It’s a different formula,” John explained.

“No, he looks…perfect. He seems perfect. Doesn’t he?” Sherlock looked up at John, openly bewildered.

John walked over to him, looked down at the happily suckling baby in his arms. “He’s beautiful,” John said, honestly, because he was. There was nothing surprising about that. Sherlock clearly had solid DNA.

“Right.” Sherlock looked back at Oliver. “So why would she…How could she…” Sherlock trailed off, then abruptly leaned his head down and rested his lips against Oliver’s temple, not quite a kiss but the intent was clear.

Because she was an idiot, John wanted to say, but that seemed too trite for the situation. So John put his free hand on the back of Sherlock’s neck, because he thought that what was called for was a wordless sort of comfort, a silent I know, I’m with you, it’s breaking my heart, too.

Sherlock, after a moment, lifted his head and cleared his throat. “What do his medical records say?”

John dropped his hand away. “He’s fine. Healthy. There’s nothing wrong with him.”

“Other than the fact that he’s a clone.”

There was nothing they could do about that, so John didn’t bother to respond.

“You’re texting Mycroft about the breast milk,” said Sherlock.

“Yes.”

“Tell him that I want all the records belonging to all the other clones. The ones who died.”

“Sherlock,” John said, carefully. “I’m not sure that’s such a—”

“I want to know how they died, John, so that I know how to make sure that Oliver doesn’t.”

John looked at Sherlock, looking so fiercely down at Oliver, who was looking adoringly back up at him. It had been one day, and John couldn’t believe he had thought himself happy before. If Sherlock wanted to analyze the data and make sure their baby stayed alive, then John was all for it.

“Alright,” he agreed. “I’ll get them for you.”
Second day of life with Oliver. John came downstairs to Sherlock trying to teach him how to roll over. Sherlock was rolling over in slow motion, narrating what each and every single one of his muscles was doing. Oliver was giving him an are-you-serious look from his position snuggled in John’s chair. When John walked into the sitting room, Oliver looked at him, clearly inviting him to share in the mockery of what Sherlock was doing.

“I know, he’s ridiculous,” John told him, stepping over Sherlock. “You get used to it.”

“How else is he going to learn how to roll over?” Sherlock called after him, as John walked into the kitchen.

“The same way all babies do, Sherlock, it just happens naturally.” John put the kettle on.

“Mycroft stocked the refrigerator with breast milk,” said Sherlock from the other room. “It tastes much better than the formula.”

John verified the contents of their fridge. “Is that Oliver’s opinion or your opinion?”

“Both, because we’re—”

“The same person,” John finished for him. “Yes, I know.”

“Mycroft did not bring me any of the information about the other clone babies. He claims it’s going to take him time to assemble all of it.”

John readied their tea. “Did you talk to him?”

“No, he texted you.”

The kettle clicked. John considered. “My mobile was in my bedroom with me.”

“Oliver and I are very stealthy.”

John wondered if Sherlock made a habit of sneaking into his room. And did he even have a problem with that? A normal person would have a problem with that. He didn’t seem to have a problem with it. He was so far from normal. It wouldn’t have surprised him if Sherlock just crawled right into his bed one of these days. John would have just told him not to steal the duvet and rolled over.

Or not. Sherlock slept naked. If a naked Sherlock crawled into his bed, John wouldn’t just roll away from him. He would…He would…

“John, that water’s going cold whilst you’re staring at it,” Sherlock said from the kitchen doorway.

John jumped and hastily pushed the button for the water to re-boil. “Right. Yeah. Sorry. So. Oliver’s eaten?” John was desperate that Sherlock not do that mind-reading trick he sometimes liked to show off.

“Not really. We both just tried a little bit and pronounced it acceptable. I’m always feeding him, so I thought you’d like a turn.”

John was surprised into looking at Sherlock. “Thank you.”
Sherlock shrugged and sat at the kitchen table with Oliver in his arms. “He should learn that the food in this flat comes from you. To the extent he wishes to eat, of course.”

“Well, Ollie,” John asked the baby, as he began to fix the bottle, “what do you say? Will you take your milk cold or would you preferred it warmed up a bit?”

“Are you calling him ‘Ollie’?”

“Maybe,” said John, who really hadn’t thought about it; it had just slipped out. He reached for the baby and settled him in his arms and said, “Let’s see.”

Oliver cooed up at him, looking delighted to see him.

John smiled and said, “Good morning to you, too. Here we go,” and offered him the bottle.

Oliver sucked on it tentatively, then his eyes widened a bit as he registered what it was, and then he began suckling enthusiastically, one hand up to rest against the bottle as if worried John might take it away.

“Good,” said John, relieved. “Maybe I’ll have a shot at getting a little bit of weight on this particular version of Sherlock Holmes.” John glanced across at Sherlock, smiling, to find Sherlock watching him intently, an odd expression on his face. “What?” asked John, self-consciously.

“He has gained an ounce since he has been here,” said Sherlock.

John did not think that was what Sherlock had been thinking at all, but he let it go. “Quite a feat, considering he’s barely been eating.”

Oliver made a little grunting noise around the bottle in his mouth, as if to say, Hey, I can hear you, you know.

“Slow down,” John told him, “you’ll make yourself sick.” He sat at the kitchen table, listening to Oliver’s greedy gulping of the milk, and said, “We need to come up with a story.”

“A story for what?” asked Sherlock.

“For how we ended up with a three-month-old baby who looks just like you.”

“We can’t tell them the truth,” concluded Sherlock, flatly.

“No, we can’t,” John agreed. Oliver, coming to the end of his bottle, let out a wail. “Alright,” John said, shifting him to his shoulder so he could pat his back, “let it settle first, then I’ll give you more.”

“Because they’ll all think he’s a mutant freak.” Sherlock frowned in dark displeasure.

“Look,” said John, rubbing his hand over Oliver’s back. “So far this whole thing has been kept quiet. If it gets out that we’ve got the first successful human clone living with us, the British government will be the least of our problems. Everyone will want something from him, and none of it would be good.”

“What are we going to tell him?” Sherlock asked, solemnly, lifting his eyes from Oliver to John’s face.

Oliver let out a soft burp in John’s ear, and John sucked in his breath and thought. Because he didn’t know what to tell Oliver. He was inclined to go with the truth—lying was always bad—but it seemed like such a harsh thing to tell a little boy, that he was a one-of-a-kind human clone.
“Luckily,” said John, “we don’t have to worry about that for a little while.”

Sherlock allowed the point with a brief flicker of his eyebrows, and Oliver made unhappy noises and John got up to make him another bottle, thinking Oliver could probably afford to make up the sustenance he had missed yesterday.

“We’ll tell people I donated sperm,” said Sherlock. “Wanted to perpetuate my intellect. They’d believe that of me.”

John had to agree that they would. “And we ended up with Oliver how?”

“Mother died in a tragic car crash. Along with all of his other living relatives. They tracked me down. You insisted we keep the baby.”

John glanced at him over his shoulder. “I insisted? Why me?”

“Because they’ll never believe that I wanted to keep the baby.”

John was completely distracted from the milk he was supposed to be fetching from the refrigerator. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Because I’m a heartless sociopath, John, do keep up. Why would I care about a child I never wanted?”

Oliver squirmed in John’s arms to remind him that he was supposed to be feeding him, and John pulled out a container of breast milk and said, “We’re telling a story about Oliver, not a story about you. They tracked you down and you looked in his eyes and you thought that you could never let anyone else raise him. The end.”

“Sentiment,” scoffed Sherlock.

John shook his head at him.

“And you never did make tea,” added Sherlock.

“You’ll have to get used to having two of you around to make demands on my time.”

The doorbell rang, and Sherlock frowned in its direction. “Not a client.”

“Good. Now is not the time to take on a client.”

“Why not?”

“Do you think we could get our clone baby settled here for more than a day before we introduce him to a life of crime-fighting?”

“John, he’s me. He’s going to love the detective work.” Sherlock’s eyes were shining with anticipation over it.

“Boys!” Mrs. Hudson called up the stairs. “You’ve got a delivery!”

John followed Sherlock to the top of the stairs and looked down at the two boxes at the bottom of them.

“Mr. Holmes?” said the deliveryman.
“Yes,” Sherlock affirmed, and then walked down the stairs, dressing gown flying behind him, to sign for the boxes.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hudson,” John told her, pleasantly.

“Good morning. Hello, Oliver!” She waggled her fingers at him.

Oliver extended a fist in some form of greeting and cooed at her. John had no doubt he was saying, *It would be a better morning if I could get some more milk here.*

“What is it?” John asked, as the deliveryman departed and Sherlock ripped open the first box.

It was full of file folders. Sherlock pulled out the first one and glanced at it, and then confirmed what John had suspected. “The records,” he said, grimly.

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John sat at the desk with Oliver on his lap, and Sherlock sat opposite him, and they spread the file folders over the desk. Well, they spread some of the file folders over the desk. Because there were a lot. And they were alarmingly thin. Every single piece of data that could have been measured about the babies represented by each file folder had been measured; it was just that none of them had lived long enough for the data to get very extensive.

In the beginning they had been named, alphabetically—*Andrew, Beatrice, Cal*—but eventually that had stopped and it had devolved into numbers, which meant it was distressingly easy to determine just how many human clone babies had died before Oliver. The answer was 522.

“Five hundred babies,” John said, dazed, looking at the stacks of folders now littering their sitting room floor. “They made five hundred babies.”

“Unsuccessfully,” remarked Sherlock, head buried in a file folder.

John looked across at him, and knew what he would say. *Will caring about them help save them? Help save Oliver?* It wouldn’t. But still. John looked down at Oliver, who was happily crumpling some of the useless pieces of paper that had been in among the file folders, and felt swamped with sadness for all the babies who had been ahead of him.

“The good news is that they were all born with problems,” John announced, after looking at several dozen folders. “Or with problems that manifested themselves soon after birth. And Oliver’s perfectly healthy.”

“Yes, but why?”

John had set Oliver on the playmat they’d purchased the day before, and Oliver was happily monologuing to the stuffed giraffes and monkeys and elephants cavorting over his head. Sherlock was looking at him narrowly, as if he wasn’t seeing the baby who was laying there but the DNA of the molecules making up his body.

“Good genes?” John suggested, in an attempt at a joke.

Sherlock stood, walking over to crouch down next to Oliver, who turned his attention to him but did not pause in his happy babbling. “All of the other babies emerged with lungs not fully formed, or synapses that failed to fire correctly, or malfunctioning hearts. A plethora of problems, no real pattern to them, just the pattern that human clones didn’t seem to work, that something was going wrong in the actual process of growing the baby. Until Oliver. Born absolutely perfect, not a problem in
sight.”

Oliver reached for his toes, succeeded in grabbing them, and beamed up at Sherlock in pride, as if to prove his perfection.

“Why should that be, Ollie?” asked Sherlock, musingly.

“Are we calling him ‘Ollie,’ then?” remarked John, as lightly as he could.

Sherlock acknowledged the comment with a brief smile, not taking his gaze from Oliver.

“Look,” said John, pushing the folders away from him. “I’m not sure we’ll ever know. It happened, he’s here, we have him. It’s just luck. All births are really just luck, it’s a complex process and a million things could go wrong, and that’s before you add in the complicating factor of cloning.”

“Luck.” Sherlock’s tone was hard, as was his face when he looked up at John. “You want me to base our child’s future safety on luck.”

“That would be the case even if he wasn’t a clone,” John said, gently, because it was true.

Sherlock, making a sound of disgust, rose away from Oliver and collapsed onto the sofa in a sulk. Oliver, after a moment of stunned confusion following his departure, began to cry.

John stood and walked over to retrieve him. “Okay,” he said, soothingly, “your dad is just going to have himself a bit of a sulk, which is a habit I would like to not encourage in you if we can at all help it.”

Sherlock made another sound of disgust and flopped over to present John and Oliver with his back.

The flat while Sherlock was sulking was never a pleasant place to be. John knew he was sulking in an embodiment of worry over Oliver, so he wasn’t inclined to have a disagreement about it. His usual method of dealing with Sherlock’s sulks was simply to let him be for a little while. If Sherlock didn’t work himself out of it in a few hours, then John would engage heavy artillery.

But, in the meantime, John announced, “Oliver and I are going for a walk.”

Sherlock did not acknowledge this. John ignored him and bundled Oliver up and taught himself how to use the pushchair they’d bought and then departed the flat. It was not a bad day outside, sharp and brisk but not unbearable, and Oliver was wrapped in his periodic table blanket so John doubted he was cold. In fact, he seemed very happy to be outside, keeping up a running commentary for John’s benefit.

“When you learn to talk, you’re never going to shut up, are you?” John remarked, fondly, because Sherlock also liked to hear the sound of his own voice. When he wasn’t sulking.

The baby oohed and aahed over the street scenes, and John wondered if he was already deducing things in that quicksilver brain he possessed. People stopped to ooh and aah over the baby, and they told John he was darling, and John beamed with pride as if he had had anything to do with the creation of the baby. But it was nice, because not one person said that Oliver looked like anything other than a perfectly normal baby. John knew Oliver looked like a perfectly normal baby but it was soothing to have it independently verified.

It grew nippier outside as the sun began to set, and John turned the pushchair toward home.

Mrs. Hudson met him as he struggled through the front door.
“Hello,” she said, holding the door for him. “Did you have a nice day?”

“Cheers,” he said, and then, “Yes, Oliver and I went for a stroll.”

“Oh, how lovely. And it looks like you have a tired little boy there.”

John glanced at Oliver. He was rubbing his little fists into his eyes and yawning, looking adorably exhausted and fighting it every step of the way. “I thought he’d fall asleep in the pushchair but he is apparently as stubborn about sleep as his dad.” John kissed a cheek flushed pink from the long exposure to the chilly March air.

“Aww,” said Mrs. Hudson, as if that made Oliver extra-adorable. “Do you need anything? Anything I can help with?”

“I think we’re good for now, Mrs. Hudson. I’m sure you’ll be receiving frantic pleas for help from us soon enough.”

“Oh, any time, dear,” said Mrs. Hudson, fondly, and John headed up the stairs to the flat.

The sitting room was dark, which meant Sherlock had not been up to turn on the lights, which meant Sherlock was still sulking.

“Tell you what,” John said to Oliver. “Why don’t we have a bath, get you properly settled for the night?”

Oliver looked wearily intrigued by the prospect, and John retrieved the baby bath seat they’d bought and went about preparing a bath for him. Oliver perked up a bit at the running water, watching with Sherlock’s sharp eyes as it began to collect in the tub. John knew the baby must have had a bath before, but he doubted the baby had ever seen a proper bathtub, with a proper faucet. Probably baby baths had been brought to him, wherever he was being held, being referred to only by his number, 523.

John pushed the thought away and focused on putting Oliver in the bath. Oliver made a little exclamation of surprise upon coming in contact with the water that then dissolved into a gurgle of glee. He splashed at the water enthusiastically, laughing in delight at his discovery.

“What are you doing?”

John glanced over his shoulder at Sherlock, standing in the bathroom doorway. John did not comment on the sulk, because nothing was more likely to send Sherlock careening into a sulk then mentioning a previous sulk. So he just said, “Oliver is taking a bath.”

Oliver splashed hard enough to get a bit of soap in John’s eye.

Sherlock edged into the bathroom and stared down at the proceedings. “He likes it,” he concluded.

John didn’t say anything snide about the deduction. John said, “Yes, he does.”

The bathroom was not large. Sherlock, leaning against the sink, was necessarily touching John where he knelt by the bathtub. And John didn’t mind. Sherlock seldom had the same understanding of personal space as other people did. He was constantly standing just a little too close to John, leaning just a little too near over his shoulder, and John had grown used to it. In the time when he had thought Sherlock dead, the air that brushed against him had seemed so cold and empty without him. Sherlock’s warmth was comforting at all times, and it was comforting now, as he watched John carefully wash Oliver, who squirmed and laughed as if enjoying what a challenge he was making it,
and John thought that he had never supposed 221B could get so...*domestic*.

“Sherlock, can you fetch him a towel?” John asked, as Oliver dodged away from his attempts to clean his face.

He felt the rush of the air that filled in the space Sherlock had been occupying, and then Sherlock returned, holding out a towel. John lifted Oliver, who was slippery when wet, and managed somehow to wrap him in the towel without dropping him.

“Did you want to dress him?” John asked, handing him across to Sherlock.

“He’s shivering,” Sherlock said, in surprise.

“I’m sure he’s cold, just out of the bath. Hence why we’re going to put him in a sleepset and not let him sleep naked.”

“Fine, but I’m using the plain gray one Mycroft bought him and not the hideous one with the dancing screwdrivers that you bought for him.”

“Fine,” agreed John, amused, as Sherlock exited the bathroom.

“And don’t think it doesn’t pain me to use anything from Mycroft,” Sherlock called back, as he disappeared with the baby into his bedroom.
Chapter 6

Oliver wormed his way irreversibly into life at 221B within days. John had liked his life before Oliver’s arrival, he had liked having Sherlock back, he had liked the friendship they had forged for themselves. He worked at the clinic when they were between cases and an extra hand was needed, or otherwise tagged along to crime scenes, or vetted clients with Sherlock, or blogged about their experiences. The consulting detection earned them a steady and reliable income, given the level of fame they’d achieved, and their life together had settled into as much of a routine as it ever achieved.

Oliver should have felt like a wrench thrown into their system, and yet he didn’t. That was helped in great part by the fact that they happened to enter a bit of a lull in business just as Oliver entered their lives, which gave them time to adjust around him without trying to balance the other demands on their time. They went for walks in the park, Sherlock deducing for them, to show off for John’s sake and to educate for Oliver’s sake. John sat with Oliver on his lap and read him the morning newspaper—nothing too upsetting, but he was hoping to encourage Oliver to take an interest in current events beyond crimes; Sherlock sat with Oliver on his lap and read him chemistry textbooks. Oliver seemed to enjoy either activity, although John suspected it had more to do with Oliver’s craving to be near someone, to have someone communicating with him. They ate too much Chinese takeaway, because John couldn’t be bothered to cook, but then that was nothing unusual. Mrs. Hudson made them a great deal of tea, but then that was also nothing unusual.

Mycroft stopped by more often than he usually did, but they tolerated him. Oliver seemed wary of him, and John wondered at the evidence that Sherlockian distrust of Mycroft Holmes was apparently genetically embedded. Unless Oliver connected Mycroft with the first three months of his life. At any rate, Mycroft seemed to genuinely care about Oliver, and inquired after him and watched him raptly. He held him awkwardly the one time John suggested it, and Oliver had turned an appalled what-are-you-thinking look on him, and so John had never repeated the experiment. Sherlock seemed to think Mycroft only cared about Oliver to the extent that he was a scientific curiosity, but John wasn’t so sure; he thought Sherlock had never been entirely fair to Mycroft when it came to Mycroft’s emotions.

Their kitchen was cleaner than it had ever been, more devoid of experiments than John had ever known it to be, because Oliver had become Sherlock’s experiment for the time being, and Sherlock was very proud of himself when Oliver accomplished rolling over and sitting up on his own in short order, and Sherlock moved on to crawling, demonstrating it by crawling himself all over the sitting room floor. Oliver laughed at him, which made Sherlock complain that the baby wasn’t taking the lesson at all seriously, and John wondered how he had been happy before this. Even more amazingly, John wondered that it had never occurred to him that he might want this.

Oliver had been with them a week, a week of relative calm, death-free and toxic-accident-free, and Sherlock had not been bored once.

John sat with his blog open and stared at it.

“You’ve got nothing to say,” Sherlock remarked, from where he was sitting on the floor teaching Oliver chemical equations with the visual aids of the big, bright blocks Mrs. Hudson had bought for the baby.

“Well, I don’t want to talk about Oliver. I don’t want to make him…blog fodder.”

“Why don’t you put on your blog that he has no idea the sun goes ‘round the moon?”
“Sherlock, he doesn’t know what the sun and moon are.”

“You could put that on your blog. ‘Oliver is clever when it comes to rolling over but he is spectacularly ignorant about some things, like what the sun and the moon are.’”

“Are you ever going to get over that?” John asked.

“No,” Sherlock responded, simply, and then, “Oliver, take that blue block out of your mouth, we need it to represent carbon.”

Oliver gave Sherlock a look that did not seem to bode well for Sherlock getting the blue block. Sherlock sighed and seemed to come to the same conclusion, turning to John.

“We need a case,” he said.

“Do you think so?”

“Yes. You need something to blog about. You like to tell people things, and you want to tell everyone about Oliver, and you can’t, so we need to give you something else to tell people.”

“Oh, is that why we’ve been solving crimes all this time? So that I can have something to blog about? How selfless of you.”

Sherlock grinned at him.

Oliver gurgled a bit around the blue block in his mouth, his contribution to the conversation.

Sherlock said, “See, Oliver would enjoy a case as well.”

John hesitated.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “You don’t think Oliver should come investigating with us.”

“It isn’t exactly safe, is it?” John admitted, reluctantly, because he hadn’t wanted to have this conversation until it was absolutely necessary.

Sherlock had been reclining casually, but now he sat up, sharp and displeased. “Do you think I would put him in danger?”

“I think you have a different definition of ‘danger’ than most other people,” said John, delicately.

Sherlock pressed his lips together and breathed hard. Oliver, noticing his mood, gave John his what-have-you-done-now look. Then Sherlock stood, stiff and jerky, unlike the fluid smoothness with which he normally moved.

“Sherlock,” said John.

“No. Absolutely. You’re right. It’s a miracle I haven’t baked him in the oven yet.” Sherlock pulled on his coat as he spoke.

“That isn’t what I mean, and you know it. Where are you going?”

“Out.”

“Out where?”
“Somewhere that’s interrogation-free. I’d take Oliver but I’m sure you’re concerned I’d leave him unattended in his pram or sell him to a drug dealer for a hit.”

“Sherlock,” said John, sharply, but Sherlock had already left the room, and John could hear his steps jogging firmly down the staircase. The front door opened and closed. “Dammit,” muttered John, scrubbing a hand over his face, and then looked at Oliver, who looked displeased with him. “That could have gone better,” John allowed.

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Sherlock did not come back, and Oliver grew progressively unhappier the longer he was deprived of him. John realized that Sherlock really kept Oliver occupied with just his fact of being. John understood that, because Sherlock had always had the same effect on John. John experienced a moment of kinship with Oliver, and Oliver’s mood devolved rapidly into what was clearly a Sherlockian sulk. Nothing John did impressed him. He turned up a disdainful nose when John tried to build towers with the blocks, tried to rip the pages of the chemistry textbook when John tried to read it to him, and absolutely positively refused to eat anything. John walked the floor with him, bouncing him soothingly and trying to hum an approximation of the songs Sherlock played for him on the violin and thinking that it was possible he was going to kill Sherlock when he got back because now they had a baby and he couldn’t disappear like this.

Mrs. Hudson was eventually pulled upstairs by the sound of Oliver’s unrelenting cries.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s Sherlock, is what’s wrong with him,” answered John, grimly.

“Oh, poor thing,” clucked Mrs. Hudson. “He probably has a tummy ache.”

“No.” John shook his head. “He’s fine. He’s sulking. It’s just that he’s a much louder sulker than Sherlock.”

“Here, let me see him,” Mrs. Hudson offered, and John handed Oliver across. “There, there, what are you sulking about, love?”

Oliver cried harder and kicked his feet for good measure.

“I think you were having more success,” remarked Mrs. Hudson, and handed him back over.

Oliver did quiet at being back in John’s arms, and even stopped crying, with a little hiccup. He looked up at John with Sherlock’s gray-green-blue eyes, wet with tears that were running down his face, and John was at the end of his rope and still his heart broke. “Okay,” he said, gently. “Stop. I’m not going to leave you. Okay?”

Oliver, taking sobbing little breaths, closed his little fist into John’s shirt, as if to keep him there, and John brushed a kiss over the damp, dark curls.

“Where’s Sherlock?” asked Mrs. Hudson.

“He is also sulking, only he went out of the house to do it.”

Mrs. Hudson’s eyebrows skidded upward. “He went out to sulk?”

“We had a disagreement,” John admitted.
“An actual one?” and John knew that Mrs. Hudson meant, As opposed to the disagreements you think you have but you don’t really mean because you normally let Sherlock do whatever he likes.

“Well, he went out to sulk,” John pointed out.

“Oh, dear. Well, I wouldn’t worry about it. All couples have domestics after bringing a baby home. New babies are stressful.”

John sighed and didn’t even bother to correct Mrs. Hudson’s assumption, because, frankly, he was raising a baby with the man and they had had a domestic about it. “Thanks,” was all he said. “And thank you for coming up to check on him. He seems calmer now.”

“I think he realized it could be worse and you could have given him to me and then he’d have neither one of you,” said Mrs. Hudson, with wry affection. “You be good for your papa,” she warned Oliver.

Oliver, one hand now clasped around John’s index finger, regarded her suspiciously, as if fearful she was going to snatch him away, and snuggled closer to John.

“Thanks again, Mrs. Hudson. Good night,” said John, and, after she had left, turned his attention back to Oliver, who had stopped crying but still looked miserable, red and tear-stained, lower lip trembling. “I’d never get rid of you,” John told him. “Silly baby. We’re keeping you forever. And your father will eventually come home, it’s just that he’s an enormous git, and you can tell him that I said that when he gets back.”

Oliver sniffled and looked unimpressed, but he did seem much less agitated than he had. Loath to put him down now that he was quiet, John walked around with him, tidying the flat a bit, and eventually Oliver fell asleep against him.

This left John with a dilemma. It was now late enough that Oliver should pretty much sleep through the night, if his lack of dinner didn’t wake him up before then. John could have taken Oliver up to his bed but he was scared to sleep in the same bed at Oliver, scared he’d accidentally roll over onto him and suffocate him, or have a nightmare and lash out and harm him. So no, Oliver had to go in his cot.

But that introduced more problems. The cot was in Sherlock’s room. If John went to bed in his own room, an entire floor away, he was worried he wouldn’t hear Oliver if Oliver cried for him. There was no baby monitor in the flat, because all of the surveillance around their flat interfered too much with the reception. So John found himself sitting on Sherlock’s bed reading.

And the next thing he knew he was jerking awake and Sherlock was crawling into the bed next to him.

At least, he hoped it was Sherlock.

“Sherlock?” he slurred out, trying to rub the sleep out of his eyes, just to make sure. The room was dark. Sherlock must have turned off the light.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “I’m home. Go back to sleep.”

“Where have you been?” John glanced around the room but didn’t see a digital clock anywhere.


“Oh, you didn’t hop over to Belgium? Good to know.”
Sherlock chuckled, which John supposed was a good sign. “Go back to sleep,” he said again.

John had no intention of going back to sleep. It was one thing to fall asleep in Sherlock’s bed while he was out. It was another thing to just…sleep in Sherlock’s bed with him. But John reached out and put the book on his chest on the bedside table and slid down on top of the duvet and stared up into the darkness. He was no longer sleepy, he was thoughtful, and he wanted to start a conversation with Sherlock and didn’t know how to.

Sherlock started it for him, rolling toward him. “Why Belgium?” he asked.

John shrugged. “Why not?”

Sherlock took a deep breath. “His life expectancy is between one-third and one-half of our life expectancy.”

“You don’t know that,” John said, because he had hoped that Sherlock had not done research into other mammalian clones, but when did Sherlock ever leave any subject unexhausted?

Sherlock made a skeptical sound, a distressed sound.

“I know that you would never hurt him,” John said, turning his head, even though in the darkness all he could make out was Sherlock’s silhouette. “I didn’t mean to imply that I thought you ever would.”

“You think I’d do it unintentionally.”

John hesitated. “I—”

“You like it, you know.” Sherlock’s voice was sharp, slicing. “You like the danger, you like the rush of adrenaline, if I tried to protect you from all of it, you’d never have it. And I cannot believe that it has managed to escape your notice that, whenever it’s truly dangerous, I exclude you. Or were you too busy being hurt about that whenever it happened to notice that I was protecting you?”

John fell silent, realizing it suddenly. He thought of whenever Sherlock lied about his whereabouts, where he was going, what he was doing, and how frequently those occasions were the riskiest of Sherlock’s life. And John was always furious at being excluded afterward, thinking that, had he been there, things would have gone differently. And Sherlock, all along, had been thinking that, had John been there, John might have been the one in danger.

“Sherlock,” John started, not sure what he was going to say next.

“I have tried to keep you safe. And I am not always successful. So you’re right. The likelihood seems high that I will hurt him no matter what I do.” Sherlock sounded glum and resigned now. Which John never liked. Sherlock was many things, but the thing John lived most in fear of was Sherlock depressed. He hated the terror of that darkness that sometimes came in and sat heavily on Sherlock’s chest and pulled him beyond John’s reach. “Okay,” John turned fully onto his side to face Sherlock. “Stop it. Is this what you’ve been doing, wandering around London thinking about this? He’d not be better off without you, so get that thought out of your head right now, Sherlock Holmes. He cried all night because you weren’t here. He loves you—”

“He’s used to me now—”

“No, he loves you. And, more importantly, he needs you. He’s you, remember? What would happen to him without you?”
“I don’t know. Maybe he’d grow up absolutely normal. Maybe he wouldn’t be…Maybe we should have let him be adopted. I thought he’d like a good crime scene.”

John decided that what he most wanted was to go back in time and stop himself from ever saying anything about the crime scene. “Sherlock—”

“Maybe if you took him to feed ducks every day or something like that, maybe he’d like that just as much.”

“Stop it,” John said, fiercely. “You don’t believe that. You’d find that deadly dull, and he is you, remember?”

“But who am I, John? I spent all day thinking…He has my DNA, so he looks like me, but who’s to say that he’d like a good crime scene, that he’d have an affinity to chemistry? Is that genetically dictated? Given a normal childhood, a loving childhood, given you, who’s to say he wouldn’t be more like…you?”

“If you think,” John said, flatly, “for even a second, in that stupid, stupid brain of yours, that I would ever let you leave me to do this without you—”

“You’re very good at it, John, and you could—”

“I don’t want to do it without you,” John heard himself say, and he knew this was true, that he’d been thinking it from the moment Sherlock had first pulled Oliver into his arms, but he hadn’t yet said it out loud and it seemed a momentous thing to say. He was glad of the dark.

Sherlock was a silent for a moment. “Really?” he asked, dubiously.

“Really. I can’t imagine doing this with anyone but you. I can’t imagine a life I would want any more than the life I have now. I chose you such a long time ago, Sherlock. You have always been my first choice. Oliver doesn’t change that. How could you forget that? After everything we’ve been through, to not respect the fact that I chose you and you know that.”

Another long moment of silence. “I always worry you’ll get bored,” said Sherlock, after a second.

John blinked. “You always worry I’ll get bored?”

“Yes. Of course. I know you think I don’t realize it but I know I’m difficult to live with, I know my life is unconventional, I know half the time you’d like to wring my neck and so far that moment has always passed and you’ve always seemed content again, but eventually you could have enough and get bored with it and want something more…normal. And now there’s a baby, and I didn’t intend to use him as a trap for you, not entirely, but it’s possible that I did, a little bit, and if you want out, if you want out with him—”

“Shut up,” John cut him off, furiously. “Just shut up. You jumped off a building and made me think you were dead for an entire year, and I forgave you, and how you can ever harbor any doubts about my commitment to you in the wake of that is…is…incomprehensible to me. I am here. I am not bored. I am never bored. I worry you’ll grow bored. I worry now we have Oliver, and eventually you’ll grow bored with him and you’ll resent him—”

“How could I ever grow bored with him? You spent the evening with him, he never does anything boring.”

Sherlock’s tone was honest, and John thought that Sherlock believed that, could not imagine a time when he might find the constancy of the baby to be unbearable. Sherlock loved Oliver so
ridiculously much, thought John. It was utter madness for Sherlock to suggest for even a second that he could be capable of walking away from Oliver, even for his own good, because Sherlock was clearly over the moon for him.

John didn’t say that, because John thought that Sherlock wasn’t used to thinking of himself as loving people as much as Sherlock loved Oliver, and that pointing that out to him might cause either panic or denial. And John didn’t want to point out the obviousness that Sherlock was prone to boredom, that his attention was held by so few things. John didn’t want to think about it, he didn’t want to worry about it. He was so content, he was so happy. What harm would it do, for a little while longer, to let himself live in that happiness? To find a way to preserve it?

So John just said, “Crime scenes, with the police all around us, crime scenes are as safe as the world ever gets. But I draw the line at stakeouts.”

After a moment, Sherlock giggled. Actually giggled. “What do you think Sally will say?” he asked.

“You’re a terrible person,” John said, relaxing back onto Sherlock’s bed with him.

“You don’t really think so.”

“Oh, no?”

“You chose me.”

John smiled and closed his eyes and settled deeper into the pillow under his head. In another minute, he was going to get up and go to his own bed, but for now he was warm and content, with Sherlock beside him radiating renewed reassurance and Oliver’s breaths comforting from the cot in the corner. “I did,” John agreed. “Idiotic prat.”
Chapter 7

John woke to the low rumble of Sherlock’s baritone mingling with Oliver’s contented cooing.

“Shh,” Sherlock was saying. “You’ll wake Papa.”

John blinked his eyes open. Sherlock, leaning over the cot, pulling Oliver up and out, Oliver gurgling a delighted good morning. John let his eyes fall closed, snuggling deeper into the duvet and thinking that Sherlock could handle this morning because Sherlock owed him for the night before.

The night before.

Which made John’s eyes fly open. The bedroom was empty, and John supposed it was possible that he had dozed off, but he was wide awake now. Wide awake, in Sherlock’s bed, with Sherlock’s duvet pulled over him. Which was not at all what he had intended.

John scrambled out of the bed, feeling appalled. Sherlock had come home and then John had just slept in his bed. For no reason. Sherlock was going to think him…something. Insane? Irrational? A duvet hog?

Sherlock was sitting at the desk, typing furiously on his laptop. Oliver was also on the desk, propped up on his periodic table blanket, enthusiastically smashing his tiny fingers on John’s laptop and periodically turning his head to coo happily at Sherlock about the experience.

“Good,” Sherlock said, without taking his eyes off of the laptop. “You’re up. We could do with some tea.” He sounded distracted, leaning forward to peer more closely at his laptop screen.

A normal morning, thought John. Just a normal morning. Not Sherlock striving for normality. Just straight-up normality. John hesitated, wanted to say, Sorry about taking up your bed last night, thought that would evaporate the normality. So he said instead, “Right,” and walked into the kitchen.

No need to ask if Oliver had eaten, because the detritus of a baby breakfast was in the sink, so John put the kettle on and stuck bread in the toaster for him and Sherlock and walked over to poke his head into the sitting room. “You’ve got him playing with my laptop.”

Sherlock still didn’t look up from his computer. “I think he’s going to start a blog. Can’t be any worse than yours.”

“Haha,” said John, and walked back into the kitchen to make tea and toast, which he carried out to the desk. He set the plate and the cups down out of reach of Oliver and paused to look over Sherlock’s shoulder. “What are you doing so manically this morning?” The screen was open to a message board, and John read the first post with interest. Should my baby be crawling by now?

John blinked. “Is this a…mummy message board?”

“Yes,” Sherlock affirmed, sounding strange.

“For a moment, John thought maybe he was embarrassed at being caught out, but if he hadn’t wanted to be caught, he wouldn’t have still been on it when John had come out of the kitchen. John glanced down at him in confusion and then realized that he had a hand in Sherlock’s hair, resting on the back of his head, caught up in the dark curls. John thought that he really must be going stark raving mad and hastily took his hand away. He said, quickly, as if nothing strange had happened, “Why?”

“I thought they might be useful, but it turns out they’re rubbish and all of the people on them are
idiots. This one’s all worried about whether or not her baby ought to be crawling by now, when what she ought to be worried about is the fact that her baby-sitter has a dangerous crush on her husband.”

“Oh, God,” said John, stomach sinking. “Don’t tell me you told her that.”

Sherlock didn’t answer. “And the one that answered her is no better, she thinks she knows everything but she’s about to be made redundant from her job at an investment bank.”

“Sherlock, are you interacting with these people?”

“Of course I am. I’m Deerstalker143.”

“Deerstalker?” John echoed.

“They all think I’m a dedicated Sherlock Holmes fan.”

“Well, at least that much is true,” remarked John, and Sherlock laughed.

“I am 32, I like the color purple, I am married to a doctor, and my firstborn is, everyone assures me, very advanced for his age, isn’t that right, Ollie?”

Oliver made a noise that sounded affirmative and smashed a little bit more at John’s laptop keys.

John turned his attention for the first time to his laptop and felt his eyes widen, because the screen was showing his blog, on which Oliver was steadfastly typing a new entry. An entry that read, so far, hwu;ar .zn kdz .jkz nn znv....... Zdf.zv

“What the hell, Sherlock?” John exclaimed. “You’re actually letting him type up a blog.”

“Why not?” Sherlock was back to typing furiously at his mummy message board associated.

“Why not?” John took the laptop away from Oliver. “You’re letting him type up my blog.” John deleted the new entry, while Oliver showed off his new skill and rolled onto his back and made fake cries of protest. “Oh, stop,” John told him, “I can tell when you’re faking just to get your own way.”

Oliver gave him a Sherlockian pout, and John groaned to discover that his blog now had a series of entries. >V >N. and .zn znwznw and vbbfbybb and ,V,B,D,H,H,BH,B,B…///////////

“Sherlock,” John complained, because the entries were already garnering comments, mostly consisting of ????? One from Mike: You okay, mate? And then, on another entry: Okay, now you’re frightening me. Type something coherent.

“People read this blog,” John said, sitting on his chair with his laptop and commencing to soothing the commenters. “You should have let him type in your blog, nobody reads that thing.”

“Haha,” Sherlock rejoined. “Papa is scintillating this morning, Oliver.”

John posted a new entry. Sherlock’s idea of a joke. Disregard. There is no crisis, unless you count the soon-to-be strangling of a flatmate that will shortly be happening here.

“‘Soon-to-be’ and ‘shortly’ are redundant,” said Sherlock, from the desk.

“Shut up,” said John.

Sherlock shut his laptop with a precise, sharp click, picked up Oliver, and turned from the desk. “I
thought we’d take him to feed ducks in the park. See what he thinks of it.”

It was the first thing Sherlock had said with forced casualness all morning. John sleeping in his bed was cause for no turmoil at all in Sherlock Holmes’s brain, possibly because all of his turmoil was being devoted to Oliver. John supposed he could understand that.

John glanced outside, where the sun was shining. Rare good weather for this time of year, and John thought they might as well take advantage of it.

“Good idea,” he agreed.

***

With Oliver strapped to his chest, Sherlock fed the ducks. John sat on a bench and watched them. Other than procuring stale bread from Mrs. Hudson—who tutted over their outing adoringly—John planned to play no role in the feeding of the ducks. He wanted to just enjoy, and indeed there was much to enjoy. Sherlock had found a smart little gray overcoat for Oliver to wear—doubtless it had come from Mycroft, but John didn’t ask, knowing Sherlock would hate to admit it—and he and Oliver really did look like the clones they were, in their gray coats in the park. Oliver was wearing a dark blue hat that echoed Sherlock’s scarf, and they wore identical expressions of bored distaste over the ducks.

Sherlock crouched, dragging the hem of his coat in the mud, and pointed to something on the ground, and Oliver seemed like he was paying intent attention, and John wondered what deductive lesson was occurring and realized that he was smiling like a besotted idiot and didn’t even care that Sherlock was going to sulk about his coat later because at just that moment Sherlock placed one of his large hands on Oliver’s head, gently, a quick caress, and John’s heart twisted painfully and he found himself thinking, That is yours.

And it was true. In some odd way that made no sense, the little tableau in front of him belonged to him. And he didn’t know what descriptive words to stick on them to describe his relationship with them, but the possessive pronoun was clear as day to him: whatever they were, they were his. Any minute now, Sherlock would admit his and Oliver’s mutual boredom and turn back to John and probably gift him with one of those just-for-John smiles, and John realized he was waiting for that, that he always felt energized by one of those smiles.

John had spent a lot of time not really thinking very hard about his relationship with Sherlock. He had not liked life without him, when Sherlock had forced him into it, and so there had not really been a question that John would find a way to forgive him. And then John had been happy and it never did any good to look at happiness too closely, in John’s experience. And so John had just…let it be. Sherlock made him happy, and that had been enough for him.

But the truth was, in the rare moments when he was honest with himself, he wasn’t entirely sure how Sherlock made him happy. He thought it went beyond best-friend-ness, or even flatmate-ness. There were times when he did things without thinking, like the hand in Sherlock’s hair that morning, couple-y things that he seemed to keep falling into. Like sleeping in Sherlock’s bed the night before. He did not know if Sherlock had slept naked next to him or not, but the idea of it made his mouth dry, and not with horror or embarrassment but with anticipation. He had spent the night in Sherlock’s bed, completely platonically, and somehow the biggest problem he felt like he had with that was that it had been so very platonic, that neither one of them had closed the gap on the mattress.

It was not the first time John had thought about this, of course. John had no idea how many times he’d thought about it. He told himself not to, but he’d stopped denying they were a couple, subconsciously, and subconsciously was where the thoughts happened. Sometimes the dreams were
fevered and filthy, but sometimes the dreams were also casual and sweet, a cuddle on the sofa, a snog in the kitchen while John was making tea. Sometimes the dreams weren’t even about Sherlock, but in the dreams he knew that he was with Sherlock, and there was a strange, cozy comfort in those dreams, a warm buzz of happiness that John inevitably lost upon waking, and he would spend the first little while of his morning in a haze, trying to resist the mad, tempting impulse to burrow his way into Sherlock’s arms. He could rely on Sherlock for anything and everything, he knew. Sherlock might pretend to be thoughtless and clueless, but all important things Sherlock remembered and was amazingly devoted to. Anything of import that John might ask Sherlock for, he knew he would get immediately. But still it would be nice, John admitted now, in the smallest of internal voices, to take it one step farther and know that he was loved. Not a friendly affection, but an all-consuming, dedicated passion, a wild adoration. John wanted to look across at Sherlock Holmes the way he was doing right now and know that Sherlock loved him…

…in exactly the same way he loved Sherlock.

It was not, by a long shot, the first time he had thought that he might be in love with Sherlock, but before, somehow, he had always been able to tell himself that Sherlock made his emotions run high, that it was the effect of the adrenaline flow Sherlock provoked in him. Maybe it was time to admit that the reason Sherlock made his emotions run high was because he was actually in love with him, with everything that entailed.

And there was Sherlock, who he had long ago vowed to accept just as he was, and who seemed as disinclined to enter into a relationship as anybody John had ever met. And now they had a baby, which was messy enough without John sitting Sherlock down and saying, I think I might love you. Love-love you. What do you think? And Sherlock would either say that he’d known all along—and Sherlock knew everything so that seemed possible—and hadn’t been saying anything so as not to throw off the balance of their relationship, or look at John with complete and utter shock. And how was either of those outcomes a good one?

Sherlock had straightened, a protective hand clasping Oliver to him, and he dumped the rest of the bread crumbs in an enormous pile at his feet, sending the ducks squawking over in a frenzy. Oliver gave a startled cry that cut itself off into laughter, and Sherlock glanced over at John, grinning, and then the grin faded off his face, transitioning into puzzlement, and then…nothing. Nothing John could read. He looked back steadily, face betraying nothing, and John wondered what was written on his face, John wondered if he looked as love-struck as he was feeling.

Sherlock turned, leaving the crush of ducks behind him, and walked back up to the bench. “And where is it you’ve gone?” he asked, coming to stand beside him.

“I’m right here,” John managed, looking up at him.

“You’re really not,” Sherlock answered, his voice very soft.

For a crazy half-second, John thought Sherlock was about to reach out and touch him, but it was Oliver who reached for him instead, extending a tiny fist of greeting and bringing John’s attention to him.

“Hello,” said John, and touched the tip of his index finger to Oliver’s fist. “What did you think about the ducks?”

“He doesn’t like ducks,” announced Sherlock, decisively, and it was as if the odd little moment had never happened at all.

“Could have told you that,” replied John, striving for the same normality that Sherlock was so
effortlessly achieving, and stood up from the bench. “Come along, my two cold and hungry Holmeses. Back to Baker Street.”

Sherlock smiled one of his just-for-John smiles and let John lead the way, and John didn’t realize until afterward that he’d used the word my to apply to both of them.

***

“Let’s go to Angelo’s for dinner,” Sherlock suggested.

He had been lost in thought, typing furiously on his laptop, and John assumed he had been tormenting the people on the mummy message board again. Oliver had just woken from his nap and was in a state of sleepy compliance, and John was taking advantage of it to snuggle him on the sofa.

John glanced over at Sherlock at the desk. “Okay,” he said, agreeably. “Why?”

“Because we’ve no food in the house and it’s approaching that time of the evening when you start to complain about that and pester me about takeaway menus and what I ought to be ordering and how much I ought to be eating and I’d prefer to foreclose all that: Let’s go to Angelo’s.”

So they bundled up Oliver and went to Angelo’s and it immediately became clear to John why Sherlock had wanted to go to dinner at Angelo’s: because he wanted to show Oliver off. As soon as they walked in and Angelo swooped up to them, Sherlock turned to him with the world’s most transparent expression of casual interest.

Angelo said, “Sher—” and then noticed Oliver and said, “Oh.”

“This is Oliver, Angelo,” Sherlock said, and although he sounded neutral, John could hear him bursting with pride.

“Oliver, eh? Isn’t he a handsome little man?” Angelo closed a hand around one of Oliver’s and shook it as if Oliver were much older.

Oliver stared at him, his lush Sherlockian bow of a mouth parted in fascination.

“Your usual table,” said Anglo, extravagantly, gesturing to it and beaming at both of them.

“Thank you,” said John, edging past him to his side of the table.

Sherlock settled across from him, looking pleased. “That was Angelo, Oliver. I proved him innocent of murder by proving him guilty of other things. It was an interesting story, I should tell you it.”

“Not right now,” John said, picking up his menu. “Angelo probably doesn’t want to hear it again.”

Angelo came bustling back over, holding two flutes and an open bottle. “Champagne for the table! To celebrate your new baby!”

“Oh, not necessary, Angelo,” John said, even as Angelo filled the flutes, and remembered the first time he’d tried to refuse one of Angelo’s actions, the romantic candle on the table. He had started out life with Angelo by denying that he was part of a couple and now he’d somehow reached the point where he was refusing champagne to celebrate the baby he was raising with the man he was not in a relationship with. Or something.

“Absolutely necessary! I’m so happy for the two of you! So many happy days in front of you, eh?” Angelo, a twinkle in his eye, clapped Sherlock on the shoulder and hurried away.
“You wanted to go out to dinner specifically so someone would make a fuss about Oliver,” John remarked.

“He deserves to have a fuss made about him.”

“You don’t think we fuss about him enough?”

“Fussing is not quantifiable,” Sherlock sniffed, as if the conversation made any sense at all.

John decided to drop it. He wanted to know if people had not fussed over Sherlock as a child, if he had felt ignored. It would explain why he was so loud as an adult. But not even the presence of Oliver made John feel comfortable probing at Sherlock’s childhood. It hadn’t been happy, that much was obvious to John, so he wasn’t going to make Sherlock relive it if he didn’t have to. He’d just let Sherlock try to fix it with Oliver and pull him back if he was going too far.

So instead John said, “Well, Angelo brought us this champagne. Should we toast?”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at him. *To what?*

“To Oliver,” said John, picking up one of the flutes.

Sherlock smiled. “To Oliver,” he agreed, and clinked his glass against John’s and took a sip and then said, “Oliver Copernicus. I looked that up, you know. You’re a terrible person.”

John laughed.

***

John thought that Harry should probably know that he was basically a father now. Sherlock made a face when he said that.

“You know,” said John, “I know you don’t like her, but we cannot raise this baby entirely without an extended family.”

“Why not?” asked Sherlock, as if that were perfectly reasonable.

“If you want me to be his father with you, then she is his aunt.”

There was a moment of silence. “He has enough to be going on with with my genes, as far as… abusive tendencies might go.” Sherlock spoke carefully, choosing his words, because Sherlock never brought up the drug addiction in his past.

John knew it cost him a lot to bring it up now, and he understood what Sherlock’s fear was. “I would never have him around her if I thought she was going to be a bad influence.”

Sherlock ducked his head down closer to his laptop, so that John couldn’t quite see his face anymore. “You are extravagantly optimistic when it comes to your sister’s alcoholism.”

John opened his mouth to hotly protest, then took a second to swallow down his kneejerk reaction, acknowledging that it was possible Sherlock had a point. He glanced at Oliver, who was happily nibbling on his own foot. “Maybe Oliver could give her a reason to stay sober this time,” he suggested, but it sounded feeble to his own ears.

Sherlock made a skeptical sound from his laptop, and John looked at Oliver and thought of the temptations of his future. He thought of how many times Harry had promised to turn her life around, and how many times that hadn’t been true. He thought of Clara’s broken heart, of a good career
destroyed, of possible futures brushed aside. And he thought that it would kill him if such a thing ever happened to Oliver, ever. Oliver should have only the best and the brightest, and Oliver should stay far above all of his demons.

So when John texted Harry to schedule a time to meet up with her, he abandoned the idea of taking Oliver with him. Maybe Sherlock was right, maybe it was best to be cautious with Oliver until Harry could be totally trusted.

***

John was not sleeping.

Which was what Sherlock said when he opened John’s bedroom door. “You’re not sleeping.” A proclamation.

John didn’t bother to deny it.

Sherlock clambered onto the bed next to him, which was unprecedented. Aside from John falling asleep in Sherlock’s bed a week earlier, they had never lain in bed together. And now it was twice in as many weeks. John had no idea what to make of that.

“Sherlock?” he said, questioningly.

“You’re going to visit with your sister tomorrow,” said Sherlock.

“Yes. I told you that.”

“Coffee. At a neutral site a good distance away from both of your flats.”

“You’re on fire tonight,” drawled John. “Why don’t you predict what I’ll choose to wear?”

“You could bring Oliver,” said Sherlock.

John blinked at him, but the room was dark and he naturally could barely make him out. Why did Sherlock insist on having conversations like this in the dark?

“If this is because you’re not comfortable being here alone with him,” John began, “Mrs. Hudson will—”

“It’s not about that,” Sherlock snapped. “We’d be absolutely fine.”

“Good. I think you will be, too. The two of you will have a lovely afternoon together.”

“You wanted your sister to meet him. You wanted him to give her a reason to stay sober.”

“And, as you pointed out, I am always overly optimistic about the possibility of that. ‘Extravagantly optimistic’ was the exact phrase you used, I think.”

Sherlock said nothing for a long time. Long enough that John almost asked if he planned to sleep in his bed that night. And then he said, “You have to be, don’t you.”

It wasn’t a question, so John didn’t answer it, just listened, waiting patiently for the rest of Sherlock’s point.

“The people around…You have to be extravagantly optimistic, in order to keep…” Sherlock shifted, and John was sure he was looking at him. Probably Sherlock could see in the dark, with those
remarkable cat eyes he had. “You gave me a reason. I didn’t have one before you. There were no reasons, until the day there was you. So maybe Oliver will be that for her.”

John’s breath caught in his throat. He had the irrational impulse to close the space between them, not for a snog or anything, just to be able to press his face against Sherlock and breathe him in and remind him every day how much of a reason he had to stay sober, to stay with John. John remembered pints with Lestrade, after Sherlock had jumped off St. Bart’s, of Lestrade’s face as he said that he’d always assumed Sherlock would die young but it would be of an overdose, of how very close Sherlock had come to achieving it before John had ever met him. Sherlock Holmes was living on borrowed time, twice over, and now he was in John’s bed claiming that John was the reason, and John couldn’t breathe.

And he thought of the way he had been, before he’d met Sherlock, so depressed, so hopeless, so static. He thought of that and he said, his voice raw with the honesty of it, “You have a way of making people better.”

“That’s you. You do that. Oliver gets that from you.”

“Oliver doesn’t have any of my genes.”

“It’s nature versus nurture.”

“You fixed me,” John insisted, because this was too important for Sherlock to brush away and John had said it out loud only once, to Sherlock’s gravestone, and he needed for Sherlock to hear it now. “You saved me.”

“That isn’t a way I have,” Sherlock denied. “To the extent it’s happened at all, it’s happened only once.”

“Maybe it’s a way Sherlock Holmeses have with Watsons,” said John, stubbornly.

Sherlock’s laughter was a mere breath in the bed next to him. “Take Oliver with you tomorrow.”

On John’s tongue formed the words I love you, as shining and true as anything he had ever said.

John swallowed them down, and he closed his eyes and fell asleep without bothering to tell Sherlock to leave. When he woke up in the morning, and Sherlock was gone, he tried not to be too disappointed.

***

In the end, John did not take Oliver. He didn’t want to use him as some kind of pawn in the chess match of Get Harry Sober that John had been playing for the past decade or so. He left Oliver with Sherlock and took the Tube to meet Harry.

John was slightly late but Harry was later. John took a seat and waited, watching the pedestrians come and go outside the café window and not letting himself check his watch.

She came into the café with her eyes bloodshot, and she ordered coffee but didn’t touch it in any way.

John studied her and said, mildly, “You’re drunk.” He was disappointed, and he hated that he was disappointed. Sherlock was right, he was extravagantly optimistic when it came to Harry.

Harry rolled her eyes. “I hate that you think you’re a detective just because you’re living with one.”
“I’m not a detective, I’m a doctor,” said John.

“I had one drink because otherwise I cannot bear you judging me across the table the way you do. Why did you even ask me to meet you for coffee? Was it just to criticize me again? Too long since you got to feel superior?”

“I’m just worried about you,” said John, stubbornly.

“Can we just agree that I know that you’re going to say that to me? And stop having these little meetings?”

“I…” John trailed off, because now that he had to put Oliver into words, he wasn’t sure what to say about him. He hadn’t exactly adopted him, because his name was directly on Oliver’s birth certificate. But he also hadn’t exactly fathered him in a way that Harry would understand.

Harry lifted her eyebrows at him, looking mockingly interested in whatever he had to say next.

“I have a baby,” John heard himself say, and thought that was probably the simplest way of putting it.

Harry blinked. She looked shocked. John wanted to say that he had finally found something to say during their meetings that surprised her. “With who?” she asked, incredulously. “You don’t date anymore, you haven’t dated in ages.”

“Why do you assume I’d have told you if I was dating someone?” countered John.

“Alright, then,” Harry allowed. “Who’s the lucky lady?”

Stupid move, John, thought John, because he had to respond, “Well, actually, it’s Sherlock, kind of, in a way.”

“Oh, my God,” said Harry. “You went and adopted a baby together.”

“Not quite. Not as such. Not entirely. But we are…raising a baby together. A little boy. His name is Oliver.”

“Oliver Watson?”

“Oliver Watson-Holmes.”

“Watson-Holmes.” Harry’s face turned hard suddenly. “You know, that’s something I’ve never understood about you.”

John was bewildered. “What?”

“How you could decide to spend the rest of your life with someone and not tell me. You wonder why we don’t talk as much anymore, and it’s because every time we talk you spend the whole time telling me what I should and shouldn’t be doing, claiming that you care about me, when you don’t even care enough about me to ever sodding mention to me the love of your bloody life. I have to follow along on your blog like everyone else, because you can’t ring me and say, ‘It’s true, I love him, we’re in a committed relationship and thinking of adopting a child.’”

John shook his head. “It’s not like that, Harry. It’s…I mean…”

“You’re raising a child together. That’s a committed relationship.”
“Right, well, yes, we have a relationship, in that we’re flatmates, and we’re committed to each other, of course, in that we don’t have plans to alter that in any way in the foreseeable future, but it isn’t like…I mean, we’re not shagging or anything like that, we’re just—”

“Raising a baby together,” interrupted Harry, flatly. “You realize how ridiculous you sound, right? At least, I hope you do. You think just because there’s no sex there’s no relationship? You’re in love with him, and you’ve been in love with him for years. You took him back after everything he did to you, you never date anymore, you’ve said yourself, right now, that you can’t imagine a future without him. How is it that you can’t see how long ago that ship sailed for you? You’re an idiot not to be shagging him, because I bet he’s good in bed and you need some good sex, you are way too bloody uptight.”

John frowned across at her, irritated because he was realizing that he knew she was right, and realizing that he should have known she was right ages and ages ago, and realizing that maybe he was wasting time not telling Sherlock, but also he really wasn’t gay and didn’t know how to go about telling Sherlock without destroying everything, and now they had Oliver to worry about, and there was nothing more precious than Oliver.

“Sherlock isn’t like that,” said John.

Harry raised a dubious eyebrow. “Sherlock isn’t like what? Doesn’t have sex?”

“No,” John answered, belligerently. “He doesn’t.”

“And how would you know?”

“I know.”

“He’s probably been pining for you all this time. Who else would he have sex with, if not you? You’re willing to tolerate the celibacy you’re going through as long as Sherlock stays celibate himself. If he were to try to bring someone else home, you would have him stripped out of that clothing and shoved up against a wall before he could manage to say your name. Don’t even try to tell me that you wouldn’t. You can be jealous and possessive with the things you think are yours, and he is yours, and you just sealed the deal with a baby, just to make sure.”

“I am not using Oliver,” John said, flatly, because he wasn’t—he adored Oliver—and because he feared it was the one untrue thing Harry had said.

“But the permanency he brings with him is a nice little side effect, isn’t it?”

John glared.

Harry said, “Not so fun to go to coffee and get picked apart, is it?”
John’s head was aching by the time he got back to Baker Street. There was Harry to worry about, because there was always Harry to worry about and he always worried about her most fresh after seeing her. And there was Oliver to worry about, because now he had a baby to worry about. And there was Sherlock to worry about, because he was in love with Sherlock, and maybe it was possible Sherlock felt something for him in return, and it was maybe also possible that he wanted to have sex with Sherlock but he wasn’t gay and Sherlock didn’t have sex with people unless he didn’t have sex with people because he also wanted to have sex with John and—

John’s phone buzzed with a text and he was relieved to have a distraction from the inside of his head.

It was Harry. *I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to upset you. Would love to meet Oliver. xxxxx*

John frowned and considered how to respond. He wasn’t sure he could handle another interaction with his sister like the one he’d just had for a while. And he definitely didn’t want to have to cope with it in front of Oliver.

As he was still debating how to respond, another text came in. John at first thought it must be his sister, apologizing more effusively and begging to see Oliver. But it wasn’t. It was Greg Lestrade. *Haven’t heard from you in a while and Sherlock’s been ignoring my texts. Everything okay?*

John stared at the text uncomprehendingly. It was true that he hadn’t spoken to Greg in a while, that he had never gone so long without speaking to Greg because normally this long without a case would have sent him groveling to Greg to find something to occupy Sherlock’s fevered mind. But John had no idea what Greg was talking about when he said that Sherlock was ignoring his texts.

As he was right outside of 221B, John pocketed his mobile, deciding to leave both texts for another day. The second one especially merited a conversation with Sherlock.

Oliver was sitting on the floor in the middle of the sitting room, and all around him were scattered the most random objects. Some of them were baby toys but more of them were household objects, like the tea towels from the kitchen and a bar of soap from the bathroom and an entire pile of John’s jumpers.

“What are you doing?” John asked, instead of saying anything more normal like “hello.”

Sherlock looked up from where he was holding up a bright blue mug, apparently for Oliver’s perusal. “Oliver is telling me what colors he likes,” said Sherlock. He was also seated on the floor with Oliver, cross-legged, his laptop resting open on his lap. As John watched, he made a couple of notations on it.

“Oh,” said John. “And what’s the verdict so far?”

“He hates green,” Sherlock replied, definitively, holding up something else, a scrap of navy blue
John blinked at it, then realized, “Hang on, are those my pants?”

Sherlock shrugged. “I needed something this shade of blue.”

“So you went through my things until you found a pair of pants that suited you?”

“No, I knew you had a pair of pants that would suit before I started going through your things.”

“And how did you know that?”

“John.” Sherlock gave him a brief but withering look. “As if this was the first time that I went through your things.”

John decided there was really no point in having a discussion about boundaries. They’d had that discussion multiple times before, and Sherlock never listened, and John never followed through on any consequences for not listening, so it was just a waste of breath, basically. Plus, they were apparently dating without shagging, or something, so John supposed he couldn’t be too angry because he wasn’t entirely sure where the boundaries even were anymore.

“Why have you been ignoring Lestrade’s texts?” John asked, instead.

He had been hoping that this would surprise Sherlock but Sherlock merely said, as he dangled a banana in front of Oliver and took more notes, “So he’s texting you now. Interesting. It’s not as if this murder is so difficult he shouldn’t be able to solve it on his own. It’s laughably simple. It’s possible I’ve been spoiling him.”

“So you’re ignoring his texts.”

“I told you, the murder is boring.”

“You haven’t had a case in weeks. Not a client, not a crime scene, nothing.”

“We’ve been busy, John.” Sherlock indicated Oliver, who was now reaching for the banana.

“It appears he likes yellow,” remarked John, and walked into the kitchen. Which looked like a war zone. John turned around and walked back out. “What happened in the kitchen?”

“Experiment,” answered Sherlock, carelessly, not looking up from his close scrutiny of Oliver’s reaction to the sofa cushion Sherlock was now displaying.

“In?”

“Turns out baby spoons do have a purpose,” Sherlock sniffed, primly.

John laughed, then turned his attention to Oliver, leaning down to sweep him into his arms, because he suddenly felt like he needed him solidly there, reminding him why he was doing all of this. He pressed his nose into the baby-soft down of his curls and said, “Hello, love. Did you have a good day with Daddy?”

“Other things that turn out to have a purpose,” Sherlock continued, setting aside everything on his lap. “Clothing that snaps.”

John smiled and kissed Oliver’s temple.
Sherlock picked himself up with that lightness that he had never lost, and John thought how, when he had first met Sherlock, he had thought that, as he aged, he would stop being so ridiculously nimble, start sitting the right way in chairs and things of that sort. That had never really happened.

“How was coffee with Harry?” Sherlock asked, full of studied nonchalance.

John lifted his eyebrows at him. “Can’t you deduce?” he asked, mildly.

Sherlock looked him over, then said, “Baby socks, however, do not appear to have a purpose. Oliver hates them.”

Changing the subject for him, and John loved him so much that it practically hurt, loved him so much that he did something he’d never done before, which was to take the step to close the short distance that separated them and rest his forehead against Sherlock’s shoulder. This strange relationship with Sherlock wasn’t just lacking in sex, it was lacking, for the most part, in all physical contact, and John recognized how starved he was for it, how he’d been ignoring the value in having someone there to hold you when you needed it.

Sherlock seemed shocked by what he was doing, which wasn’t surprising, since John himself was shocked. Sherlock awkwardly picked up an arm and draped it over John’s shoulders, pulling John closer up against him, and John jostled Oliver a bit to allow for it and breathed in Sherlock. John had never before thought how familiar he was with Sherlock’s smell, but he was. It washed over him now, and Harry seemed a million miles away. What did it matter, what they called any of this? It worked for John.

“Alright?” Sherlock asked, uncertainly.

“Yes,” answered John, and meant it.

***

Oliver was terrible at routine. John didn’t find that surprising, because Sherlock was terrible at routine. John tried to institute things like nap times and bedtimes and meal times, and both Oliver and Sherlock looked at him as if he were mad, and then at each other fondly, as if to say, Isn’t he so amusing? That’s why we keep him around.

Hand-in-hand with his lack of routine was that Oliver had taken to sleeping less and less. John thought that, in some weird way, being around Sherlock seemed to be activating Oliver’s Sherlockian genes. The baby who had napped so frequently in the early days that Sherlock had been despairing had, by this time, transformed into a baby who slept in typical Sherlock snatches. He often fell asleep with no warning, fighting it as long as he could and growing cranky as a result. But there were things that helped with putting a stubborn baby to sleep, chief among them Sherlock’s violin. So, that night, John sprawled on the sofa and looked at the mess Sherlock and Oliver had made of the sitting room and listened to Sherlock’s violin coming from Sherlock’s bedroom.

Eventually Sherlock emerged from the bedroom and re-entered the sitting room.

“Is he sleeping?” asked John.

“Yes. He apparently was tired.” Sherlock still thought Oliver slept too much. “You’re taking up too much of this sofa.” Sherlock nudged at John’s legs.

“You normally take up all of this sofa,” John pointed out, even as he shifted to make some room for Sherlock.
“Yes,” Sherlock agreed. “What are you doing on the sofa at all?”

John glanced over at Sherlock. He had curled up in the opposite corner of the sofa. Their legs were a hopeless tangle in between them. Normal flatmates, John thought, did not sit on sofas together like this. Which just underlined everything Harry had said.

“I had a long day,” said John.

“The next time you have coffee with your sister, I’m going with you.”

John snorted. “You think that will help, will you?”

“Obviously,” said Sherlock, sounding irritated that John doubted that his presence would help all things in all ways.

“She wants to meet Oliver.”

“Of course she does. Didn’t you think she would?”

“I thought…” John considered, then exhaled a puff of breath. “I don’t know what I thought.”

Sherlock said nothing.

John nudged at him with his toes. Another thing a simple flatmate probably wouldn’t have done, because a simple flatmate wouldn’t have had his toes tucked up against his flatmate. “Aren’t you going to tell me what I was thinking?”

“You left me alone with Oliver today,” said Sherlock, instead of answering. “You didn’t even hesitate.”

John was surprised. “Of course I didn’t. Sherlock, you must know that I don’t worry you’d ever do anything to harm the baby.”

“Knowingly,” said Sherlock.

“What?”

“I’d never knowingly do anything to harm him.”

“That’s the most I can hope for,” said John, firmly. “It’s the most anyone can hope for.”

Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut. “I didn’t text Lestrade back because I couldn’t. If I knew anymore—any more details—anything that might make the murder more interesting…”

John finished Sherlock’s sentence for him. He would have gone to the crime scene. He would have taken Oliver with him. John considered Sherlock, eyes still squeezed shut, looking desperately unhappy. Unhappy with himself, John knew.

“We didn’t ask for a baby,” John began, carefully.

Sherlock opened his eyes immediately, met John’s. “I’m not giving him up,” he said, fiercely.

“I wasn’t going to suggest that,” John soothed him. “I was just going to say that we weren’t planning on a baby. Even people who accidentally get pregnant have nine months to get ready. We had a baby dropped on our doorstep, out of the blue. There’ll be adjustment time, Sherlock. We have to find the way to make our life work, all of us together.”
“I don’t want him to feel, not even for a moment, that he isn’t wanted,” said Sherlock, frowning into middle distance, and John wished Sherlock would talk about his childhood, wished he knew more about the mistakes that Sherlock must be trying to correct with Oliver. “The first eighteen months of a child’s life—”

“Sherlock,” John interrupted him, shifting to sit up, to lean closer to him in his conviction. “He’s you. He doesn’t just see, he observes. Do you really think he’s going to observe anything other than us wanting him and loving him?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, turning his attention fully on him. “He’s going to observe that I spent the entire afternoon distracted because Lestrade had sent me a text about a murder. He’s definitely going to observe that.”

“But he’s you. So he’s probably just going to be miffed that you wasted the afternoon teaching him colors when you could have been solving a crime.”

For a moment, Sherlock continued to look at him, and then he looked away, and it felt a little bit like a victory.

“You should text Lestrade back,” John suggested, into Sherlock’s silence. “Tell him we’ll drop by the crime scene tomorrow. We’ll bring Oliver and introduce him.”

“What if Oliver doesn’t like it?” asked Sherlock, a trace of very faint anxiety evident in his voice. Something no one but John would ever have heard.

John really had no idea if an affinity for crime scenes was encoded in Sherlock’s DNA or if Sherlock had developed it in reaction to something that had happened in his childhood. What he did know was that it was obvious to him that Oliver worshipped Sherlock. If Sherlock liked crime scenes, Oliver would like crime scenes as well, of that John was certain.

But John didn’t want to point out how much Oliver clearly loved Sherlock, because he didn’t want to panic Sherlock any more than he actually was. So he said, “He’s you, Sherlock.” One of Sherlock’s curls was falling over his face. John had the sudden impulse to reach out and tuck it behind Sherlock’s ear. Which was ridiculous and not something a flatmate would do, thought John.

Sherlock saved him from his preoccupation with his hair by saying, “I’m not sure we like the same colors. That’s odd, isn’t it?”

John snorted, looking away from Sherlock to break himself of the spell. “He’s being contrary. That’s not odd at all.”

Sherlock paused. “Are you implying I’m contrary?” He sounded genuinely astonished by this.

“Idiot,” John said, fondly, and closed his eyes.

“I’m not… contrary,” Sherlock sputtered, offended. “What I am is right. All the time.”

“You weren’t right about my sister being a brother,” John pointed out, mildly.

“Well, that was a trick. Her name was a trick.”

“I had no idea that we started calling Harriet ‘Harry’ just so we could trick Sherlock Holmes, once I actually met him.”

“I’m not contrary,” grumbled Sherlock, and John felt him settle into the sofa a bit more comfortably.
John, his eyes still closed, let himself sink into the warmth of contentment.

***

John woke to the baby crying. Not a cry of distress so much as a cry of irritation. John was well-acquainted with Sherlockian irritation. He was well-acquainted with ignoring most Sherlockian irritation. And the baby was with Sherlock, John could hear Sherlock’s voice talking to him, so John decided he could let Sherlock deal with, well, himself. No doubt Sherlock was the source of Oliver’s irritation in the first place.

John closed his eyes and snuggled deeper into the sofa. He was not surprised to find he’d spent the night there. He’d been exhausted, and it was not quite unusual for him to drop off on the sofa and for Sherlock to leave him there rather than wake him. John did the same when it was Sherlock who fell asleep on the sofa. All in all, their sofa was much slept-in.

His mobile buzzed on the coffee table, and John opened his eyes and looked at it and debated whether he wanted to read the text. He thought he most definitely did not want to read the text, but that he probably ought to, so he snaked out a hand from underneath his blanket and snagged his phone to pull over to him.

It was a text from Lestrade.

_Seriously, I’m going to send people by to check on you._

John answered it. _No need. Things have been more unusual than usual. Will stop by today to explain._

He had just finished composing the text when Sherlock’s bedroom door opened. Sherlock marched into the sitting room, Oliver squirming in his arms and still making discontented noises.

John hit _send_ on his text and said, “Good—”

Sherlock practically dropped the baby on John’s chest. John scrambled to sit up to hold him properly. “He is being _stubborn,_” Sherlock informed John, sounding personally offended by that.

“Where could he possibly get that from?” asked John, dryly, as Oliver’s thunderous frown turned to unmistakable delight. He cooed a greeting at John, and John kissed the tip of his nose, and Oliver actually giggled.

“Traitor,” mumbled Sherlock, and collapsed into his chair.

John tried to hide his smile but wasn’t sure he succeeded. “You must have done something to upset him,” John told him, as he stood up off the couch with Oliver in his hands.

“His moods are capricious and illogical. They follow no reasonable pattern,” Sherlock sulked, getting up just so he could deposit himself in his preferred sulk spot of the sofa.

“Again,” remarked John, walking into the kitchen with the baby, “can’t imagine where he gets that from.”

“Mycroft’s cloning was clearly _wrong_,” Sherlock shouted from the sitting room.

The baby babbled loudly in Sherlock’s direction and waved his fists and feet frantically, determined not to lose ground in whatever fight the two of them were having.
John ignored both of them, making breast milk and tea automatically now. He could barely remember anymore the days when breast milk hadn’t been part of his morning routine.

“We have to go see Lestrade today,” John called into the sitting room as he tested the bottle.

“I told you: the case is dull,” replied Sherlock.

“We’re not going to see him because of the case.” John walked back into the sitting room and held out Oliver and the bottle to Sherlock. “Here. Feed him while I make us tea.”

Sherlock sat up enough to take Oliver and settle him with the bottle. Oliver gave him a look that said, *I’m going to eat because I’m hungry but this doesn’t mean our prior altercation is forgiven or forgotten.* Sherlock gave him a look that said, *You’re cute but you’re wrong and I’m right.*

John continued, “We’re going to see Lestrade because of Oliver.”

“What does Oliver have to do with Lestrade?” Sherlock asked John, as John went into the kitchen to finish with the tea.

“Oliver is our baby and Lestrade is our friend. That is what they have to do with each other.”

“Lestrade is our friend?”

“Stop being a…prat,” John said.

“A prat?” echoed Sherlock. “Censoring your vocabulary in front of the baby, are you?”

John marched into the kitchen with the teas and put them down firmly. “He threatened to send someone over to check in on us. We owe it to him to tell him we’ve got a baby now, and to do it face-to-face.”

Oliver made a displeased noise. John glanced at him. His eyes had cut over to where John was standing. When John looked up from Oliver, Sherlock was giving him a similarly displeased look. The two clones were clearly standing united once more.

“That’s enough out of both of you,” John said. “Drink up, and then we’re all getting dressed and going on a family outing.”

Oliver and Sherlock exchanged one of their long-suffering looks.
Chapter 9

In the end, Sherlock got ready much more quickly than John had expected, and John realized that, although he was refusing to admit it, Sherlock was eager to show Oliver off to Scotland Yard, as eager as he had been to show him off to Angelo. Sherlock sighed and complained and pretended this was not true, but John saw through all of it and so just ignored him.

Oliver, meanwhile, was bright-eyed at the prospect of an outing. Oliver adored outings. John was sure he was already deducing amazing things. When he started talking, John was convinced they were going to be treated to a barrage of observations.

They arrived at New Scotland Yard and struck everyone they encountered in the lobby dumb. Every single person just stood and gaped at the sight of Sherlock Holmes with a baby nestled firmly against him. Sherlock, clearly tickled pink at the reaction, marched through the lobby and to the lift, and John followed, amused.

And then they reached Lestrade’s office. He blinked at the baby; Sherlock walked in, waited patiently for John to follow, and then confidently closed the door.

“Hello, Lestrade,” said Sherlock, pleasantly. “You have a tremendously dull case with which you nonetheless need my help because of the general incompetence of this police force.”

Lestrade said, “You have a baby.”

“Brilliant,” remarked Sherlock. “I cannot fathom why you haven’t solved this murder case yet, given the slicing astuteness of your observations.”

“Sherlock,” said John, mildly, because he knew it was enough to do the trick. And then, to Lestrade, “That’s Oliver.”

Lestrade blinked at him in bewilderment. “Okay…”

“Oliver is Sherlock’s son,” John explained.

“Oliver is our son,” Sherlock corrected, swiftly.

“Which is biologically impossible,” said John, “so technically—”

“How do you have a son?” Lestrade interrupted.

“The biological process involves the fertilization of an egg with sperm—” Sherlock began.


Sherlock frowned a bit. “His name is Oliver. He isn’t a ‘that.’”

“Right.” Lestrade was still staring at Oliver. “Oliver. Where’s his mother?”

“Dead,” answered Sherlock, flatly. “No other living relatives.”

“Dead? Dead how?”
“I didn’t kill her.”

“That’s not what I was suggesting, I just…”

“Anyway, I am Oliver’s only surviving relative, so John insisted we had to take him in.”

John shot him a look. “We both insisted.”

Sherlock shrugged.

Lestrade looked as if he wasn’t entirely sure who to stare at the most, so his gaze kept shifting. Eventually he said, “So now you have a baby?”

“I told you things had been unusual lately,” John offered.

“Do you have a crime scene you’d like me to look at?” asked Sherlock.

***

They took a cab to follow Lestrade to the crime scene. Sherlock was radiating a level of smugness that John knew he ought to disapprove of but that just made him shake his head and smile fondly.

“Pleased with yourself?” he asked.

“I thought that went well,” responded Sherlock. “So does Oliver.”

John rolled his eyes only a little bit. “Of course.”

Sherlock looked at him. And Sherlock grinned. And suddenly John was in a different cab, the first cab, with this unusual and intriguing man beside him, turning to grin out the window because he was too shy still to grin directly at him, to possibly betray the incandescent thought burning through his brain: You’re going to like this man a lot. And even that thought had missed the mark so widely, had so astonishingly understated it.

Sherlock winked at him.

John had a disoriented moment when he wanted to catch Sherlock by the sleeve, hold him still, look at him until all of his hopelessly insufficient thoughts became painfully obvious, and he wasn’t even sure what those thoughts were.

But the cab stopped, and Sherlock leaped out, a whirl of energy as always, and John resignedly paid the fare and stepped out after him.

The body had been removed, of course, but the rest of the crime scene had been preserved, and Sherlock was literally clapping his hands with glee over this. John thought this recent stretch had been the longest he’d ever seen Sherlock go willingly without a case, and even though Sherlock hadn’t complained, he thought Sherlock was realizing how much he’d missed it. Everyone else at the crime scene, except for Lestrade, was staring at Oliver, who was regarding the crime scene avidly. Lestrade was studiously not staring at Oliver, clearly determined to pretend everything was normal, as he walked Sherlock through what had happened.

Sherlock waved him away impatiently, saying, “Yes, yes, yes, obvious,” and then turning abruptly to John, surprising him by pulling Oliver out of his carrier and handing him to John.

“Oh,” said John, taking him automatically. “Did you want me to—”
“Must get closer,” explained Sherlock, pulling the harness off of him and then promptly dropping to the cement and sprawling out on his belly and peering at all of the evidence that the rest of them didn’t see.

Oliver watched him raptly, gnawing on the edge of a bumblebee rattle that he had insisted on bringing along with him.

“Yes,” John told him. “This is how he behaves at crime scenes.”

Oliver looked at him.

“Alright,” John conceded, “you’re right, he behaves like this pretty much all the time.”

Oliver, satisfied, went back to watching Sherlock, who had by now slithered across the room on his belly like a snake, his magnifying lens out as he collected information. It felt like the dozens of other previous crime scenes John had stood at, watching Sherlock, except now he had a warm bundle of content baby in his arms, and that was better. Who knew that that was what had been missing?

Clearly everyone else at the crime scene disagreed with John’s conclusion that having a baby at a crime scene was perfection. There was a lot of whispering and looking at them, and John held Oliver closer instinctively. Oliver seemed oblivious to all of it; John wondered if that was some kind of genetic coping mechanism Sherlock had given to him, the ability to effortlessly pretend not to care what people thought. John would have preferred that Oliver not fall into such coping mechanisms as an infant, but he also thought that maybe Oliver had had those coping mechanisms well-developed shortly after birth, the object of lots of attention but none of it necessarily loving, the way a baby would need. John thought how much worse all the whispers and gawking would be if they knew Oliver was a clone instead of just thinking him an unexpected baby.

Lestrade came to stand beside him, loud with unasked questions. John, feeling a little like Sherlock, said, wryly, “Okay, ask away.”

“No,” said Lestrade, shifting toward him, a hollow denial, as if to pretend he wasn’t overflowing with questions. “It’s just…” He looked down at Oliver. “He was…in some kind of…sexual relationship? And you were okay with that?”

John didn’t say, Why does it matter to me who he shags? Which was what a normal flatmate would undoubtedly have said. Instead he said, “He donated some sperm.”

Lestrade looked relieved. “Oh, that makes much more sense. I couldn’t wrap my mind around…He didn’t do it anonymously?”

“Do you really think he wouldn’t want to take credit if the child turned out to be a genius?” asked John.

“Fair point,” Lestrade allowed. “Well, there’s no question of the paternity, is there? He looks just like him, right down to his suffering-mere-mortals look.”

John glanced down at Oliver, who was indeed regarding Lestrade with a miniature version of Sherlock’s why must these people be sent to torment me look. “Well,” said John, and thought of exactly how identical Oliver was to Sherlock. “Yes,” was all he could think of to say, because it was true, there was no question of Oliver’s paternity, he had nothing but paternity.

“Tough break for the poor little thing, isn’t it? Losing his mum like that?”

John bristled a bit. “Yes, but lucky for him he has Sherlock.”
Lestrade said nothing but looked pointedly at Sherlock, who was now abusing one of the PCs about exactly what he’d seen when he’d arrived on the crime scene.

John said, defensively, “He’s very good with Oliver.”

“Excuse me,” interjected Sally Donovan, hotly, “but whose baby is that?”

“It’s obviously mine,” answered Sherlock, who had somehow managed to materialize next to them at exactly the right moment. “You’re meant to be a police officer, the child arrived here with me and looks just like me, put the clues together.”

Sally looked at him in disbelief. “You’ve got a child?”

“You are not the only one, Sally, who is capable of the activities that result in fertilization of an egg,” rejoined Sherlock.

“But who would shag you? I mean, how long could you hide your freakishness for?”

“That’s—” John began.

Sherlock reached past him for Oliver, cutting him off by saying, “Come along, Oliver, I am going to demonstrate for you the incompetent manner in which evidence was collected at this crime scene.”

Sherlock walked off, Oliver in his arms. John turned to finish telling Sally to back off of Sherlock, but Lestrade beat him to it.

“Unprofessional and uncalled for. Leave him alone,” Lestrade said.

“You can’t have a baby at a crime scene,” Sally complained.

“The baby’s not contaminating anything, and it’s not like we’ve got to watch him.”

“But it’s a baby—”

“He’s a baby,” John corrected her.

Sally looked at him, eyebrows raised challengingly. “And you think you should be raising him at crime scenes?”

“I think we should be raising him anywhere that makes him happy, and if he’s anything like his father, then this is the place,” retorted John.

Sally’s eyebrows skidded upward even more. “We’? Really? You two making it official then?”

John frowned in frustration. “It’s not like that.”

Even Lestrade looked surprised. “What do you mean, ‘it’s not like that’?”

“We’re not like that.”

“You…have a baby,” Lestrade pointed out.

“Not together. I mean, we didn’t have the baby together. We’re just raising the baby together. Can’t two people raise a baby together without shagging each other?”

Lestrade and Sally were both staring at him.
“I… guess,” agreed Lestrade, doubtfully.

John wanted to throw up his arms or bang his head against the nearest wall or do something equally dramatic. He thought it was tremendously unfair of everyone to assume he was shagging Sherlock Holmes when he wasn’t. If he was getting regular sex, wouldn’t he be in a better mood?

“When one flatmate suddenly has a baby,” John asked, “isn’t the logical conclusion that the flatmates have to raise the baby together?”

Lestrade and Sally continued to stare at him. John thought possibly he was wrong in having suggested that his situation was a logical conclusion to anything.

“This case is more interesting than Lestrade described,” Sherlock announced, coming up to them. Oliver rattled his bumblebee to punctuate the point.

“I told you it was an interesting one,” said Lestrade.

“You think everything’s interesting,” replied Sherlock, “and you highlighted entirely the wrong facts about this case in your attempt to make it interesting to me.” Sherlock looked at John, his eyes shining. “I have dust to experiment on.”

John couldn’t help smiling back. Sherlock was infectious in these moods. “Excellent. At home?”

“No, I need the equipment at St. Bart’s.”

“Oh,” said John, looking at Oliver in Sherlock’s arms and thinking about mealtimes and naptimes and all of the effort he’d undertaken to try to give Oliver’s life a routine.

Sherlock’s face fell, all of his bright-eyed enthusiasm vanishing. He also glanced down at Oliver. “Oh,” he said. “You ought to bring Oliver home. Of course. For…” Sherlock trailed off, and John knew it was because Sherlock never had bothered to acknowledge that the baby needed to eat and sleep.

And what the hell, John was already failing at keeping the baby on a schedule, he wasn’t sure that trekking off to St. Bart’s for who knew how long was going to make a difference.

“No, we’ll go with you to St. Bart’s. Ollie would just sulk and cry for you anyway if I tried to deprive him of the fun of the experiment.”

Sherlock beamed and Oliver rattled his bumblebee in evident agreement and John glared at Donovan and Anderson, glowering from the corner, only a little bit as he followed Sherlock and the baby out.

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The dust wasn’t dust, apparently. Not entirely. Sherlock was monologuing to Oliver what he hoped to find in the dust. Oliver was alternating between listening intently, staring at Sherlock’s hands and computer screen as if he really did understand completely what Sherlock was doing, and stacking petri dishes. John was closely monitoring the petri dish playing and not really paying attention to what Sherlock was saying.

Sherlock was partitioning the dust between his own petri dishes, shaking it out carefully. Oliver watched from John’s lap, apparently fascinated. And then sneezed.

John looked more closely at the dust Sherlock was shaking out. He wanted to make sure the dust wasn’t toxic, but he didn’t want to insult Sherlock by assuming that he wouldn’t have protected
Oliver if it was. John hesitated on the stool, arm tight around Oliver.

Sherlock, as unerring as always, sensed it. “It’s not toxic. If I thought it was, I wouldn’t have either one of you here.”

“Right,” said John. “Of course. I just had to, you know, be sure. You know.”

Sherlock sighed.

“I do trust you,” John insisted. “It’s just that we’re still adjusting, remember?”

“So this is why pregnancy evolved to take several months, is it?” asked Sherlock, now dropping a few drops of liquid from a pipette into one of the petri dishes.

“Probably, yes.”

Oliver banged his bumblebee rattle against the counter, rattling the petri dishes.

Sherlock frowned and glanced at him. “You’re going to contaminate the results.”

Oliver decided to put the rattle in his mouth instead.

John winced and grabbed for it. “How clean are these counters?”

“John, you know they’ve been sterilized. Honestly, you’re a nervous mother hen, I’d never have anticipated. You’re a doctor, you ought to be used to babies.”

“It’s different when the baby’s yours. Think of how much I fret over how little you eat and sleep.”

“Are you implying that you’re my mother hen, too?” Sherlock was examining his petri dishes and scribbling notes.

“I…” said John, and trailed off, because “mother” definitely did not seem like the proper label to put on his relationship to Sherlock. “No. Of course not. I…But he is your clone. So.”

Sherlock flashed him a brief smile before turning back to his experiment. “So you worry unreasonably about each of us equally.”

The smile made John feel warm and flushed and he thought he probably turned pink, which was embarrassing. “No more than you worry unreasonably about me.”

“I’ve never considered, for even a moment, sterilizing our kitchen counters for your safety.”

“Maybe you should. Anyway, I don’t make a habit of just going around and sticking random things in my mouth.”

“I’ve noticed,” remarked Sherlock to the petri dish, and for a long moment John stared at his profile, steadily turned away, and wondered if he was reading the double entendre into the conversation. Yes, thought John. Sherlock didn’t flirt, period. Certainly not with him. And then Sherlock added, “And I never think of you as my mother,” and looked up at him.

John stared at him, stared back into his eyes, blue and gray and green and intense, and couldn’t swallow, couldn’t breathe, because Sherlock didn’t think of him as his mother, which made sense, he wasn’t, so why should that be so unbearably sexy, why should it make John want to lean over and close his fist into Sherlock’s shirt and just twist and pull and kiss him—
The door to the lab clattered open. John jumped, startled, and Oliver made a disapproving noise of protest at being jostled. Sherlock turned back to his petri dish as if nothing had just happened, and maybe nothing had happened and John was just losing his mind.

“They said you had commandeered this laboratory,” said Molly, and then blinked at Oliver. “That’s a baby.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Why must everyone find it necessary to state the obvious? Yes. It’s a baby. His name is Oliver.”

Molly looked at Sherlock, and her lips thinned into that trembling but unyielding line that John knew so well these days. Whatever had happened between Molly and Sherlock during the faking of Sherlock’s death had altered their relationship irrevocably. Sherlock tried to pretend otherwise, but Molly stood up to him more and Sherlock listened to her more. This was not a universal change, Sherlock had not come back a more malleable person. This was a special Molly development.

So Molly gathered herself and fought back. “It isn’t obvious that you would have a baby, is it?”

Sherlock allowed the point with a little grunt of displeasure into his petri dish, sounding remarkably like the grumpy noise Oliver had made when John had jostled him.

Molly walked over to John and Oliver and smiled down at the baby. “Oliver, did you say?” She crouched to be more on his level, cooing to him. “Aren’t you the beautifulest little boy ever? Aren’t you just, Ollie-Ollie-oxen-free.”

Sherlock had straightened next to John, looking appalled. “Don’t talk to him like that.”

Oliver giggled, and Molly tapped her index finger against the tip of his nose, and Oliver giggled even harder. “He likes it,” Molly said. “You like it, don’t you, widdle Ollie-wollie?” Molly glanced up at John and winked.

Sherlock groaned, “Oh, my God.”

“I could just eat him up with a spoon,” said Molly, and rose to her feet.

“Would you like to hold him?” John offered, politely.

“No,” interjected Sherlock.

John looked at him in surprise at his rudeness. “No?”

“Not until she agrees to speak proper English to him. I won’t have my son addressed in such a fashion.”

“Sherlock thinks he’s three months going on thirty-three,” John told Molly, and carefully handed Oliver over.

Oliver shook his bumblebee rattle at her.

“That is an honor of the highest order,” said John. “He must like you.”

“Nonsense,” muttered Sherlock. “It means nothing of any special significance. He likes the sound of that rattle.”

“Sherlock is also an expert when it comes to human-baby communication.”
Molly smiled briefly and turned her attention to the contentedly cooing baby in her arms. “Oh, he’s darling. Really and truly.” She looked up, around John, toward Sherlock, who was still lost in his experiments. “Where did he come from?”

“A woman’s uterus,” responded Sherlock.

“Technically correct,” said John, giving Molly his best you know how he is smile.

So Molly looked at John to continue the conversation. “You used a surrogate, of course,” she concluded with interest.

“Oh,” said John. “Not…Not really. Not like that. It was just…” John trailed off and realized that Sherlock always left this to him. All the bumbling about trying to define their relationship, Sherlock never participated. “Do you want to explain, Sherlock?” John asked, trying to force him into putting some sort of label on it.

“Through a series of happy accidents,” responded Sherlock, calmly, without looking up from his experiment, “we happened to be presented with a baby with my DNA. Which we are raising because there isn’t anyone else to do it.”

Which all seemed true and false at all the same time, and didn’t really illuminate John any further as to the nature of their complicated relationship.

“Technically correct,” said John, again.

Molly looked between them as if she didn’t quite know what to think, and said, hesitatingly, “Oh. Okay.”

Sherlock looked up, perching his elbows on the counter and taking a deep breath. “It’s all very confusing. Biologically, he owes his existence to me. Legally, I am his father and John is his mother. Practically, Oliver will be coming to St. Bart’s quite frequently. And to your morgue, more specifically.”

“If that’s acceptable to you,” John added, hastily.

“I don’t care whether it’s acceptable or not, he’ll be coming. It’s best to get used to dead bodies at an early age.” Sherlock turned back to his experiment.

“Is it?” asked Molly, sounding as if she didn’t quite know what to think about that proclamation.

There was a hitch in Sherlock’s movements, a sudden stillness to him, as the unwitting blow hit, and John knew his mind was whirling backward, regressing, back to whether it mightn’t have been a better idea to give Oliver to someone else to raise to make normal.

John said, firmly, “He’s Sherlock Holmes’s son. We won’t need to get him used to dead bodies. We won’t be able to keep him away from them. Isn’t that right, Ollie?”

Oliver shook his bumblebee rattle.

“That means yes,” said John.

And Sherlock didn’t disagree.
Chapter 10

Back at the flat, with a murder solved. Sherlock was on his usual post-case high, monologuing exuberantly on pollen and irises and bumblebees to a wide-eyed Oliver. John couldn’t believe how wide-eyed Oliver still was. John was on the other side of an adrenaline crash, and even though it had only been twenty-four hours without sleep and he had been known to go longer, it had been quite long enough that he was exhausted. Oliver had napped not nearly enough, mostly being awake and alert and surprisingly uncranky. He had clearly enjoyed the endless stimulation all around him, as Sherlock had finished up his experiments and dragged them back to the Yard and then around to so many greenhouses that John lost count until Sherlock found the one he wanted and then got the information he needed by capitalizing on the shopgirl’s preoccupation with Oliver, which Lestrade said was illegal and John said was maybe slightly unethical and in the meantime Oliver just beamed at all of them in happy delight. Oliver had liked all of it so much that John had ignored all of his better judgment about taking the baby home and giving him a proper sleep. John was the worst parent in the history of time. Fresh bottles and nappies had kept arriving like clockwork, to wherever John was, which made John think Mycroft agreed with that assessment.

Oliver was getting cranky now, as John trailed behind him and Sherlock into 221B.

“He needs a bath,” John yawned, “before we put him to bed. And that’s your fault, so you’re in charge of that.”

Sherlock didn’t quarrel, because Sherlock liked giving Oliver baths. Sherlock liked most things about Oliver, honestly. So John let himself collapse onto the sofa and listened to the odd dialogue that Sherlock and Oliver carried out in the bathroom, the rumble of Sherlock’s deep voice punctuated by Oliver’s joyful baby squeals and lots of splashing.

“John,” murmured Sherlock, the tone of his voice like a kiss against John’s ear.

“Mmm?” John responded, because more than that seemed like a lot of effort.

“The sofa is fine every once in a while, but if you make a habit of it your neck will protest. As will your back. And your shoulder.”

“Hmm?” John stretched sleepily and opened his eyes.

Sherlock was crouched in front of him, a fire flickering in the fireplace behind him. He looked otherworldly. Sherlock always looked otherworldly. He was otherworldly. And he was somehow John Watson’s best friend. It made perfect sense to John, in that moment, that he was in love with Sherlock Holmes. How had he, a mere mortal, ever stood a chance?

“Go to bed,” Sherlock said, and smiled at him, soft and relaxed, like the edges of a fuzzy dream you couldn’t quite catch but you knew it had been such a good one.

John couldn’t bear to look at him anymore. John closed his eyes.

“Come on,” said Sherlock, and gave him a little nudge. “Up you go. Oliver, tell Papa he must go to bed.”

John opened his eyes at that, searching for the baby, who was stretched out on his periodic table blanket on his stomach, ripping up articles from scientific journals that Sherlock had disagreed with and relegated to baby toys.
“How is he not tired?” John asked, as the baby gurgled happily. “I mean, it’s true you’re never tired right after a case, even though you should be; it always takes you longer to collapse than it would any normal human being. But he’s a baby.”

Sherlock’s smile widened. “He’s me,” Sherlock reminded him.

Unbearable, thought John, and closed his eyes again.

“Come on,” Sherlock urged him, and tugged him off the sofa. “You can have my bed for the night.”

“You’re going to need your bed,” John only half-protested, letting Sherlock lead him.

“Not for a little while.”

“Oliver’s tired,” John told him. “He’s overstimulated right now, but he needs to sleep. You can’t let him stay up, you have to put him to bed.”

Sherlock poured John into his bed. John went, because Sherlock had a comfortable bed and it was right there. “Yes,” said Sherlock. “Absolutely. I will put him to bed.”

“You’re being too agreeable,” grumbled John. “You don’t intend to do a thing I say.”

“I’m going to play him the violin,” said Sherlock, and pulled the duvet up and over John.

John opened his eyes. The curtains were closed in Sherlock’s bedroom, but light spilled in from around them, across Sherlock’s face, leaned over him as he adjusted the duvet. His hair was a wreck from his hands being in it during the deductions of the previous day. John looked at it and said, “Sherlock,” and then didn’t know what else to say. He looked from Sherlock’s hair to his eyes and thought, I want to comb my hand through your hair. I want to be the person who does that. I want so much more than I can say. I’m terrified by how much I want from you.

Sherlock said, gently, “Go to sleep, John.”

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John woke up in Sherlock’s bed. And thought how he really had to stop making a habit of waking up in Sherlock’s bed.

The city was loud outside the window but the flat was quiet and John spent a little while enjoying the stillness before curiosity pulled him up and out.

He found Sherlock and Oliver both fast asleep on the floor in the sitting room, Oliver’s periodic table blanket underneath them and the blanket from the back of the sofa over them. There was a careful amount of distance between them, not so close as to be suffocating, not so far away that they couldn’t still sense each other. Sherlock was on his side, curled into a ball facing Oliver, one hand resting on the space in between the two of them and his face half-buried in a sofa cushion he was using as a pillow. Oliver was on his back, head turned toward Sherlock, breathing with soft yet heavy puffs of breath from between his parted tiny bow of a mouth.

John shook his head at the pair of them and wondered when they had finally gone to sleep.

He took a shower and made himself a quiet cup of tea, two Sherlock Holmeses still sleeping soundly in his sitting room. And then he thought that perhaps he’d go down and visit for a bit with Mrs. Hudson, except that, halfway down the stairs, he realized that the foyer was occupied by Mycroft Holmes, leaning on his umbrella in mock casualness. John had a flashback to the first time he had
met Mycroft, in a deserted warehouse. How times had changed. Or not. Mycroft was still showing up in shadowy places to demand things, even if the shadowy places were sometimes John’s foyer.

John paused in descending the staircase and tried not to frown, but he’d been having a pleasant morning (or evening, depending on whether one’s sleep schedule was correct instead of a mess) and the arrival of Mycroft normally derailed pleasant Baker Street mornings and/or evenings and/or any times of day.

“Just the person I was hoping to see,” remarked Mycroft.

“Good job you were standing in my house then, isn’t it?” rejoined John.

Mycroft gave him that pained smile that he gave him whenever he thought John was attempting to be too clever. “I thought we might have a little chat,” suggested Mycroft, in the mild way that he delivered commands.

“Not in the foyer,” replied John. “I won’t have you waking Sherlock.”

“Which Sherlock?”

And even though they joked about it between themselves frequently, John looked at Mycroft and said, firmly, “There is only one Sherlock Holmes upstairs. And then there is an Oliver Watson-Holmes. One of each.”

Mycroft’s smile was now the smile he gave John whenever he thought John was being an idiot. That smile was much more relaxed and comfortable. “As you wish,” he said, indulgently.

John gritted his teeth and said, “I ought to fetch my coat.”

“No need,” responded Mycroft. “There’s a car.”

Of course, thought John, and continued descending the stairs, reaching the bottom just as Mrs. Hudson opened her door.

“Oh, I thought I heard voices,” she said. “Hello, Mycroft.” And then, to John, her tone much warmer, “Hello, dear. How is our little darling?”

“Sleeping,” answered John. “Mycroft and I are going to go off and have the world’s briefest discussion. I should be back long before either one of them wakes.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble. If Ollie wakes before his father, I’ll just take him down here.”

“Ta, Mrs. Hudson,” said John, and followed Mycroft out onto the street and into the waiting car.

“Ollie?” Mycroft queried, as the car slid smoothly away from the curb.

“Sometimes nothing but ‘Ollie’ will do,” replied John, and hoped he didn’t sound too defensive.

Mycroft narrowed his eyes and studied him in silence. Studied and studied and studied.

John wanted to ask if he’d woken up with a different face or something, Mycroft was spending so much time staring at it. “Look, I’d rather stop all this phony espionage stuff. He’s your nephew. If you want to know how he is, come by and see him and talk to him and hold him. We’ve never denied you entry into the flat.”

Mycroft made a noise that John would have called a snort in a less dignified person. “I’d like to see
you try.”

“No,” said John, his tone even and unquestionable. “You wouldn’t.”

After a moment during which Mycroft studied him intensely again, Mycroft inhaled through his nose and remarked, “You had him at a crime scene yesterday. You had him investigating a crime. Through the night. A baby a mere three months, three weeks, and three days old.”

“You’ve really nothing better to do than sit around and watch my comings and goings on CCTV?” John wanted the question to sound light, but he could feel himself growing tenser. He was dubious himself as to the wisdom of his behavior during the past day of Oliver’s life. He didn’t feel like defending an attack from Mycroft.

“As you may recall, you received fresh bottles and nappies like clockwork, so perhaps you ought to thank me for my lazy choice for occupying my time,” Mycroft pointed out, mildly.

“If you hadn’t wanted me to have him at New Scotland Yard yesterday, you shouldn’t have sent me new nappies. Running out of nappies would have had us back to Baker Street pretty quickly.”

“I’m just not sure what would have possessed you. This is a baby who has been on the strictest of schedules his entire life. And in less than a month you’ve got him taking catnaps on conference tables in a police station.”

“He’s Sherlock Holmes’s son,” John reminded him. “He liked the police station. And he hates schedules. I have a happy baby. He laughs and he smiles and he’s interested in everything. And I’d wager he wasn’t like that on his strictest of schedules in whatever institution you were holding him in.”

“Ah, you forget. He isn’t Sherlock Holmes’s son. He is Sherlock Holmes. Full-stop.”

“That distinction isn’t important to me. And the sooner you stop thinking of him that way, the easier it will be for you.”

“I merely point that out because Sherlock Holmes’s son, yes, one might expect him to be dragged along to crime scenes. But Sherlock Holmes himself, as a baby, did not receive such treatment.”

“You may have missed this,” remarked John, his tone scathing, “but Sherlock and I are raising Oliver to be his own person. Full-stop,” John finished, mockingly.

“Behind police tape.”

“Anywhere he wants to be.”

“And what if he doesn’t want to be behind police tape?”

“Then he doesn’t have to be. I don’t know why you persist in thinking I’m stupid, even after all this time.”

“I don’t think anything of the sort,” said Mycroft.

“Yes, you do. You think the thought hasn’t crossed my mind that maybe, if you take Sherlock’s DNA and raise him properly, raise him the way he should have been raised, then what you end up with at the end of the day is a happy, well-adjusted human being who doesn’t like crime scenes and doesn’t get called ‘freak.’”
“Sherlock thinks he has a friend now. A playmate. *Company.*”

“Sherlock thinks he has a *baby.* And if you stopped skulking about like this and spent just two minutes watching the two of them interact, you’d realize that. If you didn’t think we were capable of raising the baby, why did you ever even tell us about him?”

“I didn’t think you’d let him,” answered Mycroft.

John blinked, because he hadn’t been expecting that response. “What?”

“I told him because I had to tell him. How could I not tell him? Despite what you may think, keeping the baby’s existence from Sherlock did not cross my mind as an option, not once it became clear the baby was both surviving and thriving. And I knew Sherlock would get this foolhardy idea in his brain, Sherlock is egotistical, naturally he would think himself the best possible candidate for raising the child. But I thought you would be level-headed and practical, as you always are. I thought you would point out that you cannot raise a baby like this, that you do not have lifestyles conducive to it. I didn’t expect you to take one look at the baby and go completely *insane.*”

John knew, objectively, that there was some sense in what Mycroft was saying. That maybe, under other circumstances, John would have pulled Sherlock back from this terribly impractical decision he had made. But he couldn’t imagine that Mycroft had thought John would be able to do that under *these* circumstances.

After a moment he managed, “Didn’t you look at him and fall in love with him immediately? How could you not have?”

“It wasn’t a matter of not loving the baby,” said Mycroft, almost gently, and John thought later how it was the first time he had heard Mycroft really admit to loving anything. “It was a matter of wanting to make sure the baby had the best life possible.”

“And thinking that that life wasn’t with Sherlock?” John accused, sounding more hurt than harsh, as if the same assessment had been leveled by Mycroft against him.

“If I had asked you to name all the things you think Sherlock’s brilliant at, you would have filled a notebook, and not once would you have written ‘raising a child.’”

“I would have been wrong,” said John.

“Yes,” said Mycroft, although he didn’t sound like he was agreeing with John, he sounded like he was affirming something else entirely, something John wasn’t privy to. Mycroft’s gray eyes flickered over John, his usual judgmental gaze. Then he said, “I think that I didn’t expect you to have the faith in him that you do. I don’t know why, after all this time, you are still startling me with your loyalty, Dr. Watson. But he said he wanted to raise a baby, and you immediately decided that he’d be brilliant at it. And you will not waver in that belief, not even whilst you change nappies in a deserted alley because Sherlock is busy chipping at the asphalt for clues.”

“Oliver is loved,” said John. “Oliver is *adored.* He is fed when he’s hungry and he’s changed when he’s dirty and he’s held when he needs to feel safe. When he cries, one of us is there to soothe him, and when he smiles, one of us is there to smile back, and he will never be a lonely little boy who turns into a lonely man because he didn’t know how cherished he was. And it won’t matter what side of the police tape we’re on for that, it won’t matter where he napped or for how long. What will matter is that he will be loved and he will know it, wherever he is. Now I’ve had enough of this conversation. Take me home.”
Mycroft’s gaze was so steady that even his blinks seemed like a metronome to John. He said, almost absently, “That is your solution, isn’t it? Love him enough, and everything will be fixed.”

John wasn’t sure whether Mycroft was referring to John loving Oliver or Sherlock, and he didn’t want to find out. He was about to demand again to be taken home when the car drew to a stop and John glanced out the window and realized they were in front of 221B. He opened the door.

“Do remember to bring more than three nappies with you the next time you go to a crime scene,” suggested Mycroft.

“I’ll make sure Oliver waves at the nearest CCTV camera,” John responded, drily, and then got out of the car, relieved to be back in the normal world that seemed not to exist whenever he was stuck in Mycroft’s suffocating black cars getting ferried madly all over the place.

John walked into the foyer of Baker Street to the greeting of noises from above. Oliver, loudly babbling about something. The sound of something striking the floor, possibly thrown by Oliver. Sherlock’s tread along the sitting room floor, heavy and sure. The pitch of Mrs. Hudson’s voice cooing comfortably to one or both of them.

John closed his eyes and listened, just listened, let them wash over him, the sound of his home and his family and his life and he was tired of trying to label it or categorize it or describe it to other people. Or even to himself. This was how things were, and in just a moment he would ascend the steps and Sherlock would hear his foot on the stair and launch directly into some spirited monologue about something and Oliver would gurgle in greeting and Mrs. Hudson would offer him tea and he loved every single thing about this life he was leading and everyone else on the planet could go to hell.

John put one foot on the staircase, and then the next, walking up to his home.

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Oliver was in a disagreeable temper the rest of the day and into the night. Very little pleased him, and he spent most his time with his face scrunched up in disbelief, as if to say, I cannot believe how dull the two of you are being. How is life this boring? How can you bear any of it?

It was so Sherlockian that it was thoroughly predictable that Oliver’s temper would irritate Sherlock, who thought the baby was being difficult.

“We just solved a murder yesterday,” Sherlock told him, trying to appease him by letting him play with John’s laptop. “Granted, it wasn’t a very interesting murder, in the end, but it was passably acceptable, Oliver.”

Smash, smash, went Oliver against John’s keyboard.

John, re-entering the sitting room after washing some bottles in the kitchen, bent down and took the laptop away from Oliver, which sent Oliver into paroxysms of unhappy sobs, kicking his little feet.

“Oliver was playing with that,” Sherlock frowned at John, from where he was perched on the floor next to Oliver, because Sherlock was almost always on the floor if Oliver was on the floor.

“It isn’t a toy, Sherlock.”

“Well, it’s hardly a real computer. You only use it for porn and your execrable blog, and your passwords are so simplistic that Oliver will be cracking them before the month is out.”
John felt himself go pink and was irritated by that. “I don’t use it for porn,” John protested, because that was true. He had stopped, self-consciously, when he had realized how frequently Sherlock used the computer, how transparent John’s Internet life had become when he had moved into Baker Street.

“I know,” said Sherlock.

Then why did you say it? John wanted to ask, but also wanted to stop talking about pornography. He picked up Oliver, whose sobs had devolved into half-hearted wails of unhappiness.

“You need to go to sleep,” John told him.

Oliver cried.

“He’s fine,” said Sherlock.

“No, he’s not, he’s exhausted. You threw off his sleep schedule.”

“You took away his toy,” retorted Sherlock, sulkily.

“It was my laptop.”

“I don’t understand why you’re so obsessed with his schedule, anyway. You’re as bad as Mycroft. Have you always secretly aspired to be a PA?”

“Speaking of Mycroft,” began John, bouncing Oliver up and down so that his wails were starting to subside into hiccups.

“Yes, it was uncharacteristically tolerable of him to spare me his presence.”

“What the bloody hell did your parents do to the pair of you?” John snapped, and he hadn’t meant it to come out so short and abrupt, but clearly the conversation with Mycroft had nudged on a nerve John hadn’t realized. But he felt like he was making stabs in the dark when it came to Oliver, when it came to making sure he was never as unhappy as Sherlock had been, and that wasn’t fair to Oliver and so unnecessary when Sherlock was right there and could tell them. Just say it.

Sherlock blinked, evidently astonished by the question.

“I mean,” John continued, “it’s fine, you know. I don’t care. Whatever happened then, happened then, and it really doesn’t matter to me, except that it probably matters to Oliver, because it’s behind how you behave toward Oliver, and it’s behind how Mycroft behaves toward Oliver, and I wish you’d just tell me. ‘John, they were absolute bastards who locked us in the nursery and threw away the key and made the nannies climb up through the window to bring us food every once in a while.’ At least then I would know what I’m dealing with.”

Sherlock’s eyes were glittering dangerously, a warning signal if ever John had seen one. “What you’re ‘dealing’ with?” he repeated.

John ignored the danger because he always did, rushed headlong into it. “You don’t think that your attitude toward your parents is influencing how you raise Oliver?”

“I don’t see how it’s relevant.”

John barked harsh laughter. “How can you possibly say that?”

“I can say that because I’m not them.”
“And you do realize, don’t you, that the more you’re not them, then the less he is you?” John pointed out.

“Is that meant to be a threat?”

“No, that’s meant to be a fact. You aren’t who you are because of your DNA, you know. Not really. Your hair and your eyes and your cheekbones, that’s your DNA. The rest of you was formed by things that I know nothing about. Do you know how frustrating that is?”

Sherlock was regarding him calmly from the floor, and John couldn’t tell if it was the sort of calm under which his displeasure was still simmering, or if the displeasure had retreated. “Why is it so frustrating?”

“Because you know everything about me, and you always have, you did from the moment I opened the door at St. Bart’s, you knew everything about me before you even knew my name. And I know nothing about you. You’ve never bothered to tell me. Our relationship is completely one-sided.”

There was a long moment of silence. Oliver put his fingers in his mouth as if he were munching on popcorn and turned his attention from John to Sherlock, eager for the rejoinder.

What Sherlock said was, “What does that have to do with Oliver?”

John blinked. “What?”

Sherlock picked himself up from the floor finally. “What does any of that have to do with Oliver? You’ve gone on at quite some length on the unfairness of not knowing about my childhood, but that hasn’t anything to do with Oliver’s childhood. We’ll raise Oliver the way we raise him, and we’ll deal with the child that results, however much like or unlike me he may be. I asked you an extremely pertinent question, about why my childhood ought to matter to you at all, and what you said was that it matters because I know about your childhood and ‘our relationship is completely one-sided.’ So what, I ask again, does that have to do with Oliver? Because it sounds to me, from everything you’ve said, like it has to do with you and me and nothing at all to do with Oliver.”

“We are raising him,” John pointed out. “Together. How can you tell me that things that have to do with you and me have nothing to do with him? We are him right now. Not in the clone sense, but…we are his entire world. Don’t you see that? We have to…be on the same page with each other about him.” Sherlock had walked over to stand in front of him, and John tipped his head back a bit to maintain eye contact. He could hear an edge of desperation in his voice that he didn’t like. He wanted to be calm and rational but he had started the conversation in an emotional vein and he couldn’t seem to pull back from it. He realized he was stammering to try to articulate his point.

“What is the source of disagreement?” inquired Sherlock, mildly.

The calmer Sherlock kept getting, the more flustered John became in response. He hated that Sherlock had that effect on him. “What?” he replied, aware he sounded idiotic. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Oliver give him a look that said,”Really? That’s the best you can do? At least keep up your end of this little drama.

“You want us to be on the same page when it comes to Oliver. Where are we on different pages?”

“I don’t know, I…They haven’t come up yet. But they might. We haven’t discussed…School.” John was relieved to be able to arrive at some topic that seemed suitable.

“He won’t be going.”
“He won’t be going to school?”

“He won’t be going away to school. He’ll attend a day school, somewhere here in London. Mycroft will get him into whichever one we decide upon, so we’ve no need to worry about that now. There. Same page. Unless you were eager to send him away?”

“Of course not—”

“Then,” finished Sherlock, confidently. “Same page.”

“You hated being sent away,” said John, because it seemed obvious, and because, dammit, he wanted to know these things and why wouldn’t Sherlock, after all this time, trust him with this?

“Why does it matter to you?”

“Because of him.”

“Why does it matter to Oliver why I won’t send him away? Surely all that matters to him is that I won’t.”


Sherlock raised his eyebrows. “And why should it matter to you?”

“Because, after all this time, after everything, you don’t trust me.”

Sherlock went still. Not that he had exactly been moving, but John knew Sherlock and John could see that he had managed to surprise him with that. Sherlock paused, seeming to take stock. And then he said, “Of course I trust you. You think I don’t trust you?”

“You trust me to buy milk when we run out, to order takeaway, to make us tea. You trust me to follow wherever you go, and, when you’re not going anywhere, you trust me to be here. But you don’t trust me enough to tell you anything about yourself. Everything I know about you—everything—has been hard-won.”

“Yoo-hoo,” said Mrs. Hudson, hesitantly, poking her head into the sitting room door. She looked uncertain. “Everything okay up here, boys?”

John realized they must have been shouting at each other. He hadn’t even noticed. Oliver, seeing Mrs. Hudson, began babbling at her around the fingers in his mouth, clearly trying to recap the entire argument.

“We’re fine,” said John, wearily, tearing his eyes away from Sherlock, who was still staring at him in something that looked like confusion. “Sorry. Everyone in this flat needs a bit of a kip at the moment.” John tried to smile at Mrs. Hudson, as he moved out from behind Sherlock.

“Maybe you just need some tea,” Mrs. Hudson suggested. She sounded vaguely anxious, which seemed odd to John, because he and Sherlock quarreled on a fairly regular basis. Was it just that they had been doing it in front of Oliver? Which, John recalled, Sherlock hadn’t wanted to do.

“Tea is a lovely idea,” John agreed, because he didn’t have anything better to do. “I’ll make us some.” He retreated into the relative safety of the kitchen, concentrating on the act of making tea. Oliver was still nestled against him. John was getting used to doing this all one-handed.

Oliver gurgled wisely at John. No doubt he was giving him relationship advice. You’re doing this all
wrong, Papa. The way to get Daddy to open up to you isn’t to shout at him.

Unfortunately, John had never known how to get Sherlock to open up to him. Sherlock had always been an iceberg to John. John knew a tiny piece of him, and the rest of him was unknown, unseen, waiting for something to brush up against it and provoke some mad result like the faking of a suicide. And the thing was that Sherlock was, in a way, right. What did that matter, if John was just his flatmate? John wasn’t just his flatmate. And he wanted to know. He wanted to know Sherlock Holmes, not because he’d untangled his puzzle, but because Sherlock wanted him to know, didn’t mind him knowing, trusted him enough to know.

In the end, John knew, what he wanted was for Sherlock to say, Yes, I love you, too, here is my heart, you can hold it and I’ll hold yours and it’ll all be alright. And how unfair was it for John to demand that from Sherlock when he’d never said it to him?

John took a deep breath and finished fixing their tea and managed, through a series of trips back and forth, to get it out to the sitting room. Mrs. Hudson had departed, apparently thinking they would be able to handle the resolution of this on their own. Sherlock was sprawled on his back on the sofa, his fingers pressed to his mouth. Oliver pointed to him and cooed.

John sat in his chair, Oliver settled against him, and regarded Sherlock on the sofa. After a moment, he ventured, “I think Oliver might already be teething.” He thought Oliver would be a safe topic of conversation, especially if John avoided asking When did you start teething?

But Sherlock didn’t respond at all.

“I’m sorry,” John said, after a moment. “I know you didn’t want to argue in front of Oliver, and I really didn’t mean for us to have a row. Mycroft put me out-of-sorts. You know how that is.”

“I trust you with Oliver,” Sherlock said, without looking away from the ceiling. “Oliver is…I trust you with everything.”

“I know,” said John. And then, after a moment, “And thank you for that.”

“You think I had an option. You think that trusting you—with Oliver, with anything—is a conscious decision on my part. When it’s habit. I don’t think about you. You just are. I don’t know how you can be so stupid about this.”

Typical Sherlock, thought John, complimenting him and insulting him all at once. John looked down at Oliver, who yawned enormously.

“Let’s take him for a walk,” said John, suddenly.

“Hmm?”

“A walk. He likes them, and he’s exhausted. He’ll fall asleep before we’re halfway down the street.”

“Fine.” Sherlock, still focused on the ceiling, waved a hand in John’s direction. “Take him for a walk.”

John had risen to his feet. He looked over at Sherlock and said, gently, “Come with us.”

After a moment of silence, Sherlock turned his head and met John’s gaze. Sherlock was unreadable. But then, hadn’t that been the reason for the entire disagreement? Sherlock was opaque, impenetrable, unknowable. And it was frustrating as hell.
But, after a few seconds of regarding each other, Sherlock stood up.
Chapter 11

John slept poorly, restlessly, beset by dreams in which he was tangled in Sherlock’s coat, and yet every time he tried to reach it for it to push it off of him, to get some air, it dissolved into smoke. When he woke, the bedsheets were twisted all around him and he struggled out of them, feeling straitjacketed. Then he headed downstairs.

There was clanking and banging coming from the kitchen. John stuck his head into it. Sherlock was seated at the table, microscope to one side, mixing things in various kitchen bowls. John made a mental note to destroy those bowls later, as Sherlock sliced something that looked mysteriously like an animal organ and sprinkled it into a bowl like it was a garnish. Oliver was sitting in his highchair, a spoon in one hand and Sherlock’s skull settled on the tray in front of him. He was taking turns banging the spoon against the tray and the skull. When he saw John, he banged the spoon even more enthusiastically.

“Good morning,” said John.

“Hmm,” said Sherlock, poking at one of the bowls with a fork. John made a mental note to destroy their forks as well.

John glanced at Oliver, still whacking the spoon against things, and then back to Sherlock. He couldn’t read Sherlock’s mood. Sherlock had been quiet during the walk the night before and quiet afterward, but sometimes Sherlock was just quiet. And it wasn’t unusual for Sherlock to be so caught up as to not bother to wish John a good morning in return.

“What are we up to?” John asked, hoping he didn’t sound hesitant. In all honesty, he wasn’t entirely sure what the row had been about the day before, or how he could fix it, or whether he ought to be the one fixing it at all.

“We are testing a hypothesis,” Sherlock responded. “Tell Papa, Oliver. ‘Hypothesis.’ Say it.”

“You would want ‘hypothesis’ to be his first word.”

“As good a word as any, isn’t it? And better than the vast majority.”

“You could start off with something a bit simpler than that. Something with fewer than four syllables, perhaps.”

Sherlock wrinkled his nose in disgust. “I’m not starting him off with ‘Dada,’ don’t even suggest it.”

“I was going to suggest ‘skull.’”

Sherlock’s face relaxed back into casual satisfaction. “Acceptable.”

“Glad you think so. It’s settled, Oliver. Your first word will be ‘skull.’ If you disagree, talk to your father about it.”

Oliver banged his spoon and made a noise that might or might not have been the word “skull.” John, startled, looked at Sherlock, who looked at Oliver with obvious delight.


“That was coincidence,” said John.
“It wasn’t. It was his first word. I’m going to make a note of it in his spreadsheet.” Sherlock leaned over and kissed Oliver’s temple, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and John smiled and thought of Mycroft pointing out how wrong John would have been if asked to predict Sherlock’s parenting abilities.

While John was being pleasantly hazy about the sweetness of the tableau of Sherlock experimenting and Oliver banging away next to him, Sherlock commented, not looking up from his microscope, “You’re wanted at the clinic today.”

John, startled, noticed for the first time his mobile resting at Sherlock’s elbow. “Sherlock, really, you have to stop stealing my phone.”

“I didn’t steal it, you left it in the sitting room.”

John had been discombobulated before bed still. John believed that.

“I heard it ringing,” Sherlock continued, “so I fetched it.”

“And you spoke to Sarah?”

“Of course not. I saw it was the clinic ringing you. Clearly, your strep throat diagnosing talents are needed.”

“It isn’t just strep throat,” John grumbled, walking into the kitchen to retrieve his phone. It was indicating a voicemail, which he listened to. As Sherlock had predicted, it was Sarah asking if he could go in. Begging, really. Apparently, they were desperate. John put his phone down. “You were right,” he said.

“Of course I was right,” said Sherlock, using a pipette to add something to one of his bowls.

“Not about the strep throat.”

Sherlock made a noncommittal noise.

John looked at Oliver, who had now stuck the wrong end of the spoon in his mouth and was contentedly watching Sherlock experiment. He was reluctant to leave him.

“You don’t want to go,” remarked Sherlock.

John looked at him, studiously working on his experiment and not looking back. “Not because I don’t trust you with him.”

“I know,” said Sherlock.

Although clearly he didn’t. Clearly, no matter what John said or did, Sherlock continued to doubt that John thought he could take care of the baby.

Or maybe Sherlock was the one who doubted it. Suddenly, that made so much more sense to him.

John pulled out the chair next to Sherlock and sat in it.

“Hey,” he said.

Sherlock didn’t acknowledge him, so John reached out and put his hand over the one Sherlock had resting on the table. Sherlock stilled and looked down at their hands inquisitively.
“You’re really good at this, you know,” John said. “Sort of spectacularly good at it, really.”

There was a moment of silence. “Do you think so?” asked Sherlock.

And John remembered a moment years earlier, praising one of his deductions, Sherlock responding, curiously, Do you think so?

“Yes,” John said, firmly. “I do. It’s annoying, frankly.”

Sherlock managed a chuckle, and John removed his hand, fairly certain that he’d made his point.

“I hate to leave him because I hate to leave him,” John continued. “Not because I’m leaving him with you.”

Sherlock looked up and finally met his eyes. “Don’t go, then.”

“And leave the clinic without my strep throat diagnosing expertise?” John rose to his feet, speaking lightly.

“How would London survive?” asked Sherlock, dryly.

“Exactly.” John brushed a hand over Sherlock’s shoulder on his way out of the kitchen. Sherlock needed reassurance, John told himself, and such things were reassuring. He also dropped a kiss on the top of Oliver’s head.

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In between running cultures for strep throat, somehow John told Sarah that he and Sherlock had adopted a baby. The words just fell out of his mouth. He was sad he didn’t have any photos on his phone to accompany the announcement. He wanted to show him off. He wondered if he had already become one of those parents.

Sarah just said, “Aw, I’m so happy for the two of you. I guess I always knew he was where you’d end up, considering that you actually took him along on our first date.”

“I didn’t take him along, he just showed up,” said John, for the umpteenth time. “And it’s not like that.”

Sarah was making herself a cup of coffee. She stirred sugar into it and looked at him. “Not like what?”

“Not like what you’re thinking. We’re not together.”

Sarah lifted her eyebrows. “You just adopted a baby, but you’re not together?”

How many times was he going to have to explain this? Why couldn’t people just understand? What was so odd and unusual about two friends adopting a baby together?

Okay, maybe it was odd and unusual. But not when one of the friends was Sherlock.

Sherlock who John knew he was in love with and should be together with and couldn’t make himself tell.

“No together like that,” John confirmed, firmly.

Sarah just stared at him for a second. And then she said, “The flat only has two bedrooms, doesn’t
it?"

What did that have to do with anything? “Yes,” John answered.

“Ah. So you’re moving, then?”

“Moving?”

“Well, where’s the baby sleeping?”

“In Sherlock’s room.”

“He can’t sleep there forever. Eventually you’re going to need another bedroom for him. And Baker Street only has two.”

There was some amount of sense in what she was saying. Actually, there was a perfect amount of sense in what she was saying. Baker Street was too small for them. Not right at the moment, but eventually, at some point in the future, it was going to be one bedroom too small. Why had John not realized that earlier? Did Sherlock intend to move? John couldn’t imagine Sherlock in a different flat, with a different landlady. He couldn’t imagine that Sherlock could imagine that, either. But if Sherlock didn’t intend to move…

Suddenly the vulnerability John had seen in the kitchen that morning seemed almost sinister to him. Sherlock wasn’t yet confident of his ability to handle Oliver on his own. But he would get there. John knew he would. John had even helped him along that morning. Sherlock would get used to Oliver, get used to the idea of himself as a father; it had barely been a month, after all. Sherlock would get comfortable eventually, and eventually Oliver would need a bedroom of his own, and despite what Sherlock might think at the moment about the importance of John in their lives, Sherlock and Oliver would be a fairly self-sufficient unit. And they would need John’s bedroom.

John had never been worried before that Sherlock might ask him to move out of the flat. Not from the first moment he had set foot in the flat. Sherlock had wanted him there, that much had been clear from the very beginning. John had never held it over Sherlock’s head, but he had always known that if he threatened to leave, Sherlock would be devastated. John worried about a million other things in his strange, incomprehensible life but he never worried about Sherlock throwing him out.

And now he worried. Where would he even go? Did he even remember how to live without Sherlock? He had done it, when Sherlock had been “dead,” and he had been appalling at it, suffocated by the quiet all around him. How could he do it again? And it would be worse, leaving Oliver behind, too. He had barely been able to leave Oliver for a day. How could he ever walk away from him?

John sat in his office, ostensibly eating lunch but really staring at his mobile on his desk and telling himself it was a bad idea to phone Sherlock and say, You know I can’t fathom a life without you in it, right? So we need to look for a bigger flat. The mobile sat there, taunting him. Sherlock had not texted. John had received texts from Harry—still begging to meet Oliver—and Lestrade—suggesting they go out for drinks sometime soon. Probably so they could discuss John’s infuriating non-relationship with Sherlock.

John understood why sometimes some people just screamed from frustration. John felt a special kinship with all of them. He looked at his phone and willed it to vibrate with a text. It didn’t.

It was not exactly unusual for Sherlock not to text him during the course of a day. There were days when his phone never stopped vibrating with texts, when Sherlock was bored and demanding
attention, but there were other days when he never heard from Sherlock because Sherlock was wrapped up in an experiment. Sherlock had Oliver to occupy his time. It made sense that he wasn’t bored, wouldn’t be texting John. But somehow it made John feel even more on the outside. John had walked out of Baker Street that morning and out of Sherlock’s and Oliver’s lives. They had already gone on without him. John had no idea what they were doing; he was already out of the loop.

John took a deep breath and pulled his phone over to him. He tapped his fingers on the desk anxiously, and then opened a new text to Sherlock. He stared at the blank screen, then typed carefully. *You were right – wall-to-wall strep throat.* It wasn’t strictly speaking true, but it was close enough, and it opened up the conversation.

John stood and paced around his office and wondered what was wrong with him. He was behaving like a bloody schoolboy. All he was doing was texting his flatmate, it was a perfectly normal activity, but now he was worried it had been the wrong thing to do, that Sherlock wouldn’t text him back, and *what would that mean.* John worried at his thumbnail, realized he was doing it, dropped his hand, appalled. What had got *into* him?

The phone on his desk vibrated. John looked at it and then practically pounced on it.

*As anticipated.* –SH

John looked at it, bit his lip, wondered if he should text back. What would he say? Sherlock had texted back fairly quickly, and that had been John’s objective with the text. Hadn’t it?

Then the phone vibrated again.

*Have explained to Oliver that you’re busy saving the world from strep throat.* –SH

John considered the text, considered a response. Was it sarcastic? Chiding? Was it Sherlock being stroppy because he’d prefer for John to be home? John almost hoped that it was.

While he was considering, the phone vibrated again.

*Or at least the slice of world in a six-block radius around the clinic.* –SH

John came up with a response to that one which he thought didn’t make him sound desperate and needy with a subtext of *Don’t kick me out of our flat just because you’ve got a baby clone of yourself now.*

*Be fair – it’s at least a ten-block radius.*

Sherlock’s next incoming text vibrated almost as soon as John had sent it.

*Oliver was deeply unimpressed by strep throat once I explained it to him.* –SH

John contemplated. Either a continued dig at John’s current occupation or a genuine assessment of Sherlock projecting onto Oliver.

The phone buzzed again.

*We are both much more interested in Kawasaki’s disease, if you happen to see any cases of that.* – SH

John shook his head at the screen.

*I am not bringing home contagious bacteria for the two of you to study.*
The phone buzzed with a response.

*Oliver is very disappointed. He asked me what the point of your leaving was if not to bring us back contagious bacteria for experiments. –SH*

John smiled, typed out, *Saving the world from strep throat, ten block radius.*

He put the phone down and called for his next patient, and when it vibrated one last time, he glanced at it.

*Eight at the most. –SH*

John’s afternoon was better than his morning.

***

John stopped on his way home from work to buy Sherlock a gift. Because he was a ridiculous human being. At least he had come to terms with that. Was it better to be insane and know it? John was undecided on that point.

Sherlock was watching some atrocious reality television show when John walked into the sitting room. Oliver was on his lap, listening as Sherlock said, “You can tell she’s been unfaithful to him by the shirt she’s chosen.” His eyes shifted to John as he walked in, and he smiled, and for a moment John felt…tipped. He could think of no other word for it. Sherlock smiled at him all the time, but this smile, after a day being separated from him and worrying that maybe Sherlock no longer cared about him, made him feel a little light-headed with relief. “Look, Oliver, Papa’s home,” said Sherlock, and lifted Oliver toward John in obvious invitation.

John smiled back because he couldn’t help it and set the bag with the gift down on the floor next to the door and strode across the room to accept Oliver. He closed his eyes and breathed him in, a curious mixture of Sherlock’s scent—light yet expensive cologne, the constant clinging of formaldehyde underneath, a slight undercurrent of smoke from the latest explosion Sherlock would have caused—with baby powder and still-new skin. Oliver smelled like home with a twist, John thought, and felt himself relax into it, tension unspooling from his shoulders.

“Oh,” he heard himself say. “I missed you.”

“We missed you,” responded Sherlock, lightly, and John opened his eyes, but Sherlock wasn’t looking at him, was turning off the television and getting to his feet, and Oliver chose that moment to close a fist around some of John’s hair and pull, getting John’s attention back. “Eight cases of strep throat, three texts from your sister, and one from Lestrade.”

A disturbingly accurate assessment of his day, of course. John tackled the easiest one. “There was also a broken finger thrown in there.”

“Scintillating,” said Sherlock, coming to stand in front of him. “I asked Mrs. Hudson to watch Oliver. What’s in the bag?”

“It’s a gift,” said John. “And watch Oliver when?”

“Tonight. Now, in fact.”

John was surprised. Sherlock looked matter-of-fact, as if nothing unusual were going on. “Now? Why?”
“Because we’re going out. The gift is for me, or for Oliver?”

“Going out where? And hang on, can’t you deduce about the gift?”

Sherlock frowned. “Of course I can deduce about the gift.” There was a pause. “We’re going to Angelo’s.”

“For what?”

“I thought we could use a night off.”

John wanted to say *But I just got home.* But it was possible—probable—that it was Sherlock who needed the night off. He had just spent the entire day alone with the baby, after all. And while John knew Sherlock adored Oliver, that would be a lot for anyone to deal with.

“I can stay with the baby,” John offered.

“How can you stay with the baby when we’re going to Angelo’s?”

“No, I mean I would stay behind. With the baby.”

Sherlock was frowning again. “Don’t you want to come to Angelo’s?”

John felt as if he had been confused and off-kilter since the moment he had walked into the flat. But maybe he’d just been confused and off-kilter for years now and he was just starting to realize it. “Of course. I just thought that maybe you needed some…” John trailed off. Saying *alone time* to Sherlock Holmes seemed ridiculous. When Sherlock needed alone time, he took off on his own. He had never been shy about doing that, and John didn’t see Oliver’s presence changing that.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed, as if suspicious of the soundness of John’s mental capacities. “Needed some what?”

Oliver pulled on John’s hair extremely energetically. Clearly, there was only so long he could tolerate not being the center of attention. Like father, like son, thought John, wincing. “Nothing,” said John, shifting Oliver in his arms. “Never mind. An evening out will be lovely. Mrs. Hudson will love watching Ollie. Isn’t that right, Oliver? If you’re nice to Mrs. Hudson now, she’ll make you the best biscuits when you get a bit older.”

“She’ll make him the biscuits regardless, he’ll have her wrapped around his little finger,” said Sherlock, dismissively.

“I’m trying to encourage good behavior,” John told him.

Sherlock snorted, his eyes drifting to the bag by the door. “About the gift…” he began.

“Oh,” said John. “I’ll take it to Angelo’s with us.”

Sherlock nodded once, shortly. “Good idea. Let’s go.”

“Wait a second. Have you packed a bag?”

“We’re going to Angelo’s, it’s not an overnight trip.”

“I mean for Mrs. Hudson.”

“Mrs. Hudson isn’t taking any trips, either.”
“I mean of Oliver’s belongings,” John clarified, exasperated.

Sherlock looked genuinely confused. “Oliver isn’t staying overnight at Mrs. Hudson’s. I haven’t arranged for that.”

“I meant of things like nappies and bottles and a change of clothing and a few toys.”

“She’ll be just downstairs, she can come up and get anything she might need.”

“It would be courteous of us to give her a bag,” said John, and handed Oliver across to Sherlock. “I have to go pack you a bag, Oliver. Daddy was going to send you down to Mrs. Hudson with nothing at all.”

Oliver looked at Sherlock, obviously offended.

“I was going to make sure the skull went with you,” Sherlock told him, sounding a mirroring version of offended.

Oliver looked slightly appeased, which he expressed by cooing at Sherlock and batting a hand against his nose. Sherlock accepted the apology with a small smile, which made John’s chest hurt. When had Sherlock grown to look so natural with the baby in his arms? The most unnatural of babies, and yet everything about the two of them looked so perfect and right.

John tore himself away from the vision they presented, picking up the bag with his gift on his way to Sherlock’s bedroom to pack Oliver’s bag.

“Where are you going with that?” Sherlock called.

“No peeking!” John called back.
Chapter 12

There was a candle already flickering on their table when they got there. John barely gave it a second glance.

Sherlock ordered them a bottle of wine. And food. John mused briefly upon the fact that having a baby had had such a radical effect on Sherlock’s moods. He marveled at the fact that Sherlock had been eating such regular meals. He wondered if he was slowly syncing with Oliver’s schedule.

Which made John say, “Did Oliver eat well for you today?”

“Don’t you think Oliver is bored of the breast milk by now? How incredibly dull, to have that for every single meal. It isn’t even especially good.”

“He’s probably wondering the same thing about how much tea we drink.”

“I’d let him try the tea, except that everything I’ve read seems to insist upon feeding babies nothing but monotonous milk for months.”

“It’s best for them.”

Sherlock made a face. “According to the ‘experts.’ What makes any of them more expert than you or me?”

“The fact that they’ve studied more than one baby.”

“There is no one more of an expert in Oliver than I am,” sniffed Sherlock.

“Except possibly for me,” John pointed out, agreeably, as Angelo returned with the wine, pouring it with broad winks at each of them.

“Lestrade wants to go out for pints, of course,” said Sherlock, swirling his wine around his glass before taking a sip. “And your sister wants to meet Oliver. And you don’t want to do either.”

“I didn’t say that,” John denied.

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Okay,” John admitted. “No, I don’t want to do either thing.”

“You originally wanted your sister to know Oliver.”

“That was before,” said John.

“Before?”

Sherlock’s gaze was sharp and knowing, the way it almost always was, and John took a swallow of wine and told himself not to fidget. He should probably be bloody used to that look already, shouldn’t he? But he knew that he didn’t want to answer the question. Before she pointed out how hypocritical I’m being about our relationship. He said instead, “Before she showed up drunk to our coffee date.”

Sherlock dropped it, but John didn’t doubt for a second that Sherlock knew there was more to the story. Sherlock always knew. “And what of the Lestrade pints?”
“You want me to go for pints with Lestrade?”

“You love to go for pints with Lestrade. You sit and have pointless conversations about football and rugby and me.”

“And you?”

“Of course me.”

“Because you must always be a topic of conversation?”

“Because I’m what the two of you have in common.”

Which was true enough. He and Lestrade were friendly, but Sherlock was right that he was the common link between them. They hadn’t stayed in touch when Sherlock had been “dead.” Then again, John hadn’t stayed in touch with anyone at all when Sherlock had been “dead,” so maybe that indicated nothing.

John said, “We’ll talk about Oliver.”

“How clever he is?” suggested Sherlock, lightly.

“You know that’s not what we’d talk about.” Angelo put bread on the table, and John attacked it, tearing it apart with perhaps more force than was necessary.

“It ought to be.”

John put his destroyed piece of bread down on his bread plate. “Doesn’t it ever bother you?” He was exasperated and curious enough to ask the question.

“What?”

“Talking about us.”

Sherlock looked genuinely perplexed by the question. “When do I talk about us?”

“I mean with other people. When other people ask questions about us. Don’t you get sick of it?”

“What does it matter to me what other people think?”

Of course Sherlock would think that. Sherlock genuinely didn’t care, for the most part. John wished he could be that blasé about it. He tore morosely at his bread some more.

“What does it matter to you?” Sherlock asked, more gently than John would have thought.

John kept his eyes on his bread. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “It matters. It’ll matter to Oliver.”

“Of course it won’t. It doesn’t matter to me, and he’s me.”

Maybe Sherlock was right about that, but John wasn’t so sure. He was fairly convinced that Sherlock had been a sensitive child. Any child with as much perceptive reasoning power as Sherlock had had to have been. “We don’t have enough bedrooms,” said John.

“You seem to prefer the sofa,” responded Sherlock.

“I’m being serious. There aren’t enough bedrooms.”
“And?”

Sherlock was the most infuriating human being on the planet most of the time, thought John, mentally gritting his teeth. “What is your solution to that?”

“My solution is to worry about it when it actually becomes an issue. Why go begging for trouble when real trouble follows us around so readily?”

Which was a response that made a certain amount of sense, dammit. John hated when he felt like he had no rebuttal to Sherlock. John finally took a bite of his bread, to cover up not having anything to say in response.

“Are you happy, John?”

John’s gaze had been idly wandering over the restaurant, the other diners, the food they were eating, but at that his eyes snapped to Sherlock. He had his wineglass lifted, as if preparing to sip from it, and was looking at John steadily over the top of it, and John, having met his eyes, couldn’t look away. “Why would you ask me that?” He would have thought that would have been obvious, especially to Sherlock Holmes.

“Because it’s the only thing that matters to me,” replied Sherlock, gravely.

There was a thickness to John’s blood, a sluggishness to the thudding of his heart in his chest, as if the normal passage of time had slowed and everything was taking longer than it should. John looked into Sherlock’s eyes and said, “I’m very happy.”

“Even with all the recent…disruption?” Sherlock seemed to search for the word he wanted to use.

“I love Oliver. I love our life with him in it.”

“Then you appear to be worrying a great deal over nothing. Drink your wine.”

John ignored the directive. “Are you happy?” he asked.

Sherlock smiled at him, and Angelo brought the food. Terrible timing, thought John, as they lapsed into silence, each preoccupied with their meal. And their thoughts, John supposed. Certainly his thoughts were whirling and tumbling so quickly through his head that he couldn’t even hope to pin one down, to grab one and examine it. Across the table from him Sherlock ate steadily and John loved him so much he felt dizzy with it. Tell him, he thought. It was the perfect opportunity, in this romantic restaurant, with food and wine, almost like a proper date, and yet John’s tongue twisted in his mouth, not even sure where to start. You asked me if I’m happy. Here’s what would make me happier…

Sherlock said, suddenly, abruptly, slicing through John’s chaotic and panicked thoughts, “They should never have had children.”

John blinked, so lost in his own thoughts that he hadn’t even bothered to wonder what Sherlock might have been lost thinking about. “What? Who?”

“My parents,” answered Sherlock, casually, as if this wasn’t the world’s most enormous revelation, the information John had been begging for just the other day. Sherlock took a bite of his veal piccata and chewed like it was any other bite of veal piccata he’d ever had.

John tried not to stare. John tried to think of what to say next. He decided on, “Why do you say that?”
Sherlock gave him a baleful look. Apparently he’d expected a more intelligent response than that. “Because it’s true.”

John considered. There were two possible meanings to Sherlock’s statement, he decided. Sherlock could mean that they shouldn’t have had children because of the way those children had turned out, or that they shouldn’t have had children because they hadn’t been parental types. John thought the latter more likely at the moment. “They were…selfish?” he guessed, hoping to get more out of Sherlock on the subject.

Sherlock made a thoughtful noise to his veal piccata. “Not exactly. They were interested in the things they were interested in. They weren’t interested in children.”

“They did have them?”

“Surely you must have deduced by now that Mycroft and I come from a certain class. Even you could not have failed to realize that.”

“The continuation of the family name?”

“The name, the history, the estate. There’s a dreadful house out in Cornwall.” Sherlock made a face and kept steadily eating his veal piccata.

John had never seen Sherlock eat with such purpose. John, meanwhile, hadn’t even touched his meal. He watched Sherlock and didn’t dare breathe for fear Sherlock’s revelatory mood would pass.

“They were both scientists,” Sherlock continued, and John thought, Of course. “Chemists. They had an enormous laboratory in the old stable. The most well-cared-for thing on the entire estate. Everything in it was state of the art for the time, gleaming and beckoning. We weren’t allowed to go into it, so naturally it was my favorite place on the entire planet, the best place I could even imagine. My childhood was endless strategizing of how to get in there and conduct my own experiments.”

“Did you ever manage it?” asked John, spellbound.

“Of course. They found out and claimed I contaminated some chemical reaction that had been underway, but they’d done their equations incorrectly, that hadn’t been my fault.”

“Did you tell them that?”

“Do you think, even as a child, that I was good at not telling people the truth about their own stupidity?”

John tried to imagine Sherlock without that trait. Sherlock was right, he couldn’t. It was one of the things that was simply part of Sherlock. But the love for chemistry, the converted laboratory of their own kitchen, now seemed fraught with emotional complications. He had been descended from chemists, so surely some of it was hereditary, but the inaccessibility of his parents’ lab, the obvious representation it had come to mean of the attention of two distracted parents, seemed to explain how intensely Sherlock loved it, how nondescript he became without access to the outlet of it.

“I can’t imagine they took that well.”

“Really?” Sherlock sounded surprised. “Then you are imagining that they paid any heed at all to anything I might say.”

John thought how much worse that would be. It suddenly made complete sense to him, how much Sherlock acted out, how many impossibly irritating things Sherlock did. He had clearly developed
the habit as a child, as a means of trying to be noticed in any way at all, and John understood how that must be a difficult habit to break.

“At any rate,” Sherlock continued, his voice still so bloody casual, “it was fine, really. The nannies were all stupid, so I did as I pleased, until I went away to school. And school was tedious, but there were laboratories and science and then eventually chemistry and then eventually the solving of crimes. Where you picked up the story. And there you have it. What you didn’t know, you now know.”

John kept staring at Sherlock. He didn’t want to—he didn’t want to make Sherlock self-conscious or uncomfortable—but he was amazed at the way Sherlock had brushed aside so many decades, so many decades that John knew had been filled with drug addiction and self-destructive behavior, and Sherlock knew that John knew that. Sherlock had basically just revealed that he had been lonely and unhappy for the entirety of his life, prior to John’s entrance into it, and yet he was steadfastly pretending as if that had not been true, as if he had not been devastatingly hurt as a sensitive young boy and had never fully recovered, had never really stopped trying to hide the vulnerability of that. Although John supposed that Sherlock would have been horrified at any such description of his life, and John didn’t blame him. The twists and turns that had formed who they were were not made to be dragged out into the light and inspected.

And Sherlock had done this for him. Because he’d asked. Because it had been bothering him. John looked across at him and said, meaning so much more than just the two words, “Thank you.”

Sherlock pushed veal piccata this way and that on his plate. “Well, you thought it would be important to Oliver. To know. So.” Sherlock shrugged.

John felt overwhelmed by the depth of the confession Sherlock had just shared with him. He cleared his throat and tried to think if he had anything to equal it. I’m in love with you, he wanted to say, and Sherlock would look up and…what? John didn’t know. But he also felt like saying it in that moment might feel like trying to upstage Sherlock. Sherlock had made an astonishing gesture in everything he had just said and John didn’t want to diminish it at all.

John suddenly remembered the gift in the bag next to him. “Oh,” he said, seizing upon it and handing it across the table. “For you.”

Pleasure mingled with relief crossed Sherlock’s face. He was obviously anxious to move onto something slightly more normal. John watched him pull the book out and consider it for a moment, his face unreadable.

“It’s a book,” John explained, to fill the silence. “I mean, to keep track of Oliver’s milestones and things. You’ve been using a spreadsheet for it, and that’s very you, but I thought you might like an official book to stick the spreadsheet in. All very scientific.” The book had some preset pages to be filled in but it had a ton of space at the back for what John imagined would be Sherlock’s spreadsheets. And it wasn’t especially babyish. It was a baby book that looked as if it belonged to an adult, and John thought Sherlock would appreciate such a thing.

Sherlock flipped slowly through the book, looking curious about it, and eventually closed it and said, “Thank you. It will be useful.”

“Do you like it?” asked John, trying not to sound as desperate about it as he felt.

“Yes. And so will Oliver.”

“Because he’s you.”
“And he has good taste,” agreed Sherlock, setting the book on the table beside him. And then Sherlock changed the topic of conversation, to the other people in the restaurant with them, showing off as he normally did when they were out to dinner, but John noticed that he kept stealing little looks at the book, and he felt drunk on it.

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Drunk was what he felt by the end of the evening, even though he wasn’t sure he was. There had been wine, yes, but there had also been coffee, and there had been a lot of lingering over dessert, not that he had realized it. Sherlock had pointed it out, glancing at his watch and suggesting that they go relieve Mrs. Hudson, and John had looked down at his watch and been positively startled by the time. A glance around confirmed that they were the only customers in the restaurant; Angelo should have kicked them out long ago.

Feeling embarrassed by it—a condition not helped by Angelo being knowing and nudgey as they prepared to leave—John left an extravagant tip after Sherlock insisted on paying. Sherlock lifted his eyebrows at that, but said nothing.

John was contemplative as he walked back to Baker Street next to Sherlock, and Sherlock was silent as well. John was wondering what had been different about that particular evening. Had it been the fact that it had begun with Sherlock more open than John had ever seen him? Perhaps that was why he had felt so wrapped in intimacy. Sherlock had seemed comfortable and relaxed, he had been witty and entertaining, and John could have sat there forever, listening to him talk, watching him. That voice of velvet wrapped up in so much elegance, and all of it existing just for him at the moment. John tried to keep up his end of the conversation, but he felt as if he’d been stupid all night.

How many times had Sherlock thought him stupid over dinner? What had he thought of him their first dinner at Angelo’s, when he’d so fumblingly inquired about Sherlock’s sex life?

The thought compelled him to interrupt the silence. “That first dinner at Angelo’s,” he began.

“Hmm?”

John didn’t turn his head but strove to catch a glimpse of Sherlock from the corner of his eye. Sherlock was looking ahead at where they were walking, didn’t seem especially interested in the topic of conversation. “What did you think of me?”

Sherlock looked at him then. “I thought you were a clever man whose brain was working against him.”

Not what John had expected. “What do you mean?”

“Your limp, John,” Sherlock reminded him, looking almost amused that he’d forgot it.

But he had forgotten it, in the midst of everything else that was happening to him. “Oh, God,” he said, “that was forever ago, wasn’t it? Do you think I’d still be limping along with a cane, if I hadn’t met you?”

“Yes,” answered Sherlock, readily.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” John replied, drily.

“Oh, don’t be like that. You were a mess, and your therapist was an idiot. She never once understood your problem.”
“And what was my problem?”

Sherlock quirked an amused smile into Baker Street, as they entered it. “You hadn’t met me yet.”

“You’re an arrogant sod, you know it?”

“I merely speak the truth. Before me, you had too much time to think. I make sure you don’t.”

“That must be hard work,” remarked John, gravely.

“It’s good to have Oliver to help me bear it,” agreed Sherlock.

“We should have thought to clone you long ago.”

“A Sherlock Holmes in every household.”

“Perish the thought.”

“There’d be a lot less stupidity in the world.”

“No, there’d just be a lot more people around to complain about the world’s stupidity.” John followed Sherlock up to 221’s door.

“How cynical of you,” said Sherlock, sticking his key in the door.

“Your clones would go to support groups together. They would tell horror stories. ‘That one’s wifi password was “password.”’ ‘That one keeps using third-person verb tenses with second-person pronouns.’”

Sherlock, laughing, opened the door and stretched his arm out, indicating that John should go first. “He didn’t even notice she was left-handed.”

John giggled, definitely not the first time he’d giggled in their foyer and, he hoped, not the last. “And, dear God, is there no one who knows how to make a good curry anymore.’ You’d be opening Indian restaurants all over the place. And Chinese.” John knocked on Mrs. Hudson’s door.

“She’s upstairs,” Sherlock told him. “She would have put Oliver to bed in his own cot. And opening restaurants would require us to cook.”

John began walking up the stairs. “I’m wagering that some of you might not be intensely lazy. Some of you might not have me to take advantage of.”

He said it lightly, because he meant it lightly, but Sherlock said, “We’d have to clone you, too. We cannot have all these Sherlock Holmeses running around without yous to accompany them. What would become of all of them?”

John stopped at the top of the stairs, turned around. Sherlock was a couple of steps behind him, meaning their heights were basically evened out. He tried to think of something to say. “They’d be brilliant, temperamental geniuses.”

“They’d be lonely,” said Sherlock, gravely, his gaze even and steady and true.

John stared at him, thinking of how easy it would be to press forward and into him and tell him he was never going to be lonely again, because John was never going to leave him. John thought it was possible he was wavering there on the step, possible that he’d leaned toward him, shifted his weight, and then, from the sitting room, came the unmistakable sound of Oliver talking knowledgeably to
himself.

John blinked and leaned back and glanced toward the sitting room. Then he turned back to Sherlock. “Sherlock—” he began.

“Oliver is speaking intelligently about the late-night programming on BBC One,” said Sherlock, brushing past John.

John watched him go into the sitting room and mentally kicked himself, but he wasn’t sure if he was kicking himself for not having kissed him or for getting too close to kissing him. Deciding he wasn’t going to settle that matter anytime soon, because he certainly hadn’t settled it yet, he simply followed into the sitting room.

Mrs. Hudson was sitting in John’s armchair, sound asleep, Oliver wide awake on her lap. He had indeed been watching late-night programming on BBC One, clutching Sherlock’s skull, but, upon seeing them walk into the room, he turned his attention to them and greeted them enthusiastically, keeping his little hands tight around the skull.

Sherlock was reaching for him, carefully picking him up off of Mrs. Hudson’s lap, extracting the skull as he did so. Oliver gurgled at him, no doubt detailing the evening he’d had without them. Sherlock, looking almost absent and automatic about it, kissed a haphazard spot on Oliver’s head before offering him to John.

“Hello, little fellow,” John told him, warmly, and kissed the tip of his nose, enjoying the reliable giggle that followed this action. “You’ve outlasted Mrs. Hudson.”

Oliver beamed with pride over this.

“Not surprising,” said Sherlock.

“He needs to be changed,” John said. “Wake Mrs. Hudson nicely and gently.”

Sherlock gave him the look he gave John whenever he thought John was underestimating his ability to behave like a normal human being. John wondered if Oliver was going to develop that same look, if he would have to.

John carried Oliver into Sherlock’s room and laid him on Sherlock’s bed, because they had never bothered to get a proper changing table. Oliver babbled contentedly at him while John changed his nappy, no doubt telling John everything that had happened that evening, and John made appropriate interested sounds to keep the baby talking. And then, as he zipped up Oliver’s sleepsuit, he paused and looked down at him. Oliver’s bow of a mouth widened into a fond smile. He cooed a bit more loudly and reached out to poke John in the eye, clearly a sign of affection.

John picked him up and held him tightly, thinking of all the things he already had to say, all the things Sherlock must have had to say for years, with no one there to listen to him. “We’re going to listen to every single thing you have to say,” John whispered, fiercely, to the baby. “Every thought in your head is going to be important to us. And there’ll be crime scenes and there’ll be experiments, but there will never be anything more important than you, I promise you. Never. We will keep you adored and beloved and never lonely. Do you understand me?”

Oliver paused in his cooing and snuffled at John’s neck, and John thought that translated to a yes, you’re being silly, I already knew all this. He loosened his hold on Oliver a little bit, and Oliver twisted, reaching toward the bedroom door and the world beyond it.

John gave in to the plea, encountering Mrs. Hudson as he walked through.
“Hello,” John said, pleasantly.

“Hello there,” Mrs. Hudson responded, and then tapped Oliver’s outstretched fist, smiling at him. “Naughty baby, not falling asleep.”

Oliver grinned in delight.

“Was he good for you?” John asked.

“He was an angel,” said Mrs. Hudson, adoringly.

“Really? Something must have gone wrong in that cloning process, no angelic being has Sherlock Holmes DNA.”

Oliver gave John the baleful look he knew Sherlock was shooting him through the sitting room wall. Except that then Sherlock appeared in the sitting room doorway, and yes, there was that look. John grinned and kissed Oliver’s affronted cheek because he couldn’t kiss Sherlock’s.

“Oh, you,” Mrs. Hudson said, full of fond scolding. “How was your date?”

“Oh,” said John, stupidly, because he had not thought to categorize the evening as a date, and it confused him that Mrs. Hudson would, because Mrs. Hudson knew they weren’t… Didn’t she? “It was…It was…” He glanced back toward the sitting room doorway, but Sherlock had disappeared. “It was…a lovely evening.”

“Good. I’m so glad. I thought you two dears could use a night out after the row yesterday.”

“That was just a silly disagreement,” John began.

“Of course it was, dear.” Mrs. Hudson patted his arm soothingly. “I’ve told you, a new baby in the house, tensions run high, spats are bound to occur. But the two of you look very happy and relaxed just now, so I’m glad you had fun. Good night, dear,” she finished, before John could get a word in, although John wasn’t sure what word he wanted to get in there. “Good night, love,” she told Oliver, and then called over her shoulder, “Good night, Sherlock!”

“Good night, Mrs. Hudson!” Sherlock called back.

John watched her walk down the stairs, delaying the moment when he was going to have to walk into the sitting room and ask Sherlock if they’d just been on a date. Was it possible they’d just been on a date? Did Sherlock Holmes date people? Like that? Would Sherlock really have thought to put together a romantic evening to apologize for the quarrel, for John’s long day, for John’s brush with insecurity that afternoon? Was that really what had happened tonight?

John walked thoughtfully into the sitting room, just as Sherlock commenced playing on his violin. “Sherlock,” he said, slowly.

“I thought some Mozart, what do you think? That kind of an evening. Can you say ‘Mozart,’ Oliver? You ought to be able to say that, it’s only two syllables.” Sherlock delivered this speech without any hesitation in the music he was playing.

Oliver yawned enormously and settled more heavily against John, clearly prepared to be sleepy now that everyone was home. Now that their family was intact, safe and sound.

John sat in his armchair with Oliver snuggled against him and listened to Sherlock play, until long after Oliver had drifted off into sleep against him.
One of the surgery’s doctors returned from holiday the following day, meaning that John wasn’t needed at the clinic. Which was good, because their doorbell rang around mid-morning, just as John was trying to convince Oliver that he wanted to take a nap and Sherlock was disagreeing about the necessity of the nap because then Oliver might miss an exciting development in the fruit mold experiment Sherlock was running. The kitchen had turned into a complaining Sherlock and a squalling Oliver and John in the middle of it, thankful for the chaos because it was distracting him from how confused he felt about the current status of his relationship with Sherlock and whether or not they were now, somehow, dating.

And then the doorbell rang.

Oliver stopped crying. Sherlock stopped complaining and looked at John, who looked back at him.

“Client,” they said at the same time.

And suddenly Sherlock was a bundle of delight. He pulled Oliver out of John’s arms and danced him through the kitchen and into the sitting room.

“A client, Ollie!” he exclaimed to him. “There’s a word for you to learn. ‘Cli-ent.’” He overenunciated it carefully.

John supposed that meant it was left to him to get the door.

The client was a younger, clearly distraught man who followed John upstairs into the sitting room. Sherlock was sitting in his usual chair, with Oliver prominently on his lap, both of them looking expectant. John thought this was the most adorable thing he’d ever seen. The client drew to an abrupt halt just inside the sitting room door.

“Problem?” inquired Sherlock, mildly, lifting an eyebrow. Oliver managed to convey a cocked eyebrow as well.

“That’s a baby,” the client pointed out.

“Yes,” John agreed, stepping past him to get to his own seat. “You needn’t worry about speaking in front of him, his confidentiality is impeccable.”

“Whose baby is it?” said the client, still not moving.

Sherlock looked offended. Oliver stuck a finger in his mouth in an indignant way.

“My baby, of course,” Sherlock retorted. “Honestly, if you’re going to be such an idiot, I don’t even
want to hear your story.”

Oliver blew an eloquent raspberry to punctuate that.

“No, Mr. Holmes. Sorry, Mr. Holmes. I didn’t mean—I’m sorry—I really need your help, I’m sorry, Mr. Holmes.”

Sherlock frowned and swept his eyes up and down the man and then said, “You are worried about your wife.”

The man looked dumbfounded. “How did you know?”

John thought Sherlock was about to announce, Bored, and send the man on his way, except that then the man said, “She’s been receiving these letters.”


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Sherlock stuck all of the letters the man had brought with him to the mirror and then stepped back. John, holding Oliver, came to stand next to him, and the three of them regarded the dancing men together.

“You’ll have to crack the code,” John remarked.

“Obviously,” Sherlock said, dismissively. “Why can’t people tell Oliver is my child?”

“What?” said John, caught off-guard, because he had assumed Sherlock’s thoughts would already be deep into the cipher.

Sherlock had leaned down a bit to put his face directly next to Oliver’s, and he was now frowning at the twin reflections in the mirror between the dancing men drawings. “It makes no sense,” he said. “We are clones. He literally looks exactly like me.”

“He’s little, Sherlock,” John told him. “You’re not. Some people aren’t good at seeing a resemblance between baby features and adult features.”

“Everyone seems to find it so unbelievable,” he went on, musingly, as if John hadn’t spoken. “The evidence is right there in front of their eyes, it would be impossible for a baby to look more like me, and yet they don’t think he’s mine. Why is that?” Sherlock straightened and looked at John suddenly, eyes flashing. “Is it that inconceivable that I could procreate?”

“Sherlock, have you had sex with anyone since I’ve known you?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It has a great deal to do with the act of procreation.”

“Obviously not.” Sherlock jabbed a finger at Oliver to make his point. Oliver babbled to back him up.

“Cloning is not something normal people think about when they see a baby. You don’t have a girlfriend, there’s no obvious place for a baby to come from, as far as they’re concerned.”
“That client doesn’t know anything about me. For all he knows, I could be shagging half of London.”

“I never write in the blog that you’re shagging half of London.”

“Why would you? It isn’t relevant to whatever insipid story you’re telling. You haven’t written anything in the blog about my personal life in a very long time. So why should a client who knows me only through your descriptions of me as a detective automatically assume that I don’t have a happy significant other who has borne me this beautiful child? Why?”

John looked at Sherlock and wondered about that himself. Because Sherlock was dangerously attractive and outrageously charismatic. It made sense that Lestrade and Molly would be surprised about the baby but why would someone who had just met Sherlock assume that he could not have fathered the child who did, undeniably, resemble him very strongly? Was there something in the way John wrote about him on his blog, some possessiveness to his descriptions, that made people assume they were a couple as strongly as they did?

Sherlock announced, “We’re going to conduct an experiment.”

“In?” asked John.

“We’re going to separate. You are going to take Oliver for a day and keep track of how many people assume you are his father. And then I am going to do the same thing.”

“Take Oliver where?”

“Anywhere you like. Well. Not some sort of children’s playgroup or father-son gathering or something that would make it too obvious. You’re always out running all sorts of ‘errands.’”

Sherlock said the word dubiously, as if he did not think John could possibly be telling the truth about that. “You’ll just take Oliver out with you as you do them.”

“Sherlock, why are we conducting this experiment?” asked John, because he didn’t like the sound of this experiment. He didn’t want to have an experiment where he came home and said that everybody all day had assumed he had fathered this dark-haired, bright-eyed, curly-headed child and no one thought the same of the dark-haired, bright-eyed, curly-headed Sherlock.

“What a stupid question,” said Sherlock, and looked at Oliver for commiseration, which Oliver readily gave him. Oliver did not shake his head in dismay over John’s idiocy, but he might as well have. “Now,” continued Sherlock, clearly changing the subject, “what do you think of this cipher? A substitution cipher. What do you say?”

John looked at the drawings of dancing men resignedly. “I have no idea. Could be one of those book ciphers like in The Blind Banker?”

“What a stupid question,” said Sherlock, and looked at Oliver for commiseration, which Oliver readily gave him. Oliver did not shake his head in dismay over John’s idiocy, but he might as well have. “Now,” continued Sherlock, clearly changing the subject, “what do you think of this cipher? A substitution cipher. What do you say?”

John looked at the drawings of dancing men resignedly. “I have no idea. Could be one of those book ciphers like in The Blind Banker?”

“Unlikely. And I was asking Oliver his opinion.”

“Of course you were. And Oliver agrees with you, I suppose?”

“Obviously.” Sherlock turned to place Oliver in the highchair that Sherlock had pulled into the sitting room. John had pointed out that the highchair was meant to be for eating, but Sherlock had said that otherwise Oliver would have nowhere to sit in the sitting room. Which had made a lot of sense, actually, and so Sherlock had won. “Oliver is very clever,” Sherlock said, and smiled at the baby briefly. Oliver smiled in response and banged the skull that had been left on the highchair’s tray. “So the most common dancing man should represent ‘e,’” mused Sherlock, and then he was lost in his deductions.
John left him to it. He made himself and Oliver lunch and fed Oliver in the sitting room because John had always preferred to be near Sherlock when he was working and he assumed Oliver would be the same way. Then he said that Oliver needed a break from cipher-cracking and spent a blissful little while making Oliver dissolve into giggles by hiding a stuffed microbe behind the sofa. Eventually, John convinced Oliver to fall asleep and left him happily napping in his cot to stop in the kitchen to take some biscuits into the sitting room, where he pondered the wisdom of making a blog entry that would announce Oliver’s existence to the world so that new clients would stop assuming he was anyone’s child but Sherlock’s.

“There it is,” Sherlock announced, suddenly, and turned from the mantelpiece, where he had been scribbling away as he deduced. He focused on John, then frowned. “Where’s Ollie?”

“Taking a nap.” John popped a biscuit into his mouth. “The cipher exhausted him. Care for a biscuit?”

Sherlock ignored him, pulling out the chair on the other side of the desk and saying, “He brought us enough messages that I can make some sense of the cipher.”

John read Sherlock’s writing upside-down. “‘Am here Abe Slaney’? ‘At Elriges’? ‘Elsie come’? What do you make of all of it?”

“Clearly the wife—Elsie—had some sort of liaison at some point with Mr. Slaney here. And he is now at Elriges, determined that she should come to him.”

“Okay,” John agreed. “So why doesn’t he just send her a text?”

“Doesn’t have her mobile number. Or she’s blocked him. And he sends the messages in code in case the husband opens them first.”

“She knows this code?”

“Obviously. What good would it do Mr. Slaney otherwise?”

“Why would they have ever invented this code?”

“Oh, they’re Americans, who knows why they do anything?” Sherlock sat back in his chair, stretching. “Well, that’s that settled, then. I’ll e-mail Mr. Cubitt and confirm for him that his wife is having an affair.”

“How do you know she relented and went to this Elriges place?”

“Statistically more likely.”

“You can’t just destroy his marriage based on statistics.”

“You are such a dedicated romantic,” remarked Sherlock.

John thought it was possible he blushed. He didn’t really want to get into his romantic side, given how topsy-turvy his headspace about Sherlock currently was. He denied, “I’m not, I just—”

“Like to believe in happy endings. The fair Elsie remains faithful, ignores all of Mr. Slaney’s urgent pleas. You attribute to others your own incomparable sense of loyalty.” Sherlock was smiling at him faintly, as if he were a particularly amusing specimen of himself at this moment.

“Would you do it?” John asked, suddenly, bluntly.
Sherlock cocked an eyebrow at him. “Have an affair?”

“Yes.”

“In order to cheat on a significant other, one needs to have a significant other, wouldn’t you say?”

“Because you wouldn’t, you know,” John answered his own question.

The amusement had faded off of Sherlock’s face. He had not shifted his posture from its relaxed passiveness but John could see the distaste that was lurking in Sherlock’s expression. “Ah, this has always been your problem, John.”

“Has it?”

“Making people into heroes.”

“Making you into one, you mean.”

“You do it with everyone.”

“You wouldn’t betray a trust. Not a real trust. Not a trust you believed in. You would never do it.”

“Once upon a time, not so very long ago,” remarked Sherlock, his voice as even and slick as ice, “I let you think I jumped off a building to my death.”

John smiled at him, pleased the tables had turned a bit. “Oh, but you can’t fool me. You did that to save my life. You’re really just one big softy, underneath it all.”

Sherlock did shift then, looking uncomfortable and disgruntled. “Stop it,” he grumbled.

“A big marshmallow,” John continued, grinning openly.

“I could poison your tea.”

“You’d have to make me tea first,” John couldn’t resist pointing out.

Sherlock reached for the newspaper John had left on the desk and raised it in front of his face. “This is a tiresome conversation,” he said from behind its safety.

John laughed and pulled his laptop over to him, opening a new blog entry and typing a subject line carefully.

“What are you typing?” asked Sherlock, suspiciously.

“A blog entry.”

“About what?”

“What do I write blog entries about?”

“What ridiculous drivel are you going to—“

“Sherlock Holmes doesn’t want you to know this, but he’s very kind and soft-hearted,” said John.

“There is no way you’re typing that. You can’t type that quickly.”

“He would stop to rescue a kitten stranded in a tree,” continued John.
“I detest cats.”

“I have witnessed him helping old ladies cross the street.”

“I have never done that.”

“What if they had valuable information you needed?”

“That’s a completely different situation.”

John made a noncommittal noise and kept typing.

Sherlock stood up to walk around behind John, and, when he saw that John was indeed typing what he had said, John could hear the frown in his voice as he said, “John.”

“Good to let people know you’re human,” rejoined John, blithely.

“Why do you always say that?” complained Sherlock, and grabbed John’s laptop, scurrying away with it.

“Hey,” exclaimed John, trying not to laugh and destroy the effect of his disapproval, leaping up to follow Sherlock.

Sherlock held it up, which put it farther out of John’s reach, which was annoying, pausing by the window. “I shall throw it out the window.”

“I’ll just use your computer to type up a blog entry.”

“As if you could guess my password,” scoffed Sherlock.

“I know your PIN. I’ll just use your bank card to buy another computer,” John retorted, and made a leap for his laptop, closing a hand around it and pulling.

Sherlock didn’t let go, but he lowered his arm in response, and John tugged hard at the laptop to dislodge it, pulling it against his chest in what was almost a hug. Sherlock jerked forward as well, still attached to the laptop, and suddenly, just like that, Sherlock’s hand was against John’s chest and his head was tipped toward John and there was no space between them, none of the space that John realized suddenly he depended upon to keep himself from losing his head, because with all of it gone there was nothing but Sherlock, Sherlock everywhere, inside and outside, inescapable and undeniable.

John looked up into Sherlock’s indescribable eyes and realized that his breathing had quickened. “Sherlock,” he said, and his voice was rough and low and he felt himself lick his lips, a movement he could swear Sherlock’s dark pupils focused on.

Sherlock did something John would never have predicted, not in all the time they’d been living together. He ducked his head down, and John sucked his breath in, thinking he was about to be kissed, but Sherlock rubbed his nose against John’s. It was worse than being kissed, John thought, closing his eyes. It was more intimate, more devastating. John’s heart had been at Sherlock’s feet before, but now he felt it crack into a million pieces, never to be put back together again.

“Are we dating?” John heard himself blurt out, and then hated himself, but it seemed like a valid question, at just that moment, being nuzzled by Sherlock Holmes, Mrs. Hudson’s comment from the night before still bouncing about in his head.
“Are we dating?” Sherlock repeated, and his voice sounded laced with amusement, and John wasn’t sure if that had been the right or wrong thing to say to him.

And then the baby cried. John blinked, looking away uncertainly, toward Sherlock’s room, where Oliver was wailing, then looked back at Sherlock. Who has possibly moved a fraction away from him. Or possibly not. John looked at his mouth, and Oliver cried, and John thought he was the least responsible parent ever to be stalled here like this.

“That settles it: he cannot possibly be a genuine clone,” rumbled Sherlock’s voice.

Which was not at all what John was expecting him to say. “Why do you say that?”

“Because I do not have such appalling timing.”

“I’ll get him,” said John, because Sherlock was making jokes, while they were close enough for John to feel Sherlock’s exhalations against his skin, and this was all too much impossible for him to wrap his mind around right now.

Sherlock’s bedroom seemed like it held all the fresh air that had been sucked out of the sitting room by Sherlock’s general closeness. John sucked it down and picked up the crying baby, shushing nonsense at him in an effort to soothe him, tucking him against his shoulder. Dirty nappy, John realized, and decided he didn’t blame Oliver for raising a fuss in such circumstances, but still.

He went about changing him, and Oliver sniffled and generally got himself under control.

John snapped his bodysuit and looked down at him, sprawled contentedly on Sherlock’s bed. “I don’t know if that was a perfect move on your part or a terrible one.”

Oliver looked innocently blank. Which was a look Oliver seldom wore, and a look Sherlock would only have worn if he was neither innocent nor blank, so John wasn’t sure whether to trust him. Then Oliver smiled sunnily at him, and John felt like such a terrible cynic, and picked him up and cuddled him and kissed his head and Oliver babbled happily.

“I suppose you’re awake now? That was a quick nap.”

Oliver continued to babble, doubtless in the affirmative, and John stood in Sherlock’s bedroom doorway and considered what he was going to say when he walked back into the sitting. No, wait, I mean it, are we dating? He didn’t know what to make of the entire idea. Did Sherlock Holmes really date? Sherlock hadn’t sounded, in response to the question, like he thought they were dating. But Sherlock had also rubbed his nose against the side of John’s. And that hadn’t been a kiss but it had been a gesture of affection nonetheless. Hadn’t it? It had to have been. Of physical affection. Of the sort of affection that went beyond simple flatmates. Like the rest of their lives together, really. Always so far beyond simplicity.

Sherlock came bounding out of the sitting room, and John tried to come up with a reason why he was standing frozen in the bedroom doorway.

“It’s a message,” said Sherlock, brandishing his mobile about. “And not a good one. Hello, Oliver,” in response to the baby’s fist-waving greeting.

John tried not to feel helplessly confused by what Sherlock was saying. He didn’t succeed. “What?”

“A message, John! The dancing men! Have you already forgotten?”

John wanted to point out that in between the discussion about the dancing men cipher and this
present moment, they had *almost kissed*. But maybe Sherlock was dropping that, changing the subject, and John didn’t want to awkwardly resurrect it. “Where did the new message come from?”

“He texted it to me. ‘Prepare to meet your maker, Elsie.’ Promising, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would say the opposite of promising for Elsie,” managed John.

“Must get to Norfolk,” said Sherlock, replacing his mobile in his pocket and reaching for his coat.

“You should ring Lestrade,” countered John.

“Already done.” Sherlock shrugged on the coat. “Knew you would want me to. But this is too serious a threat to leave to the police.” Sherlock put a foot on the first step, then stopped and looked back at John, his eyes wide. “We can’t take Oliver. It’s too dangerous.”

“Yes,” John agreed.

Sherlock looked at the baby in John’s arms, who was regarding him with avid interest. “Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock began.

“Is out. Book club. Remember?”

“Right.” Sherlock swallowed and kept his eyes on Oliver. “Then you have to stay with him. Of course.”

“Yes,” said John, because this was true. There was no other way around it. Maybe they could get in touch with Molly, or even Mycroft, but that would take a while, and they couldn’t just keep foisting Oliver on other people every single time a case came up. They needed to find a way to make this work, and John was the less important member of their little team, so John would stay home with the baby.

“Yes. Right. Yes. So,” said Sherlock, and then abruptly leaned down and kissed Oliver’s cheek. Oliver looked a bit taken by surprise by it. “Good,” finished Sherlock, and then turned crisply and jogged down the staircase.

Oliver looked at John, as if to say, *What? No good-bye kiss for you, Papa?*

“Shut up,” muttered John, and carried him into the sitting room.
Chapter 14

It took two whole minutes for John to panic. Oliver raised half-hearted protests at not being allowed to go after Sherlock, until John put him on his periodic blanket, surrounded by scientific articles to crumple to his heart’s content and his beloved skull settled next to him. Oliver pretended to wail a little while longer, for appearance’s sake, while simultaneously excitedly tearing at the papers, and John walked over to his chair, and he looked at Sherlock’s empty chair, and panic slammed into him like a lorry.

*He had let Sherlock go off into danger alone.*

All these years of *protecting Sherlock*, of treating it at his *job*, and he had just *let him walk out the door*, and he hadn’t had a choice, not really, they were parents now, they had Oliver to consider, but having Oliver meant that, in a weird way, he and Sherlock were both more bound together than they ever had been and also divided in ways they never had been. John was not used to being separated from Sherlock when there was danger around him. John’s reason for *being*, for longer than he cared to think of, had been to keep Sherlock safe in just these situations, and now he wasn’t with him, and who was going to do that for him?

John looked at Oliver, his vision white around the edges with how much his adrenaline was surging, with no outlet. He literally had two Sherlock Holmeses now, both of them his responsibility, and he had no idea how he was going to keep both of them safe. It seemed like an impossible task. It seemed like he had no option but to choose between them, one or the other, always leaving one unprotected and exposed.

And he had made that decision and let Sherlock walk out the door and *he hadn’t told him how he felt*. So much wasted time, and if something happened in Norfolk, and he never told Sherlock, and Sherlock never knew—

The panic rose up in a surge and overwhelmed John and his mobile was in his hand before he knew it. And then he stared at it. What to say? Could he really ring Sherlock and say…?

He texted instead. Telling himself that Sherlock preferred to text and it wasn’t that John was a coward. *Be careful*, he texted, hating how inadequate it sounded.

*Obviously. –SH*, came the reply.

John sighed in frustration. He wanted to shout that that wasn’t what he had meant, and why couldn’t Sherlock have understood all of the things that were contained in those two simple words. *No*, he texted back. *I mean it. I need you to come back to us in one piece.*

*I am in no immediate danger. –SH*

Obstinate bastard, John thought, through gritted teeth, and texted back, *There’s danger in Norfolk or you wouldn’t be going.*

*Danger for Elsie. I’ll be perfectly safe. You’re being illogical. –SH*

John stared at the mobile in his hand. Oliver cooed contentedly to the skull next to him and ripped a piece of paper in two and John closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath and then texted, *There are things I need to tell you.*

*Nothing I don’t already know. –SH*
John rolled his eyes. No, you don’t know this.

John, do you imagine for one second that there is anything you could tell me that I don’t already know? –SH

“How is it that you love him?” John murmured to himself, under his breath, and texted back, Yes, I do.

You’d be wrong. –SH

You’re insufferable, John texted back, his temper momentarily snapping.

I love you, too. –SH

John stared at the text.

And stared at it.

And stared at it.

And stared at it.

He was still staring at it when Mycroft Holmes tapped cursorily on the sitting room door and inquired, mildly, “Is now a bad time?”

***

John didn’t text back.

Sherlock stared at the mobile in his hand, not vibrating, and resisted the urge to fling it out the window. If he could get the window to open. How could he not have texted back? It was an inexcusable lapse on John’s part. The only thing that could possibly justify it would be if John had been grievously injured. The instant he thought that, Sherlock regretted it. No, of course he didn’t want John to be grievously injured. He just wanted John to bloody text him back.

John was being so obtuse about the entire thing. More obtuse than usual, even. Sherlock had been beyond patient, waiting all these years for John to realize the obvious, which was that John was in love with him, Sherlock was sure of it, and he was sure that John had realized it since the arrival of Oliver, John’s conduct was a red flag of awareness. Why was he still not admitting it?

Sherlock stared out the window and considered. When he got back from Norfolk, he thought, he was going to kiss John. No more talking, no more allowing John to dither. If he waited for John to make up his mind about all of this, they were both going to be old and gray and Oliver would be graduating from university. He wouldn’t even tell John, telling John would leave John room to think this was up for debate, a question instead of fact. He would kiss John, just a bit, and he would let John make the decision after that, with the full evidence in front of him.

Yes, thought Sherlock.

His phone vibrated in his hand and Sherlock nearly fell off the seat of the train and then glanced around, pretending nothing of the sort had happened. He needn’t have worried: as expected, no one around him was observing anything. Idiots.

It wasn’t a text from John. Instead, it was Lestrade ringing him.

Sherlock wrinkled his nose and considered whether he had the inclination to deal with Lestrade at the moment. Well, Lestrade was theoretically facilitating Sherlock’s interaction with the Norfolk
police, so he supposed he should at least speak with him (although Lestrade’s facilitations weren’t especially useful or even the least bit necessary but John liked for Sherlock to pretend that they were and Sherlock did the things that John liked and John should know by now what that meant, infuriating person).

“What?” snapped Sherlock into his phone. He wanted to tell Lestrade that he was keeping the line open for John, that he didn’t like to use the phone to talk to people who weren’t John.

“Where are you?” Lestrade asked.

Stupid question, thought Sherlock, but what did he expect? “On the train going to Norfolk. As I said I would be. Surely you recall.”

“I was hoping to catch you before you got on the train.”

“Why?” asked Sherlock, impatiently.

“Because there’s no reason for you to go to Norfolk. Elsie Cubitt killed her husband, then turned the gun on herself.”

Sherlock straightened in his train seat, absorbing this new information, staring unseeingly out the window. “But why would she do that?” he asked, more of himself than of Lestrade, because Lestrade would never be able to answer such a question. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’ve no idea why she did it, but she did it.”

Idiot, thought Sherlock, viciously, and didn’t examine whether he meant it of Lestrade or of himself.

“Tell them not to touch a thing. Not one thing at the crime scene. I need everything left exactly as is, do you understand me?”

“Sherlock, what can you—”

“Tell them not to touch anything,” Sherlock reiterated, and ended the call.

Then he looked out the train window, turning the information over and over in his brain. Elsie Cubitt had killed her husband and then herself. But that didn’t make any sense. That wasn’t what was supposed to have happened. And he had sent Cubitt away so blithely. Had he really underestimated so severely the threat of the situation, of the whimsical dancing men in the curiously old-fashioned letters? Had he really been so spectacularly wrong?

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John looked at Mycroft, standing in his sitting room doorway, and his first instinct was to slide his mobile into his trouser pocket, as if worried Mycroft would be able to see Sherlock’s declaration of love. (Serious? Joking? Contemptuous? Sarcastic? John had no idea.)

Oliver rolled onto his back and crumpled some paper into the air and gurgled something that may have been “hello” and may also have been “descend into Hades and take your umbrella with you.” John felt either was equally possible from Sherlock’s clone.

Mycroft was looking at Oliver curiously. “He looks well,” he said, as if he had expected otherwise.

“We take care of him,” John replied. “Feed him and bathe him and everything.”

Mycroft quirked his unamused smile at John and walked confidently into the sitting room, crouching
by Oliver. Oliver tried to eat paper, which made John feel like it called into question the care they were actually taking of Oliver.

“Not that, Ollie,” John said, trying to quickly pull it out of Oliver’s hand, although Mycroft had clearly already seen it.

Oliver cried in protest, and John picked him up and tried to quiet him, and Oliver pulled unhappily and mercilessly at John’s hair, and John thought Oliver did not play fair and also was the least cooperative human being to ever have existed. Which made perfect sense, considering his DNA.

“If you’d been sitting in a car on the street waiting for Sherlock to leave before you came in, he’d’ve noticed,” remarked John, trying to rearrange Oliver in his arms so that his hair was less accessible, with Oliver loudly disagreeing with every move. “So you must’ve taken a flat across the way or something equally creepy.”

“My brother’s outlandish conspiracy theories have rubbed off on you,” Mycroft told him.

“When I said you should stop by to visit, I meant when Sherlock was here.” John succeeded in getting Oliver’s hands away from his hair, which caused Oliver to cry in earnest. “He’s out of sorts because Sherlock’s out,” John explained, which was probably only half-true, the other half being that Mycroft was there. And the other half—ignoring the fact that it was too many halves—being that John hadn’t allowed him to eat paper and Oliver was used to always getting what he wanted. Already John had managed to spoil him, he thought.

“I brought him a present,” said Mycroft, setting down the bag he was carrying and pulling a medium-sized, gift-wrapped package out of it. “Will that help?”

Oliver kept crying, as if to say it would definitely not help, but John heard the shift toward falsity in the cries, because Oliver, through his scrunched-up eyes, was regarding the present with reluctant interest.

John took the present. “Yes,” he said, and juggled Oliver so he could open it. Oliver’s cries had petered off into one every couple of seconds, when he happened to remember that he was supposed to be annoyed. By the time John managed to reveal the periodic table building blocks, Oliver had stopped crying altogether and was staring at the box in wide-eyed delight.

John put him back on the periodic table blanket and crouched next to him and pulled out the blocks and scattered them around. Oliver sat and looked at them, as if he could not believe such riches had been bestowed upon him.

John looked at him, at the tears still staining his chubby baby cheekbones of mystery, and brushed one of the teardrops off his skin. “There you go, love. Thank Uncle Mycroft.”

Oliver gave him a baleful look that clearly said, I’m telling Daddy you said that when he gets home.

John sighed and stood and looked at Mycroft. “Thank you for the present. But you don’t need to bring a present every time you come to visit.” John wondered if that was what Mycroft had tried to do with Sherlock, if it was the only way Mycroft could think of to express affection, which was a sad thought and possibly true, given the cold and distant parents Sherlock had described. “You also don’t need to wait for Sherlock to go out before visiting.”

“He seldom goes anywhere without at least one of you in tow. The dancing men were really that interesting?”

“If you want to know about his cases, you should ask him,” John replied, tightly, and then, because
Mycroft was there and John was avoidance-minded enough to prefer dealing with Mycroft over dealing with Sherlock’s text, “Tea?”

There was a flicker of something over Mycroft’s face. Pleasure? Had he thought John was going to throw him out? “Please,” said Mycroft.

John went into the kitchen and filled the kettle and pulled out proper teacups and put teabags in them and then could resist no longer and pulled out his mobile again. I love you, too. —SH Yup, that was still what the text said.

“What the hell, Sherlock,” breathed John, and closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to make sense of it. Why would he say it that way, for the first time, via text, like that? Unless he didn’t mean it? And what if he did?

John had to re-boil the water, it took him so long to remember that he had been making tea, and he thought Mycroft would have some sort of snide comment about it, except that when he walked into the sitting room, Mycroft was sitting in John’s customary armchair, watching Oliver raptly. Oliver was banging two blocks together and apparently explaining the procedure of it to the skull beside him on the blanket.

John had never thought he would feel that way about Mycroft, but, looking at him, he felt an odd burst of sympathy. Mycroft was a Holmes. Mycroft had had the same childhood as Sherlock. Who knew what defense mechanisms Mycroft had developed to survive that? Who knew how much Mycroft possibly wanted to love Sherlock, to love Oliver, and had no idea how to? John, who currently was drowning in love for a man who might just love him, too, but still hadn’t been able to say anything about it, thought he knew a little bit of what Mycroft was feeling.

John put the teacups down and sat in Sherlock’s chair without comment.

“He doesn’t look at all like Sherlock,” Mycroft said, suddenly, sounding amazed.

“Really?” This surprised John. He frequently thought that Oliver looked exactly like a miniature Sherlock, unusual eyes that grew less decidedly blue and more indescribable each day, and dark curls that were slowly growing into thickness, and a tall body whose baby fat was beginning to be shed, and those Sherlockian expressions that killed John on a daily basis.

“I don’t remember Sherlock being so…” Mycroft trailed off, and John looked at Oliver on the blanket, talking to his skull with such delighted animation. Mycroft cleared his throat. “I don’t remember him being that way. He was a quiet, reserved child.”

“I don’t think he was,” said John, keeping his eyes on Oliver. “I think he was just like that, only there was nobody paying attention to him.”

“The idea you have in your head,” began Mycroft, stiffly, “that I didn’t—”

“I don’t have any idea in my head about you,” John interrupted him, honestly. “You were seven years old. What could you possibly have done? How old was he when you were sent off to school?”

Mycroft looked confused. “Well, he was still a baby, of course.”

“Of course?” John echoed. “How old were you?”

“I was eight. We were both eight when we were sent off. It was traditional.”

John thought of Sherlock, who even now clearly took great comfort in the familiarity of his
surroundings, who had a surfeit of possessions that he tossed over a place to make it into home. He thought of him as an eight-year-old, being sent away to school. He thought of how much Sherlock spoke of being lonely, he thought of the fierce conviction in Sherlock’s voice when he’d said they weren’t sending Oliver away. John glanced at Oliver, so happy and content as he knocked blocks about.

“Well,” John heard himself say, “we won’t be doing that.”

“Not sure what Mummy and Father will think about that,” remarked Mycroft.

John looked at him in surprise. “Are your parents still alive?”

Mycroft looked at him in answering surprise. As if John should have known this. “Of course they are.”

Sherlock never talked about them. Only the once, and that hadn’t been in the present tense. But it was clear Sherlock did not like them, so that was perhaps not surprising. “Has anyone told them that they have a grandson?” asked John, feeling slightly dazed by this revelation.

“They don’t have a grandson,” Mycroft replied, midly.

“Yes, they do,” John retorted, through gritted teeth. “And someone should tell them.”

“That is, surely, a story for Sherlock to tell them.”

Probably, John allowed, and hated it when Mycroft made good points, so he said, scathingly, “I can’t believe that you didn’t ring them immediately to crow about the first successful human clone.”

Mycroft sighed and regarded John wearily. “Forgive me for being blunt, but they would not have rejoiced at the replication of Sherlock’s DNA. He was always, to them, an odd anomaly as it was.”

“The tests,” John realized, recalling Sherlock’s mention of them on Oliver’s first day at Baker Street. “They thought there was something wrong with him. They sent him for tests.”

“Did you never wonder where Sherlock got his high-functioning sociopath diagnosis from?”

“I thought he diagnosed himself, since the diagnosis was so obviously wrong.”

“You see him so differently from the rest of the world,” mused Mycroft, studying John almost clinically. “I have always wondered that about you. From the very beginning, there was never any question in your mind. You look at him and you see a prince, and you are so very confused when everyone else tells you it’s merely a pauper.”

“Everyone has been wrong about him,” John clipped out. “Apparently from the time he was a baby. If your parents are going to say things to Oliver that resemble in any way the things they clearly said to Sherlock, it’s better that they never know he exists, because I will not allow them to have Oliver think, for even a second, that he isn’t perfect, in every way, just as he is.”

John’s mobile rang. John looked at it in surprise, startled out of his anger by the fact that it was blinking Sherlock. Sherlock, who never rang when he could text. Text. The last text Sherlock had sent. And John had never answered it because Mycroft had arrived at the door and then there had been all of this. Oh, God, John thought, he should have responded in some way, any way. But he hadn’t known how the text was meant, so he hadn’t known how to—

“Are you going to answer it?” Mycroft asked, curiously.
“Yes,” John said, and his voice sounded strange even to his own ears. He cleared his throat. “Yes.” He stood. “Watch the baby,” he commanded, vaguely, before wandering into the hallway, putting the mobile to his ear. “Hello,” he said, trying to sound perfectly normal. Or was he not supposed to sound normal? *What was he supposed to do?* He walked into Sherlock’s bedroom and closed the door.

“I was *wrong,*” Sherlock’s voice bit out at him.

John thought of Sherlock’s last text and felt cold wash over him. He sat heavily on Sherlock’s bed and swallowed and said, faintly, “You…were?”

“Cubitt is *dead,*” Sherlock continued.

John blinked, placing the name with difficulty, because he’d been so busy thinking about… “He’s *dead*?”

“Yes.” Sherlock sounded tight and impatient, and John could imagine him pacing, nervous energy overflowing.

“Who killed him?”

“The police claim it was Elsie.” Sherlock’s voice dripped disdain.

“And what does Elsie have to say for herself?”

“Elsie is also dead.”

“What? Who killed her?”

“She killed herself. It was a murder-suicide. So they *say.*”


“Exactly. It doesn’t make any sense. They were little dancing men, a stupid affair, how could I have been *wrong* about it? I sent him away, I sent him home, I told him not to worry, and then his wife shot him? *Why?* What did I miss?”

“Sherlock,” John interjected. “Take a deep breath. Where are you?”

“On the train still.” The *obviously* was implied, but John appreciated that it was merely implied.

“Okay. Go to the crime scene and look it over. The police could be entirely wrong about what happened.”

“Two people will still be dead.”

“You don’t know that it’s because you got something wrong. Go to the crime scene and look.”

Sherlock dragged in a harsh breath that John heard over the mobile. “I need you here with me,” he said.

John looked at the framed periodic table on Sherlock’s wall, thought of Oliver on his periodic table blanket, playing with his periodic table blocks. “You want me to—”

“No,” Sherlock snapped. “Of course not. You can’t. But I want you. I haven’t done this without you in—You’re good at arriving at just the right stupid idea.”
“Thank you,” said John, dubiously.

“You’re good at listening. You’re good at dealing with people. I’ve all these tiresome police officers I’ll have to fight with, and you know I hate that, I’ll probably get myself thrown in prison for pointing out the truth of their idiocy—”

“Once you get to the scene, ring me and I’ll talk to them for you. I’ll talk to you. Tell me everything you see, and I’ll come up with just the right stupid idea.”

There was a moment of silence. John wondered what Sherlock was doing, tried to envision him on the train.

Sherlock said, “It’s fine.” And he sounded a little bit better. Tired, but less distraught.

“I don’t mind,” John told him, honestly.

“It’s fine, though. I’m fine. Sorry. I just…”

“Was wrong,” John finished for him. “You don’t handle that well.”

“You and Oliver are alright?”

“Why wouldn’t we be?”

“Because I left you in London because I thought you’d be safe there,” answered Sherlock, wryly. “Which was exactly why I told Cubitt to go home. If I have already been wrong once today…” Sherlock trailed off meaningfully.

John thought of Mycroft in the other room, but decided that, even with a Mycroft in the other room, he and Oliver were definitely alright. “We are fine. Both of us. Go to the crime scene, ring me if you need me, turn around, come home. I’ll wait up for you and everything.”

“You’ll try,” Sherlock responded, absently. “You’ll fall asleep on the sofa.”

Not tonight, John thought, Sherlock’s text floating in his head. “Sherlock,” he began.

“Where is the lover in all of this? Abe Slaney? If indeed she was having an affair, why wouldn’t he be the victim of her murder-suicide? Wouldn’t she have been more likely to murder her husband and then join her lover?”

He was so far away from the subject of his text, John thought, and decided this was not the time to bring it up. “Ring me if you need me,” he said again, by way of saying good-bye.

“I’ll be fine,” Sherlock told him, dismissively, as if he hadn’t just been panicking over the phone at him.

“Ring me if you want me,” John said.

There was a moment of silence. “Yes,” Sherlock said.

John ended the call and took a deep breath and walked back out into the sitting room.

Mycroft was sitting on the floor. Actually sitting on the floor. Oliver was on his back, gnawing on a corner of one of the blocks and looking at him warily. Mycroft looked just as wary, honestly.

“Is he behaving himself?” John asked.
He was not prepared for what Mycroft answered, which was, “I never saw Sherlock this happy. I came home from school and he was this tiny, quiet baby, too thin even then. Didn’t say a word. Didn’t make a sound. He didn’t start talking until he was five. Which was after the first round of doctors to assess what was wrong with him. How can they be clones of each other? They seem to be polar opposites of each other.”

John had not known how long Sherlock had been silent for as a child, and it made his heart ache a bit. How lonely must a baby feel to never even bother to make noise? “Nature versus nurture,” John said, and was pleased when his voice sounded admirably even.

“You’re conducting your own little experiment.”

“No, I’m raising a baby,” John corrected.

Mycroft didn’t take his eyes off Oliver. He drank in the sight of him eagerly, raptly, and John wondered at Mycroft coming home to his miserable baby brother, what he had thought of him. He suddenly felt sorry for Mycroft, who had, after all, been raised by the same parents that had made Sherlock such a disaster. It wasn’t necessarily Mycroft’s fault that he was so dismal at being a regular person. He just happened to fail at it in ways that didn’t make John love him.

“Would you like to hold him?”

Mycroft looked at him in alarm. So did Oliver. “That didn’t work out well last time,” said Mycroft, doubtfully.

“Stop looking like I’ve proposed you walk down Pall Mall naked,” John said and leaned over to pick up the baby. “Your uncle Mycroft is not very used to babies,” John informed him, “so please be kind to him.”

“I am perfectly capable——” Mycroft began, as he picked himself up from the floor and sat on the sofa.

“Shut up,” said John, and put Oliver in his hands.

Mycroft and Oliver looked equally uncertain, but at least neither one of them cried, thought John.

“See?” he said. “Nothing to it.”

Oliver gave him an offended look, as if to say, I am very complicated, thank you very much.

Mycroft said, and John would never have thought that he’d hear Mycroft sound so awestruck, “He is so incredibly little.”

“He’s a respectable weight,” John said, “and he’s actually tall for his age. And developmentally advanced. Sherlock would tell you he’s the cleverest little boy to ever be born. And not just because he’s Sherlock’s clone.”

Mycroft didn’t take his eyes off of Oliver. “And he’s well?”

The question confused John. “Doesn’t he look well?”

“I mean…” Mycroft looked at him finally. “I know you don’t like to, but you must acknowledge he’s a clone, John. He should be examined regularly to ensure that there are no abnormalities—”

“No.” John shook his head. “Absolutely not.”
“John—”

“After you just explained to me about the rounds of doctors your parents made Sherlock see? About how they made him feel odd and less than worthy? You want me to subject our son to it? To make him think he has a reason to grow up scared?”

“He does.”

“He doesn’t. He’s a perfectly healthy little boy. His medical records tell me as much, and I watch him closely. He’s fine.”

“I wish you’d let the doctors—”

“No,” John said again. “He’s already spent too much of his life being poked and prodded by impersonal doctors who didn’t care about him. He isn’t an experiment anymore. He’s a person. And I won’t make him feel like he’s patient number 523.”

Mycroft looked over at him for a long moment. “You think I don’t see him as a person?” Mycroft asked, finally, flatly. “I’m trying desperately to keep him alive here.”

“And the data they collect at Baskerville wouldn’t be a bad side benefit,” drawled John.

“We wouldn’t take him to Baskerville, of course.”

“He’s got one father who’s a doctor and the other who’s a scientific genius. I think he’s pretty well covered, Mycroft.”

Mycroft’s face was stony. He looked at Oliver, who looked back at him and managed to make drooling look defiant. “As you wish,” said Mycroft, stiffly.

John sighed, feeling exhausted. It was not an ideal situation for both Holmeses to decide to be emotionally trying during the same afternoon. “I know you have good intentions,” he said.

“Yes, actually. I’m the one in this flat who’s never really doubted that you have good intentions, even when you’re going about them in the stupidest possible way.”

Mycroft bristled at the use of the word stupidest, as John had known he would. “I—”

“If there’s anything about Oliver that gives us the slightest pause, any sneeze out of order, do you think there is nothing Sherlock and I wouldn’t do to make sure he’s okay? Do you think you wouldn’t be the first person we would ring, to request every asset of the British government be brought to bear to save our son? Do you really imagine that? Can you really be so clueless?”

Mycroft scowled. Oliver wisely said something that sounded like ba ba fa fa ba but meant, clearly, Papa’s right.

“You need to trust us. Which is something you’re terrible at. But that’s what you need to do.”

“Did you relish that little speech?” asked Mycroft, dryly, after a moment of silence.

John considered. He felt considerably lighter than he had a few minutes earlier. “Yes, actually.”

Mycroft blew out a quick, impatient sigh and regarded Oliver, a steady, assessing gaze. “He looks well enough,” he pronounced, as if dismissing the topic, and stood, holding him out awkwardly.
Oliver squawked in offense at how he was being held and kicked his feet in displeasure.

John stood and saved him, cuddling him soothingly into his arms.

“I must be off,” announced Mycroft.

“Thanks for dropping by,” John told him, being very formal and polite about it after he’d called him stupid and clueless and bad at trust.

Mycroft inclined his head and walked out of the sitting room.

John let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and looked down at Oliver, who looked exactly the way Sherlock usually looked after a Mycroft visit. John was just about to comment on that when Mycroft walked back into the sitting room.

“You’re right, you know,” he said, abruptly.

John looked at him in astonishment, both at the sudden return and at the content of the phrase. “What?”

Mycroft was looking fixedly at the scatter of building blocks over the blanket on the floor. “It was not entirely my fault, but the upbringing of the first Sherlock Holmes resulted in some unfortunate conditions that it would be preferable to avoid this second time. I acknowledge the value in your involvement at present.”

John stared at him, because such sentiments were unprecedented out of Mycroft. But, before he could react, Mycroft turned on his heel and exited the flat. For real, this time.

John looked down at Oliver, who looked unimpressed.

“I have had the strangest day, Ollie,” John told him, dazedly.
Chapter 15

Oliver was not happy about the Sherlock-shaped hole in the flat. As the day wore on, he grew progressively more vocal about this. Mrs. Hudson returned from book club and poked her head in and asked how things were, and Oliver complained about the undesirability of John as compared to Sherlock, and John explained where Sherlock was, and Mrs. Hudson said, “Oh, poor little dear, he prefers to have his whole family in one place, doesn’t he, little love?”

Oliver didn’t know how to nod his head yet, but John had the impression that he nodded vociferously internally in response to Mrs. Hudson’s question.

John bathed Oliver, which perked up his spirits a bit, and then took him for a long walk, which Oliver adored. Gradually his delighted babbling faded into silence, and John peeked into the pram to find him solidly, peacefully asleep. John let himself feel some measure of relief over that. He turned for home and laid the baby carefully in his cot and Oliver snuggled deeper into sleep and John thought that one of his Sherlock Holmeses was quite safe and sound.

Which left the other one, who John frustratingly had not heard from since the phone conversation during Mycroft’s visit. John sat in his armchair and looked at his silent mobile and debated phoning Sherlock. And saying what? Just wanted to make sure you’re okay. Are you okay? Are you on your way home yet? Do you love me? What is that even supposed to mean?

John swore and scrubbed his hand over his face and decided to do something else, anything but stare at the mobile like a moony teenager. The sight of the book he’d given Sherlock piqued his interest. It was sitting neatly on Sherlock’s side of the desk, and John thought there was no reason why he shouldn’t look through it.

He retrieved it and settled back down in his armchair and flipped through it slowly. It surprised him, honestly. There was a great deal of hard data about silly things, which John would have expected: printouts of spreadsheets about nappy changes and which rattles Oliver had gnawed on and for how long. There was data about other things as well: spreadsheets about how long Oliver had slept during a day and when and where, and how much he had eaten and when and where, his height and his weight at the same time every day. But there were also things John hadn’t really expected, silly sentimental things that surprised him a little. Sherlock was keeping track of Oliver’s smiles. There was a list of words that Sherlock was guessing Oliver was trying to say. There was a folded piece of paper on which Sherlock had written Effect of JW on OWH, and then underneath it, scrawled timestamps with brief descriptions next to them, like soothing or energizing or fascination. John didn’t know quite what to make of that. On the back of the piece of paper, Sherlock had written Effect of OWH on JW. The rest of the paper was maddeningly, frustratingly blank. John really didn’t know what to make of that.

Toward the back of the book were medical notations, in the hurried hand Sherlock used when he was taking notes for his eyes only. Basic things like temperature and pulse rate. They were cross-referenced in a code that John realized represented the other clone babies, the ones who had died before Oliver. Sherlock was tracking Oliver as compared to the other clone babies. Sherlock had vowed to find a way to keep Oliver safe, and he was doing it the only way he knew how: by gathering and analyzing data.

John thought of Mycroft’s offer. Maybe he should not have dismissed it out-of-hand. Maybe they should be subjecting Oliver to the full panoply of tests that the British government could offer them. Maybe they should be monitoring him as closely as they possibly could. He had a genius for a father; why hinder him by limiting the data he could access?
They would have to talk about this, John thought. A serious discussion, the way co-parents would. Straightforward. Simple.

Absolutely none of the things they ever were, John thought, and then almost laughed, feeling hysterical. When had his life become this? It had happened so gradually he hadn’t noticed. But he had come home from Afghanistan, wounded and at loose ends, and then, somehow, he’d ended up being a father to a clone baby with his flatmate who had just announced via text that he loved him and then ignored said text in their subsequent telephone conversation.

And this had just been another day in the Watson-Holmes household, frankly.

John closed Oliver’s baby book and put it back on the shelf and pulled out his mobile.

_I love you, too. —SH_

Yes, it still said that.

John hit “reply.” He stared at the blank reply, though, uncertain what he wanted to say. “I love you, too,” Sherlock had said. As if John had said it first. So should John…say it then? Via text? Just like that, all of the words he’d had pent up for so long, just…electronically conveyed to wherever Sherlock might be?

John huffed a frustrated exhale and glanced at his watch and put his mobile aside and looked up the schedule of trains from Norfolk. He didn’t want to text Sherlock to see if he was on his way, he didn’t want to be a pest, but he really wanted Sherlock to just be home now. For what? he thought. So they could have any of the numerous serious conversations they needed to have? Or so that they could continue to avoid them, continue to dodge all the elephants that now inhabited this sitting room with them?

John almost didn’t care what happened once Sherlock got home, he would just feel better once Sherlock was home, he always felt better when Sherlock was home.

The door to 221 opened downstairs. John listened, tense with anticipation, putting his laptop aside, but there were no steps on the staircase. There was not a single sound, actually.

John wished his gun wasn’t upstairs in his bedroom. Why had he left it there? Going up there to get it would leave Oliver exposed in Sherlock’s bedroom, which was clearly unacceptable.

John picked up the fireplace poker and edged out onto the landing, trying to keep himself in shadows as much as possible.

Sherlock was standing in the foyer, unmoving at the bottom of the staircase, looking very deep in thought at the balustrade.

“Sherlock?” John asked, curiously, his grip on the fireplace poker loosening.

Sherlock looked up at him in surprise, as if he hadn’t expected him to be there. But where else he would be? Asleep on the sofa, John supposed, which had been Sherlock’s predication.

Sherlock took the stairs slowly, watching his feet on them, all of it uncharacteristic.

“You okay?” said John, uncertainly, as Sherlock reached the top.

And then Sherlock crowded him up against the wall of the foyer and kissed him.
John wanted to have some sort of thought, but his mind went utterly blank. There was the wall at his back and Sherlock at his front and Sherlock’s lips pressed against his, earnest and determined, and John’s mind was blank.

Until the moment when thought rushed in and then John’s mind was everything. He dropped the fireplace poker and closed his hands into the collar of Sherlock’s coat and pulled him in closer and held him there and kissed him back.

And then there was nothing odd or unusual about it. It was just a kiss. And, what was more, it was a kiss that should have happened so very long ago. John had spent so much time worrying that kissing Sherlock Holmes would be beyond him, that there would be something other about it, and instead it was complete and unparalleled perfection. John had been in love for years, but at that moment John was absolutely bewitched. Every iota of his being dissolved into hazy heat, drifting toward Sherlock, caught in his magnetic field. Surely John had had a life before this, but he couldn’t remember what it had been, because now there was this and it was divine. Surely, somewhere, violins were swelling and a choir had reached a crescendo.

Sherlock pulled back, which allowed things like oxygen to flood back up toward John’s mouth and nose, not that he cared much for that.

“The fireplace poker?” he said, his voice deep and amused.

John ignored him, used the hand on his collar to pull him back in, and the kiss tipped, past the first flush of joyful this is real and happening to bloody hell it is not happening nearly quickly enough. This was the moment, John thought, when the film would have cut away, because the kiss pushed into wet, messy, pornographic territory, rougher and far more urgent. And now, thought John, now was when it would get strange, but he spread his hands along Sherlock’s broad chest, not a hint of curve to it, and felt nothing but a pressing need to pluck those obscene buttons off his shirt and taste him. Sherlock was hard against him, erection evident through all the many layers of clothing, and John waited for a flood of heady alarm that never came, that was completely swamped by how much he wanted to see if he could drive Sherlock insane with pleasure.

Sherlock stopped kissing him, although he did not move away even an inch. He leaned heavily against John, pinning him into the wall, and put his face in John’s neck, and kissed it. A soft, chaste brush of his lips.

Suddenly John thought he might go plummeting to the floor. Or burst into tears. He squeezed his eyes shut and put his hands in Sherlock’s thick curls, keeping him against him. Sherlock loved him, he realized. Sherlock adored him. It was all right there. How had he missed it for so long?

He wanted to say he was sorry. What he said instead was what he should have said ages ago. “I love you,” he said.

Sherlock lifted his head and looked at him. Looked at him. His lips were swollen and rosy and wet and the pupils of his eyes were blown wide and his hair was a mess and every inch of him was John’s and the realization of this was so…so…undeniable. Had he known this all along? Had he reveled in the comfort of it without ever recognizing it for what it was?

“How can you ask me if we’re dating?” said Sherlock, still slightly out of breath. “We’re married.”

“I’m an idiot,” said John.

Sherlock actually rolled his eyes, which struck John as being hilarious, given their current position, and he started laughing and then couldn’t stop. Sherlock drew his eyebrows together, looking unsure
what to make of this mirth.

John cupped his hands around Sherlock’s face and gave him little, sipping kisses around his giggles. “We should have—registered for china—God knows—you’re always—destroying it,” he managed, and dissolved into more laughter. “A new toaster,” he gasped, “to make up for the time you put a rat tail in ours.”

“Cutlery,” said Sherlock. “A really good set of knives.”

“New towels. Definitely.”

“Jumpers.”

“You don’t put jumpers on a wedding registry.”

“We’d have them on ours. Your jumper situation is dire.”

“Pillock,” said John, and Sherlock kissed him again, tasting of bliss and rightness, and they’d tipped away from the urgency again, back into a pleasant, lazy glow of low-level arousal, buzzing through him, and John thought he could ride this feeling forever, he wanted to bask in it. “Tea?” he said, when Sherlock had pulled back.

Sherlock smiled at him. “Yes.”
Chapter 16

John made them tea. It was just like every other cup of tea John had ever made for them, except that just before this cup of tea, they’d snogged. Incredible, unbelievable occurrence, it should have been, and yet he stood in their kitchen and made them tea and felt nothing remarkable had happened. Everything in his life felt perfectly right. The world was rushing all around him but John Watson felt absolutely still in contentment.

He walked out to the sitting room with their tea and sat on the sofa with Sherlock. Their legs were a bit of a tangle, but their legs were frequently a bit of a tangle on the sofa. There was nothing terribly unusual about their pose, nothing out of the ordinary. It was just like a thousand other nights in 221B.

Sherlock blew on his, as he always did. John watched him, watched those lips, as he had so many other times, only now those lips had kissed him and he’d kissed them back and John waited to feel something other than joy, but there was nothing there, his chest was crowded with euphoria, it left no room for anything else.

“What happened with the case?” John asked.

Sherlock made a face. “It was Abe Slaney who did it.”

“Killed both of them?”

“Looked like a murder-suicide, apparently, if you are an idiot.”

“Of course,” agreed John, so bursting with love for him that he was finding everything about him adorable.

“There was, I think, a minimum of insults on my part. You would have been pleased with me.” Sherlock looked proud of himself, as he sipped his tea.

John wondered what minimum of insults meant in Sherlock-speak.

“I don’t,” Sherlock continued, “want you to think that that means I ought to be unsupervised at all crime scenes.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” replied John. “I actually hated to let you go by yourself today.”

“There’s Oliver to think of,” said Sherlock.

“Yes. It will work itself out.”

“This is the same impulse of yours that permits you to believe in heroes,” sighed Sherlock. “You’re a relentless optimist.”

“Tonight especially,” said John.

“No, you always are. It’s adorable to me that you don’t see that.”

“Do you think I’m adorable?” John didn’t want to admit that the adjective caused his heart to perform a strange, little leap in his chest. But it did.

“Of course I think you’re adorable.” Sherlock sounded exasperated, not at all like he found John
adorable. “You are.”

_Sherlock Holmes thinks I’m adorable._ thought John, at a loss as to why, exactly, that should make him feel like his lungs were filled with helium.

“What did Mycroft want?” asked Sherlock, and sipped his tea.

John’s brain took a moment to shift tracks, and then he glanced around the flat for some sort of telltale sign. “How’d you know Mycroft was here?”

“The new blocks, of course. You’ve always been frugal, you’d never have taken Ollie shopping without me and certainly not to purchase anything so frivolous as more toys. And Mrs. Hudson would not have bought periodic table building blocks. Hence: Mycroft. What did he want?”

“To see his nephew.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and sipped his tea again. “He has no interest in a nephew.”

“I don’t think that’s true. I think he loves Oliver.”

“You think he loves me,” Sherlock reminded him, eloquent skepticism.

“He does.”

“Optimist,” Sherlock accused, mildly, and rubbed a hand up John’s calf.

Which was bloody distracting to put it mildly. He watched Sherlock’s hand moving on his leg and felt like he needed to give himself a mental shake to be sure it was all real. “He brought something up, though, that I think maybe merits some serious discussion,” John suggested, hesitantly.

Sherlock, his hand now kneading into the underside of John’s foot, which felt a million times better than it had any right to, lifted an eyebrow at him. “Mycroft had a point?”

“No. For…for _everything_, I suppose. For _anything_.”

“Mycroft’s solution for everything is _testing_. Mycroft places far too much store in what ‘experts’ have to say.”

“You’re worried about it, too,” John cut in, keeping his voice even. “I read Oliver’s baby book. You’re tracking data. As much data as you can. And you’re comparing it to the other clone babies. You’re worried about it, too, and you’re doing everything in your power to stop it. This is what’s in your brother’s power.”

Sherlock stared at the floor, looking thunderously unhappy. John was not thrilled over that being Sherlock’s expression so soon after their first kiss but this, he thought, was an important discussion that his libido probably shouldn’t get in the way of.

“I was 31 when I jumped,” Sherlock said, abruptly. “Thirty-one when I gave Mycroft the strands of my hair with my DNA that they used to create Oliver. Which means that Oliver in there is already thirty-one, for all intents and purposes. It means that he started life with thirty-one years lived behind him, years he didn’t get, years he’s not going to get, but they’ll count against him anyway, because
unless I come up with some way to change it, Oliver is going to be deprived of an entire third of his life. The life expectancy of a male human being in the United Kingdom is 79 years. That means Oliver will be forty-eight when he dies. Forty-eight, John. Forty-eight is...nothing. For God’s sake, it took me over thirty years to even come close to living the life I wanted to live, and he’ll be—"

“You don’t know any of this,” John cut him off, deciding that he’d heard quite enough. They couldn’t live like this, with Oliver’s lifespan a ticking clock over their heads. “He is a healthy baby boy and you don’t know—”

Sherlock lifted his head, his eyes blazing at John. “I know because it’s science, John. Unless I find some way to change the science of it, that’s how it’s going to be. And considering the fact that I can’t even explain how he’s still alive at this moment, I don’t know how I’m going to fix it. All I know is that I don’t want him in some government laboratory somewhere being pushed and prodded and trying to determine what everyone wants to hear so that he can just get out and come home to us. If he has forty-eight years, they are going to be the happiest forty-eight years any person ever got on this planet.”

“Right,” John said. “Right. Fine. I agree.” And then John did something that he’d wanted to do for so long that he couldn’t remember not wanting to do it. For the first time, he let himself lean forward and smooth his hand over Sherlock’s curls, settling it over the back of his neck, hoping that it was soothing and comforting. Sherlock closed his eyes and leaned into the pressure, so John thought it might be. “I agree,” John reiterated, and took a deep breath and stroked his hand through Sherlock’s hair and tried not to get caught up in the fact that he was doing this, because the intimacy would make him dizzy if he let it. “I said no to Mycroft.” John took another deep breath. “And then I thought...if there’s anything...”

“I thought we could do it,” Sherlock said, keeping his eyes closed.

“You thought we could do what?”

“We could use the lab at St. Bart’s. We’d take him there and we’d draw his blood and we’d analyze it, and I’d have it to work from, for experiments, and he wouldn’t be scared, because it would be us. It would just be...Daddy doing mad experiments because that’s what Daddy does, and Papa going along with it because that’s what Papa does.”

John was silent for a moment, because he hadn’t quite expected this. “You’ve been giving this thought,” he realized. While John had been flailing about trying to get his feet under him, worrying about his own identity, Sherlock had been developing a plan to save their son’s life. Thank God he had Sherlock.

Sherlock opened his eyes and looked at him. “I thought monthly, for the blood-drawing. I think that would be sufficient, and reasonable. At least for now. We’d only need a small amount.”

John looked back at him and remembered when Sherlock’s eyes had been the most astonishing sight he’d ever seen, and now they were just home: inexplicable and achingly familiar. John used the hand he still had in Sherlock’s hair to nudge him forward and kissed him.

It was no longer their first kiss, nor was it their second, and it felt like a kiss that had been taking place for years already, unremarkable and yet fantastic. Sherlock kissed with a finesse John wouldn’t have expected, and John was a good kisser, he had prided himself on it in younger, headier days. But Sherlock kissed him with toe-curling effectiveness, Sherlock kissed him ingeniously, Sherlock kissed him until John found himself on his back on the sofa with Sherlock balanced over him, and John blinked up at him, out of breath and dazed and aching.
“Jesus Christ,” John gasped.

Sherlock smiled and kissed him again, kissed him upside-down and inside-out, and John determined to hold his own and kissed him back and eventually Sherlock made a small desperate noise in the back of his throat and shifted, his fingers digging into John’s scalp, which John counted as a small victory. He shifted in response, pressing up and into Sherlock, and heard the strangled sound he made, because that felt fantastic. He had not really anticipated that the hard, unyielding, smooth planes of Sherlock’s body stretched over him would feel like that when pressed against him. He had wanted Sherlock—had suspected it, known it, accepted it—for a very long time, but now he wanted him, all of him, it felt like the most right thing he would ever do, to shag Sherlock Holmes senseless on their sofa.

Sherlock pulled back, not very far, his breaths spilling out over John’s wet, parted lips. “This is my absolute favourite fantasy,” Sherlock said, his voice low and licking and pure sex, really.

And Sherlock had fantasies about them. John suppressed the shiver the idea provoked, the image of Sherlock sitting in their sitting room, lost in thought, and it hadn’t been thought about an experiment, it had been some filthy scenario involving them. Sherlock, John thought, probably had brilliant fantasies. John wanted to hear—wanted to enact—every single one of them.

“Snogging on the sofa like teenagers?” he managed, around his pants for breath.

“Oh, John,” said Sherlock, leaning farther back so John could see him more clearly, and Sherlock grinned, wicked and feral and John’s breath caught in his throat, stumbling over the image he presented. And then Sherlock slid, deliberate and cunning, down the length of John’s body, his eyes on John’s the whole way, dark glints full of all sorts of obscene promises. “So much more than snogging.”

John gave up trying to hold his gaze, throwing his head back in a desperate search for air, for some sort of relief from the tension that was coiling up inside of him, because Sherlock Holmes was some kind of wanton sex god or something and if John had known that he would have done this a long time ago. Possibly.

“Jesus Christ,” he said again.

“Sherlock Holmes,” Sherlock corrected, sounding almost absent, and undid the belt John was wearing.

John propped himself up on his elbows so he could better see what Sherlock was doing. This also meant he could have looked over to see if the sitting room door was closed, but that would have required taking his gaze off Sherlock and he wasn’t sure he would have been able to do that for the world at the moment. “Should we go to a bedroom?” he asked, trying to pretend like his mouth wasn’t watering with anticipation because apparently he’d really, really wanted Sherlock’s mouth around him.

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow at him, unfastening his jeans. “There’s a baby in my bedroom.”

“I have a bedroom,” said John, even as he lifted his hips so Sherlock could push his jeans down.

“Your bedroom is all the way upstairs.” Sherlock leaned forward and ran the tip of his tongue up John’s erection through his pants, a light tease. John fell back against the sofa with what he was sure was a comical lack of grace. “Do you want to stop and go upstairs?” Sherlock asked, his mouth open against John’s pants, the words breathed out against him.
John thought it was pretty clear from where Sherlock was positioned that the answer to that question was no. So he didn’t bother answering. He concentrated on trying to breathe.

Sherlock shoved at John’s pants and John squeezed his eyes shut and waited and concentrated on not coming as soon as Sherlock’s mouth touched him because suddenly that seemed like a real possibility to him.

“John,” said Sherlock. Sounding the way he sounded when John had just attacked someone on his behalf and he was ascertaining injuries. Oddly business-like for such an intimate scenario. “Look at me,” he said.

John opened his eyes, looked down the length of his body at Sherlock.

Sherlock licked his lips, looking...nervous? Sherlock, who had just kissed him into oblivion and then shoved his pants off of him. Sherlock, whose head was positioned just above John’s erection.

“Tell me…” Sherlock said, carefully. “Tell me yes.”

John knew the question he was answering there. Tell me yes, you want this. Yes, you want me. Tell me. John looked at Sherlock and reached out a hand and put it in Sherlock’s already-wrecked hair and kept his eyes on Sherlock’s. “Yes,” he said, his voice almost breaking with the honesty of it.

Sherlock pushed himself up, back over John’s body, and in a way it was moving in the wrong direction and in a way it was moving in the right direction, because when their lips met it felt like everything perfect in the world having been distilled into that moment. Sherlock was tugging at John’s jumper and the shirt underneath it, pushing them up, spreading his hands over John’s chest, and John murmured, “Yes, yes, yes,” as he kissed Sherlock back. And then Sherlock’s lips moved, down John’s throat, over John’s scar, across John’s chest, and every press of them against his body felt like being branded with fire. Mine, mine, mine, mine, said Sherlock’s lips, and John sighed and shifted to meet his kisses and sighed, “Yes, yes, yes, yes.”

And when Sherlock’s mouth finally closed over John’s erection and sucked, John groaned, feeling that it was too much. John looked, just to make sure it wasn’t a dream, and there was Sherlock’s dark head, and John closed his hands into those alluring curls and tugged, and Sherlock hummed encouragement, and John tried desperately to be polite and not choke him and yet it had been too bloody long for everything and when he came he shuddered with it and muffled his shout against the sofa cushion.

John wasn’t sure how long it took him to recover enough to take stock of their relative positions, but whenever it happened, he was sprawled, bonelessly content, on the sofa, and Sherlock was sitting on the floor next to him, head tipped back against his chest, eyes closed against the absent stroke of John’s hands through his hair.

“That wasn’t the first time you’d done this,” John remarked, looking at him, because that had been blatantly obvious.

Sherlock smiled, smug and gorgeous. “Did you believe all that virgin-baiting on the part of Moriarty?”

And Mycroft, thought John, but didn’t say, because it made perfect sense to him that neither one of them would have got Sherlock’s sexual history correct. He stroked Sherlock’s hair and enjoyed the calm intimacy that had fallen over their sitting room. He had spent many quiet evenings in this sitting room with Sherlock, but he wasn’t sure he could ever remember either one of them being so relaxed. John supposed there had been simmering sexual tension electrifying their sitting room from the very
first time they had walked into it together. He had just crossed a line with Sherlock, but he felt as if what he’d finally done was graduate university or receive a long-coveted promotion or something to that effect. He felt proudly triumphant with himself, for the brilliant way that his life had turned out.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, eventually, curiously, when Sherlock stayed silent and still against him.

Sherlock didn’t respond for a moment. Then, slowly, “That I’m happy. And lucky. And surprised.”

“Surprised?” echoed John, because the happy and the lucky made sense, John’s thoughts were running along a similar line.

“Sometimes, John, I do get things wrong.”

“What? I’m sorry? What was that? Could I get that in writing?”

Sherlock smiled and said, “Shut up.”

John hesitated, wondering if Sherlock had been thinking about the poor Cubitts in Norfolk. John had forgotten all about them. Possibly understandably. John didn’t want to bring them up if Sherlock wasn’t already thinking about them, so he ventured, carefully, “What did you get wrong?”

Sherlock finally opened his eyes. He smiled at John, open and guileless. “Can’t have you knowing all my secrets, can I?”

John conceded the point with a small indulgent shake of his head. And then he said, “Let me take you to bed.”

Sherlock’s expression changed. Not quite so guileless. His eyes darkened intriguingly, and when he spoke his voice was a low rumble. “Yes.”

***

There were some things that John Watson knew, thanks to his medical training. One of those things was how to find a prostate, which he did with unerring accuracy and unrelenting pressure, dissolving Sherlock into a quivering mass of begging gibberish in his bed, and that was pretty much the most amazing thing he’d ever accomplished, John decided, watching Sherlock shudder with pleasure. Sherlock made bossy demands in bed—predictable—and tugged hard at John’s hair to direct him to preferred locations on his body and liked a bit of roughness, and when he climaxed he shouted John’s name and John was a little bit relieved that they were two floors above Mrs. Hudson at the moment.

John went to fetch a flannel and poked his head into Sherlock’s room briefly. Oliver’s heavy, steady baby breaths filled the room, and John, satisfied, went back upstairs.

“Are you sleeping in this bed?” he asked Sherlock, who certainly looked as if he planned to sleep in the bed for a thousand years or so.

“John,” said Sherlock, sleepily, into the pillow he’d commandeered. “You cannot give me such a ruthless orgasm and then kick me out of your bed.”

“A ruthless orgasm,” repeated John, and got into bed next to Sherlock.

“Mmm,” said Sherlock, closing his eyes.
“I love you,” said John, and kissed Sherlock’s forehead.

“Mmm,” said Sherlock again, but this time he smiled.

“Will Oliver be all right downstairs by himself?”

“We’ll hear him if he cries. He ought to sleep until dawn anyway and I’ll be up by then.” Sherlock yawned enormously, which did not seem to support his conclusion that he was going to be up in a few hours.

John looked at him, there in his bed, absolutely naked, sex-sated and –sleepy and –satisfied, and he felt himself smile sappily at him. As if sensing his gaze, Sherlock opened his eyes, and for a moment they just looked at each other in silence.

“Is it strange?” Sherlock asked, finally.

John considered, because any number of things that had happened or that were currently happening could have been considered strange. And yet… “It’s perfect. Everything is perfect. It feels as if we’ve been doing this all along.”

Sherlock smiled and closed his eyes again. “Maybe in a previous life.”

“Maybe we’re reincarnations, destined to find each other in each life we lead,” suggested John. It would explain the instant connection between them, he thought, the immediate and visceral reaction he’d had to Sherlock, the idea that Sherlock was the most amazing creature in the universe and was going to change his life.

“Such a romantic,” pointed out Sherlock.

“You’re the one who brought up reincarnation in the first place.”

“You must be rubbing off on me.”

“Not quite,” said John, “but it could probably be arranged.”

Sherlock chuckled. “Are you going to sleep?”

“Surely you appreciate the irony of you asking that question.”

“It is impolite to be snide to your bedmate at this time of the evening,” rejoined Sherlock.

John slid down, trying to get a bit more comfortable, lying so he could face Sherlock, studying his face. After a moment, he ventured, softly, “I’m glad you came home safe.”

Sherlock, in response, snored.

***

John woke on his side, facing out into his bedroom, with Sherlock plastered up against his back, an arm draped over his waist, snuffling breaths into the back of his neck. John woke smiling. John woke to bright sunlight in his room, because neither of them had thought to draw the curtains the night before.

So much for Sherlock Holmes being up at dawn, thought John, and stretched luxuriously. He had forgotten what it felt like to wake up and still be thrumming with satisfaction. He felt like a string on Sherlock’s violin, still vibrating at a perfect pitch long after the bow had moved on. Except that the
John slid out from underneath Sherlock carefully and pulled on a T-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts and walked down the stairs. The flat was quiet and sun-drenched, and John fancied that it felt bright and content, the way John himself did. As he walked into Sherlock’s bedroom, he became aware that all was not as quiet as it had seemed, because Oliver was babbling softly to himself in his cot. Or babbling softly to the planets in the mobile floating over his head. Either way.

John walked over to the cot and peeked over into it. Oliver had a hand around each of his feet and when he saw John his face lit up with delight. He babbled a bit more loudly, a bit more animatedly.

“Good morning to you, too,” John told him, unable to resist smiling back as he lifted the baby out of the cot. “Thanks for letting us sleep in a bit.”

Oliver said something that doubtless translated to *Don’t mention it* and closed a hand around John’s hair to pull at it, his preferred gesture of affection.

John changed him and set about making him breakfast, flipping on the kettle as he went. He had just finished making the bottle and had just cut off Oliver’s stream of morning monologue by coaxing the nipple into his mouth when Sherlock pressed up against his back and pressed a somewhat sloppy kiss to the base of John’s neck.

John looked out the kitchen window, which was right in front of him as he’d been feeding the baby standing at the sink, and smiled. “Good morning.”

Sherlock felt as if he was practically collapsed against John, judging from the amount of his weight that John was absorbing. “Come back to bed,” Sherlock mumbled.

“I’m feeding the baby.”

“Feed him in bed.”

“Sherlock,” said John, good-naturedly, but found himself letting Sherlock tug him into Sherlock’s bedroom. He’d at least pulled a dressing gown on, so he wasn’t naked, but he looked thoroughly debauched anyway, his hair sticking up all over the place, as he shuffled into his bedroom and tumbled immediately into bed.

Oliver looked from the unmoving Sherlock to John with interest, as if to say, *Care to share?* “Not until you’re much, much older,” John told him. “Actually, no, what am I saying? Not even then.”

“Are you bringing him to bed?” demanded Sherlock, voice muffled by his pillow.

“He just got up,” John protested, but he settled on the bed with Sherlock anyway, propped against the headboard.

Oliver finished the rest of his bottle with enthusiasm, and then John sat him on the bed next to Sherlock. He was still wobbly but he was quickly gaining balance. John smoothed a hand over Oliver’s flyaway curls and thought of how fast time was moving. John felt like he’d finally got
everything right, like his relationship with Sherlock was now what it should have been for ages, like now there was Oliver, too, and there was everything John could ever have wanted. They were a family, thought John, and they’d been one before, John had known that, but now they felt more solidly so. A family. Oliver put his hands on Sherlock’s hip for balance and John thought of Oliver’s future ahead of him, of their entire future ahead of them, long and happy, all of them, together. And John wanted time to slow down, so that he could lay here in this bed with his family forever.

His family.

Oliver beat his fists against Sherlock’s hip, looking devilishly gleeful, and John let him, because Oliver looked so happy, and John was sprawled in bed with Sherlock Holmes, and John wanted to do nothing but bask.

“He’s being very rude,” Sherlock mumbled.

“He’s in a good mood,” John rejoined. “So am I, incidentally.” John looked over at Sherlock, who was looking disgruntled, even though his eyes were closed. “I am in a very good mood,” John said, and ducked his head so he could press his lips over Sherlock’s.

He felt Sherlock’s mouth curve into a smile. “Oh, are you?”

“Mmm,” said John, and concentrated for a moment on the kiss.

“Feeling well-shagged?” asked Sherlock, and Sherlock Holmes had his tongue halfway down his throat and was asking him questions like that.

John felt as if he blushed to the tips of his ears, drawing back. “Not in front of the baby,” he scolded, in a hiss.

“You started it.” Sherlock sounded unconcerned. “You’re blushing. Three-Continents Watson, are you really going to start blushing about sex now?”

“I’m not blushing,” John denied, blushing furiously.

Sherlock stretched like a cat and reached for Oliver, pulling him up and onto his chest. “Is Papa the most adorable thing you’ve ever seen?” Sherlock asked him, absently kissing one of Oliver’s fisted hands.

Oliver replied in a knowing series of monosyllabic nonsense.

“He agrees,” Sherlock translated, at the end.

“I can’t wait until he’s a teenager and stops agreeing with you,” John remarked, settling a bit deeper into the pillow he was leaning against, contentedly watching Sherlock kiss each of Oliver’s fingers, to Oliver’s curious delight.

“That will never happen,” said Sherlock. “He’s my clone.”

“Like I said: I can’t wait,” reiterated John.

Sherlock gave him a dark look that made John grin and want to kiss him again. How had he gone for so very long without kissing Sherlock Holmes? He felt like he needed to spend the next few years of their life together making up for that. He was going to be indulging in the impulse to kiss Sherlock whenever he wanted for a while. He was going to scandalize Lestrade. Well, probably Donovan more than Lestrade at this point, honestly.
“Shall we go to St. Bart’s today?” suggested Sherlock, now experimentally blowing on each of Oliver’s fingers. Oliver was squirming and giggling on Sherlock’s chest.

“Let’s not,” said John, and rested a protective hand on Oliver’s back. “I want today to be us. Just us. Can we do that? I want to lay in bed with you for hours. I want to be absolutely wrapped in the two of you. I don’t want there to be a world beyond ours. How does it sound?”

He half-expected Sherlock to respond with Dull. Sherlock said, “Lounge around all day? You never do that.”

“I’ve never had a reason to before.”

“You don’t lounge around all day because you have a reason. That’s an oxymoron. You lounge around all day because you have no reason to be anywhere else.”

“Not true. That’s why you don’t enjoy it when you lounge around all day.” John turned more fully toward Sherlock, nudging his nose against Sherlock’s hair, because he could do these things now. “Lounge around all day with me. We’ll read to Oliver and teach him how to count.” John pressed his mouth to Sherlock’s ear, whispering, “And then we’ll have lazy sex when he takes a nap.”

“Ah, you mean ‘lounge around’ as a euphemism for ‘sex,’” remarked Sherlock, loudly.

“Not in front of the baby,” hissed John, appalled.

“Adorable,” Sherlock said, shaking his head a bit, before giving John a quick, fierce kiss that John was still recovering from when Sherlock bounced his way out of bed, taking Oliver with him and announcing, “I think breakfast is called for.”
Chapter 17

John made them breakfast, coaxed into it far too easily by a couple of well-placed kisses on Sherlock’s part. Not that he didn’t usually make them breakfast, but normally he just tossed some toast at Sherlock and hoped that he ate it. Now he made bacon sandwiches, explaining the process to Oliver, who sat in his highchair with his hands clutching Sherlock’s skull and watched raptly. Sherlock disappeared behind the paper at the kitchen table, deigning only to say—again—that Oliver must be growing tired of milk by this time. John ignored him and put a bacon sandwich in front of him and Sherlock ate every single bit. Apparently, he’d just needed some sex to get him to eat.

It rained for most of the day, drops pattering at their windows. It was cozy and soothing. John read a book about a black sheep to Oliver. Sherlock went outside to collect rainwater in vials and then “rescued” Oliver from the black sheep book to explain to him what could be seen in the rainwater according to Daddy’s microscope. So John sprawled on the sofa and closed his eyes and listened to them, voices mingling with the rain.

Mrs. Hudson poked her head in and beamed at the domestic scene and told John she was “so happy” for the two of them.

John flickered a grateful smile at her and waited until she’d gone downstairs to get up and walk into the kitchen. “What’d she mean by that?” he asked.

“Here.” Sherlock thrust Oliver into John’s arms. “He is being difficult. He keeps insisting that the slides should be thrown all about the kitchen.”

“Silly baby,” said John, drily.

Oliver explained in no uncertain terms exactly who had been difficult.

John said, “Yes, yes, I know,” and carried Oliver into Sherlock’s bedroom and changed his nappy and walked the floor with him only a few times before he fell asleep practically mid-rant.

And then John walked out into the sitting room, where his other Sherlock Holmes had taken up residence on the sofa. “Push over,” John told him.

Sherlock sat up to give John room.

“He’s sleeping,” John said, as he sat.

“Ah, then it’s time for sex, is that it?” Sherlock immediately lay back down, his head in John’s lap.

John would have protested. Except that Sherlock’s head was in his lap. “It’s only our second day as a couple, let’s pretend the romance hasn’t gone out of it quite yet.”

Sherlock’s eyes were closed as he said, “I’ve been romancing you for so many years. Do catch up, John.”

“What did Mrs. Hudson mean?”

“Hmm?” Sherlock sounded disinterested in the conversation. Which was probably due to the fact that John had started absently carding his hands through Sherlock’s hair. John was obsessed with touching Sherlock’s hair all of a sudden. Almost as obsessed as he was with kissing Sherlock.
“When she stopped in, she said she was so happy for the two of us.”

“Of course she is. She’s been trying to get us together ever since she met you. If you knew how many lectures I was subjected to whenever you were out of the flat.”

John blinked in surprise. “Lectures on what?”

“You, of course. What a catch you were. How you’d brightened me up. How you made me laugh. How you were clever and kind and patient and stubborn. How you were very handsome. Et cetera.”

“But… I wasn’t gay then. I don’t think. I mean, not that she knew. Not that I knew.”

“You were in love with me, John,” explained Sherlock, matter-of-factly. “Everyone knew about that but you, you know.”

“Mrs. Hudson knew?”

“Everyone knew,” Sherlock repeated.

John considered, then asked, “Mrs. Hudson thinks I’m handsome?”

Sherlock’s lips curved with amusement. “Don’t fish for compliments. You’re an attractive man, and you know it.”

“So she knows we’re together now. Do you think she… heard us last night?”

“Unlikely. We weren’t especially loud.”

“You were loud.”

“That was with two floors between us, and it was very late by then. At any rate, you’re radiating contentment instead of frustration and you’ve had a soppy smile on your face all day, so Mrs. Hudson merely made her own deductions. Mrs. Hudson is very good at deductions, you know.”

“And you never say that.”

“I tell the truth,” Sherlock responded, simply.

John combed thoughtfully at Sherlock’s curls on his lap. Sherlock fell silent, and John wondered idly if he was going to fall asleep. He hadn’t been entirely serious about the sex. Although he wouldn’t have objected to Sherlock turning his head away and getting down to business, either. Which was astonishing to him, not only that he wanted Sherlock, but that he was craving Sherlock. Who would ever have predicted that? Sherlock Holmes, really a very skilled sexual being.

“You’ve got questions,” remarked Sherlock, as he sometimes did.

“Before me, who?” John heard himself ask.

Sherlock opened one eye and regarded him. “I’m not sure this is a topic of conversation you wish to pursue.”

“Why? Have you shagged, like, a million people?”

Sherlock rolled his one open eye. It was quite a marvel to behold. “Don’t be ridiculous, John.”

“Alright, then. We don’t need to go into specifics, I was just wondering—”
Sherlock closed his open eye. “You’re jealous and possessive and I’m not sure—”

“I’m not jealous and possessive!” protested John.

“You are. Mind you, I’m not complaining—”

“When have I ever been jealous and possessive? You used to tag along on my dates, you were so insanely jealous. You’d send me those ridiculous texts to make me run to your side.”

“We suit each other,” said Sherlock, not bothering to deny it. “I haven’t dated since meeting you, so you’re thinking of traditional jealousy, which you haven’t had need to indulge in. But you’re jealous when I pay attention to things other than you. Not immediately, but you grow progressively grouchy the longer I am preoccupied.”

“Well, that’s perfectly understandable. It’s difficult being ignored.”

“Especially so when the person ignoring you is the person you’re in love with. And once you have decided that something or someone is yours, you defend your ground viciously. You’ve done it with Oliver, where Mycroft is concerned. You did it with me when it came to Moriarty, all the time. You were jealous of Moriarty, actually. I think you thought Moriarty was the only viable threat you had as someone I might find more fascinating than you. And once you’d decided that you wanted a life with me, at 221B, you snarled at anyone who might suggest otherwise. Like, for instance, your sister. So. You are jealous and possessive and I don’t think we should discuss sexual history.”

“Alright,” John conceded. “Fine. Maybe a little. It’s just that I didn’t know you had a sexual history to discuss until yesterday.”

“Because it wasn’t worth discussing. Ordinary people find sex to be so fascinating. It’s so simplistic, biologically speaking. Who has time to let their brains be so addled by something so ridiculous? I’ve had sex, I never saw the point.”

John kept his hand stroking through Sherlock’s hair and tried not to tense up, which Sherlock would notice. He tried to sound casual. “Is it something you did because you thought I needed it?”

Sherlock was silent for a second, then opened his eyes. “No. I never saw the point. And then I met you. And suddenly I understood, why so many people all around me placed such importance on sex. Because I wanted you, every inch of you, I wanted you laid out naked before me and I would taste you until I could catalogue every body part blindly, and you would gasp my name and think of nothing but me and I would bring you such pleasure that you would crave me like a drug. And I wanted you to want me the same way. I wanted you to turn off everything in the world that wasn’t you, I wanted you to drown me in sensation until I couldn’t breathe and was gasping for relief and then I wanted you to drown me a bit more, just because you could, and you would be mine and I would be yours and we would never come up for air, we would just drown together.”

John stared down at him, his mouth dry. He could feel his blood pounding in his veins, thick and heavy, and he could not imagine how he had not realized how single-mindedly he had wanted Sherlock before this. Sherlock was right, he was like a drug to him, like it had been too long since his last hit and now there it was, right in front of him, and he was light-headed with anticipation of what it would be like. “I want you like that,” he said, his voice low and rough and he was ridiculously aroused and they had done nothing yet.

Sherlock shifted himself into sitting, his pupils already blown wide as he put his hands in John’s collar and pulled himself closer, until all John could see were Sherlock’s eyes, boring into his own. “I am not this person for everyone else, John,” he said, his voice unsteady. “I am not this person
“Just for me,” John said, and he meant it to be a question but it came out as a demand, a growl.

“Just for you,” Sherlock confirmed, and John kissed him, rough and bruising, a claiming sort of kiss, a scouring away of all mouths that had kissed Sherlock’s before his.

“No one else,” John whispered, into the lack of air between them.

“Never,” said Sherlock, and hung onto the kiss, refusing to break it, even as he shifted to straddle John fully, pressing against him.

John could feel Sherlock’s erection, heavy and demanding, and he suddenly wanted it, the weight of it against him, in his hand, in his mouth. John’s own erection throbbed at the idea, at the teasing press of Sherlock against him, in his lap.

“Upstairs.” John nipped hard at Sherlock’s bottom lip, took it between his teeth, pulled, satisfied when Sherlock gasped with pleasure. “Now.”

Sherlock scrambled off his lap and started walking toward the stairs. John caught up with him at the sitting room doorway, spun him around, kissed him deeply, licking at his mouth, drinking his taste down. Sherlock moaned, catching his hands into John’s hair and kissing him back the same way.

John nudged him. Sherlock’s foot hit the first stair and he stumbled, catching himself on the balustrade before they collapsed into a heap, and still never breaking the rhythm of the kiss, the give-and-take of their tongues. John, hand cupped around the back of Sherlock’s head, straightened his balance and they staggered up the stairs locked together, John far too far gone in desire to care if it would be obvious by now to Mrs. Hudson what was going on.

They fell through John’s bedroom door together, and John finally pulled away, pulling his T-shirt up and over his head. “Off,” he gasped. “Everything off.”

Luckily neither of them had ever got fully dressed during their lounging day, so the undressing took no time at all, and John pushed Sherlock back onto the bed, where he went willingly, bouncing slightly as he hit the mattress. John fell on top of him, pinning him down with his weight, trapping their erections between their bodies in a kind of blissful torment.

“Mine,” John said, closing his teeth on Sherlock’s neck, just above where it met the collarbone, in a love bite.

Sherlock made a strangled noise that might have been John’s name, arching up and into John, his hips stuttering desperately, his hands scrabbling down John’s back.

John grabbed for Sherlock’s hands, pinning them by Sherlock’s head, and sucked at the spot he’d just bit. Sherlock groaned, rendered wordless.

“I don’t want you to ever forget that,” said John, letting go of Sherlock’s hands and moving down his body now, alternating kisses with licks and bites and nips. Sherlock’s hands closed into his hair, tugging. “You—like this—you’re mine.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” chanted Sherlock, twisting underneath him, and John settled his hands on Sherlock’s hips and thought of him, desperate, panting, and how he had never been this human for anyone else, never wanted this way. “Obvi—” began Sherlock.

John cut off the word by swallowing Sherlock’s erection. It was ambitious of him, and led to him
choking unattractively, but that didn’t matter to Sherlock, apparently, because he just gasped, “Christ,” and closed his fists into the duvet.

John sucked, carefully and observantly, trying to make a mental catalogue like the one he knew Sherlock already had memorized about John. But John had never done this before—the night before he had avoided using his mouth, feeling self-conscious about it—and he wanted to get it right, trying techniques he had always liked himself and trying to gauge which Sherlock preferred.

Apparently, Sherlock preferred all of them, because he moaned incoherently and pulled John’s hair hard enough that it would have hurt if John hadn’t been so bloody aroused that his body seemed to be translating everything as pleasure.

John pulled back, trying to gain some distance, bring things back under control.

Sherlock grabbed for him, complaining, “Finish it, for God’s sake.”

John resisted. “Is it good?”

“You know it is,” Sherlock snapped, “stop teasing.”

“Talk to me,” John commanded. “Tell me how it feels.”

Something John had not fully anticipated was the effect Sherlock’s voice would have on him, breathy with pleasure and rough with lust and deep and dark as sin, as he gasped, “It feels—fantastic—my God—more—John—more—John—”

Sherlock climaxed and John sputtered inelegantly but couldn’t be bothered to care because Sherlock’s voice saying his name just like that had been almost too much for him. He leaned his forehead against Sherlock’s hipbone, struggling for breath, for control, because he was so hard it hurt and if he even so much as looked at Sherlock he was frightened it would be enough for him to come.

Sherlock, limp beneath him, chest heaving, said, “You love my voice, don’t you?”

John squeezed his eyes shut. “Stop talking.”

Sherlock did the opposite. “Come for me.”

How was it possible that Sherlock said things like that? John marveled at it only briefly, with the two percent of his brain that was still functioning. “Jesus Christ,” he groaned. “Sherlock, I need—” He draped a heavy leg over Sherlock, desperately needing pressure on his erection.

“God, yes, do it, against me,” said Sherlock, and John, powerless to resist such a directive, pulled himself up farther, gasping at the friction, thrusting blindly, and there was the slide of Sherlock’s skin, of Sherlock’s hand reaching for him, of Sherlock’s voice in his ear, and John had no idea what Sherlock was saying but Sherlock kept talking, and he could have been reciting the Magna Carta and it still would have sounded filthy at that moment, and the orgasm was on John almost immediately.

He collapsed onto Sherlock, a sweaty, tangled mess, and swore. Eloquently, he thought.

“Mmm,” agreed Sherlock, and John felt the kiss he brushed over his temple.

John blew out an exhalation of breath against Sherlock’s chest. “How have we not been doing this for years?”

“You were being an idiot.”
John, with a great effort, rolled off Sherlock onto his back and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, feeling his pounding heart slowly drifting back to normal. “That was ridiculous.”

“Was it?”

“Ridiculously spectacular.”

“Does it always feel like that for you?”

“No. It always feels good. This was something else entirely.”

There was a moment of silence. “Another type of good?”

John put his hands down and opened his eyes. Sherlock was beside him, and hadn’t moved, but John could sense the tense worry in him. Actually, John was probably the only person who would ever have been able to sense that. “An incredible type of good,” he said.

Which seemed to satisfy Sherlock, who relaxed next to him.

John, content now that Sherlock had settled again, closed his eyes and let himself drift. He knew he should get up and clean off, and make Sherlock do the same thing, but it was so cozy, there in that room, in the bed together, Sherlock’s breaths soft and even and Sherlock’s next to him, and John didn’t move a muscle until the baby started crying on the floor beneath them.

“You’re right,” Sherlock mumbled.

“Not something I hear too often.” John stretched in an attempt to wake himself up and then rolled blearily out of bed. “About what?”

“Oliver doesn’t sleep enough.”

John laughed so hard he almost fell down the stairs.

***

The following morning, John woke to an empty bed and a commotion downstairs. Sherlock shouting, Oliver screaming. A jolt of adrenaline tumbled him out of bed, had him fumbling for the gun in the bedside table, flying down the staircase—

And when he burst his way into the sitting room, ready to fight the unseen assailants, Sherlock and Oliver both fell silent and looked at him with identical expressions of dismayed bewilderment, as if they had expected him to immediately grasp what was going on and were disappointed in him.

“What the hell are you doing?” John panted, because there was no one else in the room with them and clearly no intruders or other type of trouble.

“We’re practicing shouting,” replied Sherlock, as if that was a perfectly legitimate thing to be doing.

“While I’m trying to sleep?”

Sherlock shrugged. Oliver did that thing he did that somehow managed to convey the impression of a shrug.

John collapsed onto the sofa and sighed, “Bloody hell,” and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath to try to shut off the adrenaline flow through his body. He’d been looking forward to waking up to Sherlock curled against him again, to maybe a lazy morning shag. They had had such a lovely day
the day before, which they had concluded by giving Oliver a bath together and then retreating to John’s room and having more sex, and John couldn’t remember the last time he’d had so much sex in a twenty-four hour period, and he’d wanted to wake up and revel in the deliciousness of the entire situation.

Except, he had to admit it was more fitting for his day to start like this, because that was just how life was in 221B.

“Oliver and I are glad you’re awake,” Sherlock announced.

“I bet you are,” muttered John, rolling himself off the sofa. “Tea and toast, I suppose?”

“That would be lovely,” Sherlock confirmed. “Plus, we’ve a busy day ahead of us.”

John grunted on his way into the kitchen, and put the gun down on the counter to fill the kettle. Then looked at the gun. Probably there should not be a loaded gun in his bedside table anymore. Oliver wasn’t mobile yet, but he would be before very long. They were going to have to discuss gun safety, John thought.

John made tea and toast, finding the ritual soothing and restorative of a good mood, so that, when he walked back into the sitting room, he was much calmer. He put Sherlock’s tea down next to Sherlock’s chair and leaned down to kiss Oliver’s head, where he was perched on Sherlock’s lap, brandishing a magnifying glass.

“Good morning, love,” he said to the baby.

Oliver prodded him with the magnifying glass.

Sherlock said, “Which of us are you greeting right now?”

And John recalled with a start that it would have been perfectly appropriate for him to say such a thing to Sherlock, too. He shifted his gaze from Oliver to Sherlock and grinned. “Good morning, love.”

“Good morning,” Sherlock replied, and pulled him in for a brief kiss.

John settled into his own chair. “Did you feed him?”

“Yes. More milk.”

“You can try something else if you like, but you’re in charge of all of the nappies that day.” John sipped his tea, which was the absolute perfect temperature. So he sipped some more. Then he said, “What’s this busy day you’ve got planned?”

“We’ll take Ollie to St. Bart’s, then we’ll get married, and then we’ll remake your room into a nursery.”

John blinked, then put his mug down sharply. “What did you say?”

“Surely you agree that it’s undesirable to keep tripping up the stairs on our way to have sex.”

“Eventually I assume we’ll stop snogging long enough to make it up the stairs safely. And not in front of the baby, remember?”

“I don’t think anyone would ever have predicted, Oliver, that I will be the parent to teach you about sex,” remarked Sherlock.
“I don’t mind giving him a speech about, you know, the birds and the bees, but when he’s older and when it isn’t about, you know, us. And back to your second point.”

Sherlock lifted his eyebrows inquisitively. “We’ll get married?”

“Yes. We’ll get married?”

“Obviously. Doesn’t it make the most the sense?”

John stared across at him. “Doesn’t it make sense?”

“We live together, we have a child together, and now our relationship is—” Sherlock put his hands over Oliver’s ears briefly—“sexual. So yes. I think it makes sense.”

“Because we share a flat, a child, and a bed.”

Sherlock looked bewildered. “Yes. Isn’t that typical of married couples?”

“Yes,” John agreed, standing. “Absolutely. All couples decide to get married for exactly those reasons.” He reached for Oliver, pulling him into his arms.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting him dressed.” John turned and marched out of the sitting room, into Sherlock’s bedroom. “Got to get him ready to attend a wedding today.” John slammed drawers open and shut, shuffling violently through Oliver’s clothing until he found an outfit that matched. Oliver, in his arms, watched with his mouth wide open in shock.

“You’re upset,” said Sherlock, from the doorway, sounding perplexed.

John glanced at him, with his eyebrows drawn together in puzzlement, as if John were the world’s most confusing human being. John turned back to Oliver, changing his nappy with ruthless efficiency, while Oliver gaped up at him.

“Good deduction,” John snapped.

“Yes.” John snapped Oliver’s bodysuit and tugged a shirt over Oliver’s head. “I definitely want to get married. I’m glad you squeezed it onto our agenda for the day, right between taking blood from our clone baby and cleaning out wardrobes.” John, finished dressing Oliver, straightened and pushed him into Sherlock’s arms.

Sherlock and Oliver both blinked at him, looking absolutely shocked by his behavior.

“Would you prefer we keep your room and let Oliver have our room?” Sherlock ventured.

John grabbed his coat. “No, no. You ought to make that decision. You are best at making decisions, after all.”

“What does that mean? And where are you going?”

John was jogging down the stairs, shrugging into his coat. “I’ll meet you at St. Bart’s.”

“John,” said Sherlock, both sharp and uncertain.
“Bye, love,” John said, pushing his way out of 221’s door and not bothering to clarify which one he’d been saying good-bye to.
John was at St. Bart’s when they got there.

Sherlock wanted to pretend that he’d expected him to be there, but the reality was he’d spent a little while fruitlessly pacing the sitting room floor in 221B, worried that he’d never see John again, and all for the transgression of what? Moving too quickly? After being so patient for so many years, now he’d moved too quickly?

Oliver picked up on Sherlock’s mood and fussed over everything and did not stop crying for the entire cab ride, no matter how much Sherlock tried to comfort him. In fact, Oliver did not stop crying until the moment he saw John, sitting in the lab at St. Bart’s and chatting with Molly. Oliver reached for John immediately, squirming out of Sherlock’s grasp toward him, and John took him and pulled him in close, pressing his nose into Oliver’s soft curls and meeting Sherlock’s eyes as he did it.

“There, there,” he soothed, and Oliver stopped crying.

“I’ll just,” said Molly, not even bothering to pretend there was anything that might come after that, and scurried out of the lab.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be here,” said Sherlock, even though that was the exact opposite of what he’d intended to say.

“I’m sorry,” said John. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to…To either one of you.”

Sherlock decided that this was awkward, and Sherlock despised awkwardness. His preferred method for dealing with awkwardness was not to acknowledge the awkwardness. So he slid out of his coat and draped it over a stool and said, “I think we should tell Molly.”

John looked…exhausted. And he’d slept well the night before, Sherlock had lain beside him whilst he’d snored all night, so there was no reason for John to look so very tired. “Can we not do all this today? Can we tell Molly some other time?”

Sherlock studied him critically, trying to determine the source of John’s exhaustion. He wasn’t getting sick, was he? “Are you alright?”

John nodded. “Just not looking forward to this.” John looked grim. “Do you want me to draw the blood?”

Sherlock hesitated. He decided to drop his pursuit of what might be wrong with John. He also
decided against having John draw the blood. John could do it quite competently, but it would be cowardly on Sherlock’s part to have John do it. He shook his head. “No, I’ll do it. He’s going to need comforting, and you’re better at that.”

“You could comfort him.”

Sherlock ignored John, because John frequently spouted nonsense like that. He took hold of Oliver’s arm and looked for the vein and told himself to treat this like he would an unknown baby. He was not normally squeamish about doing things, the idea that he might be now was ludicrous.

Oliver for a moment looked at him with interest, curious as to why Sherlock had hold of his arm, and then Sherlock stabbed him with the needle and Oliver absolutely howled with panicked displeasure. Sherlock had had lots of experience with needles—lots more than John would have liked to have known—but he had no experience with needles on unwilling live participants. He was unprepared for how much Oliver twisted in an attempt to get away from him, screaming with something that sounded very much like terror.

“Hold him, would you?” Sherlock snapped, trying to get everything over with as quickly as possible.

“I’m trying,” John responded, between gritted teeth, and pressed a hand against Oliver’s head, pressing a kiss to the other side. “Shhh,” he breathed out, softly. “Shhh. It’s almost done.”

Oliver cried. Actually, Oliver didn’t just cry. Oliver sobbed, heartbrokenly. Sherlock was familiar with Oliver’s cries by now, and there was a plethora of them, but Sherlock had never before heard one so sincerely hurt. If Sherlock let himself listen to that cry one more second, he was going to be in a puddle on the floor, weeping and begging Oliver to forgive him. To forgive him for drawing blood to try to save his life. This was absurd.

Having drawn enough blood, Sherlock fastened gauze to Oliver’s arm with a bandage and turned from him swiftly. He sensed rather than saw Oliver turn more fully into John, as if he were trying to burrow as far away from Sherlock as he could get. Sherlock could well imagine the betrayal that would be written all over Oliver’s face. He remembered the feeling vividly from the first time he was flung into a mysterious hospital and poked and prodded at.

Which was why he said, as he carefully dated the sample, “He’s being melodramatic. It doesn’t hurt that much.”

“It isn’t the pain, Sherlock.”

No. It was the betrayal. It was the person who was supposed to keep you safe abandoning you to the very opposite of safety. Sherlock’s numbers were vicious slashes of black on the label.

Oliver was still crying, although the sobs were muffled, and Sherlock deduced that he must be pressed against John’s shoulder. John said, “I’m going to track down a stethoscope. I might as well give him a proper examination while we’re here.”

Sherlock said nothing in response, pretending to be lost in the piece of paper he was staring at, although he had no idea what the piece of paper even was. All he knew was that John left the lab, the door closing behind him, and Sherlock sank onto a stool and put his face in his hands and leaned heavily against the lab bench and just did not move for a little while. He fancied he could still hear Oliver wailing against him from down the hall.

The door opened, and Sherlock lifted his head and sat up abruptly, furious that he’d let John startle him in such a position.
Except it wasn’t John. It was Molly, looking at him with frank and open concern.

“Everything okay?” she asked, hesitantly.

Sherlock considered. “No,” he decided. “Everything is not okay.”

Molly looked frightened. “You’re not going to have to die again, are you?”

Sherlock supposed that that was a legitimate fear on Molly’s part, but Sherlock also wasn’t in the mood. “No,” he responded, shortly.

“Well, that’s good,” said Molly, cheerfully, with her nervous little giggle, which faded when she saw that Sherlock was definitely not amused. “Oliver sounded unhappy,” she ventured.

“Understatement,” Sherlock dismissed, because he didn’t want to think about Oliver. And also because it had occurred to him that Molly might be of some use with his other issue. “I may have upset John.”

Molly blinked. “John?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I’m sure you didn’t. You never really upset John. He loves you too much for that, you know that.”

Sherlock ignored this ridiculousness. “I said we should get married.”

Molly stared, looking shocked. Why should she look shocked? Wasn’t this obvious? “You said that to John?” she clarified.

“Yes. Of course. Obviously. And it upset him.”

“Are you…a couple, then?”

“Of course we’re a couple. We’re raising a baby together.”

“That’s not…I mean, yes, I see your point, but I’m not sure John would think—”

“And we’re having sex,” Sherlock confirmed, impatiently, “which everyone, for idiotic reasons, seems to think is the most important part about being a couple.”

“Oh,” said Molly, and clearly wanted to ask several follow-up questions, but merely said again, “Oh.”

“So I told him we should get married, and he’s angry about it. Why should that be?”

Molly lifted her eyebrows. “You told him?”

Ah, thought Sherlock. Okay, that may have been a good point. John hated to be bossed around, and possibly he had interpreted that statement as bossing.

Not that Sherlock wanted to admit that he’d possibly, from a certain perspective, ordered John to marry him. “Well,” he said, and shrugged a bit.

Molly looked as if he’d suddenly started dancing naked around the laboratory, such was the comical expression of shock on her face. “You can’t just tell people that they’re marrying you. That’s not
how it works. It’s not like telling him to get milk on his way home, just another item on his grocery list.”

And he had basically put it on their grocery list, hadn’t he? He had buried it with other chores and errands, just one more thing to get out of the way. He had assumed that John wouldn’t stand on ceremony, wouldn’t need it, would recognize the practical value of having their relationship legally recognized, for Oliver’s sake, for their own sake. But maybe, given the evidence of John’s behavior in the wake of it, he’d been wrong about that.

He was getting a lot of things wrong lately. It was irritating.

He drummed his fingers on the laboratory bench and looked at the vial of Oliver’s blood.

“Ollie’s okay, isn’t he?” asked Molly, tentatively.

Oh, he’s brilliant for a clone baby, thought Sherlock, but John had seemed reluctant about confiding in Molly and Sherlock didn’t want to upset John at the moment any more than he already had. He said, brusquely, rising to his feet, “He’s fine. Just a little routine blood work I’m going to do.”

Molly looked less than convinced about this, but just bit her lip and nodded her head and looked up at him. “I think John will say yes. Eventually.”

Sherlock almost didn’t realize that she was talking about the marriage thing. But, of course, John would say yes because Sherlock was supposed to have asked him a question about marriage instead of just announcing it the way he had. How had he made such a mess of things?

Sherlock said to Molly, faking a bravado he did not at all feel, “Obviously.”

***

It should have occurred to John, as he walked down the hallway with Oliver still wailing in his ear, that he was likely to encounter Mike Stamford. But it didn’t, until the very moment Mike rounded the corner and abruptly stopped walking, staring at John with the baby in his arms.

“Ah,” said John, jovially, as if this were all a perfectly normal situation, walking down the hallway comforting your flatmate-slash-lover’s clone baby. “Mike. Hello.”

Oliver kept crying, but it was starting to grow half-hearted now. Oliver, John could sense, was beginning to suspect that he’d made his point.

“John,” Mike replied, eyes riveted to where Oliver was pressed against John’s shoulder. He clearly wanted to demand what was up with the baby, but he merely said, automatically polite, the same way he’d been that day in the park so long ago, “How are you?”

And John, thinking about that day in the park, smiled suddenly. One day Mike Stamford had called his name, and that had somehow led to the bundle of baby in John’s arms. John was out-of-sorts with Sherlock’s obtuseness in dictating marriage to him and miffed at the lack of comfort Sherlock had displayed toward the distraught Oliver, and still he thought that he would not have wanted his life to have turned out any other way. John could not bear to think of what might have happened had Mike Stamford not called his name that day.

So John said, turning Oliver so that he was facing Mike, feeling a burst of pride over how clever and beautiful Mike would see that the baby so obviously was, “This is Oliver.”

Oliver sniffled, catching his breath, and regarded Mike with what, to John, were unmistakably
Sherlock’s sharp, gray-green-blue eyes.

Mike looked back at Oliver and said, clearly unsure how he was supposed to be reacting, “Hello, Oliver.”

An explanation was warranted, John knew. “He’s mine and Sherlock’s,” John continued, and it was the first time he had said it so very bluntly, the first time he had felt entitled to say it so very bluntly, but that’s who Oliver was, and now it was probably time for everyone to know.

Mike lifted his eyes from Oliver to John and smiled at him, warmly and acceptingly and not a bit surprised. “About time,” was what he said.

John acknowledged that with a small smile that he half-buried against Oliver’s head. “This is Mike,” he told Oliver. “Mike introduced Daddy and me.”

“So I suppose that makes me, in a way, responsible for your existence,” Mike told Oliver, solemnly.

Oliver looked skeptical about this claim.

“You used Sherlock as the donor, I see,” continued Mike. “He’s a carbon copy, isn’t he? I suppose I can’t fault you the choice, but maybe you’ll go for the matching set eventually?”

“Maybe,” John said, because it sounded better than, I don’t want to be cloned.

“What are you doing here with him? Trying to get him to want to be a doctor when he grows up? Or are you already taking him along on investigations?”

“Routine blood work,” John told him. “We’re waiting for Sherlock to finish up with everything.”

“An opportunity to catch up,” Mike decided. “You’ve clearly got a lot going on.”

Which was how John found himself in Mike Stamford’s office. To try to distract Mike from Mike’s unerring interest in John’s relationship with Sherlock and the ins and outs of Oliver’s existence, John borrowed Mike’s stethoscope to listen to Oliver’s heart and lungs, all of which sounded absolutely perfect. John thought he’d have to do this more often at home, now that they were monitoring Oliver more closely.

John was just finishing up, giving Oliver the stethoscope to examine more closely in response to Oliver’s swipes at it, when Sherlock drew to a stop in the doorway.

John looked over at him. He looked stiff and awkward, unsure of himself, and John hated for Sherlock to get like that. As annoying as Sherlock’s arrogance could be, John preferred it to all the vulnerability that lurked there when you scratched the surface. John hated when he scratched the surface. Sherlock had mentioned marriage the wrong way, but John had lost his temper perhaps a tad too easily. John put it down to his heightened emotional state lately.

“Ready to go?” John asked him, striving for the casual comfort with which he and Sherlock usually conversed.

Sherlock looked at him warily, as if certain John was going to bite Sherlock’s head off if Sherlock got any closer. “Yes,” he answered, slowly.

“Congratulations, Sherlock,” Mike told him, heartily.

Sherlock’s eyes shifted from John to Mike. “For what?”
“Oliver, of course.” Mike gestured to the baby, just as John rescued Mike’s stethoscope from being bashed against the desk.

“Ah,” said Sherlock, still looking blank about why congratulations should have been necessary under such circumstances. “Yes. Of course.”

“Well, we should be off,” John announced, handing Mike back his stethoscope. “Say good-bye, Ollie.”

Oliver mumbled around the fist he stuck in his mouth.

“We’ll pretend that was ‘good-bye,’” said John, and glanced after Sherlock, who had already darted off down the hallway without a word of farewell to Mike.

“It was good catching up,” Mike told him. “And, really, congratulations on all of it. Fatherhood suits you, you look delighted with the universe.”

As John had actually been in a terrible mood when he had first encountered Mike, he found this to be an extraordinary assessment, but he just smiled in response. He mused on the comment as he hurried to catch up to Sherlock, wondering if he really did look that delighted, if, even at his most irritated, he still looked more delighted than the average human being. He looked at Sherlock, who had just behaved infuriatingly rudely and yet John still adored him. John adored him always, even when he was angry with him. And John thought Oliver was probably in the same boat.

“Are we going home?” John asked, as he and Sherlock walked out of St. Bart’s together.

The hitch of Sherlock’s hesitation would have been nonexistent to anyone who wasn’t John. “Are we?” he asked, and hailed a cab.

John said, firmly, “Yes.”

***

Sherlock excelled at a lengthy list of things. One of the things not on that list, however, was “apologies.” He sat in the cab next to John and felt the weight of every wrong word that had come out of his mouth recently, and he didn’t want to make it worse by adding more wrong words, so he sat drowning in silence and wanting to fix things but frightened of ruining everything more.

And that was just his situation with John. That didn’t even take into account the fact that Oliver was clinging to John, burrowed tightly against him, watching Sherlock with wide, accusatory eyes. Sherlock had managed to alienate the two most important people in his life, all in the course of a single disastrous morning.

They reached Baker Street and Sherlock followed John up the stairs and debated what to say, and then John turned to him, holding out Oliver.

“He’s had an exhausting morning,” John said. “He needs a nap.”

Oliver looked at Sherlock distastefully. Sherlock looked at Oliver fretfully. “I’m sure he’d prefer you —”

“He wouldn’t,” said John, and pushed Oliver into Sherlock’s arms. Sherlock caught the baby instinctively to keep him from dropping to the ground. “You’re his father, and he loves you, and he needs you right now. Go and comfort him.”
Sherlock had no idea what that entailed. He juggled Oliver and felt more awkward holding him than he’d ever felt before. “You’re the one he wants, I—”

“Listen to me.” John put his hand on the back of Sherlock’s neck, and it was the first time John had touched him since their argument, and Sherlock stilled so as to keep the pressure there for the longest time possible. “That’s not true. We are the two most important people in his life. We are. Together. We’re his parents. He wants both of us. He is always going to want both of us. He’s had me for a while just now. Now he needs you.”

Sherlock stared at John’s dark blue eyes, feeling helpless. John always thought Sherlock could do anything, and Sherlock always dreaded splintering that illusion. “I don’t know what to…” Sherlock trailed off. He didn’t even know what he didn’t know. What to do? What to say?

“Yes, you do,” John said, an annoyingly cryptic and useless answer, and then John disappeared into the sitting room.

Oliver made a sound of displeasure, and Sherlock looked down at him. He was looking up at Sherlock with stricken, heartbroken eyes. Sherlock felt his own heart quiver in response to that look, which was either impossible or alarming, neither of which was good. He took a deep breath and tried to steel himself. If John was going to force him to take care of Oliver right now, then he would do an excellent job of it, because Oliver deserved it.

“A new nappy,” Sherlock told Oliver, ducking into his bedroom. “And then Papa says you’re due for a nap.”

Oliver protested that.

“I know, he insists you sleep far too much, I’ve already had that discussion with him.” Sherlock went about changing Oliver’s nappy with brisk efficiency.

Oliver complained.

“Maybe,” said Sherlock, “if you’re very quiet, we can just sit in here together and pretend to be napping.” Sherlock sat on his bed, propping himself up against the headboard, and settled Oliver into his arms.

And made the mistake of looking down at him.

Oliver looked back up, his opal eyes bewildered and hurt and sad.

And Sherlock hated himself.

Sherlock could remember the first round of doctors he’d been inflicted with. He’d been three at the time, and he remembered echoing hospital corridors and musty offices with huge, ugly desks. He remembered strangers peering at him, poking him, prodding him, speaking to him with annoying overenunciation as if he couldn’t understand what they were saying otherwise. The doctors were his earliest memories. He couldn’t remember what had come before them. He couldn’t remember what had made him resolve not to speak for as long as he could, but his determination settled into stubborn single-mindedness after the doctors kept trying to coax him into saying something.

He couldn’t remember, either, when he had started feeling lonely, because he had felt it for so long that he hadn’t recognized it for what it was until he’d met John and stopped feeling that way. The loneliness had been a part of him from the very beginning, and he had come back from unsatisfying appointments with doctors and he had not really understood what had been going on and there had been no one to explain it to him, no one to care that he had been frightened. No one to tell him it was
all going to be alright.

Sherlock hadn’t spoken because there had been no one to speak to.

Sherlock looked down at Oliver and thought of all the words he’d wanted said to him. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Oliver blinked his eyes and took little hiccups of trembling breath.

Sherlock pulled him closer, up against his shoulder, burying his face against Oliver’s soft, warm hair, the tiny jut of his shoulder. “I’m so sorry. I had to, to keep you safe, I had to, I had no choice. I’m just trying to keep you safe, that’s all. Because I love you the most ridiculous amount and I can’t let anything happen to you and I will protect you, from everything that could ever hurt you, as long as I am alive. I promise you, everything I ever do will always be because I love you. You will never be alone, you will always have me, always, and I will love you no matter what, no matter who you turn out to be. That is how I love you. Do you understand me?”

Sherlock held his breath, feeling ridiculous after the outburst, as if Oliver was really going to respond. But Oliver said, “Da.” And Sherlock knew it wasn’t Oliver saying Daddy, no more than Oliver had really said skull that day, but Sherlock also knew better than to turn his back on a good sign like that. And an even better sign was that Oliver snuggled against him, catching his fists in the cloth of Sherlock’s jacket and settling his head into the curve of Sherlock’s neck, close and trusting.

Sherlock closed his eyes and let out the breath he’d been holding. Maybe he hadn’t destroyed every important relationship in his life that day. “So am I forgiven?” he asked Oliver.

Oliver didn’t respond, but that was okay, because Oliver stayed tucked contentedly up against Sherlock’s shoulder, his breaths growing heavier and heavier as he drifted toward sleep, and Sherlock held him and reveled in him and considered the other problem of John.

John loved him. John had said as much. And John had stuck by him through much worse than the bungling of a marriage proposal. (Or the inability to notice that it should have been a proposal in the first place.) But John was old-fashioned. Sherlock knew that, and had somehow managed to ignore that, because he’d been stupid. John was adorably old-fashioned, with all his queen-and-country-ness and idealized loyalty, like a code of chivalry. And John was, moreover, a romantic. He had a soft spot for the idea of things like soulmates, like cuddles on the sofa, like lazy sleepy kisses, like walks in the rain. And Sherlock had said, to a man such as this, We’ll get married. That’s it.

Sherlock was astonished by the depths of his stupidity.

Oliver was clearly sleeping against him now, so there was nothing for it but to lay Oliver down and try to make things right with John. He’d apologize, the way he’d apologized to Oliver. And he’d ask this time. Nicely. Politely.

He settled Oliver in his cot and headed from his bedroom into the sitting room.

Where the curtains had been drawn. In the dim imitation of twilight this produced, candles were scattered throughout the room, flickering distorted shadows everywhere. Momentarily disoriented, because he had not been expecting this, Sherlock paused, blinking against the candlelight.

“John?” he asked, cautiously, curiously, unsure what to expect.

John walked out of the kitchen, holding two flutes of champagne. “Is he sleeping?”

“Yes.” Sherlock answered the question automatically, the same way he accepted the champagne
flute. “Where did you…How did you…?”

“I ran out to the shops while you were in with Oliver.”

And Sherlock hadn’t noticed, because Sherlock was an absolute wreck today. “John,” he began, firmly, gathering his courage around him like a mantle.

“No. Me first.” John took Sherlock’s flute away, which was silly, because Sherlock hadn’t even drunk it yet. He put both of the flutes down on the coffee table and turned back to Sherlock, catching his hands between his own. “Are you in love with me?”

An easy question to answer. “Yes.”

“Do you want to spend the rest of your life with me?”

Another easy question. “Yes.”

John burst into a smile and then sank gracefully to one knee, still clasping Sherlock’s hands. “In that case. Will you marry me?”

Sherlock stared down at him, floored into a moment of silence. After everything that had just happened, now John was proposing to him? “Yes,” he answered, finally.

“Good.” John stood back up and caught Sherlock’s face between his hands and kissed him, tenderly, adoringly, lingeringly.

Sherlock drew back and rested his forehead against John’s and drew a shaky breath. “You have to think about this,” he forced himself to say.

“Really?” John sounded amused. “This morning you were ordering me to marry you, and now I’ve proposed and you tell me to reconsider?”

“That’s exactly why you should reconsider. I am rubbish at this, John.”

“Rubbish at what?”

“At…proposing marriage.”

“I noticed. That’s why I did it for you.”

“No.” Sherlock was growing progressively frustrated. “That’s not what I mean. I’m rubbish at all of this. I’m rubbish at being…I’m…I didn’t even know why you were angry with me this morning. I had to ask Molly.”

“You told Molly that you ordered me to marry you this morning?”

“Yes,” Sherlock responded, sulkily. “There was no one else to ask, and I had to fix things with you.”

John kissed him again, brief and achingly affectionate. “I’m sorry that you panicked so much about this. I’m sorry that I overreacted this morning. This is all still very new to me. You’ve had a ridiculous amount of time to get used to the fact that you love me, but I’ve just realized it and I may be a little of an idiot about it sometimes still. I can’t help it. But you’re better at this than you think. Just like you’re a better father than you think. Now.” John said the word as if that ended the entire disagreement. And maybe, Sherlock admitted, it did. “You’ve just had a rather lovely marriage proposal from an incredibly dashing man who’s poured you champagne. Do you know what you do next?”
“Drink the champagne?”

“Forget entirely about the champagne because you’re much too busy with other occupations.” John slid a hand into Sherlock’s trousers, clearly concerned that otherwise Sherlock might miss the point.

Sherlock definitely didn’t miss the point. “Oh,” he said. “Delightful.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Next week I am moving 1300 miles away from home. I expect things to be a bit chaotic, so I probably won't be posting. Think good moving thoughts for me!

John woke up when Sherlock crawled heavily onto the bed with him, practically on top of him, and began pressing kisses to random places on John’s body.

“Mmph,” said John, which was about as coherent as he was able to get at the moment.

“Oh,” said Sherlock. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“When you dropped on top of me and started kissing me all over?” John managed, blinking himself more awake. “You didn’t mean to wake me?”

“No.” Sherlock rolled off him, next to him on the bed. “I was downstairs, and you were up here sleeping, and it suddenly occurred to me that I could come up here and kiss you if I wanted. That it’s allowed.”

“Mmm,” said John, trying to recapture his sleepiness but feeling it scatter farther away from him.

“Yes, theoretically, very true.” He yawned and snuggled deeper into his pillow. Sherlock had been playing the violin when John had gone up to bed. He had been doing it for hours by that point, completely lost in himself. John’s fantasies about going to bed together disintegrated, and really, that was okay, because he ought to get a good night’s sleep anyway, and he had come upstairs alone. He wasn’t sure how long ago that had been.

Sherlock didn’t seem to have come to bed for sex, which was fine with John. He’d had quite a lot of sex recently. The idea of just being in bed with Sherlock and having it be normal and natural was almost as appealing to him at the moment. Sherlock was quiet next to him, so John closed his eyes and enjoyed the comfort of his presence in the room.

“Why did Mike congratulate me?” Sherlock asked, suddenly. “As if he thinks Oliver is my accomplishment. Does he think Oliver is my accomplishment?”

“No,” John denied. “Not really. He was congratulating you on your good luck in having Oliver at all.” John paused. “And your good luck in catching me, of course.”

“Did you tell him about us?”

“I did. No point denying it anymore, right? After all, we’re getting married.”

“You actually stopped denying it a long time ago,” Sherlock pointed out, sounding thoughtful. And then, after a moment, “Do you…want a big…thing?”

“A big what?” asked John, perplexed.

“A big wedding.”
“You want to do wedding planning now?”

“No. I’m asking. I…didn’t realize…that you would want a…romantic proposal. So…” Sherlock trailed off uncertainly.

John reached out and found Sherlock’s hand in the dark, squeezing it to reassure him. “It wasn’t about the romance of it, Sherlock. I really didn’t care about candlelight and champagne. I only went out and got that stuff because I had the time and I thought I would go all-in if I was going to do it. Really all that I wanted was to hear you say that you love me. You love me and you want to spend the rest of your life with me and raise our child together. Those are wedding words, to me. And you were speaking of it so…practically. So clinically. Like it made logical sense so we ought to do it. And just at that moment I didn’t want logic. I didn’t want you to want to marry me because it made sense. I wanted you to want to marry me because you’d completely lost your head over me.”

Sherlock was silent for a moment. “The two are not mutually exclusive.”

“I know. I reacted…knee-jerkingly. And I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

There was another moment of silence. Then Sherlock said, “Know that no matter what I might do or say, ever, for the rest of our lives, there will never be a point in time when I will not love you. It is such a constant that I forget you don’t realize it. But it’s true.”

“I know it’s true,” John whispered, because he did, and somewhere inside he had always known it. “I’m sorry I forgot.”

More silence in the room, except for their side-by-side breaths.

Sherlock said, “So do you want a big one?”

“God, no. But I think we should at least plan something. Nothing big, but something for us to point to. When Oliver asks about our wedding, I don’t want to say, ‘One day we got up and decided to get married.’ I want him to realize how much we thought about it, how much it meant to us. And we should have family and friends there. We should have Mycroft.”

John had thought Sherlock might argue with him on the Mycroft point, but instead Sherlock said, “Oh, I was going to have Mycroft officiate. It’s one of the powers granted to him as the British government and he’ll be able to slice through all the paperwork.”

Which made a lot of sense. “Let’s pick a day then. We’ll work with Mycroft’s schedule. Whenever he thinks he can get everything done. We’ll invite just a few people: Mrs. Hudson, Lestrade, Molly. My sister.” John paused. “Your parents?”

“No,” answered Sherlock at once.

John let it go. He wasn’t overly eager to meet Sherlock’s parents anymore, anyway. “We’ll get rings. I want to be jealous and possessive with you and make sure everyone knows you’re mine.”

“Likewise,” replied Sherlock.

“I think I’ll have to make an announcement on the blog.”

“A wedding announcement?”

“And an announcement about Oliver, too, I think.”
Sherlock was silent.

“Don’t you think I should at least mention him? Sooner or later, one of the startled clients is going to tell some member of the press anyway, and wouldn’t you rather we get to control the story?”

“What would you say?”

“That you and I have got married and adopted a baby. I’ll tell them after the fact, after everything is said and done. That’s it. Nothing else. They don’t need to know anything else.”

“Not his name,” said Sherlock. “Not what he looks like.”

“Nothing.”

“Not that he’s a clone.”

“Of course not.”

“He’s enough of a target just because he’s mine.”

“He isn’t a target, Sherlock.”

Sherlock made a skeptical noise. “You’re all targets.”

John knew Sherlock genuinely thought that. He also didn’t know how to make Sherlock stop thinking that, since possibly Sherlock was right. John thought he had preferred it when Sherlock had insisted that nobody cared about them. He took a deep, steadying breath, and then said, “I think you’re right about telling Molly, though. We can trust her, as you say. And an ally at Bart’s would be useful.”

“Exactly,” replied Sherlock, absently, as if his rightness in that regard was a given and he’d already moved on to more important things in his mind.

John sighed and knew that he should have found it annoying, but he couldn’t help it: He loved him. And he was going to marry him. He had always suspected he would spend the rest of his life with Sherlock Holmes. He had never envisioned it would involve marriage and a child. And now that it had it felt spectacularly inevitable. How had he missed all the clues leading up to this?

“This should really be the nursery. It’s much better suited to being a nursery than my bedroom is,” said Sherlock.

John ignored him. “Stay,” he said.

He felt rather than saw Sherlock turn his head to look at him. “Stay where?”

“Here. Now. Don’t go back downstairs to the violin. Just stay for a little while. Until I fall asleep.”

“The nightmares don’t bother you as much, do they?” asked Sherlock, sounding both quizzical and concerned. “I thought they’d got better.”

“They’re much better,” John assured him. “I just thought it would be nice for you to be here as I fell asleep. I actually really like sharing a bed, you know.”

“Do you?” Sherlock sounded mildly curious. “You almost never did it with any of your girlfriends.”

Which was incredibly telling, John saw now, and how had he not realized all of this so much
sooner? It was beyond him. “I wasn’t engaged to any of them.”

“I’ll stay,” Sherlock promised him. “And tomorrow we’re definitely moving the rooms around.”

***

John woke to an empty bed. Sherlock was downstairs, already packing up Oliver’s accoutrements from the bedroom. Which mainly involved tossing them into a huge pile in the hallway while Oliver protested their ill treatment loudly. They spent the rest of the day completing the move, the climax of which involved John insisting that they invest in a baby monitor and Sherlock having a clipped disagreement with Mycroft over the surveillance interfering with the signal that ended with, “Oh, and we’re getting married as soon as you can manage it, clear your calendar so you can officiate.”

“Is that how you plan to invite everyone to our wedding?” John asked, drily, when Sherlock was off the phone.

“Well, I’m certainly not going to hand-deliver engraved invitations.”

“Maybe I’ll handle telling everyone else,” John decided.

Sherlock shrugged, clearly having lost interest in it entirely, and collapsed backward onto the sofa. Oliver told the skull next to him on his periodic table blanket that Daddy was terrible at wedding announcements.

“Tomorrow,” announced Sherlock, “we are doing the experiment.”

“The experiment? What experiment?”

Sherlock gave his long-suffering, why-me sigh. “The experiment. I shall take Oliver for the day and keep track of the assumptions people make about us.”

“Sherlock,” sighed John. “I don’t think we need to—”

“Yes. We do. This is important.”

“Important to what?”

Sherlock waved his hand around to show John that the question was so stupid that he didn’t need to deign to give it a reply.

John sighed again. He did not like the idea of this experiment, but he didn’t know how to dissuade Sherlock from an idea once he’d had one. He hadn’t yet discovered the trick to it.

The following day dawned gray and gloomy. John thought maybe the weather would inspire Sherlock to stay inside with the baby, but Sherlock seemed to take no notice of it. He dressed Oliver and strapped him in and announced, “I’ll be back later.”

“Later when?”

Sherlock shrugged. “That is dependent upon the progress of the experiment. I’ll call.”

“Should I consider myself to be on my own for dinner?”

“You usually are,” Sherlock pointed out, which was true enough, because it was John who ate dinner and Sherlock who picked at whatever John had put in front of him.
“And you’ve got enough nappies with you?”

Sherlock indicated the bag slung over his shoulder, which John assumed was an affirmative response.

John wished it was cold enough for him to demand that Oliver be kept inside. Possibly it was damp enough? “You’re really going to drag him around in the rain?”

Sherlock and Oliver gave him identical expressions of *did-you-just-move-to-London?* “That is hardly *rain,*” said Sherlock.

Oliver shook the bumblebee rattle he was so fond of.

John wanted to say, *Don’t let what other people think bother you. They’re idiots, remember?* But he didn’t think Sherlock would appreciate being told that. Or listen to him, really. So he just sighed again and said, “Fine. Be careful. Have fun.”

Sherlock swept out of the room in a swirl of dramatic coat and John looked around the empty sitting room, feeling a bit bereft with everyone else gone. What had he used to do before he’d had Sherlock? And Oliver? He couldn’t even remember.

At loose ends, he considered knocking on Mrs. Hudson’s door to see if she fancied a cuppa. But John had told Mrs. Hudson about the wedding the night before—Sherlock had shouted out confirmation of it from the kitchen, where he had refused to budge from an important experiment involving charred toast, from the smell of things—and John thought Mrs. Hudson would twitter at him about the wedding. She had seemed to think they should be wearing coordinating ties, and Sherlock had said, “I don’t wear *ties,*” and John had changed the subject. He didn’t really want to revisit the subject, not even now that Sherlock was out.

Thinking about the wedding, though, made John remember. He pulled his mobile out and texted Lestrade. *Up for a couple of pints today?*
The café was dingy and Sherlock didn’t like it. He sniffed at the coffee and turned his nose up. He’d taken Oliver out of his carrier and had him settled on his lap, and he said to him, “Not sure we should touch this table at all. It’s a hotbed of bacteria. How Papa can complain about the state of our kitchen when this is what people eat on…”

Oliver ignored him, testing the table’s resiliency by knocking his rattle against it. Sherlock supposed this was a sound experiment and decided not to stop him.

A woman at the next table looked over at him, but said nothing about his son, unfortunately. Neither had the barista. Well, she had said, cooing, “Aren’t you just the sweetest?” without revealing any assumptions about Oliver’s parentage. Sherlock wondered if this experiment was going to be an enormous failure because he’d be unable to get people to discuss the assumptions they were making. Sherlock could make deductions, of course, but that was poor science to simply rely on his deductions, and how would John make such deductions, anyway? But if Sherlock came right out and said—What do you think is the relationship between me and this baby?—it would surely skew results.

The woman at the next table looked over at them again, glaring at Oliver’s rattle.

Sherlock frowned at her and said, loudly, “Hush, Ollie, the woman at the next table needs all her concentration for the gay erotica she’s currently writing.”

The woman turned scarlet, and a couple of the other patrons of the dismal café looked up at her with some interest, and Sherlock felt marginally better about everything.

And then Harry Watson walked in.

She was late—as usual—and when she spotted him she visibly gulped a swallow before wending her way over to his table. He’d chosen the one farthest from the door deliberately, and he watched her weave over to it, tottering slightly. He frowned, and she sat opposite him, and her eyes latched onto Oliver and stayed there, drinking him in hungrily. She wanted a child with Clara, thought Sherlock. Clara said there would be no children unless Harry got her drinking problem under control. Harry never did.

Those had been hypothetical children, thought Sherlock. Maybe, with a real child in front of her, the outcome would be different.

Harry continued to stare at Oliver, and Sherlock took her in, from her unkempt hair to her bloodshot eyes to the way her hands were ever-so-slightly trembling. Oliver on his lap was subjecting her to the same scrutiny.

“You’re drunk,” remarked Sherlock, mildly.

Harry flinched as if he’d reached out and hit her and glared at him defensively. “I’m not drunk. I had
a drink to steady myself to come out and see you. You’re not exactly the most welcoming person, you know.”

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow. “One drink?”

Harry’s eyes flashed with obvious hatred for him. “You’re a cruel and obnoxious bastard,” she bit out.

“Not in front of the baby,” Sherlock told her.

“Oh, God forbid anyone say anything against the great Sherlock Holmes,” fumed Harry.

“I was referring to the vulgarity, not the sentiment. We don’t swear in front of the baby. It’s a rule instituted by your brother, actually. I’m afraid you’ll have to find less colorful ways to express your distaste for me.”

Harry glared at him but said nothing. She dropped her gaze back to Oliver.

Sherlock thought they might as well get on with things. “This is Oliver,” he offered, by way of introduction. “Ollie, say hello to your aunt Harry.”

Oliver regarded her, then looked at Sherlock, his head tipped in what was doubtless confusion.

“Papa’s sister,” Sherlock explained.

Oliver looked back at Harry. Then he tried to stick the rattle in his mouth.

Sherlock winced and took it from him. “Sorry, but that rattle is filthy from having been on the table.”

Oliver wailed in protest.

“I told you not to put the rattle on the table,” said Sherlock. “I told you not to touch the table.”

Oliver cried and cried and cried.

“Oh, bloody hell,” muttered Sherlock, searching through his pocket until he came up with his magnifying lens. He handed it to Oliver, and Oliver, appeased, stopped crying and cooed lovingly at the magnifying lens.

Sherlock turned his attention back to Harry, who had not taken her eyes off of Oliver. “Do you have any questions?” Sherlock asked, politely, proud of himself.

Harry blinked her eyes back to Sherlock, looking bewildered. And also drunk. “Questions about what?”

“Oliver, obviously.” Really, how drunk was the woman?

“I have questions about why you’re even here. You text me, out of the blue, like it’s something I should expect or something, you texting me, when you’ve never done it before, and you say, ‘Oh, fancy meeting your nephew?’”

“I didn’t say anything about bringing Oliver with me,” Sherlock pointed out, mildly. “And I doubt that you really leaped to the conclusion that I would, judging by how shocked you were to see him. So you came here today to meet me with no idea what I might say to you. You’re either brave or stupidly curious. Based on shared DNA, I’d say ‘brave,’ but you haven’t proven yourself to resemble John all that closely.”
“My brother,” sneered Harry. “Is he really so very brave? Is that what you think? I’ve been texting my brother like mad and he can’t even be arsed to tell me to stop. Too much of a coward to even reply to a text, never mind come and see me face-to-face. I thought he’d sent you as his messenger.”

“He doesn’t even know I’m here,” Sherlock told her.

Harry had warmed to her topic and ignored him entirely. “And do you know why he’s not speaking to me? Because I told him the truth. About him and about you and about the whole bloody mess you’ve caused.”

“I’m sitting here,” Sherlock told her, icily, “offering you an olive branch I don’t especially think you deserve. You ought to reconsider your choice of conversational topic.”

Harry, of course, was too drunk to take his sensible advice. “He’s in love with you, you know. Do you at least see that? Do either one of you bother to acknowledge the fact that you are in a sodding relationship together? Or do you both walk around being self-righteous about other people’s blind spots and human transgressions while you pass judgment, so cool and calm and above it all?”

Sherlock looked at her for a moment. John had mentioned inviting her to the wedding, so he clearly intended to tell her at some point, but he had not done so yet, and Sherlock thought that was John’s place to do so. Sherlock was flirting with disaster by having smuggled Oliver here in the first place. But John loved Harry, for some misguided genetic reason or something, and Sherlock knew well the power that one person—one person more important than the addiction—could have. Something else to think of, something else to desire and crave. Harry had wanted children. Harry could at least have a nephew.

“I’m here,” Sherlock said, “because I love John.”

That stopped Harry dead in her tracks. She sucked in a breath and stared at him in shock.

That pleased Sherlock. It pleased Oliver as well. Sherlock felt him relax minutely and realized that he’d grown tense in the face of this unknown woman’s diatribe.

“I love John,” Sherlock continued, into the blessed silence, “and John loves you. So I’m here. This is Oliver. Oliver, this is your aunt Harry. One hopes that she is going to be a bit calmer now.”

Harry managed to look a bit abashed.

Oliver looked at Harry and blinked.

Harry stared at him. Then she swallowed and licked her lips and hesitantly lifted her eyes back to Sherlock. “Why did you bring him?”

“Because I thought what I had to say would be tempered if Oliver was no longer hypothetical to you.”

Harry’s attention was back on Oliver. “What do you have to say?” she asked, sounding distracted now by the baby on his lap.

“Surely you are perfectly aware of John’s hesitation in exposing Oliver to you.”

Harry bristled. “It’s ridiculous,” she spat out, hotly. “I don’t have a problem, he’s overreacting—”

“You have a problem,” Sherlock interrupted, evenly. “The sooner you admit that, the more you might get to see of Oliver. Because I’m fairly confident of my ability to convince John that you ought
to be allowed interaction with Oliver, so long as you get sober and stay that way. I am not overly optimistic of your ability to do so, but I thought I ought to give you the opportunity, because a permanent fracture between you and John is not something I desire; it will hurt him in the long run more than he realizes at the moment. And you should know: Oliver is an absolute delight. Not knowing Oliver would be the biggest mistake you could make with your life. And you have made such astronomically enormous mistakes.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” Harry muttered, sullenly.

“That I don’t deny,” rejoined Sherlock.

Harry stared at Oliver. “Get sober,” she echoed.

“Immediately. You didn’t know it, but the drinks this morning were the last drinks you’ll ever have. If you want to see Oliver again.”

Harry took a deep breath. Then she ventured, “Can I hold him?”

Sherlock hesitated. He didn’t like for people to hold Oliver, really. He preferred for Oliver to always be tucked into the safety of his arms or John’s arms. Mrs. Hudson’s arms were also acceptable. But maybe Harry needed Oliver to be more concrete. Sherlock himself remembered vividly how much he’d fallen in love the moment he had taken Oliver into his arms and looked into his eyes. So Sherlock nodded and carefully transferred Oliver across.

Harry held him carefully, as if any wrong move on her part would break him. Oliver looked up at her curiously. And Harry lit up. Sherlock knew the expression, because he was lucky enough to see it frequently on John’s face.

“Hello, Oliver,” she crooned to him, grinning. “I’m your aunt Harry.”

Oliver’s eyes cut briefly over to Sherlock, as if checking he was still there, then looked back at Harry. He spoke briefly, then stuck his fist in his mouth.

Harry looked charmed, which Sherlock considered the only acceptable reaction when faced with Oliver, frankly. “He has your eyes,” remarked Harry.

He has my everything, thought Sherlock, but didn’t say.

“Aren’t you gorgeous?” said Harry to Oliver. “Aren’t you absolutely gorgeous?” Harry looked up at Sherlock, eyes shining. “Oh, my God, he’s beautiful.”

Sherlock wondered if Harry would have made the same comment had she known the truth about Oliver’s DNA. He merely agreed, because clone or not it was undeniably true that Oliver was the prettiest baby who had ever existed. “Yes. He is.”

“This means a lot to me,” Harry told him, solemnly. She was trembling, and Sherlock wasn’t sure if that was from alcohol or emotion. “Really. That you would do this. For me. It means a lot to me.”

Sherlock was unmoved. If anything, he felt a little bit uncomfortable. “Don’t disappoint me. Don’t disappoint him.”

“No.” Harry shook her head energetically. “No. I won’t. I swear to you. You’ll tell John?”

“I’ll tell John.”
“I just want him to be happy,” implored Harry. “I don’t think it’s making him happy, living with you and not having you. Do you understand? I was only trying to—”

“Do you think I don’t desire his happiness?” asked Sherlock, crisply.

Harry faltered, uncertain. “No…”

“Time for Oliver and me to be off,” Sherlock decided, rising and slinging Oliver’s bag over his shoulder. “Busy day today, hmm, Ollie?” Sherlock reached for Oliver, who settled comfortably into the angle of Sherlock’s arms, just as if he belonged there, which he clearly did.

Harry’s face had fallen. “Oh,” she said. “Right. Yes. Of course.”

“Say good-bye, Oliver,” said Sherlock.

Oliver stayed stubbornly silent.

Harry smiled at him and said, “Good-bye, Oliver. It was so lovely to meet you. I’ll see you soon maybe?” She looked up at Sherlock for confirmation.

Sherlock thought of the wedding scheduled for Tuesday next. “Quite possibly,” he replied. “But, Harry.” He caught her eye. “I’ll know. If you don’t adhere to our deal. I’ll know.”

Harry gulped a swallow and managed to nod.

Sherlock nodded in return, and then he swept out of the café, Oliver solidly in his arms, and then, once he stepped outside, he paused to breathe. The things one did for love, Sherlock thought. Because that had been decidedly disagreeable.

“Alright,” he told Oliver, shaking off the unpleasant film of misery that seemed to be clinging to him after that encounter, a miasma draped over him. “Shall we get on with the experiment now?”

“Do do do do do do do,” said Oliver, clearly bubbling over with questions about his aunt.

“No,” Sherlock agreed. “I don’t have a good feeling about it, either. Maybe it’ll be one of the times when we’re wrong, hmm?”

“Ba ba ba,” replied Oliver, doubtfully.
Chapter 21

John was already at a table, nursing a pint, when Lestrade walked into the pub. He went up to the bar and got his own pint before joining John.

“Bit early in the day for a pint, isn’t it?” he asked, cheerfully.

“Not early in my day,” replied John, half-toasting him with his pint before taking another huge gulp of it.

“Oh? Have you got a case on? Operating on a different time zone?”

“No. Just had a long day already.”

“What’s Sherlock done this time?”

“He’s conducting an experiment.”

“Hardly unusual, that,” remarked Lestrade, and sipped his pint.

“It’s an experiment in why people don’t think he’s Oliver’s father.”

Lestrade lifted his eyebrows. “Is there doubt about that? He looks like a bleedin’ clone.”

John almost laughed. He took a sardonic sip of his pint and then agreed, “Yes. He does. Which is why Sherlock is offended that more people don’t assume that he is Oliver’s father.”

Lestrade looked bewildered. “What people?” he asked, blankly.

“Clients, for instance. Clients don’t know what to make of Oliver when they see him.”

“Well, can you blame them? You’ve never mentioned a baby. They’re not prepared.”

“I know that. Try telling Sherlock that.”

Lestrade acknowledged that point with a brief nod of his head. “So what’s this experiment then?”

“I don’t know.” John rubbed at the back of his neck. “He’s…wandering the city with Oliver and… doing something, I don’t know. Keeping track of people’s assumptions? Somehow? Who knows? But, anyway, it meant I had the afternoon free and I know you’ve been wanting to meet for a pint so…” John took a deep breath and let it out and tried not to look like meeting Lestrade for a pint was akin to being led to a firing squad.

“I thought you were just going to ignore my texts indefinitely,” commented Lestrade, and swigged his pint again.

“I wasn’t ignoring them, I was…” John took another deep breath, trying to sort through his thoughts. “I knew what you were going to want to talk about, and I didn’t know what I was going to say, so I didn’t…”

Lestrade was watching him closely. Sometimes John viewed Lestrade simply as a friend but there were other times when John was keenly aware of the fact that Lestrade was really quite a clever detective. Not up to Sherlock’s par but not half-bad. John was surrounded by people who saw through every disguise he tried to erect. It was bloody exhausting. “We don’t have to talk about it,”
“No, we should. Of course we should. Especially because now I know what I’m going to say.”

“Okay,” said Lestrade, slowly.

“Sherlock and I are getting married,” said John. “Tuesday next. We’d love it if you could come.”


“We’re getting married,” John repeated. It was actually a relief to say it. No, it was more than a relief. John felt giddy. And it wasn’t just the pint. John realized he was grinning, helpless to suppress it. He tried to cover it by sipping his drink but he didn’t think he quite accomplished it.

“But I thought you weren’t…” said Lestrade, confused. “You said you weren’t…”

“We weren’t. Then. We are. Now. And it took us long enough to get around to it, don’t you think?”

“Well…” answered Lestrade.

“Oh, come off it, I know Scotland Yard’s had wagers going on about the two of us for years. We’re long overdue, aren’t we?”

“Personally, the date I’d chosen for the two of you has long since come and gone, and thanks very much for nothing on that front, because I would have won a very tidy sum of money.”

“Sorry about that. It turns out I was slow on the uptake with him. And now that I’ve caught up, I don’t see any reason to wait to get married. Neither does he. I think, honestly, he would have married me years ago. I think he sees my delay as being ridiculous and unnecessary. I may have been an idiot, possibly, for a lot of years. And we have a baby now, so I think it’s more important than ever that we get married.”

“And there’s…sex?”

“There’s very good sex.”

“Never mind, I don’t want to know,” Lestrade decided.

John sipped his beer, feeling oddly smug.

Lestrade was practically gaping at him. “You’re just so…calm.”

John considered. “This is right for me,” he said, finally. “I’ve been calm ever since it happened. Calmer than I’ve been in years. I feel…settled. Like there’s nothing to look for anymore. Everything’s right here, everything I could possibly want. It’s like winning the lottery. Or, more accurately, it’s like finding the winning ticket from years ago, realizing you’ve been carrying it in your pocket all the time.”

Lestrade had stopped gaping. Lestrade was now smiling. “You’re happy,” he said.

“I’m gleeful,” said John. “I’m not sure I’ve ever been so happy in my entire life. And I just get happier. He does the most ridiculous things, like this foolhardy experiment he’s so set on, and I think to myself, ‘This is a terrible idea, he’s not going to accomplish anything but being grumpy about the results,’ and I’m right, but it doesn’t matter, I let him do it because if he didn’t do ridiculous things sometimes I wouldn’t love him half as much as I do.” John knew he sounded silly, that he had to stop gushing like some starry-eyed teenager, but he couldn’t help it. He hadn’t really got a chance to
say any of these things to anyone, and he’d had them bottled up for ages, he was realizing now.

“You two,” said Lestrade, “are the two luckiest bastards I’ve ever met in my life. Billions of people in the world, and you somehow managed to trip over each other. Lucky bastards,” he murmured again, and sipped his beer.

They were, so John didn’t dispute it. John sipped his beer as well.

“You two,” said Lestrade.

“Will you be there?”

“Of course. Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

***

Sherlock took Oliver to the British Museum. They were both absolutely uninterested in viewing the exhibits, but Sherlock wandered around in circles near the public loo and waited to see how many people complimented him on his baby. Many people did, and a decent percentage of them clearly seemed to assume he was Oliver’s father. Several of them even commented on how much the baby resembled him.

Tourists, Sherlock thought, were apparently excellent judges of these things.

After he’d assembled a decent sample size at the British Museum, Sherlock decided it was time to switch venues. The supermarket, he thought. The dairy aisle, possibly.

Sherlock stepped onto the pavement, where the rain had picked up its pace. Oliver squawked in protest at getting wet, and Sherlock frowned and stuck a hand out over Oliver’s head and looked for a cab.

What pulled up in front of him was a black car.

Sherlock wrinkled his nose at it in distaste.

The back window rolled down. “Are you really going to stand out in the rain just to spite me?” came Mycroft’s voice. “You’ll give your baby pneumonia.”

Sherlock wanted to say that wasn’t how it worked but he didn’t want to tempt fate when it came to Oliver’s immune system so he frowned more heavily and then jerked the car door open.

Oliver babbled happily at being brought into the shelter of the warm, dry car, and Sherlock thought at him, Traitor.

“Shall I take you home?” inquired Mycroft, mildly.

“We’re going to the supermarket,” Sherlock sniffed.

Mycroft lifted his eyebrows in that deliberately irritating way he had. “For what?”

“Milk,” spat out Sherlock, belligerently.

Oliver, picking up on Sherlock’s mood, directed a couple of angry syllables Mycroft’s way and waved his fists.

Mycroft glanced at the baby, then looked back to Sherlock. “Don’t you think meeting with his sister
behind his back is a foolhardy thing to do?"

Sherlock stiffened. Every time he conversed with Mycroft, he thought it wasn’t possible for him to be more annoyed with Mycroft. And yet Mycroft always proved him wrong. “Do you never tire of spying on me?” Sherlock demanded. “Do you really have absolutely nothing better to do?”

“The amount of guilt in your posture at the café is evidence enough that you’re unsure it was one of your better ideas, meeting with her,” continued Mycroft, as if Sherlock hadn’t spoken.

Sherlock slumped a bit against the car seat. “I should start a war or something,” he muttered. “That would keep you busy for a bit. Nothing major, just a minor little skirmish.”

“I thought global politics was beneath you,” remarked Mycroft.

“They are,” Sherlock insisted, glowering at him.

“What could you possibly have been thinking?” Mycroft asked.

Sherlock said nothing, because he had no answer to that question. He’d been thinking that he loved John desperately; that Harry’s drinking made John unhappy; that Sherlock couldn’t bear to see John unhappy; that maybe Sherlock could do something about that; that Sherlock had to do something about it if doing something about it was at all within his power. And maybe those were valid thoughts, but they’d been valid thoughts of his heart, not of his brain, and Sherlock was already open to enough Mycroftian ridicule as it was.

“Be careful, would you? I’d hate to have sign a divorce decree right after I witness the marriage certificate.”

Sherlock bristled. John and I are going to be together forever, he wanted to say, and then wondered if he could possibly sound any more childish. So instead he said, “Oliver, try to spit up on Mycroft’s shoes, if you could.”

Mycroft sighed and rolled his eyes and said, “Charming.”

“Now that you’ve interrupted my day to scold me about the conducting of my relationship, could you complete this kidnapping and take us to the nearest supermarket?”

“That wasn’t why I wanted to talk to you today.”

“And yet it’s the only topic you’ve discussed,” Sherlock pointed out, brittly.

“Tuesday next,” said Mycroft.

“Oh, God, have you some ridiculous conflict in your schedule? A fitting for a new shirt that cannot possibly be delayed?”

“Of course not,” said Mycroft. “I’ve cleared my calendar for you.”

This gave Sherlock momentary pause, as he hadn’t really expected Mycroft to…do that. But Mycroft gave him no time to absorb this, because Mycroft kept talking.

“I wanted to talk to you about the wedding ceremony.”

“Oh,” said Sherlock, and waved a hand about. “You’d be better off speaking to John about that but he doesn’t appear to have many preferences. As far as I’m concerned, it can be as brief as you like. There’ll only be a handful of guests.”
“Father and Mummy?” asked Mycroft, and his voice carried so much weight that Sherlock knew this had been the point of the entire encounter.

“No,” Sherlock answered, crisply.

Mycroft looked at him impassively for a moment. “Do you think you should—”

“No. I don’t think I should do anything. You know I said I’d have nothing to do with them, and I won’t.” Sherlock could sense Oliver, still and attentive on his lap, clearly listening hard to every single word, and Sherlock hated that there should even be a moment of Oliver’s life when he was thinking about Catherine and Cecil Holmes.

“Things have changed since then—”

“Have you told them about Oliver?” Sherlock demanded.

“No.”

Sherlock wasn’t sure if the answer surprised him or not. He considered. “Why not?” he asked, finally.

“Because I thought we should discuss it first.”

“Really?” Sherlock lifted a skeptical eyebrow. “You thought you should discuss something with me before simply dictating how things should go?”

“We had a deal, did we not?” Mycroft reminded him.

They did, an ancient deal that Sherlock had never forgotten, because it had been forged in a rehab clinic when Sherlock had already been crawling the walls with withdrawal and hating Mycroft more than anything in his life other than his parents. The deal had been that Sherlock would get clean—and stay clean—if he never had to speak to their parents ever again. Mycroft had struck the deal, and that had been the end of it. He assumed Mycroft spoke to their parents about him but he had never really asked, because he really didn’t care.

“Yes,” sniffed Sherlock.

“A deal to which I have always adhered, have I not?”

Yes. Admirably. Which Sherlock was never going to say. He looked at Mycroft and blinked, because Mycroft knew he had kept to the deal.

“I won’t force you to invite Father and Mummy.”

“But you’ll tell them I’m married?”

“I have to.”

“Why?” challenged Sherlock.

“Because you’re their son.”

“They couldn’t care less—”

“Imagine if Oliver didn’t tell you when he eventually gets married—”
Sherlock covered Oliver’s ears and hissed, furiously, “Do not bring Oliver into this. My situation with Oliver has nothing in common with my situation with our parents. Nothing.”

Oliver reached up and grabbed at Sherlock’s little finger, seeming more interested than annoyed. Sherlock left his hands in place, on either side of Oliver’s head.

“Don’t tell me they care if I’m married. Don’t tell me they care that Oliver exists.”

“There is a very practical reason why Oliver will interest them a great deal,” said Mycroft, evenly, solemnly, his eyes steady on Sherlock’s face.

“Because he’s a clone?” guessed Sherlock.

Mycroft shook his head. “Because he’s your son.”

“And you think they suddenly care about having grandchildren?” demanded Sherlock, incredulously.

“Very much. There’s a great big house in Cornwall with a long and illustrious history tied to a family whose name is about to die out. Except.” Mycroft’s eyes rested on Oliver.

Oliver was trying to get Sherlock’s little finger into his mouth.

“Isn’t he,” Mycroft continued, “for lack of a better word, the heir, Sherlock? Isn’t it all his now? Isn’t it his right? We are unlikely to have other children, you and I. There is only him.”

Sherlock hadn’t really thought about that. He didn’t really want to think about it. He said, defensively, “He isn’t a Holmes. He’s a Watson Holmes.” It was a silly cosmetic distinction, and he knew it. Oliver was as entirely Holmes as a child could be, more Holmes than any natural child Sherlock or Mycroft might have had. But John was involved, and to Sherlock that made all the difference. Oliver had John. That was supposed to save him from the fate of Catherine and Cecil Holmes.

Mycroft didn’t bother to say anything to that. Mycroft looked at Oliver. Sherlock’s hands had slipped a bit from their original positions, and Oliver was now delightedly gnawing on Sherlock’s little finger, making contented gurgling noises around it. He was happy. He was unmistakably happy. Sherlock had limited experience with babies but he was convinced he had never seen a child as happy as Oliver. And that was what he wanted for Oliver, this delightfully happy bubble, and inside of this bubble there was no room for large, drafty houses in Cornwall that smelled of damp and disuse and neglect.

Sherlock closed his eyes for a minute, feeling oddly underwater, and it was annoying that, after all these years, just the idea of having to talk to his parents again would send him spiraling into a panic, when he should have been so far beyond that. He was happy, and John was marrying him next week, and they had a child. And all of it felt so fragile in that moment, exactly like the bubble he’d just been thinking of.

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Because he didn’t have time for all this childish panic. He had a child of his own who needed to be protected. “I don’t care about the house in Cornwall,” he said, firmly. “I hope the house in Cornwall tumbles into a pile of rocks. Oliver will never set foot in it. He’ll never go anywhere near it. You’re not to mention Oliver to them. Ever.”

“Sherlock. You’re a minor celebrity. You’re not going to be able to keep Oliver a secret forever. You think they won’t find out?”
Sherlock thought about how John was already talking about having to make a blog announcement. He wondered if his parents actually read John’s blog. “I don’t care,” he reiterated. “Let them find out with the rest of the general public. I don’t want them to find out as if they are special.”

Sherlock met Mycroft’s eyes for a very long moment, stubborn and intent. Then Mycroft nodded. “Alright,” he said, and the word was almost soft.

Sherlock relaxed a bit. He hadn’t realized how much he’d tensed during the conversation. Now that they’d reached the end of it, he was feeling exhausted. “Good. Now take us home.”

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow. “I thought you were going to the supermarket?”

Bugger. He had been going to the supermarket, hadn’t he? But he had lost all interest in the experiment now. What he wanted was John. He wanted to drag himself into the flat and collapse and John wouldn’t care why, John wouldn’t even ask why, John would just love him. Sherlock had spent so many years longing to have the ability to collapse onto John when he needed it.

“Home,” said Sherlock, and decided to ignore the fact that he had originally asked for the supermarket.

Mycroft let him.
John was not in the flat when Sherlock dragged himself and Oliver in. Sherlock blinked around it blearily and then swore loudly, because he didn’t really care about swearing in front of Oliver. There were things Oliver shouldn’t hear, like about his grandparents, and then there were things that it didn’t matter if he heard. But Oliver still looked at him wide-eyed. *As soon as I start talking, I’m telling Papa what you said,* said that look.

“We’re supposed to stick together, you and I,” Sherlock reminded him. “We’re clones.”

Oliver sniffed skeptically and then looked around the flat, clearly looking for John.

Sherlock knew the feeling. And he supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised that John wasn’t there, since he’d told John he would be out all day, but he was out-of-sorts about it anyway. He put Oliver down on his periodic table blanket, where Oliver immediately embarked on telling his skull and his stuffed water molecule and a giraffe Mrs. Hudson had bought for him all about his exciting day of sneaking around behind Papa’s back and then hearing horror stories about a terrible house out in Cornwall.

Sherlock texted John. *Where are you? SH.*

Then Sherlock wandered into the kitchen. He eyed the kettle, lost all interest in drinking a non-John-made cup of tea, wandered back into the sitting room. Oliver was bashing at the giraffe with the skull. Sherlock thought this a worthwhile activity. The giraffe was a bit boggle-eyed and silly-looking.

Sherlock’s mobile vibrated. *Killing time. Are you home?*

*Yes. SH,* Sherlock texted back, and decided against texting, *Come home immediately.* Because he decided it was implied.

Sherlock left Oliver happily entertaining himself with rolling over, using the water molecule as leverage, and stood at the window so that he knew as soon as John turned onto Baker Street. And then Sherlock exhaled. He felt as if he’d been holding his breath since getting into Mycroft’s car.

John jogged up the stairs, and Sherlock stood by the window, waiting for him.

“Hello,” he said, jovially, in Sherlock’s direction, and then, directed toward the baby on the floor, “Hello, Ollie. You’re home earlier than I expected.” John turned back toward Sherlock. “How’d the experiment go?”

Sherlock crossed the room and collapsed against John. John uttered a surprised little *oof* at absorbing his weight but caught him, and Sherlock cuddled tightly into him, pressed his face against John’s neck and breathed him in.

“’S alright,” John said, an automatic soothing reaction, his hand going up to pull through Sherlock’s hair.

Sherlock closed his eyes and just breathed. And John said nothing. John stood and held him and stroked at his hair and Sherlock breathed.

After a moment, John ventured, “You okay?”
Sherlock nodded against him.

“Okay, well, that wasn’t terribly convincing, but I’ll let it go for now,” remarked John, and brushed a kiss over the curve of Sherlock’s ear.

Sherlock took a deep breath and pulled himself together and managed to step away from John. He really did feel better now that he’d got to burrow into John the way he’d wanted so desperately to do. “No, I’m fine,” he insisted, feeling a little bit like an idiot under John’s gaze. “It was just a long day. Oliver missed you.”

“Did he? Glad one of you did.” John grinned at him, to show that he was joking and knew Sherlock had missed him. “Have you eaten?”

“I’m not hungry,” said Sherlock, and let himself fall backward onto the sofa.

“What about Oliver?” John crouched, picking Oliver up.

“I fed him at the British Museum,” said Sherlock, absently, settling his fingertips together under his chin and looking up at the ceiling.

“The British Museum,” repeated John, in the tone of voice he used to indicate that nothing ought to surprise him anymore. And then, “How long ago was that?”

An entire Mycroft conversation ago, thought Sherlock.

“How about it, Ollie?” John crooned to the baby. “Shall I make you a bottle, love?”

John moved into the kitchen with Oliver. Sherlock counted his footsteps. He closed his eyes and listened whilst John murmured at Oliver and Oliver responded. Home wrapped all around him, settled heavily on top of him, and Sherlock just breathed.

***

Sherlock was sleeping on the sofa when John emerged from the kitchen with Oliver in his arms eagerly suckling at a bottle. John supposed he should have expected that. Sherlock had seemed exhausted when John had walked in, and Sherlock tended to just drop when he reached that state, sleeping anywhere and anytime.

John decided to let him sleep, and occupied himself with hiding the skull behind various obstacles while Oliver giggled with hysterical delight. Eventually, as the shadows stretched across the sitting room, John gave Oliver a bath and then carried him upstairs to his new nursery, where John sat and read him a book about purple elephants and a little blue truck. Oliver was wide-eyed with fascination when John started reading the book and sound asleep by the end of it. So John kissed the baby’s temple and carefully laid him down in his cot and then went downstairs.

He let Sherlock stay sleeping and sat in his chair and read The Mill on the Floss. Which he’d been trying to read for so long that he thought it was really time to give up. After a few more pages of it, he thought, yes, definitely, he was no longer going to read that book, and switched on the telly to watch something awful instead. He thought it would be a welcome novelty to watch a television show without Sherlock’s endless commentary but instead he found it terribly dull, and he finally decided that he might as well join the rest of the family and go to sleep.

John shut the telly off and stood and walked over to the sofa and looked down at the fast asleep Sherlock, undecided whether he should wake him up to come to bed or not. Sherlock looked very young in his sleep, as he always did. He looked a great deal like Oliver. Which was to be expected
but still sometimes the intense resemblance between the two caught John off-guard.

Sherlock had had a bad day, John thought, thinking of how much he’d snuggled against John when John had come home. Stupid terrible idea for an experiment, thought John. He touched Sherlock’s hair gently, drew a finger across one of Sherlock’s cheekbones. Sherlock snuffled and shifted a bit but he didn’t wake up, which John took as a sign. So he left him on the sofa and went to bed alone in Sherlock’s bed in Sherlock’s bedroom.

John had not been especially tired when he went to bed, but he hadn’t expected to lay awake for hours. Which was what happened. He wondered if it was the newness of Sherlock’s bed still. Or maybe the momentousness, that this actually had, magically, somehow, become his life. John lay on his back and watched the patterns of moonlight and starlight dance over Sherlock’s ceiling and listened to Oliver’s even breaths over the baby monitor.

And then Sherlock came to bed. Stumbled into the bedroom and fell onto his side of the bed. And even though he was still and unmoving, John could tell he didn’t fall back to sleep.

John turned toward him. “Do you want to tell me what happened today?” His voice was gentle and soft but it had been so quiet in the flat for so long that John actually winced, concerned that he might as well be yelling at Sherlock.

Sherlock didn’t deny that things had happened, which John had mostly expected. Sherlock, after a moment, just shook his head, a motion that John sensed rather than saw.

John didn’t press. “Fine,” he said. He paused. “But you know that you could, right? You know that whatever it was or is or whatever, you know that you could tell me and I wouldn’t care. I wouldn’t leave. I’d stay right here with you and marry you next week. I’d still love you.”

Sherlock’s voice was even when he eventually spoke. “Do you think I’m worried you’ll leave me?”

John hesitated. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I worry about the same thing,” John admitted.

“Worry that I’ll leave you?” Sherlock sounded incredulous. “What a stupid thing to worry about.”

John flinched, the insult hitting a little too well. “It doesn’t seem so bloody stupid to worry about when you’ve actually done it before,” snapped John.

There was a moment of silence. “That was different.”

“It wasn’t sodding different.” John was no longer doing a very good job keeping his voice down and he didn’t really care much anymore. His words lashed out over their bedroom. “You left me. I don’t care why you did it. That’s what you did. You left, and the world was—It was—I was—You left. And I worry every day, every minute, about how I would ever survive if you did it to me again. So if you really think that whatever it is that happened today is going to make me leave you, then you need to stop giving me and Oliver lectures on seeing but not observing.”

Sherlock didn’t say anything. There was a moment of utter stillness in the room, torn through by John’s quick, sharp breaths, and then Sherlock rolled over and cuddled himself against John with the same desperate need for contact that he’d telegraphed before when he’d collapsed on him in the sitting room. John should have guessed that Sherlock would crave physical comfort like that. Sherlock had been crowding just a little too far into John’s personal space for ages. John should have
realized how much he longed to take that one little step and close the distance between them.

“Don’t be angry,” Sherlock said into John’s neck.

John sighed. “I’m not. Not really. I’ve accepted why you thought you had to do it. And I’m glad you’re back. I’m not angry. I love you and I’m going to marry you.”

“I met with Harry today,” said Sherlock.

Of all the things John had expected Sherlock to tell him about that day, that was last on the list. John considered for a moment, then said, sarcastically, “I assume you don’t mean that you accidently bumped into her on the Tube?”

“No,” Sherlock mumbled, voice still muffled against John’s neck because he was still hiding his face against John. “I very deliberately texted her and set up a meeting so she could meet Oliver, and I did it behind your back because I knew you wouldn’t want me to do it. Don’t be angry.”

“Listen to what you just said to me. You did something you knew would make me angry, and you did it in spite of the fact that you knew it would make me angry, and now you don’t want me to be angry about it?”

“You’re wrong—” Sherlock began, but John squirmed and cut him off.

“Lift up your head for this conversation, this is ridiculous,” John snapped.

Sherlock lifted his head. It was too dark for them to really see each other clearly, but John hoped Sherlock could at least sense his heavy scowl of disapproval.

“You’re wrong,” Sherlock said, “about keeping Oliver from Harry.”

“Let me remind you that you were the one who originally brought it up,” clipped out John.

“Yes. And then I said later that I thought maybe—”

“You said Oliver has enough to worry about when it comes to addictions without exposing him to an alcoholic aunt.”

“I know, but—”

“You said I was extravagantly optimistic when it came to Harry’s alcoholism. Those were your exact words.”

“Yes, but you were right,” Sherlock said, exasperatedly. “I told you that.”

“No, you just told me I was wrong.”

“You were right in the first place. When you wanted to introduce Ollie to her. You were right about that.”

“You talked me out of that.”

“I shouldn’t have.”

“So you were wrong.”

Sherlock hesitated. “I was—”
“You were wrong.”

“Possibly. A bit. More that I revised my hypothesis. And I told you that I did.”

“Yes. You said lovely things about needing a person to give you a reason to change your life. That makes perfect sense to me when you’re talking about you and me, because I was someone different for you, you didn’t have someone like me before. But Harry’s had me, all this time. Someone to get better for. And she didn’t—”

“I had Mycroft. One is not always inclined to listen to overachieving, golden-child brothers.”

“She had Clara. She had a wife, a significant other, a woman who loved her and who she should have loved so much more than the alcohol. All addicts are different, Sherlock. And my sister isn’t the type to clean up her life because someone else has had a baby. How’s that pessimism for you? Extravagant enough?”

Sherlock was silent for a moment. “I just didn’t want you to be disappointed again. I was trying to save you from getting your hopes up.”

“And what does introducing Oliver to my sister behind my back have to do with that?” John demanded.

“Harry wanted to have children with Clara. Did you know that?”

“No,” said John, bewildered. “We never discussed that.”

“Clara wouldn’t have children until Harry got her drinking under control.”

John processed this. “Harry told you this?”

“Of course not,” Sherlock answered, impatiently.

John didn’t bother to ask how Sherlock knew, because clearly Sherlock had just deduced all of this. “Alright,” John said, calmly. “So she couldn’t kick her drinking habit in order to have desired children with the woman she loved. That bodes well for Oliver’s influence on her, doesn’t it?”

Sherlock shook his head a bit in obvious frustration. “Those were hypothetical children. It’s easy to lose focus when the focus is theoretical. Oliver is real. He’s alive and he’s breathing and she’s held him in her arms. He’s something, something she can touch and see. Maybe Oliver will have no effect on her. Maybe she’ll just keep drinking. And if that happens, no one is any worse off, Oliver won’t be scarred from this one meeting. But she knows she won’t get to see Oliver again unless she stops drinking, and maybe that will mean something to her, and maybe she’ll find the ability to overcome it. It made logical sense to do it, John. There are no negative repercussions, only the possibility of positive ones.”

John thought for a long moment. “Okay,” he admitted. “It makes some sense. But.” John leaned over and turned on the bedside lamp, because they needed to be able to see each other for this conversation. Sherlock regarded him warily, his blue-gray-green eyes wide and almost fearful. This was all so new to Sherlock, John thought. He kept making these terrible mistakes and worrying that he had just ruined everything.

John reached out and took Sherlock’s hands in his. “I’m not going to leave,” he said. “But this has to stop. We’re partners, yeah? I mean, we always have been, but now we’re going to be married and I love you and you love me and we know how it is between us and what all of that means is that we have to do things together. Especially things that impact Oliver. We have to make these decisions
together, right? We’re a family. That’s how it works.”

Sherlock had dropped his gaze and was now looking at their joined hands, but John could tell he was listening hard. John reminded himself that, from what he knew of Sherlock’s childhood, Sherlock had very little idea how a family ought to work.

“So we tell each other things, okay? And we promise to listen to each other. Like I listened to you tonight and agreed that you have a point about letting Ollie meet Harry. You just should have brought it up before you went to meet her with him.”

There was a moment of silence. “Okay,” said Sherlock, eventually, sounding glum about it.

John wanted to coax him out of that glumness. “Yeah?” He leaned forward, ducking a little so he could brush a kiss on the underside of Sherlock’s jaw, just where it met his neck. Sherlock leaned his head back automatically to accept the kiss, which had been John’s intention, to pick Sherlock’s gaze up from their hands.

“Yes,” said Sherlock.

“Good.” John lifted his hands off of Sherlock’s, the better to fist them into Sherlock’s lapels to hold him in place. Only Sherlock would get into bed without bothering to even take his jacket off first, never mind get fully undressed. “The key to a good relationship is communication.”

“You’ve reached this conclusion based on all the successful relationships you’ve had before this one?” And only Sherlock could ask a question like that and make it sound genuinely curious.

And only Sherlock could say something so insulting to him and have it cause him to laugh, which it did. “You’re a bastard,” he told him, fondly, and pushed him back onto the bed.

Sherlock looked up at him, tumbled and bewildered. “Who’s rubbish at this,” he said.

“Well, you’re the only successful relationship I’ve ever had and I didn’t even know I was having this relationship until a few days ago,” John rejoined. “And don’t tell me that’s why it’s been successful so far.”

“It was probably successful because I was dead for a large part of it,” remarked Sherlock, frankly. Which made John laugh again, because their whole situation was so incredibly absurd. He rested his forehead against Sherlock’s shoulder, pressed against the expensive fabric he was wearing, and sighed contentedly. “I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too,” said Sherlock, after a second, sounding almost uncertain about whether that ought to be his next statement.

“There you go,” said John, and lifted his head. “Communication.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips against Sherlock’s, nibbled at them until Sherlock parted them for him.

Sherlock made a luxuriant noise and seemed to uncoil into the kiss, sliding more fully underneath John and bringing up his hands to curl into John’s hair. “Good communication?” he mumbled around John’s lips.

“Brilliant start,” John assured him, breathily, before putting his mouth to better use.

“Brilliant start?” echoed Sherlock, thwarting John’s better use. “You want more?”
John paused, looking down at Sherlock underneath him. “I want everything,” he said, aching with the truth of it.

“What if I said the feeling is mutual?”

“Good communication,” John told him.

“Brilliant start,” Sherlock replied.

***

When John woke, Sherlock was still in the bed, curled up tightly next to him. John did not often wake to a sleeping Sherlock, because Sherlock seldom slept long enough to last in the bed until morning, but whenever he did Sherlock was pressed right up against him, so John always woke feeling hot and a bit claustrophobic. Which was worth it because it was the result of Sherlock and of all the things John put up with when it came to Sherlock being cuddled a bit too tightly was the least of them.

Oliver was cooing to himself over the baby monitor, a contented monologue on life, and John closed his eyes and let himself drift for just a minute, marveling at how incredibly lucky he was. Especially at having the momentary luxury to just let himself marvel at it.

Then he rolled himself out of bed and kissed Sherlock’s head where it buried itself into John’s vacated pillow. It was a shame, thought John, as he yawningly went to retrieve Oliver, that they had not done this before Oliver had arrived. Not that John would have a life without Oliver back, not for anything in the world. But he did kind of want to spend a morning in bed with Sherlock without the knowledge that he was responsible for a baby in the background. He wanted to wake Sherlock up with long, lazy kisses that spiraled into slow, sleepy sex. He felt a bit like they had missed out on things like that, that the honeymoon period of their relationship had been necessarily rushed and abbreviated.

Honeymoon, thought John, climbing the stairs. There was an idea. They should go on a honeymoon. They would take Oliver with them, of course, so it wouldn’t be exactly like a regular honeymoon but John was busy daydreaming about cuddling at cafes and nuzzling at tourist attractions and having glasses of wine on a balcony overlooking, say, Paris or Amsterdam or Budapest while the baby slept in the other room.

Glee burst over Oliver’s face when he saw John. He babbled enthusiastically and kicked his legs and waved his fists energetically. John couldn’t help but grin back in response.

“Good morning, little one,” he said, and kissed one of Oliver’s chubby cheeks and accepted the fist bump on the side of the head that passed for an answering kiss from Oliver.

He changed him and dressed him and, while feeding him, contemplated his mobile. Oliver sucked greedily at his bottle and watched John with Sherlock’s unusual eyes, looking wise and all-knowing as he usually did. You’re being a coward, Papa, those eyes said. I met her yesterday and she wasn’t so bad.

“She isn’t your big sister,” John told him.

She’s my aunt, Oliver blinked at him.

“Two very different things.”

Oliver looked unimpressed, an expression so common on Sherlock’s face that John thought he’d
better get used to it in duplicate. He shifted his eyes from John’s face to the rest of the kitchen, and John knew the meaning of that. You have grown dull and foolish, I will now occupy my attention with anything else I can find.

So John decided it was time to stop being a coward. He texted his sister. Can you meet up for a cup of coffee or something today?

He put the mobile down on the desk when he carried Oliver into the sitting room, and he sat in his chair with Oliver on his lap, and the mobile immediately beeped over on the desk. John blinked. “That was quick,” he told Oliver.

Oliver gulped down milk and looked at John, clearly saying, I’ve stopped caring about this saga, I’m eating. Oliver’s enthusiasm for food was one way in which he did not match Sherlock, John thought.

John stood and picked up the mobile from the desk.

The text was from Sherlock. Come back to bed. –SH

John smiled and replied. I’m feeding your clone.

He eats too much. Bring him with you. –SH

“Daddy’s awake,” John told Oliver. “Do you want to go and see him, or do you want to force him to get dressed and out of bed and come to us?”

Oliver looked torn by these choices so John made the decision for them, because he thought if he stayed in the sitting room he’d just obsess about Harry texting him back and whether or not she would be sober when she did. So he went into the bedroom and settled on the bed with Oliver. Sherlock shifted to slot into place next to him.

“You eat too much,” he told Oliver.

“He doesn’t,” John said. “Leave him alone.”

Oliver blinked at Sherlock over his bottle, the same unimpressed look on his face as he’d treated John to. John wondered what it meant that Oliver had already ceased to be impressed by his parents.

“You’re always feeding him. All that digestion is going to slow down his mental faculties.”

“No, it isn’t. That’s some delusion you’ve made up in your head.”

Sherlock sniffed and muttered something under his breath that John didn’t catch and decided not to inquire into further.

“How did Lestrade handle the news of our pending nuptials?” Sherlock asked.

John didn’t bother to ask how Sherlock had known he’d seen Lestrade yesterday. After years of living with Sherlock Holmes, you stopped asking those questions. “He says he’ll be there.”

“I suppose you’ll want me to watch Oliver whilst you meet your sister?”

John sighed and shook his head indulgently. “Just once, do you think that I could actually deliver some news to you instead of having it be deduced?”

“I suppose. Goodness, John, what did you do all day yesterday whilst I was out with the baby?”
John laughed. “Stop it.” Oliver had finished the bottle so John set it on the bedside table.

Sherlock reached for the baby, shifting so he could get Oliver into position to wind him. “Whatever could Papa have been doing this morning whilst he was feeding you, Oliver?”

“You’re a tosser, do you know that?” John told him.

“Such shocking language in front of the baby,” Sherlock chided him, eyes wide with mock solemnity.

John leaned forward and pressed his lips against Sherlock’s mouth, because he couldn’t help it. Sherlock apparently hadn’t expected to be kissed, because he made a small sound of surprise and juggled his hold on the baby before kissing back.

“I love you,” John said, drawing back and smiling at him, “but that doesn’t change the fact that you’re an insufferable berk. Now.” John rolled out of bed, pleased at the pink-and-white just-kissed flush of Sherlock’s face. “Get up and get dressed, I shan’t have you setting a bad example for the baby about lounging about all day.”

“Just the other day you were encouraging it!” Sherlock called after him as he headed into the sitting room.

John ignored him, glancing at his mobile just to satisfy his own curiosity. A missed text. John opened it with a bit of trepidation.

Yes! I can meet up anytime today! What works for you? Looking forward to it! :) xoxoxoxox

John tried to read signals into the text. He tried to deduce the way Sherlock would. He failed miserably. So he carried it back into the bedroom. Sherlock was still in bed. He had Oliver on his back next to him and was saying, “Ten toes, see? One, two, three—” He glanced over his shoulder at John when he entered and lifted an inquiring eyebrow at him.

John held out his mobile.

Sherlock dropped Oliver’s foot and took the mobile and read the text, then handed it back to John. “Any time works for me.”

“What do you think?”

Sherlock lifted both of his eyebrows this time. “You’re not making any sense.”

“Do you think she’s drunk? You’re the one with the special deduction superpowers. Is she drunk or sober?”

“They’re not superpowers, they’re observations. Anyone could make them if any of you would just —”

“Yes, yes,” John interrupted, impatiently, not interested in the lecture. “But what do you think about the text?”

Sherlock looked at him. And Sherlock said, “Just go and see, John.”
John was unaccountably nervous about meeting Harry. He thought it was because it seemed like Harry’s last chance. If Harry couldn’t pull it together for Oliver—for Oliver, who in John’s totally unbiased opinion was the most important creature in existence—then Harry would never be able to pull it together, and John would have to resign himself to a future where he watched Harry slip ever farther down the road that was going to kill her, unpleasantly, and prevent her life from ever achieving any real happiness. John had spent a long time telling himself that he was resigned to such an occurrence already, but it had clearly all been a lie, because what was making his stomach leap about unpleasantly while he fussed with a cup of tea and waited for Harry was hope.

Harry arrived. Harry sat down opposite him. Harry looked absolutely terrible, exhausted and drawn, with huge shadows under her eyes and blotchy skin, but she looked sober. Absolutely, painfully sober.

She looked across at him and managed a decently bright smile and said, “Hello.”

John took a deep breath. Because, confronted with a fully sober sister for the first time in years, he had no idea what to say. He settled for, “How’s it going?”

Harry nervously tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with a shaking hand. “Oh,” she said. “You know.”

“Sherlock told me that you saw him and Oliver yesterday.”

Harry nodded, still looking nervous. “Yeah,” she said. “Yes.” She licked her lips and then said, in a rush, “He’s beautiful, John. He’s positively gorgeous. He might be the most perfect thing I’ve ever seen.”

John tried not to beam with pride, given that he’d had absolutely nothing to do with the baby’s existence. He deflected with humor. “Oliver, or Sherlock?”

“Shut up. You know what I’m talking about. He’s darling.” Harry sucked in a breath and hesitated and looked at John out of the corner of her eye, while she fidgeted with John’s discarded teaspoon. “Sherlock…told you what he said?”

“He said you made a deal.”

“And I’ve kept it,” Harry said, with a desperation that made John wince with pain to hear. “Can’t you tell? I haven’t had a drink since I saw Sherlock yesterday, I swear I haven’t.”

Harry’s voice had risen, and a few people in the café were giving them curious looks.

“Oh,” John said, keeping his voice low. “Shh. I believe you. It’s fairly obvious.”

Harry relaxed a bit, her tongue darting out again to wet dry, chapped lips. “It’s just…I’m serious about it this time, John. I really am. He’s family. Probably the only family I’ll ever have to survive me.”

John didn’t say anything, because he’d heard proclamations of seriousness from Harry before. So had Clara, of course. It was why Clara had eventually left. One could only take so much of it. But he wanted Harry to be serious. Harry seemed serious. Harry seemed to be in deadly earnest, and hope danced again over John’s internal organs, and that was possibly why her next statement rubbed him
so incredibly much the wrong way.

“I don’t even care that he’s not yours—”

“He’s mine,” John cut her off, sharply, and stared her down. “He is my son, definitely. There is no room for debate on that. I don’t want you a part of his life if you’re just thinking of him as being good enough, as being enough like my son to qualify, as being some kind of stand-in.”

Harry’s eyes were wide. She blinked and stammered, “No.”

“Good.” John took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down with a sip of tea. Then he said, “If you’re serious, a rehab—”

“Oh,” said Harry, “I don’t know—”

“I know some good ones. And I would help you. And it would help you to be in one. I think you should go.”

Harry looked across at him. John looked back, his gaze even and stubborn. John could out-stubborn anyone, he thought. He could even out-stubborn Sherlock Holmes on occasion, when he really wanted to. Harry wasn’t going to kick this on her own. Not even John could be that extravagantly optimistic about that.

Harry nodded eventually, a short little jerk of her chin. “Yes. Okay. Yes. I can…Yes.”

“I’ll get everything set up,” said John, uncoiling, “and make sure that you’ll have next Tuesday afternoon free.”

“Oh,” said Harry, vaguely, clearly not understanding but not wanting to admit it fully.

“Yes. Because next Tuesday, I think you’ll want to be attending my wedding.”

Harry blinked across at him, plainly astonished. And then she said, “What?” And then, looking delighted, she screeched it. “What?”

“Shhh,” said John, but he was grinning as he did it. Because he couldn’t help it. Relating the news made him feel euphoric. He suspected the tips of his ears were pink.

“I told you!” exclaimed Harry, but she didn’t say it cruelly or vindictively, she said it joyfully, and John realized just how much he’d been waiting for her approval of the whole thing. They had been through a great deal, and it didn’t matter: She was still his big sister, and the only relative he had left, and he wanted her at his wedding, smiling and happy for him.

“I know,” he said, trying to sound rueful but really just sounding giddy about the whole thing.

“Jesus, once you decided to do it, you did it proper, didn’t you?”

“Well, why waste time? I think, in Sherlock’s head, we were married long ago. This is all just a formality to him.”

“And what about to you?” asked Harry, shrewdly.

John considered, forming his words carefully. “I see his point. But I think I am…unexpectedly looking forward to that formality. I…want that acknowledgment from everybody, that we have a permanent and important and valued relationship.”
Harry was looking at him with a fond smile playing on her lips that made him feel like he was five years old again. “You’re old-fashioned.”

“Well.” John was sure the tips of his ears were pink now. “Yes.”

“Good on you. And you’re happy? Well. I don’t even need to ask that, do I?”

“I’m happy.” said John. “I’m very happy. I have everything I wanted. Including everything I didn’t even know I wanted.”

“You’re lucky. Your life worked out wiser than you would have let it otherwise.”

“I think that was mostly Sherlock,” John confessed, and then paused. “You’re going to get there, you know. This is a step in the right direction. It’s not like I had any hope that my life would turn out this way when I first got back from Afghanistan.”

“Or when Sherlock died,” Harry added, pointedly.

“Yes,” said John, and cleared his throat and glanced out the window.

“Never thought you’d end up with a husband, did you?”

John laughed, grateful that Harry had moved off of that point. “A husband and a baby.”

“Look at you, adventure-seeking John Watson, who ran off to get shot at. You’re getting positively domestic.”

“It’s shameful, isn’t it?” said John, and smiled.

“I’m so proud of you.” John was surprised to see Harry’s eyes filling with tears. “When you first came back, and you were so…You found what you needed and you’ve hung onto it for dear life, and I admire that about you so much—”

John reached out suddenly, to grasp Harry’s hands tightly between his own. Harry looked down at their joined hands on the table, blinking furiously.

“You’re going to get there, Harry,” John told her, fiercely. “I am not the only one who can hang onto things for dear life. You take this chance, this opportunity, and you make it yours. Yeah?”

Harry nodded, tight-lipped, and John wanted to believe her more than he ever had before.

But when he got home, he was grateful when Sherlock didn’t ask him how the visit had gone, and even more grateful when Oliver let him cuddle him, and even more grateful when Sherlock cuddled them, too.

***

John didn’t sleep the night before his wedding. He laid in Sherlock’s bed and looked out the window and thought of how he was getting married. Married. The next day.

John had thought about getting married before. Never to a specific person. He had never met anyone he had thought quite right for the position, never met anyone, as an adult, who had inspired fantasies of cozy home-making. As a teenager, sure, he had imagined that he would spend the rest of his life with Dora Duncaster, who had taken his virginity and thereby gained what he had thought would be everlasting devotion. Until the day when he’d met Anna Mitchell, and he’d decided he’d quite like to try to shag Anna Mitchell, and maybe his adoration of Dora wasn’t quite as permanent as it had
seemed, once it had occurred to him that other women in the world might let him shag them.

He had not been, he thought, a particularly thoughtful teenager. But he had always been interested in women. Always. So when he thought about marriage, in a vague abstract way, there had always been a woman involved.

He hadn’t thought about marriage before going out to Afghanistan. In those days, he had been focused on his career and then on joining the military. Once he’d enlisted and found himself stationed in a desert, he wondered why he hadn’t stayed home, met a nice girl, got married. He could have had a solid, dependable practice, could have provided a lovely home, he and the anonymous wife could have had a boy and a girl and it all could have been picture-perfect. And instead he’d chosen the chaos of Afghanistan. There was clearly something wrong with him.

And then he’d come home, and he’d thought of nothing. Nothing. Until the day he had met Sherlock, and the color rushed back into the world. While there had been Sherlock, he had not thought much about marriage. Every so often, when he asked a girl out, he would wonder if she would be the one, and he would move out of 221B and break up the partnership, but it had never happened. Then Sherlock had died, and John had suddenly been desperate to get married. He had been so lonely that the loneliness had been like breathing in water. The longer he lived like that, the closer to death he felt, the more desperate he became to shake it off. If he got married, he thought, he wouldn’t be lonely anymore. He wouldn’t come home to an empty flat devoid of experiments, of mess, of life.

He hadn’t got married while Sherlock had been dead, because he’d been unable to marry anyone who wasn’t Sherlock. Or, that’s what he should have realized. He didn’t, not in quite those words, but the only companionship he was looking for, the only thing that was going to fill the void in his life, was Sherlock. No one else would have succeeded, and he had kept his head about him enough to realize that, to not drag anyone else into his disastrous depression. When Sherlock had come back, John had been there, waiting for him, and John had not thought about marriage again, to anyone. John had stopped dating entirely. It should have all been so obvious.

John had stopped thinking about children, too, he had to admit. He had never exactly been a person who had been desperate to have children. He liked children well enough and he had assumed, when he met the right woman, he would have them with her. He had been looking forward to being a father, but it had not been a pressing desire of his. Sherlock had eclipsed the fuzzy prospect. John had not really given a second thought to the children he thought his life with Sherlock was making him give up. He wanted Sherlock more than anything in the world. He had always wanted Sherlock more than anything in the world.

And now he had a child. And he was getting married. And John would have been the world’s worst fortune-teller, because he would never have predicted any of this.

Dawn crept into the room, gray and hazy. John had not thought to imagine the weather on the day of his wedding, but it seemed appropriate that fog wreathed the window.

Sherlock opened the bedroom door, closed it, rolled his way onto the bed and then completely onto John, burying his face in the curve where John’s neck met his shoulder, which was Sherlock’s favorite place, if you asked John. It was Sherlock’s wont to unceremoniously wake John whenever he crawled into bed with him. He seemed to have little concept of the idea that people generally didn’t like to be woken once they’d fallen asleep. John snapped at him about it and was very cranky but then Sherlock usually distracted him with sex and John minded a lot less being woken in the middle of the night after that and sometimes, falling asleep alone and feeling a little neglected, he would hope that Sherlock would show up at some point and kiss him awake.
Sherlock brushed his lips against John’s clavicle. No idle brush of his lips, that. A deliberate nibble. John chuckled. “It’s bad luck for us to be seeing each other at all, never mind shagging.”

“Why’s it bad luck?” mumbled Sherlock, and kissed underneath John’s jaw.

“Because it’s our wedding day.”

Sherlock’s lips paused, Sherlock’s noise pressing briefly against John’s neck as he thought. Then he said, “Ah. Wedding day. Yes. Bad luck for the bride and groom to see each other on their wedding day before the ceremony.”

He said it as if he were reading out an encyclopedia entry. His mind palace’s definition of Superstition, wedding, or something like that. John was a bit amused Sherlock hadn’t deleted such a thing.

“Exactly,” he said.

Sherlock shook his head, his nose brushing over John’s skin. “It’s bad luck for a bride and groom. Doesn’t say anything about two grooms.” Sherlock sucked on John’s ear.

John conceded that Sherlock had a very good point, and that had nothing to do with the purr of pleasure he heard himself make in reaction to Sherlock.

“Anyway,” John managed, his hands now tangled in Sherlock’s hair. “Since when do you believe in luck?”

Sherlock’s lips stopped moving over John’s skin. After a moment, Sherlock picked his head up entirely, looking down at John. “I believe in luck.”

“Do you?” John was dubious. “Mister There’s-a-Reason-for-Everything-If-You-Let-Me-Deduce-What-It-Is?”

“One day I happened to mention to Mike Stamford that I was looking for a flatmate. That same day, Mike Stamford happened to run into an old medical school mate in a random London park after not having seen each other—or even thought about each other, possibly—in literally years. Tell me that’s not luck. It’s nothing if not luck. Had I mentioned it to Mike later, his encounter with you would have come and gone and nothing would have come of it. Had I mentioned it to Mike earlier, he might have forgotten all about it when he met you.”

“Had I not wanted coffee that day,” said John, picking up the thread of the conversation. “Not walked through the park.”

“Exactly. We’ve been incredibly lucky.”

John had a flash of memory, to Sherlock’s head, resting on his stomach while he sprawled on the sofa in the sitting room, post-orgasm lethargic. Of Sherlock saying he was happy, and lucky, and surprised.

He said it to him, pushing his overgrown curls off of his forehead. “Happy, and lucky, and surprised.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed.

“Surprised at your good luck?” John guessed.
“Maybe. Possibly.” Sherlock flickered a smile at him. “As a wedding present, I will tell you what surprised me.”

“Oh,” said John, pleased to have provoked this. “What was it?”

Sherlock ducked his head down and pulled John’s hands out of his hair, pinning them on either side of his head. And he said, “You. It’s always you.”

***

John wore a suit. It was brand new for the occasion. Mrs. Hudson had suggested it, and, when John had mentioned it to Sherlock, Sherlock had agreed vociferously, and given him the name of a Saville Row tailor. John suspected Sherlock had been desperate to do just such a thing since the time of their first meeting. The suit had been ridiculously expensive, but Sherlock’s gaze when he saw John in it was worth the price, John decided. It was a light gray suit, with an even paler shirt and a tie in shades of plum to match the plum shirt Sherlock was wearing. Sherlock had bought nothing new for the wedding. Sherlock had said what he wore every day was quite good enough. And then he had said, “Isn’t it?” looking at John anxiously, as if worried that he’d overstepped a boundary, and John had said, “Yes. Wear the purple shirt.” And so there they were.

Sherlock had bought Oliver a suit of his own. That was utterly absurd. It was the tiniest suit John had ever seen but it was still much too big for Oliver. Oliver looked as if he were swimming in it. Sherlock discarded the tie and criticized the cut of the coat, as if that were the reason the suit wasn’t fitting. Oliver looked from Sherlock to John, and his eyes clearly said, *Save me from this madman.*

“Sherlock,” John said. “That suit is enormous.”

“Oliver is tired of being dressed entirely in dull snapsuits.”

“I really don’t think he is.”

“He’s also tired of milk.”

“No, he isn’t tired of that, either.”

Sherlock held Oliver up in front of the mirror, showing him his own reflection. “There. What do you think, Ollie? It leaves a bit to be desired, it’s true, but the general idea is a good one.”

Oliver did not look at his reflection. Oliver used the mirror to look at Sherlock. And Oliver’s expression told Sherlock, *You’ve lost your mind, get me out of this.*

“Sherlock, I don’t think babies want to be dressed in little suits,” said John.

“Nonsense.” Sherlock turned Oliver away from the mirror, tucking him familiarly up against his hip, and John marveled at the fact that it was now perfectly natural for Sherlock to be holding a baby so very casually. “He isn’t a baby, he’s me.”

“And you wanted to wear suits all through your childhood, did you?”

There was a momentary flash of confusion across Sherlock’s face, and John realized he hadn’t ever thought of it that way. John wondered when Sherlock had started dressing so sharply. Was it really a matter of taste and preference, or had there been an effort of masking to it, of playing a part, that Sherlock hadn’t even recognized until that moment?

Sherlock seemed to shake off the moment of introspection. “It’s one day, John. He’s not wearing a
snapsuit to our wedding.” That appeared to settle the question. Sherlock passed Oliver over to John with definitive finality.

Oliver looked resigned. John gave him an *I tried* look and handed him Sherlock’s skull to cheer him up. Oliver babbled at the skull, doubtless inquiring why the skull didn’t have to get specially dressed up today.

John looked up to find Sherlock staring at Oliver fixedly. John glanced back down at him, then back to Sherlock. “What? Nothing wrong with him, is there?” All of the blood tests had come back absolutely perfect. As far as John could tell, they had an utterly normal baby. A bit developmentally advanced, actually. A better than normal baby.

“No. Just thinking: I happened to have to fake my death, and my brother happens to be the British government, and the British government happens to be lax with watching what certain scientists might be doing, and there happened to be my DNA in the right place at the right time at a laboratory somewhere, and then…” Sherlock gestured to Oliver.

Oliver very wisely told Sherlock, “Ba da da da ba ba.”

John smoothed down one of Oliver’s Sherlockian curls. “Lucky, yeah?”

Sherlock leaned over and pressed a kiss against the curl John had just smoothed, taking a second to breathe in what John knew was Oliver’s addictive baby smell. “So far,” Sherlock said.

“Stop it,” John told him, firmly. “Not today. Today we get married and promise each other a fabulous future full of only good things.”

“I thought the vows were ‘for better or for worse.’”

“Sherlock, I like to think you and I have already been through our worse,” remarked John, drily.

“I hope so,” said Sherlock, very seriously, looking down at John with anxious charcoal eyes.

“Yes,” John insisted, and then, “Where is this coming from?”

“Happiness,” Sherlock answered.

“That makes no sense,” John told him. “Be happy, then. Stop thinking these thoughts.”

Sherlock looked at him for a moment, still solemn and grave, and then shifted his gaze down to Oliver. “What do you think, Ollie? Ready for a wedding?”

Oliver said something which was obviously *Yes*.

“Let’s fetch Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock suggested, pulling on his coat. Even though he didn’t need it. The fog had unexpectedly burned away. The sun had been unusually stubborn, and the temperatures were mild. John had thrown open the windows, bringing a beautiful late spring breeze into the flat. He took a light blanket for Oliver’s benefit, but he doubted they would need it.

Mrs. Hudson looked appalled to find the trio of them in the foyer when she exited her flat.

“You two!” she scolded. “Don’t you know it’s bad luck?”

“That’s only a bride and a groom, Mrs. Hudson,” John informed her, wisely. “Not two grooms.”

Mrs. Hudson didn’t look convinced.
Sherlock said, without any tact at all, “Look, Mrs. Hudson, here is Oliver,” and practically shoved John in Mrs. Hudson’s direction.

But it did the trick, Mrs. Hudson forgetting all about their breach of superstition and reaching for the baby, cooing greetings at him.

Sherlock opened the door and stepped through. John followed him and looked at the black car waiting for them.

“Your doing?” John asked.

“Absolutely not. I would have taken a cab. I think it would have been appropriate. We have spent much of our courtship in cabs, you and I.”

John was inclined to agree, especially when Sherlock put it that way, but it was nice to have the private ride there for them, even nicer when it proved to come with champagne.

“Bit early for champagne, isn’t it?” asked Mrs. Hudson, practically.

“But nice of Mycroft,” said John.

Sherlock snorted. So did Oliver. John shook his head at the pair of them.
They were married in Mycroft’s office. There were probably more romantic places to be married, but John would have been hard-pressed to name any place he would rather have been than Mycroft’s office, because that was where Sherlock was. They walked in to find the small coterie of guests had almost entirely preceded them, much to Mycroft’s apparent misery, which seemed to delight Sherlock. Molly had broken out her décolletage, and John wondered if it had anything to do with her assumption that Lestrade would be there. Lestrade was not there when they got there, though. Mike Stamford was there, with his wife, and Harry, who was standing there looking highly uncomfortable and very out of place. As Mycroft kept frowning at her suspiciously, John didn’t blame her.

“How?” he whispered to her, escaping to stand by her side. “He looks at everyone like that.”

“Including babies,” remarked Harry.

John glanced over at where Mycroft was indeed regarding Oliver warily, as if expecting him to suddenly do something that might require intervention. Like crying, John supposed, so maybe Mycroft’s look was deserved.

“Well,” said John, “babies are unpredictable. Mycroft hates unpredictability.”

“He must love you, then. Watsons are nothing if not unpredictable,” said Harry, wryly.

“If you could drink, I’d toast to that,” John told her.

“Oh, great,” said Harry. “Alcoholic humor.”

Mike’s wife had cornered Sherlock, who looked absolutely horrified that this woman was even there, and was cooing over Oliver, who looked identically horrified. Apparently, Oliver didn’t mind silly behavior like this from Molly but resented it from others. Living up to his clone nature there, thought John, and was just about to say he had to rescue Sherlock when Mycroft said, “Shall we begin?”

“Lestrade’s not here,” Sherlock pointed out.

Mycroft looked pointedly at his watch. “He’s late.”

“And you cleared your calendar,” Sherlock sniffed.

“World War Three brewing over there,” murmured Harry.


“John will want Lestrade to be here. John.” Sherlock turned to him as he made his way over to him. “Shouldn’t we wait for Lestrade?”

John gave Mycroft a look, because Sherlock had a grand total of three friends when John was taken out of the equation, and surely they could wait until all three of them showed up.

Mycroft sighed enormously and rolled his eyes dramatically and said, “Very well,” as if conceding to a point of negotiation in an official government treaty.

“I thought you’d invite some of the rugby lads,” said Mike, because it was Mike who had suggested that John take up rugby again as a way of feeling less lonely during his grieving period. John
frequently thought he was far too old and out-of-shape to be playing any sort of rugby anymore, even the playful sort that didn’t mean anything at all, but he had thought it good, even after Sherlock came back, to have something outside of Sherlock, who otherwise was his entire world.

John shook his head. “I didn’t want to crowd the gathering. Mrs. Hudson, do you know Mike Stamford?”

“I don’t believe so,” said Mrs. Hudson.

“Of course not,” contributed Sherlock, as brusquely helpful as always. “Why would they ever have had cause to meet?”

John ignored him.

So did Mike, who just said to Mrs. Hudson, “I introduced the two of them. So you could say I played Cupid here.”

Mrs. Hudson bristled a little. “Well, if they hadn’t moved into my flat, they might never have fallen in love, so there.”

And now people were squabbling over who was most responsible for their romance, thought John. Fantastic.

Which was when Lestrade rushed in, pulling on a suit coat as he came. His hair was a mess, and he was clutching a tie in his hand that he clearly hadn’t had time to put on, and he was out of breath as he said, “Sorry. Sorry. Got held up.”

“Oh, it’s a good one!” exclaimed Sherlock. “I bloody knew it. Why didn’t you ring me?”

Lestrade gave him a look as he attempted to put his tie on. “You’re getting married today, remember?”

“Oh, that would have waited.” Sherlock glanced at John. “You wouldn’t have minded.”

“Frankly,” replied John, sardonically, “I think it would only have been appropriate for you to cancel our wedding to go to a crime scene.”

“You are making an absolute mess of that,” Mycroft said, and then straightened from the desk he was leaning on to walk over to Lestrade and begin briskly tying his tie.

Lestrade looked shocked. He looked at John, who he was sure looked equally shocked. John looked at Sherlock, who was still sulking about the crime scene. Oliver was still looking suspiciously at Mike’s wife, as if worried she was going to swoop down on him at any moment.

“Er, thanks,” said Lestrade, staying still for Mycroft’s benefit. And then, to Sherlock, “You’ll still get to see the crime scene, it’s just that we processed the—”

“What good will it do me if you’ve moved the body away?” demanded Sherlock.

“We took pictures, Sherlock. We’re not complete idiots.”

Sherlock and Oliver fixed Lestrade with matching looks of disdainful disbelief.

John shook his head and said, as Mycroft stepped away from Lestrade, “We can start now.”

“Excellent,” said Mycroft.
“Here,” said Sherlock, going to hand Oliver over to Mrs. Hudson. And then, seeing that Mrs. Hudson was already weeping copiously into a handkerchief, “Never mind. Here.” He turned to Molly instead, who took Oliver with obvious delight at having been selected for the important duty.

Oliver looked pleased with the selection, too, showing off the skull he was clutching in his arms, and Molly looked appropriately impressed with it, and Oliver beamed and giggled. Oliver, John thought, had a crush on Molly.

Sherlock turned to stand next to John, and John turned to face him, and Sherlock suddenly reached out and took his hands, which made perfect sense, because they were getting married, and it burst over John all of a sudden. Sherlock was not one to make much of how sentimental he very obviously was underneath his brisk exterior, but this was still, in the middle of all the everyday chaos around them, a wedding. John looked up at Sherlock’s face and tried to remember when he had thought it weird-looking instead of devastatingly attractive. He looked into eyes whose color he couldn’t name and tried to remember looking into eyes that did have nameable colors. All of it seemed very far away. For far too long in his life, there had just been the undeniable fact of Sherlock. And now he was about to cement that it would be that way for the rest of his life, too.

“Sherlock, repeat after me,” said Mycroft, and at least he was making an effort not to sound bored. “I do solemnly declare.”

“I do solemnly declare,” Sherlock said, his voice firm and steady.

“That I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Sherlock Atherton Holmes.”

“That I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Sherlock Atherton Holmes.”

“May not be joined in matrimony to John Hamish Watson.”

“May not be joined in matrimony to John Hamish Watson.”

“I call upon these persons here present.”

“I call upon these persons here present.”

“To witness that I, Sherlock Atherton Holmes, do take thee, John Hamish Watson.”

“To witness that I, Sherlock Atherton Holmes, do take thee, John Hamish Watson.”

“To be my lawful wedded husband.”

“To be my lawful wedded husband.”

“John, repeat after me,” said Mycroft, and John tried to repeat after him as firmly as Sherlock had. He suspected that he failed.

And then Mycroft said, “There you are. Congratulations.”

John blinked. He looked at Mycroft. “That’s it?”

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow at him. “Legally, yes. Did you want something more?”

“We have rings,” Sherlock said, with a sigh of impatience, and dug them out of his pocket.

“Well, you didn’t tell me that, did you?” retorted Mycroft.
“Never mind,” said Sherlock, “we’ll do it ourselves. Let me see your hand, John.”

“The romance of this is devastating, Sherlock,” John told him, and heard one of the guests let out a muffled choked laugh at that. John’s money was on Lestrade.

Sherlock slid the ring onto John’s finger, where it winked and flashed at him, and said, “I give you this ring as a sign that you are my favorite person on the planet.”

John had been looking at the ring, which he had not seen, because Sherlock had been taken with the idea of rings and John had let him pick them out himself, and it was a lovely ring, platinum, he guessed, or white gold, and solid and heavy, and then Sherlock said that, and John blinked and looked up at Sherlock in astonishment. Sherlock looked frank and matter-of-fact, as if no other vow would have made sense, and John loved him so much that he thought he might stop breathing or start crying or do something else equally embarrassing.

And then Sherlock said, “Here’s yours,” and pushed his own ring unceremoniously into John’s hand.

“Right,” said John, dazedly, and then cleared his throat to shake himself out of it. He took Sherlock’s proffered hand and took a deep breath. “I give you this ring as a sign that you, too, at all times and in all ways, are my favorite person on the planet, no matter what.” John looked at Sherlock’s matching ring on his finger and then up at Sherlock. “And not at all anything like a high-functioning sociopath.”

Sherlock’s breath caught for a moment, which John noticed only because he was close enough to hear it and because it was so quiet in the room that you could have heard a pin drop. Even Oliver was apparently watching raptly.

“You can kiss him,” said Harry, and John thought he’d get her back for that one, but all the same it gave him an excuse to fist a hand into Sherlock’s coat to pull him closer and to kiss him.

Oliver babbled his approval and slapped his hand against his skull, and John found himself caught up in a round of hugs and handshakes and congratulations and even posing for some mobile phone photos that ended abruptly when Sherlock said, “Crime scene. Very important. Everyone go home now.”

“Sherlock,” John said, without any hope of impressing upon him how rude that was.

“Hello, Oliver,” Sherlock said to the baby, taking him out of Molly’s arms. “Are you ready to go to the crime scene with Uncle Lestrade?”

“Uncle Lestrade?” echoed Lestrade.

“He thinks I’m going to be so touched by his sentimental streak in saying that that I will absolutely agree to spend our first hour as a married couple at a crime scene,” said John.

“A crime scene was our first date, I will remind you.”

“He is right about that,” remarked Lestrade. “There was enough sexual tension to make a bloke feel dead uncomfortable.”

John looked at him in amazement. “No, there wasn’t.” Had there been? Even then? “Was there?”

Lestrade didn’t even bother to answer him. “And why Uncle Lestrade?” He reached for Oliver, who went willingly. “Why can’t we do Uncle Greg?”
“I’m still not sure that’s your real name,” Sherlock informed him.

“It’s his real name,” contributed Mycroft, who had settled behind his desk and was deep into his papers, apparently not above working through his brother’s wedding reception. “And it’s a lovely one.”

John gave Mycroft a curious look. Lestrade actually blushed a little bit and said, “Let’s go to the crime scene, Master Watson Holmes.”

“Strangest wedding ever,” said John, as his new husband followed their clone baby and the Scotland Yard D.I. holding him out of the British government’s office.

“Perfect,” said Molly, next to him, and John was inclined to agree.

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They spent their first hour as a married couple at a crime scene. They spent their first sixteen hours as a married couple at a crime scene, and at New Scotland Yard, and at various suspects’ houses, and Sherlock’s eyes were lit up with enthusiasm, and Oliver’s eyes were sharp with fascination until the very moment when he fell asleep against John during a cab ride, and John spent the rest of the evening with a baby napping against him, being insulted by Sherlock while he made the common-sense observations that Sherlock mocked and yet was inspired by all at once. John knew his role by that time.

“A stakeout,” Lestrade repeated, at six o’clock in the morning. Lestrade was bleary-eyed, and John was exhausted, and Oliver had been in a deep sleep for hours, and John was getting cramped from holding him no matter what position he chose, and Sherlock was bouncing around as if he’d been mainlining caffeine. Which he hadn’t been. Lestrade and John had been, and they were far the worse for wear.


“Fine. I’ll have one of—”

“Don’t you think it should be us?” Sherlock interrupted, with a pout.

“No,” answered Lestrade. “I don’t think it’s anything that someone else can’t handle—”

“Idiot,” proclaimed Sherlock, and paced a tight little circle around the room in irritation.

“—and we’re dead on our feet, Sherlock.”

“Everyone sleeps so much,” complained Sherlock.

“I’ll make you a deal,” John said to Lestrade.

Lestrade looked at him questioningly.

“You take Ollie back to Baker Street and put him down, you can sleep for a bit—”

“In our bed?” yelped Sherlock.

“Like I would want to sleep in your bed,” retorted Lestrade.

“—and I’ll go with Sherlock and some sort of team of officers to do whatever this stakeout is.”
Lestrade regarded him. “Really?”

John shrugged. “It’s our honeymoon.”

“This is why you are magnificent, John,” gushed Sherlock. “Not especially clever in most things, but magnificent all the same.”

“Thank you, darling,” said John, drily, as he carefully transferred Oliver over to Lestrade.

“I’ll have to send Dimmock with you. You need someone with some sort of ability not to let himself be run over roughshod.”

“I’ll handle him,” said John.

“As if I need to be handled,” dismissed Sherlock, impatiently. “Lestrade, listen to me, this is very important.”

Lestrade looked at Sherlock expectantly. So did John.

“If Oliver wakes and starts crying, you are to go to him immediately.”

Lestrade looked bewildered. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“It is difficult to conceive why any of you do any of the supremely stupid things that you do,” sniffed Sherlock, and then swept his way out of Lestrade’s office.

Lestrade looked at John. “Lucky you, mate.”

John held up his hand, on which his wedding ring shone. “Don’t I know it.”
Chapter 25

John always knew that stakeouts were singularly dull undertakings. Sherlock always forgot this. Sherlock adored stakeouts. Or so he thought. For the first twenty minutes. For the first twenty minutes, he was vibrating with anticipation, anxious to have his theories validated. After the first twenty minutes, Sherlock despised stakeouts. So John thought he only had to make it through the first twenty minutes and then Sherlock would start whingeing and they would go back to Baker Street and tumble into bed and sleep for ages. Well, John would sleep for ages. Sherlock probably wouldn’t sleep for ages, because that was how he was.

They were crouched, uncomfortably, in an alley. John was sitting on the pavement, because he was too tired to worry about how filthy it was, leaning against the brick wall of the building next to him. Sherlock was hunched behind a rubbish bin, peering at the object of the stakeout. John closed his eyes, confident that he wouldn’t sleep through any excitement or any life-saving Sherlock might need, and leaned his head back against the brick wall. And yawned enormously.

He thought of Sherlock sweeping out of Lestrade’s office earlier, worried that Oliver’s cries might not be answered. Had Sherlock cried as a baby and been ignored? Was there some sort of residual memory of that lingering in Sherlock’s brain? But no, John thought, frowning. Hadn’t Mycroft told him that Sherlock had been a quiet baby? That Sherlock hadn’t made a sound until he was five years old? Hadn’t Mycroft said that? John thought that was what Mycroft had said. Sherlock, silent. John hated when Sherlock was silent. It was his least favorite Sherlock mood, because it was the one that worried him the most. When Sherlock was quiet—listlessly quiet, not actively, sulkily, sullenly quiet—John could too easily see the drug addict in him, the version of this man he had never really known and didn’t, honestly, ever want to know. And when Sherlock was quiet, it was like he was dead again. For the first time in a very long time, John saw Sherlock tumbling off the roof of St. Bart’s, as clearly as it had happened that day and in all the nightmares that had followed, and he hadn’t had that dream for ages, but he woke up with a start to find Sherlock in front of him, hands carefully on his shoulders.

John didn’t feel exactly like he’d been sleeping but he also knew he hadn’t been awake. And he was trembling and gasping for breath as if he’d just been running a marathon.

“You were having a nightmare,” Sherlock explained, sounding uncertain.

John panted for breath and reached out and tucked his hands comfortably into the collar of Sherlock’s coat, where they fit so perfectly, and pulled him into a hard, bruising kiss.

Sherlock seemed to deduce what the dream had been about. Which was thoroughly unsurprising, since Sherlock always knew everything. He pulled out of the kiss and dragged his lips across John’s face, peppering him with kisses and murmuring, “I’m here—I’m here—Right here.”

John wanted to tell Sherlock to always be there, every time he woke up from a nightmare, but he didn’t need to, because Sherlock always would be there, they had just made that vow.

So instead he said, his voice rough and gravelly, “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“Let’s go home,” Sherlock suggested, and it was so caretaking a statement that John knew exactly how much Sherlock adored him, all wrapped up in those three words. Then Sherlock said, to cover it up, “It’s dull here, anyway.”

And then there was an explosion from across the street.
John ducked for automatic cover, lifting up an arm to shield his head and also using his hand still on Sherlock’s coat to pull him down into relative shelter because John knew by now that Sherlock’s instinct was always to run directly toward an explosion.

And, on cue, Sherlock barely waited for the debris to stop falling before he leaped to his feet and glanced out across the street. “Idiots,” he exclaimed, his eyes shining with delight, and then he took off at a dash.

“Bloody hell,” cursed John, under his breath, and took off after him. Luckily, adrenaline reliably kicked in, and he was able to keep Sherlock in sight, as he ducked around corners, pursuing something John couldn’t see. The streets were still relatively deserted but there were more and more morning commuters emerging, and they all gave him strange looks as he dashed by them, chasing after a bloke in an overdramatic and heavy-for-the-weather coat. John brushed a couple of them on his way past and called back hurried apologies over his shoulder.

And then, wheeling out of a particularly narrow alleyway after Sherlock, someone slammed into John’s right at full-force, sending John sprawling heavily to the pavement, where he landed on his shoulder and cursed in pained annoyance. Whoever had landed on top of him like a ton of bricks was pulled off of him, and John rolled over onto his back and blinked upward as Sherlock shoved the man against the nearest wall, hard enough to make John wince in sympathy.

“There you are,” said Sherlock, and neatly pressed his forearm against the bloke’s neck in a hold that would have choked him if he moved even an inch. Sherlock looked pleasantly over at John, as if they’d just encountered each other by chance on an early morning stroll.

John pulled himself into his feet, feeling like a bundle of bruises thanks to the explosion and then the collision. “Tell me that’s the murderer and not just someone you’re angry with for running into me,” he said.

“It’s the murderer,” Sherlock informed him, cheerfully. “He tripped right over you, just as I knew he would.”

“Actually, he ran right into me, to be technical about it. And ta ever so much for letting me in on your brilliant plan to use me as a literal snare.”

“If I’d told you, you would have hesitated at the final crucial moment and ruined the timing of everything.”

There were police sirens drawing nearer to them. John looked down at his expensive wedding suit, which was torn now in several places. “This is why I don’t buy nice clothing,” he remarked.

“You don’t buy nice clothing because you have terrible taste.”

“If you want our marriage to make it to the twenty-four hour mark,” John told him, “you’ll stop talking now.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, thought better of it, closed it again.

The police swirled up and around them, and Sherlock was in his element as he told them exactly how he had heroically collared the hero, and someone handed John an ice pack as almost an afterthought. John didn’t even know which part of his body the ice pack should be applied to. He settled for his shoulder.

Eventually, the police led the murderer away in handcuffs and John heard Sherlock say, “We’re not going to make statements now. Can’t you see my husband is exhausted?”
He said *husband* with a trace of pride that made John feel a bit of warmth in his chest, and John was annoyed about a lot of things, but the problem was that, underneath all of that irritation was all that adoration ready to flood back in once the surface had been scratched the tiniest bit. John, sitting on the pavement once again as he waited, with his head tipped back against another brick wall and an ice pack against his shoulder, woke himself up from his doze enough to stand and walk over to where Sherlock was waiting.

Sherlock beamed at him, still looking immensely proud, and John had the oddest feeling that Sherlock was proud that there was *John*, instead of being proud of himself, as Sherlock normally was. But Sherlock was looking at him as if Casanova himself had just ridden into town on a white steed, when all it was was John Watson, bedraggled and in need of a shower, limping over to him.

“Home?” Sherlock asked, smiling sunnily at him. Sherlock was clearly in a remarkably good mood.

“Oh, my God, yes,” said John.

Sherlock made a cab appear the way he could, and John poured himself into it, leaning up against the door and closing his eyes. He intended to let himself drift until they got to Baker Street. In fact, he could feel the beginnings of a headache lurking, and he wanted to keep his eyes shut until he could crawl into bed and sleep it off.

There was a problem, though, and the problem was Sherlock. Sherlock sat next to him, not touching him and not speaking and not bothering him in any way, but Sherlock was thrumming with self-satisfied energy. Sherlock was feeling smug and predatory, the way Sherlock did after cases, and it was rolling off of him in waves that were electrifying the air in the cab. John felt the answering jolt of adrenaline in his own body, and thought, *Really? Look at the state you are in. You’re really thinking about a shag right now?*

John opened one eye a crack and peered over at Sherlock. Sherlock had his hands resting on his knees. John looked at those long fingers, splayed against Sherlock’s trouser leg. John looked at the column of Sherlock’s throat. John looked at Sherlock’s elegant profile, at the bow of his mouth, a moue of self-possessed confidence, and wanted to smash his way through it and make Sherlock think about things that were not his own brilliance.

*Yes*, John thought. *Definitely a shag.* It occurred to him that he’d wanted to shag Sherlock after a successful case for years now. No wonder it always took him ages to fall asleep when they got home, when by rights he should have been exhausted. John had always blamed the adrenaline still left in his system, but now he saw it had been persistent sexual frustration, always at a simmer, kicked up to a rolling boil by the way Sherlock could suck all of the air out of the back of a cab and leave John dizzy on him.

Sherlock turned his head to look at him quizzically, and John realized that he had both eyes open, and that he’d sat up, and that he was no longer pretending that he was going to go to sleep as soon as they got home. Which was immediately obvious to Sherlock, who blinked and in a blink transformed his eyes from sharp tools of deduction to liquid tools of seduction, and it was unfair that he could do that.

Sherlock’s fingers curled into the fabric of his trousers. He took a heavy, labored breath, and then another one, holding John’s gaze.

When the cab pulled to a stop in front of 221 Baker Street, John said to Sherlock, “Pay him.” It came out as a growl.

Sherlock blinked again, pupils dilating an impossible amount more, and John stumbled out of the cab
and up to their door, unlocking it and pushing it open and going up the stairs, confident Sherlock would follow him.

Lestrade was sitting up on their sofa, yawning. “Thought I heard you lot. The baby’s sleeping—”

“Thanks so much for watching him,” John said. “We’ll see you soon.”

It was an obvious dismissal, and Lestrade cocked his head at him in confusion, and then Sherlock walked into the room behind John, and the tension must have been so thick that Lestrade just said, “Right,” and hurried out of Baker Street as quickly as he could.

And John immediately turned to Sherlock and backed him into their room and onto their bed, where he landed a bit inelegantly, blinking up at him with dark, enormous eyes.

“Don’t do that,” said John.

“Do what?” asked Sherlock, breathless.

“Seduce me in cabs,” said John, and leaped on top of him, straddling him. Sherlock was already hard, and his breath quickened just that little bit more.

“I was sitting in that cab,” said Sherlock, as John pressed his hands on either side of his head, leaning over him. “I wasn’t doing anything.”

“Never, ever stop,” John told him.

“You just said—”

John swallowed the illogic Sherlock had been about to complain about with a kiss, wet and deep and so slow until Sherlock moaned and moaned and moaned again and unconsciously followed the dip and thrust of John’s tongue with the rocking of his hips. And John loved Sherlock this way, mindless with pleasure, incoherent with it. John thought of sex these days in terms of Sherlock’s orgasms, because it was Sherlock’s orgasms that propelled John’s, it was Sherlock’s gasps and pleas that John craved more than anything he’d ever known before. Sherlock could say “John” in just such a way that John was convinced he could come just from the sound of that alone. When he got Sherlock to that point, he sometimes had to stop and squeeze his eyes shut to push his blood back down, to take a breath, to make things last a bit. And when he did that, Sherlock reached for him, pulled at him, messy and uncoordinated in his desperation, his hands tugging and twisting and scratching and it all would have hurt, except that Sherlock would say it again—“John”—in just that way, and John would swear.

“Again again again again,” he pleaded into Sherlock’s ear, as his hand worked at him.

Sherlock gasped and clung and said his name as an unbroken chain. “JohnJohnJohnJohnJohn.” And then a pause, a stillness, a moment of clarity so out-of-place in the lust-heavy air of their bedroom that John, bewildered by it, had no time to brace himself, before Sherlock reached down, took him firmly in hand, and said, just once, with single-minded determination, “John,” and all it took was that and one pull and John realized it in the moment that it was too late, saying, “Jesus Christ,” and then the climax rushed over him.

“Not just my voice,” said Sherlock, sounding almost musing as he put the pieces together. “Your name in my voice.” He closed John’s hand around his erection, guiding it, because John was way too exhausted to pull together the energy to finish Sherlock off at the moment.

“That was cheating,” John gasped.
Sherlock didn’t answer him, arching up into the rhythm he was making John create and crashing into his own orgasm.

John waited, until Sherlock had melted into the bed next to him. “That was cheating.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Sherlock murmured, sounding sleepy now. “It was clever.”

“You’re going to use that all the time now, now that you know that,” said John, without heat. He had a hard time thinking that would be a bad development.

Sherlock had his eyes closed but he smiled a bit in response to that. “All the time. At every time. John John John John John.”

“It doesn’t work like that, you know. There have to be certain circumstances.”

“I know,” said Sherlock, and yawned enormously.

“Do not even think about falling asleep. You have to go fetch a flannel and clean us up a bit.”

“Why do I have to do that?”

“Because you’re the one who wasn’t tired at the stakeout. I was exhausted. I was going to come right home and sleep, only you seduced me in the cab.”

“Stop it, you ravished me, so you’ve nothing to complain about and ought to be the one doing the cleaning up.”

“Wanker,” John told him.

Sherlock’s sleepy smile widened. “Only because you were remiss at the end there.”

“Because you cheated. I was going to do you first, and then me.”

“You shag with such an orderly queue. It’s so British of you.”

*I hate you,* John thought to say, but it came out as, “I love you desperately.”

He momentarily felt like an idiot for that, only Sherlock opened his eyes and turned his head to look at him and smiled, not the smirks he’d been smiling but one of those genuine smiles that lit up his eyes and made John think of Oliver. “Happy wedding,” Sherlock said to him.

“Are you happy?” John asked, because he thought he was but he needed to hear it.

“I married my favorite person on the planet, then I solved a crime, then I had sex with someone I actually enjoy having sex with. Who also happens to be the same favorite person on the planet I just married.”

“Good job it’s the same person,” remarked John.

“This has been the most perfect 24-hour period I could ever have imagined,” Sherlock told him, and he said it so solemnly, with such aching, honest belief.

John kissed him, soft and sweet, because he had to.

Over the monitor, Oliver cried.
John cursed his momentary lack of practicality in engaging in a shag instead of in sleeping so that he could have rested a bit before going back to taking care of a baby. “You get him,” he told Sherlock. “He’s your clone, you’re where he gets his appalling inability to sleep a proper amount from.”

Sherlock didn’t quarrel. Sherlock rolled out of the bed and disappeared momentarily into the bathroom, and John heard the water run and thought, *Oh, yes, right,* and then a wet flannel landed with a plop on the middle of his chest. John cleaned himself up while listening to Sherlock’s tread up the stairs, the rumble of Sherlock’s voice talking to Oliver, who stopped crying immediately. John sighed and wrinkled his nose at the rumpled messy sheets on their bed and once again cursed his lack of practicality. Even if it had been excellent sex. John dug out the duvet that had been tossed to the floor and spread it over their sheets and sprawled out on top of it and had the thought that he should fetch a blanket or put on some clothing or *something* and then fell dead asleep.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

I have had...A Day. I get so many comments from all of you telling me that I've brightened your days, and I'm always so delighted to hear that, but it occurred to me that you ought to know: You totally, utterly, and completely brighten mine, too. It was a day when I felt unsure of myself and slow-witted and stupid and dull, and I thought, "You know what? You get to post Nature & Nurture tonight, and it should make people *happy,* and you'll stop feeling so useless." And for the fact that you gave me that uplifting thought in the middle of a slog of a day, I thank you. And I thought you should know. (Sorry I'm clingy lately. I'm having a lot of thinky thoughts about a lot of things. There may eventually be A Post about these thoughts and things.)

John woke aware that he was warm. There was a blanket over him. Sherlock’s doing, obviously, and John smiled into his pillow at how thoughtful Sherlock could be at times. And then John became aware that something was thudding against his hip.

John cracked an eye open so he could see. Sherlock was sprawled on his back next to him in the bed, fully clothed and sound asleep, his mouth open, snoring slightly. And Oliver was sitting up in the valley between their two bodies, beating a fist against John’s hip and pushing about on the mattress a couple of the decapitated head balls Mycroft had brought him and the stuffed caterpillar that had been the first toy they’d bought for him on that first shopping excursion. The reason for the blanket over him became clear: covering him up, John realized.

John smiled between Sherlock, whose hand was resting limply against Oliver’s leg, as if he’d been holding him in place before falling asleep, and Oliver, who, noticing that he was awake, gave him a smile of pure, unabashed delight and beat him a bit harder on his hip.

“Hello,” John told him, keeping his voice low for Sherlock’s benefit and smiling in response. He reached a hand out and tapped a finger against Oliver’s nose, which made Oliver giggle gleefully. John smiled even wider and nudged a ball over to Oliver, who pushed it back, beaming with joy at this game. They played it for a little while, until John could stand it no longer and reached for Oliver and pulled him up and over to him and smothered him in kisses, and Oliver laughed, squirming playfully in John’s grasp.

John settled Oliver on his back next to him and tickled at his belly and Oliver giggled and kicked his feet and then John suddenly realized that Sherlock was awake and watching them.

“Oh,” said John. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you. I shouldn’t have—”

“You love him,” Sherlock interrupted him, his voice rough with sleep.

John blinked, not sure what the point of saying that might be. Had Sherlock doubted that? John looked down at Oliver, contentedly looking up at him as if the sun rose and set on him, and then back up at Sherlock. “Yes,” he said. “Of course I do. Mycroft says I’ve completely lost my head over him.”

John meant the remark to be light and joking, but Sherlock’s face darkened. “Oh, does he?” muttered
Sherlock, belligerently.

John frowned. “I thought Mycroft did a nice job with the wedding.”

Sherlock waved his hand about. “The wedding was fine.”

“Then what’s this about?”

Sherlock was staring up at the ceiling, thinking about things that he definitely was not sharing with John. “Nothing. Just Mycroft.”

John didn’t believe that. “Sherlock—”

Sherlock rolled over to his side, jostling Oliver in his position on the mattress. Oliver looked at him in disapproval.

“You head must be killing you,” Sherlock cut John off, unceremoniously.

“Not really,” John said. He had the hint of a headache but nothing major.

“Hmm. Then it looks worse than it is.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“No rows in front of the baby,” Sherlock reminded him, primly.

“I’ve noticed you only adhere to that rule when it suits you,” John pointed out.

“Oliver misses his skull,” announced Sherlock, and rolled out of the bed, taking Oliver with him.

John sighed and decided to tackle the topic later. Instead, he retreated into the bathroom, where he looked at his reflection in the mirror and was alarmed to see that Sherlock was right and there was a nasty bruise on his temple. He must have scraped his head harder than he’d realized in the collision. John decided he was grateful for whatever lingering adrenaline was keeping the bulk of the pain away from him and downed a couple of paracetamol just in case.

After showering he made them tea and toast and carried them into the sitting room, where Sherlock was energetically typing on his laptop, Oliver on his lap and watching raptly.

“What’s that you’re up to?” John asked, putting everything down on the desk and leaning over Sherlock, putting a hand in Sherlock’s hair as he did it.

Sherlock leaned back into the pressure on his scalp and said, “Blog entry.”

John studied it with interest. It appeared to be some kind of analysis of the occurrence of different kinds of bacteria. “What experiment is this?”

“I’ve been documenting the cleanliness of Oliver’s baby bottles after you attempt to sterilize them. Some methods are much less effective than others, you know.”

John’s eyes widened a little bit. “You know that the bottles aren’t clean enough? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Oh, it was nothing to worry about. For God’s sake, he can handle a bit of bacteria.”

Oliver twisted in Sherlock’s lap and looked up at John and babbled his agreement with this wisely.
John shook his head and sighed and sat in his chair, prepared to eat his toast and bring up Mycroft again, when he suddenly found himself with a lap full of baby.

“Your turn,” said Sherlock. “I’m taking a shower.”

“Okay,” John agreed, as Sherlock disappeared into the bathroom. “He’s acting strangely today,” John told Oliver. “I’m going to choose to believe it’s unconnected to our marriage.”

Oliver stuck his fingers in his mouth as if to say, *What are you going to do, we get in moods sometimes.*

And then Mycroft said from the doorway, “I do hope I’m not interrupting the honeymoon.”

Oliver scowled at him and directed some angry nonsense his way. John said, “Seriously? Your surveillance is so precise that you have the ability to show up here as soon as he gets in the shower?”

“I wanted to speak with you and I thought you were unlikely to separate from each other so soon after your wedding.” Mycroft sat in Sherlock’s chair without waiting to be invited and regarded Oliver with the wary respect Mycroft usually reserved for Oliver.

Oliver looked back at him stonily and kept babbling angrily. John wondered exactly what Sherlock told Oliver about Mycroft when John wasn’t around and thought they might need to have a discussion about that.

“You know,” said John, trying to silence Oliver by adjusting his position on John, which only made Oliver fussier, “I think I’m done acting as go-between for the two of you.”

“I’ve already spoken to him about this.”


“You’re planning a blog entry to announce your marriage and Oliver’s existence?”

“It only makes sense. Although Sherlock’s writing one up right now about the proper sterilization of baby bottles so, you know, the cat’s going to be out of the bag fairly soon here.”

“And once the cat is out of the bag, to use your turn of phrase, how do you intend to handle my parents?”

John lifted his eyebrows. “I wasn’t going to handle them. I don’t generally ‘handle’ people.”

Mycroft made the closest sound he ever made to a snort. “You handle Sherlock, more admirably than any of the rest of us do.”

“And while I know you mean that as a compliment, I’m not sure I handle him so much as...I’m just compatible with him,” John realized. Sherlock was annoying at times, there was no question, but John didn’t mind Sherlock’s annoyingness because he liked the rest of Sherlock. Sherlock, in all the nooks and crannies of his oddities, suited John. They had fitted together like two snug pieces of a jigsaw puzzle from the moment they had first conversed, and they had never seen any reason to break that up; perfect fits like that were rare.

“Call it what you will,” said Mycroft, carelessly. “If I were you, I would suggest a visit to Cornwall with Sherlock and Oliver.”

“Is this what you spoke to him about already? I take it Sherlock has no desire to go to Cornwall?”
Mycroft licked his lips and looked vaguely uncomfortable, which he only did in dire situations, like right before Sherlock flung himself from a rooftop. John frowned. Even Oliver had stopped squirming on his lap and was listening closely, sharp Sherlockian eyes flickering over Mycroft as if observing every little nuance of his posture and exactly how much cake he’d had the day before.

“Sherlock and I…have an ancient agreement.”

“An ancient agreement?” echoed John. Mycroft said it so formally, it might as well have been a treaty forged with an enemy combatant. “Signed in blood?”

Mycroft ignored that. “Did you never wonder why I am the only member of Sherlock’s family to whom he speaks?”

“No,” John said, honestly. “The reason for that is obvious to me.”

Mycroft looked startled by this. Oliver twisted on John’s lap to look up at him, his expression one of You’ve just surprised Uncle Mycroft! Good for you!

“The two of you are idiots,” John said, bluntly. “He loves you, although he’d rather die than admit it. And you love him. You have a knack for doing the world’s most irritating things but you always do them from a place of love and he knows that, even if he only knows it subconsciously. I know you try to take care of him, and I know he secretly trusts you with that. So no, I’ve never wondered why you’re the only other Holmes I’ve ever met. It was obvious to me you’re actually fairly close brothers, and I just assumed your parents were dead, although now that I know they’re not, I’ve concluded Sherlock really doesn’t like them. And given what Sherlock’s told me, he has good reason not to like them, and I’m not going to subject Oliver to it. Sherlock and I have already discussed it.”

“And you think it will be that easy, do you?”

“Yes,” replied John, stubbornly. “They’ve never cared about our lives before, have they?”

“You didn’t have a baby before.”

“From what I can discern, they didn’t care overly much about Sherlock when he was a baby. Why should Oliver be different?”

“Because there’s a great big house in Cornwall that they think someone needs to inherit,” said Sherlock, from the doorway.

John wondered when the shower had shut off. He wondered that Mycroft hadn’t noticed. He hadn’t noticed, but that was predictable for him. Or maybe Mycroft had noticed and wanted Sherlock to walk in on this little conversation.

Sherlock had chosen a white shirt to wear, and his hair was damp from the ambient humidity of the bathroom, curling a bit more wildly up around his head, and he looked extremely displeased. And John didn’t blame him. Oliver spoke to him enthusiastically from John’s lap, flailing his hands in Mycroft’s direction, the better, no doubt, to illustrate his story about what was going on.

“We’ve already had this conversation,” Sherlock told Mycroft, sourly, walking into the sitting room and picking Oliver up off of John’s lap. “I’ve already said no. John isn’t going to convince me otherwise.”

“I wasn’t going to try,” John defended himself.
“You can go now, Mycroft,” said Sherlock, disappearing into the kitchen. “You’ve nothing more to say.”

“I understand why you want nothing to do with them,” Mycroft began.

Sherlock reappeared, apparently unable to resist. “They didn’t even come to my funeral,” he snapped.

Which was true, John realized at that moment. He didn’t spend much time thinking about Sherlock’s funeral, because he would much rather forget it, and most of it was a blur anyway, but he definitely didn’t remember Sherlock’s parents being there.

Mycroft paused awkwardly. “They sent flowers,” he said, eventually.

“It was my funeral,” said Sherlock.

“It was a fake funeral,” Mycroft pointed out.

“Did they know it was fake?” asked John.

“No,” said Mycroft, after a second. “I didn’t tell them. But they may have guessed it from something about my demeanor. They’ve always been…difficult to fool.”

“They guessed that their younger son had faked his own suicide with the help of their older son? That’s what they guessed?” said John, disbelievingly.

Mycroft spoke directly to Sherlock, ignoring John. “You decided you didn’t want anything more to do with them, and I told you that I would ensure that for you because you seemed to think it was something you desperately needed. And I’ve done it, haven’t I? And I’m even willing to admit you were right, because you have been…better…ever since. But I don’t know if I can continue to ensure it now that there is Oliver.”

John looked from Mycroft to Sherlock. Sherlock fidgeted uncomfortably, and Oliver reached out a hand and touched Sherlock’s nose, as if to offer comfort. Which did seem to recall Sherlock to himself.

He drew himself up imperiously and said, “I am so honored to have finally discovered the one thing you can’t do.”

Mycroft sighed.

Sherlock added, “And I see that you’ve resumed eating carbs,” and then turned on his heel and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Mycroft frowned and stood and looked down at John with a trace of resigned sadness to his expression. “Make him have a conversation about it, hmm?”

Mycroft exited and Sherlock immediately re-entered, thrust Oliver at John, and went for his violin, where he screeched a series of violent, furious notes before throwing the violin to the floor and throwing himself dramatically onto the sofa.

Oliver clapped his hands together once in what was clearly gleeful approval of all of the Byronic histrionics. John could foresee a day when he shared his flat with two unabashedly melodramatic people who would delight in one-upping each other in the “overreaction” department.
“Are the hysterics over now?” John asked, calmly.

“I hate him,” announced Sherlock, to the ceiling.

“I am aware of that,” said John, although he also knew that wasn’t true, because Sherlock had clearly cut out of his life the real objects of his hatred. “You need to tell me about your parents.”

“I’ve told you about my parents.”

“They couldn’t be bothered to show up to your funeral, but they’ll come running up from Cornwall for Oliver’s sake?”

Sherlock steepled his fingers in prayer position underneath his chin. “They’ll want to see if they can influence him. I am a terrible disappointment, you know.”

“Maybe we should write them a note. Send them a photo. ‘Here’s your grandchild. He’s quite healthy and happy and sends his love.’ Maybe they’d be appeased.”

“Let Mycroft deal with it,” said Sherlock, airily, waving a hand. “Mycroft’s being lazy. He can hold them off.”

John looked down at Oliver on his lap and felt a vague discomfort. His parents were dead, so Sherlock’s parents were all Oliver had. “Maybe they…feel bad. About, you know, everything,” he said, lamely, because he still knew precious little about the Holmases.

“They didn’t come to my funeral,” Sherlock reminded him.

“To be fair,” contributed John, “I almost didn’t go to your funeral, either.”

There was a moment of silence, then Sherlock turned his head to look at him. “But you did.”

“Wasn’t easy.”

There was another moment of silence. Sherlock looked as if he was on the verge of saying something, but that even he didn’t know what it was.

Oliver filled the silence with his opinion. Sherlock looked at him and smiled softly, his face written all over with love, and John thought of someone, somewhere, telling Sherlock he was a sociopath, and how Sherlock’s idiot parents could have got it so very wrong.

John kissed Oliver’s temple and said, “We’ll let Mycroft deal with your parents.”

Sherlock looked abruptly thoughtful, his gaze on Oliver. “Unless you think Oliver might want a huge, drafty house in Cornwall?”

“Oliver’s you, isn’t he?” John reminded him. “Do you want a huge, drafty house in Cornwall?”

“Mamamamamamama,” said Oliver.

“He’s saying that Cornwall’s rubbish,” translated John.

Sherlock laughed, and John thought he had never heard a more beautiful sound than that.

“Let’s go away,” he heard himself say.

“Go away where?” asked Sherlock.
“I don’t know. Anywhere. I think we should go on a honeymoon somewhere. We’ve never had a holiday together, you and I.”

“We’ve been lots of places together.”

“Investigating crimes, Sherlock. Never on holiday.”

Sherlock looked honestly bewildered. “But what would we do on holiday?”

John put his hands over Oliver’s ears. “Have a lot of sex,” he said, frankly.

Sherlock frowned a bit. “We can have a lot of sex here, can’t we?”

“Here there’s Mycroft popping in to worry you about your parents and some stupid house up in Cornwall, and Lestrade ringing us with crimes that you feel compelled to go solve, and me fretting about not getting updates from my sister in rehab, and Mrs. Hudson on the floor below us listening to the mattress squeak.”

“My mattress doesn’t squeak.”

“I’m speaking metaphorically.”

“I hate it when you do that. It’s so writerly of you.”

“We just got married. And an hour later we were doing exactly what we’re always doing. And it’s not that I’m unhappy about that, but I’m thinking that it might be nice to take a breath and just be us and be stupidly in love and enjoy each other. We have no reason to be in London right now. Let’s take Oliver and get on a train or a plane or a car and just go.”

“Take your hands away from his ears.”

John obeyed.

“Oliver,” Sherlock said to him. “How would you like to go on a holiday?”

Oliver scrunched up his face, giving every impression of thinking very hard about this proposal. After a moment, he said, “Mamamamama.”

“Yes, you can bring your skull,” replied Sherlock.

“Mamamamamama,” said Oliver again, and began chewing on his fingers, looking content.

“He’s all for it,” said Sherlock, and then, casually, “Mycroft has a house in the South of France and he owes me right now. Would that suit?”
John sprawled in the sun on the verandah that overlooked the Mediterranean Sea and closed his eyes and listened to Sherlock demonstrating crawling to Oliver.

“No, no, no,” he was saying. “You have to lift yourself up to do this properly, Ollie.”

“Mamamamamamama,” Oliver complained to him.

“I wish you’d stop with that syllable, it’s incorrect. Try ‘da.’ Or ‘pa.’”

“Mamamamamama,” insisted Oliver, and John could hear the Sherlockian pout in that tone.

“Leave him alone,” John inserted, lazily. “He doesn’t want to crawl right now. And he doesn’t want to talk right now. He’s on holiday. He’s just going to laze about in the sun.”

“When have you ever known me to laze in the sun?” huffed Sherlock.

“You ought to do it more often,” remarked John.

“I’d burn,” Sherlock pointed out.

John ignored him, and after a moment Sherlock crawled onto the lounge chair John was in and sprawled on top of him and kissed the base of his throat. John smiled and tangled his hand casually into Sherlock’s curls as Sherlock settled his head on John’s chest, turned toward where he’d left Oliver on his playmat so he could keep an eye on him.

“What does your brother have this house for?” John asked.

“Don’t bring up my brother on our honeymoon,” replied Sherlock.

John chuckled and kissed the top of Sherlock’s head. “Fine. I can agree to that rule.”

“Are you happy?” Sherlock asked, after a moment.

“Delighted. This is exactly what I wanted.”

“Good,” said Sherlock. “I’m glad.”

“You are bored to death, aren’t you?”

Sherlock groaned dramatically and turned to press his nose into John’s breastbone. “No one has killed anyone in the longest time.”

“Just the other day you had that conversation at the café about that break-in at that other villa.”

“With the ransacked desk,” said Sherlock, musingly. “Where they took the romance novel, two votive candles, a snowglobe, and a roll of duct tape.”

“Yes. You seemed very taken with that.”

“There was more to that, yes.”

“It is a strange set of things to break into somebody’s house to steal.”
“Well, yes, it’s surely obvious that—”

“It’s a petty break-in, Sherlock. Your mind is making too much of it because you think too much. Let me distract you.” John leaned his head down to nuzzle behind Sherlock’s ear.

“Do you think they’ll let me investigate?” Sherlock asked, not to be deterred.

John gave up on distracting him for the moment. “If you speak more of that sexy French to them, probably.”

“It isn’t sexy to them, it’s just their language.”

“It’s sexy, because you’re the one speaking it. When I speak it, I just sound like an idiot.”

“That’s true,” said Sherlock.

John laughed.

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The next day, while Sherlock was feeding Oliver and simultaneously treating him to a lecture on the likelihood of violent crimes in certain types of weather, the doorbell rang. John, who had been cleaning up from the proper breakfast he’d made for them, went to answer it with a little frown, because there was unlikely to be a nice reason why someone had shown up at their door.

The man at the door was a policeman, and John’s frown deepened.

“Is Monsieur Sherlock Holmes in?” he asked, politely.

“Seriously?” said John. “We’re on holiday.”

Sherlock came bouncing over to the front door, jostling Oliver, who looked tolerant of it. “Has there been a crime?”

“A murder actually,” said the policeman.

“A murder!” Sherlock practically went into paroxysms of glee over this. “Did you hear that, Oliver? We won’t die of boredom here after all! Excellent! A murder, John!”

“Yes,” said John, decidedly less enthusiastic about this development than Sherlock was. He didn’t mind murder investigations—if he did, he would not have married Sherlock Holmes—but they were on their honeymoon, and they had a baby.

None of which mattered, because Sherlock was out the door with the policeman, conversing in rapidfire French, and John followed behind, resigned to it. Oliver, for his part, looked completely fascinated. He listened spellbound to the unfamiliar rhythms of the French all around him, and Sherlock filled John in as they drove to the villa.

“Another break-in,” he said.

“I thought it was a murder.”

“Yes, the housekeeper disturbed the burglar and was killed. The burglar got away.” Sherlock wasn’t bothering in the least to hide his shining excitement over this problem, and his enthusiasm was infectious. Oliver clapped his little hands together once in a mimicry of Sherlock’s delight. Sherlock had that tendency, to clasp his hands together when he was excited, and Oliver was either copying it
or it was genetically engrained.

“Forgive me, Doctor Watson,” the policeman said, in his fairly flawless English. “I did not realize you did not speak French as well.”

“It’s fine,” said John, but was relieved that the policeman switched over to English as they reached the villa.

“The body is still in place,” he said, as they walked up to the front door. “You may not want your baby to—”

“He’ll be fine,” said Sherlock, dismissively, carrying Oliver confidently past the crime scene tape.

“He’s used to crime scenes,” John told the concerned-looking policeman. Who at least hadn’t seemed to express much surprise over the presence of the baby. But then John supposed the gossip had gone out around the area that the great detective had arrived with his sidekick and a baby. Certainly the police had known easily enough where to find Sherlock.

“Allow me to say, Dr. Watson, that I am devoted to your blog,” said the policeman, gravely.

John puffed up with pride, sensing the eyeroll that came from Sherlock. “Thank you,” he said.

“You have such a…panache,” continued the policeman.

“Yes, yes,” inserted Sherlock, impatiently, “John is a literary genius. Could someone please walk me through this crime scene?”

And then Oliver, still in Sherlock’s arms, said, quite distinctly, “Dead.”

There was a moment of silence. Sherlock, looking stunned, blinked and looked down at Oliver. Oliver was gnawing happily on the bumblebee rattle Sherlock had produced from his pocket for him as they’d walked up to the villa.

“Oh,” said Sherlock. “Yes. Well. Can’t argue with that, Ollie.” And then he looked across at John. “See that? Real first word: ‘dead.’ It’s a good choice.”

John gave the policeman who was staring at them a tight smile. “We’re not a typical family.”

The policeman gave him the c’est-la-vie look that the French had perfected, and someone stepped forward to walk Sherlock through the crime scene. Apparently the French equivalent of Anderson. His English was not as good and he struggled through the narrative, stumbling over the unfamiliar words. Sherlock wasn’t listening anyway. He kept circling the body, peering down at it, then crouching to look more closely, then standing up to look out the nearby window, frowning at the shattered glass all around. Oliver, gnawing contentedly on his rattle, looked at all the things Sherlock looked at. John smiled for the struggling forensics expert’s benefit, paying polite attention.

Sherlock interrupted, abruptly, turning from the window, “So the housekeeper heard the shattering window?”

“Oui, monsieur,” answered the forensics expert.

John looked down at the body at their feet. “The housekeeper was a man?”

“Progressive household,” remarked Sherlock, and John couldn’t tell how sarcastic the comment was. He was still walking around the crime scene, looking closely at everything.
Oliver in his arms shook his rattle and practiced his one word. “Dead dead dead,” he said.

John knew that Oliver was still too young to be really connecting meaning to the word, even if he was a genius clone baby, but he was a little alarmed that they apparently said the word so often that Oliver had picked up on it as a sound he thought it would be desirable to learn how to say. As opposed to “Dada” or “Papa” the way another baby might have.

Sherlock seemed to be paying no attention to Oliver’s monologue. He spoke over him, playing out the scene with his hands. “Heard the breaking window, came down to investigate, disturbed the burglar, the burglar shot him and ran off. Is that how they’re saying it went?”

“Yes,” said the original policeman who had come to fetch them. John thought he would have to be sure to get his name for the blog.


“The Cunninghams. They own this villa. From England, like yourselves.”

“Their land abuts the villa with the break-in the other day?” asked Sherlock.

The policeman nodded. “It appears to be the same burglar.”

“He must have finished the first romance novel he stole,” remarked John.

Sherlock acknowledged the joke with a brief twitch of his lips. “How long had the housekeeper worked here?”

“Years.”

“No complaints about him?”

The policeman looked surprised. “Do you think he was in league with the burglar?”

“If you were a burglar who had successfully broken into one villa, why would you break into the villa next door?”

“Something about the land here?” suggested John.

Sherlock was back to standing at the window, looking out at the sea in the distance. “Is that the only thing that connects the two? The land?”

“It’s enough, isn’t it?” said the policeman. “Certainly they’ve been fighting over it for years. A dispute about lemon trees on the boundary. It’s ridiculous.”

Sherlock turned from the window, looking intrigued by that. “Indeed?”

“Well, lemon trees are very rare in France. You should speak to the Cunninghams,” the policeman suggested. “They saw the burglar as he fled.”

“Cunninghams plural?”

“Monsieur and Madame.”

“I will speak to them. Perhaps you could tell me their story first.”

“Madame Cunningham was in bed. Monsieur Cunningham was awake and working in his study. He
apparently had an early morning conference call.”

“The study is located where?”

“Upstairs.”

Sherlock looked up at the ceiling, as if he could see straight through it. Oliver copied him. “Alright. And then what?”

“They heard their housekeeper calling for help. Monsieur Cunningham came running downstairs just as the burglar shot the housekeeper and dashed away. Monsieur Cunningham stopped to see if he could help the dying man. Madame Cunningham, meanwhile, had gotten out of bed and saw the burglar fleeing from her window. He ran to the road, she said. He could have gone anywhere after that.”

“Haven’t they an alarm system here? Security cameras?”

“The alarm wasn’t on, as the house was occupied.”

“They weren’t worried, given the break-in next door?”

“They didn’t think a burglar would break into an occupied house. The house next door was empty at the time it was broken into. And there are security cameras here but at the doorways, not at the window.”

“Hmm,” said Sherlock, as if he was barely paying attention, looking all around him.

“There is this, which may be of interest.” The forensics expert, eager to be part of the conversation, leaped forward, holding something out. “We just found it.”

John walked over to Sherlock so he could look over Sherlock’s shoulder, as Sherlock took it.

It was a small, ripped piece of paper, on which was written at quarter to six and learn what and may.

“Well, this is the most important thing about this murder,” Sherlock said, brusquely. “You should have mentioned this much earlier. Where did you find this?”

“It was in his hand.” The forensics expert gestured to the dead body on the floor.

“And when did he die, did you say?”

“At approximately six o’clock this morning.”

“And why was the housekeeper here at six o’clock in the morning? Would that have been expected?”

The policeman shrugged. “They said they weren’t sure of his habits.”

“And was the housekeeper French or English?”

“He was French,” said the policeman.

“And yet he was in possession of a note written in English?”

The policeman looked offended. “He spoke perfect English, of course. He worked for an English couple.”
Oliver reached for the little piece of paper and Sherlock gave it to him absently.

The forensics expert uttered a strangled noise as Oliver crumpled it up and then looked up at him and said, happily, “Dead dead dead dead dead.”

“Let’s work on a nicer word to say to people, hmm, Ollie?” said John, and carefully extracted the piece of paper from his hand.

Oliver squawked a protest at him.

“Do you think the note means that the housekeeper knew the burglar?” asked John, handing the piece of paper back to the forensics expert.

“If he knew the burglar, why wouldn’t he have just let him in?”

John considered. “Throw off suspicion?”

“If he knew the burglar, why would the burglar kill him?”

“Maybe he was really upset that he didn’t get his share of the haul from last time.”

“Miffed about not getting the duct tape,” drawled Sherlock.

John didn’t laugh, because it was terrible to laugh at crime scenes, people always looked at them strangely. So he swallowed the chuckle and said, “Or the snowglobe. Some people feel passionately about snowglobes.”

“Let’s go talk to the Cunninghams. John, this honeymoon is a great success. This has been charming.”

“He’s a romantic at heart,” John told the policeman, and then recalled that their marriage had not yet been publicly announced. He would have to fix that in the next blog entry, he thought, as he watched the policeman’s eyes glance at their hands, noting their matching rings.

“Whoever wrote that note killed the man,” Sherlock told John under his breath, handing Oliver over to him as they followed the policeman to the front of the house.

“And do you know who wrote the note?” asked John.

“Of course I know who wrote the note.”

“Of course.”

“The person who wrote the note pulled it out of the dead man’s hand. They left a corner behind but they didn’t realize it. And they put it in their pocket. So we just have to find the right pocket.”

Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham were waiting in the front room, both looking exhausted and distressed. They were a middle-aged couple clinging to youth very badly and they looked surprised to find two strange men and a baby suddenly in their police-crawling house.

Cunningham demanded, “And who are these people?”

His wife was also staring. “They’ve got a baby,” she said.

John expected Sherlock to say something about stating the obvious but he was apparently on his best behavior. Oliver wasn’t. Oliver waved his rattle and told Mrs. Cunningham, “Dead dead dead.”
“We’re trying to teach him new words,” John told her.

“These are乡men of yours,” the policeman said. “The great detective Sherlock Holmes and his… Doctor Watson.”

Mrs. Cunningham recognized their names, John could tell. “Oh,” she said. “From the papers.” She looked at Sherlock. “You’re the one who faked your suicide.”

“I haven’t time for this,” Mr. Cunningham said. “Whilst you’re having some sort of playgroup, the man who killed Guillaume is running free, and we don’t have a single clue.”

“Actually,” said the policeman, “our forensics expert has just discovered—”

Sherlock abruptly crashed to the floor. Oliver cried out in alarm and kept crying in great, round sobs. John stared at the limp, unconscious body at his feet for half a beat of his heart before reacting, falling back onto instinct and sinking to the ground, keeping hold of Oliver even while he felt for Sherlock’s pulse at his throat.

“Oh, my God, he’s been poisoned!” shrieked Mrs. Cunningham.

“Bloody hell!” exclaimed Mr. Cunningham. “People are dropping like flies.”

Sherlock’s pulse was there. Completely strong and healthy and steady.

John narrowed his eyes.

“What is wrong with him?” asked the policeman, sounding horrified, having knelt next to John.

Sherlock’s eyes fluttered open, eyelashes batting exaggeratedly. He looked around with every impression of confusion and bewilderment. “John?” he said, faintly, as if he were on his deathbed and could barely summon the energy for the single syllable.

Oliver, upon seeing Sherlock’s eyes open, stopped crying and was now just blinking at him, making little sniffling noises.

John said, wryly, “Right here, darling.”

“Oh, dear.” Sherlock closed his eyes again. “I’m so sorry. It’s the heat. I am so susceptible to heatstroke.”

“It’s air-conditioned in here,” said Mr. Cunningham.

“We were in the sun earlier,” said John, figuring he was supposed to go along with this absurd story.

“What can we do?” asked the policeman. “A cold bath?”

“An ice cold shower will work wonders,” said John. “As cold as you can get it.”

“But can probably wait until we get home,” decided Sherlock, sitting up in an astonishing recovery.

“In the meantime, though, I wonder if we might go upstairs.”

“To… lay down?” said Mrs. Cunningham, confused.

“If you like,” said Sherlock. “But I should like to see your study, Mr. Cunningham.”

Mr. Cunningham was staring at Sherlock like he was insane, and John didn’t blame him. “I don’t see
what—"

Mrs. Cunningham laid a hand on his forearm. “If it will help catch Guillaume’s killer, dear…”

Mr. Cunningham sighed. “Fine.”

Sherlock leaped to his feet, full of a suspicious amount of energy for a man with heatstroke.

“Dead dead dead,” Oliver chided him.

“Not yet, love,” Sherlock told him, and leaned down to kiss his cheek. “Shall you lead the way, Mr. Cunningham?”

The study was a corner room at the top of the stairs. Sherlock peered through each of its windows, hands clasped behind his back, looking healthy as a horse. No one seemed to know what to make of him, but John knew exactly what to make of him, and John knew definitively that he was crazy because he had willingly and happily married this man and when they got home he didn’t know if he was going to give him a lecture about his behavior or shag him for it.

No, he did know, and that was the craziest thing about it.

“You had the light on in here?” said Sherlock.

“Yes, I was working,” answered Cunningham, shortly. “Look, I don’t see—”

“The light would have been visible from these windows. Why would a burglar break into a house where there were lights on?”

“I don’t know,” said Cunningham. “I’m not a burglar, am I?”

“No,” Sherlock agreed, affably. “You most definitely are not. And this door leads where? Oh, to the bedroom I see.” Sherlock stepped swiftly through it.

“Excuse me,” Cunningham said, hotly. “Is it quite necessary for you to—”

“Not necessary at all,” said Sherlock, smoothly, walking back into the study. “Sorry, didn’t mean to upset you. Now, this is what I suggest you do.” He strode quickly over to the desk and grabbed a piece of paper and a pen.

“No you mind?” demanded Cunningham.

“He makes it a habit never to mind,” remarked John.

Sherlock sent John a brief smile, then said, “You ought to offer a reward for information. Surest way to get the public involved. John could publicize it on his blog. John’s blog is extraordinarily popular, even here in France, I take it. Something like this would work, wouldn’t you say?” Sherlock handed the paper across to Cunningham.

Cunningham read it. “Well, yes, I suppose so, but Guillaume was killed around six o’clock.”

“And what did I say?”

“Five.”

“Ah. Fix it, would you, and give it to John? He handles the blogging side of things.” Sherlock waved his hand about.
John refrained from mentioning 243 different types of tobacco. Cunningham, with a little sigh of exasperation, made a note on the piece of paper and then handed it across to John.

“Are we done here now?” Cunningham asked.

“Yes,” Sherlock answered.

“Good.”

The little entourage turned to walk out of the room. Sherlock, coming out from behind the desk, grabbed John’s hand and took the piece of paper, looking at where Mr. Cunningham had crossed out five and written six.

“Ah,” said Sherlock.

“Ah what?” asked John.

“Dead,” said Oliver.

Sherlock reached out to the elaborate floral arrangement they were standing next to and shoved it off the shelf. It fell to the marble floor and shattered, sending flowers and water everywhere.

“Oliver, how terribly clumsy of you,” said Sherlock.

Oliver glared at him.

So did John.

The entourage turned back to them, making exclamations.

“What did you do?” said Mrs. Cunningham, looking horrified at the mess, and John wondered if the vase had been an antique.

“Sorry,” said John. “My baby—”

“Dead dead dead,” insisted Oliver, shaking his rattle to punctuate the points he was making.

“Do you know how much that vase was worth?” demanded Mr. Cunningham.

“We’ll pay you for it,” said John, hoping it wasn’t worth too much.

“Where is Monsieur Holmes?” asked the policeman, looking around.

“He’s in our bedroom,” spat out Cunningham. “The man is mad.” Cunningham stalked after him.

The policeman looked across at John. “This is more fun to read about on the blog than it is to live it,” he remarked.

And then there was a commotion from the bedroom and Sherlock’s voice shouting, urgently, “John!”

John raced through the doorway into the bedroom to find Sherlock pinned against the wall, flailing with his legs and clawing at Cunningham’s hands around his throat. For one desperate moment, John met Sherlock’s eyes, and then he fell onto Cunningham. Even with one arm tight around Oliver, he was able to pull Cunningham off of Sherlock and fling him up against the wall, an elbow at his throat.
He looked back at Sherlock, who was leaning heavily against the wall, breathing hard.

“You okay?” he asked Sherlock.

Sherlock didn’t answer.

“Sherlock,” he said, and Sherlock seemed to blink back to himself, nodding.

“What is the meaning of all of this?” asked the policeman, who evidently had a much slower reaction time than John Watson, and that was why John couldn’t let Sherlock go investigating on his own, thought John.

“What the hell,” John snapped out at Cunningham, digging a bit more heavily at his windpipe.

Cunningham choked and scrabbled and looked at John in a panic.

Oliver dropped his rattle, staring.

Sherlock, coughing dryly, took Oliver out of John’s arm and pulled him in close. “There’s your murderer,” Sherlock told the policeman. “And your burglar. Both of them.”

John glanced at Mrs. Cunningham, who was standing frozen in the doorway, as if she didn’t know what to do. The policeman was at John’s side, saying, awkwardly, “Er. Dr. Watson. If you’d let me…”

“We are on our honeymoon,” John told Cunningham, angrily, which was possibly a ridiculous thing to say but you didn’t try to strangle honeymooners, for God’s sake.

Cunningham just blinked at him.

John took a deep breath and a step back and forced his blood down from the surge it had experienced at the sight of Sherlock, pinned down and deprived of oxygen and using his last gasp of breath to call for John. He looked over at Sherlock, who was standing near the doorway, next to Mrs. Cunningham, Oliver in his arms, looking a bit shaken but other than that perfectly fine. Oliver was quiet. He looked too shocked to even cry.

John bent down and retrieved Oliver’s rattle and walked over to them, taking another deep breath. He felt both sets of identical opal eyes watching him closely. “Here you are, Ollie,” he said, making sure his voice was gentle and calm.

Oliver, after a wide-eyed moment, took it and promptly stuck it in his mouth.

John supposed the cleanliness of the rattle was the least of their issues at the moment.
Sherlock put Oliver to sleep with some violin. John sprawled on the terrace with his laptop and a bottle of wine and the Mediterranean sunset and listened to the music. As the twilight was closing over the sky, Sherlock came out to the terrace and stood for a moment just beyond the doorway.

“He’s sleeping?” John asked, glancing over at him and pouring him a glass of wine.

“Yes.”

“Did he seem upset?”

“No.” Sherlock licked his lips. “Do you think he should have been?”

“Yes,” John answered, frankly. “Because I am bloody upset. Come over here and let me look at your throat.”

“It’s fine,” Sherlock said, but he walked over to John and sat at the edge of his lounge chair and let John examine the bruises.

“Buggering hell,” John muttered, tipping Sherlock’s chin to get a better look. “What was he thinking? We were all of us in the next room. What was he going to say when we found your strangled body in his bedroom?”

“He was an idiot.” Sherlock paused. “He was probably going to blame my death on my heatstroke.”

John closed his eyes and shook his head and suddenly found him laughing. Laughing hard enough that he leaned forward to press his forehead against Sherlock’s shoulder. “I shouldn’t be laughing,” he said. “Today was awful.”

“Stop it, today was divine. It was a decent little mystery and I got to feign heatstroke.”

“That was the worst approximation of heatstroke I’ve ever seen.”

“Well, I couldn’t let that stupid policeman let it be known that we’d found the note. And I only had to fool two idiots. Really, who writes notes these days?”

“And then leaves the incriminating note in the pockets of the sweatpants thrown on his bed,” added John.

“Exactly. All over two stupid lemon trees. They break into their neighbor’s house to get evidence about the stupid lemon trees, poor Guillaume tries to blackmail them over it, so then they set him up and kill him. Idiots. Over lemon trees.”


“I scared you, too.”
“Oliver’s more important. You’ve been scaring me regularly for years.”

“I’m sorry for that.”

“No, you’re not. Not really. And you wouldn’t be you if you were. I wouldn’t change you for the world, you know that.”

“But you could have done without the murder on our honeymoon.”

“Yes. But it’s alright. Can we avoid crime for the rest of it, though?”

“Yes. Absolutely. Do you think we’ve destroyed Oliver?”

“Oliver is you, and you always seem to pull through near-death experiences better than the rest of us.”

“I was hardly near death,” scoffed Sherlock. “I’ve had worse strangulations.”

John closed his eyes briefly. “Of course you have. This is why I don’t let you out of my sight. What if I hadn’t been there today?”

“He wouldn’t have actually killed me with all of that police in the house. And, anyway, if you hadn’t been there, I would have behaved differently. I can only do things like the things I do when you’re there, you know.”

Because he knew John had his back, always, went unsaid.

John said, “I drafted a blog entry.”

“About the case?”

John nodded and turned the laptop toward Sherlock so he could see it. “I want your approval before I post.”

“‘When Life Gives You Lemon Trees?’” read Sherlock. “Really?”

“It’s just the title, Sherlock.”

The blog entry began with, We’re in the South of France on our honeymoon. Yes, you read that correctly. And, of course, because it’s us, we squeezed in time between sunbathing and walking hand-in-hand along the sea to solve a murder mystery.

“Well, that’s one way of announcing it to the world,” remarked Sherlock.

“We have to now. More and more people are learning about it. If we don’t say it, someone else will.”

“It’s fine. I think it works well.”

“Keep reading.”

Sherlock kept reading, all through John’s account of the case, and eventually reached the end, where John had added, almost as a postscript to the rest of it, And, in case you’ve heard rumors, they’re true and we have a baby. He’s lovely and delightful and Sherlock would like me to tell you that he’s the cleverest baby to ever have been born. His first word has turned out to be “dead.” Make of that what you will.
Sherlock smiled and turned the laptop back to John. “Post it,” he said, “and then let’s go to bed.”

“That is a good plan,” said John, hitting the submit button. “Giving me a heart attack by faking heatstroke and then smashing an antique vase so you can go off and get yourself almost strangled, those were not good plans.”

“Shut up,” said Sherlock, in a good-natured whine, “and come to bed.”

So John did, grinning, and in the morning when he check his blog, in amongst the cavalcade of congratulatory comments (and Mrs. Hudson’s chiding Boys! You’re supposed to be relaxing!) was a single comment from Sherlock. It read, It’s an excellent first word.

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They ended up staying at Mycroft’s for two weeks. They had had no schedule in mind when they’d got there, because they led unscheduled lives, and John had grown used to that flexibility. They went to France with the thought that they would go home when they’d had enough, and the decision that they’d had enough turned out to be a mutual one. John had feared Sherlock and Oliver would both grow bored after two days, but Oliver seemed not to care where he was so long as John and Sherlock were there with him, and Sherlock actually took to lounging about between bouts of shagging better than John would have supposed when he’d first proposed the honeymoon. But eventually John and Sherlock realized that they missed home, with everything that entailed. So they went home.

They were bickering good-naturedly when they got out of the cab in front of Baker Street, disagreeing about which sort of takeaway they should order.

“Why don’t we just order both?” suggested John. “You can perform experiments on the leftovers.” Which Sherlock would have done anyway.

“Oh,” said Sherlock, straightening from paying the cabbie and turning to him with a smile as the cab drove away. “That’s clever of you.”

John was standing on the bottom step, evening out their heights, Oliver in his arms. He grinned at Sherlock. “Clever? Really? Careful, it’ll go to my head.”

“Brilliant,” Sherlock said, swooping in for a kiss.

John caught his free hand up in Sherlock’s coat, intending to push him away but not quite achieving it. “Not right here on the front steps,” he said, around the kiss, but he was smiling even as he said it. John had not known Sherlock to be particularly physically demonstrative in public before, and he thought Sherlock had fallen into the habit on their honeymoon, and John was undecided whether he approved of it but he was in honeymoon mode enough to not mind much at the moment.

“Oh, stop it, we’re newlyweds,” said Sherlock. “Anyway, I want to make sure Mycroft gets a good show.”

“A show of how well his house worked out for us?”

Sherlock leaned away a bit, thinking. “Ah.”

“You really shouldn’t kiss me for reasons that have anything to do with your brother, you know,” John told him.

“Dead dead,” Oliver agreed, wisely.
The door to 221 opened, and Mrs. Hudson said, “What are the two of you doing out here?”

Sherlock straightened fully away from John, genuine pleasure lighting up his face. “Mrs. Hudson,” he said, bounding up the steps to catch her hands in his.

“Welcome home,” she said, cheeks pinkening as Sherlock kissed her cheek. “Did you have a good time?”

“We had an excellent time, Mrs. Hudson,” John said, sincerely.

“And there’s the little lamb,” Mrs. Hudson cooed, rushing toward Oliver. “Never mind about the two of you,” she said, with a little laugh, as she pulled a willing Oliver into her arms.

“Dead dead dead,” Oliver told her, smiling widely and showing her the skull he was clutching, as if to say, *Yes, the skull and I both went to France and survived it.*

Mrs. Hudson raised her eyebrows and looked at John. “You were serious in the blog entry,”

“I’m always serious in the blog.”

“Only the truth for John’s legions of dedicated readers,” added Sherlock.

And John looked at him, about to berate him for the edge of sarcasm in the remark, except that just at that moment Sherlock looked past John, toward the pavement, and the color drained out of his face and the smile he’d been smiling disappeared and his eyes widened in something like horror.

“Did Daddy and Papa take you down to the sea?” Mrs. Hudson was asking Oliver, as if everything was normal, because Mrs. Hudson was focused on the baby in her arms, and Oliver answered, “Dead dead dead dead dead dead,” and John turned his head to see what could possibly have alarmed Sherlock so much.

There were two people standing on the pavement, a man and a woman, older, probably close to seventy, well-dressed in matching black trenchcoats. The man was holding an umbrella, leaning on it slightly. He was entirely bald but for a fringe of silver-white over his ears. The woman, by contrast, had thick, luxurious, steel-gray hair that was pinned back on her head, not tightly enough to keep curls of it from springing free. They were both gazing at Sherlock with a trace of anxiety on their faces.

John looked from them back to Sherlock, unsure what to do.

“Sherlock,” said the woman, hesitantly. “You might not remember us, but—”

“I might not remember?” Sherlock interrupted, incredulously. “What has Mycroft told you about me? Of course I remember you.”

The woman drew herself up ramrod straight. “Ah. I was, of course, giving you the benefit of the doubt as to why you have not deigned to speak to us in decades. Ask us in, Sherlock, you have always had appalling manners.”

Sherlock’s parents, John realized, and looked at Oliver, who was now watching the scene raptly. Which Sherlock could not possibly want.

“Mrs. Hudson,” John said, politely. “Could you take Oliver—”

“Oh, please don’t,” said Sherlock’s mother, desperately. “We’ve come such a long way just to see
him.”

John hesitated, looking to Sherlock for guidance.

Sherlock didn’t take his eyes off his mother. Sherlock said, “Mrs. Hudson, could you take Oliver to Mrs. Turner’s? I’m sure he would love a visit with her, having been away for so long.”

Mrs. Hudson glanced at John, and John nodded a tiny bit at her in encouragement.

She nodded a tiny bit back. “Certainly, Sherlock,” she said, hurrying off the steps.

John reached out and brushed a reassuring hand over Oliver’s head as they went, just to make sure Oliver didn’t feel abandoned.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock said, gravely.

Mrs. Hudson paused, looking back at him, confused by how solemnly he’d said that, since Sherlock wasn’t given to such things as a general rule. “Of course,” she said. She cast a confused glance at his parents on the pavement and then hurried next door to Mrs. Turner’s.

Sherlock looked stonily at his parents, and an awkward silence settled over them. John tried to read Sherlock but failed utterly. He wasn’t sure Sherlock even knew what he was thinking or feeling at the moment.

“John,” said Sherlock’s mother after a moment, fairly gushing it at him.

John turned to her, startled at being addressed by name.

“We have so wanted to meet you.” She smiled kindly at him.

John drew in a breath, and then had no idea what to say. Because this woman didn’t seem so bad. But this woman had to be bad, because Sherlock had gone to apparently great lengths not to see her for a long time, and Sherlock desperately didn’t want Oliver anywhere near her.

“He should have brought you to visit so much sooner than this, but you know how he is, he never does anything the proper way, does he?”

John would have agreed with that whole-heartedly, he really would have. Except that there was something about the way she said it that rankled him. Sherlock never did anything the proper way, and that was what made Sherlock so amazing, that was why John loved Sherlock so bloody desperately. He was the world’s most annoying human being, but people who loved him were supposed to recognize that that was what made him him, and you took the good with the bad, no one was perfect, and Sherlock’s good far outweighed his bad, as far as John was concerned.

Not, apparently, as far as Sherlock’s mother was concerned.

“Mother, Father,” said Sherlock, stiffly. “won’t you please come in?”

“Oh, well done, Sherlock,” said his mother, as if Sherlock were a four-year-old who had just managed to tie his shoes for the first time.

Sherlock set his jaw and looked pointedly at the CCTV camera that was always trained on their door, just before turning to follow them in.

“It’s just up the stairs,” John directed them, and then murmured, “Sherlock,” catching at his sleeve as his parents started going up the stairs.
“What are you waiting for?” Sherlock hissed at him. “You’re a war hero and a doctor, they’re going to love you.” Sherlock turned and followed him up the stairs, apparently furious that John had been a soldier and a doctor.

“Bloody fantastic,” John breathed, and then found himself falling into parade stance before following them up the stairs.

“It’s, um,” Sherlock’s mother was saying, doing a full circle in their sitting room, when John walked in. “Well.” She looked at him and smiled. “It’s very kind of you to indulge his habits so.”

Why did she say everything in such a way as to make John bristle? Had Sherlock’s entire childhood been filled with these passive-aggressive comments?

“I do my fair share of…” John looked around the room, trying to pick out something of his in it. There was his chair, but that had been there when he’d got there. He had books on the bookshelves: medical books that Sherlock sometimes quizzed him out of when he was bored, enjoying the scrawls of a much younger John taking sleep-deprived notes in their pages; and mystery novels that Sherlock always solved by the end of the first paragraph, if not before. But that seemed unremarkable.

Truthfully, Sherlock had colonized 221B, and John had just moved into it and found a John-shaped hole there in which he’d fit perfectly. Everything in it had started out life as Sherlock’s, possibly, but it had all become theirs: their desk, their wallpaper, their sitting room, their flat, their life. “Unusual decorating,” John finished, even though it wasn’t really true, and he felt from the pitying expression on Sherlock’s mother’s face that she knew it wasn’t true.

Sherlock was making a racket from the kitchen.

“I think Sherlock’s making us tea,” said John, noticing Sherlock’s father frowning toward the kitchen.

“Really? Do you let him do that?”

I’d let him do it all the time if he offered, thought John, but didn’t say. He looked at Sherlock’s mother in genuine confusion and said, “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, you know,” said his mother. “His condition.”

“His condition?” echoed John, disbelieving.

“Of course. I think it’s lovely of you that you’re willing to deal with him. Mycroft must pay you handsomely.”

This family, thought John. What the hell was wrong with all of them? “Mycroft doesn’t pay me at all. There is nothing wrong with Sherlock,” he said, as Sherlock entered the room with a tea tray.

“You needn’t worry about hurting his feelings, John, he hasn’t any,” his mother informed him, wisely.

John was so startled by this pronouncement that he didn’t know what to say, and was easily distracted by Sherlock shoving a teacup unceremoniously into his hand and saying, “Tea, John.”

“Thank you,” John said, automatically, and then, “You can’t honestly believe that?”

“Believe it?” Sherlock’s mother had sat down in John’s chair, making herself quite at home. “We have a diagnosis.”
John stared at her. *He hasn't any feelings*. That was what Sherlock’s mother thought. John looked at Sherlock, briskly adding sugar and milk to his tea, and thought how Sherlock had a surfeit of feelings, Sherlock was in many ways the most sensitive and vulnerable and emotional person John had ever met, and that was why Sherlock hid all of it so far away, because if the world knew how easily Sherlock Holmes could be cut to the quick then everything would have been so much worse for Sherlock. John knew these things about Sherlock, but Sherlock’s mother apparently didn’t. Sherlock’s mother apparently legitimately believed that Sherlock was cold and robotic, and John thought of her casually hurting Sherlock’s splayed-open feelings again and again and again, until he must have been so emotionally chafed raw that it had to have been a constant throbbing ache inside of him. No wonder there had been a cocaine addiction, John thought.

“Are you experimenting in the kitchen, Sherlock?” demanded his father, the first words he had spoken. “What have we *told* you about that?” His father shook his head at John in dismay. “Over and over and over we punished him for experimenting in improper places, but apparently we never broke him of the habit.” He looked chagrined and apologetic, as if sorry that their failure had led to John having to live with experiments in his kitchen.

“Well, did you ever give him a *proper* place to experiment?” asked John. He heard the trace of steel in his tone, recognized it immediately.

So did Sherlock, who sometimes said it was his Captain-Watson leaking through. Sherlock looked up from his intense contemplation of his teacup, straight at John. He opened his mouth, but he didn’t say anything, and John *hated* when Sherlock was silent, nothing good ever came of Sherlock spending too much time in his brain, and John was now realizing it was because these people had been telling Sherlock his entire life that he was *wrong*, in every way. John had a sudden thought that he was never going to complain about severed heads in the fridge ever again.

“Sherlock, we had to come once we saw John’s blog entry about the baby,” said Sherlock’s mother, clearly getting down to business. “Where is the poor child’s mother?”

“I’m his mother,” answered John, feeling anger twitching at his muscles. He tried to force his fingers to keep holding his teacup lightly and easily.

Sherlock’s parents laughed gaily, as if John had just told an hilarious joke.

“I am,” John insisted, “if you look at his birth certificate.”

John’s tone must have convinced them he was telling the truth, because their laughter faded and they both frowned at him.

“It seems to me,” mused Sherlock’s mother, “that you appear to be a bit *too* indulgent of Sherlock’s sociopathic tendencies. But then, I suppose Mycroft was not exactly spoilt for choice when it came to your position.”

“Okay,” said John, definitively, putting his teacup down and getting ready to do serious battle.

Sherlock’s mother ignored the thin ice she was skating on, addressing Sherlock. “Surely you can comprehend that you can’t raise the child, Sherlock. Children need…more than you can give him—”

“That’s enough,” John sliced in, and his tone made both of the elder Holmeses jump and look at him. “That is more than enough. It’s time for you to go.”

“John,” beseeched his mother. “We’re only trying to—”

“Wouldn’t it be best for Oliver to—” contributed Sherlock’s father.
“He is absolutely amazing,” John bit out at them.

“Well, yes, I’m sure he is,” Sherlock’s mother agreed, “and we’re only trying to keep him that way—”

“Not Oliver. Sherlock. Sherlock is absolutely amazing, and the two of you are complete idiots. How you had two such clever children is beyond me. He has the biggest heart I have ever encountered, he has enormous capacity for love, he loves me, more than anyone ever has before, more than I ever imagined anyone would, and he loves Oliver beyond description. You have never looked at him and actually seen him, have you? Not once. You see some diagnosis, or all the ways in which you think he’s not normal, and you have never once understood that that’s what makes him so absolutely amazing. So no. You almost destroyed him. I won’t let you exercise your destructive tendencies over Oliver. Everything about Oliver is absolutely amazing, as you were so very ready to believe, and we’ll be keeping him that way, ta very much, no help needed from Cornwall.” John paused to catch his breath, realizing he was breathing furiously. Sherlock’s parents stared at him, open-mouthed and unmoving. “That means you can go,” John snapped.

After a moment, Sherlock’s parents both shifted their gaze past John to the doorway.

“Mycroft,” said his mother, in appeal.

John, startled, looked over his shoulder at Mycroft in the doorway.

Mycroft looked calmly at his parents, as if nothing interesting was going on. “You didn’t tell me you were going to be in London. Shall we go and have tea?”

“Mycroft,” said Sherlock’s mother, standing. “Surely you realize—”

“Yes, yes, we’ll discuss it over tea, like civilized people.”

That seemed to convince both parents that they ought to depart. They did it with sniffs of indignation, heads held high, glaring at John as they went, as if confident that they were the ones with manners.

John wanted to say, Good riddance, don’t come back, but he thought he might have already made his point. Didn’t mean that the loss of his temper wasn’t still flushing adrenaline through his body.

Mycroft waited until they were walking down the stairs before finally glancing back into the sitting room, first at Sherlock, then at John. “It seems as if Captain Watson handled everything admirably,” he remarked. “I’ll take care of the clean-up.”

John took a deep breath, watching Mycroft leave and trying to think of what he was going to say to Sherlock. His mind was blank of words, was just a roiling swirl of emotions he couldn’t articulate.

Sherlock walked past him over to the sitting room door and slammed it shut.

Great, thought John. He’s angry. And maybe John had crossed a line there, he admitted. Maybe it hadn’t been quite his place to throw Sherlock’s parents out. Although he didn’t think Sherlock had wanted them there in the first place.

Sherlock turned from the door and stalked toward John.

“Look,” John started.

Sherlock kept stalking. John, startled, found himself pressed up against the desk, and then Sherlock
leaned in and kissed him, fingers hooked through the belt loops on his jeans. The kiss was hard and glittering, slicing with a hint of teeth, and blood rushed out of John’s head so quickly that he actually felt off-balance, reached out a hand to the desk to brace himself.

“Oh,” said John, stupidly, when Sherlock let him up for air.

Sherlock’s lips quirked into a smile, and then he ripped John’s shirt off of him. Literally. Buttons went bouncing off the walls of the flat.

“Jesus Christ,” muttered John, weak-kneed enough that he flailed another hand at the desk to keep himself upright, because that might have been the hottest thing he’d ever seen.

Sherlock leaned his head down to the base of John’s throat where it turned into his shoulder and bit, and John gasped for breath and arched up toward him. Sherlock sucked, hard enough to leave a bruise, which was plainly his intention. John took the risk of falling over and tangled a hand into Sherlock’s hair and said, “Sherlock. Oh, my God.”

Sherlock dropped to his knees, pulling at John’s belt, and John’s brain skidded off-line into an endless repetition of yeseyesyes. Sherlock grabbed at John’s hands, putting them firmly on his head, and John closed his hands around tufts of Sherlock’s hair and pulled and yanked. Sherlock’s eyes were wide, steady on his, and John knew it was the lingering edge of the adrenaline that made him thrust harder into Sherlock’s mouth but Sherlock was also encouraging of it. A thought which made John groan and spiral off into a climax.

After which he slid down to sprawl bonelessly on the floor and try to catch his breath.

Sherlock straddled him, a heavy and not-quite-welcome weight on his oversensitized skin, and nuzzled into him, dotting light, feathery kisses over his chest and up his throat and over his face, and John couldn’t bear to push him away, not when he could tell so very clearly that what Sherlock was saying with every brush of his lips was I love you I love you I love you.

Eventually Sherlock stopped kissing him, leaning down and resting his head next to John’s, face pressed into the curve of John’s shoulder. Sherlock breathed, a contented little sigh that made John’s heart fall a couple of beats out of rhythm. He managed to lift an arm to keep Sherlock pressed against him and, feeling that his breathing had evened out, spoke.

What he said was, “Your parents would be absolutely appalled at the fact that we just did such an improper thing right here in the sitting room.”

Sherlock giggled, there was no other word for it, joy and delight bubbling out of him. The exhalation of it rushed over John’s skin, and that seemed to provoke Sherlock squirming away briefly so that he could launch another campaign of brushing kisses over every inch of John. His breath tickled at John’s ribs, making him wriggle a little bit.

“Enough,” he said, and then pulled Sherlock up so that he could look up at him. Sherlock’s hair was an absolute mess, which John had decided was his favorite way for Sherlock’s hair to be. He pushed the curls off of Sherlock’s forehead tenderly and said, gently, “Enough.”

Sherlock took three quick breaths, licking his lips and looking uncertain. He opened his mouth, and John braced himself said, and Sherlock said, “Watch out for the china.”

John took a moment to process that. “The china,” he repeated.

“Yes, you pushed a teacup off the desk and it shattered.”
John smiled at him, pulled his head down so that he could press a kiss on Sherlock’s temple, huffing out a brief chuckle. “I’ll watch out for the china,” he promised.

Sherlock cuddled into him, hiding his face, and John let him be quiet, there in their sitting room. He didn’t know what to say about Sherlock’s parents, and he was letting Sherlock take the lead there. Eventually Sherlock shifted, lifting his head enough so that he could see John’s face. He traced a finger over John’s forehead, down his nose, around his mouth.

And then he said, softly, “I don’t know if it will ever be enough.”

“That’s a good thing,” John promised him.

Sherlock looked at him for a moment, then flickered a small smile at him, and then sat up. “Let’s get Oliver,” he said.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

This is a short one. Sorry. It was just that kind of week/day. Next week will be back to usual length, promise!

Oliver woke in the middle of the night screaming.

He jerked John out of a sound sleep. John was alone in the bed, so Sherlock must still be up, and indeed he heard Sherlock jogging up the stairs toward Oliver, so John yawned and put his head back down on the pillow.

Oliver did not stop crying. Oliver almost always stopped crying as soon as someone picked him up. John waited, wide awake now, listening to Oliver cry and predicting how long it would take Sherlock to change his nappy. Surely Sherlock was more adept at that by this point. But Oliver kept crying.

John rolled out of bed, meeting Sherlock coming down the stairs with a crying Oliver in his arms. Oliver looked rumpled and distressed, his hair sticking up on one side of his head. He was clinging hard to Sherlock and heaving tear-soaked sobs.

“What’s up, Ollie?” John asked him, tenderly, reaching a finger out to brush against Oliver’s hand.

Oliver cried more.

“I changed his nappy,” said Sherlock, looking desperate.

“Maybe he’s hungry,” suggested John, and made Oliver a bottle while Sherlock walked up and down the sitting room with him, trying to interest him in something other than crying.

Oliver refused to take the bottle. Oliver cried heartbrokenly at being offered it, as if despairing of their stupidity in offering him a bottle.

“Maybe he had a bad dream,” said John, concerned, smoothing a hand over Oliver’s head.

Oliver cried and cried.

Sherlock put his lips into Oliver’s hair and breathed out, “Shh, shh. I’ve got you. Look, we’re both right here and we’d never let anything happen to you.”

Oliver appeared to disagree with that.

“The violin, maybe?” said John.

He took the displeased Oliver and Sherlock retrieved his violin and played all of Oliver’s favorite songs. Oliver wailed unhappily, flailing his arms and legs about, and John had a sudden idea.

“Wait a second,” said John. “I think he’s teething.”

“You’ve been saying that for months,” snapped Sherlock, Oliver’s constant cries clearly having him
at his wit’s end.

“Well, I was bound to be right sooner or later. Let me see what I’ve got here, Oliver.” John switched on the light in the bathroom and found the teething gel that he’d bought when he’d first thought Oliver had been teething, months ago as Sherlock had said. Oliver apparently had been just a copious drooler. “Here we are,” said John, trying to get at Oliver’s mouth.

Oliver writhed away from him.

Sherlock, watching critically from the bathroom doorway, said, “He doesn’t want it.”

“Because his mouth hurts, he doesn’t want me to touch it.”

“Will that help?”

“Yes.”

“Then he’s being ridiculous. Oliver, stop it, Papa’s trying to help.”

John succeeded in getting a finger against Oliver’s gums as he opened his mouth to wail further displeasure, and Oliver stopped mid-wail, looking surprised and then cautiously optimistic. His grip on John loosened a little bit, and he took a couple of shaky breaths and then blinked between the two of them, looking thoroughly miserable.

“Sorry, love,” John told him, and kissed his head. “It’ll be over soon, I promise.”

“Over soon?” Sherlock echoed. “As if he’s only going to have one tooth?”

“As always, your dad is looking on the bright side,” John told Oliver. “Here,” he said to Sherlock, and handed the baby back over. “He should go back down now. I’m going back to bed.”

John walked into the bedroom and crawled into bed. He had just got himself comfortable when Sherlock walked in, carrying the now quiet Oliver.

“John,” he said, urgently.

“What is it?” John asked, peering up at him in the light spilling from the hallway.

“Are you sure about this?”

“About what?”

“The teething. It just seems like an awful lot of fuss for him to raise over one tooth.”

“Have you ever had a toothache?”

Sherlock looked offended. “Of course not.”

John rolled his eyes. “Of course not. Then hopefully he’ll have perfect teeth, too, but, in the meantime, he has to grow them first, and trust me when I tell you that teeth can hurt out of all proportion to their size.”

Sherlock sounded intrigued. “You’ve had a toothache?”

“Yes. I am disappointingly ordinary that way.”
“Did it hurt more or less than a gunshot wound?”

“Sherlock,” said John, in exasperation.

“Well, it isn’t like I have experience in either domain,” Sherlock sniffed.

“It hurt less than a gunshot wound, and that is the end of this midnight conversation. Go and play Oliver the violin. If he isn’t asleep within five minutes, come and get me and I will happily take Oliver to A&E with you. But he’ll be asleep, because all that was wrong was that his tooth was bothering him and I numbed it for him.”

Sherlock left the bedroom. Then Sherlock came back into the bedroom.

“Sherlock,” sighed John.

“It’s just that he feels warm.”

“First of all, he was just crying up a storm. Second of all, he’s teething, a low-grade fever is perfectly natural.”

“You’re sure he’s not actually sick.”

John heaved another sigh and reached out and pressed a hand to Oliver’s neck. He didn’t feel especially warm to John. Sherlock was panicking. “I’m sure. Even if he were sick, it would probably be nothing more than a cold.”

“And you would be okay with that?” asked Sherlock, sounding disbelieving.

“Sherlock. He’s going to get sick at some point in his life.”

“I don’t get sick,” said Sherlock, loftily.

“Yes, you do. That one winter you had pneumonia, remember?”

“That was because Lestrade pushed me into the Thames.”

“Lestrade didn’t push you in, you fell.”

“I didn’t fall. How would I have fallen into the Thames?”

“The way people fall, Sherlock. By falling.”

“You think there’s a greater likelihood that I fell into the Thames than that I was pushed?”

“No, actually, I think there’s a bloody enormous likelihood of you annoying someone enough that they push you into the Thames but I was there that day and you fell.”

“This is preposterous,” Sherlock sputtered.

“Oliver’s asleep,” remarked John.

Sherlock looked down at Oliver, startled to see that was true.

“See? He’s fine. Go put him in his cot and let me sleep.”

Sherlock left the bedroom. John listened to him go up the stairs to Oliver’s room. And John, who had just been exhausted, stared up at the ceiling, wide awake, his mind whispering at him insidiously.
What if Oliver wasn’t fine? What if he wasn’t just teething? What if there was something seriously wrong with him? What if some sort of switch had been flipped in his clone baby DNA and some terrifying, frightening, quick-moving condition was even now taking him over? And he’d been sobbing about it and they hadn’t understood and John had numbed a bit of the pain and then told Sherlock to put him back to bed?

John tried to shut the voice up. He tried to be logical. Oliver would have symptoms, surely, if something dire was wrong with him. He wouldn’t have gone back to sleep so quickly and easily. He would surely have more of a fever. He had barely had any sort of fever at all. Right? Hadn’t he? He hadn’t felt warm. But John had just woken up. Maybe his own body temperature had been incorrect. Sherlock had thought Oliver felt warm, and Sherlock wasn’t usually prone to hysteria.

Gritting his teeth, John conceded the fact that his brain wasn’t going to let him go back to sleep until he checked on Oliver again. He stopped in the bathroom to grab the thermometer he’d bought for Oliver and then popped his head into the sitting room. He hadn’t heard Sherlock come back down, and the empty sitting room confirmed that.

John went upstairs and into the nursery, where Oliver was sound asleep in his cot and Sherlock was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, watching him.

Sherlock lifted his eyebrows a bit in accusation, which John could see from the room’s nightlight (another bumblebee; Sherlock had insisted). “I thought you said he was fine.”

“Yes. Well. Just checking.”

Sherlock gave him a knowing look that John ignored as he stuck the thermometer into Oliver’s ear. Oliver scrunched up his face in displeasure but didn’t wake and after a second the thermometer beeped with a reading.

“What’s it say?” asked Sherlock.

“37.4. And 37 is normal. So he’s fine.” John, feeling exhausted now that he’d satisfied himself as to Oliver’s well-being, put the thermometer down, contemplated going back downstairs, and instead just sank to the floor next to Sherlock.

“You’re not going back to bed?” Sherlock asked.

John shook his head. “I don’t think I can sleep. I’d rather be here in case he wakes up again. He’s fine, though. Really he is. It’s just…a tooth.” John knew he was right, but he just could not make himself leave Oliver at the moment.

“Should we take him to see Molly tomorrow?”

“I don’t know,” said John, and sighed. “Maybe. Do you think we should?”

“You’re the doctor.”

“And you’re the genius who’s been reading up on cloning.”

Sherlock was silent for a moment. “I think he’s teething.”

“Yes,” agreed John.

“But what if he’s not?”
“Yes,” agreed John, after a second.

There was a moment of silence.

“Lestrade really did push me into the Thames, I didn’t just fall.”

“Oh, my God,” said John, and tipped his head back against the wall and laughed until he cried.
Chapter 30

John woke with his head on Sherlock’s shoulder. Sherlock was awake and probably had been awake all night. Oliver wasn’t awake yet. So John rubbed his head against Sherlock and slumped into him a little more and enjoyed the cuddle.

Then Oliver woke up.

Oliver was unhappy and he let everyone know it. John supposed he wouldn’t have been Sherlock’s clone if that wasn’t true. He also had a little sliver of white peeking out from his top gum. John showed it to Sherlock and said, “See? Tooth,” and Sherlock said, “That? That caused all the commotion?” and Oliver cried at him in that way he had that John knew said, I don’t have words to complain at you right now so I’m doing this instead.

A client showed up as John was completing Oliver’s morning routine. Normally Oliver was very interested in clients, but Oliver was listless and feeling less than his best and couldn’t be bothered to behave for the client, not even when John put Sherlock’s skull in his lap.

The client looked at him and said, “So that’s the baby, huh?” as if he’d been expecting something completely different.

Sherlock frowned and said, “He isn’t feeling well today. He’s teething. It’s difficult and painful. And obviously your wife’s best friend has stolen your dog. She’s in love with you, you know.”

The client gaped at him.

“You can go now,” Sherlock snapped.

“He could have paid us first,” remarked John, after the client had departed, shifting Oliver to his shoulder in an attempt to get him to settle a bit.

Sherlock waved a hand negligently. “He would have complained that I hadn’t earned it because I’d just made that up. It would have been tedious. And Ollie’s not feeling well and tedious clients aren’t making it any better, are they?”

Sherlock reached for the baby and John relinquished him gladly, and Oliver wailed a bit (clearly: No, they’re not, they’re dreadful and making my life even more painful) and, snuffling, cuddled against Sherlock’s shoulder. Sherlock kissed the side of his head and John had the impression that the little disagreement they’d had that morning over the appropriateness of Oliver’s reaction to the tooth had been entirely forgiven on both sides.

“Isn’t there anything we can do for him?” Sherlock asked.

“I just gave him more teething gel, which I think helped. And I’ve a teething ring in the fridge to bring with us.”

Sherlock nodded, and John ducked into the kitchen to get the teething ring. He could hear Sherlock talking to Oliver in the sitting room.

“Papa has something to help with the pain. Papa’s a doctor, this is how he knows these things.”

John wondered if Sherlock meant that to be a compliment or to be an explanation for why he had filled his brain with such trivialities.
“Here we are,” said John, presenting Oliver with the teething ring.

Oliver looked at it dubiously. So did Sherlock.

“It’s an owl,” John explained.

Oliver gave John a look. Sherlock voiced the look. “Oliver doesn’t like owls.”

“He doesn’t like owls? When has he had cause to develop an opinion about owls?”

“John, he’s six months old,” said Sherlock, as if that explained that.

“Okay,” said John. “Well, I don’t have anything else, so maybe we could give the owl a try and Daddy can buy you a more appropriate teething ring at his leisure?”

Oliver grudgingly took the owl in his mouth and gnawed at it. Just because there’s nothing else, his gaze told John.

“Thank you,” said John, and kissed the top of his head.

“St. Bart’s?” asked Sherlock.

“St. Bart’s,” John affirmed.

They ran into Mrs. Hudson on their way out the door.

“Poor dear,” she clucked at Oliver. “I head him last night. Is he teething?”

Oliver took the owl out of his mouth and told Mrs. Hudson in no uncertain terms all about the hell he’d been through over the past few hours. Mrs. Hudson nodded sympathetically in response to him.

“You need to grow your teeth so you can eat the biscuits I’m going to bake for you,” Mrs. Hudson informed him when he seemed to reach the end of his narrative.

Oliver looked thoughtful at that, as if Mrs. Hudson had raised a point in favor of teeth that Oliver had never considered before.

“We are off to St. Bart’s,” John told Mrs. Hudson. “Just to make sure it was just his tooth and nothing more serious.”

“And Mrs. Hudson has a date,” contributed Sherlock.

Mrs. Hudson blushed and said, “Sherlock.”

“Have a good time!” Sherlock called as he breezed out the door with Oliver.

“Yes,” said John, confused. “Have a good time.”

“He’s perfectly fine, John, I’m sure of it. Stop worrying.”

“Thank you,” John said, because it was nice to be soothed instead of having to do the soothing.

He hurried to catch up with Sherlock, who’d already hailed a cab and gotten Oliver set up in his contraption.

“Who’s Mrs. Hudson going on a date with?” John asked.
“The same bloke she’s been dating for ages now,” Sherlock replied, negligently.

“What? I didn’t know anything about this. Why don’t you tell me things?”

Sherlock looked at him, confused. “I thought you knew.”

“How would I have known?”

“Did you really think she was going to a book club?”

“Yes!”

Sherlock stared at him in amazement. So did Oliver.

John pointed at the baby and said, “Do not even pretend that you knew all about Mrs. Hudson’s love life.”

Oliver affected indignation and gnawed harder on his owl.

“Well, who is this man?” John asked. “Is he good to her?”

“I haven’t noticed any cause for complaints. And he doesn’t have any wives, hidden or otherwise, so that’s a point in his favor.”

“Yes,” agreed John. “You know, speaking of six months.”

“Were we speaking of six months?”

“You mentioned Ollie being six months old.”

“Yes. He is.” Sherlock eyed John warily, as if frightened they were going to have a conversation composed of nothing but obvious observations.

“We’ve got to bring him to the surgery and get him properly checked out.”

“What? Why?”

“Because we have to, Sherlock. He’s due vaccinations and we need to get his red book up to date —”

“You can do all of that.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Aside from the medical ethics of it?”

Sherlock waved his hand about, dismissing that idea. “Mycroft would get you what you need. Or we’ll take him to the surgery and you can do it.”

“Sarah’s not going to let me jab my own son.”

“So we’ll break into the surgery.”

“Sherlock, don’t you want him to have the very best of care?”
“No,” retorted Sherlock.

John lifted his eyebrows. “No?”

“No. I’m sure the very best of care would be Baskerville, and we are taking him nowhere near Baskerville. In fact, we probably should never even take him to the countryside, it would be too close to Baskerville.”

“Not Baskerville. Of course not Baskerville. Just the surgery. We won’t breathe a word about his…” John glanced at the cabbie. “You know. We’ll just go to the surgery and have Sarah jab him and put him in the official records and all that.”

“Sarah,” muttered Sherlock, sounding unconvinced.

“Think about it,” said John, knowing by now when to push and when to back off.

They arrived at St. Bart’s and interrupted Molly in the middle of examining a corpse.

“Oh,” she said, upon seeing them, looking pleased. “Hello. I didn’t know you were stopping by. Is this one of yours?”

Sherlock was looking at the corpse. A female, in her mid-twenties, formerly quite pretty, with no evidence of foul play. “No. Is it an interesting one?”

“Don’t know. She just dropped dead out of the blue, poor thing. It’s tragic. I’m thinking it might have been an undiagnosed heart condition.”

Sherlock’s eyes gleamed. “Or poison,” he suggested.

“Dead,” said Oliver, around his owl.

“Oliver’s very good at assessing death as a state of being,” explained Sherlock.

“Or not-being, I suppose,” said John.

Molly smiled at Oliver. “Hello. How are you, Ollie-ollie-oxen-free?”

Oliver beamed at her because Oliver apparently always beamed at Molly, even when a new tooth was plaguing him.

“Oliver is teething,” said John.

“Aw,” said Molly. “That’s not fun, is it?”

“Dead,” said Oliver.

“Better than being dead, though, I suppose,” agreed Molly, with the nervous giggle that still always accompanied her attempts at jokes.

John gave her a small smile because he always made an effort when Molly made jokes. Oliver and Sherlock just stared at her identically.

“We’d like to run some more tests,” said John.

Molly looked hesitant, her face falling.
Sherlock said in response, “No one would notice. No one would care.”

“It’s not that,” said Molly. “It’s just…” She hesitated, then spoke in a rush. “When you were here taking blood last time, I don’t think it was actually…good, for you or for him, and you’re being—I mean, there isn’t any need—I’m sure it’s just a tooth.”

John glanced at Sherlock, who glanced back at him.

John said, “Molly. There’s something you need to know about Oliver.”

Molly looked almost fearful at that. “What? He’s not sick, is he? Oh, my God, is he sick?”

“No,” replied John. And then, truthfully, “Not that we know of.”

“Molly, when we faked my death, I needed to give my brother a sample of my DNA so that everything could be done as accurately as possible,” inserted Sherlock, clinically. “I gave him some of my hair.”

“Okay…” said Molly, clearly unsure where this was going.

“The DNA was on file with the British government. Who used it to create Ollie.”

“Okay…” said Molly again, looking uncertainly at Oliver.

John knew that Sherlock seemed to think that this had explained everything. He said, “Ollie’s a clone. As far as we know, he is the first and only successful human clone.”

Molly lifted her eyes to John and stared at him. “A clone? Of Sherlock?”

John attempted a smile. “He does look just like him, doesn’t he?”


“A necessary falsehood,” Sherlock told her, briskly. “We can’t have everyone knowing he’s the world’s only human clone. He’d never get any peace.”

Molly blinked, eyes wide. She glanced at Oliver, who was blandly gnawing on his owl as if to belie this story about his interesting birth, and then looked back up at them. “So…why are you telling me?”

“Because we thought you should know.”

John tried to explain it a little more rationally. “Because that way it makes sense how frequently we have him in here for blood tests. It’s not just that we’re…excitable. It’s that he’s the first successful clone.”

“And all the rest have died,” Sherlock inserted, bluntly.

Molly looked at him. “The rest?”

“Did you think they got it right on the first try?”

Molly looked at Oliver, still working very hard to look thoroughly unremarkable in Sherlock’s arms. “What did the rest of them die of?”
“What didn’t they die of?” countered Sherlock.

“When is why you’re running every test in the book on him,” Molly concluded, and looked at John.

John, with a faint smile, nodded. He knew it made them sound insane, but he didn’t think it made them sound any more insane than anything else that they did.

“Poor little thing,” Molly said, looking at Oliver, and John felt Sherlock bristle next to him.

“When is exactly why we’re not telling people this,” he snapped, a hand going up to cup protectively around Oliver’s head, and John wondered if he even knew that he’d made that motion. “I don’t want people pity him. He isn’t an object of pity.”

Molly, eyes wide, stammered, “No. Of course not. That’s not what I meant. Just that it’s a lot for a little boy to have on his shoulders. And you, right there, evidence of how he’s supposed to turn out. It’s just…a lot.”

“He’s fine,” Sherlock insisted, but John heard the edge in his voice and knew they were going to have to have a conversation about this. John suppressed his sigh and wished Molly had just unblinkingly accepted what they were telling her. Although John supposed Molly’s reaction was the best they could have hoped for, which really did illustrate why they weren’t telling people.

Molly nodded silently, clearly anxious not to misstep again.

John turned to Sherlock and said, “I’ll draw the blood this time. You can be designated comforter.”

And John almost didn’t flinch when Oliver started screaming in violated horror. Almost.

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Sherlock was silent on the way home. Oliver, tear-streaked and betrayed, pressed his face into Sherlock’s neck and clung to him. Sherlock kept him close and stared stonily out the window. John wasn’t offended by either of his hurt Sherlocks, because he knew that he wasn’t strictly speaking responsible for what had hurt them, but he did wish that he could do something to help them. But he couldn’t while they were in the cab. It was not the place to open up a frank discussion about the challenges of raising a clone.

John trailed after them into 221B. Sherlock took Oliver into the sitting room. John, thinking tea would help, because tea helped everything, went into the kitchen, where a brand new teething ring was sitting propped up on the table, with a skull-and-crossbones pirate flag fluttering off the end for a baby fist to grab into to hold it in place.

John picked up the teething ring and walked into the sitting room, holding it up. “Look at what appeared in our flat.”

Sherlock had put Oliver down on the periodic table blanket, where he was cuddled up with his skull, clearly dramatizing for its benefit the recent events of his life. Sherlock was perched on the back of his chair, watching him closely over steepled fingers. He barely cast John a glance. “Mycroft,” he said.

“Well, here you go, Ollie.” John handed it to the baby, who took it suspiciously, with a little sniff, as if to say, Well, I will allow you to use this as an olive branch, at least it’s better than the owl, and then stuck it in his mouth. John left him to his dignified sulking and walked over to his chair and sat and looked across at Sherlock, trying for a smile. “A pirate, huh? We’ve never really talked about that.”
Sherlock shook his head, as if to dismiss the topic.

“Sherlock.” John leaned forward. “What Molly said—”

Sherlock kept his eyes on Oliver. “I thought I was doing the right thing. For him. I didn’t want him to be alone.”

“And he isn’t. He’s with us and he’s happy—”

“You would have given him up for adoption. You told me to.”

John knew he had suggested it. He glanced at Oliver on the blanket and tried to imagine living his life without him. He couldn’t. He could barely recall knowing Oliver so little that he could have contemplated suggesting that Sherlock give him up. He looked back at Sherlock. “I’m an idiot, though,” he pointed out.

“Molly’s right. I’m right here, right in front of him, and all of his life he’ll know and he’ll think and he’ll wonder if he has to do everything just like me, because it’s in his genes. He’ll feel like he’ll know every terrible misstep he could make. He’ll see everything I’ve done incorrectly and he’ll fret about whether he’s doomed to repeat all of it. Or else he’ll rebel against it, and either way it wouldn’t be him, any of it, it would just be a reaction to—”

“Sherlock, stop it,” John interjected, firmly, having had quite enough of this. “He is going to be fine—”

“He is a clone, John!” Sherlock shouted across at him, and Oliver on the blanket jumped, startled, and stared at him, dropping the teething ring out of his mouth. “He’s not going to be fine! Even supposing that I can get him to adulthood—which is an enormous supposition to make at this point—he isn’t going to be fine, because he is a clone, and he’ll have to—”

“Sherlock,” John interrupted him, making his voice quiet, because it cut through Sherlock’s shouting more effectively than trying to outshout him would have.

Sherlock swallowed the next couple of words and glared over at John, as if daring him to contradict anything he had said.

“We are all of us a bundle of genes we inherited from someone else,” John pointed out. “We all of us have to figure out who we’re going to be. He isn’t any different. He’ll struggle his way through and he’ll make mistakes and some of them will be the mistakes you made and others of them will be entirely new mistakes and all of it will be because he’s human and none of it will be because he’s a clone. He is going to be fine.”

Sherlock took a deep and hesitant breath. “If we’d given him to a normal family—”

“He’d have been fine then, too, yes, I’m sure. But it wouldn’t have been better. Different, yes, but not better. Just different. Listen to me: He’s going to be fine.”

Sherlock looked over at Oliver. So did John. Oliver sat with one hand resting on his skull and looked back at them with wide, unblinking gray eyes.

John stood, reached for Sherlock’s clasped hands, and tugged.

“John,” Sherlock complained.

“Get up,” John commanded.
“For what?”

John tugged a little harder. “Get up.”

Sherlock sighed. “You’re going to throw out your back or something.”

John snorted. “Oh, yeah, because I’m a delicate flower who couldn’t kick your arse any day of the week.”

“John, I know judo. And I am an expert swordsman.”

John waggled his eyebrow in a playful leer. “Is that a euphemism?”

“John, really,” huffed Sherlock.

“Fine, I’ll be sure not to challenge you to a duel and just kick your arse the old-fashioned way. Come on, get up.”

Sherlock made an enormous sound of disgust and consented to sliding heavily off the chair, standing up. “Now what?”

“Come on.” John pulled him over to the baby’s blanket, and then sat next to Oliver, who was watching the proceedings with interest.

Sherlock looked down at the pair of them. “What are you doing?”

“Sit with us,” John said.

“This is stupid,” Sherlock grumbled, and sat opposite them. “What is supposed to be the point of this? There. Are you happy?”

“Yes. And so are you. And so is he.” John leaned over and kissed Sherlock, who pretended to sulk and not kiss him back, until finally giving in with a little flutter of his breath and bringing his hand up to keep John’s head in place and opening his mouth for him.

John nudged, tipping Sherlock’s balance over, until he had him on his back, and then he pulled back.

“And now I’m lying on the floor,” Sherlock remarked.

John leaned over and picked up Oliver. “Daddy’s showing off his powers of observation for us.”

Oliver babbled enthusiastically.

“He wants in on it,” John told Sherlock, and put Oliver soundly on Sherlock’s chest. Sherlock reached his hands up automatically to balance him there. “Go ahead, Ollie, show Daddy what you already know.”

Oliver told Sherlock something very serious and important and reached out and touched the ridiculous cupid’s-bow of a mouth that he shared in miniature form.

A suggestion of a smile floated over Sherlock’s face. John wisely didn’t comment on it.

“What is this meant to accomplish?” Sherlock demanded of John, trying to sound stern with Oliver’s fingers in his mouth.

“I want you to look at him. And I want you to tell me that there’s anything he wouldn’t be able to
handle. Because he’s *here*, and that makes him literally the biggest miracle on this *planet*. You think you’re going to intimidate him, Sherlock Holmes? He’s *you*. If there is anyone who is going to be able to go toe-to-toe with you, don’t you think it would be him?”

“Dead dead dead,” said Oliver in agreement.

“He is going to be *fine,*” John insisted.

Sherlock looked at Oliver and smiled, just the tiniest bit, before biting gently with his lips onto Oliver’s fingers, which made Oliver giggle in delight.

John, relieved and drained, laid down next to them and thought that they were not going to tell anyone else, ever, about what Oliver was, because it wasn’t nearly as *relevant* as everyone else was going to seem to think it was.
Sherlock woke John up by crawling into bed and saying, “Why would anyone choose to have a child?”

John had been expecting Sherlock to show up in the middle of the night, because Sherlock had had an emotional day and preferred to talk through emotional days in the middle of the night, but he hadn’t expected quite that opening salvo. “What?” he asked, blearily.

“Children,” Sherlock clipped out, impatiently. “People choose to have them. All the time, according to the evidence. Why?”

John considered the question. “Has Oliver done something to upset you?” he asked, bewildered.

“No. Of course not. Oliver has fallen asleep in the middle of our experiment on the specific staining properties of different types of cloth when confronted with blood.”

“Of course he has,” said John.

“So why?”

“What was the question again?” John asked, blearily.

“John.”

“You just woke me up out of a sound sleep, Sherlock, give me a second.”

“Were you dreaming?” Sherlock sounded curious.

“What? No. I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

“Why do people choose to have children?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been one of those people. I assume they like children, they want to bring one into the world, they’re in love with another person and want a sign of that love? Et cetera. Where is this coming from?”

Sherlock had dropped fully onto the mattress next to him now, clearly shifting into musing mode.

“Sherlock,” John prompted, and kicked him a little bit when he didn’t respond.

“If Oliver hadn’t happened accidentally, I would never have thought to have a child.”

“We didn’t have the kind of life where it would have come up.”

“Would you have?”

“No. Probably not. Not with you.” He realized as soon as he said it how it sounded.

“Hmm,” said Sherlock, sounding offended.

“I don’t mean like that, I just mean…Without Oliver, I don’t know that I would have realized…And biologically we can’t have a child, and I don’t know if we would have ever had the kind of relationship where I would have brought up adopting a child with you. I mean, two heterosexual
flatmates don’t adopt babies together.”

“We were never two heterosexual flatmates, John.”

“I thought we were. Or something.”

“Or something,” Sherlock agreed, drily, and was silent for a moment.

John took advantage of this to scoot closer to Sherlock into a cuddle. You had to pin Sherlock into a cuddle during the few moments when he was still.

Sherlock shifted automatically to fit his body next to him, then said, “I just don’t know why anyone logical would choose to have a child. They must not realize…”

“Realize what?” John yawned, face comfortably pillowed now against Sherlock’s shoulder.

“How terrifying it is.”

“Everything worthwhile is terrifying, Sherlock,” John informed him, sleepily. “You and I live our lives constantly on the edge of danger, we should know that better than anything.”

Sherlock snorted. “There is nothing terrifying about a murderer when compared with Oliver.”

Because John knew exactly what Sherlock meant, he agreed, “I know.”

“I don’t remember what it was like before him, John. He fell asleep and I took him upstairs and I sat in the kitchen and it was so quiet and there was no one to talk to and every night was like that, before him, and I can’t remember how I was able to stand it. It’s like how I can’t remember life before you, either. It’s like all of it happened to someone else and I was just observing, and nothing has been real until this point. It’s…curious.”

“You’re in love,” John pointed out, and shifted so he could press his face into Sherlock’s neck.

“Mmm,” he allowed, and John felt the kiss he brushed across his head. And then he said, “I…My parents…”

“You’re not your parents. Oliver won’t hate you,” John assured him.

“I am my parents. We are all of us just genetics, isn’t that what you said today?”

“We are all of us just genetics, and we are none of us just genetics. The central contradiction of humanity, and watch us prove it with our son. Now. Shut off that brilliant brain of yours and get some sleep.”

Sherlock didn’t quarrel. For a whole minute. Then he said, “If he turns out okay, it’s going to be because of you. Because he has you.”

John opened his eyes and looked into the darkness all around him and thought of how much he loved him. “Oh,” he said, lightly. “That’s just the well-known Watson effect on Sherlock Holmeses.”

“Studied and verified,” agreed Sherlock.

“Confirmed,” added John.

“You should see the data I’ve collected on it.”
“Yeah?” John shifted, pulling himself up a bit. “How much of it is X-rated?’’

John loved that he could hear the quirk of Sherlock’s smile. “Not as much as you might think.”

“Got to work on that,” suggested John.

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John managed to drag Oliver and Sherlock to the surgery only to find that Sarah was out sick.

“Oh,” said Sherlock, affecting deep sorrow. “What a shame. We’ll just have to—”

“Nope,” said John, and gave him one of his Captain Watson looks, and Sherlock, glaring and sullen, went over to a chair to sit with Oliver on his lap.

A little old lady, not put off by his radiating sulkiness, said, “What a beautiful baby you have.’’

Sherlock grudgingly allowed his sulk to dissipate enough for him to preen and say, “Thank you.’’

Oliver held out the bumblebee rattle he was clutching (because John had said the skull was too bulky and anyway he didn’t want Oliver to associate it with injections), gave the old lady a wide smile, and said, “Dead.’’

The old lady laughed and said, “Isn’t he clever?’’

And then they called for Mrs. Herring and she stood up and said to Oliver and/or Sherlock, because it wasn’t clear, “Good-bye, dear.’’

Oliver waved his rattle at her.

John came over to them and said, “We’re seeing Eliza Thompson.’’

“That old lady is the most intelligent woman I’ve ever met,’’ Sherlock informed him.

“What old lady?’’ asked John, blankly.

“Mrs. Herring.’’

“Who’s that?’’

“The woman who was just sitting next to me!’’

“Okay,’’ said John, clearly not grasping the truth of Sherlock’s statement, and sat next to him and smiled at Oliver.

“Who’s Eliza Thompson? Do you know her?’’

“No. But I’m sure she’s a very competent doctor.’’

“Competent?’’ complained Sherlock, loudly enough that several people glanced over at them. “You’re alright with sending our son to a competent doctor?’’

“Shh,’’ John hissed at him, as Oliver decided to chime in with a chorus of deads. “I’m sure she’s a very good doctor. We’ll do this and get this over with and we won’t have to come back for months and months, yeah?’’

Sherlock privately thought they were never coming back again because he was definitely going to
concoct a better scheme for taking care of Oliver than allowing some unknown woman named Eliza Thompson to do it.

“You’re overdue for these vaccinations,” said Eliza Thompson, glancing at the red book that John had given her, which Mycroft had given to them at the very beginning of everything. “You should have been here weeks ago.”

Oliver banged his rattle against Sherlock’s shoulder in clear protest that Eliza Thompson was speaking.

“I know,” said John. “We—”

“You haven’t even had a health visitor.”

“Well—” began John.

“Generally speaking, this red book’s a bit of a mess,” remarked Eliza Thompson, closing it.

Oliver dropped his rattle in irritation.

“We’ve kept excellent records,” Sherlock informed her, primly.

“Yes,” agreed John. “And, also, we’ve had an unconventional adoption. We didn’t get him until he was a few months old, so we’ve been busy playing a bit of catch-up. And, you know, I suppose we fell into the fact that I’m a doctor so I knew enough to weigh him and keep him on track. But we thought it would be wisest to let someone who was a bit more impartial be in charge of all the jabs.” John flashed an annoyingly solicitous grin at Eliza Thompson and reached out one hand to smooth over Oliver’s curls. Oliver, solidly in Sherlock’s arms, gave John a little glare, because clearly Oliver also disapproved of John just conversing like this.

“Oh, absolutely,” said Eliza Thompson, and fluttered her eyelashes ridiculously, and Sherlock gritted his teeth and catalogued her inability to apply deodorant properly. “Let me see the little man.”

Perhaps sensing that Sherlock wasn’t going to hand Oliver over to this woman, John took Oliver out of Sherlock’s arms and transferred him to the purported doctor.

“Oh, look at you,” Eliza cooed at him annoyingly. “Aren’t you a lovely boy? You’ve even got a tooth, haven’t you? Very handsome little fellow. He looks like his dad.” And, unbelievably, Eliza smiled at John when she said that. John. When the person in the room who Oliver resembled in absolutely every respect was Sherlock. “Did the teething give you a lot of trouble?”

“Not much. He can be a bit melodramatic,” answered John.

Sherlock stared at him. Oliver glared with a power that Sherlock thought quite impressive.

“Ah, wait until he’s a teenager,” laughed Eliza Thompson.

Sherlock hated Eliza Thompson. Not just because she wasn’t John. Sherlock hated her because she was flirting with John, even though he was standing right there and even though John was wearing his ring. And it wasn’t that John was flirting back, but he was being polite and Sherlock hated Eliza Thompson.

So did Oliver.

Oliver gave her a narrow-eyed look and said, “Dead,” by which he meant, I would like to see your
medical license. Or possibly just, *I don’t like you, you can stop existing now.* Either would have been okay with Sherlock.

“Don’t worry,” said John, with that smile that he only ever used with strangers when he was turning on the charm, a smile Sherlock detested and Oliver liked even less. “It’s not a premonition or a command or anything. It’s just his first word.”

“Oh, it’s just sounds,” said Eliza Thompson, dismissively, settling Oliver on the examining cot. “Doesn’t mean anything at all, don’t worry about it, he doesn’t know the meaning of the word.”

Oliver chewed on his fingers in offended indignation.

“Of course he knows what it means,” Sherlock inserted, since Oliver didn’t know *all* words yet so Sherlock had to be his voice for him sometimes. “We use it around him quite a lot, he’s obviously picked up on it.”

Eliza Thompson gave Sherlock that look that Sherlock hated, and then she followed up with that look that people gave to John, as if Sherlock couldn’t see very well that that follow-up look to John was always meant to be a look of *Are you aware he’s a maniac? And you seem so normal!* Sherlock hated everything about that entire chain of events, and he hated Eliza Thompson even more.

And then Eliza followed it up by saying, “You use the word ‘dead’ around the baby a lot?”

John, to his credit, said, “We solve crimes for a living. And Sherlock’s right, Oliver is quite clever.”

“Oh, I’m sure he is,” said Eliza, in an indulgent tone of voice that said she thought all parents were addle-minded and thought their idiotic children were special, and Sherlock hated the fact that she seemed to think Oliver wasn’t special.

Sherlock hated absolutely everything about this situation.

Eliza poked and prodded at Oliver and did a variety of stupid things that had Oliver looking at John with a *Why did you ever think this was necessary?* stare. And then Eliza weighed him and measured him and Oliver turned his gaze to Sherlock. *Why did you ever go along with this?* Sherlock was wondering that himself. John had been so boring about some kind of stupid medical ethics he was worried about. As if John didn’t break rules of medical ethics all the time when he thought it necessary. As if John wasn’t obviously the best doctor there was and should have been in charge of all of this.

They were never doing this again. Sherlock would go to medical school and become a doctor himself so he could ignore rules of medical ethics and save Oliver all of this tediousness.

And then Eliza brandished a needle and Oliver’s eyes widened and he burst into immediate tears.

Of course, Sherlock realized, just a moment too late, cursing himself for how distracted he’d been over just the fact of Eliza’s existence. Oliver was not an idiot. Oliver had already picked up on what needles meant. John seemed to realize it at the same moment, exchanging a quick glance with Sherlock.

“Hello there,” Eliza said to the sobbing Oliver, sounding surprised. “I haven’t even touched you yet.”

Oliver sobbed and twisted and reached desperately for Sherlock, and Sherlock didn’t care if he wasn’t *supposed* to under some ridiculous standard of human behavior, Sherlock snapped, “Give him to me,” and pulled Oliver out of this idiot woman’s arms and held him close, and Oliver hid his
face and sobbed his heart out against Sherlock’s throat.

“He, uh…” said John, and then didn’t bother to say anything else.

“Okay,” Sherlock whispered to Oliver, and turned his back on Eliza, because he didn’t want Eliza having any part of Oliver’s desperate little breakdown here. “Shh shh shh,” he said to him.

John said, “Can we have a minute?”

“Look, if you just let me—”

“Give us a minute,” John said to her, shortly, and Sherlock was so relieved to have John back on his side that he actually closed his eyes for a moment just to savor it, even with Oliver crying against him. The fact that John had known, immediately, that Sherlock had wanted Eliza out of the room. Sherlock wanted to point out how ridiculous it was to ever bring anyone who wasn’t the three of them into their lives. With very few exceptions.

“Okay,” said Sherlock to Oliver, as the door closed behind Eliza, and rested his lips against Oliver’s temple. Oliver caught his breath with little heaves that shook his body. “Listen to me, love. I know, okay? I know. If you do this for Papa and me, we’ll be done. We won’t put you through it again for months.” He heard himself say it, and then glanced over at John, because they hadn’t really discussed this, but Oliver’s bloodwork was normal, Oliver was normal, and Sherlock had decided that if he couldn’t stand to have his heart shredded every few weeks, then he couldn’t imagine how Oliver was going to cope with it.

John nodded.

“Right,” Sherlock said, and closed his eyes and rested his head gently against Oliver’s warm, damp one. “So just one more time for us, and then a long time off. No needles. Can you do that for us?”

Sherlock felt John’s hand land on Oliver’s back, gentle and soothing, and Oliver snuggled into Sherlock, no longer crying. Oliver took a deep breath and let it out on a little sigh, and Sherlock opened his eyes and looked over at John.

“Okay?” John asked.

Sherlock nodded.

John went over and opened the door and Sherlock heard him say, Captain-Watson voice and all, “My husband’s going to hold him during the jab.”

And so Sherlock sat on the examining cot and held Oliver in his lap, and Oliver clung to his little finger and cried energetically when Eliza Thompson the Idiot jabbed him and Sherlock thought that never, ever, ever again were they doing this.

He said as much to John as they walked back to the flat, Sherlock pushing the pushchair.

“Yes,” John agreed, briefly.

“That was awful.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t care about your ‘medical ethics’ or whatever nonsense, we’re not bringing Oliver back to that idiot woman and her idiot…comments about things. I don’t even think she’s a doctor. I have
strong doubts. So does Oliver. And we are not, under any circumstances, having a *health visitor* come into our home."

“Sherlock, I’m not arguing with you.”

Sherlock paused, registering that for the first time. “You’re not. Why not?”

“Because that was horrible. So we’ve got months to go until we have to worry about this again, let’s not think about it right now. Let’s just…go home.”

Sherlock was silent for a moment. “She was a horrible woman.”

“She wasn’t that bad.”

“She was *flirting* with you.”

“No, she wasn’t.”

Sherlock snorted. “You think I don’t know when a woman is flirting with you? Women are *always* flirting with you.”

“You ought to re-evaluate which of us is the strikingly attractive one in this relationship,” remarked John.

“They want to snuggle you in your ridiculous jumpers and then let you order them around in the bedroom. You’re an irresistible combination to them.”

“I…What?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “You’re perfect. You’re…kittens and danger, all in one package.”

“Kittens and danger?” echoed John.

“Yes,” Sherlock answered, refusing to back down from the description. “And don’t pretend you don’t know all of this, Three-Continents Watson.”

“I’m never letting you meet any of my mates ever again. And you’re wrong, I’ll have you know. I worked bloody hard at…It’s not like they just fell into bed. I’m not James Bond.”

“She said Oliver looked just like you.”

“She was just being…She was flirting with me,” John realized.

“Welcome to this conversation, John,” said Sherlock.

“Dead dead dead!” Oliver called from the pushchair.

“I wasn’t flirting back, though, was I? Was I flirting back? Oh, my God, I was flirting back, wasn’t I?”

Sherlock lifted his eyebrows at him and kept walking.

“I didn’t mean—I mean, it was just—I was trying to—if she liked us, I thought it would be—”

“It’s fine, John,” Sherlock told him, mildly.

“No. Wait.” John put a hand on his arm, gently but firmly enough to arrest his forward momentum.
“Look at me.”

Sherlock did, and thought how there was nothing as dear to him as the sight of John Watson, save for possibly the baby in the pushchair he was pushing. John’s hair was ruffled by the breeze and his eyes were squinting against the sun and he looked agitated, his mouth drawn with guilt.

“I would never…I don’t even remember what she looked like, I barely noticed her, it was just…I was just…I choose you. I always will choose you. I love you. I didn’t mean to…I love you. Yes?” He asked it like he was seeking verification of the fact.

And Sherlock felt himself smile, because the truth was John had always rather needed verification of that, because Sherlock had always known more about how John felt about him than John himself did.

“Yes,” Sherlock assured him, because he did know that John loved him. John flirted as a sort of automatic instinct. Sherlock knew he didn’t realize he was doing it, wasn’t doing it maliciously or with purpose or any sort of intent. It didn’t mean Sherlock liked it, but it was hardly worth an argument.

John suddenly reached up to give him a quick, fierce kiss. “Yes,” he agreed, and then intertwined their fingers together as they resumed walking. And it made pushing the pushchair awkward but Sherlock wasn’t about to complain.
Chapter 32

Oliver fell asleep early, worn out from the emotional ordeal of the doctor’s appointment. Sherlock sat at the desk with various blood-stained pieces of cloth laid out all around him and typed up observations and gradually became aware of John leaning against the kitchen doorframe, watching him, his arms and ankles casually crossed.

It was the time of the night when John normally made them tea, but he didn’t seem to be about to offer that. Sherlock lifted his eyebrows at him and said, “What?”

John had a smile playing about his lips, small and a bit smug, and Sherlock wasn’t sure what to make of it. “You think you know,” John said. “But you don’t.”

“I don’t know what?” asked Sherlock, annoyed, because he hated when John spoke in incoherent riddles like that.

John pushed himself off of the doorframe and walked over to the desk slowly. “You think you know how much I love you.” John drew to a halt in front of him, and Sherlock looked up at him in confusion. “But you have no idea.”

“John—” Sherlock began, shifting in the chair to face him.

“No. Quiet.” John suddenly sank to his knees, putting a hand on either arm of Sherlock’s chair. “You have no idea how much I love you. You know that I love you, I know that you know that. You think it’s something I fell into. You think you’re so very lucky that you somehow tricked me into thinking that this was what I wanted. You’re not sure how you accomplished it. So I’ll tell you: There was no trick, Sherlock. This isn’t a magic show, you and I. You’re thinking that someday I’ll come to my senses and realize what I’ve done, realize that I could have so much more than you, someone so much better than you, someone normal who wouldn’t accidentally set my socks on fire, who wouldn’t fill the cutlery drawer with caterpillars, who wouldn’t drive me mad and make me want to tear my hair out, and, oh, my God, Sherlock, I need you to understand that that is not true. You haven’t hit me over the head, this isn’t some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder, I haven’t lost my mind. I love you. I love you more than I thought it was possible to love another human being. I didn’t know you could meet a person, a stranger, and have him fill in everything inside of you that was empty. I thought being alive meant you just learned how to live with that emptiness. I didn’t know it was possible to love the way I love you. That’s why it took me so long to realize it. This isn’t what people write songs about, because they couldn’t, because they couldn’t possibly put into words what love is, because it’s this, and it’s...everything. I love you. And you don’t know how much. Because I love you so much that I’m wondering how I tricked you into thinking that I was what you wanted, I love you so much that I’m sure that someday you’ll come to your senses and realize what you’ve done, realize that you could have so much more than me, someone so much better than me.”

Sherlock stared at him. He thought that he should say something but he was oddly unable to breathe. There was not enough space in his chest, as if his ribcage had compressed around his lungs. If he was about to die, he could not imagine a better moment to go out on.

“So stop, love,” John whispered, and leaned forward and fluttered a kiss over Sherlock’s right eye, dragged his mouth in breaths of kisses over to Sherlock’s left eye. “Stop.” He kissed over one cheekbone, and then the other. “Stop ever thinking that you’ll take whatever scraps I’ll give you.” John’s lips grazed along Sherlock’s left ear, down his jaw. “Because I’m giving you everything.” John finally reached his mouth. “Everything,” he breathed out, achingly.
Sherlock closed his hands into John’s hair and reached out to pull him into a kiss, and Sherlock would have made it hot and hungry and desperate, but John slowed it down, pulling back the slightest bit from the edge where Sherlock was sitting. He kissed, leisurely and adoring, like he had the rest of his life to finish the kiss, as his fingers undid Sherlock’s shirt with the same excruciating slowness, inching it out of his way until he could finally spread his hands along Sherlock’s chest.

And then he stopped kissing him. He leaned his forehead against Sherlock’s and breathed.

“John,” Sherlock started, his voice rough.

“Shh.” John kissed under his jaw, and then down his throat, and then down his chest, nudging the shirt aside as he went, and Sherlock felt oddly limp and boneless, settling deeper into the chair and leaning his head back and closing his eyes and feeling the effort of his breaths. And John loved him. How John loved him. When had that happened? How had that happened? Sherlock felt confused and discombobulated and John felt utterly fantastic, tugging Sherlock’s shirt the rest of the way out of his trousers and dragging his lips across Sherlock’s abdomen.

And then John pulled back.

Sherlock, finally concluding that John wasn’t going to resume his ministrations, managed to lift his head up and look blearily down at him, crouched between his knees, his hair a spiky mess and his eyes impossibly dark and impossibly blue.

“Come to bed with me,” John said, almost a question, almost uncertain, as if he was unsure Sherlock would.

Sherlock nodded, and John stood and reached out a hand, which was silly, because Sherlock could stand up all on his own, but Sherlock took the hand and let John lead them to the bedroom, because it seemed somehow important for John to do this.

They undressed in the bedroom, in a silence that Sherlock didn’t want to breach. He felt like John was the one who ought to break it.

John stood in front of him and looked at him closely, and Sherlock looked steadily back at him, waiting to see what he was going to say.

What John said was, “One day—and I don’t know when this day happened, just that it did—one day I fell to pieces at your feet. And you put me back together again.”

Sherlock blinked at him, because he didn’t know what to say to that.

John took a step closer to him, and then another step, which had the effect of backing Sherlock right up to the bed and then onto the bed, and John said, “I am going to absolutely take you apart.”

Which sounded like an excellent idea to Sherlock.

And then John was on top of him. And he whispered, “And then I’ll put you back together.”

And Sherlock nodded.

And the thing was that Sherlock always thought that John dissolved him into pieces. But John seemed very intent that evening. Maybe it was that John was paying so much attention, was focusing so hard, but Sherlock felt that every touch of his mouth to his skin was drowning in love, that every sweep of his fingertips was suffocating in adoration, and Sherlock felt over-sensitized to all of it, like he couldn’t bear it, like he was filled to the brim with emotion. And he always felt that way when it
came to John, had been feeling that way for so long that he had forgotten how painful it had been in the early days, to love him in such an all-consuming way and to have nowhere to direct it, to have no idea what to do with it, to just have it flopping around inside of him, clamoring to get out of him. Now it could get out, when he was filled to the brim, and he knew he was speaking, could hear his voice, and had no idea what he was saying, if it made any sense, and found he didn’t care, because what mattered was why he was talking, and he knew John knew that. And he was damp with sweat and desperate with desire and drunk with love, high with it, it swirled through him, as sharp and sluggish as any drug he’d ever tried, and his cells ached, wanted, craved, and when he climaxed it was no rush of pleasure but a slow build that crashed over him and dragged him inexorably under until he had no idea where he ended and the rest of the universe started.

“Me, too, love,” John murmured over him, dotting kisses onto his fevered face. “Me, too. All of it.”

And Sherlock suddenly understood what John had meant when he’d said that he would take him apart. Because Sherlock found himself clambering to get as tangled into John as he could get, wanting to get closer, shuddering with the pain of not being able to just live in John, and he heard himself say, heard the barely suppressed sob in the words, “You can’t ever leave me. Please. Never. I don’t know what I would…”

“Shh,” John said, and let him unravel.

And Sherlock understood what John had meant when he’d said he’d put him back together again.

Sherlock, spent and exhausted but more deeply content than he could ever remember being, ever, lay against John, and said, almost conversationally, as if the fact of it was something to be examined in a scientific manner, “There is nothing you could do, ever, that I wouldn’t forgive.”

“When you love,” responded John, his fingers tracing a pattern up Sherlock’s shoulder, “you love.”

“What would be the point of doing it halfway?” asked Sherlock, genuinely perplexed by the idea.

John nosed his way behind Sherlock’s ear and then rested there, breathing. “You’re amazing,” he said.

Sherlock smiled. And then, after a second, started giggling.

“What?” asked John, confused, giving him room to roll about in mirth.

Sherlock turned to face him, grinning. “Do you know that you do that out loud?”

John laughed. “Sorry,” he said. “I’ll stop.”

“No, no,” Sherlock told him, gravely. “It’s fine.”

***

Time passed. And Oliver grew. He learned how to crawl, and caused John to panic over his newfound mobility and install gates in every doorway of the house, which made Sherlock complain that Oliver had learned a new talent and John had punished him by putting him in prison. John stood fast on the gates, because they only made sense, but he thought of Sherlock’s words every time he came across Oliver sitting forlornly by a gate, glaring at him and clearly planning his escape. He was Sherlock’s clone, John expected him to learn how to open the gate locks any minute now. Which was why he agreed that Sherlock could give him lessons in ascending and descending staircases. Supervised lessons. And as these lessons consisted mainly of Sherlock himself crawling up and down the stairs while Oliver sat in John’s arms and stared at him, John thought they were quite
brilliant.

Oliver also started talking a bit more properly. His fondness for dead died off, replaced by a zealous affection for the word no. Yes was beyond him, but no was beloved. He said no constantly: to most questions he was asked but also just to the things that John and Sherlock did. John would choose a jumper for the day and walk into the sitting room and Oliver would look up from his skull and his blanket and say, “No,” and John would find himself in the bedroom choosing a different jumper. Sherlock thought this was hilarious until the day Sherlock set forth a long hypothesis about his current experiment that Oliver listened to closely, gnawing on his pirate flag teething ring, and then responded to with a thoughtful, “No.”

Oliver’s third word after no was please, but Oliver only used that to manipulate. He would point to whatever he wanted and bat his long eyelashes and say, “Please?” He didn’t use this very often on Sherlock, because Sherlock basically always gave Oliver everything he wanted, immediately, with no further pleading necessary. He used it on John, and normally to very great effect. John was always reminded of Sherlock when Oliver did this, of Sherlock turning on a pout because he thought it would get results. John had always been very good at resisting Sherlock, but Oliver always added in a bit of a lip tremble and some shimmering tears and, sod it all, the kid was very good. John thought he really needed to steel himself or Oliver was going to run roughshod and be enormously spoiled.

Who the hell was he kidding? thought John one night, sitting by the fire and pretending to read a novel but secretly watching Oliver with Sherlock, while Sherlock held up a variety of objects and Oliver signaled approval or disapproval and Sherlock made notes for his spreadsheet of Oliver’s Preferred Toys. Oliver, John thought, was already the most spoiled baby in Great Britain.

Oliver’s fourth word was Papa. John thought Oliver had probably learned it because he thought it would be useful for further manipulation, but it didn’t matter. The truth was that, the day Oliver first said it to him, John had walked in to fetch him from his cot and Oliver’s face had lit up and he had said, “Papa,” as if the sight of him was the best gift Oliver had ever been given, and John might have actually got teary-eyed. He had always assumed that Sherlock was Oliver’s favorite, his preferred parent. Certainly Oliver seemed to watch Sherlock’s every move, hang on his every word. John had not expected to be the first named parent. John had expected Papa to be way down on Oliver’s list of necessary words. And maybe Oliver had moved it up his queue for manipulative purposes, but John found he didn’t care.

John thought Sherlock might be sensitive about being the first named parent. John said something like, “He probably learned ‘Papa’ first because he plans to exploit it the way you’ve learned to exploit ‘John.’”

Sherlock had looked at him and said, “Not quite that way, I hope.”

“No. But, you know. The general idea.”

“John,” Sherlock had said, turning away in that manner he had when he’d lost interest in something. “I long ago knew you would be his favorite. Why would you think you wouldn’t be his favorite, when you’re mine?”

Oliver’s fifth word was Dada, said complainingly one day when Sherlock had been unforgivably distracted by something that wasn’t Oliver, and Sherlock looked up in absolute shock, and John had never been so grateful to be allowed to witness something as he was the look on Sherlock’s face in that moment. Oliver was looking at him, holding out a fake pair of forceps that Molly had given him, looking for all the world like a surgeon who had asked for assistance and not got it quickly enough, and Sherlock abandoned the experiment he’d been wrapped up in and smothered Oliver in kisses,
which had made Oliver squawk in indignation before giggling, forceps completely forgotten.

Sometimes at night John couldn’t sleep. He had never been an especially good sleeper, too many years of messing with his schedule. He slept far more than the other inhabitants of his flat—even the baby one—but that wasn’t saying much, and he suspected that life with them had thrown him off even more. He tried to keep to a sleep schedule, but there were some nights when he went to bed while Sherlock was playing the violin to Oliver, and he would lay there and listen to them in the other room and definitely not sleep. Oliver would talk in the spaces between music, the few words he knew interspersed with the other sounds he was working into his repertoire, and Sherlock would respond, and John felt like they were having deep and serious discussions about the merits of Mozart versus Wagner, and in those moments John could not believe how astonishingly well everything about his life worked.

It had its annoying aspects, of course. Sherlock was never going to be especially helpful when it came to keeping their kitchen stocked with items necessary to human sustenance, and that was not going to change now that there was a baby or now that they were shagging. And yes, sometimes John felt a bit like the hired help, every so often, when Sherlock was in an ordering-around mood and Oliver had been fussy and John was just snappish. But then Sherlock would do something, some amazing Sherlockian thing. Never anything simple like making John a cup of tea or offering to run to the shops, of course, but things that were somehow better than that. John might come home to a new novel sitting on his chair, and Sherlock would say something derogatory about how dull it looked but John would know that Sherlock had deliberately gone out and bought him that. Or Sherlock would take a break from his experiment or his case or his sulk or whatever it was and sit Oliver on his lap and teach him out of John’s old textbook on communicable diseases, which would keep Oliver out of John’s hair and quiet long enough for John to feel less in demand. Once, amazingly, John came home to the kitchen completely cleared of body parts. Sherlock had mumbled something about needing to make space for new body parts, but John had kissed him soundly, knowing that it had been a peace offering for a disagreement about Sherlock forgetting to drain the baby’s bath water out of the bath.

Mycroft dropped by more frequently than Sherlock would have liked, but John generally thought he was quite inoffensive and Oliver seemed to be getting cautiously used to him (buoyed by the fact that Mycroft often brought him newspapers from work, having discovered that Oliver’s favorite occupation was the ripping of newspapers; John thought it possible theirs was the only baby on the planet who routinely crumpled up Le Monde, the New York Times, the Daily Mail, and several dailies from the Middle East, China, and Japan). Harry came out of rehab and continued to appear to be doing well. She never visited Baker Street, because she claimed that Sherlock made her nervous, so John took Oliver to meet her at neutral locations. She always seemed fine, and Sherlock never made any comments one way or the other, so John decided to believe that she was fine, with no indications otherwise. She doted on Oliver, but Oliver seemed reserved with her. There were a few select people with whom Oliver was effusively taken, and they tended to be the same select people with whom Sherlock was taken: Mrs. Hudson, Molly, even Lestrade. John wasn’t sure if this was some sort of genetic predisposition or if Oliver was picking up on Sherlock’s cues about these particular people, responding well to them because he knew his father relaxed in their presence, trusted them. Outside of that inner circle, Oliver was cautious, more inclined to watch than participate. John realized that Sherlock’s wariness with the general public was not entirely the result of a painful childhood, as Oliver seemed to share it and John could not imagine Oliver feeling any more secure, any more showered with love. There was an essential shyness, John thought, that would have made Sherlock seem standoffish if you were looking at it the wrong way, and Sherlock’s parents clearly had been. Oliver was simply slow to warm to people, as if he couldn’t immediately see the point much of the time, and he was that way with Harry. Not that Harry seemed to notice, because Harry thought Oliver was absolutely brilliant. John always wanted to point out that Oliver
was Sherlock and Harry was oddly terrified of Sherlock, but he bit his tongue on that point.

Mrs. Hudson continued to dote on Oliver, which was useful, as they left him behind whenever crime investigation seemed like it might veer into danger. They took him whenever they were going to a crime scene or to a morgue or to other less exciting places. Oliver loved all of it. Sometimes Molly got pressed into emergency baby-sitting when they went off somewhere they couldn’t take him, and Molly said he was always an angel because she would just sit and show him internal organs and explain what disease had affected them and he always listened with wide-eyed interest and chewed on whatever toy had been brought along.

Sherlock would also leave Oliver with Lestrade, if it made sense, but he refused to leave him with anyone else from Scotland Yard, and John didn’t blame him, because it wasn’t as if the rest of Scotland Yard had ever proven themselves to care overly much about the things that Sherlock cared about. Donovan and Anderson were both tolerant of Oliver but in the same vein that they had eventually grown tolerant of John, as if it wasn’t worth the argument anymore and they’d go along with it by grumbling their disapproval constantly. Oliver ignored them with Sherlockian alacrity, although John knew Sherlockian alacrity well enough by now to know that it was possible Oliver was actually very hurt underneath it all, and John always made sure to be extra-doting of Oliver after a brush with Donovan or Anderson.

Yes, he was spoiling the baby, and he knew he was, but he’d decided the baby deserved a bit of spoiling.

Some of their clients cooed at him. Oliver always responded by gazing at them impassively and Sherlock would always say, bluntly, “Don’t talk to him like that, he’s not an idiot.” More of the clients seemed a bit uncertain of him, but, since Oliver was always rapt when there was a client telling a story, they always soon came to like him, and eventually John knew that Oliver simply became a fixture, part of their public persona. They kept details about him to a minimum, as Sherlock had always requested, but they couldn’t help that people knew there was a baby, and John rather liked that people seemed to approve of this baby, since Oliver was a pretty perfect baby.

Who refused to walk. Sherlock seemed to think he should have taken his first steps, although Sherlock was always anxious to hit the next milestone once any milestone had been achieved. Oliver stood a lot, but showed absolutely no inclination to take any steps anywhere, and the more Sherlock pestered him about it, the more Oliver seemed to become entrenched in the commitment to spend the rest of his life crawling everywhere.

“Aren’t you bothered by it?” Sherlock complained on a rainy evening in late November.

“Why should it bother me? It’s not like he’s eleven years old and being lazy or something, Sherlock. He’s a baby. He’ll walk when he’s ready.”

“He’s doing it as a personal slight,” said Sherlock, and frowned at Oliver.

Oliver looked his best impression of innocent and said, “Dada.”

“Don’t even try that with me,” Sherlock told him, and collapsed backward onto the sofa.

John ignored him, sliding from his chair to the floor so he could sit next to Oliver. “Daddy’s going to sulk now because you’re not mobile enough for him. But when you are more mobile, he’ll do nothing but complain at how you’re going to get into everything.”

“No, I won’t,” said Sherlock, voice muffled against the couch cushions.
Oliver, delighted to have a fellow occupant of the floor, beamed, “Papa,” and then crawled away at the warp speed he had perfected, glancing over his shoulder to make sure John was following.

So John followed, chasing after him good-naturedly, and Oliver laughed and crawled between the legs of the desk with a lot more ease than John could. John backed up and intercepted him on his way out from under the desk, which sent Oliver into convulsions of pleasure at John’s cleverness.

“You’re just encouraging him,” Sherlock mumbled from the sofa.

John glanced up at him, letting Oliver go. Sherlock was watching them, as Oliver crawled away from him, and John obediently set off after him again. “I don’t know why this is encouraging him. I don’t know why he likes this. This is absolute murder on your knees.”

“More so than other activities performed on one’s knees?” queried Sherlock.

“Well, not quite the same result to look forward to,” remarked John, glancing back at Sherlock, who flickered a smile at him.

John tackled Oliver again, who giggled and squirmed in his grasp, and John stood and swung him up into his arms and said, in wonder, “When did you get so big, hmm?” Because Oliver was never going to be a chubby baby, but he had lengthened and put on weight to match it, and John tried to think of how tiny Oliver had been when Mycroft had first walked in with him and could barely remember it.

He kissed Oliver’s head and swung him through the air and then landed him with a gentle plop on Sherlock’s chest.

“Dada,” Oliver told him, pleased to see him, and touched his nose.

“Yes, yes,” said Sherlock, pretending to be disgruntled and not fooling Oliver for a minute. “Hello.” He smoothed Oliver’s flyaway curls.

John sat in his chair and regarded the pair of them. “We should have a party for him.”

“A party,” Sherlock told Oliver. “Your father and his predilection toward having other people around.”

“He’s going to be one. We should celebrate.”

Sherlock looked at Oliver for a moment, who had wrapped his hand around Sherlock’s index finger and was biting on it enthusiastically, before saying, “Yes. We should.”

“The first of many,” John said, firmly, reading the reflective melancholy of Sherlock’s tone.

Sherlock turned his head toward him and smiled. “Yes, Captain Watson,” he said.

John smiled back and slid back down to the floor and crawled over to the sofa. Oliver and Sherlock watched him, Oliver with interest, Sherlock with pleased amusement.

“What are you doing?” asked Sherlock, with mock exasperation.

“Kissing you,” said John, and did.

“You’re ridiculous,” Sherlock said into his mouth.

“You love it,” John promised him.
“No,” contributed Oliver, clearly miffed at no longer being the center of attention.

“One second, Ollie,” John told him, “let me give your father a proper snog.”

Oliver interrupted the proper snog by basically crawling his way between them, and then he settled on Sherlock’s shoulder and looked up at John and looked so content to be exactly where he was, cozily settled between the two of them, that John ended up spending the rest of the evening sitting by the sofa on the floor while Sherlock complained about every single thing on the telly and Oliver made little affirmative noises of agreement.
Chapter 33

The Christmas tree was up for Oliver’s birthday party. Oliver loved the Christmas tree. John thought it probable Oliver would cry when they took it down, because Oliver was that attached to it. He would sit for hours and study it, and John would watch him closely, braced for a sudden stealth attack that would cause the tree to topple over. But Oliver always just turned his head eventually and looked at John and said, wonderingly, “Papa,” and gestured at the tree. John thought he was asking why they hadn’t had the tree up all along.

Sherlock’s interest in the Christmas tree was that he was busy conducting an experiment about tree sap that required tree sap to get stuck on every single thing in the flat, including Oliver’s hair, which did not lead to a pleasant evening and there was much cursing by John in between Oliver’s screams of outrage and Sherlock insisting that it had all been a worthy sacrifice “for science.”

John cleaned the entire flat for Oliver’s birthday and told Sherlock, “So help me God, if you get any sap anywhere in this flat for the next twenty-four hours, I will ‘science’ you into sleeping out on the doorstep for the next week.”

Sherlock blinked at him and pointed out, “It’s December.”

“Which is why you’d better be very careful about the sap, yeah?”

Sherlock looked horrified.

John grinned at him and said, “What if I give you something better to do for an hour or so?”

“An hour?” said Sherlock, and lifted an eyebrow at him.

“Do you know how much I hate you?” John told him.

Sherlock grinned and pulled John’s jumper off of him.

And there was no sap anywhere in the flat but the tree when the guests started arriving.

John had urged people not to bring presents, but that had clearly meant nothing, since everyone walked in with presents. Mrs. Hudson arrived with a present and a cake, even though John had baked one.

“I told you I was baking one,” he reminded her, accepting her cake, which was lovely and had blue frosting roughly reminiscent of Oliver’s eyes. It looked delicious, and John was sure it was, but he had really wanted to bake Oliver’s birthday cake himself, out of some strange sort of possessiveness.

“Yes, dear,” Mrs. Hudson told him, vaguely, and took Oliver out of Sherlock’s arms.

Sherlock was smirking, because Sherlock had been dubious about John tackling the cake.

“Shut up,” John told him, and brought the cake into the kitchen.

Mycroft arrived with a small entourage of men carrying a box. And another cake, this one a ridiculously elegant affair that looked in danger of toppling over.

“I baked a cake,” John said, a little annoyed now.

“Yes, Sherlock told me,” Mycroft remarked, blandly, directing one of his men to put the cake into
“I am not a bad cook, you know,” John said, to whoever might be listening. “If I didn’t cook, we’d all starve.”

“You do order a lot of takeaway,” Mrs. Hudson said, and then, when John glared at her, “Well, sometimes I have to answer the door, dear, because the two of you are terrible at answering the door.”

“Because Sherlock is always breaking the doorbell. And you’re an ungrateful prat,” he told Sherlock.

“I love you,” Sherlock told him, pleasantly, and kissed him.

John kissed him back but also pulled a little bit at his hair, as if that would teach him any sort of lesson.

“One thing I’m definitely grateful for is that the two of you don’t do that stuff at crime scenes,” announced Lestrade, walking into the flat with a bottle of wine and a party hat with a large shiny green pompom on the top.

“Oh, excellent, you brought wine,” said John, taking the wine.

“And a terrible hat,” remarked Sherlock.

“It’s for the birthday boy,” Lestrade put it on Oliver’s head.

Oliver scrunched up his face and gave Lestrade an I-always-suspected-you-were-insane-thank-you-for-this-final-proof look. “No,” he said.

“And I thought we might need wine,” remarked Lestrade, ignoring Oliver’s displeasure.

“We definitely need wine,” said Mycroft, stepping forward to take the wine from John. “Well done.”

Lestrade blushed.

John stared at him and narrowed his eyes.

Molly said, “Yoo-hoo! I thought I’d come right up?”

“Yes, yes,” John said, letting Lestrade escape into the kitchen. With Mycroft, John noted.

Molly was holding a teddy bear with a large red bow.

“We said no presents,” John told her.

“I know, but I saw this and couldn’t resist.”

“No, no, no,” Oliver said behind him, and John turned his head. Oliver had pushed the hat off his head but was still telling it no where it was laying on the floor.

“Look what Molly brought you,” John told Oliver.

“Here you are, Ollie,” said Molly, brightly, as she presented him with it. “Happy birthday!”

Oliver looked intrigued by the teddy bear. Probably because he wasn’t used to stuffed animals that
weren’t somehow also chemical equations. He was holding his skull, though, which prevented him from being able to grab for the teddy bear.

John anticipated his issue and took the skull so that Oliver could reach for the teddy bear. Oliver pulled it in experimentally, and then pressed his face into its fur with a giggle of approval.

Sherlock appeared over Mrs. Hudson’s shoulder, peering down at Oliver and the teddy bear. “What is that?”

“It’s a teddy bear, Sherlock,” John told him.

“It’s called Teddy.”

Sherlock stared at Molly. “It’s a teddy bear called Teddy.”

Molly blinked. “Yes?” she offered.

“That’s as if Mycroft handed us a baby and John and I decided to call him Human.”

John rolled his eyes. “Give it another name, then.” He looked at his watch, then put the skull down and pulled out his mobile and texted his sister. *Running late? You’ve missed seventeen different cakes arriving and a lot of presents that I told people not to bring.*

“What is this enormous box?” asked Lestrade, nudging it with his toe.

John turned and noted that Lestrade and Mycroft had both emerged from the kitchen. Lestrade was holding a glass of wine. Mycroft was offering a glass to Molly, pouring it smoothly.

“Mycroft brought it,” John answered. “Even though I said no presents.”

“What’s a birthday without presents?” countered Mycroft, producing another wine glass for Mrs. Hudson, who had to juggle Oliver to take it, blushing.

“Ah, yes, that’s right, I forgot how traditionalist the Holmes brothers are in these matters,” remarked John, dryly.

Sherlock had walked over to the present, looked down at it, and then began opening it.

“Hey!” protested John.

Sherlock looked up at him. “Aren’t you meant to open birthday presents?”

“*Oliver* is meant to open the birthday presents! They’re his!”

“Oliver isn’t going to open birthday presents, he’s twelve months old,” scoffed Sherlock.

John crossed his arms and regarded him. “This from the man who yesterday was complaining to me that Oliver hadn’t yet mastered the art of using a pipette.”

Sherlock ignored him, pulling the wrapping paper off the present and handing it to Oliver, who looked overwhelmed by the riches of a teddy bear and wrapping paper. Then Sherlock opened the box and said, “Oh, for God’s sake, Mycroft.”

“What is it?” asked John, walking over so he could look into the box, accepting the wine Mycroft pressed into his hand absently. And then he said, pleasantly surprised, “It’s a rocking horse.” And it was, a very handsome, obviously expensive one, painted in an attractive dappled gray. John pushed
his wineglass into Sherlock’s hand and wrestled the rocking horse out of the box with Lestrade’s help. And then he looked up at Sherlock, who looked disgruntled. “But this is lovely. Why are you frowning? It’s a lovely gift, Mycroft.”

“He knows I hate horses,” Sherlock bit out.


“Why would I ever have mentioned it?” Sherlock demanded.

“What do you hate about horses?”

“It was a bad experience as a child,” inserted Mycroft. “I thought we could save Oliver from the same issue.”

“Come here, Ollie, let’s have a look,” said John, taking Oliver out of Mrs. Hudson’s arms and placing him carefully on the rocking horse.

Oliver had to drop his teddy bear and his wrapping paper to grab hold of the reins, and he looked a bit dubious about the whole thing.

“Look at that,” Mycroft said. “He’s a natural.”

Something occurred to John. He looked up at Mycroft. “This isn’t about turning him into some ridiculous aristocrat with a house in Cornwall, is it?”

Mycroft gave him his best long-suffering eyeroll.

“Mycroft loves horses,” said Sherlock, in the same tone of voice he would have used for Mycroft kicks puppies.

“Nothing wrong with horses,” said Lestrade.

“Do you ride?” Mycroft asked him.

“Uh, no,” answered Lestrade.

“Shame,” said Mycroft.

John looked between the two of them and drew his eyebrows together and decided that he wasn’t sure if he really wanted to know. Then Mrs. Hudson came forward with her gift, which was a brightly colored book about bumblebees, and Oliver sat on his periodic table blanket surrounded by his riches and poring over the illustrations in the book, with breaks for wrapping paper crumpling.

Mrs. Hudson said, “We should have cake.”

“Oh!” said Molly. “Wait! Before Oliver makes a mess of himself, we should get some pictures.”

“Yes,” said John, firmly, because he didn’t think they had nearly enough pictures. “Sit down,” he told Sherlock, who looked inclined to shrink away. Sherlock obeyed, settling on John’s chair, and John picked up Oliver and dropped him on Sherlock’s lap and then perched on the arm of the chair. “Smile,” he commanded, smiling himself.

Molly snapped several photos.

“Did they smile?” John demanded.
“Sort of,” said Molly, diplomatically.

John dragged his fingertips through the hair on the nape of Sherlock’s neck, and Molly snapped several more photos. In the kitchen, there was a bit of a commotion going on with the cakes.

John looked at his watch. “I’m going to ring Harry,” he said.

“Yes,” agreed Sherlock. “John, there’s something you should know.”

John felt his stomach sink. This was it, he thought. This was when Sherlock was going to tell him that Harry had fallen off the wagon months ago.

But Sherlock just said, “It has nothing to do with your cooking abilities. Or baking abilities, I suppose I should say.”

John blinked, confused. “What?”

“The reason why everybody brought cakes. They have every confidence in your ability to bake a cake. They worry about a cake baked in my kitchen, that despite your best efforts it’ll be contaminated with some experiment. So. I thought you should know.”

Odd thing to want to make sure he understood, thought John, but nice of Sherlock to clarify it for him. “Okay,” he agreed, because that did make some amount of sense; John himself sometimes worried about the food he made in the kitchen. “Please be a good host for the next few seconds while I ring Harry and don’t start any fights or explode anything or anything.”

“John,” huffed Sherlock, complainingly.

John pressed a kiss to the top of his head and pulled his mobile out and went into their bedroom and shut the door and took a deep breath and called Harry. Who did not answer. John frowned and looked at his watch again, even though he knew exactly what time it was and exactly how late Harry was. For her nephew’s first birthday party. The only first birthday party he would have, after all.

John left a message, which he thought was ill-advised even as he did it, but he was irritated enough to let his temper let him be reckless. “Yeah, Harry, where are you?” was the entire message.

And it was so annoying, because it should have been a good day. It had been a good day. His son had turned one and he was surrounded by people who loved him, who had brought him presents and made him cakes, and these people would be there to love him through whatever mistakes John might make with him, and John was aware that there was no way he would get everything right and that they needed to give Oliver a support system for back-up. And Oliver was surrounded by love, Oliver would never be lonely, all of these people would always look out for Oliver. And everything had been going so well, as well as a party with Sherlock and Mycroft in the same room could ever have been expected to go, and he had been lulled into a false sense of security, and he had really never entertained the possibility that Harry would…that she would…

John stood at the window and closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against it. It was freezing cold, because it was a bitter day outside.

Sherlock didn’t knock, and John wasn’t sure he’d expected him to. He heard the door open and then close and then Sherlock said, “They’ve got three different cakes with a candle each.”

John thought of Sherlock reassuring John about his baking ability. “You knew. You knew she was late because she’s off somewhere getting drunk.”
There was a moment of silence. “Did you speak to her?”

“No, of course I didn’t speak to her,” John snarled. “Do you really think she would answer the phone when she can see it’s me calling and she knows that she can’t—Never mind.” John straightened from the window. “Never mind. It’s Oliver’s birthday. I’m not letting her ruin it.” John walked over to where Sherlock was standing uncertainly by the door.

“John,” said Sherlock.

John shook his head. “Not now, okay?” he said, tightly. “He’s only going to get to do this for the first time once. I want to watch his face when we sing to him, I want to blow out his candles, I want to let him make a mess of his cake. That’s what I want to do. Okay?”

Sherlock nodded, and John opened the bedroom door.

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Sherlock was furious. Because John was unhappy. And John shouldn’t ever be unhappy.

John had desperately wanted Oliver’s birthday party. Sherlock hadn’t really cared, and Sherlock was willing to admit that Oliver had no idea what a birthday even was. But John had wanted to throw a birthday party, and so Sherlock had gone along with it, and if Harry hadn’t been an idiot then it all would have gone well. Sherlock was polite to Mycroft, even when Mycroft had bought Oliver an obnoxious present, and they had posed for photos, and Oliver had been delighted by everything, and it should have been a bloody good day, it would have been, if Harry hadn’t gone and failed so spectacularly.

John thought they needed to eat something other than cake. Sherlock disagreed, but John was restless and would not be dissuaded and seized on the opportunity to get out of the flat and take a walk, which was always John’s preferred method of working through something that had upset him. So Sherlock let him go. He laid on the floor whilst Oliver crawled all over him, dragging his teddy bear and his wrapping paper, and stoked his fury at a low simmer.

Oliver, having pulled himself over the twin mountains of Sherlock’s legs, looked back at the skull on the opposite end of the blanket and pointed and said, “Please?”

Sherlock leaned over to grab it for him, and that was when the doorbell buzzed, and Sherlock knew immediately that it was Harry. He was actually surprised, because he had not expected Harry to show up. Harry never showed up at Baker Street. As today had proved, Harry almost never came to Baker Street, even when she was invited.

Sherlock looked over what Oliver was wearing. A sleepsuit. Good. Warm enough that he should be fine if Sherlock bundled him in a blanket. Sherlock got to his feet.

Oliver had looked in the direction of the door at the sound of the doorbell. Now he looked up at Sherlock and said, very clearly, “Client.”

Another day, Sherlock would have had John’s baby book out immediately to record the new word—and the fact that it had been used in perfect context—but Sherlock just replied, “No, your bloody difficult aunt Harry,” and swept Oliver up and into his arms. He grabbed his coat on his way out of the flat and used it to wrap up Oliver, like an impromptu blanket, leaving just Oliver’s head sticking out of the charcoal wool. And then he headed down the stairs.

He opened the door just as Harry had turned to start walking away. She looked up in surprise, and she was very clearly drunk, listing a bit to the side, balance off, eyes bloodshot, lips chapped.
Sherlock took all of this in at a glance, as he tucked the bundle of Oliver and his coat up against him and frowned at her from the doorway. Harry smiled at him, wide and alcohol-lubricated, with an edge of fear in her eyes, as if he might be tricked into thinking she was sober.

“Did you think no one would be home?” he demanded.

“I—I didn’t…” Harry drew herself up, staggering only a little bit, and Sherlock saw the moment when she decided belligerence would be appropriate, would separate her from the knowledge of having disappointed John, would allow her to blame it all on someone else. She said, “What’s the matter? John won’t speak to me?”

“John’s not here. John’s taking a walk. You almost ruined Oliver’s birthday,” Sherlock snapped at her.

Harry did look abashed at that. “I didn’t…I didn’t mean to…” She took a deep breath. “It’s so hard. You have no idea. It’s so hard.”

“I have every idea,” Sherlock cut in, brittly.

“Oh, because you conducted some sort of experiment on it?” said Harry, bitterly. “It’s so easy for you to be so smug and so judgmental—”

“John was so excited today,” Sherlock interrupted. Because this entire conversation was missing the point, talking about Harry, talking about Sherlock, it was all beside the point, and the point had been John. “He was so excited. He was so looking forward to celebrating, to celebrating Oliver and to celebrating you, and I have been trying so hard to give him everything he could possibly want, and the only piece of the puzzle I couldn’t control was you, and how could you—”

“Shut up!” Harry shouted at him. “Do you ever stop being so much bloody better than everyone else?”

“That is so much more than enough,” John’s voice lashed out, lethally quiet.

Sherlock looked at him in surprise. How had John snuck up on them? Had he been that lost in the disagreement? He was standing with the bag of takeaway in his hand and glaring at Harry. Sherlock hoped he was never the object of such a glare from John.

“Sherlock, you don’t have a hat on the baby,” said John, evenly, without ever taking his eyes off of Harry.

Sherlock looked at Oliver, who was watching everything that was happening very closely. This was a true observation, but he didn’t see the relevance of it at the moment.

“John,” Harry said, turning to him pleadingly. The alcohol made her sloppy, made her overbalance as she put a placating hand on his arm, jostling their takeaway and making John wince a bit at how much weight his bad shoulder suddenly absorbed. “You have to understand—I had to have just a little—if I was going to—I mean, if I was going to face him—you’ve got to understand—he’s so terrifying and he’s so—”

Sherlock didn’t know whether or not to say anything to defend himself, but he didn’t have to, because John laughed harshly, a laugh that had Harry swallowing what she would have said next. “You’re going to blame him? Really? When he was the one to convince me to give you this chance?” John shook her hand off his arm and walked past her.

“It’s just that he’s so posh and thinks he’s better than us and—”
John paused with his foot on the first step and looked back at her, sounding honestly perplexed when he said, “I don’t know why you think I would love him if he was really like that. I don’t know why you’ve got it in your head that he would…or that I would…I don’t know what to do anymore, Harry. I’m wrung out. I’m exhausted. And I think I’m…I think I’m done. I think I can’t…I’m…I…Yeah.”

He went to turn away again, and Harry said, begged, “John.”

John half-turned back and just said, in response, “Harriet.”

Which seemed to do something to Harry, made her disintegrate somehow, crumple. John turned his back, walking up to Sherlock and then past him, saying, “Sherlock, you’ve got to put something over his head if you’re taking him out in the cold.”

Sherlock glanced uncertainly at Harry, before turning to follow John inside. John was already halfway up the stairs. “John,” he said.

“We’re not discussing it, Sherlock,” he replied without pausing, and disappeared into their flat.

Sherlock looked at Oliver, who looked thoroughly astonished by everything he had just witnessed. “No,” he said, very eloquently.

Sherlock had to agree with that assessment.

Not knowing what else to do, he followed John into their flat. John was organizing takeaway on the kitchen table. He’d already put the kettle on, too. Clearly, John was doing everything normal that he could think to do. He turned and pulled out forks, put them on the table. Turned and took mugs out of the cupboard. Turned and put the forks back in the drawer. Then said, under his breath, “Bugger,” and pulled the forks back out.

“Papa,” said Oliver at that point.

John put the forks on the table and looked at them for a second, and then turned and took Oliver in a fluid motion and put his nose in his hair and breathed. He was holding him so tightly that Sherlock expected Oliver to protest and also understood why Oliver didn’t.

“He said a new word,” ventured Sherlock, trying for normalcy.

John shifted to look questioningly at Sherlock.

“Client,” Sherlock supplied.

“Two syllables,” said John, and kissed Oliver’s head. “Did you put it in the book?”

“Not yet.”

“I’ll do it.” John, still holding Oliver snugly, walked out of the kitchen with him and into the sitting room.

Sherlock followed, wishing he didn’t feel so out of his element. He detested not knowing what to do next. He wished he hadn’t let his fury drive him down the stairs to talk to Harry. He should have just let her turn around to go home and saved John the entire scene.

He watched John pull the baby book off its shelf and open it and blurted out, “Are you angry with me?” Which was the stupidest, most selfish thing for him to say, and he knew it as soon as it came
out of his mouth and wanted to take it back.

“I’m not angry with you,” John said to the book.

Sherlock decided to take him at his word. Anyway, if he said anything else, he’d probably make everything a great deal worse. What was it about wanting to make John happy that turned him into an idiot who did the exact opposite?

He walked into the kitchen, cursing himself in a silent frenzy in his head, and began blindly scooping takeaway onto plates, because it gave him something to do.

John eventually followed him into the kitchen. “Sherlock,” he said.

Sherlock mechanically kept moving food from container to container and looked up at John in dread.

“I have everything I want. And I had a wonderful day.”

So he had heard that bit. Sherlock had assumed he had, based on the timing of John’s interruption, but now it was definitely confirmed. Sherlock laughed humorlessly. “You absolutely did not.”

“Yes. I did. It was a wonderful party. Thank you for going along with it.”

Sherlock put the spoon he’d been using down with a sudden clatter. “Stop it,” he said.

“What?”

“Stop trying to make me feel better, stop trying to comfort me.”

“I’m just—”

“You want to get things back to normal, and the quickest way for you to do that is to take care of someone, and you know I’m upset, so you’ve come in here to take care of me, but I’m upset because you’re upset, so we’re stuck in some kind of vicious circle right now, you and I. So stop comforting me. If you’re angry with me, be angry with me.”

“I’m not angry with you,” John insisted.

“But you’re angry.”

“Of course I’m angry, Sherlock,” John snapped, and then took a deep breath and looked at Oliver in his arms. “I meant what I said,” he said, slowly, sounding so swamped with sadness that Sherlock felt as if his very veins were twitching in anxious desire to make John happier.

“What part?” asked Sherlock, desperate for a clue as to what he could do.

“I’m exhausted,” John answered, eyes still locked on Oliver.

John was exhausted! Excellent! He looked exhausted! This was something Sherlock could help with! “I can take care of him the rest of the night,” Sherlock offered, enthusiastically, reaching for Oliver. “You know Ollie and I are experts at keeping each other company all night.”

John looked at him with an expression Sherlock couldn’t read, but he didn’t think it was a bad expression.

“So you can rest,” Sherlock clarified, when John stayed just standing there.
“Yeah,” John agreed, eventually. “Okay. I’m not hungry, anyway.” John leaned over and kissed Oliver’s head. “Happy birthday, little one,” he said, and then he kissed Sherlock’s cheek on his way out of the kitchen.

Sherlock checked the security of the gates in the doorways and then let Oliver down to roam whilst he played through a full selection of John’s favorite pieces on the violin. When he was done, Oliver was yawning and lolling sleepily against his teddy bear, so Sherlock collected him and took him upstairs and read John’s blog entry on the pink lady case to him until he fell asleep.

Then Sherlock went downstairs and considered what to do. He’d been hoping that Oliver would stay up a bit later to distract him a little longer, but Oliver had had a busy day. They had all had inexcusably busy days.

Sherlock glanced at their closed bedroom door, then decided that John would not object to having him there in bed with him if he woke during the night. John preferred to have Sherlock in the bed, Sherlock knew.

Sherlock went into the room and crawled into the bed next to John as carefully as he could.

John mumbled, “I am really, really, really not in the mood.”

Sherlock looked at the shape of him in the dark in surprise. “That’s not why I—I thought you might want me to be in the bed with you. I mean, you like having me in the bed. You’ve said that you…” Sherlock stopped talking because he didn’t think was being anything other than imbecilic.

There was a moment of silence, then John said, “Yes. Yes, I like having you in the bed. Sorry. Yes.”

Sherlock laid down carefully, making sure not to crowd him, but John shifted until they were pressed together and Sherlock took the invitation and snaked an arm around John’s chest.

John intertwined their fingers and said, “And the violin-playing was beautiful, thank you.”

“I didn’t mean to keep you up,” Sherlock said into John’s hair, voice muffled. “I meant to lull you to sleep.”

John laughed, the same sort of harsh, cold, unamused laugh he’d laughed at Harry. “I love that you thought I could fall asleep.”

“You said you were exhausted,” Sherlock pointed out, a bit hurt.

“I didn’t mean it literally, Sherlock.”

“Oh,” Sherlock realized, because, put that way, he did feel stupid.

John picked up Sherlock’s hand in his own and brought it to his mouth and pressed his lips into the palm.

And then he said, shakily, “Sherlock. I love you. But if you ever do that to me…to us…ever…”

Sherlock thought of addictions. He thought of how you could be convinced that you were handling them, in control of them, and then end up missing the most important things because the addictions had all along been controlling you. Sherlock had experience in that that he hated to admit. Sherlock pressed his face into John and thought of his current addictions, of the way John smiled at him, of the sound Oliver made sometimes when he caught sight of him, and thought that if there were any addictions he was never going to be able to break, whose withdrawal would kill him, it was those.
Sherlock could handle the continued denial of every controlled substance, so long as he kept John Watson with him in Baker Street and the baby in the nursery.

“I know,” Sherlock replied, and held John that much more tightly. “I know.”
John woke when Oliver started crying over the monitor. Sherlock was still in bed, still curled protectively around him. He hadn’t been sleeping; that much was clear from how wide awake he sounded when he said, readily, “I’ll get him.” And then he was out of the bed and out of the bedroom and John closed his eyes and turned his face into his pillow and thought that in most respects he was the luckiest person he knew. He had made this huge and utter disaster of his life, had been a broken man with nothing to look forward to, and now he had the world’s most remarkable baby calling him “Papa” and a genius who was using all of his considerable mental talent just to make him happy. He was really very, very lucky and it was stupid to feel sorry for himself just because of Harry. He refused to let Harry ruin any of it.

John pushed himself out of bed with a bodily effort and wandered out of the bedroom. He could hear Oliver talking to Sherlock. “No. No. No,” Oliver was saying, pausing before each one. Choosing clothes then, thought John, and left them to it and took a shower, hoping it would shake off his malaise.

What really shook off his malaise was the way Oliver came crawling over to him as soon as he opened the bathroom door, and John picked him up and held him close and said, “Good morning, love. Very handsome outfit you’ve picked there. You look very smart.”

Oliver giggled and preened and John wandered into the sitting room, where Sherlock had lined up on the desk basically every teacup and mug they had in the house.

John lifted his eyebrows. “Are you making tea?” He wasn’t sure why Sherlock would have needed every mug in the house to make tea, but perhaps Sherlock thought he needed to make tea on some sort of grand scale.

“No,” Sherlock replied, as if he didn’t know why John would ever have suggested such a thing.

“Okay,” said John. “Well, can I borrow some cups for me to make us tea? What exactly are you doing with all of them anyway?”

“Experiment.”

That was Sherlock’s all-purpose explanation for everything. Oliver was squirming in his arms, so John put him down and said to Sherlock, “Right, but what kind of experiment?”

“Cleanliness,” responded Sherlock, absently.

“No,” said John. “Absolutely not. You are not allowed to criticize how I clean our mugs, since I’m the only one in the flat who cleans them.”

Sherlock looked up at him, and then said, “Right. Yes,” and meekly went to sit in his armchair.

Which meant that Sherlock was still coddling him after yesterday, and John found that suddenly annoying. He wanted Sherlock to be difficult—no, impossible, the way he usually was, and insist on the experiment, or ignore John’s wishes, or something.

And that was irrational, to criticize Sherlock for being nice to him, so John took a deep breath and counted to ten and walked into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

“Yoo-hoo!” Mrs. Hudson called up the stairs. “Are you boys decent?”
Get caught snogging half-undressed on the sofa and never live it down, thought John, and called back, “Yes!”

Oliver crawled out of the sitting room and over to the top of the stairs and pulled himself up to standing on the gate at the top of it.

“Mamama,” he greeted Mrs. Hudson, pleased, as she walked up the stairs toward him.

John swept him up into his arms and moved the gate out of Mrs. Hudson’s way.

“Very sweet of you, Ollie, but I’m not actually your mum,” Mrs. Hudson told him, kissing his cheek.

“Mamamama,” Oliver said, cheerfully, undeterred.

“It was a lovely party yesterday, John,” Mrs. Hudson told him, as he replaced the gate.

“Ta, Mrs. Hudson. I was just making tea, would you like some?”

“Oh, no, dear, thank you.” Mrs. Hudson bustled into the sitting room, and John put Oliver back down so he could enthusiastically follow her. “What are you doing, Sherlock dear?”

“Playing,” answered Sherlock, and then the violin began.

John busied himself making cups of tea, listening to Sherlock’s violin. Mrs. Hudson was talking to Oliver, and when John walked into the sitting room with the tea, she was sitting on the sofa with Oliver sitting next to her, flipping through the bumblebee book she’d bought him the day before.

John put Sherlock’s tea next to his chair, not disturbing his playing, and then sat in his own armchair and looked expectantly at Mrs. Hudson, because it wasn’t like she made a habit of dropping by for no reason. She usually had a piece of gossip she was bursting to share, if it wasn’t a desire to borrow some sugar, or a new baked good she wanted them to try. Sometimes she showed up if she was worried about Sherlock, to make sure he was okay, and John had a sudden flash of panicked thought that she had heard the disagreement with Harry the night before and had come up to make sure he was okay.

Then Mrs. Hudson said, “I wanted to talk to you boys about Christmas.”

Christmas, thought John. He’d put up the tree, but he hadn’t really thought about it beyond that. He’d been focused on Oliver’s birthday party. He’d assumed that they would open gifts in the morning and then they would spend a lazy afternoon eating takeaway from the day before. He had been thinking he might invite Harry over, and now he shied away from thinking about that. But Christmas had never been a major event at Baker Street, because Sherlock only haphazardly acknowledged its existence, and even though there was now Oliver, John hadn’t given much thought to it. He’d assumed the gift-buying was his responsibility.

And he had a week left.

How the hell had he let the entire month get away from him so quickly?

“I’ll be going to my sister’s as usual,” Mrs. Hudson continued, helping Oliver to turn the page of the book. “I didn’t know what you had planned, but I wanted you to know that she said you are all welcome to join us.”

Sherlock kept playing his violin, showing no indication that he’d heard any of this.
John considered, then said to Mrs. Hudson, “That’s very kind of her and kind of you, but I think we’re just going to have a quiet holiday and stay home. His first Christmas and all that.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Hudson agreed. “Of course. I just wanted you to know you had the option.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll leave you to your concert then,” said Mrs. Hudson, handing Oliver his book.

“Mamamama no,” Oliver announced, pointing at one of the bumblebees.

“It’s a bee, Ollie,” Sherlock said, without pausing in his playing.

Oliver frowned and considered this pronouncement carefully.

John got up to move the gate out of Mrs. Hudson’s way, then walked back into the sitting room, sat down, and said, “We haven’t discussed Christmas.”

“What is there to discuss?” asked Sherlock.

“What we’re doing. You didn’t want to go to Mrs. Hudson’s sister’s, did you?”

Sherlock gave him a look.

“Right,” said John. “Stupid question.”

“It isn’t his first Christmas, you know,” announced Sherlock, finishing his song with a flourish and lowering his violin.

“What?”

“You told Mrs. Hudson it’s his first Christmas, but it isn’t. He was born before Christmas last year.”

“He was a week old at Christmas last year, and he was in some clinic or hospital or institution or something where nobody cared about him and probably no one bothered to buy him a single present or wish him a happy Christmas. So I’m not counting last year,” John pointed out, sharply. He knew Sherlock didn’t understand one arbitrary day being different or special in any way, but John’s heart broke a little to think of Oliver alone and unloved on Christmas. Christmas existed for children, it was for children, in John’s opinion.

After a moment, Sherlock nodded and then started playing again.

“Christ, I was so focused on his birthday party, I didn’t even think about the Christmas shopping,” John sighed.

“Don’t feel compelled to get me a Christmas present, John,” said Sherlock, languidly.

John almost laughed. Trust Sherlock to assume it was always all about him. “Not you. But we should get something for Lestrade and Molly and your brother. All the people who have helped us. Mrs. Hudson, of course. Oh, bloody hell, I’ve got to go shopping.” How had he not thought of this before now?

“No no no bo,” Oliver said, and John didn’t know if it was directed at him or not.

Sherlock stopped playing again. “You’re going to get Oliver presents?”
“Of course I’m going to get Oliver presents. It’s Christmas, isn’t it?”

“Oh, God, are you going to tell him they’re from Father Christmas?”

“Well.” John glanced at Oliver, who was now jabbing angrily at the bee in his book. “I don’t think it really matters this year.”

“You’d have to lie to him, you know. Because there is no Father Christmas.”

Sherlock said it almost viciously. John looked at him in confusion. “Right,” he said. “I know there’s no Father Christmas.”

“Well, I think it’s moronic,” announced Sherlock, staunchly. “We love him, so we’ll buy him presents. Why do we have to pretend they come from some corpulent man with questionable fashion sense and a penchant for house-breaking?”

John smiled a bit. “I would have thought you’d love him for being a criminal.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and resumed playing, and then abruptly stopped. “Unless you’ve got your heart set on it.”

“My heart set on what?”

“Playing Father Christmas.”

“Sherlock, it’s fine. I see your point about lying to him. And I don’t need an excuse to spoil him with a ton of presents he definitely doesn’t need.”

“Spoil him? It isn’t ‘spoiling’ him to buy him presents. Look at him, he’s perfectly alright, not spoiled at all.”

On cue, Oliver looked up from his bumblebee book and said, “No.”

“Spoiled,” Sherlock muttered, as if in disbelief, and started playing his violin again.

Which was when someone started walking up the stairs. Assuming it was Mrs. Hudson, John stood to help her with the gate, but Mycroft had already stepped lightly over it by the time John got to the doorway.

“Oh,” he said. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Mycroft responded, pleasantly, and followed John into the sitting room.

Sherlock stopped playing on a sour note, frowning at Mycroft.

Oliver looked at Mycroft and pointed at him and said, happily, “Client!”

John tried not to laugh. Sherlock didn’t bother to try not to laugh. He dissolved into delighted hilarity.

Mycroft looked from Oliver, who joined Sherlock in giggling, to John. “Why does he think I’m a client?”

“Don’t take it personally, I’m sure he thinks the world is divided into me and Sherlock and then clients.”
“Well, I’m his uncle,” Mycroft said, a bit irritably, and sat carefully on the sofa next to Oliver.

Oliver looked at him, his eyes still gleaming with wicked Sherlockian amusement, and John was sure Oliver knew exactly how he had offended Mycroft and was very pleased with himself.

“Why are you here?” Sherlock asked, having recovered from his fit of laughter and going back to frowning. “We just saw you yesterday. Two days in a row is completely unnecessary.”

“I realized that I had failed to speak to the two of you about Christmas. Yesterday, with all of the other guests, did not seem the opportune time.”

“We have phones,” Sherlock pointed out, scathingly. “Both of us.”

“You have been ignoring my texts all morning.”

Sherlock paused, which showed that that had to have been true. “You should have texted John.”

“Indeed I did,” answered Mycroft.

“I shut my phone off,” John said, because he hadn’t wanted to confront the possibility that Harry would try to get in touch with him.

“Now that we have settled the state of your individual mobiles, on the subject of Christmas, I thought the three of you could come to dinner. There will be goose.”

Goose, John thought. Mycroft was having a Christmas goose. Of course he was. And John’s plan had been leftover takeaway.

“We’re not going anywhere on Christmas,” Sherlock sniffed. “It’s Oliver’s first Christmas. We’re staying here and spoiling him with presents.”

“There was something in his tone that made John look at Sherlock curiously. Sherlock looked momentarily uncomfortable before pushing it away, and John thought that maybe there was more there than Sherlock’s detestation of foolish fantasy fictions. Certainly Sherlock had been unexpectedly feeling about the matter, when John had expected him to be mostly snide and dismissive.

“We’re not playing Father Christmas,” Sherlock retorted, belligerently. “We can buy presents without playing Father Christmas.”

“Fine,” said Mycroft, with the long-suffering air he frequently used when speaking with Sherlock (not that John blamed him). “I simply wanted to extend the invitation.” Mycroft stood and then paused and looked back at Sherlock. “I know that we have not traditionally spent Christmas together,” began Mycroft, stiffly, awkwardly.

“Because it’s an artificial contrivance,” Sherlock reminded him.

There was a moment before Mycroft replied, “Yes. Of course.” He glanced at John and said, “John,” in farewell as he walked out of the sitting room.

Oh, bugger, thought John. Because he had been looking forward to a lazy, casual Christmas.

He waited until he heard the street door close, and then he said to Sherlock, who had resumed
playing, “Maybe we should go.”

“Oh, stop it. He’s manipulating your sentimentality. He really could not care less whether or not we spend Christmas together.”

“Who’s he going to spend Christmas with, if not us?”

“I’m telling you, John, he doesn’t care about Christmas. This is about exerting power over us and making us go to his house.”

“Where he’ll be sitting, all alone, with his Christmas goose.”

“Don’t make him sound pathetic. Well. He is pathetic. But no more so than usual. Just because it’s some arbitrary day.”

“I don’t know,” said John, and looked at Oliver, who was clearly getting ready to roll off the sofa in his neverending series of Experiments to Test Papa’s Reflexes. John grabbed him and put him on the floor and said, “Maybe one of us should spend Christmas with his siblings. For Oliver’s sake.”

Sherlock stopped playing his violin. He tapped the bow against his head and then looked up at John. John knew he was debating whether or not to bring up Harry.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” John said, stepping over Oliver. “I just have a funny feeling I’m not going to be on speaking terms with her in a week’s time, and Christmas is a family holiday, and maybe we shouldn’t set a precedent for Oliver of not speaking to family members on Christmas.”

“Five minutes ago you were telling Mrs. Hudson you wanted a quiet day in. Now you want to go to Mycroft’s monstrosity of a house and have a goose.”

“I don’t actually want to go. I just think we should.”

“For what possible reason that makes any actual, logical sense?” Sherlock demanded.

“Because you don’t want him to grow up lonely,” John replied, and he knew it might have been a low blow, but it was also the truth. So far they’d done a very good job, he thought, of giving Oliver a large, extended family to make him feel loved. And John thought it would be terrible of him to savor his little family while leaving Mycroft all alone on Christmas Day. Mycroft who had clearly extended the invitation at great personal effort. Mycroft who clearly, whatever Sherlock wanted to believe, loved both Sherlock and Oliver and wanted to be involved in their lives. And Mycroft who had never done anything that John had seen to really deserve to be cut out of their lives.

Sherlock was silent for a moment, which John knew was an acknowledgment of his point. And then Sherlock said, “It would be a sad life for him if he isn’t lonely because of Mycroft.”

John looked at him and wondered if he should ask what the deal was with Father Christmas, because there was clearly some deal, but Sherlock started playing his violin again, and John thought that he would leave it for the time being. He glanced at Oliver, who was tugging interestedly on the rocking horse’s tail, and thought of his phone in the bedroom, of Mycroft at Christmas, of Harry at Christmas, of Harry drunk, of what Harry was doing at the moment, of whether she was okay, and should he—

John turned abruptly to Sherlock. “I’m going to go Christmas shopping,” he announced.

Sherlock stopped playing and lowered his violin and looked at him solemnly. He didn’t ask why. It was clear he knew exactly why John felt compelled to get out of the flat. He said, “Do you want me
to go with you?"

Sherlock Holmes, offering to come with him to do Christmas shopping. It was stupid, but John thought that that simple fact might be enough to make him cry, which just showed how fragile his emotional state was and why he needed the distraction of mad crowds and immensely frustrating present decisions.

“No,” he said, and leaned swiftly over Sherlock for a quick, fierce kiss.

“Oh,” Sherlock said, sounding a bit dazed, when John pulled back.

“But thank you for offering,” John said, and kissed him again.

“No,” Oliver remarked from the floor.

John pulled back again. “I think I’ll take Ollie.”

“You don’t have to, I’m perfectly capable of watching him.”

“I know that. I know. I…” He felt like he wanted the baby with him, although he wasn’t sure how to say that without sounding needy. “He’ll enjoy all the people. You know he likes that.”

“Yes, because he’s too young to have grown tired of all their tediousness.”

“Says the man who dies of boredom whenever we leave behind city crowds.”

“Take him,” said Sherlock, to change the subject. “You’re sure you don’t want me to come along?”

“Do you want to?”

Sherlock looked at him, obviously torn between lying because he felt like he ought to offer for John’s sake and telling the truth because he desperately didn’t want to go to Christmas shopping.

“No. We’ll be fine,” John assured him. “He’s going to help me pick out the best present for Molly, he’ll love it.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and went back to his violin.
Two hours later, John had made a decent dent in his Christmas shopping list and had succeeded in buying Oliver a ridiculous number of things. Oliver had spent most of the time ignoring what John was doing—which at least preserved Christmas surprise—in favor of babbling intelligently at everyone who came near him. As usual, everyone smiled at him and then at John and John felt himself relaxing into the familiarity of this role. This was his child, who trusted and loved him, and John thought that the solo shopping trip with him had been exactly what he’d needed to settle him back into his own skin, his own life. He was still sad about Harry, but he felt he had recaptured the sense of contentment he’d had before Harry had fallen off the wagon.

So he paused and walked around to the front of the pushchair and pulled Oliver up and into his arms, wanting a bit of a cuddle. Oliver complied, saying, “Papa,” and snuggling in against his shoulder, as if sensing that John had needed it.

“You’ve been a delightful companion,” John informed him. “Shall we go home to Daddy now?” He turned his head to look at Oliver, and realized that Oliver was not paying attention to him, that he was staring with wide-eyed fascination at something over John’s shoulder.

John turned his head. A Santa’s grotto.

John shifted, and Oliver never took his eyes off the Santa’s grotto, twisting to make sure he kept it in sight. So John grabbed the pushchair with its pile of bags and carried Oliver closer to the Santa’s grotto and for a little while just enjoyed the sight of Oliver staring in wonder. He watched the children clamber up onto Father Christmas’s knee. And then he said something John did not expect.

He pointed at Father Christmas and looked at John and said, “Please?”

Which was ridiculous, because he was a year and a day old and he didn’t actually know that he wanted to go sit on Father Christmas’s knee.

Although he did know when he wanted a certain toy, and that saying “Please” would get him that toy.

So maybe he did want to go sit on Father Christmas’s knee.

John blinked at him. “You want to go see Father Christmas?”

Oliver tore his gaze away from Father Christmas long enough to send John his patented I’m so woeful look that always got John to do whatever he wished. And he added to the end of it, again, “Please?”

“Oh, okay,” John said, looking back at Father Christmas. Sherlock didn’t want to play Father Christmas but that was different from letting Oliver have a look at him. It wasn’t like John was lying to him; there was a Father Christmas in the Santa’s grotto. And, really, John should have predicted that Oliver would be fascinated. Oliver was curious about everything, and he had never seen anything
like a Santa’s grotto, so this should have been expected.

John carried Oliver for a closer look, and waited in the queue. Oliver continued to be rapely fascinated by the operation of the Santa’s grotto, watching all the other children in wonder. When they got up to the front of the line, John said, firmly, “I don’t want a photo, he just wants a closer look at Father Christmas.”

The bored teenager chewed her gum loudly and said, “We’re still going to charge you for a photo.”

“Fine,” agreed John, impatiently, because now Oliver was squirming in his eagerness to go see Father Christmas, and shoved money across. Then he carried Oliver over to Father Christmas.

“Ho ho ho,” said Father Christmas, boominly, smiling at Oliver. He was really a good Father Christmas, twinkling eyes and everything. Oliver had gone still in John’s arms, staring at him wide-eyed. “Who have we here?”

“This is Oliver,” John said, and affably handed Oliver across.

And Oliver immediately started screaming his head off, as if John had sent him to be tortured and he hadn’t been begging to visit Father Christmas.

Father Christmas was trying to comfort him, but John snatched him back and held him close while he sobbed and said, hastily, “Sorry, sorry.”

“All the little ones are scared at first,” Father Christmas said, clearly not at all thrown by Oliver’s hysteria. “He’ll calm down.”

“Nope,” John said. “That’s okay. We’ll be okay. Thanks anyway. Bye now.” He hurried away, pushing the pushchair and trying to comfort the very unhappy Oliver. “Shh,” he said. “Shh. I’ve got you. I thought you wanted to go see him. But, I see now, you just wanted to see him, you didn’t want to be held by him. I see. I’m sorry I misunderstood. I’m sorry, okay?”

Oliver’s sobs were slowing, as he sniffled and clung to John and looked generally miserable.

John felt awful, because Oliver had been so curious and inquisitive and interested in Father Christmas, and John hadn’t meant to ruin it. He kissed the side of his head and said again, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, love. Okay now?”

“Papa,” gasped Oliver, and pressed his wet face into John’s neck.

John kissed the side of his head again and tried not to feel like a terrible failure. Except that he did. He had an alcoholic sister he couldn’t save and a baby who had trusted him and who he had pushed into a stranger’s arms and terrified. If you judged John Watson’s life by this day, he was doing an amazingly terrible job.

John took Oliver home and tried not to trudge up the stairs, because Sherlock would know how things had ended if he trudged up the stairs. Like Sherlock wasn’t always going to know, immediately, no matter how much John plastered smiles onto his face. As soon as he walked in, Sherlock demanded, “What happened? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” John told him, and handed him Oliver. Oliver had recovered and said, “Daddy,” with a smile but Sherlock took one look at him and said, “Why was he crying?”

John was carrying the bags into their bedroom. He said, “It was nothing. He’s fine.” Which was completely and utterly true. It was a tiny little blip on what had been a happy day.
So why did he feel like crawling under the duvet and sleeping for a million years?

He didn’t let himself crawl under the duvet, because that was a stupid and pointless thing to do, but he did let himself collapse backward onto the bed, just for a second, just to collect himself without Sherlock’s deducing eyes raking him.

Which just meant that Sherlock immediately walked into the bedroom and said, “I can’t deduce it and Oliver isn’t telling me so you have to tell me what happened yourself.”

John sighed and closed his eyes. “It was stupid, Sherlock. He wanted to see Father Christmas, so I took him to see Father Christmas. He just wanted to look at Father Christmas.”

“Of course,” Sherlock said. “Father Christmas is a ridiculous-looking invention, of course he would want a closer look.”

“I let Father Christmas hold him, because I misunderstood, and I made him unhappy.”

There was a moment of silence. “He’s fine. That’s very minor. You just alarmed him because it wasn’t what he expected. Also, he didn’t have his skull.”

John opened his eyes and looked at Sherlock, who was holding Oliver, who was looking down at him curiously. “He didn’t have his skull?”

“So he felt very alone. You gave him to Father Christmas all on his own. If he’d had his skull, he would have felt better.”

John regarded Sherlock and wondered if Sherlock knew that because Sherlock had spent years of his life clinging to the skull like a security blanket. Or had there been a literal security blanket? How long had Sherlock had the skull, anyway? John doubted he’d had it as a child, it seemed like exactly the sort of “abnormal” thing Sherlock’s parents would have discouraged.

“Come on,” Sherlock said, walking out of the bedroom. “We’ll go back with his skull. You’ll see.”

“Sherlock.” John sat up, feeling exhausted. “It isn’t necessary—”

“Yes, it is.” Sherlock, skull fetched and coat thrown over his free arm, walked back into the room.

“If he wants to get a closer look at Father Christmas, we’ll let him get a closer look at Father Christmas.”

“You don’t even want us to do the Father Christmas thing,” John pointed out.

“That has nothing to do with this. He’s curious, and I won’t discourage his curiosity. Come on.” Sherlock nodded his head toward the door impatiently.

“You can take him,” John said. “I—”

“No. You were enjoying yourself at the shopping trip. I can tell from how long you were gone and the number of bags you had with you when you came back. It was good for you to get out of the flat, and this silly thing with Father Christmas is weighing on you more than necessary, and now you’re going to sulk around the flat determined to believe that you inevitably let down the people you love, which is such idiotic rubbish that I’m not even going to entertain it by refuting it. I’m simply going to say that I won’t leave you here to sulk. Come on.”

“I wasn’t going to sulk,” John denied, even though he had definitely been going to sulk. “I was going to make myself a cup of tea.”
“And then sulk into it.”

“You know, you’re one to talk about sulking,” John pointed out, belligerently.

“Yes, I know, I’m the only one allowed to sulk in this flat. I simply will not abide such behavior on your part.”

John stared at him. “Do you know how you sound? You’re unbelievable.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed, simply.

John sighed and gave in and went with Sherlock. It was going to take more energy than he felt like investing to argue him out of it. Oliver looked excited to be going on an outing with both of them this time, and he talked to them endlessly on the way to the shops, while Sherlock said, at suitable intervals, “Really?” or “Yes,” or “I know,” or “Lovely.”

“What’s he saying?” John asked, eventually, amused despite himself by Sherlock’s apparent grasp of the conversation.

“He’s telling me what a brilliant day out he had with you,” responded Sherlock, blandly.

“You’re ridiculous,” said John, but he also thought that he almost smiled and he knew Sherlock saw that.

They waited in the queue at the Santa’s grotto, Sherlock making scathing observations about everyone around them, and Oliver listened closely and made affirmative little noises, as if to say, Yes, yes, that is what I thought about all of them, too, last time I was waiting in this queue.

The Father Christmas did not remember them, which John was a little offended by, because, yeah, sure, he saw lots of children, but Oliver was surely memorable. But Sherlock simply said, “Oliver, this is Father Christmas. He is a modern-day mythical figure who has developed from a bastardization of Christian religious ideas and ancient pagan rituals. It is currently en vogue for old, fat men to dress up in a costume of red velvet trimmed with cheap imitation fur and pretend to be the man who provides presents on Christmas Day, but the presents on Christmas Day will come from Papa and me.”

John glanced over his shoulder to make sure none of the children had been close enough to hear this explanation, but they seemed safe from furious parents. Father Christmas was another matter, however, as he frowned and looked ready to say very un-Father-Christmas-like things about being called an old, fat man. Then Sherlock thrust Oliver into Father Christmas’s arms, and Father Christmas sputtered but held him.

Oliver looked alarmed for a moment, his hands tight around his skull, and then he looked cautiously at Father Christmas. And then more interestingly, his features puckered up in Sherlockian concentration. If his hands weren’t clutching his skull, John would have expected them to be lifted in a steeple against his lips.

“Hello there, little fellow,” Father Christmas boomed at him, heartily.

Oliver frowned, not as if he was about to start crying but as if he simply disapproved of Father Christmas. He glanced over at Sherlock, with an expression of, Can you believe this moron?


Father Christmas glared at him. “My ho-ho-ho thing?”
Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Don’t be tedious, you know exactly what I’m talking about. Go on.”

“Ho ho ho,” Father Christmas spat out, obediently.

It was the least jolly ho-ho-ho John had ever heard but Oliver looked delighted at it, giggling and reaching one hand off of his skull to tug at Father Christmas’s beard experimentally.

“Real,” Sherlock confirmed. “It’s a quality Father Christmas.”

“Dead,” Oliver told Father Christmas, pleasantly.

“And what would you like for Christmas?” Father Christmas asked him.

“Nothing,” answered Sherlock, and smoothly picked Oliver back up. “We’ll be getting him anything he wants.” And then Sherlock, in a swirl of his dramatic coat, marched away.

“Thank you for your time,” John said to the bewildered-looking Father Christmas, and then hurried after him.

“There you are,” Sherlock said, when he had caught up, and handed Oliver over to him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t bring your skull with us before, love,” John told Oliver.

“Don’t blame yourself for that,” Sherlock remarked, mildly, as he kept walking. “You’re in a blame-yourself mood. You ought to delete every thought you have in your head today.”

John took hold of the lapel of Sherlock’s coat and tugged on it, hard, spinning Sherlock into a fierce kiss. Sherlock made an adorable oomph sound of surprise before kissing back.

John pulled away. “What about that thought?” he asked, huskily.

Sherlock licked his lips. “You can keep that thought.”

John grinned. “Thanks for the permission.”

“In fact, you can hold it for later,” Sherlock suggested.

John chuckled and let go of Sherlock’s coat. “Come on, Ollie. I am going to buy all of us hot chocolate in recognition of how we are the luckiest family in all of London.”

“Sentimental,” remarked Sherlock.

“Shut up,” said John, affectionately.

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John woke up to Sherlock curled around him, nose pressed into his neck. Sherlock’s nose was still cold, so he must have just got into bed, but John wasn’t going to complain about a cold nose against his skin when the nose was Sherlock’s and when John seldom got to wake up to the combination of bright sun and Sherlock curled up against him, still and content.

John smiled and stretched a little bit, and Sherlock leaned into him more heavily.

“Happy Christmas,” Sherlock mumbled against the skin of his collarbone, and followed it up with a wet kiss.
John smiled more and turned a little into the kisses, which were now making their way up his neck. “Happy Christmas,” he responded.

Sherlock nudged to get John completely onto his back so that he could pull himself up and over him.

“What’s all this?” John asked, amused, looking up at him.

“Lazy morning sex. Don’t you love lazy morning sex? I kept Oliver up until devastatingly late, he should sleep for an absurdly long time.”

“Which means we’ve got about twenty minutes, tops, given what you characterize as an absurdly long time to sleep.”

“Then let’s get on with it, shall we?”

“Doesn’t seem especially lazy.”

“You’re just going to lie there. That’s the ‘lazy’ part.”

“Does it mean I’ve been with you too long that I actually find this kind of romantic?” John mused.

Sherlock ignored him and bent his head and got on with it, wet and a bit messy, which was actually just the way John liked it. And even though John was convinced they didn’t have much time, Sherlock really did take his time, building it up slow and leisurely, so that when the climax crashed over him, it was a bit like just very comfortably going under, and John thought that he wanted to start every morning this way.

Sherlock rolled away from him and John stretched and smiled and said, “Did you just get me sex for Christmas?”

“No just any sex. Lazy morning sex.”

“You gave me sex for Christmas. You are the vainest git on this entire planet,” John told him.

Sherlock shrugged, looking uninterested in the accusation.

John rolled over on top of him and said, “I love you.”

Sherlock smiled, sunny and bright. “This is how one should spend Christmas.”

“Yes, with glad tidings of merry Christmas orgasms.”

Oliver cried over the baby monitor, and John glanced at it.

“I’ll get him,” he offered, and rolled off Sherlock, and then went hunting for things to make himself presentable and ducked into the bathroom before fetching Oliver, who was standing in his cot and beamed at his appearance and said, in delight, “Papa,” and lifted his arms up.

“Good morning,” John grinned at him, and gave into the impulse to smother him with kisses until he giggled. “Do you know what today is?” John asked him, conversationally, as he changed his nappy.

“Skull,” Oliver told him, wisely.

John looked at him in surprise. “Yes, I’ll be sure to bring your skull down with us. How long have you been saying that word? That’s a new one, isn’t it?”
“Skull,” said Oliver, and showed off by grabbing both of his feet.

John tucked him into his arm, leaving him in his sleepsuit, since it wasn’t dirty and John believed Christmas mornings should be spent in sleepsuits, and snatched Oliver’s skull off the room’s rocking chair before heading out of it. “Today is Christmas,” he told Oliver. “Remember Daddy told you all about Father Christmas? Well, today is Christmas Day.”

“Oh which,” Sherlock said, from where he was sprawled on the sofa, “we have decidedly not been visited by Father Christmas.”

Oliver babbled at Sherlock, as John dangled him over onto Sherlock’s chest. Sherlock greeted him with a brush of a kiss and said, “He’s telling us how awful Father Christmas was.”

“He says ‘skull’ now, did you know that?”

“That’s a new one,” said Sherlock.

“A Christmas word,” said John, handing Sherlock the baby book so he could record it on his way into the kitchen, where he made tea and toast for him and Sherlock and a bottle for Oliver. He brought everything back into the sitting room and said, “Let’s open presents.”

“Presents from Papa,” Sherlock announced for Oliver’s benefit, and sat on the floor with him.

John had bought Oliver a ridiculous amount of stuff, and they moved through it efficiently. Oliver seemed a bit more taken with the gift wrap than with any of the gifts but John was okay with that, and Oliver did seem to really like the anatomy puzzles, spending a lot of time after he’d opened them staring at the anatomically correct heart, at the bones of the hand, at the nerves entwined through the spinal cord.

“He’s going to be a doctor,” Sherlock remarked.

“Nah, he only cares about it for murder-solving purposes,” said John, trying not to flush pink with pleasure, because a part of him really wanted Oliver to want to be a doctor, wanted that evidence of John’s influence on him. And he knew it was selfish of him, but still. John reached for the next present and then paused in surprised. “This is for Oliver from you.”

“I did buy him Christmas presents, John. It’s just that you didn’t notice because you’d bought him so many.”

Which was true, but John had only done that because for some reason he’d assumed that Sherlock would leave all of the Christmas buying up to him.

“Go ahead,” Sherlock told him, “open it, it’s really a gift for you more than Oliver.”

John gave him a quizzical look but opened the gift, which turned out to be a box full of tiny baby jumpers.

“I thought that, every once in a while, dressing him in a terrible jumper wouldn’t do him much harm,” said Sherlock.

John laughed. “You are ridiculous.”

“I made sure the jumpers weren’t quite as hideous as you would have preferred, and yet hideous enough that I thought they would appeal to you.”
“My taste in jumpers really isn’t as bad as you like to pretend. What do you think, Ollie? Want to pick out a new jumper to wear to Uncle Mycroft’s today?” John held up a selection of them.

Oliver chewed on a puzzle piece representing a piece of ribcage and considered the jumpers John was holding up.

“When did you buy these?” John asked Sherlock.

“I have access to the Internet, John. And you don’t notice anything. Now, are you going to give me the present you bought me that you think I don’t know about?”

John scowled at him but got up and went and retrieved the present from its hiding place under the sink and carried it out to Sherlock.

“You’re actually pretty bloody difficult to buy for, you know,” he remarked, handing Sherlock the present.

“You didn’t need to buy me anything.”

“Well, if I’d known we were just giving each other—” John leaned over and put his hands briefly over Oliver’s ears—“blow jobs for Christmas, I wouldn’t have bothered.”

“Don’t act as if you didn’t love that,” said Sherlock, mildly, opening the present, “and, anyway, please be accurate, it was lazy morning sex.” Sherlock had by now opened the present and was regarding it curiously.

“It’s a 3-D puzzle ball,” said John. “They are supposed to be all the rage right now.”

“Well, I’ll solve this immediately,” said Sherlock. “Obviously.”

“You haven’t solved it yet?” asked John, mildly. “I’d already solved it by now.”

Sherlock looked up at him, narrow-eyed. “You’re lying,” he said.

John smiled and pulled out the one remaining present, which was decently heavy and unfamiliar to John. “Another one of yours?” he asked, because it had no tag on it.

“What?” Sherlock tore his attention away from the puzzle ball. “Oh. Yes. For Ollie.” He set the puzzle ball aside. “I’m going to solve that immediately just as soon as Oliver opens this.”

“Of course you are,” said John, indulgently, and pulled the wrapping paper off to reveal a microscope. And not a child’s microscope, either. A really nice one. One that had clearly cost a pretty penny. One that was meant for a professional, frankly. “Sherlock,” said John, and looked at him.

“What? He’ll need one sooner or later.”

Oliver regarded the photograph of the microscope on the box and reached out and touched it and said, very clearly, “Spear,” and then, “Mint.”

Sherlock looked delighted. “Yes, that’s it, for experiments.”

“Spearmint,” said Oliver, again, pleased with himself, and chewed a bit more on the puzzle piece.

“And now he says experiment?” said John.
“Let’s get you all set up with your new microscope.” Sherlock stood, sweeping Oliver into one arm and the microscope into the other, and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Do not think that I’m letting you two get so carried away with experimenting that we miss dinner at your brother’s!” John called.

He wasn’t surprised when he got no response, just the low murmur of Sherlock and Oliver interacting in the kitchen.

John sprawled underneath the Christmas tree and looked at the detritus of the morning all around him and thought that he had never really had a nicer Christmas.

He sipped his tea and steadfastly did not think of Harry.
Chapter 36

John dressed Oliver in one of the jumpers Sherlock had bought for him and gathered the presents he’d bought Mycroft. Mycroft was even more difficult to buy for than Sherlock was, which was saying something. At least John knew what Sherlock liked. He had no idea what Mycroft liked, other than being unnecessarily byzantine in communicating with others. He had asked Sherlock, and Sherlock had said, blankly, “Why would you want to get Mycroft something for Christmas? You’re not related to him,” and John said, “First, we’re married now, so I am related to him, a bit. And second, I’m getting it for you to give to him,” and Sherlock said, “Oh, my God, it’s bad enough you’re making me have dinner with him, I’m not also exchanging Christmas presents with him,” as if John had suggested that Mycroft ought to move in with them or something equally heinous.

“Sherlock,” John said to him, as he walked into the sitting room with his arm full of presents. Oliver crawled over to him in greeting. Sherlock was sprawled on the sofa, frowning at the puzzle ball. “I’ve got it to level 37 but there is no logic to what this sodding ball is doing,” Sherlock complained.

“How many levels are there?” asked John, dropping the presents onto his chair. “138.”

“Got a way to go, haven’t you?”

Sherlock glared at him. “I’m making excellent progress. There is no way a normal human being could have reached level 37 so quickly.”


Sherlock stared at him for a moment. “You’re serious,” he realized. “Brilliant deduction. Of course I’m serious. Go. Hurry up, I don’t want to be any later than we have to be.”

Sherlock was not moving. Sherlock stayed sprawled on the sofa, staring at him in comical amounts of shock. John thought of how frequently he tried to surprise Sherlock, and how seldom he succeeded, and now Sherlock was acting as if he’d just pulled off the biggest surprise of his life, and John had no idea what it was.

“What?” John asked, and looked down at what he was wearing. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You’re serious,” Sherlock repeated.

John blinked. Because Sherlock never repeated himself. “What are you even talking about right now?”

“You really think we’re going to Mycroft’s?”

“Um,” replied John. “I don’t think it, I know it. And I’ve been telling you it for days. And don’t even pretend that you deleted it, because I know you didn’t.”

“I didn’t think you were serious. I thought you were just telling me we were going to Mycroft’s so that when you told me on Christmas Day that we weren’t going to Mycroft’s, you could pass it off as
“a Christmas present.”

John folded his arms and regarded him. “Well, you certainly read *that* wrong.”

Sherlock frowned. “But you gave me this puzzle! Why would you give me a puzzle and then make me go somewhere before I could solve it?”

Which was actually a fair point and John should have thought that through. “You can take it with you to Mycroft’s.” John thought this was really a good idea. It would keep Sherlock occupied and out of trouble. It was undeniably like being married to a toddler, sometimes.

Sherlock’s frown turned into a full-fledged scowl. “I can’t take it to Mycroft’s, he’ll solve it immediately just to show off.”

“Fine. Leave it, then. It’ll be here when we get back.”

Sherlock rolled off the couch as slowly as possible, dragging himself into standing, and then he walked over and collapsed onto John’s shoulder. “How much do you love me?” he asked.

John laughed and kissed his head. “A great deal, and you know it, and you also know this isn’t going to work. Go and get dressed.”

“Why do I have to get dressed? I could just go like this.” Sherlock straightened, sending John a bright smile. “It’s a *compromise.*”

And it was, which was a bit annoying. John said, “Fine. But you’re putting shoes on, because it’s December, and I’m not dealing with you getting pneumonia again.”

“That was only because Lestrade pushed me into—”

“Go,” said John, and kissed him quickly so that it sounded less harsh.

Sherlock rolled his eyes and made his melodramatic way out of the sitting room, proclaiming to Oliver, “Your father is the world’s *most unreasonable man.*”

Oliver looked at John.

“You don’t believe that for a second, do you, Ollie?” John asked him.

Oliver gave him the equivalent of a shrug and crawled over to the sofa and pulled himself up to standing and succeeded in gaining the puzzle ball Sherlock had left there. Then he sat on the floor with it and looked at it with interest.

“There are apparently 138 levels on that thing,” John told him. “I expect you to get up to at least 100 before your father puts his shoes on.”

“Dead,” said Oliver, and poked at the ball.

Sherlock came back in and made an exclamation at seeing Oliver with the puzzle ball. Oliver held it out to him, looking pleased, and said, “Dada.”

“Don’t push me back a—Oh,” said Sherlock, as he retrieved the ball from Oliver.

“‘Oh’ what?”

“Now I’m on level 38.” Sherlock frowned at Oliver.
“He advanced you a level?”

“Skull skull skull,” recited Oliver, as he crawled around the sitting room in search of it.

“Okay, let’s go.” John picked up Oliver and the skull he had been newly reunited with and struggled Oliver into his coat. “Can you grab the presents?”

“What? Why?”

John glanced at Sherlock, who was staring at the presents. “Sherlock, don’t take this the wrong way, but are you feeling okay?”

Sherlock frowned at him briefly. “I’m fine.”

John actually did walk over and brush the back of his hand over Sherlock’s forehead, as if he expected him to be burning up. Sherlock ducked away impatiently. “It’s just that you don’t usually ask questions like that.”

“The presents can’t possibly be for Mycroft.”

John sighed. “Come on,” he said.

“Why would you buy presents for Mycroft? I told you not to!”

“Sherlock,” John said, patiently, as he walked down the stairs with Oliver in his arms. “Let’s go.”

“Wait. I think I do feel terrible. Maybe we should stay home.”

“Too late, you missed your chance on that one.” John opened the door.

“Damn it,” he heard Sherlock mutter behind him, before stomping his way down the stairs.

“Dada,” Oliver said.

“Yes, yes, he’s coming,” John assured him, and smiled at the black car that was idling by their door. “Look, Mycroft sent us an escort, isn’t that lovely of him?”

“Oh, yes, that’s Mycroft,” grumbled Sherlock, “all full of Christmas cheer.”

“One hour,” John promised him. “And then we’ll come home and you can work on your puzzle ball.”

“Solve my puzzle ball, John, I’m going to solve my puzzle ball.”

“Yes, sorry, silly me,” said John, and followed him into the car.

Sherlock went into full-blown sulk mode during the drive to Mycroft’s, and John considered why he was doing this in the first place and thought he should have just ignored Mycroft’s pathetic plea and who said you had to spend Christmas with family and Harry hadn’t even called him but then he again he hadn’t called Harry, either, and never mind, it was a good thing they were getting out of the flat, John decided, just in time for them to arrive at Mycroft’s house.

John had never been to Mycroft’s house before. Mycroft preferred to kidnap him off to other places. It was large and imposing in a ridiculously overbearing way, and it was exactly what John would have expected.
Sherlock was the one who unstrapped Oliver from the car seat Mycroft had provided, telling him, “This is Uncle Mycroft’s house. It is a terrible place and you should avoid it at all costs.”

“Sherlock,” sighed John.

“The only reason we are here now is because Papa feels bad for Uncle Mycroft because Papa does not fully appreciate that Uncle Mycroft is manipulating Papa.” Sherlock continued.

“Sherlock, stop it,” said John, although he said it without heat because it wasn’t worth the argument. Frankly, he’d got Sherlock out of the flat and to Mycroft’s and he couldn’t have hoped for more than that.

John ducked out of the car, holding the presents, and Sherlock followed with Oliver, who clutched his skull and babbled with joy at being on an outing. John rang the doorbell, sure that it probably sounded a gong somewhere in the house, and after a moment Mycroft swung the door open.

John had been half-expecting a butler, so he was a little surprised to see Mycroft, but he flickered a smile at him and said, “Merry Christmas, Mycroft.”

Mycroft looked actually astonished to see them, which made John momentarily wonder if they’d got the date wrong and it wasn’t actually Christmas.

Mycroft looked past him, to Sherlock and Oliver.

“I am here under protest,” Sherlock announced, sullenly.

“Client,” Oliver greeted him, happily.

Mycroft turned back to John. “You…came.”

“Of course we came. Didn’t you invite us?”

“Yes, but…I didn’t think you’d get him out of the flat.” Mycroft must have been genuinely shocked to have let something like that slip.

Sherlock smirked and stepped into the house. “Rookie mistake, Mycroft: underestimating John.”

And then a puppy started yapping from somewhere inside the house. John looked up in surprise, because Mycroft had never struck him as the puppy type.

Sherlock agreed, clearly, because Sherlock said, “Do you have a dog?”

A puppy bounded into view, a black Lab trying to grow into its flailing legs. John heard Oliver suck in a little breath as it came galloping down the hallway, and John looked at him in concern in case he was terrified.

But Oliver looked enchanted. He gazed down at the puppy, who looked back up at him and wagged his tail and barked, and Oliver exclaimed, in wonder, “Dada.”

“It’s a dog, Ollie,” Sherlock told him. “And I have no idea where it came from, it’s certainly not Mycroft’s.”

“It’s, er, mine,” inserted a voice, sounding awkward.

John and Sherlock both looked up from the dog to Greg Lestrade, standing in Mycroft’s hallway, and John felt his jaw drop open.
“You have a dog?” said Sherlock.

As if that was the most shocking thing about Greg Lestrade being at his brother’s house for Christmas. John stared at Sherlock.

“Apparently,” said Lestrade, fidgeting nervously and rubbing the back of his neck. “Now I do. As of this Christmas.” Lestrade gave Mycroft a sheepish little smile.

John decided to stare at Lestrade instead.

Sherlock rolled his eyes and said, “Enough. No more.”

“Please?” begged Oliver, squirming about in his desire to get down on the ground with the dog.

“Not on the tile,” Sherlock told him, and set off confidently down the hallway, because clearly he knew the layout of Mycroft’s house.

John blinked and tried to get his bearings.

“Shall I take those, John?” asked Mycroft, smoothly.

“What?” said John, and then realized he was still clutching the presents. “Oh. Yes. Thank you.”

Mycroft took the presents and turned to walk down the hallway. Lestrade looked as if he was about to follow but John lunged forward and grabbed his arm.

“Not so fast,” John hissed. “What the hell.”

“I have no idea,” Lestrade hissed back to him. “It’s all very…sudden.”

“What is all very sudden?”

“All of it.”

“Lestrade!” Sherlock shouted from down the hallway. “Come and control your dog, I won’t have him harming Oliver!”

“We are going out for so many pints,” John promised him, darkly, as he made his escape.

Then John slid out of his coat and left it on the coatrack by the door and followed the voices to what was clearly a library. There was a large Christmas tree by the window, decked out in dark red ribbons and ornaments, very tasteful and understated and not at all like the blinking colored fairy lights John had stuck on their tree. Oliver didn’t seem nearly as obsessed with Mycroft’s tree as he was with their tree at home, but that made a bit of sense, because they didn’t have a dog to distract him. Sherlock was sitting cross-legged on the floor, Oliver guarded in his lap, while the dog bounced around and barked at Oliver and Oliver clapped his hands in glee and giggled.

Sherlock watched the dog warily. “It isn’t very well-behaved, is it?”

“Well, pets take time to train. Look how long it took John to get you under control,” responded Lestrade, affably.

Sherlock glared first at Lestrade and then at John.

“Mulled wine, John?” Mycroft asked him, pleasantly.
“Oh, my God, yes,” said John.

“Shall we open presents before the goose?” asked Mycroft.

John wanted to make a joke about hoping that Mycroft didn’t get them a puppy, not because he had anything against dogs but because he didn’t think he could handle a dog in their life at the moment, but he was scared Mycroft really had got them a puppy and would then be offended by the joke.

So John took a large gulp of his mulled wine and watched as Mycroft sat and opened the presents he’d brought him. Oliver got Uncle Mycroft a tie, and John and Sherlock got Mycroft gloves.

“He shouldn’t have put my name on the package,” sniffed Sherlock.

Lestrade was trying to hold the puppy still, because Oliver had decided to start crawling, and John was watching him reach for the ribbon wrapped around Mycroft’s tree, which looked like it might be a disaster.

“Thank you, John,” Mycroft said, ignoring Sherlock.

John, circling around to tug Oliver back from the Christmas tree, said, harried, “Yes, well, happy Christmas.”

Oliver cried his displeasure, which made the dog bark in response.

“Here,” said Mycroft, handing Sherlock a fairly flat package. “This should keep Oliver busy.”

Sherlock took it and tore the giftwrap off.

John stared down at the gift and, after a moment, said, “You bought Oliver…a laptop.”

“Would you rather he break yours?” asked Mycroft, mildly.

“No, he doesn’t need to be playing with laptops, he’s a year old.”

“Nonsense,” Sherlock said. “He loves laptops. This is the best present Mycroft has ever bought in his life.” Sherlock set the laptop on the floor.

Oliver stopped crying and his eyes lit up with what was obvious delight and he crawled over to it and immediately started smashing his hands over the keys.

“Christ,” mumbled John, and wondered how he had married into this insanity.

“For you, Sherlock,” said Mycroft, handing Sherlock a large box.

Sherlock frowned darkly and muttered deprecations against Mycroft and tugged open the top of the box and pulled out a light gray suit.

John looked at it, and then looked at it more closely.

“Wait a second,” he said. “That’s my wedding suit.”

“It is indeed,” Mycroft confirmed. “I had it mended.”

“And then gave it to Sherlock for Christmas?”

“Well, the suit was always really a gift for him, wasn’t it?” asked Mycroft, blandly.
John couldn’t deny that was true. But... “Hang on, that was in the back of the wardrobe.”

“Yes,” agreed Mycroft. “It was.”

“How did you...Never mind.” John decided he didn’t want to think about Mycroft slipping into their flat and rifling through their things. He would prefer to pretend that Sherlock had given the suit to Mycroft. Although that clearly had not happened.

“And for you, John.”

John’s box was considerably smaller than Sherlock’s had been. It was even smaller than Oliver’s.

“Not a suit or a laptop, then,” remarked John, as he opened it.

What it was was a frame, probably an antique from how heavy and ornate it was, and inside the frame was one of the photographs Molly had taken on Oliver’s birthday. John, perched on the arm of his chair and smiling into the camera. One of his hands was visible, but he knew the other one was resting on the back of Sherlock’s neck, tricking the corners of Sherlock’s mouth to tip up into what was really a nice smile, sweet and a bit shy. Oliver on Sherlock’s lap was not smiling at all but he was looking straight at the camera, his eyes ocean-blue and wide, his bow mouth slightly parted. He looked a little startled that the photographer had had the audacity to catch him on film, and also much wiser and haughtier than anyone else in the photograph. It was such a perfect photograph that John just stared at it for longer than he thought he should have, and then when he realized how long he had been quiet, he realized that he also couldn’t quite talk and cleared his throat.

“Thank you,” he said, and looked up at Mycroft, who looked pleased at his reaction. “Thank you. It’s lovely.” John paused. “Should I ask how you got it off of Molly’s mobile?”

“I think the goose is ready,” said Mycroft.

***

Mycroft’s dining room was very grand but they sat all clustered around one end of the large table, with candles burning in a candelabra in the middle of them, and it seemed very cozy. Mycroft had to run into the kitchen to grab extra place settings, as the table had just been set for two, which made John feel a bit like an intruder even though he’d been invited. He was amazed that Mycroft really had seemed to assume that they would just not show up.

The goose was delicious and John would have been content to eat something that wasn’t takeaway and enjoy it in silence except that Lestrade said, “So, Ollie, was Father Christmas good to you?”

Oliver was sitting on Sherlock’s lap, while Sherlock pushed the food around on his plate disinterestedly. Oliver was also uninterested in eating any of the food John had brought for him, which didn’t surprise John, as Oliver was simply not much of an eater and would only eat when the mood was upon him.

Sherlock said, immediately, “Don’t be ridiculous, he didn’t get any presents from Father Christmas.”

“Oh.” Lestrade looked uncomfortable. Clearly he had thought that his question was a safe topic. “So, no presents in your house, then?”

“Obviously we got him presents,” complained Sherlock. “But we got him presents. Not some fictional imbecile with reindeer.”

“Okay then.” Lestrade, evidently deciding that it was safer to talk to John instead of Sherlock, said,
“So what did you get for Christmas, John?”

The only thing John had got for Christmas was X-rated, John thought. “Um,” he said. “The picture frame.”

Lestrade looked amused. “Yes, I know, I saw that. Didn’t your husband get you anything devastatingly romantic?”

“Oh, like a puppy?” said John, seizing the opportunity to change the subject.

“I got him lazy, morning sex,” announced Sherlock, as if everyone had needed to know that. “John likes lazy, morning sex and he doesn’t get much of it because Oliver doesn’t sleep enough.”

John knew his ears were pink. He looked at Sherlock and said, “Yes. Thank you. That’s enough.”

Sherlock looked innocent. Oliver reached out and picked up a piece of goose from Sherlock’s plate and looked at it in disgust.

There was the sound of something crashing from the library.

Lestrade looked alarmed and said, “Oh, no, the puppy!”

Sherlock perked up at the sound of a catastrophe occurring and leaped up to follow Lestrade out of the room to investigate.

John looked at Mycroft, who sipped his wine nonchalantly.

“Aren’t you going to go see what happened?”

“Someone will sort it,” said Mycroft, sounding unconcerned, and then looked at John. He said, very gravely, “Thank you.”

John cocked his head and considered what a disaster dinner had been so far. “For?”

“Getting him to come here.” Mycroft really did sound amazed over that accomplishment. “He really will do anything for you.”

“Mycroft, it’s Christmas. You invited us and you’re family and you even cooked us a goose. Well, you didn’t cook the goose, but—Of course we came.” John felt a little guilty, honestly, because he hadn’t really wanted to come, but it was clear that it had meant a lot to Mycroft, so John was happy that he’d insisted upon it.

“Sherlock doesn’t like Christmas. He doesn’t like the fuss.”

“I’ve noticed,” remarked John, wryly, and then, after a second, when it occurred to him, “Hey, what’s the story with him and Father Christmas?”

“He hasn’t told you?”

“I haven’t asked,” John admitted.

“But you know there’s a story?”

“He’s…odd when it comes to Father Christmas. I didn’t expect him to embrace the idea but he’s unusually passionate about it for something so silly.”
Mycroft looked at him for a moment. “There was a nanny, when Sherlock was very young. Five maybe? Definitely not more than six. Sherlock was not…prone to obedience as a child.”

It was a delicate turn of phrase, and John smiled, because he could imagine that was an understatement.

“I was home for the Christmas holidays,” Mycroft continued, “Christmas was just around the corner, and Sherlock was being a terror, and the nanny, in a fit of anger, told Sherlock that, if he wasn’t good, Father Christmas wouldn’t come. We were not a household who talked about Father Christmas. The idea transfixed Sherlock. I didn’t realize it, not until later, but he got it in his head that possibly he should ask Father Christmas for things, things that he’d wanted. He pestered the nanny with questions about how you went about getting such things from Father Christmas, and the nanny was an idiot who didn’t realize the danger and told him to write Father Christmas a letter, which Sherlock did. And then Sherlock asked me to post it. I was young myself and I knew there was no such thing as a Father Christmas but I didn’t see any harm in going along with it. I…underestimated Sherlock’s ability to…place blind faith in things. I stuffed the letter into the book I was reading and I never thought of it again. And Christmas came and went and Mother and Father gave us each the very practical presents that was their wont. Of course, there was nothing from Father Christmas. And I had…forgotten that Sherlock had been expecting Father Christmas to come. But then he asked me, that night, what he’d done incorrectly, so that he could fix it for the next year, and I was so astonished, because he was such a clever little boy, and I just told him that of course there was no Father Christmas, it was all a story.”

John felt dread, because he could see how this story was going to end.

Mycroft paused, sipped his wine, said, “I will never forget the look on his face when I said it. It wasn’t just that he was disappointed, he was devastated. He cried himself to sleep that night. And I felt terrible about it, although if Sherlock were to tell you this story he would tell you that I didn’t care. The next Christmas, I bought him a present and pretended it was from Father Christmas and Sherlock got offended that I was treating him like an idiot.”

John was silent for a moment. He looked at his wine and thought of Sherlock, insistent that Oliver know that the presents had come from them. Because the point hadn’t been for him that there had been no Father Christmas, the point had been for him that there had been no one, no one to care enough to ask a little boy what frivolous thing he might have wanted for Christmas. John wanted to make every Christmas even more magical now, for Sherlock and for Oliver, on behalf of the heartbroken little boy he couldn’t fix it for and could only love in adult-form and hope to move past it.

John said, “What did he ask for? In the letter to Father Christmas.”

Mycroft took a deep breath and another sip of wine. “A pirate ship,” he said. “And a microscope.”

John thought of Oliver’s microscope sitting on their kitchen table and allowed himself a moment to close his eyes so that the emotion wouldn’t totally tip him over.

Mycroft put his wine down definitively, as if to say that sharing time was over, and turned to John. “About your sister.”

John blinked and straightened defensively. “I don’t want to—”

“I offered to send her to rehab and she accepted.”

John stared at him. “She just got out of rehab.”
“She obviously needed another stint,” replied Mycroft, unflinchingly, and John was reminded that Mycroft had a lot of experience dealing with beloved addicts.

John regarded Mycroft and didn’t know what to say. Thank you? Or stop interfering? John supposed this was how Sherlock felt every day of his life.

John settled for, “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Of course I did. We’ve traded siblings, you and I.”

That seemed to make perfect sense to Mycroft, who said it so matter-of-factly, but John had no idea what to make of it. “Sorry?”

Mycroft looked at him, looking slightly surprised that he didn’t see how obvious this was, and John thought the Holmeses should really get used to him being a step behind them. “I no longer have to worry about my sibling, chiefly because you worry about him for me. So I shall likewise worry about your sibling for you.”

John realized that this was Mycroft saying to him, We are family now. And they had been the equivalent of family for a very long time, since long before John had formally become his brother-in-law. John figured that once someone had seen you at the point Mycroft had seen John at after Sherlock had flung himself off a building, then probably you were some version of family from that point on. But Mycroft vowing to take care of John’s sister just because she was John’s sister struck him a bit dumb with emotion. He stared at Mycroft, unsure what to say in response.

Which of course was when another crash sounded from down the hallway.

“We should check on the safety and well-being of the other occupants of this house,” remarked Mycroft, and stood.
They left Lestrade with his puppy at Mycroft’s once Sherlock started whining and John’s other baby grew fussy as well. John, on his way out the door, said to Lestrade, “Pints. Definitely.”

Lestrade had the grace to look a bit abashed when he nodded.

“Thank you so much for coming,” Mycroft told John, very formally. “It was lovely to spend Christmas together.”

“Don’t think we’re going to make a habit of it now,” called Sherlock, from where he was standing by the car.

John ignored him. “Merry Christmas,” he said. “Thank you for the gifts and the goose was delicious.”

“It was terrible,” called Sherlock.

John rolled his eyes and walked over to the car. “Could you behave for thirty more seconds?”

“No,” Sherlock replied, and ducked into the car to get Oliver situated in his car seat. “I’ve behaved myself astonishingly well all day, Mycroft will get entirely the wrong idea.”

John didn’t even know what that wrong idea could possibly be. “Well,” he said. “Thank you.” He paused, then said, “It’s good for Oliver to have a Christmas like that, to understand just how many people would lay down their lives for him. And if you’re going to pretend that Mycroft wouldn’t, you’re incredibly wrong.”

Sherlock said nothing but looked irritated, which John knew was an acknowledgment that he’d been right.

Sherlock gave the buckle of the car seat one final tug. Oliver, loosely holding his skull, looked up at him with sleepy, heavy eyes, and Sherlock gave him a smile that John knew was meant to be quick and furtive before kissing the tip of his nose. John piled himself into the car and pretended not to notice that Sherlock was not sulking as actively as he wanted John to think.

John closed the door and Sherlock nestled directly up against him, face in his neck, settling into a cuddle.

“Did you know about Lestrade and your brother?”

Sherlock groaned, a sound of truly epic indignation. “Must we talk about such things? I have been so good, you should be rewarding me. I never even remarked upon your terrible Christmas jumper.”

John paused. “You remarked upon it just now.”


Another pause. “What’s wrong with this jumper?” John actually quite liked the jumper. He thought it festive.

“John,” said Sherlock, too appalled to explain any further.

John sighed and let Sherlock be quiet up against him. It was really rather nice. Oliver was asleep
before they’d even turned out of Mycroft’s street, and John wondered if he was going to have two
sleeping Sherlock Holmeses on his hands by the time he got home.

He didn’t. When the car pulled to a stop in front of Baker Street, Sherlock straightened away from
him and stretched.

“Could you take him up and put him in his cot?” John asked him, nodding toward Oliver. “I’ve got
to check in on Mrs. Hudson’s flat.”

Sherlock looked at him. “Check in on Mrs. Hudson’s flat?”

John affected his best look of innocence. “Yes. I told her I would.”

“Well, go on,” John urged, eager now to see his reaction. “Open them.”

Sherlock dropped to the floor next to the boxes and pulled the first one over to him and opened it
with a brisk tearing of the paper. And then he stared at the box.

“John,” he said, his voice low and amazed and delighted.

“Twelve dead guinea pigs,” affirmed John. “Actually, twelve biological specimens of every type I
could find on the Internet. For experiments. I thought you could freeze them until you needed them.”

Sherlock was in the sitting room when John walked in with his tower of boxes. He looked only very
mildly surprised.

John put the boxes down on the sitting room floor and grinned at him. “Merry Christmas,” he said.

Sherlock continued to regard the boxes. “You had these hidden in Mrs. Hudson’s flat.”

“Yes.” John was suddenly gleeful. “You had no idea, did you?”

“You already got me a puzzle ball.”

Sherlock, John chided. “Did you really think that was all I was going to get you for Christmas?”

“Not until you suddenly announced the necessity of going to Mrs. Hudson’s flat just now.”

“Yes.” John was suddenly gleeful. “You had no idea, did you?”

“Not until you suddenly announced the necessity of going to Mrs. Hudson’s flat just now.”

“Well, go on,” John urged, eager now to see his reaction. “Open them.”

Sherlock looked up at him, and John was honestly surprised by how shocked he looked. “You hate
having these things in the freezer,” he said, astonished.
John had a sudden flash of Sherlock’s parents making that snide comment about Sherlock finding proper places for experimentation. John told him, “I’ve tried life without dead guinea pigs in the freezer. It turns out I didn’t like it very much.”

Sherlock stood and walked over to him and gave him one of those embraces he sometimes gave him when he basically collapsed onto him, as if what he really wanted more than anything else was to just tumble into John and be absorbed by him. John caught him the way he always caught him.

“You need to go into the kitchen,” Sherlock mumbled into John’s neck, which John supposed was Sherlock’s way of saying thank you.

“Okay,” John agreed, amused. “In need of a cup of tea, are you?”

Sherlock didn’t answer.

John shoved him gently away, forcing Sherlock to unpeel himself from around John’s body, and then walked into the kitchen.

And stopped dead.

Because the kitchen had been rearranged, the table pushed into a different configuration, in order to make enough room for a second fridge to be placed in the corner. John stared at the brand new fridge and told himself that he wasn’t losing his mind, they had definitely only had one fridge that morning.

John turned to go back into the sitting room, only to find Sherlock in the kitchen doorway, arms crossed, leaning against the doorjamb, looking very pleased with himself and also at the same time shy, an achievement only Sherlock, bundle of contradictions that he was, could have accomplished.

“Sherlock,” John said, although he wasn’t sure what he wanted to say next.

“Open it,” Sherlock told him.

John held his breath when he did so, because he wasn’t sure what he’d find in there. He was braced for a whole row of severed heads to be facing him. What was facing him was…carrots. Apples. Eggs. Tomatoes. Orange juice. Butter. Cheese. A large slab of ham that had no evidence of any experiments being performed on it. An equally large slab of bacon that looked similarly pristine. And milk.

John turned his head and stared at Sherlock, who looked as delighted as a little boy. “You bought milk,” John said, because it was the only thing he could seem to focus on. He had thought he would be dead and buried before Sherlock would ever deem it necessary to buy milk.

“Did you really think I’d got you sex for Christmas?” Sherlock smirked at him.

John didn’t even care that Sherlock was being smug, because Sherlock deserved to be smug for this. He closed the fridge door dazedly and looked back at Sherlock. “The sulk about going to Mycroft’s, that was all for show, you needed me out of the flat.”

“If I hadn’t sulked about it, you’d have been suspicious.”

John had to admit that that probably would have been true. “How did you even do this?”

Sherlock’s smirk widened into a genuine smile. “I love it when you ask me that question.”

And John knew he did. John reached out suddenly and pulled Sherlock up against him, surprising an
“oof” out of him, and then backed him up against the kitchen counter. “You bought milk,” John told him, and then kissed the life out of him.

“If I’d known milk was going to do it for you,” Sherlock gasped, when John turned his attention to his neck, “I’d’ve saved myself the trouble of the fridge.’

John laughed and then turned Sherlock to push him up against the fridge. “But look at how useful it’s proving,” he purred at him, as he dropped to his knees. “And I think I owe you, don’t I?” Sherlock was still wearing his pajamas, and John didn’t think he was still in them for ease of access for John, but John appreciated the ease of access all the same.

“That…was a gift,” managed Sherlock.

John pulled off and looked up at Sherlock through his lashes. “Does that get a different color-coding in your sex spreadsheet?”

Sherlock opened and closed his mouth several times before saying, feebly, “There’s no sex spreadsheet.”

“You should think twice about lying to me when my teeth are in their present position,” remarked John.

“It’s just for science,” Sherlock defended himself, in a rush.

John smiled and shook his head, because he really didn’t care, and said, “You are far, far too coherent right now,” and went about righting that fact.

And Sherlock gasped and tugged and mumbled things that couldn’t be comprehended and came and then finally slid to the floor, back against the new fridge, and tipped his head back.

“For science,” John said, amused, and kissed his neck and settled against the fridge with him.

“The whole point of this fridge was that it was going to be sanitary,” Sherlock complained.

“Oh, shut up, we didn’t do anything to the inside of the fridge,” John pointed out, “and that’s where the food’s going.”

Sherlock didn’t protest, letting his head fall to John’s shoulder. John listened to him breathe and thought of the fridge humming behind them, with milk. All the times he had complained about lack of milk in the flat, and Sherlock had never once responded, but Sherlock had listened and remembered and Sherlock had bought him milk for Christmas. Yes, there was more than milk, there was the gesture of the additional fridge to begin with, but he had taken the trouble to somehow arrange to have it stocked with food, milk prominently featured.

John thought of the little boy who’d cried himself to sleep because of how alone he’d felt, the little boy who’d wanted a microscope and a pirate ship, and turned his head to rest his lips in Sherlock’s messy hair—probably never combed that day. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“Mmm,” murmured Sherlock. “I knew you’d like it.”

John wasn’t talking about the fridge. Not entirely. He wanted to say what he really meant. Thank you for being mine. He wanted to say it desperately but his heart got caught in his throat, choking him, and he was scared if he opened his mouth he might burst into tears or something equally ridiculous.

He wanted to say, It doesn’t matter that there’s no Father Christmas, I’ll give you anything and
everything you want, which he knew was the impulse in Sherlock being so determined that Oliver
know exactly where the presents came from, that Oliver know that there was no mythical creature
who needed to be turned to in such a circumstance, but just Daddy and Papa, who would always be
there. But he was no more capable of saying that, either.

And then Sherlock said, “You should ring your sister.”

John tensed. “What?”

“You heard me. It’s Christmas. And you believe in all that family togetherness…stuff at Christmas.”

John knew Sherlock had been about to choose a more derogatory word, had thought of Oliver
sleeping upstairs, had shied away from it. And still he heard himself say, “Ah. Should I expect future
Christmases to be Oliver and me begging for a moment of your precious time?” As soon as he said it,
he wanted it back. He had just been thinking of Sherlock feeling ignored on Christmas, why would
he then accuse Sherlock of doing the same thing?

Sherlock didn’t flinch but he drew away from John, out of all contact with him, and John hated that,
wanted to immediately apologize and pull him back, because Sherlock warm and heavy against him
was comforting and familiar and John hated every moment when he didn’t have that.

“I didn’t—” said John, scrambling to get the words back.

Sherlock interrupted him. “I didn’t realize it was overstepping my bounds to suggest such a course of
action to you,” he remarked, coldly, in that strangely formal phrasing he reverted to when he was
deply hurt. “Forgive me if I thought that the entire afternoon of dubious fraternal bonding you just
attempted to orchestrate indicated that possibly a single sentence of opinion on my behalf was
allowed.”

“Sherlock—” John began, as Sherlock drew himself up and pulled himself back together with all the
dignity he could muster before marching out of the kitchen. Damn it, thought John, and hurried to his
feet, chasing after him. He had to wend his way around thawing guinea pig bodies to do it.

“Sherlock—”

Sherlock had his violin out. He didn’t even reward John with a glare before he closed his eyes
stubbornly and scratched a violent note that made John wince.

“Hey.” John reached for Sherlock’s hands. Sherlock jerked away but didn’t play another note. He
opened his eyes and glowered at John. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

Sherlock frowned.

“I got defensive,” John said, “and I lashed out, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry. This is why I go for a walk
when I lose my temper, because otherwise I say stupid, stupid things. I’m so sorry. Can you delete
it?”

Sherlock, after a moment, put his violin and bow down. John, relieved, sat back a bit. But Sherlock
bit his lower lip and looked out the window and said, “I don’t know what else I could possibly do to
prove to you that I am completely and utterly dedicated to this.”

John stared at him. “You don’t have to prove that to me. I don’t doubt it.”

Sherlock looked at him, his eyes sharp. “You think you don’t. But your very first instinct, upon
falling into defensive position, was to accuse me of someday losing interest.”
“Oh, my God,” said John, desperately, leaning forward again and covering Sherlock’s hands with his own again, “I want to take that back. Please let me take that back. Forget I said it, please. I didn’t mean it, I didn’t mean to imply anything, it’s a sore subject and I was angry with you for bringing it up, even though you had every right to bring it up, and oh, my God, I am so sorry, please—”

“Stop,” said Sherlock, on a little sigh. “I don’t want you to grovel. I knew you wanted it back as soon as you said it.”

“Because I didn’t mean it. You’re very clever, you know that.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said.

John didn’t believe him. John thought he was saying it just to end the conversation, just to make John feel better, just to get John off the topic. And John was horrified to consider that maybe Sherlock was a little bit right, that maybe lurking in his subconscious was the fear that Sherlock would grow bored of the domesticity and wander away, because really, the thought that Sherlock might leave was never far from John Watson’s subconscious.

John took a deep breath. “I don’t know that I can shut that off,” he admitted.

Sherlock looked at him from underneath the dark curls tumbling poetically onto his forehead. He looked slightly curious under his resignation.

“There was a time when you left me,” John said, phrasing it carefully so as not to cause a fight over this. “There was a time in my life when there was…no longer you. It’s my first instinct when I lash out because it’s the biggest fear I have, going back to that, and I don’t think I can help that, Sherlock. I don’t think I can turn that off. Not quite yet. Losing you went deeper in me, caused more than just a psychosomatic limp. I’m working on it, but I can’t fix it as easily.”

Sherlock studied him closely, then he nodded, once, a nod both of acceptance of what John was saying and also of dismissal of the entire subject.

John hesitated, unsure if they were okay, if Sherlock’s acceptance of the truth of what he was saying also equalled an acceptance that it was fine with him that John felt that way. “Sherlock,” he said.

Sherlock took a deep breath, then nodded again.

“Talk to me,” John said, finally, feeling a little bit frustrated, but he tried to make sure he said it gently.

Sherlock looked at their hands. “I forget, sometimes, that there was a time when we were apart. I’ve tried as hard as I can to delete it. You don’t work that way, and most of the time I realize that, but sometimes I’m startled by it. You…startle me. Which has always been a special John Watson talent.”

John smiled, because he thought this was good, that Sherlock sounded as alright with the whole thing as John could have expected. “In good ways and bad ways,” said John.

“No,” said Sherlock, still looking at their hands. “Always good ways.” He paused. “I never worry about being without you. So it…I may take the fear more personally than you ever intend it.”

Sherlock finally looked up at him, met his eyes, said, very starkly and very honestly, “You should know. That you can stop worrying, too. Because I will let nothing separate us. I would bring you back from death itself.”

He said it in a low voice, with such depth of conviction, that John almost believed him, sucked in his breath and held it and then, when he thought a bit of his emotion had passed, said, “Like Orpheus.
Only with a happier ending.”

“Who?” said Sherlock, blankly.

John smiled and kissed Sherlock’s eyelids, both of them, feeling them flutter underneath his lips. Then he sat back and said, “She could also ring me.”

Sherlock had no problem following the sudden jump of the conversation. “She won’t. She hurt you, and disappointed you, and she’ll think that you won’t want to be contacted by her. She’ll wait for you to make the first move.”

John didn’t want to think that Sherlock knew these things from first-hand experience. John sighed and looked at their Christmas tree, haphazard compared to Mycroft’s and so beloved by the little boy upstairs. Who existed only because at one point Mycroft reached out to Sherlock, and kept doing it, until Sherlock had been tugged through the valley, and what was John doing?

And how had Mycroft kept doing it? How had he continued to have the energy? Not only to get Sherlock through it but to now be starting back at the beginning with Harry.


“I deduced. Nobody told me. But Mycroft likes that sort of thing. He likes swooping in to be the hero. So I suspected he’d done it, and I left you alone at the table so that he could tell you he’d done it. So. You therefore know how incredibly simple it would be for you to contact her.”

John considered. “You think it’s a good idea?”

“I think it’s a terrible idea.”

John blinked in surprise. “Well, then.”

“Well, I’m not going to lie to you about it. I’m furious with her. But that is because I am not a nice person, and you are a nice person, and you are not furious and just sad, so you ought to ring her and not ruin what was otherwise a surprisingly lovely Christmas.”

Despite everything, thought John, not just dinner at Mycroft’s but also the little altercation-slash-discussion they’d just had, Sherlock thought it had been a lovely Christmas. John was relieved. He leaned forward and kissed him. “You’re a nice person,” he said.

Sherlock made a scoffing noise.

“You bought me milk,” John reminded him.

“Your fixation on the milk is slightly unhealthy,” Sherlock told him.

John smiled and kissed him again and then went to ring Harry. And the conversation was mostly a sobbing apology on Harry’s side and a stilted Merry Christmas on John’s side, but John was glad he’d done it. And when he was done he went out into the sitting room to tell Sherlock to come to bed and lay with him while he fell asleep, only to find Sherlock sprawled on the sofa, sound asleep, the puzzle ball on his chest.

So John moved the puzzle ball and crawled onto Sherlock’s chest and slept with him. Which was not the most comfortable arrangement, but was the most perfect one on that particular Christmas night.
“Bloody stupid sodding stupid stupid stupid thing,” said Sherlock, and threw the puzzle ball across
the room, where it hit the wall just under the bullet-riddled smiley face.

John had been watching Oliver, who had pulled himself to standing by use of the desk chair and had
been looking very determined. Oliver, upon the ball hitting the wall and then crashing to the floor,
dropped back down and crawled over to it, babbling happily about it. John looked over at Sherlock.

“That thing is impossible,” Sherlock accused, pacing around the sitting room and tearing his hands
into his hair. “You gave me an impossible puzzle.”

“Still haven’t solved it?”

“Level 101.”

“That’s good progress, Sherlock.”

Sherlock glared at him.

Oliver rolled the ball into the center of the room and then crawled after it in delight.

Sherlock looked at him and then lit up, as if he’d momentarily forgotten about his presence. “Ollie,”
he exclaimed, and immediately dropped to the floor. “Don’t you want to practice walking tonight?
Yes?”

“No,” said Oliver, and rolled the ball to Sherlock.

“Walking is so easy,” Sherlock informed him, earnestly. “Even Anderson learned how to walk.”

Oliver considered that, gazing up at Sherlock, and then giggled and went in pursuit of the ball. On all
fours.

Sherlock sighed and flopped onto his back on the floor. “This is a terrible New Year’s Eve.”

“And yet,” John pointed out, amused, “it’s been such a wonderful year.”

Sherlock was silent for a moment. “Yes,” he admitted, grudgingly.

John grinned and winked at Oliver, who rolled the ball away again and set off after it again. “What
can I do to distract you? Rummage about in your sock index?”

“Don’t you dare,” said Sherlock.

“You could go dissect something,” John suggested.

Sherlock made a sound of enormous disgust, as if he had never once dissected anything for fun. He
rolled onto his side and curled up into a tight ball of offended sulk. “Doesn’t anyone murder anyone
on New Year’s Eve?”

Oliver had pulled himself back up to standing by the desk chair again. John watched him. Oliver
looked in his direction and immediately sat back down on the floor, looking innocent.

John turned back to Sherlock. “You should study the incidences of different types of crime on
different holidays.”

“For what purpose?” asked Sherlock, miserably.

John kept his gaze fixed on Sherlock. Because, out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Oliver had pulled himself back up to standing, and he didn’t want to let on to Oliver that he was watching. “Well,” said John, concentrating very hard on keeping Oliver in his peripheral vision, “we would know in advance if a particular holiday is an especially dull one, so that I could prepare alternative activities.”

Sherlock huffed and curled himself into a tighter ball.

And Oliver took a step. Tentative and small, but a definite step. And then another one, before losing his balance and falling to his bottom with a solid thud. John turned to face him fully, and Oliver looked innocent and stuck his fingers in his mouth, and John thought of how very much like Sherlock Oliver was, practicing achievements in private so that he could be extra-impressive in front of others. It was both ridiculous and adorable. And, John thought, it seemed also to be a manifestation of Sherlock’s dread of being mocked, which Sherlock would never admit to, which Sherlock would tell John he didn’t care about. But John thought it interesting to see that Sherlock’s wariness in letting others see him as less than superhuman, as someone capable of making mistakes, was apparently genetically ingrained.

John said nothing about the steps. He thought that telling Sherlock he’d missed Oliver’s first steps would cause a deeper descent into sulkiness.

He said instead, “I have a fantastic idea.”

“Doubtful,” sniffed Sherlock.

“I absolutely adore you,” remarked John, as he stood and walked into the kitchen.

“I know!” Sherlock called after him.

And the thing was, thought John, as he retrieved Oliver’s microscope from where Sherlock had set it up next to his own, that it was absolutely true. His husband was a tight little ball of toddler tantrum on the sitting room floor, and he had seldom loved him more than that moment. He should never have stopped going to therapy, he clearly needed it.

John carried Oliver’s microscope into the sitting room and put it on the floor and sat next to it. “Here, Ollie,” he said.

Oliver had crawled his way over to his laptop and was doing a very good impression of Sherlock typing. Now he looked with interest at John and crawled over to him.

“Sherlock,” John said.

Sherlock grunted.

“Come and show Ollie how to use his microscope. I could do it but you know I’d be terrible at it and you’d just have to correct everything I say.”

After a moment, the ball of Sherlock rolled over to face John, sitting next to the microscope with Oliver in his lap.

“Dada,” Oliver said to him, sounding pleased that he was paying attention to him, and then beamed
Sherlock reluctantly uncoiled himself, propping himself up against the sofa. No one could resist Oliver when he looked at you like that. Sherlock held out his hand, and John put the microscope into it.

“I prepared sample slides for him,” Sherlock said, still with an edge of sulkiness.

“Are they in the kitchen?” John asked.

Sherlock nodded.

John transferred Oliver from lap to floor and got up and went into the kitchen, where there was indeed a stack of slides on the table. John took them out to the sitting room, where Oliver had crawled over to the end of the sofa opposite Sherlock and was now standing against it.

“You need to be on this side of the sofa in order to see through the microscope,” Sherlock told him. “You could walk here, if you so desired.”

Oliver glanced at the sofa. He was adept at walking while clinging to an object, and that was the route John expected him to take.

Oliver looked back at Sherlock, who held out a hand, which momentarily surprised John. Sherlock’s theory on teaching Oliver to walk did not usually involve helping hands. Oliver must have been surprised, too, but he seized one hand around Sherlock’s offered index finger and clung on for dear life, tottering the rest of the way over to Sherlock.

“See?” said Sherlock, and kissed the top of his head as he settled him into his lap. “Nothing to it.” Sherlock took the slides from John and said to him, “I’m convinced he knows very well how to walk and this is all a show.”

John thought of Oliver’s secret steps and thought that possibly Sherlock wasn’t far off. “Why are you so genetically predisposed to be sneaky?” John asked.

Sherlock opened his mouth, clearly to protest, and then shut it, aware that there was little way he could protest that Oliver was him in every respect.

John settled into his chair with a novel and listened as Sherlock explained the operation of the microscope.

“I thought that I would start you off easy, with everyday objects,” Sherlock explained to Oliver. “Here, you have to look through the eyepiece.”

John watched over the top of his novel, barely pretending to read it. Oliver looked game about the whole microscope thing, which was more of a side effect of Oliver’s natural curiosity than any overt interest in the microscope itself. He also looked like Sherlock had lost his mind when it came to the eyepiece.

“Babies generally aren’t very good at looking through small lenses like that,” John told him, as Oliver just stared at the lens rather than through it.

“Maybe babies aren’t,” Sherlock retorted, as if Oliver didn’t qualify in that category.

John decided against arguing that point, since Sherlock was still in Recent Sulk Recovery stage.
“Like this, Ollie.” Sherlock demonstrated.

Oliver, looking determined, copied. And, to John’s surprise, made a small exclamation as if he really was looking through the microscope.

Sherlock flashed him a look of triumph, then said to the baby, “That is one of Papa’s hairs.”

“Are you plucking hair from my head while I’m sleeping?” John asked.

“Relax, I used my own blood for the blood cell slide.”

“There’s a blood cell slide,” sighed John. “Of course.”

“My blood,” Sherlock told Oliver, switching the slides out for him.

“Maybe teach him colors while you’re at it?” John suggested.

“Boring.”

“Useful.”


Oliver didn’t look very interested in looking through the microscope anymore but he was hanging on Sherlock’s every word the way he usually did.

“What’s on that slide?” John asked.

“Sperm,” answered Sherlock.

“Sperm,” John repeated. “That qualified as an everyday object you thought you ought to put in a slide for Oliver?”

“What would you have used for everyday objects?”

“I don’t know. Banana?”

Even Oliver gave him a look that said, You are hopelessly dull.

“What sperm is it?” John asked.

“Honestly, John, do you think I’m collecting your sperm when you’re not paying attention?”

“I’d rather you be collecting my sperm than strangers’ sperm.”

Sherlock looked at Oliver and said, “Papa is the most ridiculous person I’ve ever met.”

Oliver still refused to say the word yes but he did nod in agreement.

“Now,” said Sherlock, switching slides again. “This is an interesting one, because here we can see my DNA. And yours.”

“And isn’t it lovely?” added John.

Sherlock smiled at the microscope. “It is rather handsome DNA, true.”

Oliver said, “Speriment,” and stuck his finger onto the eyepiece.
“Experiment,” Sherlock corrected him, patiently.

“So we’ve begun with the microscope. When do you think you’ll start giving him violin lessons?” asked John, indulgently.

“He doesn’t have to play the violin if he doesn’t want to.” Sherlock paused. “He doesn’t even have to like science if he doesn’t want to. What do you say, Ollie? Was it boring?” John heard Sherlock try to hide the thread of anxiety in his voice.

“Speriment,” Oliver said again, sounding quite happy.

“He loved it,” John assured Sherlock. “Just like he loves your violin. And he might love it because he’s genetically predisposed to it, or he might love it because it’s yours and he worships you. Either way.” John shrugged.

Oliver was squirming, so Sherlock let him go. He crawled over to his laptop and resumed typing on it. Sherlock tipped his head back against the sofa and said, “As far as I know, it doesn’t run in the family.”

John almost held his breath. Because how often did Sherlock start talking about his family? Never. “What doesn’t?”

“Musical talent. I took up the violin because I thought it might annoy my parents.”

“And they didn’t mind?”

“John. They didn’t notice.”

John looked into the fire in their fireplace. “I don’t think I was mean enough to your parents.”

“You were splendid to my parents.”

John looked back at Sherlock. “So Mycroft doesn’t play?”

“Can you imagine Mycroft playing a musical instrument?”

“I try not to let Mycroft take up too much space in my imagination.”

Sherlock smiled. “Wise man. He doesn’t play. I don’t even remember where I got the idea from. Oh. Yes, I do. A boy at school. There was a boy at school who played. Everyone made such a huge fuss over him. I was better than he was by the end of term.”

And no one had made a fuss, John thought. Sherlock didn’t have to say it; John knew. Stupid bloody idiots.

“I played the clarinet for a little while,” John said.

“I know,” said Sherlock. “You were terrible.”

“How do you know that? You’ve never heard me play.”

“That’s how I know you were terrible. If you’d been any good, you would have brought it up long before this.”

He had a point. “I’ll have you know, women go mad for a mention of the clarinet.”
“Men would go madder. It’s an obvious phallic symbol. Betraying your latent homosexuality.”

John paused. Because he’d never actually thought about it that way before.

“It wasn’t, John,” Sherlock said. “It’s just a musical instrument.”

“Right,” said John.

“That resembles a penis,” added Sherlock.

John pitched a pillow at his head, which Sherlock dodged, laughing. Then he stood and retrieved his violin and played by the window for a very long time. Oliver eventually crawled over and then up into John’s lap, yawning and rubbing at his eyes, and he fell asleep against John, skull in his lap drooping out of his hands. John held him against him, a warm precious bundle that he’d never have imagined the previous New Year’s Eve. And he had thought he was happy, the previous New Year’s Eve. He’d had Sherlock back, he’d forgiven him, they’d fallen into their routine again, and John’s heart had been so full of joy as the clock had struck midnight and Sherlock had been there, playing just as he was now; John had thought, last New Year’s Eve, that he would never be any happier than he had been then. He couldn’t believe how wrong he’d turned out to be about that.

Eventually John stood and carried Oliver up to his cot, arranging blanket and skull just as he knew Oliver liked them.

“Happy New Year, love,” he told him, and kissed his cheek, and Oliver, in his sleep, exhaled a little sigh of contentment.

John turned and walked downstairs, back into the enveloping warmth of Sherlock’s music. He glanced at the clock and went into the kitchen and took the champagne out of the brand new food fridge and popped the cork and poured out two teacups because Sherlock had used the flutes as flasks when all of his actual flasks had been dirty and, naturally, it hadn’t occurred to Sherlock to actually clean them.

Then he walked back into the sitting room. Sherlock lowered his violin. From the window came the sound of a clock chiming midnight.

“Happy New Year,” John said, and held out a teacup of champagne.

Sherlock put his violin down and accepted the teacup. “Happy New Year.”

“I’ve no idea what we’ll be doing next year at this time,” remarked John. “I’ve decided that, given you, I should stop trying to make predictions.”

Sherlock flickered a smile at him and tipped his teacup against his in a toast. And then he said, “If I’d known you had champagne in there, I would have commandeered some to put under the microscope for Ollie.”

“Of course you would have,” said John, and kissed him.

***

They had never made a fuss for Sherlock’s birthday. In fact, they had barely acknowledged it. That was because, John realized, he had never known quite what his role would have been in Sherlock’s birthday celebrations, so he had tried to follow Sherlock’s lead. And Sherlock had never seemed inclined to celebrate his birthday, so John had gone along with that.
He thought it was different now. Now he knew his role. It was, astonishingly enough, husband. And he thought he ought to do something for Sherlock’s birthday. Not a big party or anything, but something.

He woke on Sherlock’s birthday to Sherlock not in the bed, which would have been nice. He found him on the sofa, curled into a contortionist pose as he slept. John smiled at him and walked upstairs, finding Oliver awake and holding court to his skull and teddy bear and molecule of water. He smiled sunnily at John when he walked in and tossed the teddy bear out of the cot.

“Let’s not throw our friends from great heights,” John told him. “Not an impulse to encourage.”

“No,” said Oliver, and John decided to interpret that as agreement, as he lifted him out of his cot.

“Today is Daddy’s birthday,” John informed him. “Remember how you had a birthday a few weeks ago?”

“Babababa,” said Oliver, around the hand he’d decided to stick in his mouth.

“Don’t worry, I handled buying him a gift for you.”

“Nonono,” said Oliver, as if to say that he had not been worried in the least about this.

John pulled the gift out from underneath the pile of stuffed animals in the corner of Oliver’s room, which had been the best place he could think of for a hiding place, since Sherlock had started to sniff around the kitchen more. Then he went downstairs.

Sherlock was still sound asleep. John put Oliver down on the floor in the kitchen, where he crawled around babbling happily to himself, and John set about frying bacon and poaching eggs.

Which was when Sherlock came in and basically collapsed against his back.

John quirked an amused smile to the frying pan in front of him and said, “Good morning.”

Sherlock rubbed his nose against the back of John’s neck and grunted and then said, “What’s all this?”

“Happy birthday,” John replied, and then twisted a bit so he could see Sherlock’s face. “You should have come and slept in the bed.”

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep.” Sherlock looked disgruntled that he had.

“I would have woken you up so nicely, too. But you missed your chance.”

“I’m sure you’ll never suffer an impulse to wake me up nicely again.”

“Only rude awakenings from now on,” John agreed. “Throwing a bucket of cold water over your head, blaring feedback into your ear, snapping your fingers into a mousetrap—”

“You’ve given a large amount of thought to unpleasant ways to wake me up.”

John grinned at him. “Alarmed?”

“Impressed.”

“And a little bit turned on.” John pecked a kiss over his lips and then turned back to his bacon.
“Well, that’s a given,” said Sherlock, resting his chin on John’s shoulder.

“Dadadadadadada,” said Oliver, in an enthusiastic greeting, and used their legs to pull himself up to standing.

Sherlock unpeeled himself from John’s back to pick Oliver up and then clearly spotted the present on the table because he said, “What’s this?”

“If your deductive powers are failing you, you should probably just take the wrapping paper off,” remarked John, good-naturedly.

He heard the kitchen chair scrape away from the table and so he turned as Sherlock sat, Oliver on his lap, and pulled the gift over to him. John had sellotaped a card to the outside of the box, on which he’d written *Daddy*, and Sherlock looked at it for such a long time that John actually turned back to his bacon and eggs because he felt a little like he was intruding on what was apparently a very profound moment to Sherlock.

John turned back when he heard the sound of the wrapping paper being torn. Sherlock ripped it off without ceremony, so that he was very soon looking at the starters’ kit of microscope slides that John had bought for him.

“For the two of you to enjoy,” John explained.

Sherlock looked up at him and gave him one of those purely joyous Sherlockian smiles that John loved so much for how rare they had once been and how common they were becoming. “They’ll probably be a bit dull compared to what he and I have been studying.”

John smiled back, acknowledging that Sherlock had meant the insult as a thank you, in his usual way. “It’s good for him to get used to dealing with dullness without throwing a tantrum. Now. I’ve made all this food for you. Perhaps you’ll eat some of it?”

He had just placed the plate in front of Sherlock when Mycroft arrived, carrying a present that had been wrapped in plain maroon wrapping paper, tied with a matte black ribbon. John looked at the balloons and confetti on the wrapping paper he’d used for his present to Sherlock and wondered whether Mycroft didn’t live on a completely different planet, with only occasional trips to Earth.

“Happy birthday,” he said to Sherlock, and put the gift on the table.

Sherlock scowled. “You’re interrupting our breakfast.”

“I can see that.” Mycroft looked unconcerned by his timing.

“Can I get you something, Mycroft?” John asked, politely.

“No, thank you, John, although that’s very kind of you to offer.”

Mycroft stood just inside the kitchen doorway and watched Sherlock calmly. Sherlock shoveled food steadily into his mouth. Oliver sat on Sherlock’s lap, his hand in his mouth, and looked at Mycroft for several silent seconds, before taking his hand out of his mouth and saying, “Client.”

Mycroft frowned at him.

John nudged Mycroft out of his way so he could get to his seat at the table and said, “Was there something else you wanted?”
“I’d like Sherlock to open his gift so I can explain to you what it is.”

Sherlock glared. “As if we’re too stupid to figure out what it is?”

“No, as if it’s a tiny bit questionable legality-wise and I’d prefer to be here to explain it,” Mycroft retorted.

“You bought him something illegal?” said John, as Sherlock, clearly intrigued by the prospect of it, pounced on the gift and tore the sleek, stylish wrapping paper off of it.

“Not quite,” Mycroft replied, mildly.

John couldn’t tell what it was that Sherlock opened, although it seemed to be medical in nature. That was definitely a syringe that John could spot. Why would they need a syringe? Had Mycroft got Sherlock heroin for his birthday? John felt like he’d reached the point with Mycroft Holmes where literally nothing would surprise him anymore.

Sherlock didn’t say anything to help him out, either. Sherlock just stared.

“What is it?” John asked, finally.

“Oliver’s next set of vaccinations.” Sherlock looked up at Mycroft, looking assessing, like he thought the gift might come with a catch.

“I thought Dr. Watson could be so kind as to administer the vaccinations from the cozy confines of this flat,” explained Mycroft, and studied his umbrella closely.

John wanted to say it was unethical, but he couldn’t deny that really what he experienced was relief at the thought that they wouldn’t have to take Oliver to the surgery and deal with all of that, that John could just do himself from the safe and comforting surroundings of 221B.

Sherlock looked at John, a question in his eyes, and he knew he was asking if John was going to be steadfast in his belief that someone else should be handling these things.

“He’s a mystery government clone,” Mycroft pointed out, when John hesitated. “I’ll not have his check-ups take place at a local GP’s surgery.”

“You’d do a better job anyhow,” said Sherlock, and John marveled at the unusual occurrence of Sherlock and Mycroft taking the same side. “You know that Eliza Thompson was awful, she probably didn’t even inject him properly.”

John sighed, knowing when he was beaten, and looked at Mycroft. “I want you to fix his red book so we don’t get funny looks and so I don’t get accused of something shady and lose my medical license.”

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow at him, as if the request amused him.

Sherlock said, “As if Mycroft would ever allow anyone to threaten your medical license.” Which explained Mycroft’s reaction. “He’d have them killed,” Sherlock continued.

John looked from the vaccines to Oliver. What the hell. He looked at Mycroft. “Thank you. From all of us.”

“Well. Least I could do to keep him safe,” said Mycroft, eyes on Oliver, so John knew who the him was in the sentence. Then he turned to John. “I trust all is still planned for this afternoon?”
“Yes,” confirmed John. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, Sherlock sit up and look at him in intrigued surprise.

“Excellent. Detective Inspector Lestrade will meet you. Good morning, Oliver.” He inclined his chin very formally toward the baby.

Who mirrored the gesture in response, and then Mycroft was gone.

“What’s this afternoon?” Sherlock demanded as soon as the front door had closed.

“A surprise,” said John, firmly, standing to clear their plates.

“What sort of surprise?”

“A birthday surprise.”

“A birthday surprise involving Mycroft? It’s not a party, is it?”

John gave him a look. “Do you really think I know you so poorly?”

“Does the surprise involve Oliver?”

“I’m not playing Twenty Questions on this surprise.”

“Give me a hint. Tell me one thing.”

“Fine. For this surprise, you need to be dressed.”

There was a pause. “Not the least useful thing you could have told me, but not the most useful thing, either.”

“Considering that you didn’t even feel the need to be dressed for a trip to Buckingham Palace.”

“Exactly. What occasion involving you is also going to involve clothing?”

“I’m not telling you anything about it, Sherlock. I want you to be surprised.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” said Oliver, who clearly disagreed with what John was doing on his father’s behalf.

“Yes,” John replied. “Sherlock, get dressed. And dress warmly.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes, clearly trying to use that little hint to determine exactly what they were doing that afternoon. “Surprises are the worst,” Sherlock grumbled.

“Really?” said John, innocently. “I rather like them myself.”

Sherlock glared.
Chapter 39

Sherlock grumbled the entirety of the morning about the inappropriateness of surprises on his birthday, which was his special day. John ignored him and eventually Sherlock relented to his curiosity—as John had known he would—and took a shower. Oliver stood by the sofa, holding on with one hand and using the other to fling his decapitated head balls across the room and shouting, “Papa! Please!” for John to retrieve them for him because he was too lazy to retrieve them himself.

Sherlock emerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his hips and glowered balefully at John.

“That is the least seductive man-in-towel pose I have ever seen,” remarked John.

“Please!” shrieked Oliver, because John was taking too long getting his balls for him.

Are you doing it? Have you done it? John thought, and picked up the balls.

“How warmly do I need to dress?”

“I’m not giving you any more clues.”

“Well, if you’re intending us to be in a freezer, you should tell me, because that would affect how I dress.”

“Sherlock.” John gave him a look.

“Papa!” commanded Oliver, and pointed to his balls.

“Why would we ever spend time in a freezer?”

“We’ve done it before,” Sherlock reminded him.

John picked up Oliver’s balls. “Yes, but not willingly. I haven’t arranged for us to be kidnapped for your birthday.”

“Hmm,” mused Sherlock, as if he had learned important new information about the surprise.

“Did you think that was a possibility?” asked John, handing Oliver back his balls and saying, “Can we stop throwing these now?”

“No,” said Oliver, and threw one.

John sighed.

Sherlock said, “Most of the mistakes people make come from dismissing possibilities prematurely.”

“If we’re kidnapped today, it’s not something I’ve planned and we should take it seriously, okay? Dress as if you’re going outside, which is what we will be doing.”

“We’ll be outside the whole time?”

“Part of the time,” John hedged.

“Papa, pleeeeease,” wheedled Oliver.
Sherlock wandered into their bedroom, looking intrigued, then reappeared. “Is it a murder?”

John handed Oliver back his balls. “What?”

“Have you arranged for someone to be murdered?”

“Get dressed,” John told him.

Sherlock huffed over John’s unreasonableness but did indeed get dressed, and had just finished when Mrs. Hudson came upstairs.

“Happy birthday, dear,” Mrs. Hudson said to him, and kissed his cheek.

Sherlock consented to having his cheek kissed and then said, “Do you know what this surprise is John has planned?”

“No, he wouldn’t tell me. Just asked if I’d be willing to look after this little one here.” Mrs. Hudson beamed at Oliver and tickled his stomach and Oliver giggled and said, “Ma,” in greeting. “Ma” had become an all-purpose greeting for Oliver and women, used for both Mrs. Hudson and Molly. John didn’t know if it was an embodiment of the beginning sound of both of their names or Oliver picking up on some floating societal pressure that there should be someone referred to as “Ma” in his life. John didn’t know where such pressure might have come from but Oliver was clever and John put nothing past him.

“So Oliver’s staying here,” Sherlock concluded.

“Yup,” John affirmed. “We are going on an actual date, you and I, just the two of us. Planned and scheduled,” he amended, since generally it tended to be during a criminal investigation that he and Sherlock got alone-time, and that didn’t count for John (although he suspected it counted for Sherlock, because Sherlock could probably think of nothing more romantic than a couple of murders).

“Planned and scheduled?” said Sherlock, as John handed him his coat, as if such a thing was unthinkable, confirming John’s suspicion regarding what Sherlock found romantic.

“Cheers, Mrs. Hudson,” John told her. “And you, little fellow, you behave yourself.” He leaned down to give Oliver a kiss.

Oliver babbled at him wisely, using every sound in his repertoire in the process.

“Okay, then,” John agreed, fondly, and smoothed down his dark curls. “Come on,” he said to Sherlock.

Sherlock paused and picked Oliver up and said, “Make sure Mrs. Hudson doesn’t touch any of the experiments. She can read to you, that will keep you both occupied.”

“I can handle an afternoon with a baby, Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson assured him.

Sherlock handed Oliver over to Mrs. Hudson without comment on that assertion.

“Come on,” John said, and they walked down the stairs together and out onto the street, where one of Mycroft’s perpetual cars was idling.

“What could this surprise be that you needed Mycroft’s help for it?” Sherlock mused.

John said nothing, and the car glided into motion.
Sherlock leaned over and pushed the partition separating the driver down. “Where are we going?” he demanded.

The driver didn’t even turn his head. John half-wondered if he was deaf.

“Damn,” said Sherlock, and put the partition back up. “Mycroft would have his staff well-trained,” he complained.

“Can you just trust me?” asked John.

Sherlock stilled. After a moment, he said, “I do trust you. That’s not what this is about.”

“I know,” said John, because he did. “I wanted to do this for you. I think you’re going to enjoy it. I wanted to see your face. And you actually like surprises, you loved the surprise at Christmas.”

Sherlock considered. “That’s because I didn’t know the surprise was coming,” he decided.

“I’ll try to be better at the subterfuge next time,” John promised.

The drive was a long one, and Sherlock made an attempt not to fidget the entire time, which John did appreciate. But it was a bit of a poor attempt, and John almost gave the surprise away several times, but he thought if he gave the surprise away then Sherlock would be even more bouncy with excitement. John was trying to decide which version of Sherlock he preferred. And then, thankfully, they pulled up to their destination.

Sherlock was plastered to the window. “Docks,” he said. “Ships.”

The car, having been waved through security, kept driving, driving, driving, until they pulled up in front of a battered-looking yacht. It would have been an impressive-looking yacht, if it didn’t look as if it had been through a war. As it was, it had been painted a dull grey-blue that hadn’t quite taken, was peeling off and rusting in places. It was a yacht that had definitely seen better days.

“Here we are,” John said, pleasantly, and stepped out of the car.

Sherlock followed him, refusing to admit that he didn’t quite know why they were there.

“This is the S.S. Tranquil Seas,” John announced.

Sherlock looked quizzically from John to the ship. “Alright,” he agreed, slowly.

John smiled, relishing this moment of Sherlock having no idea what was happening. “The S.S. Tranquil Seas was a yacht belonging to one Rory Madison.”

Sherlock, sensing a story, watched him with interest and made a sound of encouragement.

“In the middle of a trip around the Cape of Good Hope—that’s the tip of Africa—”

“I know where that is,” Sherlock interrupted, impatiently.

“—this ship was commandeered. By pirates.”

Sherlock blinked. He looked back at the yacht.

“These pirates sailed it about for a while, a scourge of the seas, and murdered the crew, and Mrs. Madison. According to Mr. Madison. They spared him for ransom purposes. Again, according to Mr. Madison.”
“But there’s some doubt,” Sherlock concluded, studying the yacht.

“He claims the pirates eventually commandeered a better ship and abandoned him, drifting, through the ocean. Which was how he was found, communications cut off, engines disabled.”

“Sheer luck that someone came upon him and rescued him,” mused Sherlock.

“So he claims,” agreed John.

“Why don’t I know about this?”

“It’s been secret while the government investigates the claims.”

“How did you know about this?”

“I asked your brother if he had any particularly good puzzles at the moment. So. There you have it. It’s a crime scene and a pirate ship. Happy birthday.”

Sherlock looked at him, and his eyes were dazzling with adoration. “You are…” said Sherlock.

“Don’t mention it,” said John, and leaned up to give him a kiss.

Which was when Lestrade said, “Hello. Did you want to board the yacht, or would you like to snog some more?”

“Snog some more,” said John.

“Board the yacht,” said Sherlock, and pulled away.

John sighed with good humor, unsurprised by Sherlock’s choice, and turned to Lestrade. “Thanks for this.”

“Why is he here?” Sherlock demanded, bluntly.

“Because your brother couldn’t be here and you weren’t trusted not to steal the yacht entirely,” remarked John, dryly. “And I decided that it would be best to have a law enforcement presence who was used to suppressing his desire to throttle you.”

Sherlock seemed not to even bother to register all of that. He said, “So I can go on the yacht to investigate?”

“Go on,” Lestrade said, with a smile, and nodded toward it. “Any insight into what happened on the yacht would be appreciated.”

Sherlock took off like a shot, and John looked back at Lestrade, who was carrying a cup of coffee and bundled up in a coat. “ Seriously. Thanks again for this. I know it’s not how you’d prefer to spend an afternoon.”

Lestrade shrugged. “I’m growing used to ‘Holmes baby-sitter’ being part of my job title.”

“Speaking of,” said John. “You’ve been ignoring all of my texts about pints.”

“Not ignoring them.”

“Let’s have pints tomorrow at 7,” I said. You said, ‘Can you have Sherlock stop in to look at these suspects we’ve rounded up for the museum vandalism incidents?”’
Lestrade at least had the grace to look sheepish. “I didn’t know what to say. I still don’t. I knew what you’d ask me and the truth is I have no idea.”

“How did it happen?” John asked.

“I’m telling you, I don’t know. He can be very…”

As Lestrade searched for the word, John considered the word he might want to find. Forceful? Persuasive?

“Charming,” finished Lestrade, which was not at all what John had expected.

John regarded him in surprise. “You actually like him.”

Lestrade actually blushed. “He’s…yes. He’s very nice once you get to know him. It’s all for show, you know. Which you should understand, because that’s what you’ve been claiming about Sherlock for years.” Lestrade gave him a pointed look.

“Oh, I know,” said John. “I’m not going to throw stones. Really, I should think I would have been the first person you called. I am the least likely person to judge you for this. In fact, I’m the only person on the planet, probably, who knows exactly what you’re going through. We should be starting a support group, you and I, not dodging each other’s texts.”

“You have a point,” Lestrade acknowledged, after a moment. “I’m still just getting used to…”


“But you got over it?”

“After he faked his own death, came back from the dead, and adopted a child, yes. I got over it.”

There was a beat. “I’d rather not have to go through that chain of events.”

John grinned. “You’ll be fine. You’re better adjusted than I was to begin with. I didn’t even acknowledge anything was going on until after Oliver arrived on the scene and I realized that I was raising a child with my flatmate and I saw absolutely nothing untoward about that.”

Lestrade looked curious. “You really didn’t realize it until then?”

John shrugged. “As Sherlock would be the first to tell you, I’m an idiot.”

“John!” Sherlock shouted, leaning out over the railing to catch his attention.

“If you fall off that boat, I’m not jumping in after you,” John warned him.

“You fell into the Thames that time,” said Lestrade.

“You pushed me,” said Sherlock.

Lestrade looked at John, confused. “What’s he on about?”

“Ignore him,” John said, and then, to Sherlock, “What’s up?”

“You’re missing all the fun! Come and see!”
So John, smiling, went and saw.
John watched Sherlock crawl over every inch of the yacht. By the time he was finished, he had collected enough evidence to confirm Mr. Madison’s story, unlikely as it was.

Sherlock carried the high of the case into the car with him. He talked and talked and talked about it, the words spilling out of him, the color high in his cheeks and his eyes bright with excitement and enjoyment and eventually John couldn’t take it anymore and kissed him, swallowing the end of Sherlock’s sentence into his mouth.

“Mmmph,” finished Sherlock, eloquently, and pulled at John to deepen the kiss.

The thing about Sherlock on a high after a case and John being exposed to that high was that John had unbuckled his seatbelt and was straddling Sherlock’s lap and creating teasing friction between them before he realized he’d decided to do that.

“This is a…bad idea,” Sherlock mumbled into John’s mouth, even as his hands went to John’s hips to hold him in a particularly good place.

“Not from where I’m sitting,” John said, watching Sherlock’s eyes flutter closed with pleasure as he rocked against him.

Sherlock gasped, “Terrible idea.”

“Sod that,” decided John, clambering off of Sherlock and getting to the floor. “This idea’s already left the stable.”

“Ideas don’t leave stables,” Sherlock told him.

John rolled his eyes and unbuckled Sherlock’s seatbelt and undid Sherlock’s fly and said, “You need to shut up so that I can get you off in the back of your brother’s car.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” Sherlock panted at him, eyes wide.

“Other parts of your body are in favor of my current terrible decision-making,” remarked John, regarding one such part of Sherlock’s body with an almost critical eye.

“Hurry up,” hissed Sherlock, and nudged the small of John’s back with one of his feet.

“I thought you wanted to lecture me about my terrible decision-making.”

“I’ve learned not to try to stop you when you get a terrible thought in your head. You’re too stubborn.”

John smiled and leaned up and over Sherlock, so he could kiss under his jaw, passing a hand teasingly over Sherlock’s erection, with no purpose but to torture him. Sherlock squirmed underneath him, making an impatient and protesting sound.

John adored when Sherlock got impatient in bed. Because Sherlock was generally impatient about life, but so few people would have supposed that Sherlock would also get impatient about sex. Actually, John thought, with that little thrill he always got when he thought it, he was probably the only person to know it, the only person to ever get to see Sherlock like this.

John pressed his mouth up against Sherlock’s ears. “How much do you want me right now?”
Sherlock made a desperate sound and tried to arch up into John’s hand, scrambling to get purchase in the angle he was at.

“Tell me,” John murmured, and brushed his lips over Sherlock’s cheekbone, over to his mouth.

“John,” said Sherlock, uncertainly, his voice trembling with desire. Sometimes he used John’s name manipulatively, but just then John was aware that Sherlock was clinging to his name like a lifeline, the same way his hands were tight in John’s shirt, keeping him close.

“Tell me what you want,” John said, his voice rough, looking into Sherlock’s opal eyes, their pupils blown wide and frantic.

Sherlock licked his lips. “I want you to get on your knees and suck me.”

“And I want you to keep your eyes on the window while I do it,” John said. “I want you to see every single person we pass by who has no idea what we’re doing in this car.”

Sherlock made a noise, indecipherable, but nodded.

John kissed him, quickly, and then dropped to his knees without preamble to fulfill his side of the bargain. Sherlock arched to meet him and John pushed his hips back down to keep from choking and looked up at Sherlock through his eyelashes.

Sherlock was watching him.

John swiped upward with his tongue in one long lick and then said, “Eyes out the window, Sherlock.”

Sherlock obeyed, immediately, and John rewarded him. When he glanced up again, Sherlock’s eyes were closed.

“Tell me about the people we’re passing,” John commanded.

Sherlock managed to get his eyes open, looked at John blearily. “What?”

“Deductions. About the people we’re passing. Tell me.”

Sherlock blinked, slowly and heavily, and John knew—or suspected—that Sherlock’s fever-pitch thought processes had slowed down to a crawl, that John’s demand was pushing at a part of his brain that had shut down. And he wanted that, suddenly. Sherlock in the middle of deducing was close to high with pleasure. John wanted him assaulted with an orgasm at the same time that his deductive synapses were firing, he wanted to completely overwhelm him.

“You’re mad,” Sherlock said.

John sat fully back on his heels and lifted his eyebrows.

Sherlock looked out the window and said, clearly. “Late 30s but pretending to be much younger. Fears her husband is cheating on her with a uni student. Because her husband’s a professor, yes. Older than her. They met when they were—met when they were—”

John hummed encouragement, which made Sherlock throw his head back, sliding a bit on the seat. Then John pulled off again and prompted, “Met when they were?”

“Met when they were oh, my God, John, please just met when she was his student and he—and he —”
“More,” said John.

“I don’t know any more about her,” Sherlock said, desperately. “That’s all I got.”

“Pick someone else.”

Sherlock turned his head where it was leaning back against the seat, too far gone to even bother to lift it. “He’s buying—he’s going to bake—girl he wants to impress—wrong type of sugar—it’s the—it’s the—”

“Deductions,” John reminded him, pausing.

“She’s a gymnast,” gasped Sherlock, staring wide-eyed out the window. “Or used to be. Broke her ankle. She’ll never—She’ll never—”

“Never what?” said John, stuttering his rhythm, trying to ease Sherlock back.

“Never never,” Sherlock babbled at him.

“Come on,” John coaxed, using his hand now. “One more for me.”

“I can’t I can’t I can’t John please please…” Sherlock flailed, hands clutching at John’s hair, and John gave him what he wanted, and Sherlock shouted when he came.

John pushed away from him, listening to his heaving breaths and wondering if he’d ever been harder in his entire life. He pushed at his jeans, struggling in the confined space of the car, swearing at the constriction.

“Stop,” Sherlock said, his voice slow and syrupy. “You’ll make a mess. Switch places with me.”

“You can barely move,” John bit out, and managed to get a hand around himself.

“Don’t be so conceited,” said Sherlock, and then, after a moment, “Yes, okay, you’re right.”

John was too preoccupied to be amused by that admission.

One of Sherlock’s hands carded through his hair, and he said, “John.”

“Jesus Christ,” John muttered, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Get up here and I’ll at least help,” said Sherlock.

And because John really wanted Sherlock, John scrambled onto the seat with him. Sherlock pushed him, backing him right up against the door, before leaning his head down, and they didn’t fit like this, and John’s leg was cramping up where it was trapped against the seat, and it didn’t bloody matter, because when he came he saw stars, and that wasn’t just because he hit his head hard on the car window at the moment of climax.

“Sherlock,” John said, eventually, looking down at where Sherlock’s head was collapsed inconveniently on John’s stomach.

Sherlock grunted.

“We can’t stay like this. We don’t fit. My back is killing me and my leg is killing me and you’re taking up the whole seat.”
“Your doing,” Sherlock said, without sympathy.

John bucked underneath him, trying to dislodge him, and said, “Plus we’re not wearing seatbelts anymore.”

Sherlock started laughing. Sherlock laughed so hard that he curled away from John, doubling over in mirth. John was just relieved to be given space to move again. He straightened out his cramped leg gingerly and looked down at himself ruefully but there wasn’t much mess. Sherlock may have been lazy about it, but he hadn’t been messy about it.

John, getting himself back into order and putting his seatbelt back on, looked at Sherlock, who had by now rolled himself completely off the seat and onto the floor, he was laughing so hard.

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” said John, caught between being annoyed that Sherlock would be laughing so hard in what should have been an afterglow and being charmed that Sherlock was so delighted.

“You,” Sherlock gasped. “You are the funniest human being I have ever met. I adore you.”

Sherlock was seldom so effusive. John felt himself blush pink. “Thank you,” he said, not quite knowing how else to respond.

Sherlock eventually stopped laughing. He stayed sprawled on the floor, long-limbed and not at all decent. Utterly debauched, in fact. He looked like the most delectable dish at a buffet, and John didn’t understand how he’d ended up with something so incredibly gorgeous in his life. Sherlock looked up at him and smiled as if he didn’t know how John could ever have thought his life would end up otherwise.

“Are you going to get up off the floor now?” John asked, politely, after a moment.

Sherlock rose up to his knees and then leaned over John. “You gave me a pirate ship for my birthday. You ordered me to deduce my way to an orgasm in the backseat of my brother’s car. And then you worried about seatbelts. I think you were put on this planet exactly for me.”

John’s breath caught in his throat. He put his hands in Sherlock’s wrecked hair and said, “I know I was.”

Sherlock smiled, pleased, and kissed him, before settling back into the seat next to him and getting himself presentable. Then he looked at John, mischief in his expression.

John got instantly wary.

“Do you think the back of this car is sound-proof?” Sherlock asked, and looked pointedly at the partition between them and the driver.

John had completely forgotten about the driver. Which was a stupid thing to have forgotten, because he had never really forgotten that they were in the backseat of a moving car. But he had forgotten. And they had not been quiet. “Oh, Christ,” he said.

“I’m hoping it’s not.” Sherlock sounded gleeful.

“Bugger,” said John.

“That would have been even more impressive, if you’d managed to pull that off.”
“Your brother is never going to lend me another car again.”

“Precisely.”

“You were very loud,” John accused.

“You were trying to overload my brain and don’t even pretend you weren’t,” Sherlock countered.

John tried to focus on the fact that he’d done it with witnesses, but he couldn’t help his curiosity.

“Did I do it?”

“Mmm,” said Sherlock, “I’d love to see an MRI of my brain during that. If you were going to do that in public, you could at least have had me strapped up to some machines or something. All of that data going to waste.”

“Such a shame,” said John.

“I’ve got to think what I could do to overload your brain. Let you bring a cup of tea to bed?”

“Ha ha, you’re hilarious,” John told him.

“Maybe I’ll wear one of your jumpers.”

“You’d stretch it out.”

“Side benefit.”

“Twat,” John told him.

“Get your swearing out now, before we get home to Oliver,” yawned Sherlock, then let himself drop over onto John’s lap. “I’m just going to take a nap,” he said, sleepily.

John looked down at him and combed his hand through Sherlock’s thicket of hair and felt so overwhelmed by love that he couldn’t breathe for a moment and had to push all of it back down before it went spilling out of him and drowned them both. But how had he gotten so lucky?

He drew his finger along the shell of Sherlock’s ear and murmured, “Happy birthday, love.”

“Mmm,” said Sherlock, and pressed his face more firmly into him. “Thank you.”

***

John woke Sherlock when they got to Baker Street. Sherlock sat up and stretched and yawned and watched John try to comb his hair down with amusement.

“You’re not going to look like anything other than a man who just had sex in a car,” Sherlock said, amused.

“You could help. Is my hair sticking up?”

“No more than usual.”

“Thank you. Wait. Does my hair usually stick up?”

Sherlock opened his car door and said, “Come along, John.”

John sighed and followed him, still combing at his hair. Sherlock’s hair was a mess but he’d been
running around on the ship all day, maybe they could call that the wind. Maybe that explanation would suffice for John’s hair, too.

John walked into the sitting room to Mrs. Hudson saying, “Did you have a nice time?”

“A spectacular time,” Sherlock answered, beaming, and then, to Oliver, who was standing next to Sherlock’s chair, “Hello, Ollie. Walk over here and say hello.”

Oliver looked at him.

“What was the surprise?” asked Mrs. Hudson.

“It was a pirate ship,” said Sherlock, still talking to Oliver. “Come over here and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Oliver regarded him evenly.

Sherlock sighed and turned back to Mrs. Hudson. “It was a pirate ship on which there had been a murder.”

“How lovely, John,” Mrs. Hudson said to him, without a trace of irony.

Only in their house, thought John, with a smile.

“Young brother had a cake delivered,” Mrs. Hudson told Sherlock.

Sherlock rolled his eyes.

John said, “How was the baby?”

“He was an angel,” Mrs. Hudson said. “As usual.”

“Doesn’t take after you at all, that child,” John remarked to Sherlock, mildly.

Sherlock grinned at him.

“Will you have some cake, Mrs. Hudson?” asked John.

“It did look delicious. I forgot to bring up the card I got for Sherlock, let me just run down and get it.”

“The cake is probably a monstrosity,” Sherlock grumbled, turning to go into the kitchen, no doubt to seek it and complain about it.

John was walking Mrs. Hudson to the staircase, intending to meet Sherlock in the kitchen afterwards, when Oliver said, firmly, “Dada.” Plainly miffed at not being the object of anyone’s attention.

John glanced over his shoulder, watching Sherlock hang back from the kitchen to turn in Oliver’s direction.

And then Oliver walked to him.

As if he’d been walking all along.

No hesitation, no wobbling. If, at the end, he sped up a bit in order to reach his goal before his balance ran out, well, there was no shame in that, since he basically crossed the room in one go.
John had frozen in the doorway, half-turned back. Sherlock was frozen, too. He looked down at the baby now clinging to his legs in shock.

Oliver lifted his arms in obvious entreaty.

“You sneak,” Sherlock said, and then picked him up and hugged him.

Oliver gave a squawk of protest at how closely he was being held.

“How long have you been able to do that?” Sherlock demanded, holding him up over his head. “You little genius.” Sherlock pulled him back in for another cuddle and looked up at John. “John, did you see?”

John smiled. “I saw. He’s been waiting for your birthday.” John walked over to the pair of them and kissed Oliver’s head. “Cunning like a fox. Well done, little one.”

Oliver sighed heavily over the amount of fuss they were making, clearly disappointed by how easily impressed they were.

“Now we’re going to work on talking in complete sentences,” announced Sherlock. “Hold him whilst I put this in his baby book.”

John found himself with an armful of Oliver, who was frowning in Sherlock’s direction.

“A baby’s work is never done,” John told him.

“No,” said Oliver, decisively.

***

John woke the next morning to Oliver crying. In reaction, John sat up in bed. Which was when he realized that Sherlock was in bed with him, curled on his side away from him. Sherlock twitched at the baby crying and made a grumbling sound of annoyance.

John looked down at him in surprise. If Sherlock was in bed with him when morning came—which happened very seldom—then Sherlock was usually plastered right up against him, because the point to bed if you were Sherlock was its proximity to John and not the need for actual sleep. And Sherlock never protested when Oliver cried because Sherlock shared Oliver’s lack of need for sleep.

John said, experimentally, “I’ll get him.”

“Mmm,” said Sherlock, into his pillow. “Thank you.”

John frowned and leaned over to brush a kiss over Sherlock’s cheek, surreptitiously taking the opportunity to check the temperature of his skin. Slightly warm, but he was also sleeping and covered with a duvet. Certainly nothing too alarming. It was just very out of character for Sherlock to sleep his way through Oliver’s morning.

Contemplating, John went upstairs and greeted Oliver and got him ready for his day. Then he brought him downstairs and peeked his head into the bedroom. Sherlock was apparently still sleeping, breaths deep and even. They didn’t sound heavy or labored at all. They sounded perfectly normal.

John decided he was overreacting. For all he knew, Sherlock had been up all night working on an experiment. Then again, he thought, as he made Oliver breakfast and Oliver showed off his walking
skills by piling a variety of toys onto Sherlock’s seat at the kitchen table. Sherlock had napped in the

car the day before. Yes, there had been pretty spectacular sex involved, but Sherlock wasn’t usually
tired after sex. And Sherlock had fallen asleep on the sofa the night before and been annoyed about

it, hadn’t meant to do it. How often did Sherlock accidentally fall asleep?

John fed Oliver and kept an ear out for Sherlock in the other room, moving around, starting his day,

being normal. The bedroom stayed stubbornly silent.

John checked on Sherlock one more time. Still sleeping soundly. He was fine, John decided, and

John was being an idiot, and John determinedly went into the sitting room and commenced

undecorating the Christmas tree.

Oliver had been sitting on his blanket, typing on his laptop, but he looked up with interest when John

went over to the tree. He watched John put the first ornament away and seemed to immediately
deduce what was happening.

“No,” he said, firmly, and crawled over to John, because clearly this called for the quickest way of

moving, which was still crawling for him.

“We’ve got to take the tree down, Ollie. It’s a Christmas thing, and Christmas is over, and now

we’ve just got a dead plant in the sitting room shedding needles that you like to believe are edible.”

“No,” said Oliver, and used John’s leg to pull himself up to standing.

“What if I let you help me?” asked John, patiently, and put a pile of non-breakable ornaments on the

floor for Oliver’s benefit.

Oliver regarded them, then sat and sifted through them, saying, “No, no, no,” to them.

John heard the shower turn on in the bathroom and heaved a sigh of relief. He kept packing away the

Christmas tree ornaments. Oliver arranged his pile of ornaments carefully, telling his skull all about

the evidence he was gathering. John let himself relax.

Until Sherlock came out of the bathroom and collapsed immediately onto the sofa. He was fully
dressed, which was heartening, but it was unlike him to go directly from bed to sofa these days.

“You feeling okay?” John asked.

“Fine,” said Sherlock. “Is there any tea?”

“I can make some.”

“Dada,” said Oliver, and chose two of his favorite ornaments to carry over to him.

“What’s this?” Sherlock looked at them with almost no interest.

“I’m taking the tree down. He objects.”

“Ah,” said Sherlock.

That was it. Ah. John went into the kitchen to make tea, worrying. Maybe, John realized, suddenly,

Sherlock wasn’t sick; Sherlock was depressed. It had been a long time since he had fallen into a true
depression. John had gotten better at keeping him occupied, at heading them off, and Oliver had

appeared to be even better at it than John. But it was unmistakable that Sherlock was off, and it did

seem a little like those days when the world was too dark for Sherlock to deal, when he stumbled to
the sofa and refused all supplications. John was just out of practice with them.

John took the tea out to the sitting room and set it by the sofa. Sherlock had his eyes closed, an ornament in each hand, Oliver piling more of them on Sherlock’s chest.

John leaned over him and kissed him gently, and his eyes fluttered open quizzically.

“I love you,” said John, because he didn’t know what else to say that might help. *You’re falling into a depression. Snap out of it.* That was no good, John knew.

“I know,” said Sherlock, sounding confused.

“Right. Just reminding you,” said John, and kissed him again. He was still a bit warm, possibly, but no warmer than he had been while in bed.

Sherlock’s mobile vibrated, and he fished it out, disturbing Oliver’s pile of ornaments. Oliver squawked at him in indignation. Sherlock ignored him, looking at his mobile. “Lestrade,” he said. “Crime scene.”

_Thank God_, thought John.

Sherlock looked at Oliver. “Triple murder,” he said, and smiled. “Want to go catch a killer?”

“Client!” said Oliver, and overbalanced in his excitement and landed with a plop. “Speriment!” he exclaimed, excitedly. “Dead!” Apparently, he was using every word he knew. And almost every word he knew corresponded with crime scenes, thought John, dryly.

Sherlock swept him up off the floor and out of the room, calling back, “Come on, John! Your destruction of Christmas can wait!”

“Skull!” Oliver called back, a command.

John picked it up ruefully and followed.
Chapter 41

Then again, thought John, holding Oliver and watching Sherlock at the crime scene. The depression theory didn’t make a lot of sense, because they’d had a good day the day before, and usually Sherlock’s depressions didn’t come on all at once, usually they crept up, bit by bit, as the dullness of the world around him pulled him under.

And Sherlock even with a triple murder to occupy him still seemed off. He’d rallied and been enthusiastic and energetic once they’d got there, but now he seemed…lethargic. He was going through his motions but John hadn’t heard him utter a single insult. The crime scenes were scattered all over a house, and it was taking time to go through all of them, and they were entering their third hour, and John was letting Oliver walk along the outskirts of the crime scene, clutching his skull, while he watched Sherlock closely. Was he flushed? Or was that John’s imagination? Certainly he’d taken his jacket off and was working in just his shirt, and John tried to remember the last time he’d seen Sherlock do that.

“We’ve got to go to the nearest bookstore,” announced Sherlock, without any of his usual drama, shrugging into his jacket and then his Belstaff.


Sherlock heaved a heavy sigh and said, dully, “I haven’t got the energy to explain it to you right now. But it’s obvious.”

Red flag right there, thought John, and stepped in front of him before he could exit the room. “Sherlock,” he said, firmly. Close up it was clear he was flushed. And his eyes were fever-bright. Damn it, thought John, he should have realized this was coming.

Sherlock looked a shade of his normal brand of irritation. “Yes? What is it? Do you not want to come? You can bring Oliver—”

John cut him off by reaching a hand up to his forehead, which was so hot that there was absolutely no question in John’s mind that Sherlock had a fever. “Greg,” said John, frowning at Sherlock, whose eyes were narrowed at him. “You need to do this without Sherlock.”

“What?” said Lestrade.

“What?” said Sherlock.

“You’re sick, and you’re going home,” said John, leaning down to pick Oliver up.

“Skull,” said Oliver, as if to remind John that both of them needed to go home.

“I’m not sick,” protested Sherlock.

“You’re definitely sick. You’re burning up.”

“I’m not. It’s hot in here. Lestrade will tell you. Lestrade.”

“It’s not that hot in here.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” said Sherlock.

“He’s sick, Greg,” said John, “and if I let him, he will work on this case until he collapses from
dehydration and his fever is high enough that we’ll have to admit him. So, if you want his help, e-mail him some stuff and I’ll let him work from bed.”

Sherlock looked so outraged that for a moment he didn’t make a sound. John braced himself. Then Sherlock exclaimed, “Let me? Like I’m…Like I’m…”

“Yeah, the fact that you can’t come up with the rest of that sentence is a pretty fair indication of how you’re feeling. Come on.” John took Sherlock’s hand and pulled him out of the house.

“I slept too much,” Sherlock said, as they got outside together. “It makes me groggy. See, I already feel much better now that we’re outside—”

“Hail a cab for us—”

“I don’t have a fever.”

“Which one of us is the doctor? And which one of us is sick and therefore probably hallucinating?”

“I’m not hallucinating,” huffed Sherlock. “Now you’re just being ridiculous. I don’t get sick, remember?”

“Well, someone forgot to tell your immune system, then.”

“You haven’t taken my temperature, so you don’t know for a fact that—”

John, ineffectually trying to hail a cab, glared at him. “I’m a doctor, Sherlock, and your temperature is not even close to being normal right now. If you like, I’ll prove it by taking you home and sticking a thermometer in your mouth and making sure you don’t cheat and then when it shows you have a fever, you’ll agree to stay in bed. Now can you hail a bloody cab for me?”

“Why can’t you—”

“Because hailing cabs is your special talent,” John snapped at him, and then felt bad, because Sherlock was sick and now he was shouting at him.

And Oliver started crying to top it all off, clearly displeased that they were quarrelling, and John remembered belatedly that they weren’t supposed to fight in front of the baby. Oliver reached for Sherlock, clearly for comfort that Sherlock wasn’t angry at him, too, and panic flooded Sherlock’s face. He stumbled backward so quickly that John actually thought for a moment that he was going to fall.

“Oh, my God,” Sherlock said. “Oh, my God, I’m sick.”

John looked at him quizzically, alarmed by his apparently messy mental state. “Yes—”

“I can’t go home.” Sherlock took a few more steps away from him, catching his hands up in his hair. “I can’t go home.”

“You have to. You’ve got a fever and a fever means your body is fighting. Hard. You need to go home and get into bed and drink lots of fluids and rest and—”

Sherlock turned abruptly, hailing a cab with that ease with which he always hailed cabs. John, relieved, moved over as Sherlock opened the door and stepped aside to let him in.

John paused suspiciously by the door.
Sherlock took a step away from him. “You take this one. Take Oliver home.”

It slammed into John abruptly. And he was holding Oliver, and Oliver was fussing about and still crying and being difficult, and John had been dealing with him automatically, worried about Sherlock, and now he realized why Sherlock was taking swift steps away from him again. Sherlock was worried about getting Oliver sick.

“And what will you do?” asked John.

“I’ll go to a hotel.”

“You’re sick. I’m not letting you go to a hotel where no one’s going to take care of you.”

“I’ll take care of myself.”

John snorted. “Oh, yeah, because there’s definitely precedent for that.”

“Oi,” said the cabbie. “Mate. Are you going anywhere?”

“Yes,” Sherlock called to him. “He’s going to Baker Street—”

“I am,” John agreed. “Start the meter and give me a second.” He turned back to Sherlock. “I understand you don’t want to get Oliver sick. But I’m responsible for both of you and I don’t trust you to take proper care of yourself without supervision.”

Sherlock hesitated.

“We’ll sequester you in the bedroom and use lots of antibacterial materials,” John said.

“I’ll go to Mycroft’s,” Sherlock blurted out.

John blinked in shock. How sick was Sherlock? “What?”

“I’ll go to Mycroft’s. He’ll be annoyingly supervisory the way he always is. You won’t have to worry about me. You can just worry about Oliver and keeping him healthy. Go home and bathe him in something antibacterial.”

“Sherlock—” John began.

“Baker Street,” Sherlock said to the cabbie.

“Whatever,” the cabbie shrugged.

John said, “If you don’t go directly to your brother’s, I will find out.”

Sherlock nodded solemnly and waited until John and Oliver were safely in the cab and on their way. And then he hailed a cab of his own and gave, in disgust, mindful of his promise to John, the address of his brother’s office.

***

The thing was that Sherlock had been tired that morning, sluggish, his brain clicking far more slowly than he was used to. He’d pushed himself through at the crime scene, although it had taken an embarrassingly long time for the deductions to form themselves, for him to be able to visualize the crime scene accurately. He was not normally like that, and he had been annoyed with himself, but he hadn’t quite connected it to the idea that he was sick. Because he almost never got sick.
Now that he had admitted the fact that he might be sick, it felt a little bit like the sickness rushed in upon him. By the time he got to Mycroft’s office, he was shivering uncontrollably and also wondering why it was so bloody hot in the cab he’d chosen, pulling his scarf off himself.

They knew him at Mycroft’s building, and they greeted him with friendly expressions, and Sherlock wondered how much Mycroft paid them to be friendly to him.

“I’ll just tell your brother you’re here, sir,” said one of Mycroft’s ever-efficient PAs.

Sherlock couldn’t even be bothered to deduce about her, to notice what she was wearing. He sat in a nearby chair and nodded. Or at least he thought he did.

Mycroft appeared, said, “What’s happened? You look terrible. Did you have a row with John?”

“I need to stay with you,” Sherlock said. He also needed a glass of water. He hadn’t realized how incredibly thirsty he was until just that moment.

Mycroft looked alarmed. “What in the world could you have done that—”

“I haven’t done anything,” Sherlock cut him off, wearily. “I’m sick, Mycroft.”

Mycroft paused and seemed to really look at him. “Oh. Of course.”

“And I can’t get Oliver sick.”

Mycroft hesitated. Sherlock could see that, even in his fever-addled state.

“Oh, whatever lecture you’re going to give, can you get it out so that I can leave here and go to sleep somewhere?” Because he was suddenly so exhausted he wasn’t sure he could keep his eyes open another minute.

“You sent John and Oliver home in a cab just now, didn’t you?”

“Do you literally just sit around all day watching CCTV of our lives?” asked Sherlock, wearily.

“You’re willing for him to be exposed to any number of questionable germs in the backseat of the cab, but you draw the line at exposing him to you?”

“Well, I am actively ill,” said Sherlock, annoyed. “I have a fever.”

“Indeed. I can see you are not feeling well, because you’re here asking to stay with me, and that means you must be out of your head. I am merely pointing out that people do all manner of things in the backseats of cars.” Mycroft lifted an eyebrow at him.

“Oh, my God, is this about the sex? I can’t talk to you about that right now.” Sherlock tipped his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

After a moment, Mycroft said, “I think you’re being silly about Oliver—”

“No, I’m not,” Sherlock interrupted him, sleepily.

“—but of course you can stay. I’ll have someone drive you to my house.”

“You trust me in the backseat of your car?” drawled Sherlock.

“Just barely, and only because you look like you’re ready to topple over.”
“I’ll need a key,” Sherlock pointed out.

“You have a key.”

Sherlock opened his eyes and lifted his head. “You never changed the locks?”


“Yes, sir,” Sherlock heard someone say. Someone. He didn’t notice who. He needed to get somewhere to sleep this off.

By the time he got to Mycroft’s house, he was somehow feeling even worse than he had been. Mycroft had probably injected him with some kind of secret government disease serum. No, there’d been no injection. He’d probably wafted it over him. It was probably piped through the heating system of his building. Yes. Definitely.

Sherlock dragged himself up the stairs, every muscle in his body aching painfully, and found a bedroom, and collapsed onto the bed.

When he next woke up, there was a fire in the fireplace and a glass of water by the bed and he was dreadfully hot. He stripped out of the coat he was still wearing, downed the glass of water, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

***

Oliver cried the entirety of the cab ride home. John didn’t know if that was because he was still upset about the argument with Sherlock and Sherlock leaving, or if he was getting sick, too. Because, honestly, John didn’t hold out a lot of hope that Oliver wasn’t going to catch whatever Sherlock had picked up. Sherlock had cuddled Oliver the day before, always cuddled Oliver a great deal, and they had matching genes. If Sherlock had encountered bacteria or a virus that he was susceptible to, then he probably had transferred it to Oliver at some point, and it was only a matter of time. John thought it would have been better for all involved if he’d given Sherlock a proper examination to see what was wrong with him. Although John suspected it was the flu.

And suddenly, with that thought, he breathed a sigh of relief. Sherlock probably had the flu. And John had given Oliver his flu jab. He’d offered to get Sherlock one, but Sherlock had refused it as unnecessary.

“Your father’s an idiot,” John breathed into Oliver’s curls. Oliver sobbed, apparently not appeased by that.

John carried him inside and upstairs and decided to give him a bath, just in case. Oliver liked baths, it might soothe him, quiet him down. John struggled his mobile out and dialed Mycroft while running the bath and also trying to strip his screaming child out of his clothing.

“Everything alright there?” asked Mycroft, sounding wry, when he answered.

“Yes. Well. Mostly. Tell me you saw Sherlock.”

“Saw him, sent him home to bed. He looked terrible.”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure he has the flu. I am giving Oliver a bath, and then I’m coming over.” John tested the temperature of the water.
“My understanding is that Sherlock wished to sequester the two of you for Oliver’s benefit.”

“Yes. And he’s forgetting that I gave Oliver a flu jab. And that I got one, too.” John settled Oliver into the bath.

Oliver splashed water at him, frowning.

John dodged away from him.

“Ah,” said Mycroft.

“So I’m not going to tempt fate and we’ll keep Oliver away from him but he’s being an idiot. If you can, get him to take some paracetamol, and I’ll be by later today.”

“Goodness,” said Mycroft. “I almost never have so many visitors at once.”

That gave John pause. Oliver was no longer splashing and instead was pouting, sitting in the bath and refusing to cooperate with John’s attempts to wash him up. “I…don’t mean to impose—”

“Not an imposition. Absolutely fine. Be sure to bring Oliver with you, the house is big enough that contact with Sherlock’s germs can be easily avoided.”

Mycroft hung up, so John supposed that was the end of the conversation. “We’re going to go and visit your uncle Mycroft,” John told Oliver.

Oliver glowered at him.

“So that I can take care of your ridiculous father for you.”

Oliver’s glower lessened the tiniest bit.

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“Sherlock,” said Mycroft’s voice, sternly. “Wake up.”

Sherlock, for one moment, huddled under blankets, with his brother shaking him awake, wondered if he was eight years old again. It was an unpleasant thought. And then he remembered that he wasn’t eight, and that it should have been John shaking him awake, and it wasn’t only because he was sick, and my God, did his head hurt.

“Why is it so bloody cold in your house?” Sherlock snapped at him, curling into a tighter ball.


“Oh, my God,” Sherlock bit out. “When I feel better, I’m going to borrow John’s gun and shoot you.”

“My house is bugged, you know.”

“Is it? Good. Mycroft Holmes is an enormous wanker who refuses to pay for heating.”

“Mature,” said Mycroft.

Sherlock contemplated the energy it would take to kick Mycroft, decided to save it up.

“The fire’s lit in here and I’ve piled extra blankets on you. If you would roll over and take this
paracetamol I’m trying to give you, you’d get the fever to break and be up and out of my house much sooner.”

Sherlock heaved an enormous sigh, gathered his energy, and rolled over, squinting up at Mycroft. It hurt to look up at him. Everything hurt. Everything was so much more effort than it needed to be.

He had a sudden impulse to ask for John, which was ridiculous, because he knew why John wasn’t there, but he felt miserable and he didn’t want Mycroft, he wanted John, who wouldn’t boss him around. Or at least wouldn’t do it so annoyingly.

Sherlock managed to focus on the pills Mycroft was handing out to him. “What are those?” he asked, suspiciously.

“Paracetamol. Exactly as I said. Doctor’s orders.”

“Which doctor?”

“Your doctor.”

Sherlock sighed. “Never marry a doctor,” he grumbled, sitting up enough so he could take the pills.

“Yes, well, you can disagree with him yourself in person soon enough.”

Sherlock swallowed the pills with water he found on the bedside table, then pushed the glass back onto the table. “No, he’s staying at Baker Street with Oliver,” said Sherlock, and slid back into his cocoon of blankets, turning his head back into his pillow.

“I made you tea.”

“I don’t want any,” mumbled Sherlock.

“You should drink something.”

“I’m just going to sleep,” said Sherlock, already halfway there.

“I’m going to leave you to John,” said Mycroft, sounding exasperated.

Sherlock grunted into his pillow and fell back asleep.

***

The number of toys John brought with him to Mycroft’s house was appalling. He was actually ashamed how many toys his child had, and how many he thought necessary to cart around with him. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t have, but he didn’t think Mycroft would have anything appropriate to distract Oliver, and John didn’t want to be worrying about what Oliver was doing while he was assessing Sherlock’s state. So he dragged into Mycroft’s house with a bag full of blocks and balls and stuffed animals and puzzles, including Sherlock’s puzzle ball, which Oliver adored. And a laptop bag. Of course.

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow at him. “I didn’t realize you were moving in.”

“It takes a lot to keep a baby occupied,” John informed him.

Mycroft looked at Oliver.

Oliver, sulking still about being separated from Sherlock, turned his face into John’s neck.
“He’s upset,” John explained. “Sherlock and I were yelling.”

“Well, I prepared the library for you,” said Mycroft, leading them back there.

Mycroft’s tree was down. Instead, the room was spread over with newspapers.

John smiled. “Look, love,” he said to Oliver. “Look at all the newspaper for you to crumple.”

Oliver, sniffling, looked.

“Want to rip some up?” John asked him.

Oliver looked at the newspaper and pretended not to want to rip some up.

John kissed his head and set him down and said, “Look,” and covered his skull with a newspaper.

Oliver pretended not to smile. Looking so much like Sherlock that John almost couldn’t stand it. He kissed Oliver’s head again and left him to his crumpling, straightening.

“Where’s the patient?” John asked Mycroft.

Mycroft rolled his eyes. “Upstairs. He’s being insufferable.”

That surprised John. When Sherlock had had pneumonia, he had actually been alarmingly easy to deal with, because he hadn’t felt well enough to cause as much trouble as he usually did. It was the thing that John had hated the most about Sherlock being sick. He had been relieved when Sherlock had started to feel better and started getting stroppy about things again.

“I’ll deal with him,” John said. “What’s he had to eat?”

“Nothing. I can’t even get him to drink anything.”

“Where’s your kitchen? I’ll make him some tea and toast.”

Mycroft pointed to his kitchen and said, grimly, “I wish you the best of luck.”

“Skull,” said Oliver, and tossed a crumpled-up piece of newspaper at it.

***

Sherlock woke to a cool hand on his forehead, tender and gentle, and a room that was suffocatingly hot. He turned toward the coolness of the hand, and someone murmured at him, “Hey. How are you feeling?”

John. He could have sworn it was John. Oh, my God, he was hallucinating. But, because it was a nice hallucination, he refused to open his eyes. “Mmm,” he said, noncommittally, and pushed his blankets away a little bit.

“I made you tea,” said the person who sounded like John. “I’d love it if you could drink some for me.”

How vivid was this hallucination? Sherlock cracked open an eye, and there was John, sitting on his bed, holding a mug.

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock asked. He tried to sound annoyed, but he wasn’t sure he actually got his protest across. He closed his one eye, because it was too much effort to keep it open.
“You’ve got the flu, you idiot. Which Oliver and I were vaccinated against.”

Sherlock turned this over in his head sluggishly. “That’s no guarantee—”

“I know. Which is why Oliver’s not in this room. Me, however—I deal with sick people all the time, and I’m rather fonder of your germs than most other people’s germs, so go ahead and cough all over me.”

“I don’t have a cough,” mumbled Sherlock.

“Sit up and drink some tea for me, love,” said John, and Sherlock could have sworn there was a smile in his voice.

“I’m so tired,” Sherlock said, by way of explaining that he wasn’t going to sit up.

“I know. After you have this tea, I’ll let you go back to sleep. I’d like you to take some more paracetamol, too. I’d prefer this fever to be down a bit more than it is presently. Sherlock.” John nudged him, gently, pushing his drowse back a little bit.

Sherlock sighed and opened his eyes and sat up, every single muscle in his body protesting. He winced. “Remember when we got into that fight with the Rookwood gang and had to hold them up until Lestrade got there?” Sherlock tipped his head back against the headboard.

“Yes,” said John, pressing the mug into his hands along with two pills.

“I feel like I have more bruises now than I did then.”

“Yes. Because you have the flu.”

Sherlock took the pills with the tea. The tea was weak and tasteless. “This is the worst tea you’ve ever made,” he said, dully.

“Because you’re sick.”

“I’m not dying.”

“If you were dying, I’d let you splurge on good tea.”

“Where’s Ollie?”

“Downstairs.”

“With who?”

“Your brother.”

Sherlock opened his eyes and sat up straighter in alarm. “You left them alone?”

“Don’t worry. Oliver will tell me everything Mycroft’s done as soon as I get back down there. He’s taking notes about it on his laptop.”

“It’s ridiculous,” said Sherlock, closing his eyes again. “You didn’t need to come here.”

“But you’re happy to see me.”

“Of course I am. That’s irrelevant.”
“I made you toast. Can you have some?”

The thought made Sherlock’s stomach do a slow flip. He already felt a little queasy from the terrible tea he was drinking just to make John happy. He shook his head.

“All right. Maybe next time you wake up.”

“I’ve had enough,” Sherlock said, and pushed the mug back at John.

John looked into it. Sherlock had no idea how much he’d drunk and didn’t care. He slid back under the covers, shivering again, because it was bloody freezing in the room.

“Better than nothing,” said John.

“Mycroft keeps turning the heating off in this room,” Sherlock complained.

“No, he doesn’t.”

“He’s playing tricks with the temperature.”

“You’re sick, Sherlock.”

“I bet he got me sick, too, somehow,” said Sherlock, into his pillow. “Probably invented the flu or something.”

“He’s probably raking in money from flu jabs somehow.”

“You’ll sterilize yourself before you go to see Oliver?” asked Sherlock, as the thought occurred to him.

“Yes.” John’s hand started combing Sherlock’s hair back off his face. Sherlock realized for the first time that it had been damp with sweat, caught to his skin. How had he not noticed that? “Don’t worry about Oliver. He is absolutely fine. He would still be fine, even if he caught the flu from you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Who’s the doctor here? Hm?”

“I’m glad you’re here,” said Sherlock, because he was. John was so wonderfully soothing compared to bossy, abrupt Mycroft.

“I know,” John answered. “Go to sleep. I’ll come back and check on you in a bit.”

“You don’t have to,” slurred out Sherlock.

“Not because I have to,” said John. “Idiot.”

Sherlock smiled and slept.
John washed his hands very thoroughly and went back downstairs. Mycroft was sitting in the library reading an old book. Mycroft, John thought, was probably the only person in the world who actually sat and read antique books. Oliver was sitting surrounded by crumpled-up newspapers, skull at his side, gnawing on one of his periodic table blocks and staring warily at Mycroft.

As soon as he saw John, he dropped the block and exclaimed, “Papa!” as if they had been separated for hours and hours. He gave up on walking in favor of crawling furiously over to John, talking a mile a minute. John caught dead and client and a variety of other words that he didn’t know what to make of, other than that they were outraged.

“Really?” said John, picking Oliver up. “Uncle Mycroft did all that during the fifteen minutes when I was upstairs with Daddy?”

Oliver sent a glare Mycroft’s way and snuggled into John.

John sighed and ignored the Sherlockian melodrama.

Mycroft rolled his eyes and said, “How is the patient? Still miserable?”

“He’s sick. I’m not happy with how high his fever is still, but I made him take a couple more paracetamol and got him to drink a little bit and I’ll check on him again in a little while.”

“After we have dinner,” said Mycroft, standing.

“I really didn’t mean to swoop in on you and disrupt your life like this. If you had dinner plans—”

“My dinner plans are dealing with a triple murder without my brother’s help, so you are a welcome distraction. And a good excuse for me to refuse to watch George Orwell.”

“George Orwell?”

“That’s the puppy.” Mycroft’s tone was dry and long-suffering and dared him to say anything about the name. John’s lips twitched. “Didn’t you buy him the puppy?”

“Yes. Greg likes dogs.” Mycroft acted as if that explained that, walking away.

Greg, thought John, and decided he didn’t want to know any more about the Lestrade and Mycroft relationship. He would have dinner, check on Sherlock one last time, make sure the fever had gone down, and then take Oliver home.

He followed Mycroft into his dining room, where a small feast had been laid out. John thought, not for the first time, that Mycroft must have servants, although John had never seen them. Very good servants.

“You didn’t have to do all this,” John said, awkwardly. He was aware of Oliver in his arms gaping at the spread. Because dinnertime in 221B was usually hastily-procured takeaway eaten in the sitting room, or a mostly-burnt dinner slid into free, non-experimenting spots on the kitchen table.

“All what?” asked Mycroft, as he sat, because clearly this was just a normal dinner in his house. He looked at Oliver and said, awkwardly, “Does he eat?”
“Every once in a while,” said John, honestly, and sat with Oliver in his lap and decided that he might as well enjoy the novelty of having a really nice dinner.

Mycroft ate in silence, so John followed suit and tried not to think about how awkward all of this was. Oliver said, “Dead,” just once, flatly, as if to say, I approve of none of this, and then sat in similar silence. John tried to get him interested in mashed potatoes by smearing a bit on his hand. Oliver stared at it in shock and then wiped it off on John’s shirt, and John thought he probably deserved that.

When Mycroft was finished eating, he pushed his plate aside and fixed his gaze on John and said, “Should we talk about Oliver?”

John’s kneejerk instinct was to say No. He said instead, “What about him?”

“This entire situation was precipitated by Sherlock’s fear of getting the baby sick. The idea that he is going to go his entire life without catching a cold is, you would admit, Doctor, fanciful at best.”

“Yes,” John agreed, because that was true.

“And have you explained that to Sherlock?”

“I didn’t think it was best to have that conversation when he was shivering and feverish on the pavement,” said John, shortly.

“Do you think that Oliver is in danger of—”

“I think Oliver’s perfectly healthy,” John cut him off, sharply. “I think we’ve run every blood test we can think of on him, and he’s fine. He’s got advanced language skills and on-target physical skills, his weight’s a little below normal and his height’s a little above normal, which is consistent with the genes he’s inherited. He’s clever, and he’s curious, and he’s engaged with the world around him, and he’s responsive to us, and he doesn’t miss a trick, ever, and he’s happy and stubborn and impossible and sweet and he’s perfect. And I’m not sending him to some top-secret government institution somewhere to poke and prod at him to make him think he’s not. It’s important to Sherlock, and it’s important to me. I’m not worrying about him. None of the other clones died from colds, Mycroft, or the flu, or anything that can be transmitted. So I’m not worrying. Not until there’s something to worry about. And if there’s going to be something to worry about, there’s nothing Sherlock or I can do to stop that, regardless of what Sherlock might like to think. And until there’s something to worry about, I’m not going to infect his life with that. I’m going to let him be a carefree, confident, fearless, unconcerned little boy.”

Mycroft was staring at him.

John took a deep breath and said, “Are we clear?”

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow at him.

Oliver said, “Yes.” The first time John had ever heard him say that word.

And then he threw John’s spoon across the table.

***

Sherlock woke feeling neither hot nor cold. He felt... comfortable. That was a pleasant change of pace. He stretched against Mycroft’s ridiculous sheets—recognizing for the first time the thread count—and turned over.
John was sitting by the bed. He had been brooding, Sherlock caught the shadow of it across his face before he smiled. “Hey,” he said. “You are looking much better.”

“I feel much better,” said Sherlock, truthfully.

John leaned over and pressed his hand against Sherlock’s forehead. “That’s more like it,” he said, and there was no mistaking the relief in his voice.

“You were worried,” Sherlock deduced.

“Not really. You’re young and healthy and it was just a fever, I was confident you’d shake it. You just took a bit longer to get there than I was prepared to deal with.”

“Also, Mycroft’s irritating you.”

“You are feeling better,” remarked John.

“Mmm. What is he doing?”

“Don’t worry about it. I brought you some more tea and some more toast. Can you manage it?”

Sherlock looked across at him, considered whether to press, considered whether he wanted to eat anything.

“I’d feel better if you ate at least a little something and also hydrated a bit,” said John, a thread of anxiety in his voice.

Damn it, thought Sherlock. Mycroft had John on edge and Sherlock didn’t want to push him any farther. So Sherlock said, “Yes. Fine,” and pulled himself up to something roughly resembling sitting.

The tea was a little bit better this time, and Sherlock nibbled down some toast and his stomach didn’t go into total revolt so he nibbled down some more.

John said, “Here,” and thrust more paracetamol at Sherlock. “If you can keep the fever down all night, tomorrow you’re coming home.”

Sherlock swallowed the pills. “John—”

“Sherlock. We can’t wrap him in cotton wool like this.”

Sherlock gave him a dark look. “Can’t we?”

“No. And you don’t want to, either. You like the world too much, you’re aware that he does, too.”

Something he thought Mycroft had said during the half-delirious time in his office drifted into his head. “This is what Mycroft’s been irritating you about, isn’t it? Talking about bacteria in cabs or something.”

“What?” said John, quizzically.

Sherlock shook his head and nibbled more toast and drank more tea.

“Well,” said John, after a second. “There are bacteria in cabs. That’s true.”

Sherlock didn’t say anything. He put the rest of the toast down because he felt like he couldn’t choke
any more of it down but kept sipping the tea.

John said, “Can I get into bed with you?”

“I don’t want to get you sick.”

“I won’t. I don’t want to crowd you if—”

“This bed is gross,” Sherlock said, truthfully, because it was.

“I’ll stay on top of the blankets.”

John seemed so determined to get onto the bed that Sherlock half-shrugged and put his tea down. “Fine.”

John moved immediately, curling up tightly against Sherlock. Sherlock thought he had to be disgusting, but John just buried his face into Sherlock’s neck and clung to him.

“What the hell did Mycroft say to you?” Sherlock asked, in annoyance, because John was never like this.

“I love our life,” John mumbled into his skin.

That gave Sherlock a little bit of pause. He pressed his lips onto John’s head and said, “Were you really that worried about me? It was just a touch of the flu.”

“I worry—endlessly—about both of you, but I don’t let myself—If I let myself think about it all the time, about how much of me is caught up in you two, and how much about you two is out of my control, I would go mad, Sherlock. And I know that’s why you want to believe that we have any control over what happens to Oliver, but we don’t. Not really. He’s going to catch a cold eventually, Sherlock. Maybe even the flu. Because there’s only so much we can do. But that’s fine, he’s not going to die from that, because we can take care of that, we can fight that, he’d die from something you and I could never stop, some disease that we can’t—You can’t think about it all the time, Sherlock, we have to live our lives and just…We have to live our lives.”

The thing was that Sherlock had been prepared to fight this out, had been stubbornly convinced of their need to protect Oliver from ever being sick, stubbornly persistent in his belief that his sheer force of will could defeat science and probability and the laws of nature. But to have John nearly falling apart in his arms over this made him back off on his stance, made him realize the truth of what John was saying, and that insisting otherwise was going to make John crack, that somehow the concept of it, of worrying about all of the things they couldn’t control, was too much for John to deal with. And John could deal with anything. So if John had come up against the one thing he needed Sherlock to back off from, then Sherlock was going to let him have it.

“Okay,” he said, and stroked his hand over John’s hair, down his neck, down his spine, to rest on the small of his back and hold him against him. “I’m fine. And he’s fine. We’re all fine. And we’ll just…be fine.”

John lifted his head and looked at him. “I know you want to fight for him. And I do, too. I don’t want you to think for even a heartbeat that I don’t want to.”

“John,” said Sherlock, faintly amused, “I never for a moment think that you are not a fighter.”

“I just want to have some time where we worry about normal baby things. Not clone baby things. I just need some time like that.”
“You can have all the time like that you want,” Sherlock said, honestly. “I’ve always been doing that worrying for the both of us.”

“But I don’t want you to. I want you to just love him, I want you to enjoy him. I want you to be happy. When you first came back, I used to think that you would be going away again any second. It took me so long to get over that. I still haven’t, you know that. And there was a long time when I didn’t let myself love you as much as I wanted to because I was so busy worrying. I don’t want you to make that mistake with him. I don’t want either one of us to make that mistake.”

Sherlock didn’t know how he was going to shut off the part of him that was doing endless covert research into cloning and genetics. He also realized that all of that research might not be as covert as he had thought it was. But he did know that John needed this. “Alright,” he said.

“Promise me you’ll at least try.”

“I promise,” said Sherlock. He certainly promised that he would never again bring it up so directly, how he felt it hanging like a guillotine over every moment. It would do nothing but cause John more of this panic that Sherlock didn’t like.

John leaned forward and hugged him hard. Sherlock thought of the first time John had ever really attempted to hug him, when he had come back from coffee with Harry and walked into the flat and right up to Sherlock and into his arms, as if he was supposed to do that, and Sherlock had been too astonished to react.

He reacted now and hugged him back and pressed his nose into his hair and said, “I’m never not happy. Not even for a second.”

“For someone who’s always happy, you do a lot of complaining,” John mumbled, after a moment.

“Well,” said Sherlock, considering the truth of that.

“Oh, never mind,” said John, “you know I wouldn’t know what to do with you if you didn’t complain constantly. I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Me, too.” Sherlock paused. “Are you feeling better?”

“Much.” Hesitation. Sherlock felt it in the slight stutter of John’s breath. “Don’t you dare breathe a word to Mycroft about this.”

“Why would I ever tell Mycroft—”

“I don’t want you to be angry with him and think you’re protecting me or something. I told him off a bit downstairs, I don’t want to ruin the effect.”

Sherlock chuckled. “I wish you’d recorded that.”

“Don’t worry, Ollie will tell you all about it. He says ‘yes’ now, you know.”

“But he still misses the first syllable on ‘experiment,’” sighed Sherlock.

“Yes. Whatever will we do with the child?” asked John, lightly. He shifted a bit, no longer actively hugging Sherlock, more just resting against him.

“We may as well keep him,” remarked Sherlock, keeping his voice just as light.

“Do you think?” mused John.
“I’ve got used to him now. Anyway, eventually he’ll start coming in handy, when he can carry things and so forth.”

“You could replace Anderson with him.”

“I look forward to the day.”

“Mmm,” said John, and pushed away from Sherlock, destroying the cuddle. Sherlock had wanted to linger in that cuddle a little longer. John leaned over and picked up Sherlock’s cup of tea and pressed it back into his hands. “Drink a little more for me.”

Sherlock obeyed and made a face. “It’s cold now.”

John stood from the bed. “I’ll make you a fresh cup. Do you feel like eating something other than toast?”

Sherlock considered. “Raspberries.”

John looked at him. “Raspberries?”

“Yes. They sound very good right now.”

“Well, I’ll see what I can do on that front, but don’t get your hopes up. I should have brought you a change of clothes. I didn’t even think of it.” John sounded rueful.

Sherlock for the first time realized that he was still fully dressed. He shrugged, because it didn’t really matter to him.

“If you’re sleeping when I get back,” continued John, “I’ll—”

“Sleeping?” Sherlock echoed, with a frown. “I just woke up.”

“Don’t forget you’re still sick. We’re just managing your fever right now. I’m also going to bring water, and if you wake up and the tea’s too cold, you’re to drink the water, do you hear me?”

“Yes,” huffed Sherlock, annoyed now at being fussed over when he was just fine for the time being.

John smiled at him and left the room and Sherlock looked across at the fire that was dying in the fireplace. He wondered if it would get unpleasantly cold in the room. Sherlock considered getting out of bed to tend to the fire. Decided that was a terrible idea. Decided instead to ask John when John got back.

So Sherlock slid back down into bed and yawned and pulled the duvet up over his head and closed his eyes for a second, since he had nothing better to do whilst he waited for John to come back.

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John made a fresh cup of tea and searched high and low for raspberries in Mycroft’s kitchen. Unsurprisingly, he couldn’t find any. Also unsurprisingly, Sherlock was sound asleep, an unresponsive lump under the duvet, when he got back to the room. John left the tea and a glass of water by the bed, stoked the fire, and went back downstairs to the library.

Mycroft was still reading.

Oliver was still watching him suspiciously. As soon as he saw John walk into the room, he commenced to smashing at the keys on his laptop. John could just imagine the blog entries Oliver
was going to write someday.

“How is he?” Mycroft asked, politely, looking up from his book.

“Better. His fever broke. I left him some tea and water and made him take more paracetamol. Is it alright if he spends the night here? He’s sleeping again, I can come and collect him in the morning.”

“John, you know that of course it’s fine. He can stay as long as he likes.”

John thought Sherlock would like to not be there at all, but refrained from saying that. “Do you happen to have raspberries?”

“Raspberries?” Mycroft echoed, confused.

“Yes, I looked through your fridge and I didn’t see any, but I thought I’d ask anyway. You might have a second fridge somewhere.”

“No, you’re the only Holmes household with two refrigerators,” remarked Mycroft, dryly.

“Sherlock was asking for raspberries.”

“Raspberries,” repeated Mycroft, even more disapprovingly than he had the first time.

“I’ll stop and get him some on my way home.”

“Raspberries,” said Mycroft, again, as if he couldn’t believe it.

And then there was the sound of barking, and then Lestrade saying, “Georgie, wait,” and then a puppy’s claws skidding down the hallway, and John just had time to scoop Oliver up before the puppy came bounding into the library, followed by a breathless Lestrade.

“Oh,” said Lestrade, looking at John. “You’re still here.”

“Yes. But we were just leaving.”

Oliver was clapping his hands and pointing to the dog and saying, “Da! Da!” Which sounded strikingly like what he called Sherlock, and John made a note not to tell Sherlock that.

“Dog,” he corrected, and let Oliver stand, holding him up carefully, while George Orwell barked and slobbered at him and Oliver giggled with overwhelming delight.

“I don’t mean to rush you out,” Lestrade started.

“No, no. Not at all. How’s the triple murder?”

“Stalled a bit. How’s the patient?”

“I’ll let him work from bed tomorrow. And don’t worry, he’ll be out of your hair and you’ll have the house back to yourselves.”

“Oh,” said Lestrade, a little awkwardly, glancing at Mycroft, “it isn’t my house—”

“Uh-huh,” said John, dubiously, with a smile. “Come on, Ollie, time to go home.” He lifted him up into his arms, grossly damp from the dog. “Say good-bye to Uncle Greg and Uncle Mycroft.”

“Da, da, da!” said Oliver, enthusiastically. Clearly he had only seen one thing at Mycroft’s house that
had interested him.

John winked at Lestrade, amused when he turned pink, and then said, “Thank you, Mycroft.”

“Please don’t mention it,” replied Mycroft, stiffly formal. “There’s a car waiting outside for you.”

John asked the car to stop at the supermarket so he could get Sherlock raspberries, just in case he was still in the mood for them the next day. Oliver was half-asleep by the time they got in, worn out by the excitement of the day. John settled him in his cot with his skull in eyesight. Oliver snuggled and looked up at him and said, queryingly, “Dada?”

“He’ll be home tomorrow,” John told him. “I promise.”

Oliver seemed to accept that, and let his eyes close.

John went downstairs and felt at loose ends with all the quiet. He tried to continue taking the tree down but he couldn’t deal with all the stillness. He turned the television on for company but it didn’t help. He gave up on the tree and tried to enjoy the novelty of having the entire sofa to sprawl on, all to himself, but really he was wondering how he had ever lived a life without Sherlock in it. Eventually he took the baby monitor with him down to Mrs. Hudson’s, who tsk’d over Sherlock being sick and at Mycroft’s and made him tea and fed him biscuits and John felt a little bit better than he had, because he did have a life with Sherlock in it, this was just a temporary blip, and he had a family above and beyond Sherlock and he never had to be alone again.

And that was all very good.
Sherlock got better. John didn’t get sick. Neither did Oliver. John thought that Sherlock seemed a bit more relaxed around Oliver, but he was also willing to admit that Sherlock might just be pretending about it. And John at least appreciated that effort.

Oliver grew taller every day, to John’s eyes. He picked up more and more words, mimicking them mercilessly. Almost everything they said got repeated. He began to understand sentence structure, even if he didn’t quite have enough vocabulary to make full ones yet, and John was amazed, could see forward to a day when they would have conversations where Oliver’s voice would be his own and not just provided by him or Sherlock. There were times when John felt like time was rushing, and his two Sherlock Holmeses were such whirlwinds of energy that he just wanted to grab them and force them to stand still long enough for him to snapshot this time in their lives. And then Sherlock, with his uncanny ability to read John’s mind when it came to some things, would stop running about and they would spend a night in and Sherlock would read medical textbooks out loud to a rapt Oliver and John would sit and realize that there was no way, ever, that he was going to forget a single moment of this time he had had.

Oliver was a charming baby, but, like Sherlock, he was mainly charming when it served his own ends. He was an absolutely ruthless and opportunistic baby. He had everyone he needed to eating out of the palm of his hand. He loved to exploit his cuteness. His tooth-dotted smile was wide and topped by innocent blinks of pearlescent eyes and everyone who encountered him was in love with him and John thought that eventually this child was going to take over the entire world. He watched him sometimes, surrounded by Metropolitan police who all spoke to him as if he were One of the Boys, telling him raucous tales of criminal-chasing, which Oliver ate up voraciously. And at those times he thought, Maybe he needs friends his own age. Sherlock hadn’t wanted Oliver to be lonely, and he clearly was surrounded by adoration, but he had no experience interacting with people his own age.

“A playgroup?” Sherlock said, when John brought it up. “A group for him to play?”

“Well, he’s a baby, Sherlock, it’s what babies do.”

“He plays here perfectly well. Look, there he is playing with that terrible rocking horse Mycroft got him for his birthday.”

“Right. Yes. I’m not disputing that. But maybe he needs to learn how to play with others.”

Sherlock gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Do you think he doesn’t already know how to do that? He isn’t an idiot, John.”

John decided it was a lost cause for the time being, and that he would bring it up again later. John knew by then how to pick his battles.

John woke the morning of his birthday to Sherlock crouching by the bed and staring at him, face only a few inches from his. Oliver was in his arms and clapped his hands when John opened his eyes.

John jumped, startled. “Jesus Christ.”
“Good,” said Sherlock, and stood. “You’re up.”

“What the hell are you doing?” asked John, trying to push back the unpleasant flood of adrenaline first thing in the morning.

“Waiting for you to wake up. Happy birthday.” And Sherlock picked up a cup of tea from the bedside table and presented it to John with a flourish.

John sat up, surprised. “You made tea.” The tea was piping hot, the mug pleasantly warm in his hands, the perfect temperature.

“We both did,” said Sherlock, and Oliver beamed and said, “Yes,” as if he’d been very instrumental in the tea-making.

“Hmm,” mused John, teasingly. “Is it poisoned?”

Sherlock scowled. Oliver followed the cue. “Of course it’s not poisoned.”

“I thought you’d spike it with dopamine or something.”

“I don’t need to spike it, you already love me.”

John smiled. “Yes. I do.” He sipped the tea and said, “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“Happy birthday,” Sherlock said again.

“I didn’t expect you to remember.”

Sherlock looked offended.

“Oh, don’t be like that, you’ve never remembered any other year.”

Sherlock hesitated, then said, “You gave me a very perfect birthday. I wanted to…”

“Sherlock,” said John. “I’m not keeping score.”

“No. I know. Oliver has a present for you.”

“Does he?” John smiled at him.

“I didn’t get you a card from him. You got me a card from him. I didn’t think about it until this morning—”

“Sherlock, seriously, stop it. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay. Ollie.” Sherlock ducked out of the bedroom with him, and John heard a bit of scuffling, and Sherlock whispering, “Remember what I showed you this is for? Remember? Right?”

What the hell, thought John, amused, as he sipped his tea comfortably in the bed. Had Sherlock tried to teach a fourteen-month-old how to do a performance?

Then Oliver came tottering out, a bit off-balance because he had John’s stethoscope around his neck and was clinging to the end of it tightly. John, surprised, put his tea down and reached out to grab Oliver before he could fall entirely over.

“What are you doing with that?” he asked.
“Help him onto the bed,” Sherlock prompted.

John glanced at him quizzically and then lifted Oliver onto the bed with him.

Oliver leaned over and pressed the stethoscope to John’s chest. Not over his heart. In fact, on the wrong side of his chest entirely. But John didn’t care about that. John was almost relieved Oliver couldn’t hear his heart, because it seemed to have skipped several beats at the baby’s actions.

Oliver’s face screwed up in concentration, giving every impression that he was actually gathering relevant evidence, and then he said, carefully, “Deep breath.”

“Oh, my God,” said John, on a shaky laugh, and looked up at Sherlock. “Did you teach him that?”

“He’s working on his bedside manner,” replied Sherlock. “And it turned out ‘happy birthday’ was still beyond him, but he could manage ‘deep breath,’ once we’d practiced it a bit.”

Oliver, his demonstration over, dropped the stethoscope and beamed with pride. John swept him up and kissed him into giggles.

“You brilliant baby,” John said, and then looked back up at Sherlock. “And you. What was that?”

“That was his idea, actually. He got into your doctor bag and dragged that out. I tried to teach him how to use it, but you’d probably do a better job.”

“You did an excellent job.”

“Well, I have a good doctor example to follow.”

John smiled at him. “You’re being very sweet this morning.”

“It’s your birthday,” said Sherlock, and paused. “Aren’t I always sweet?”

John laughed.

***

Mycroft sent a cake, which was very kind of him. Sherlock hmph’d about it. Oliver was just delighted to have cake. Oliver was obsessed with sweets. Oliver wanted to eat nothing but sweets. Sherlock, naturally, saw nothing wrong with this.

Harry rang. She sounded careful and fragile and sober. John was wishing her well and trying to stay slightly detached, because Oliver was old enough now to be aware of their moods, and John didn’t want him to be subjected to the wild ups-and-downs of life dealing with an addict. Granted, he was the clone of an addict, and John thought that was quite enough for the time being, as Sherlock had said nearly a year earlier.

Nearly exactly a year earlier, John thought, as he went through Oliver’s bedtime ritual. Oliver’s bedtime fluctuated and frequently John gave up and went to bed before him, but whenever he decided to go to sleep, if they were home—and it was true that sometimes Oliver fell asleep on the floor of New Scotland Yard or in the back of one of Mycroft’s cars while Sherlock whirled through a crime scene—then he or Sherlock read him off to sleep. John tried to read him normal baby books, but Oliver sometimes protested them. Sherlock’s choices were John’s blog—“I thought you hated my blog, I thought you said the writing was terrible,” John pointed out, and Sherlock said, “I never said that,” and John said, “Maybe not in so many words,” and Sherlock said, “It’s easy to read, simple vocabulary,” and John just smiled at him—or various grisly things John didn’t approve of.
John asked if Sherlock couldn’t just read the medical textbooks, but Sherlock said that just kept Oliver up.

At any rate, when Oliver started to do the whining sort of crying over nothing that he did when he was tired on the night of John’s birthday, John volunteered and carried him upstairs and sat with him on his lap and opened a book about a mouse detective that Molly had given Oliver for Christmas and that Sherlock absolutely despised as being “unrealistic.”

“Dog,” Oliver said, pointing at the dog in the illustrations.

“Yes,” said John, and kept reading, through Oliver’s yawns.

Oliver sank more and more heavily against John, and by the end of the book his breaths had evened out, and John sat with the warm, comforting baby weight in his lap and rested his mouth in Oliver’s thick, dark curls and thought that in two weeks it would be exactly a year since Mycroft had walked into the flat with a tiny, squalling creature and an outrageous story about his existence. And now John was married and their flat had a nursery and that tiny, squalling creature had a name and a personality that was entirely his own, despite the outrageous story of his birth, and John thought how a year ago, his birthday had gone by unacknowledged and John had had only one person in the world who he would have unhesitatingly laid down his life for and now he had two, and that was exponentially more terrifying and infinitely more satisfying.

“You were the best birthday present I ever got,” John whispered into Oliver’s hair. He had come two weeks late, but he had still been perfect, thought John.

John laid him in his cot and positioned his skull where Oliver would see it if he woke in the middle of the night and then went downstairs.

Sherlock was sitting in his chair by the fire. He was holding his violin but he wasn’t playing. He was sweeping his bow through the air instead.

“What should we do on March 17?”

Sherlock looked at him for a moment. He looked as if he had been a million miles away. He placed the date. “The day Mycroft brought us Oliver?”

“Yes.”

Sherlock smiled. “We’ll take him to feed the ducks.”

John laughed. “Do you want me to make tea?” he asked.

“No. John.”

Sherlock sounded funny. John looked at him curiously.

Sherlock looked shy and said, “I have something for you.”

John cocked his head, wondering what it could possibly be that had Sherlock looking so uncharacteristically unassured.

Sherlock used his bow to gesture at John’s chair, and John obeyed the unspoken command, taking his seat.

“I,” said Sherlock, then stopped and bit his lower lip.
John stared at him.

“I wrote this for you,” he blurted out.

John blinked. “What?”

“I wrote you a song.”

“When?” It was true that they weren’t together all the time—John had taken up rugby again, and Sarah still called him in for locum work every once in a while—but still, they were certainly together most of the time.

“I wrote it years ago.”

“Years ago—?”

“I wrote it when I was away,” Sherlock said, in a rush. Away. “Away” only meant one thing in Sherlockspeak. “Away” meant when he had been “dead.”

“When I was away,” Sherlock continued, still speaking quickly and looking now into the fire, not at John at all, “and there was downtime, and I was missing you, I…wrote you a song.”

John didn’t say anything. He stared at Sherlock in shocked silence.

Sherlock looked at him out of the corner of his eye after a moment. “Aren’t you going to ask why I never mentioned it before this?”

John swallowed. “I…”

Sherlock looked back at the fire. “I came back and things were…You were…I was so happy to have you back that I didn’t want to…I didn’t want to push you by saying…that I’d written you a song. That I’d written you this song. And then by the time I wanted to tell you, there was Oliver, and I felt like I’d waited so long, too long, and I…” Sherlock took a deep breath and finally looked at John. “But it’s your birthday, and you were so lovely on my birthday, and I just want to—”

“Sherlock,” John cut him off, surprised by how steady his voice was. “I told you, you don’t have to—”

“I want to,” Sherlock said, firmly, holding John’s gaze. “I really want to. It’s your song. I should have given it to you long ago. In my head, it’s always been your song. I hear it whenever I look at you. It’s been torture not to be able to play it for you. I want to give it you.”

“Okay,” said John. Truthfully, he wasn’t sure how to react. Sherlock had only seldom composed in the time John had known him before the fake death, the Irene Adler experience being the most notable example. John had eventually determined that he composed mostly during times of great internal confusion, not necessarily emotionally triggered. He had not composed at all, to John’s knowledge, since being back. But maybe John just had no idea when it came to Sherlock and music. Maybe he was always just groping in the dark, trying to understand something incomprehensible.

Then Sherlock lifted his violin and closed his eyes and began to play. And for the span of the ten or so minutes that it took, John did not breathe. He watched Sherlock play his song. And his song was gorgeous. His song was so achingly beautiful John couldn’t stand it. He didn’t even know how to describe it. It was plaintive and seductive and persuasive and melancholy and then it was playful and flirtatious and then it was joyous and exuberant. It was like every emotion all wrapped into one
astonishing melody, and how had Sherlock *accomplished* that?

Sherlock let the last note linger, waited until the vibrations had totally faded, before opening his eyes and lowering the violin and looking at John.

John took a breath, having no idea what to say. And he knew Sherlock wanted him to say something. He knew he *should* say something. He should have something to say to such an unbelievably beautiful gift as that song.

“Well?” Sherlock asked, eventually, looking nervous.

Looking *nervous*. As if he had no idea how *brilliant* that had been. John had a sudden vision of him, alone and lonely, putting those notes together because he had *missed John*, and that was how he had felt about him, *that*. How could John ever have not realized that? How had John spent so long in the dark about that? He really was an idiot.

John stood and took the violin and bow out of Sherlock’s hands and laid them gently on the table. Sherlock looked up at him, and John leaned down and very carefully, very tenderly, kissed his brow.

“What’s it called?” he murmured against his skin.

There was a moment of silence. “John’s Song?” suggested Sherlock, uncertainly.

He hadn’t named it. John’s lips curved into a smile against Sherlock. He kissed his forehead again.

“Did you like it?” asked Sherlock, still sounding unsure.

“Sherlock.” John’s voice was low. He pulled back a bit and placed his hands along Sherlock’s face and tipped his head back to force him to look at him. “I *love* it. It’s the best gift anyone’s ever given me. Anyone. Ever. Thank you.” And it was true that he had just told Oliver he was the best birthday gift ever, but no one had really given Oliver to John, Oliver had somehow just *happened*, whereas this astonishing song had been a very conscious gift by a person who loved him clearly very much.

John leaned down and kissed Sherlock. Kept kissing him, as he said, into his mouth, “Play it for me again?”

“I can’t play it with you sitting on my lap like this,” Sherlock pointed out.

“You need to develop that ability, because I’m going to want to be sitting on your lap whenever you play me that song.”

Sherlock smiled, John could feel it against his mouth. John thought he was pleased, and John was glad he was pleased. He *should* be.

“Allright,” John said. “We’ll shag first and then you can play that song for me again. Bring the violin to bed with you.”

“Not a good place for a violin to be,” said Sherlock, practically.

And John laughed and kissed him and thought how he really felt like this was the first birthday of his entire life.

***

“Is that your son?” asked one of the rugby lads, and John followed the direction of his gaze.
Sherlock was standing by the edge of the pitch, hands in the pockets of his coat. Oliver was running back and forth between him and a nearby bench, leaving the skull on the bench, running to Sherlock, going back to retrieve the skull, leaving it with Sherlock, repeating it. It looked like a complicated game of tag, and even at the distance John was at, he could tell Oliver was laughing uproariously and quite amused with himself. Sherlock was watching him closely with an expression John couldn’t read since he was too far away.

“It is,” John said, surprised that Sherlock was there. Sherlock never came to the rugby. He said rugby was dull and “for idiots.” Typical Sherlock. John ignored him. But it all meant that he was surprised Sherlock was there.

“Cute kid,” said Grady.

“Thanks,” said John, and couldn’t help the creep of pride in his voice. Oliver was a cute kid. And none of the rugby lads had even blinked when John had married Sherlock, said they had a child together. They had congratulated him and wished him well and John had loved them all fiercely for that, because it had been a confusing time in his life and they had been one of the few things that hadn’t felt changed to him. Everything had changed for the better, of course, but still, it had been nice to have something steady.

John walked over to Sherlock and Oliver. Sherlock, hands deep in his pockets, smiled at him and said, “Hello.”

“What are you doing here?” John asked, pleased. No, delighted, he decided, and couldn’t help but lean up to give Sherlock a light kiss.

Sherlock was surprised at the greeting but kissed him briefly back before pulling back and wrinkling his nose. “You’re a bit of a mess.”

“Some people would say I’m devastatingly attractive right now.”

“I prefer you not covered in mud.”

“Papa!” Oliver exclaimed, and barreled into him.

“How, love,” John said, and picked him up. “Has Daddy decided to let me teach you a bit about rugby?”

“John, don’t clutter his mind with such rubbish,” said Sherlock.

“Papa speriment,” Oliver said, pointing to him, and giggled.

John looked at Sherlock. “He thinks ‘experiment’ is a synonym for ‘messy,’ you know.”

“I’ve got to go to New Scotland Yard. Lestrade’s convinced he’s caught the right street busker this time.” Sherlock grimaced a bit.

The case had been going on for a while, and Sherlock was convinced the busker in question—responsible for a particularly gruesome homicide—had shifted operations to Paris, but Lestrade persisted in bringing buskers in.

“You could have just gone,” John said, because Sherlock normally didn’t hesitate to take Oliver with him to Scotland Yard if John happened to be out.

“Anderson has a cold. I am not breaking my promise to you to not worry overly much about Oliver.
It is completely and inarguably logical for a person not to wish to expose their child to *Anderson* germs.”

John decided not to get upset with Sherlock for that, because he appreciated Sherlock’s honesty. He smiled and said, “Fine.”

“Oi! Watson!” shouted someone from across the pitch. “Bring your baby over here and show him off!”

“You can all be muddy people together,” commented Sherlock.

“Will you be late?” John asked.

Sherlock shook his head.

“Then I’ll see you for a dinner you’ll refuse to eat,” said John, and kissed him briefly again. “Be careful.”

“I’m going straight to police headquarters, John,” said Sherlock, turning and walking away.

“But you can get in trouble in any circumstances,” remarked John.

Sherlock waved a hand at him without pausing.

John smiled. “Come on, Ollie, let’s go meet Papa’s friends.”

Chapter End Notes


...Possibly
Oliver was a hit with the rugby lads. Which wasn’t surprising, because Oliver was generally a hit when he wanted to be. They ran around the pitch a bit, and Oliver got dreadfully muddy, and had the time of his life, and everyone said that he looked a lot like Sherlock but that he acted a lot like John. Someone said he had John’s dreadful, uncoordinated run and John said, “Ha ha,” and all in all John had a lovely time.

John walked back with Oliver. It was late in March, and the air was brisk and damp but it wasn’t unbearable. Oliver talked as they walked. His babbles had more recognizable words in them now, but sometimes they just devolved into noise. He was always very frustrated by John’s inability to understand these noises. It was clear that Oliver’s brain outpaced his ability to share what was going on inside of it. Sherlock was a better interpreter, possibly because their brains worked in identical ways.

But Oliver was not growing frustrated tonight. Indeed, eventually Oliver settled into singing. Oliver loved singing. It surprised John, because Sherlock didn’t sing much at all, didn’t seem fond of popular music, only liked songs without words. But Oliver loved singing. Mrs. Hudson sang to him, and Oliver had picked up on “Baa Baa Black Sheep,” which was his favorite. Sherlock complained about it. John thought he was going to teach Oliver something by the Spice Girls or something to teach Sherlock a lesson.

“Baa baa baa shaap,” Oliver was singing in his ear as he turned onto Baker Street.

He juggled Oliver a little bit, digging for his keys in his pocket.

“Baa baa baa shaap,” Oliver sang again.

“We need to learn the next line of that song,” John told him, and sang it for him. “Have you any wool?”

John glanced at Oliver, who was staring at him, frowning.

“Oh, sorry,” said John, amused. “Are you the only one who’s allowed to sing?”

“You must be Dr. Watson,” said a voice to his right.

John, one foot on the first step leading to 221, turned automatically. He shouldn’t have, he always thought later. He should have been suspicious right away. But he’d been distracted by Oliver, distracted by what a wonderful day he’d had, and he turned without thinking.

The person who had spoken was almost nondescript. Middle-aged man, balding, spectacles. Black trousers, black jacket, zipped up against the approaching night air.

“Yes?” said John, for a moment wondering if it was a potential client.

Then the man, eyes fastened on Oliver, said, “And that must be the clone.”

John shifted position immediately, placing Oliver as far away from the man as he could get, and retreated back against the door, although he didn’t go in, because someone had just shown up and called Oliver a clone and there were five people in the universe who knew that. “What did you just say?” John demanded.
“He’s beautiful,” said the man, who hadn’t taken his eyes off Oliver.

“Who are you?” said John.

“Look how much he’s grown. Is he in the right percentile for body weight? He looks slightly undernourished. That could simply be a side effect of the cloning, of course. Perhaps his metabolism doesn’t—”

John decided he didn’t care anymore who the man was. “You need to leave. Now.”

His tone made Oliver cling tightly, whimpering a bit.

“Dr. Watson,” said the man, looking at him for the first time. And how did he know his name? How did he know any of this? “Do you understand the value of what you’re holding there? The value to the scientific community? All of the data that’s being lost while you—” The man took a step toward them.

John pressed Oliver against him and stood against the door and wondered why the sodding hell he hadn’t taken his gun with him to rugby. “Do not take another step,” he said, his voice so lethally quiet that it sliced through the air.

Thank God people still stopped when he spoke like that. The man froze and even held up his hands a little bit, as if John had really pulled a gun.

“Dr. Watson,” he said, pleasantly. “I just want to discuss with you the value of—You’re a man of science. If you would just allow me one examination to—”

“Go,” said John, calmly. “Now. And if I see you again, I’ll shoot you. Immediately.”

“Dr. Watson—”

John stepped inside and closed the door swiftly on him. He stood leaning against it, and he knew he should go upstairs, but he couldn’t move. In fact, with the door solidly between him and the man, he suddenly felt the adrenaline drain out of his body. He started trembling.

Oliver in his arms started sobbing.

Mrs. Hudson opened her door and poked her head out curiously. “Everything alright?”

“Fine, Mrs. Hudson,” John said, shortly, and went up to the flat with Oliver. He stood to the side of the window and looked out it. He didn’t see the man. But maybe he had just moved to lurk in the shadows.

Oliver cried, sounding terrified.


Oliver clung to him and wailed.

John pulled out his phone, realized his hands were shaking, took a deep breath, and bounced Oliver in an attempt to soothe him. Oliver was picking up on his mood, and he was picking up on Oliver’s. They were stuck in a feedback loop, John thought.

He considered ringing Sherlock, knew it would alarm Sherlock, texted instead.
Where are you?

Sherlock texted back immediately.

NSY. Still. Not the right busker. Not the right six buskers. They’re still going. SH

Then:

Where are you? SH

John didn’t reply to him. John called for a taxi.

***

John whirled into Scotland Yard with a wailing baby in his arms and an aura of such frenetic energy that nobody dared question him as he marched right through. Granted, they knew who he was by now, all of them, and clearly they decided to just leave him to Sherlock.

Oliver cried and cried, and John knew it was out of lingering terror, and knew he was doing a terrible job of soothing him, but the cabbie had complained loudly about the amount of mud John had left on the seat and John had wanted to shake him over the fact that he had more important things to deal with and Oliver would not stop crying because Oliver—his son—was terrified and he couldn’t fix it.

“John,” said Lestrade. “Sherlock said you weren’t—”

“Where is he?” John asked, not sparing a look for Lestrade, his eyes scanning every office.

“We’re doing line-ups—are you alright?”

He clearly wasn’t alright. John didn’t even dignify the stupidity of that question with an answer, and he felt a great deal like Sherlock as a result. Sherlock must be rubbing off on him.

John reached the room and tugged open the door and people looked up at him, all of the people in the room, whoever they were, because John focused only on Sherlock, who looked at him and went pale.

“We need to talk,” John snapped at him. “Now.”

The other people in the room all shifted awkwardly.

Lestrade started to say, “Okay, can we clear the room—”

“Not here,” Sherlock said to him, shortly, finally tearing his eyes away from John’s. “We need somewhere private.”

“You can have my office,” offered Lestrade, looking extremely confused.

“Good,” John said, and pushed past him, over to his office.

As soon as Sherlock entered, he said, “What the hell happened?”

John pushed Oliver into Sherlock’s arms. “Can you…? I can’t. I’m not doing any good.”

“I can see that,” remarked Sherlock, settling Oliver against him. “Shhhhh,” John heard him say, and John paced through Lestrade’s office and Sherlock whispered in Oliver’s ear and kept his eyes on
Oliver settled into little hiccups and Sherlock perched on the edge of Lestrade’s desk. “Care to fill me in?”

“There was a man,” said John, tearing his hands through his hair and not pausing in his strides. He felt like there was too much energy thrumming inside him to slow down ever again in his life.

“Where?”

“Baker Street.”

“Not in the flat.”

“Outside it.”

“And what did he say to you?”

“He knew, Sherlock. He knew Oliver was a clone. He knew my name.”

There was a moment of silence. “He knew Oliver was a clone?”

“Yes.”

“And what did he say? Was he a reporter?”

“No, he was…” John paused and tried to take a breath so that he could reconstruct the conversation. “He talked about the data. How much data we were wasting because we weren’t letting them test Oliver properly. He tried to appeal to me as a man of science. A man of science! As if I’m going to hand over my child to some creepy bastard who comes up to me on the street and looks at our baby like he’s a bundle of data for him to mine. Jesus Christ, Sherlock,” said John, and stopped abruptly and pressed his fingers into his eyes and tried to breathe.

Oliver made little whimpering noises that broke John’s heart.

Sherlock was silent.

John kept his eyes shut and kept trying to breathe and kept trying not to think about that moment of terror that had shot through his entire body at Oliver being called the clone. In that tone of voice. As if there was nothing else that he was. None of the amazing things that he was.

“John,” said Sherlock, finally, firmly, and John felt him grab his hand, pull him over.

John went because he didn’t want to resist, found himself with his face in Sherlock’s neck and his arms awkwardly clinging tightly to both Sherlock and the baby.

“Sorry,” said John, and tried to stop trembling, definitely did not move away from Sherlock.

“What did you say to him?” asked Sherlock. He was still speaking firmly but gently.

“I told him I’d shoot him if I ever saw him again.”

“Good,” said Sherlock.

“Christ, Sherlock,” said John. “If people know…if people know…they’ll try to take him from us, they’ll make us—”
“That’s not happening, John.” Sherlock was so calm, so resolute.

John used to be calm and resolute in a crisis. He was trying to remember how to do it but his mind was spinning out into a hundred million possibilities, Oliver in a strange cot, in a room by himself, terrified and missing them and crying and calling for them and there was no one to answer, just machines monitoring the data. “What if—”

“Stop it. It’s not happening. I’m sorry he scared you, and I understand why he did, but I need you to take care of Oliver for me right now.”

John felt like a stupid child for behaving the way he was, when he had a son who needed him to be stronger than this. He clamped down on his imagination ruthlessly. “Yes,” he said, immediately, and made himself take a step away from Sherlock. “Of course.” He took Oliver back and said, “Why?”

“Because I have to go and murder Mycroft now,” said Sherlock, and stalked out of the office.

***

John fled after Sherlock.

Lestrade said, bewildered, “What’s—”

“It’s nothing,” John called back to him. “Don’t worry about it.” He caught up to Sherlock as he was hailing a cab.

“It’s nothing,” Sherlock snorted at him. “You must think Lestrade’s an even bigger idiot than I do.” Sherlock held the door of the cab open to let John in. “You barge into Scotland Yard looking like you rolled around in a mud pit, demand to see me alone, and then we both go rushing off in a cab. Nothing.” Sherlock gave an address to the cabbie.

John ignored him. “Why are we going to see your brother?”

“What have you told about Oliver?”

“Molly,” John answered, readily.

“Exactly,” said Sherlock, grimly. “That’s why we’re going to see my brother.”

Oliver made a small sound, anxious and distressed, and Sherlock looked at him, his gaze softening.

“He had fun, playing rugby,” Sherlock remarked. And then, “He gets that from you.” And then, “That’s what they’d be interested in, that sort of data.” And then, “Which wouldn’t even exist if he hadn’t been taken from them.”

“I don’t think your brother would—” John attempted.

“Do you think it was Molly?” The question was scathing.

John looked down at Oliver, who was still fussing unhappily. He rested his lips onto Oliver’s head and murmured soothingly at him.

The cab drew to a stop and Sherlock clambered out.

Typical. John swore and threw money at the cabbie and then followed Sherlock into the Diogenes Club.
As soon as they entered, Oliver began full-fledged wailing. Of course. Sherlock Holmes’s clone would have realized right away that he wasn’t supposed to be making noise and so commence making a great deal of noise. Everyone looked up at them in horror. John futilely tried to hush Oliver.

Mycroft came swiftly up to them.

“Ah,” said Sherlock, loudly, and gave him one of his false, bright smiles. “How good of you to—”

Mycroft grabbed his lapel and tugged him into the next room. John followed with Oliver, and Mycroft closed the door very gently.

Then he whirled on Sherlock. “What are you doing?” he demanded, tightly.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock countered, and stalked up to him, directly in his face.

Mycroft lifted his eyebrows in mild interest.

“If you do not think that I am capable of taking my family somewhere you won’t find us, you are sorely mistaken,” Sherlock clipped out. “Keep your minions away from my son.”

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow, glanced beyond Sherlock to John, trying to quiet Oliver, then turned and opened the room’s door, allowing admission to Anthea.

“Get me the CCTV feed for Baker Street within the last hour,” Mycroft said, quietly.

“Yes, sir,” said Anthea, without looking up from her BlackBerry, and left the room.

“Oh, as if you don’t know,” snapped Sherlock. “As if you don’t spend every second spying on us.”

“I don’t, actually,” Mycroft responded, blandly. “I’m supposed to receive a report of all activities, especially anything that seems out of the ordinary.”

“Well,” seethed Sherlock, “if you haven’t received a report recently about out of the ordinary occurrences, you need to sack whoever’s doing your spying for you.”

Mycroft cut his eyes over to John and Oliver. “What happened?” he asked, calmly.

John opened his mouth to answer but Sherlock beat him to it. “Someone approached John.”

Mycroft lifted his eyebrows. “And threatened him?” he guessed.

“And knew Oliver is a clone,” Sherlock spat out.

Mycroft stilled, as if he finally found something interesting about this conversation. “Really?”

“You’re going to pretend you know nothing about this?” Sherlock demanded.

“I don’t.” Mycroft looked back at John. “What did he say to you?”

“He knew everything about us, Mycroft. He knew my name.”

“You’re minor celebrities, your name is not obscure information,” Mycroft pointed out.

“No, but the fact that Oliver is a clone is supposed to be,” Sherlock cut in. “And do you know how I know you’re involved? Because I only know of five people who know about Oliver, and the man
who approached John today wasn’t one of those five.”

“Five,” said Mycroft, clearly counting in his head.

“Mrs. Hudson and Molly,” John supplied.

John thought Mycroft’s eyebrows would have skidded right off his forehead if they could have.

“Mrs. Hudson and Molly?” he echoed. “You told two gossipy women and you think that this current situation is my fault?”

John bristled but Sherlock again beat him to it. “They didn’t tell anyone. They never would. This is coming from you. And I will not let you take him from us.”

“This is absolutely ridiculous,” said Mycroft. “If I wanted to take him away from you, then I’d do it.”

“I’d never let you,” snarled Sherlock.

“It would have been the simplest thing in the universe to accomplish whilst you were suffering from a fever in one of my upstairs bedrooms and your husband was playing nursemaid and the child was left in my care,” pointed out Mycroft, sharply, which seemed to give Sherlock pause. “I have no wish to take him away from you. I gave him to you in the first place.”

Anthea entered the room again.

“ Took you long enough,” Sherlock snapped at her and then turned and prowled away from Mycroft, hands caught in his hair.

John looked between him and Mycroft and tried to soothe Oliver’s continued whimpers of unhappiness.

Anthea handed Mycroft a tablet wordlessly and then left the room again.

Mycroft, eyes drawn, stared down at the tablet. After a moment he said, “Dr. Thorpe.”

“Who’s that?” demanded Sherlock, from the point that he had stalked to across the room.

“Dr. Peter Thorpe,” said Mycroft, and laid the tablet aside. “Dr. Thorpe is the reason Oliver exists.”

“I’m the reason Oliver exists,” retorted Sherlock.

“He’s the doctor who used your DNA.”

“He is? Then he should have been sacked long ago.”

“He was,” Mycroft assured him, tightly. “In no uncertain terms. But you understand: a man of science, being denied access to his greatest triumph.”

“No. I don’t understand. Oliver isn’t a scientific triumph. Oliver is our son.”

Mycroft looked evenly at Sherlock for a moment, then turned to John. “What did he say to you, John?” He asked it almost gently.

John felt like he could barely remember, like the entire afternoon had been such a blur. A man had come up to him and called Oliver a clone and everything after that had been white-hot panic over whether Oliver would end up a lab rat somewhere for the pleasure of greedy government scientists who wouldn’t care that he liked his skull to always be in view and preferred internal medicine to
laboratory medicine when it came to John’s textbooks and really liked typing and a good snuggle and hated to feel, ever, like he was alone. “Something about uncollected data,” managed John, from the riot of thoughts he couldn’t seem to quiet.

“You need to have him killed, Mycroft,” said Sherlock.

“Sherlock,” sighed John.

“What? Don’t pretend you don’t want him dead. If you’d had your gun on you at the time, he’d already be dead.”

“I still don’t think we should talk seriously about having people killed in front of Oliver. We should maybe set an example of not being murderers for him.”

Sherlock snorted in disgust. “It wouldn’t be murder.”

“I want him out of the country,” John told Mycroft. “I want him far, far away. Can you do that?”

Mycroft regarded him silently for a moment. “I can do more,” he said, eventually.

“Do more,” Sherlock told him.

Mycroft’s gaze shifted to Oliver, still trying to catch his panicked breath with distressed little hiccups. He walked over to John, gaze staying on the baby in his arms, and Oliver watched him back evenly. They stood for a moment, regarding each other, and then Mycroft said, very intently, very gravely, “Oliver. I will make sure that you are never separated from either of your fathers. I promise. You shouldn’t ever worry about that.”

Oliver sniffled and adjusted his hold on John, his tiny hand clenching reflexively in John’s filthy rugby shirt. But his frantic breaths finally seemed to actually slow, as if he really had understood Mycroft and was making an effort to not worry.

Then Mycroft turned back to Sherlock, who had been watching the interaction with an odd, unreadable expression on his face.

“Do you want security?” asked Mycroft.

“Security?” echoed Sherlock, which showed how thrown he’d been by what Mycroft had said to Oliver, because he hated to look stupid in front of Mycroft and he’d just repeated him.

“Yes. For the three of you.”

“How many more are there, Mycroft?” John asked. He was surprised by how quiet his voice was, how even it was. He was asking how many people in the world would try to steal his baby from him, and he sounded admirably calm.

Mycroft looked at him, a close and piercing look, and suddenly John was back in a warehouse, meeting Mycroft for the first time, being told that it was warfare that steadied him. John Watson had had a long time of peace just recently, but he could already feel his body shifting back into soldier mode, his mind settling into attack and defend and protect.

“The cloning program is on a need-to-know basis, and only a small subset of those people would know the source of Oliver’s DNA. Or that Oliver exists at all. That said.” Mycroft paused. “It is a complex procedure. There is a limited number of people, but there are still…several.”
Such a vague number. John felt a chill trickle down his spine and held Oliver a bit closer.

Sherlock said, “Kill them. Every single one of them.”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft began.

“Kill Oliver,” John inserted.

Sherlock and Mycroft both looked at him in mirroring comical alarm. Oliver stuck his fingers in his mouth.

“I want him dead,” said John. “On every official record of the program. What does it say about him now? He must just vanish. He must just vanish for Dr. Thorpe to have tracked us down, to be curious about what happened to him. So I want you to kill him. I want you to make him unremarkable. Just one more dead clone baby. Yes, maybe he made it a little bit longer, got out there in the world, but in the end, he died just like all the rest. That’s the story I want you to tell for them. I don’t want anyone to have any reason to come looking for him."

After a moment, Mycroft said, gently, “But you will still have a baby—”

“We can’t make it entirely safe. I realize that. It’s impossible. But this will help.”

“John’s right,” Sherlock agreed, swiftly. “Fix the records.”

“As you wish,” said Mycroft.

“If you’re serious, about never separating him from us,” said Sherlock, viciously, “you’ll do it because you wish it.”

“He isn’t a victory notch for them, Mycroft,” John added, and the edge of his fury sliced sharply, undulled at all by how long it had been since the man had confronted him on Baker Street. “He’s your nephew.”

“Technically,” remarked Mycroft, slowly, and glanced at the baby, “he’s my brother. Either way: consider it done.”

John kissed Oliver’s head and tried to feel better.

He did not.
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

I know, guys. There's a chapter count now. Because yes, this particular story is done.

Is the Oliver saga done? God, no. The only reason this one's done is because I decided it *had* to be split into two for my own--and your--sanity. So once this story is done, there'll be a series of vignettes linking this bit to the next major plotted story.

I have guests in town next week, so this'll get posted, but it might not be on Wednesday. It depends on when I can steal time.

Sherlock clattered around angrily in the kitchen, doing God knows what. John didn’t dare ask what the experiment could possibly be. It sounded like it consisted of Sherlock throwing things against the wall. It was enough of a racket that Mrs. Hudson came up to check on them, and John just shook his head at her, and she left, came back with a plate of biscuits, gave him a pitying look, then left again.

Oliver, wide-eyed at Sherlock’s behavior, and probably still thrown by the day’s events, clung to John. John laid on the sofa with him and read him books to try to distract him. Hours crawled by and Sherlock continued to make a furious ruckus and Oliver continued to resist sleep and John grew progressively more exhausted and also got a headache, but finally Oliver fell asleep, while examining a detailed color diagram of the digestive system.

John considered taking him up to lay him in his cot, thought that he couldn’t bear to be away from him at the moment, and instead let the textbook fall to the floor and adjusted their positions on the sofa. He tucked Oliver in close to him and closed his eyes. The headache throbbed and threatened to pull him under, and he felt so bone-deep weary that he could have been sick. He’d played rugby and had a little bit of an emotional breakdown and had barely eaten all day. Not exactly red letter, thought John, and let himself drift, listening to Oliver’s even breaths and Sherlock destroying things in their kitchen.

He woke to dim quiet, to Oliver still tucked against him, to Sherlock, in his chair, watching them sleep. John adjusted his position on the sofa a bit. His hand was asleep where it had gotten trapped under him, but at least his headache had receded to the background.

“What state did you leave the kitchen in?” John yawned, and tried to get himself comfortable without jostling Oliver too much.

“He should be in his cot,” said Sherlock.

“Oh, suddenly you’re the bed police?” asked John, a little irritably, and decided it was possible he was still touchy from earlier.

Sherlock ignored him. He slid Oliver into his arms and left the room, and John settled into the sofa and listened to Sherlock’s steps as he took the baby upstairs.

And then returned.

“You need to go to bed,” said Sherlock, quietly.
“I’m fine,” John denied.

“You’re shaking.”

John realized that he was, tiny shivering tremors. “It’s an adrenaline crash,” John said, because it was true.

“I know.” Sherlock’s face suddenly pressed into John’s neck. John opened his eyes, surprised. He hadn’t realized Sherlock had been kneeling next to the sofa. Reflexively, he lifted a hand to soothe it through Sherlock’s hair. “I’m sorry,” Sherlock said. “I’m so sorry.”

John blinked, startled. Sherlock never apologized. For anything. Ever. John’s eyes cut over to the kitchen doorway. He wondered what terrible state it must be in for Sherlock to be apologizing. “What did you do?” asked John, cautiously.

“This is all my fault.”

“What is?” asked John, confused.

“All of it. I shouldn’t have left you alone with Oliver today—”

“Hang on,” John interrupted him. He nudged him away, forcing him back far enough so he could peer at his face in the ambient lighting from the street. “You think what happened today was your fault?”

Sherlock nodded, looking solemn and miserable. “It was. I should have known that—”

“How the hell would you have known that Peter Thorpe was going to talk to me today? Are you in contact with the man, Sherlock?”

“No, of course not, I—”

“Then you didn’t know, and you couldn’t have known, and this is not your fault.”

“I should have known that the doctor who created him would—”

“No,” John said, firmly, sitting up to make his point better. This gave him an unusual height advantage over Sherlock, and made Sherlock seem suddenly very young and vulnerable to him. “You shouldn’t have known that.”

“Mycroft’s right. Men of science. I am a man of science. I would never abandon an experiment.”

“But you said it today. He isn’t an experiment. He’s a baby.”

Sherlock shook his head. “No. He’s our baby. And today I put him in danger because when I look at him all I see is Oliver instead of—instead of what he really is, which is—”

“Which is Oliver, Sherlock. When you look at him, you see him. And that’s how it should be.”

Sherlock was silent for a moment. He looked down at nothing in particular and considered. “Other people won’t.”

“And who cares about that?” John demanded, fiercely.

Sherlock looked up at him, his eyes so pale that they seemed to be glowing. “He will.”
John was silent for a moment, acknowledging the truth of that point. Then he said, “And that’s why no one will ever know. That’s why we’ll protect him and we’ll keep it a secret and he’ll stay safe and sound. Three of us, Sherlock. He has three of us protecting him. I know you saw that today.”

“He has three of us protecting him, and still some insane idiot scientist got close enough to look into his eyes,” noted Sherlock, bitterly.

“That was my fault,” said John. “I shouldn’t have—”

“It was not,” Sherlock cut in, sharply. “There is nothing about this that is your fault. You’ve done nothing but stay here to take care of a child who isn’t yours, just because I asked you to, just because you’re very bad at saying no to me and because I’m selfish enough that I exploit that a lot and have never made you learn how to—”

John drew his eyebrows together. “You think that’s why I’m here? You think I couldn’t say no to you if I really wanted to? Really?”

Sherlock stood, restless, and walked around the sitting room, talking as if he wasn’t hearing John at all. “We should go somewhere. We should take him and disappear with him. It would be safest for him. No one would know. No one would know about him, no one would know about us, we’d start over somewhere with him and that’s what we should do, but if I told you that was what I wanted to do, you wouldn’t say no. Do you see the problem here?”

John stared at him. “Is that really what you want to do?”

Sherlock stopped moving, standing by the dark fireplace, his back to John and his hands caught in his hair. “I don’t know,” he said, softly, on an exhalation.

John tried to think of how many times he had heard Sherlock Holmes say I don’t know. It wasn’t many. He looked at him for a moment, and then he stood and walked over to him and slid his arms around him and pressed a kiss to the layers of fabric covering his back. He left his face there, against Sherlock, and mumbled, “You’re right.”

“Of course I am,” said Sherlock, impatiently.

“We should go to bed.” John straightened away from him. Sherlock didn’t move at all, so John reached for his hand, held it firmly. “Come on,” he said.

Sherlock came, slowly, as if he were doing a great favor to John and had no desire to go to bed. John left him in their bedroom, disappeared into the bathroom to get ready for bed, and when he reemerged Sherlock was on the bed, still fully dressed, sprawled on top of the duvet and staring up at the ceiling.

John got under the duvet but he scooted right up next to Sherlock, settling himself into the sharp angles of Sherlock’s body, hoping that eventually his closeness and warmth would make Sherlock relax, like heat applied to a tense muscle. John wondered if he was still thinking about going away, disappearing.

“You’d miss London,” John said, softly.

“I’ve left it before. You’d miss London.”

“I’ve left it before,” John rejoined. “You like cities. So will he. I’m sure it’s genetic.”

“There are other cities in the world. There’s New York.”
“Do you like New York?” They seldom talked about traveling. Their lives were so indelibly here. John sensed that neither one of them was really a traveler in the full sense of the word. They had no desire to explore other places, they had quite enough adventuring where they were.

Sherlock shrugged. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

“You’ve never been there?”

“Not quite.”

Typical Sherlockian answer to a straightforward question, thought John, but didn’t call him on it. He said instead, “I want to stay here. I want to stay here with all the people who love him. All the people who love us. All the people we love. These people will protect him, Sherlock. They will protect him more than any isolation we could give him in New York.”

“Friends protect people,” said Sherlock, sounding odd.

“Yes. They do,” John agreed.

“You’ve always thought that.”

“Well. Yes. I suppose so.”

“You said it to me the last time we spoke face-to-face.”

“The last time?” said John, confused.

“Before…” Sherlock trailed off meaningfully.

There was really only one topic of conversation that was always a black hole when they spoke. John closed his eyes and snuggled a little closer to Sherlock. “I don’t remember.”

“‘Friends protect people,’ you said. And then I jumped off a building to protect you. Because friends protect people.”

John had his own opinions about Sherlock jumping off the roof. But it was undeniable that Sherlock had done it because he had been trying to protect the people he loved. John said, “We’d all do it for Oliver. Each and every one of us. And there would be no one to do it in New York. We’d be alone. And he’d be lonely. He doesn’t need anonymity. He needs to be Oliver Watson-Holmes. Surrounded by all these people who adore him. Being Oliver Watson-Holmes is actually rather damn good.”

Sherlock was silent for a long moment. “What about Mycroft’s offer of security?” he asked, finally.

“Aren’t we secure enough? Mycroft will make sure that we’re watched, constantly, by competent people after this. Do we need there to be more than that? Do you really want to raise our child in an atmosphere where he’s going to ask us why bodyguards follow us around? Where he’s going to have to live his life knowing that he’s so odd and different that we think people might constantly be on the verge of stealing him from us? You want to take that happy baby we have upstairs and make him scared of everything around him? Because I don’t. I want him to go out into the world and conquer it, not hide from it.”

There was another long moment of silence. “I worry so much that we’re dreaming. That this is all too perfect. And you burst into Scotland Yard today…looking the way you looked…and I thought that it must be all over, this perfection, and I wasn’t even surprised.”
John propped himself up so he could look down at Sherlock as best he could in the dark. “We’re not dreaming. This is our life. And it’s not going anywhere.”

“I just wish I could make him normal.”

Sherlock sounded heartbroken,anguished, and John thought of how many times, as a small boy, he must have wished for himself to be normal, to not stand off to the side, stamped with the label of different. And John hated that there should be any moment of thinking that, from either of his Sherlock Holmeses. They were brilliant, remarkable, amazing, and they should be proud of that, they should be celebrated. Why was John always the only one who realized this?

“He is so much better than normal,” said John, fiercely. “He’s you.” And when he leaned down to kiss Sherlock, he was willing him, desperately, to believe that.

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John thought that it would take forever for them to stop looking over their shoulders, stop glaring suspiciously at every person who came vaguely into their vicinity. And he was okay with that. It wasn’t paranoia, John thought, if they really were out to get you. He never, ever left the house with Oliver without his gun, and he wasn’t sure he ever would again. Sherlock didn’t carry a gun when he left the house with Oliver; John refused to let him. But Sherlock had other means of defense at his disposal and John trusted him.

Lestrade brought the situation up once, cautiously, at their next crime scene. “You two are okay, right?”

John, watching Oliver toddle in Sherlock’s wake, catching the tail of his coat every so often to remind Sherlock of his presence, said, “Yes. Fine. Why wouldn’t we be?” and hoped that was enough to deter Lestrade from asking any follow-ups.

Lestrade eyed John closely and said, slowly, “It’s just that you two are good for each other so I wanted to make sure, if he’s done something stupid, that—”

John stared at him. “Are you trying to be my marriage counselor?”

Lestrade grimaced. “God, no, I definitely do not want to be your marriage counselor. But, you know, I’m just…rooting for the two of you.” Lestrade looked off at the crime scene and shifted his weight embarrassedly.

John wondered how many people in his life felt themselves heavily invested in John’s relationship because of how very long it had taken to get off the ground. He said, “We’re not quarreling.” Because it was true.

Lestrade looked relieved at how straightforward the answer seemed to him. Because Lestrade didn’t know how wildly complicated their lives really were. “Good,” said Lestrade. “I’m glad.”

John, suddenly curious as to how much Lestrade knew, said, “What does Mycroft say about us?”

“Nothing,” said Lestrade, looking at him. “Ever. It’s as if we don’t even have the two of you in common.”

John wondered if that was because Mycroft didn’t want to have to lie to Lestrade, and Mycroft felt compelled to lie to Lestrade because of the secret of Oliver’s birth. And he wondered if Mycroft resented that, given that they’d told both Molly and Mrs. Hudson, leaving only Lestrade out of their inner circle.
John looked at Oliver. Sherlock was crouching by a bit of the carpet, pointing at something. Oliver, hand resting on Sherlock’s knee, was listening raptly and nodding wisely. John thought that it was not exactly the best time to ask him if he thought they should tell someone else about Oliver.

And life continued to go on, slipping past him at an alarming rate. A half-hearted spring began to give way to a rainy summer. John, unable to come up with any way to do it other than to ask straight out, told Sherlock to hand over his wedding ring so it could be cleaned.

“Cleaned?” sniffed Sherlock. “As if I don’t keep it clean?”

John looked at Sherlock’s hands, which were currently deep in a fish tank full of sheep entrails that was resting on their kitchen table. Oliver, sitting on the table so he could have a good view, was snacking contentedly on one of Mrs. Hudson’s biscuits and looking interestingly at all the guts and gore on display.

Sherlock followed John’s gaze and said, in exasperation, “I’m wearing gloves!”

“I’m taking your ring to be cleaned. I’ll get it as soon as you’re done with the sheep intestines.”

“Don’t pretend you’re not Scottish,” muttered Sherlock. “You eat these things.”

John, ignoring him, went off to fold some of Oliver’s laundry.

That night, John was reading *Exotic Viral Diseases* to Oliver while Sherlock entered data from whatever he’d been doing with the sheep entrails and corrected the book every page or so. Eventually, Sherlock said, “That book is absolute rubbish, you’d be better off reading him that terrible mouse detective book you’re so fond of.”

“You bought him this book,” John reminded him.

Because Sherlock had, second-hand, at a bookstore where they’d had the owner under surveillance. “For my son,” Sherlock had said as he bought it, and Oliver had blinked his wide, beguiling eyes, and the shop owner had been so flustered by the idea of this unconventional gift that Sherlock had managed to catch sight of the counterfeit fifty-pound note in his cash drawer.

“I didn’t want to buy it for him,” grumbled Sherlock. “That was just for a case. I could clean our rings.”

“No,” said John, simply.

“Of course I could—”

“I’m not debating that you could,” replied John. “I’m saying that you won’t. We’re not going to use them for experiments. Give me your ring, I’ll take it to the jeweler’s tomorrow.”

“What about your ring?” Sherlock demanded.

“Oh, look, Ollie,” said John, turning the page. “Cowpox disease.”

“Zees,” said Oliver, because John had the only child who would recognize the word disease before he would recognize the word cow.

“Disease,” said Sherlock, and then, “Your ring needs to be cleaned, too.”

“Fine,” agreed John, pretended to be reluctant even though his plan required both rings to go to the jeweler’s. “If I agree to send mine to the jeweler’s, will you agree to send yours?” John glanced up
from the first paragraph on cowpox disease.

Oliver pointed to the C and said, “C.” Letters were his latest lesson from John. (His latest lesson from Sherlock involved the freezing point of sheep blood.)

Sherlock said, “That’s acceptable,” as if they’d just forged a treaty.

Oliver pointed to the page and demanded, “Please!” so John started reading the agents of cowpox disease out loud.

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He should have known that wasn’t going to be the end of it, but he didn’t think much about it, honestly. He’d won what he wanted, which was Sherlock agreeing to part with his wedding ring. It was one of those nights when Oliver refused to acknowledge the existence of the human need for sleep, so John ended up leaving him contentedly typing away on his blog. Because Sherlock had started a blog for him. Owh.co.uk. It was ridiculous. So far it had a series of random keysmash entries. John had pointed out that the URL ignored Oliver’s full name of Oliver *Copernicus* and Sherlock had said, “He can change it himself if he wants to when he gets older,” as if he really thought Oliver would disown the name altogether.

John woke up when Sherlock slid into bed with him. Well. Not really. Calling it *woke up* was generous. He momentarily reached a state between sleep and full consciousness, turning automatically toward Sherlock’s warmth, pressing his nose against him.

“Ollie asleep?” he slurred out.

“Yes,” answered Sherlock, letting him settle against him.

John grunted and used Sherlock as a pillow and was almost entirely asleep when Sherlock said, “I take excellent care of my wedding ring.”

“Uh-huh,” mumbled John, still more interested in sleeping.

“I insisted on the wedding rings. I wouldn’t experiment on the wedding rings,” continued Sherlock.

John blinked himself a little more awake, processing, because Sherlock was clearly initiating one of his middle-of-the-night-because-it-means-a-lot-to-me conversations. “Alright,” he agreed. “Yes. You’re right. I’m sorry I implied that.” John lifted his head up to make sure Sherlock knew he meant it.

“You want the ring for our anniversary.”

“I didn’t know you’d even remember that.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “It’s not really our anniversary. It’s an arbitrary date for some official piece of paper that allowed me access to your hospital room and control of your medical decisions.”

“When you put it that way, you make our marriage sound downright frightening.” John, amused, pressed a kiss to Sherlock’s breastbone through his T-shirt. “Promise you won’t make any unique medical decisions just to make sure my death is interesting enough for you.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” said Sherlock, sharply.

“Sorry,” said John, and wondered why he kept misstepping today. Normally he navigated the
minefield of Sherlock’s emotional pressure points with an expertise he barely noticed. “I’m half-asleep. Don’t mind me.” He pulled himself farther up Sherlock’s body so he could settle his head into the curve of Sherlock’s shoulder.

Sherlock’s arm came up to hold him closer, assurance he wasn’t angry. “Our anniversary is January 29, so I’ll have you know that you’re the one who misses it every year.”

“Oh, am I?” John asked, good-naturedly.

“Mm-hmm. Never even a card out of you.”

“Have you been getting me anniversary gifts all this time? How rude of me not to thank you for them.”

“I always play Tchaikovsky for you extra-nicely on January 29, I’ll have you know,” responded Sherlock, primly. “You never notice.”

John felt a bit terrible. He wasn’t sure if what Sherlock was saying about the Tchaikovsky was true, but he was sure that Sherlock had probably remembered the date of their meeting every year, whereas John had to admit that most of the time he didn’t. “I see, but I do not observe,” John told him, and kissed the tip of his nose.

“You can have my ring for your secret anniversary purpose and I’ll pretend to be surprised,” said Sherlock.

“True love,” John grinned, and kissed the bow of Sherlock’s mouth.
Chapter 46

John frequently took Oliver with him when he went to the shops because Oliver was still too young to fully protest an outing and John was hoping to instill in Oliver an understanding that every so often one ought to buy proper food.

They came back from their outing to the shops with lots of proper food and no Sherlock in the flat.

And no note. Typical. Sherlock was terrible about leaving notes, no matter how much John told him that it would cut down on the panic that he’d been kidnapped.

“And I’d find a way to leave you a note if I’d been kidnapped, John,” Sherlock had said, impatiently, and John had rolled his eyes and recognized a losing argument.

“Where do you think your dad is?” John asked Oliver, setting Oliver on the table to watch as he put the shopping away. The table was Oliver’s favorite seat now. All tables. Clearly he believed himself to be above such pedestrian things as chairs.

Oliver banged a tin of beans on the table thoughtfully before pronouncing, “Crime.”

“Probably,” John agreed, and texted Sherlock. Where are you?

Sherlock responded immediately. One good thing about Sherlock was he almost always responded immediately. Bart’s. ~SH

Crime?

No. ~SH

“He could be more forthcoming with information, your father,” John informed Oliver.

“Yes,” agreed Oliver, and threw an onion to the floor.

Experiment?

No. ~SH

John sighed a sigh of fondly exasperated tolerance. Will you be long?

No. ~SH

John decided to give up. He pocketed his mobile and looked across at Oliver and said, “It’s just you and me, love. What shall we do with our time?”

“Run!” decided Oliver, eyes shining, clapping his hands together once with glee in that Sherlockian way he had.

So John chased him around the sitting room and they were still in the middle of it when Sherlock arrived home.

“Daddy!” exclaimed Oliver, who was getting much better at pronouncing his favorite words, which Daddy was definitely among.

Oliver ran over to Sherlock and John took advantage of the reprieve to collapse breathlessly onto his
back on the floor.

Sherlock put down a bag he was carrying to pick Oliver up and eyed John. “How long have you been running Papa ragged?” he asked Oliver.

Oliver giggled and said, “Papa experiment.”

“Yes, Papa is a mess,” Sherlock agreed, and stepped over John on his way to the desk.

“If you’d been chasing him around for the past half an hour, you’d be out of breath, too,” John told him. “Where’ve you been?”

“I told you.”

“What were you doing there, though?”

“The bag is for you,” said Sherlock, simply.

So it was going to be like that, was it? “Okay,” said John, and sat up and pulled the bag over to him and pulled out…a framed electrocardiogram. “It’s an EKG,” remarked John, and looked up at Sherlock.

Sherlock had perched Oliver on the desk and had given him a roll of gauze that he’d clearly just stolen from Bart’s. He glanced over at John. “Perfectly sound analysis, but I was hoping you’d go deeper.”

“You’re looking like the cat who ate the canary so why don’t you just tell me what you’ve been so clever about here,” said John.

“It’s my EKG,” said Sherlock, sounding delighted.

John looked back down at it. It looked like a perfectly normal EKG to him. “Okay.” He looked back up at Sherlock. “You’re okay, right?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and said to Oliver, as he set him down on his periodic table blanket with his skull, “Is Papa being particularly slow today?”

“No, you’re being particularly obnoxious,” John retorted.

Sherlock grinned at him, still looking pleased with himself, and said, “Happy anniversary, John. I give you—” he gestured magnificently—“my heart.”

John’s breath caught in his throat. He looked down at the framed EKG in his hands. He said, “You…”

Sherlock kissed him, which surprised him, because he’d thought he was still over by the desk. “You’re welcome,” Sherlock said, smugly.

“But our anniversary isn’t for—”

“John, this is our anniversary. You persist in placing undue importance on a visit to Mycroft’s office.”

“I thought your view was our anniversary was January 29,” John pointed out.

“That was an anniversary before we had this anniversary to celebrate.”
“And what is this anniversary?”

“The day you told me you loved me,” answered Sherlock, simply.

John suddenly dropped the EKG to the floor and launched himself onto Sherlock, catching Sherlock’s surprised sound into his mouth as he pushed him backward hard enough so that they collapsed into a sprawling and untidy heap on the sofa. When he pulled back, Sherlock’s wide-pupiled eyes were staring at him in surprised shock and Oliver was also staring at them.

“You gave me your heart,” John said. “That was showing off.”

“I am a show-off,” Sherlock managed. “Are you going to stay on top of me much longer? Because I thought you were insistent we wait on giving Oliver a sex speech and he’s going to start asking questions in a second.”

John glanced over at Oliver, who was indeed wearing his Sherlockian I’m-about-to-interrogate-you face. Even if he only knew a few dozen words at this point, he had been born into natural interrogatory tenacity.

John rolled off Sherlock and sat on the floor next to Oliver and looked down at him. Oliver looked back up at him, expression slowly shifting into a more benign curiosity. John tipped his head closer to Oliver and confided, “The answer to your question is yes, I love your father madly. More than I did a year ago today.”

John was planning to look up to catch Sherlock’s reaction to that, but instead Mycroft said, “Oh, my, such pulchritudinous sentiments.”

John looked up at Mycroft instead, just as he stepped over the abandoned EKG in the middle of the floor.

“That was private,” Sherlock scowled at him.

“And indeed, I shall endeavor to forget it.” Mycroft sat in John’s empty chair. “But it does make a nice segue into the reason for my visit.”

“I don’t understand why you can’t learn to knock,” complained John. “Such a little thing, and you’re so clever, and yet you can’t seem to remember it.”

Oliver toddled over to Mycroft and said, “Client,” but tempered it with a smile and then clambered onto Mycroft’s lap.

Mycroft looked astonished, but Oliver settled there very happily and stuck his hand in his mouth and John could have sworn he practically winked at Sherlock, who smiled suddenly and said, “You’ve gained just the right amount of weight for him to find you a comfortable pillow now. John, maybe you care to open the present?”

John looked from Oliver on Mycroft’s lap to Sherlock, still sprawled on the sofa. He glanced at the EKG on the floor and decided that he had no idea what was going on. “What present?”

“The anniversary present he’s obviously brought for us.”

“You,” John said to Mycroft, as he picked himself up from the floor, “should definitely not know that today is a meaningful day for us.”

Mycroft looked sour. Oliver had taken his hand out of his mouth and was now blandly wiping the
saliva covering it on Mycroft’s pristine waistcoat. John began to wonder if the child was actually diabolical. “My appearance today is mere happenstance.”

“And such happy happenstance,” said Sherlock. He was back to his good mood. Clearly Oliver’s ability to openly drool all over Mycroft was like a magical elixir for Sherlock.

Mycroft wriggled a bit to get his hand into his coat, and Oliver twisted on his lap to start poking at Mycroft’s nose. Mycroft froze, one hand inside his coat, and said, “What’s he doing?”

What he was doing was picking up bad Sherlockian habits, John thought, and pulled Oliver off of Mycroft’s lap, saying, “Okay, that’s enough.” He handed Oliver to Sherlock.

“It’s true, Ollie, his nose is quite big,” said Sherlock.

John gave him a look that he knew both Sherlock and Oliver would blithely ignore.

“Here,” Mycroft said, stiffly, and extracted an envelope from his coat and handed it to John. “Happy anniversary.”

“You didn’t have to, Mycroft,” said John, oddly touched in the middle of this whole weird scene.

“Of course he did,” said Sherlock.

“Yes,” agreed Oliver.

John looked at the pair of them and thought how one minute he could be astonished by Sherlock’s sweetness and the next he wanted to throttle him.

So John gave it up for now and opened the envelope and pulled out… “Tickets to the ballet.”

“Sleeping Beauty,” said Mycroft, sounding almost indifferent. “I believe you are partial to Tchaikovsky, are you not? If my research is correct. And it always is.” Mycroft was wiping his hand on his handkerchief now, trying to clean up his suit.

John was partial to Tchaikovsky played by Sherlock because he loved to hear Sherlock play, not because of any innate fondness for Tchaikovsky. But he wasn’t going to tell Mycroft that, he thought it was kind of Mycroft to have thought of them at all. “And it’s for the night of our actual anniversary,” John said to Sherlock.

Sherlock was sitting up with Oliver in his lap, looking stonily across at Mycroft. “Really?” he said. “The Royal Ballet just happens to be doing Tchaikovsky on the evening of our first anniversary?”

“Lovely coincidence, isn’t it?” rejoined Mycroft. “And I know how much you love the ballet.”

John lifted his eyebrows and looked at Sherlock, who had never said one word to him about the ballet, ever. Was Mycroft winding him up with the gift? Sherlock was frowning, so John looked back at Mycroft and said, annoyed, “Seriously?”

Mycroft looked up at him, evidently surprised by his tone. “I’m sorry?”

“Did you really buy him a present you knew he would hate? Do you think we could be done with being toddlers, seeing as how we have an actual Holmes toddler to deal with these days?”

Mycroft looked astonished and something else John couldn’t place. The astonishment was unusual enough. “But he does like the ballet,” Mycroft protested, sounding almost petulant, and John realized that the other expression on Mycroft’s face just then had been hurt.
John, confused, looked to Sherlock, who said, shortly, grudgingly, “Yes. He’s right. I like the ballet.”

John stared at Sherlock.

Mycroft from behind him said, “I didn’t know it was a secret—”

“It’s not a secret,” Sherlock snapped at him.

Oliver squirmed to get off his lap and Sherlock let him go, and Oliver marched over to his periodic table blocks and began to topple them over violently, clearly picking up on Sherlock’s displeased mood.

Mycroft said, “I didn’t mean to—”

“Yes, you did. You always do.”

“Well, if it’s going to be so problematic, I’ll just take them back, then—” Mycroft rose, reaching for the tickets in John’s hand.

John held them out of Mycroft’s reach. “No. Absolutely not. I like Tchaikovsky and he likes the ballet and it would be foolish not to go out on a date for our first wedding anniversary. It was very kind of you, Mycroft, thank you very much, do knock next time, could you?”

“John is an optimist,” sulked Sherlock. “He lives in hope.”

Mycroft ignored Sherlock and addressed John. “Good day. Happy anniversary. Best wishes for many more. Do enjoy the ballet. And let me know if you need childcare for the evening.”

John blinked at him in surprise. “Are you offering to baby-sit?”

“As if we’d let you baby-sit him,” said Sherlock from the sofa.

“I am offering to find a suitable person to baby-sit,” Mycroft responded, stiffly.

John could just imagine who would end up baby-sitting their child if they left it up to Mycroft. The Princess Royal or something.

“It would serve you right if we did make you baby-sit, then,” said Sherlock, changing his tune because Sherlock’s tune was whatever he thought would annoy Mycroft the most.

“We’ll check with Mrs. Hudson,” John said, with a tight smile.

“As you wish,” said Mycroft, and finally left, and John said, “Ollie, can you stop throwing those blocks before you break something?” and then, “Do you mind telling me what any of that was about?”

“He’s obnoxious,” said Sherlock, and stared stubbornly up at the ceiling.

“He brought us a present. Do you really like the ballet?” John knelt to start collecting the blocks away from Oliver.

Oliver gave a little gasp of shock at his audacity and said, “No!”

Sherlock said nothing.
“If you do like the ballet, then he brought us really a very nice and thoughtful present. Here, play with the gauze that Daddy brought for you.” John unraveled some of it and Oliver did stare at it, bunching it up in wonder.

“He made the Royal Ballet do Tchaikovsky on our wedding anniversary.”

“Well.” John gathered up the blocks and stuck them on an upper bookshelf. “Seems like a Mycroft move, you must admit.” John picked up his framed EKG and propped it on the mantle.

Sherlock was silent for a moment, then said, in a burst, “So what if I like the ballet? So what if I like dancing? He’s only jealous because he’s terrible at it.”

John considered Sherlock’s defensive pose and wondered how much Sherlock had been teased for liking dancing. A hell of a lot, if he had never mentioned it to John.

John leaned over the sofa, forcing himself into Sherlock’s line of vision. “Why didn’t you tell me you like the ballet?”

“I don’t like just the ballet. Mycroft is deliberately misconstruing things, as usual.”

“Alright,” John said, agreeably. “So tell me what you like.”

“I like dancing,” Sherlock said, after a moment, and managed to shrug even in his current position. “I just…like dancing. I…like dancing.”

John smiled at him, to show him that he thought that was lovely and charming and absolutely fine. “You should have told me.”

“Why? You hate dancing.”

John chuckled. Trust Sherlock to have deduced that right away. “Yeah, but maybe I just have been dancing with the wrong people.”

Oliver crawled his way up onto the sofa, onto Sherlock’s chest, in order to get their attention back.

John made room for him, saying, “I’m going to make you teach me how to dance.”

“For what purpose?”

“I think it would be sexy.” John leaned over and gave Sherlock’s forehead a quick brush of his lips. “And I’m going to take you to the ballet more often.” John straightened and headed into the kitchen, thinking it was probably time for them to consider dinner.

“You’re going to hate the ballet!” Sherlock called to him.

John just shook his head.

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“Don’t your fathers look handsome?” Mrs. Hudson asked Oliver.

Oliver, already clad in a sleepsuit and settled with milk and his skull and a particularly luridly illustrated book about unsolved murders that Sherlock had been solving for him one by one, looked up from his happy nest on the sofa and surveyed his parents critically, as if seriously considering the question.
“The answer to the question is yes,” John told him.

Oliver looked dubious. He held up his book and pointed to the photograph and said, clearly, “Brain.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed. “Grey matter, even though it looks pink.”

Oliver made an interested noise and looked back down at his book.

“Oh, Sherlock, don’t you think that will give him nightmares? Where’s that lovely book on bumblebees that I bought him?” Mrs. Hudson asked.

“We are trying not to decrease his brain capacity, Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock said, crisply.

“Be good for Mrs. Hudson,” John told Oliver, and then he paused, feeling a sudden clawing panic he hadn’t expected to feel. It was the first time, he realized, that they had both left Oliver since the encounter with Peter Thorpe. Clever Mycroft, to have noticed that they’d been steadily tag-teaming Oliver and to jerk them out of the pattern.

John turned to Mrs. Hudson. “We’re going to leave our phones on. Ring us if anything—”

Mrs. Hudson looked amusedly perplexed by him. “We’ll be fine, he and I. It’s not as if this is the first time I’ve sat with him, I’ve been doing it since he was wee and didn’t say a single word.” Mrs. Hudson waggled her fingers at Oliver fondly.

Oliver looked at her with the Sherlockian gaze of you know I only let you do that because you’re you.

“Right,” said John, “but if anything happens—anything at all—ring us immediately.”

“Anything at all? Shall I ring you if I have to change his nappy?”

She was mocking him and John didn’t even care. “And don’t let anyone in.”

Mrs. Hudson blinked, now obviously less amused and more confused. “Alright.” She glanced beyond John to Sherlock, and John wasn’t used to seeing that look from the outside, that is he quite alright look.

“Anyone,” John reiterated, firmly. “No clients, no anyone—”

“No, Sherlock, this is important—”

“She’s not going to let anyone in. Mrs. Hudson, are you going to let anyone in?”

“Of course not—”

“Not even Mr. Fairbairns?”

Mrs. Hudson made a little exclamation. “How do you know about—”

Sherlock gave her his oh please look. “Mrs. Hudson.”

“I wasn’t going to have anyone over, you know. I’m not a teenager who’s going to throw a party in your flat while you’re out.” Mrs. Hudson sounded offended now.
“We didn’t think so,” John said, in an attempt to soothe her. “We just wanted to be sure.”

Mrs. Hudson frowned at him, and John made a note to bring her back something from the ballet. Did they sell merchandise at ballets? He didn’t know.

Sherlock said to Oliver, “Standard procedure, Ollie. Don’t let her touch the experiments.”

Oliver nodded and turned the page of his book.

Sherlock turned to John. “Ready?” he asked, perfunctorily, clearly expecting the answer to be yes.

But John’s answer wasn’t yes. John didn’t feel ready. John looked at Sherlock and drew in a breath to say that maybe this wasn’t a good idea—

Which Sherlock cut off by saying, “Excellent, off we go, ta, Mrs. Hudson,” and took his arm and pulled him out of the flat.

“Have a lovely evening! Happy anniversary!” Mrs. Hudson called after them.

“Sherlock,” John said, annoyed, as Sherlock practically shoved him down the stairs.

“You’re the one who’s always saying we can’t wrap him in cotton wool, aren’t you? We can’t raise him to be scared of the world? Isn’t that what you say?”

“Now you’ve decided to start listening to me,” John muttered, irritated, as he reached for the door.

“I always listen to you.” Sherlock leaned past him and kept him from opening the door and spoke into his ear. “Mycroft’s got extra security on Baker Street. No one’s getting in or out.”

John stilled, then looked up at Sherlock. “How do you know that?”

“Because he’s Mycroft, and because that was clearly the point of this present, to get us out of the flat together, at the same time, without Oliver. Seemed like an odd thing, him getting us an anniversary present. I should have seen it right away—that’s why he brought up baby-sitting—but I didn’t see until you practically had a panic attack up in the sitting room. I didn’t realize you were still so—”

“Don’t act like you’re not still worried about him, too,” John snapped at him.

“Of course I’m worried about him, but I spend every day worried about him, I’m never not worried about him, I never thought we were safe, but you managed to convince yourself that we were, so this has been a bigger shock to you,” Sherlock retorted. “But this is Mycroft, being annoyingly clever—” Sherlock said the word like it was a terrible thing—“and he’ll know that the only way his plan will work will be for there to be extra security. If you like, we can ring him and confirm, but I’m fairly sure when you open this door, there’ll be several dark cars lurking in the street and at least two men with obvious guns lingering outside of Speedy’s.”

John took a deep breath. “And do you trust Mycroft’s people?”

“I don’t trust anyone,” Sherlock said, and then amended, “Except you.”

John looked at the doorknob that his hand was still closed around. “And Mrs. Hudson.”

“And Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock agreed.

“And Molly. Actually, you trust quite a few people.”
“Alright, fine, is that a relevant point?” Sherlock demanded, impatiently.

John took another deep breath and thought how he had to do this. He had to walk out and leave Oliver. It would be impossible to never leave him again. As impossible as thinking that Oliver was never going to get a cold.

“You made me promise once not to worry about him so much that I forgot to live our lives, to enjoy them,” Sherlock said in his ear. “I am bad at that, for a variety of reasons. I look to you for guidance on how to do that.”

John closed his eyes briefly and nodded and pulled open the door.
John spent the first part of the ballet with his hand around his mobile in his lap in case it should vibrate, spending so much of his time looking down at it to make sure it didn’t light up that he barely registered any of the dancing at all. The music seemed pretty, but he was barely paying attention to that, either.

Beside him, Sherlock was very still, and eventually John stole a glance at him, half-annoyed he didn’t seem as keyed up with nervous energy as John was. He was watching the ballet raptly, leaning forward in his seat, his fingers steepled into thinking pose while his eyes avidly tracked the dancers’ movements on stage. John didn’t even think he was blinking. He was so intent that John momentarily forgot to stare at his mobile, caught up instead on staring at his husband, unnaturally beautiful when he was passionately taken with something, no matter what it was.

*He really loves this,* thought John, and it was not that he hadn’t believed it when Sherlock had said he liked dancing, just that he hadn’t expected it to be so demonstrably true. Sherlock loved serial killers and chemistry and violins and his Belstaff coat and ballet. John suddenly wondered what else Sherlock loved, how much else John hadn’t yet uncovered about him.

The lights startled him when they came up for the interval. He blinked to get accustomed to the brightness.

Sherlock turned to him and said, “We can leave.”

“Leave? What are you talking about?”

“I don’t think you’ve seen a single arabesque of this ballet.”

John didn’t want to point out that he didn’t even know what an “arabesque” was. “But you’re enjoying it a great deal.”

Sherlock shrugged. “It’s fine.”

*Liar,* thought John, fondly. “We’re staying,” he said, firmly.

Sherlock regarded him, then said, “Ring Mrs. Hudson. I’ll be right back.” And then he stood and slid into the crowd.

John rang Mrs. Hudson.

“No unusual activity around Baker Street. Well-being of OCWH has been personally confirmed.” – Mycroft Holmes
Ridiculous, thought John. And yet it was quite possible he had fallen into the Sherlockian trap of not truly appreciating how valuable it could be to be loved by Mycroft Holmes.

So John texted back. *Thanks. You were right, Sherlock loves the ballet.*

He didn’t receive a reply, but he hoped Mycroft might be pleased.

Sherlock came back with a tumbler of whiskey that he handed to John.

“What’s this?” John asked, as he took it.

“No poisoned,” Sherlock said, and resumed his seat.

“In case you didn’t deduce it, you don’t need to get me drunk.”

“Oh, I know you have every intention of having your way with me after you dramatically re-present me with that wedding ring you have tucked in your pocket,” said Sherlock, lightly.

John frowned a bit. “Sherlock.”

Sherlock looked at him. “Sorry. Did you want that to be a surprise?”

John shook his head and sipped his whiskey and decided it wasn’t worth the argument.

“I thought you might enjoy the ballet better with whiskey,” said Sherlock.

“It isn’t that I don’t like the ballet,” John protested, weakly.

“It’s that your Captain Watson head is working overtime moving us into defensive positions against every person in London. Did Mrs. Hudson say Oliver was fine?”

“Yes,” John admitted.

“Right. Drink up.” Sherlock nudged the tumbler toward John’s mouth.

The lights flashed for the end of interval, and John sipped at his whiskey. Sherlock next to him slouched down, very different from the leaning-forward posture he’d employed during the first part of the ballet. He tipped his head very close to John’s, practically pushing himself into John’s seat in an effort to get close to him. John couldn’t tell if this was some sort of odd seduction technique or if Sherlock was trying to optimize some weird ballet viewing perspective that John didn’t know about. He wasn’t keen about the former, so he hoped it was the latter: It wasn’t that he didn’t want to be seduced, but he didn’t want to get thrown out of the Royal Ballet for public indecency when they were surrounded by people who would not miss anything seduction might lead to.

“Sherlock,” John said, trying to reclaim a bit of his space. “Do you just want to switch seats?”

“No, this is fine,” said Sherlock. “Or it would be if you’d stop squirming all around. You’re disturbing the man on your left who’s in the middle of trying to get off with that woman, a tricky endeavor as you know so well.”

“There are so many different things about that speech that I want to address that I don’t know where to start,” hissed John, as the lights went down finally.

“Shhh,” Sherlock warned him, and shifted his head still closer.

It wasn’t a cuddle. John thought he could at least understand if Sherlock put his head on his shoulder,
settled into a snuggle, but instead Sherlock was keeping his head tipped slightly up, so that they were sitting in a weird sort of half-embrace. And then Sherlock started whispering, so low John would have thought he was imagining it if he didn’t feel the rush of air against his ear, and John realized why he’d shifted so close.

"A full performance of this ballet would run approximately three hours, not counting time for intervals,” said Sherlock’s faint whisper. “So it is nearly always cut. The Royal Ballet has decided to open this second act with the beginning of what is technically Act III of the full ballet: Les Noces de Désiré et d’Aurore. You see here we begin with a Marche, which will soon segue into Grand polonaise dansée. They have made some changes but generally they are following the original choreography of Marius Petipa, who was the ballet master of the Imperial Ballet. Petipa was born into a family of performers and aside from being choreographically inclined also played the violin…”

Sherlock kept up his commentary. Sometimes it was about the lives of the dancers they were watching, of previous famous dancers to have played the role, of Tchaikovsky and Petipa and other Imperial Russian ballet greats. Sometimes it was the choreography, crooning French into his ear. Sometimes it was about the orchestration, about someone’s violin being slightly off-tempo, about the harpist hitting a single wrong note. John sat, Sherlock’s voice in his ear, and thought that it was possible he’d been selling the ballet short all of his life.

Then Sherlock stopped talking, shifting away from him.

John looked at him, annoyed that Sherlock would cut off the monologue, because he’d been enjoying it.

Sherlock was working his mobile out of his coat. He frowned down at it, then slipped it back in his coat and slipped his way out of the row.

“Sherlock,” John hissed at him, which caused several people to shush him. Annoyed, John struggled his way out of the row, accomplishing it with not nearly as much grace as Sherlock had. He tripped and fell over people and a general wave of hushed cursing followed him out of the theater.

Sherlock was in the lobby. He’d already retrieved his coat and was whirling it on.

“What’s wrong?” John demanded. “Is it Oliver?”

“No,” Sherlock answered. “There’s been a murder. Lestrade needs our help.”

John decided that a murder was the only thing that Sherlock definitely liked enough to give up the rest of the ballet. “What sort of murder?”

“A good one. Closed door. And an hysterical maid.” Sherlock waved a taxi over and held the door open for John.

“An hysterical maid?” John echoed.

“Claridge’s,” Sherlock said to the cabbie, and then turned to John. “Ring Mrs. Hudson and tell her something’s come up and we’ll be later than expected.”

“We can go and retrieve Ollie,” John offered, already reaching for his mobile.

“When we’ve already got a baby-sitter? And Lestrade is fighting with the PA to keep the body where it is?”

“The PA?” John felt like he had no idea what was going on, as he dialed Mrs. Hudson.
“Yes, it’s apparently some famous actress or something.” Sherlock waved his hand negligently.


Sherlock shrugged.

Mrs. Hudson answered with, “John, dear, everything’s quite alright.”

“I know, Mrs. Hudson. We’ve been called to a crime scene, can you watch Oliver a bit longer for us?”

“Oh, don’t worry about a thing, dear! Ollie and I will just have a nice sleepover!” Mrs. Hudson assured him.

“Thanks,” John said, as he hung up his phone.

Sherlock was frowning as he texted frantically on his own phone.

“What’s wrong?”

“Scotland Bloody Yard can’t keep from ruining everything. At least they’ve got the PA occupied elsewhere, so we’ll have the crime scene to ourselves. Here we are.”

The cab drew to a stop and Sherlock leaped out, leaving John to pay, as usual. John followed Sherlock into Claridge’s, where he’d actually never been before. Sherlock was moving swiftly, so John had no time to really admire the gleaming marble and dripping chandeliers. Sherlock strode through the lobby as if he owned the place, saying a grave Good evening to the desk attendant and then ducking them into the elevator.

“Do you know where you’re going?” John asked.

Sherlock looked at him in amusement. “Why are you whispering?”

“I don’t know,” said John, a little defensively. “It seemed like we should whisper. Where’s Greg?”

“I told you.” The elevator opened onto a floor and Sherlock strode confidently out of it. “Keeping the PA occupied.”

John looked up and down the deserted hallway. “And what are we doing?”

Sherlock was fiddling with something at the door. “Breaking in.”

“Hang on,” said John. “You can break into an electronic hotel room lock?”

Sherlock gave him a look.

“Does Lestrade know we’re breaking into this crime scene?”

“Yes,” said Sherlock, as the lock beeped. He threw the door wide open.

John stepped through, prepared for the spectre of a beautiful dead woman on the bed, but the bed was empty. The room was empty. The bath, maybe? But before he could even complete that thought, he found Sherlock on top of him, mouth capturing his in a bruising, single-minded kiss.

John tried to keep hold of the thoughts in his head, except that Sherlock seldom kissed him quite like this, and everything inside John scattered to pieces. Sherlock shoved at his suit jacket, but didn’t
succeed in getting it off him, just succeeded in trapping John’s arms in it and then pushed him back to the bed. He landed on his back with his arms still trapped underneath him, and Sherlock followed him down, stretched over him, kissed him filthily. John wriggled, trying to get his arms free and not caring overly much when Sherlock was kissing him like that.

Sherlock’s hands were at his fly, unzipping and then stroking and John tore his mouth away, squirming and gasping.

“Jesus, let me catch my breath,” said John.

“Not a chance,” said Sherlock, and produced lube from somewhere with the flourish of a magician.

“There’s no murder, is there?”

“There’s no murder.”

“This was a set-up.”

“Angry?”

“Christ, no.”

“Happy anniversary, John,” said Sherlock, and used a hand slathered in lube to slide over both of them at once.

John couldn’t help but arch, to thrust upward against Sherlock, against the friction of him. Sherlock was good at this. Sherlock was excellent at this. And he knew it. One of his special show-off skills was that he was could gauge John’s reactions well enough to pace them both to simultaneous orgasms. Which he proved again in record time.

Afterwards, he rolled off John but stayed pressed against his side.

John, finally free enough to fully move, struggled out of his suit jacket and looked down at the rest of his rumpled, ruined suit. His wedding suit. Which he’d worn out of sentimentality.

He collapsed back onto the bed. “You secretly hate this suit, don’t you?”

“I adore that suit. I can’t keep my hands off you in that suit,” replied Sherlock.

“You’ve ruined it.”

“I’ll send it to Mycroft for cleaning.”

“Don’t you dare,” said John, appalled, and, when Sherlock was silent, “Sherlock. I mean it.”

Sherlock huffed as if he thought John was unreasonable to not want to ask his brother to literally clean up their sexual indiscretions. “Fine. But it’s your favorite sexual position that caused the problem.”

“Is it my favorite?” John considered. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Trust me, John,” said Sherlock, long-suffering.

John tried to catch his breath, then said, “When did you plan this?”

“When Mycroft gave us the ballet tickets. I decided we should get something out of the evening that
we both enjoyed.”

“Well, well done, you, on that front.”

“I know,” said Sherlock, smugly.

“Do you have a brilliant Sherlockian plan for how we’re getting out of here and back to Baker Street in any semblance of respectability?”

There was a moment of silence. “I admit we weren’t supposed to still be mostly dressed for any of… that.”

John couldn’t help it: He laughed. He laughed until his stomach hurt from laughing. And then he rolled over to drape himself across Sherlock’s chest and said, “I love you.”

Sherlock smoothed a hand over his hair and smiled but looked thoughtful. He said, seriously, “I’ve genuinely no idea why.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot,” said John, and smiled. “Shall I give you your present now?”

“Shall I pretend to be surprised?”

“Prat,” said John, and rolled away from him to snag his suit jacket and pull it back, taking the rings out of the pocket. “One for you and one for me.” He handed Sherlock his.

Sherlock held it up to the light, tipping it so he could read the inscription. And then he smiled. “And what does yours say?”

“What do you think it says?”

“Or Iraq.”

“Indeed it does.”

“Good choice,” Sherlock said, and lifted his head far enough to kiss John.

John caught his head before he could lay it back down, kept it close so that Sherlock had to take what he was saying seriously. “Sherlock, this has been, by far, the happiest year of my entire life. And that wasn’t just Oliver. That was you. Every moment with you, making me happier than the moment before. That’s why I love you. And if you don’t know that by now, then I am doing a terrible job as a husband.”

“You’re the most perfect husband in the world,” said Sherlock, solemnly.

“Thank you, I’ve always thought I’m pretty great.”

Sherlock chuckled and laid his head back down and took a deep, luxurious breath, relaxed and content.

John said, “Why did you insist on wedding rings?”

Sherlock had his eyes closed when he answered. “Why did you assume I wouldn’t?”

“You’re not a traditionalist. The marriage makes sense for legal technicalities, but I didn’t think you were being…sentimental about it.”
“It’s not sentiment. It’s evidence.”

“Evidence?”

“That once upon a time the best person on the planet wanted me to be his enough that he agreed to be mine in return.”


“Ballet is as brutal as crime, you know. As brutal as a murder. Or a suicide. The lengths to which they go, the lengths to which they push themselves…but you’d never know. That’s the point. You’re not supposed to know. All dance is complex and intricate but done correctly it’s supposed to look easy. Like a good murder.”

“Only you,” John murmured, and tucked his head under Sherlock’s chin and yawned and said, “We should go, before we fall asleep.”

“We’ve got the room all night.”

“But we didn’t tell Mrs. Hudson we’d be out all night. She’ll worry.”

“She thinks we’re at a crime scene.”

“It’s rude to leave her there taking care of our child while we shag.”

“We already shagged, we’re just sleeping now. And Oliver will be sleeping by now anyway.”

“I’m sorry, we are talking about our son Oliver, right? The one who never sleeps because his clone father has him on a terribly indulgent, nonexistent schedule because of some misguided belief that sleep is an unnecessary waste of time?”

“It would be an unnecessary waste of time for me to rebut all the falsities in that sentence,” rejoined Sherlock.

John chuckled and forced himself out of the warm cocoon of Sherlock, going into the bathroom to try some attempt at cleaning himself up. The bathroom distracted him by being incredible, however.

“Sherlock?” he called.

Sherlock appeared in the doorway, looking like a quizzical and ravished mess.

John pointed to the shower, multiple showerheads, big enough for two. “We’re not leaving here until we put this shower to good use.”

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow. “I thought you were against making Mrs. Hudson baby-sit whilst we shagged?”

“That was before I saw the shower. Take off your clothes.”

“Really, John? That’s optimistic of you, isn’t it?”

“Hope springs eternal,” said John, and turned on the shower.
It was an unusually rainy summer, even by London standards. Or maybe John just felt the weather more keenly now that he was locked inside with two bored, restless Sherlock Holmeses instead of one. Sherlock spent his time creating explosions in the kitchen or throwing his still-unsolved puzzle ball against the wall. Oliver spent his time applauding the explosions in the kitchen or making John have a heart attack by finding ways to sneak past the baby gate to go up or down the stairs.

John rang Lestrade on his way to the shops. Because, despite the fact that they were both bored out of their skulls, both of his stubborn Sherlocks would still prefer their exquisite sulks to leaving the flat to go shopping.

“Why haven’t there been any crimes?” John demanded, hunching a bit when confronted with the persistent cool rain outside.

“There was a crime last week,” Lestrade pointed out.

“That was last week.”

“You sound desperate, mate,” said Lestrade, as if this was all amusing.

“Of course I’m desperate. This morning he decided it would be interesting to test the flammability of gerbil embryos by throwing them into the fireplace, Greg.”

“Why do you have gerbil embryos in your flat in the first place?” asked Lestrade, sounding curious.

“They were a Christmas present,” John grumbled, “and never mind about that, you’re missing the point. He threw them into the fire and Oliver contributed to the experiment his book about purple elephants, so now I’m going to have to explain to Mrs. Hudson that Oliver burned the book she bought him for Christmas.”

“Purple elephants doesn’t really seem like Oliver’s thing,” remarked Lestrade.

John gritted his teeth as he walked into the shop. “Again: not the point. You need to find a crime. Sherlock has been scathing about the inbox, so you’re it for me.”

There was a pause.

John, scanning the shelves for something he could take home that might tempt someone in the flat who wasn’t him to eat, heard the pause and straightened a bit, shifting his full attention to Lestrade and narrowing his eyes. “What?” he demanded, flatly.

“Nothing,” answered Lestrade, hastily.

“You’re keeping something from me.”

“I may have taken a few days off,” Lestrade blurted out, quickly.

John blinked and looked at the steady rain outside. “Are you on holiday right now?” That sounded like the best idea John had ever heard, actually. Maybe they should ring Mycroft and ask for use of the house in France again. Mycroft.
Lestrade was saying, “I mean, I haven’t gone anywhere but—”

John interrupted him. “Are you on holiday with Mycroft?”

“I was just telling you that I’m still in London—”

“Right, but you took a few days off. Did Mycroft take a few days off? Does Mycroft take days off?”

“He…said he would be less busy for a little while,” said Lestrade, awkwardly.

John looked unseeingly at the boxes of cereal in front of him. “This is serious, you two. Really, properly serious. I mean…How long have you been seeing each other now?”

“It’s difficult to say,” said Lestrade.

“Difficult to say?” echoed John.

“We have different interpretations on when it should be counted from.”

John smiled and thought of Sherlock, giving him an anniversary gift early because he insisted John had never understood their proper anniversary date. “Yes,” he agreed. “They do that, make up milestones in their heads that they think you’re going to be aware of.” John selected six different types of cereal and thought maybe he would propose some kind of experiment. And he said, “We should go to dinner.”

“We should what?”

“The four of us. If you’re going to be part of the family now, then we should welcome you into it properly. With a barking mad dinner somewhere where you and I can get drunk while Sherlock and Mycroft frown at each other. A double date.” John was warming to the idea. “It’ll be fun.”

“You’ve been with Sherlock too long,” Lestrade told him. “You’ve forgotten the proper definition of ‘fun.’”

John scoffed. “I think it’ll be lovely. Tell Mycroft I’m serious about this. We’ll even pick a nice restaurant, because we can’t possibly have you over to ours and Mycroft’s house makes me nervous.”

Lestrade sighed. “There’s nothing wrong with his house.”

“You’re good for him,” said John, fondly, and meaning it. It hadn’t occurred to him to think that Mycroft was lonely but it was nice to think that he wasn’t any longer.

“Oh, it’s, you know—” began Lestrade, clearly minimizing everything.

“You think there’s nothing wrong with him,” interrupted John, firmly. “That’s good for him. And I’m happy for both of you. And we’re definitely having dinner. Tell Mycroft I’m on to him and I know he’s not half as busy as he pretends.”

“Mycroft says I’m spending too much time on the phone with you.”

“Ah,” teased John. “Young love. I remember those halcyon days.”

“Shut up,” said Lestrade, and ended the call.

The prospect of actually having something to put on his calendar put a bounce in John’s step and
almost made up for how wet he was when he walked back into the flat.

Sherlock and Oliver were in the kitchen. John had said they weren’t allowed in the sitting room while he was out because they’d already caused quite enough destruction in there for one day. The chemistry equipment had been pushed to one side of the table, which had been strewn with a variety of parts. Oliver was rhythmically banging a piece of clear plastic against the table; Sherlock appeared to be doing some kind of sorting.

“And what’s this?” asked John, looking at the deconstructed whatever-it-was and hoping it hadn’t been anything too irreplaceable.

“My puzzle ball,” said Sherlock. “I have solved it.”

“Clearly,” said John, looking at its guts all over their kitchen table.

“Stupid sodding ball,” said Oliver.

John lifted his eyebrows at Sherlock, who said, brightly, “What did you bring back from the shops?”

John decided to let it go and presented his line-up of cereals with a flourish. “Ta-da!”

Both Sherlock and Oliver regarded the boxes with identical expressions notable for their lack of enthusiasm.

“What are we meant to do with those?” asked Sherlock.


Sherlock and Oliver both considered.

Oliver said, “Stupid sodding cereal.”

John said, pointing at Sherlock, “You need to cure him of that.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, I said it once whilst you were out,” complained Sherlock.

“And he knew you weren’t supposed to, so it’s the one thing he’s going to say from now on.” John put the milk in the food fridge. “He’s you, Sherlock, he’s not an idiot.”

“Traitor,” Sherlock told Oliver. “If you keep doing things like that, I’m not going to let you see that liver Molly cut in half for us.”

Oliver looked unimpressed, which John understood, because Sherlock never denied Oliver anything, and Oliver had realized that long ago.

“I talked to Lestrade while I was shopping,” said John.

“Oh? Does he have a crime?”

“No. He’s on holiday.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “I hate it when he goes on holiday. He comes back looking like a walnut and thinking it’s delightful. I can’t even look at him for weeks, it hurts my retinas.”

“Well, he hasn’t left London.”
How is that a holiday? Just because he doesn’t go to work every day? By that definition, you and I are on holiday constantly."

“He took a few days off work to spend them with your brother.”

Sherlock sat up straighter and frowned and put his hands over Oliver’s ears. Oliver likewise frowned, although he was frowning at Sherlock instead of John. “Why would you say that?” Sherlock hissed.

John looked at Sherlock’s hands over Oliver’s ears in surprise. “Because it’s true. What are you doing?”

“I don’t want him to have to think about Mycroft and sex,” said Sherlock, struggling to keep his hands in position over Oliver’s jerking head.

“Okay, first off, I don’t think he would, since I’d be surprised if he knows what that is yet. Second, are you just going to ignore the fact that your brother is dating Lestrade?”

“I only have to ignore it until they break up. It can’t be that much longer.” Sherlock gave up on keeping his hands over Oliver’s ears.

Oliver glared at him and said, “Sodding,” and threw the piece of plastic he’d been holding in clear protest.

John frowned at Sherlock. “Don’t wish for them to break up. That’s cruel. What if people wished that about us?”

“They’d be idiots. You know I don’t care what people think.”

“I think Lestrade makes your brother happy. And you should be pleased about that.”

Sherlock snorted. “Nothing makes Mycroft happy.”

“As usual, you are completely wrong when it comes to Mycroft. And we’re going to dinner with them.”

Sherlock stared, and John enjoyed having garnered that reaction. “We’re what?”

“Going to dinner. A double date. It’ll be nice.” John walked into the sitting room.

Sherlock followed, Oliver in his arms. “A date?”

“Yes.” John sat in his chair and stretched out his legs. “It’s going to be fun.”

“I really don’t think you know the definition of that word,” said Sherlock.

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Mrs. Hudson had decided to flee the cloud hovering over London by going to visit her sister in the countryside, where it was just as gray and rainy but, she claimed, more picturesque. This meant that John called in Molly to watch Oliver. She arrived with a heavy book tucked under her arm, which she showed to John as she came up the stairs.


Molly practically beamed. “I thought Oliver would like it.”
“Yes,” agreed John. “But if he doesn’t, he’ll rip it to shreds. He’s in a bit of a phase now. So maybe
don’t—”

“Oh, it’ll be fine,” said Molly, breezily, walking into the sitting room, where Oliver was sitting next
to his skull on his periodic table blanket and energetically ripping out pages of a poetry book that
John had found on their shelves and that neither one of them could ever recall having acquired.
“Hello, Ollie-Ollie-oxen-free,” she said to him.

Oliver smiled at her and said, in delight, “Moll!”

“Look what I brought you,” said Molly, and put the book down next to Oliver.

Oliver pulled it over and opened it and turned the pages reverently, completely engrossed.

“See?” Molly grinned up at John. “Told you. He’s going to be a doctor.”

Sherlock told him this all the time. Certainly it was borne out by Oliver’s fascination with John’s
medical bag. Oliver enjoyed Sherlock’s experiments but he loved it when John had to patch Sherlock
up from assorted mishaps, clapped in delight whenever John had to break out gauze. But there was
an odd part of John that didn’t dare to hope for such things. He didn’t think he’d be one of those
fathers who wanted his children to follow in his footsteps but it meant more to him than he’d
anticipated, Oliver’s interest in medicine.

John said, “Sherlock prefers chemistry to biology.”

“You know that doesn’t matter, right? It’s nature and nurture,” said Molly.

John knew. John also thought it was the type of thing that Peter Thorpe would have been interested
in. And he hated that he thought about Thorpe.

He frowned briefly and said, “He shouldn’t give you much trouble. He can keep himself entertained
for hours as long as he thinks that you’re waiting to be at his beck and call should you need him. He
won’t sleep, but don’t worry about that. He almost never sleeps, no matter what I do. And that is
nature, my nurture’s not helping at all.”

“We’ll be fine,” said Molly. “I’m going to teach him the bones of the hand.”

“His language skills are advanced, but that might be asking for a bit much,” John warned her. He felt
as if he was always recalibrating expectations. Sherlock was endlessly impatient that Oliver hadn’t
learned to read yet.

“Don’t mind John,” Sherlock said, coming out of their bedroom. “John is constantly saddling Oliver
with low expectations. Ollie and I regularly ignore him, don’t we, Ollie?”

“Yes,” agreed Oliver, and turned a page of his book.

John shook his head and looked at Sherlock, who was wearing his plum-colored shirt and looked
really quite lovely. John smiled at him. Sherlock had threatened to go to dinner in a bedsheet, and
then John had decided they should go to Angelo’s for dinner, and Sherlock had amended his plan.
Angelo would have let Sherlock dine in a bedsheet, but Sherlock didn’t want to deter other diners
from Angelo’s establishment. Sherlock’s loyalty was reliable, but John wasn’t going to tell Sherlock
that he sometimes manipulated it. “Ready?” asked John.

“No,” said Sherlock. “This is a terrible idea and, Molly, you should expect us back within the hour.”
“No, you shouldn’t.”

“Tell him all sorts of macabre stories and you should get along fine,” said Sherlock.

“Okay, let’s go,” said John.

Sherlock walked past him to lean down and kiss Oliver’s head.

Oliver said, “Look,” and held out his book.

Sherlock glanced at it briefly. “That’s the shoulder and upper arm. Molly can tell you all the muscles.” Sherlock passed a fond hand over Oliver’s curls.

“Shoulder,” Oliver said, carefully, trying out the word, and studied the diagram of muscles.

John thought he was going to have the only child on the planet who was going to recognize body parts from their internal parts before he could name where they were on the human body.

He followed Sherlock down the stairs and then pressed him up against the wall before he could open the door. “You are fantastic,” he said, “and I am going to be very nice to you later on tonight.” He kissed him fiercely.

Sherlock made a sound that was half-approving, half-inquiring.

“Anything you want,” John promised.

“Oh, excellent, I’m going to be considering this all through dinner,” said Sherlock, and kissed him.

Bingo, thought John, but didn’t say. He would have no problem with Sherlock thinking about sex all dinner, as long as it kept Sherlock quiet and in a good mood.
Chapter 49

Angelo greeted them effusively. “What, no Signor Oliver tonight?” he asked, jovially.

“Not tonight,” said John, with a little smile.

“Aww,” said Angelo, and looked at them as if they were adorable. “A date night. How lovely. Mustn’t let the romance go out of a marriage just because there are little ones, eh?” Angelo winked at him.

“I would agree with you, Angelo,” sighed Sherlock, long-suffering, “except that John has endeavored to kill all romance by inviting my brother to dinner with us.”

Angelo looked questioningly at John.

“It’s a double date,” said John.

This seemed to satisfy Angelo. “Ah. Well, I set aside your table for you when you rang. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes,” said John, while Sherlock just sighed heavily.

“I’ll fetch a candle,” said Angelo, scurrying away.

John said, “Are you thinking about what you’re going to ask for tonight? Because I don’t think you are.”

“You think you can distract me that easily?” demanded Sherlock.

“Yes,” replied John, simply, and sat down.

Sherlock followed suit, taking his usual seat so he could look out the window and deduce. “Maybe they won’t come.” He frowned. “No such luck.”

Mycroft and Lestrade walked in a moment later. Mycroft was dressed the way he was always dressed. Lestrade next to him looked a bit flyaway and awkward, following in his shadow a little bit.

Sherlock said, “Were you spying on us to see when we were going to get here?”

“Hello,” John said, pleasantly, smiling to show that they all ought to ignore Sherlock.

“Hi,” said Lestrade, taking the seat next to John.

“Hello, John,” said Mycroft, pulling out his chair as well. “So kind of you to invite us to intrude upon your evening.”

“Excellent choice of words,” mumbled Sherlock.

John didn’t kick him under the table. John rubbed his foot against Sherlock’s shin. Sherlock narrowed his eyes at him.

Angelo arrived back with a candle and menus and then, to John’s surprise, frowned at Mycroft,
waggling a finger at him. “So you are Mycroft.”

He said the name as if Mycroft were some sort of infamous one-named villain. So you are Blofeld, John imagined.

Mycroft regarded Angelo and then said, evenly, “Yes.”

“Hmph,” said Angelo, and stalked away.

John turned, amazed, to Sherlock. “What the hell did you tell him about Mycroft?”

“I didn’t tell him anything.” Sherlock studied the menu minutely, as if they didn’t eat here constantly. “Mycroft tried to scare him away from associating with me during the early days of our acquaintance.”

“Well, he was a hardly a suitable person for you to be skulking around in those days, given how freshly freed from rehab you were.”

Sherlock frowned harder at the menu.

Lestrade said, “I talked to Angelo about making sure none of his associates gave Sherlock any drugs.”

Sherlock looked up suddenly in surprise. “That’s why I suddenly couldn’t find anyone to sell me anything.” Sherlock looked accusingly at his brother. “I thought that was you.”

Mycroft was looking, amazed, at Lestrade. “I didn’t know you’d done that.”

“Clearly you didn’t trust Angelo enough to just have a conversation with him.” Lestrade gave Mycroft a pointed look.

Mycroft looked a bit chastised.

Which was amazing. John tried to remember if he’d ever seen Mycroft look like that before. Lestrade was magic, thought John.

Angelo arrived back with four wineglasses and a bottle of wine. “Your usual,” he said to John and Sherlock, putting it on the table for them. He looked at Mycroft and Lestrade and said, “Would you prefer two bottles of wine tonight?”

Mycroft said, “Can you bring me a wine list, please? I do not trust their ‘usual.’” Mycroft looked dubiously at the bottle of wine.

Angelo sniffed and poured wine for John and Sherlock and then went off in pursuit of a wine list.

Sherlock said, “You’ll hardly find a Latour Pauillac on the wine list, I do hope you can survive. Life must be so disappointing when you’re a snob.”

Angelo presented Mycroft with the wine list.

John cleared his throat and said, “So,” at the same moment Lestrade said, “How’s Oliver?”

Mycroft said, “What is that you’re drinking?” and turned the bottle of wine around so he could see it before Sherlock could grab it away. Then Mycroft lifted an eyebrow at him, plainly amused. “Your usual is the most expensive bottle of wine on the list. Do be careful who you fling allegations at, kettle.”
Sherlock looked furious. John deposited his foot on Sherlock’s lap and said, “Did you enjoy your holiday?”

“We didn’t go anywhere,” said Lestrade.

“You should make him take you to his house in France.”

Lestrade looked at Mycroft in surprise. “You have a house in France and you made us stay in London in the rain?”

“We didn’t go out in the rain, we stayed in,” Mycroft pointed out.

“Ah,” said Lestrade.

John felt Sherlock start to untie his shoe and looked over at him in surprise. He was untying the laces one-handed, his other hand wrapped around the wineglass he was gulping.

Well, supposed John. Whatever got him through. Because this was ridiculous. They should be able to go out for a bit of adult conversation with one of their best friends and Sherlock’s brother.

They were saved by Angelo arriving to take their order.

An awkward silence fell once Angelo had departed. Sherlock pulled John’s shoe off of him and deposited John’s foot on his seat between his legs. John arched an eyebrow at him, and Sherlock arched one back, as if daring him. John rolled his eyes.

Lestrade said again, “How’s Oliver?”

“He’s good,” said John, relieved to have Oliver as a topic of conversation.

“Staying with Mrs. Hudson tonight?” asked Lestrade, jovially.

“Mrs. Hudson is in the countryside visiting her sister. Oliver is with Molly,” said Mycroft.

Sherlock glared at him. “Is it necessary for you to show off quite so much?”

“Not necessary, no,” responded Mycroft, mildly, sipping the wine he’d ordered. “Gratifying, yes.”

Sherlock sucked in enough breath to clearly go off on some sort of tirade. John brushed his foot against Sherlock’s crotch, which shut him up almost comically quickly, and John said into his wine, “It runs in the family. Get over it.”

“That and the deductions,” said Lestrade.

“The deductions?” echoed John.

“Yes. Mycroft claims he’s better at them than Sherlock. He’s just less obnoxious about it.”

Sherlock put his wineglass down sharply and was not at all deterred by John getting a bit more daring with his foot. “He’s not better—”

“Yes, I am,” said Mycroft.

“I didn’t know you did deductions, Mycroft,” John inserted, trying to defuse the situation a bit.

Mycroft answered him, but kept his eyes on Sherlock. “Who do you think taught him?”
“You only started to teach me,” retorted Sherlock. “You’re rubbish at textiles. And ash.”

“A shortcoming I lament on a daily basis,” replied Mycroft, with mock gravity.

Sherlock frowned. John kicked at Sherlock’s inner thigh to get his attention, a motion that caused him to slide a bit, so that he ended up getting everyone’s attention.

“Um,” he said, caught off-guard, and then said the first thing that came to mind. “Molly brought Oliver an anatomy book to read.”

“Anatomy?” Mycroft looked intrigued, shifted his gaze from John to Sherlock. “Really?”

Sherlock straightened a bit, and John thought he was going to speak defensively, but when he spoke it was…mysteriously like pride. “Oliver’s going to be a doctor,” Sherlock said.

Which made everyone at the table look at John again.

John felt himself blush. He put his foot back down on the ground and tried to find his shoe and said, “Oliver’s eighteen months old. We’ve got lots of time before he makes a career decision. For instance, first we have to tackle toilet-training.”

Sherlock waved his hand dismissively. “He’s learning the bones in the body. We’re going to move onto muscle groups after that.”

“Sherlock, he doesn’t even know his ABCs.”

“I didn’t say he was learning how to spell the bones in the body. Anyway, it’s good. When Oliver is a doctor, he will be able to take care of John and me when John is too much in his dotage to do so.”

“Lovely,” said John, and Lestrade moved, and John realized he must have brushed up against his leg in his quest for his shoe. Where the hell had Sherlock put it?

Sherlock shrugged at him and his feet reached out and locked around John’s questing foot, keeping it in place.

“I would have thought you’d’ve wanted him to follow in your chemist footsteps,” mused Mycroft.

Sherlock gave him a sharp look. “Why would I have wanted that? Don’t you think we’ve had enough of Holmes chemists?”

Interesting, thought John, looking at him. That was clearly some kind of sore point.

With his usual impeccable timing, Angelo arrived with the food. Everyone seized on the distraction as an excuse not to talk to each other for a little while. Sherlock pulled John’s foot onto his lap and ate his pasta one-handed while he pressed his thumb against pressure points in John’s arch. John fought to keep his eyes open. He tried to concentrate on being annoyed, because Sherlock had never given him a foot massage before, and John would have insisted upon it if he’d realized how bloody good at it Sherlock was.

“What was his mother, Sherlock?” asked Lestrade, and John suddenly was wide awake.

Sherlock’s hand on his foot stopped moving. He looked across at Lestrade, shocked into saying, uncharacteristically, “What?”

“Oliver’s mother. Was she a doctor? Or is that just John’s influence?”
Sherlock stared at him.

John scrambled in his head to come up with a good career for her. “She was—”

“She was a schoolteacher,” Mycroft inserted, calmly, and took a bite of his lasagne.

“A schoolteacher,” Lestrade echoed.

“A very clever schoolteacher,” said Sherlock. “Not just any schoolteacher.”

Lestrade looked a little amused. “I’m not insulting his mum, Sherlock.” Lestrade went back to his meal.

Sherlock, his fork forgotten on his plate, sat and stared at Lestrade. His expression was unreadable. John shifted his foot enough that he could poke Sherlock gently in the abdomen, which pulled Sherlock’s attention to him. John smiled at him, meaning it to be an it’s-fine-he’s-okay-we’ve-got-this smile. Sherlock didn’t smile back, but Sherlock did pick up his fork, although all he did was push the pasta back and forth, his appetite clearly lost.

John said, “Oliver’s very musical. He loves to watch Sherlock play the violin. I’m sure he’ll be playing himself before the year is out.” He said it because he thought it was a comment Sherlock would enjoy, and it did get a small smile out of Sherlock.

Mycroft said, “Playing your violin?” which ruined John’s effort.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry, Mycroft, I am aware of the value of my violin.”

“Maybe he’ll play a different instrument,” suggested Lestrade. “He can’t be exactly you, Sherlock. Maybe he’ll play the piano like Mycroft.”

Mycroft and Sherlock dropped their forks with identical clatter. Both Lestrade and John looked at the pair of them in surprise.

“That was supposed to be a secret,” Mycroft hissed at him.

Lestrade blinked in confusion. “It was?”

“You play the piano?” said Sherlock. “Since when? You’ve never told me that.” Sherlock gasped suddenly. “It’s because you’re not very good, isn’t it? You’re bad at the piano.”

“He’s not bad at the piano,” Lestrade defended. “He’s very lovely, really.”

“No, no.” Sherlock looked positively gleeful. “This is the man who can learn an entire new language in an hour. How long have you been learning to play the piano, Mycroft? Couldn’t you just sit down and immediately play? Have you progressed to Mozart yet, or are you stuck on the lesser composers? Like Gershwin?”

Cheap musical insults, thought John. This evening had taken another turn for the worse. He poked at Sherlock with his foot again but it had absolutely no effect.

“Not even, like, ‘Rhapsody in Blue,’” Sherlock continued in delight, “but you’re probably stuck on ‘I’ve Got Rhythm,’ aren’t you?”

“‘Someone to Watch Over Me,’ if you must know,” said Lestrade, “and it’s really very lovely.”

Sherlock looked at Lestrade, his eyes glowing with how much he was enjoying this, and John didn’t
entirely want to ruin it but he also didn’t want to mock Mycroft anymore, so John drew his foot feather-light down Sherlock’s crotch, and Sherlock’s breath hitched slightly, derailing him just enough for John to say, “So, no good crimes out there, Greg?”

"It’s been remarkably calm," answered Lestrade.

“It’s despicable,” muttered Sherlock, annoyed. He had John’s foot in an iron grip on his lap. John was trying to wriggle out of it without giving too much away.

“And how’s George Orwell?” asked John.

Lestrade gave Mycroft a ridiculously fond look. “Mycro adores him.”

Mycro gave Lestrade a look that was half-exasperated and half-soppy. And John, shockingly, recognized that look. He saw that look, all the time, on Sherlock’s face, after he’d done something Sherlock couldn’t find annoying because it had been done by John. John blinked from Mycroft to Sherlock, caught off-guard by the sudden depth of the family resemblance. Sherlock had both hands under the table now, preoccupied with kneading his fingers into the arch of John’s foot.

“He is not quite as well-trained as Oliver yet,” said Mycroft.

“Hmm,” said John, distracted by Sherlock’s fingers, and then, translating what Mycroft had said, “Oliver isn’t trained.”

“Well, at least the destruction caused by Oliver is fairly minor,” said Mycroft.

“So far,” said Lestrade. “Judging from his genes, I’m guessing Oliver is only going to get more destructive, while I’m going to train Georgie and he’s going to be less destructive. Unless the schoolteacher mum genes suddenly decide to exert themselves. But, no offense, I don’t think Ollie stands a chance of not growing progressively more destructive, being raised by you two.”

John stiffened and pulled his foot away from Sherlock’s ministrations. Sherlock didn’t protest. John turned to Lestrade, who was sipping his wine, and said, “That’s a good thing.”

Lestrade looked confused. “What?”

“It’s a good thing. That he’s being raised by the two of us. He’s not going to be destructive. He’s going to be curious and inquisitive and fearless and adventurous, he’s going to want to know things and do things, and sometimes that leaves a mess. Nothing ever happened in this world without it coming out of a mess first. Including every single one of us at this table.”

Everyone around the table stared at John. John was vaguely aware that Angelo started to approach the table, caught the mood, and immediately backtracked.

Lestrade put his wineglass down and said, awkwardly, “Right. I didn’t mean anything bad by it, John. I was just…Sorry. I was just making conversation.”

John nodded. He knew he’d overreacted a bit. He wondered if he was ever going to stop being sensitive to the suggestion that he and Sherlock weren’t perfect parents to Oliver. “I know,” said John. “Yeah. Sorry.” John made a grab for his wine as a distraction.

Sherlock said, “Isn’t it time for the bill?” and gestured to Angelo.

“No tiramisu tonight?” Angelo asked, since Sherlock was generally much fonder of tiramisu than of any of the other food on the menu.
“Not tonight,” said Sherlock, and gave John a look that dared him to disagree.

John wasn’t inclined to disagree. He was annoyed with himself for having been the one to cause the night to take a sour turn, after he had been so worried about Sherlock ruining it. Maybe it was best they just cut their losses and go home.

There was haggling over the bill that Sherlock didn’t take any part in, and then John literally had to duck under the table in search of his shoe. By the time he had replaced it, the rest of his party had wandered outside, and Sherlock and Mycroft were having a snippy discussion about whether or not they would take a car home.

“Where were you?” Lestrade asked, curiously, and John shrugged. “Listen, mate, I didn’t mean to imply that you’re not good parents. You’re ridiculously good parents from what I’ve seen. You both have a natural talent for it. I’d never say a word against the two of you with Oliver. You know that, right? If you needed me, for some reason, I’d support you keeping him.”

John sighed and felt terrible for making Lestrade think he doubted that. “I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I was touchy about it.”

Lestrade’s eyes were sharp on him. “No one’s trying to take him from you two, right? I mean, you said there was no surviving family from the mother who was challenging you? That’s why you had to take him?”

I just worry about insane government doctors and the fact that he’s apparently the world’s first and only human clone. John wondered if at some point they were going have to tell Lestrade the truth about Oliver. They really ought to. John thought they possibly already would have if they hadn’t retreated into overprotectiveness as a reflex over the Thorpe thing. “We’re fine,” John said. “I don’t know why I overreacted like that. I’m sorry.”

“I know why you overreacted,” said Lestrade, simply, glancing over at Mycroft. “Because you’re used to people saying terrible things to you about the people you love. You’ve earned the right to be a bit touchy about that, I think.”

It was a good point. John had never really thought about it before. But he spent his life in a defensive position, expecting everyone to criticize Sherlock. Even his own sister, he thought. After a while, the defensiveness had clearly become absent-minded habit. He should have thought of that before.

“Yeah,” John agreed. “Still no excuse to jump down your throat.”

“No harm done there. How long do you think they will continue to disagree about this?”

“For three times longer than it would have taken us to just go home,” said John, grimly, stepping forward and saying. “That’s enough. We’ll take the car because I’m getting wet and not interested in debating it any longer.”

“Fine,” sulked Sherlock. “But we’re going to have sex in the back of it.”

“Well done. Thank you for saying that,” said John, and practically shoved Sherlock into the backseat of the car. “Ignore him,” he said to Mycroft, who raised his eyebrows with a look that said, I have good reason to believe he’s not lying.

“This was fun,” Lestrade said, brightly, coming over to them. And he curled his hand into Mycroft’s, firmly, as if daring him to jerk his hand away, which made John smile. “We should do this again sometime.”
Sherlock’s head reappeared from the backseat of the car. “It was not fun. And we are never doing this again.”

“Ignore him,” John said again, nudging him back into the car. “He’ll be in a better mood after we shag in the backseat on the way home.” John winked at Mycroft, who rolled his eyes.

“You are ten minutes from Baker Street,” said Mycroft.

“Perfect,” said John, and grinned while Mycroft looked even more abused and Lestrade laughed.

John ducked into the car and pulled the door closed and Sherlock grabbed at his coat collar and pulled him over and into a clumsy kiss.

“Oof,” said John, and kissed back briefly before pulling away. “We’re not shagging in the backseat of this car.”

“You said anything I wanted,” pouted Sherlock.

“Anything you want that you want because you want me to do it to you, and not because you want to irritate your brother,” said John, and sat away from him.

“I didn’t know the offer had conditions,” grumbled Sherlock, but snuggled up against John anyway. John turned his head to press a kiss against Sherlock’s curls, and didn’t even realize he’d done it until it was already done. Absent-minded habit, thought John. The number of absent-minded habits he’d fallen into with Sherlock Holmes. “That was terrible. Never make me do it again.”

“I didn’t think it was that bad. Killed an evening, didn’t it?”

“‘Killed’ being a very apt verb. And not even an interesting killing with decapitations and maggots.”

“I’m so happy I get to have two of you,” remarked John.

There was a moment of silence. “Are you, though?”

“Yes,” said John, firmly, and Sherlock hmm’d happily and pulled out his mobile.

“What are you doing?” John asked, looking over his shoulder as Sherlock composed a new text to Mycroft.

Sex in car really excellent. Thanks ever so much for loaning it to us. –SH

John sighed. “Sherlock. How old are you?”

“Seven years younger than him,” answered Sherlock.

His mobile buzzed with an incoming text.

Sod off.

“Didn’t expect that from Mycroft,” said John, with raised eyebrows.

“Unsigned,” said Sherlock, and pocketed his mobile. “That was from Lestrade.”

John shook his head and sighed and loved him and pulled out his own mobile to text Molly. On our way home.
Molly didn’t text back.

John didn’t really think anything of it, until they got to Baker Street and it was so incredibly quiet. John stilled just inside the door, thought of the gun he hadn’t brought with him because he hadn’t been with Oliver.

Sherlock, trapped behind him while he stared up at the staircase, said, “What?”

“It’s quiet,” breathed John.

“It’s fine,” said Sherlock, firmly, and brushed past John. “They’re just sleeping.” Sherlock began going up the stairs.

“How do you know?” demanded John, hissing at him.

“Because I’m Sherlock Holmes,” Sherlock called back.

“It isn’t even late,” John pointed out. Certainly not late enough for Oliver to be sleeping. Sherlock’s confidence that there was nothing wrong made no sense. John’s head was running through scenarios: Molly drugged, Oliver kidnapped, and they’d spent the evening playing footsie under the table and John hadn’t even thought about—

Molly was curled up on their couch, unconscious.

“Wake up,” Sherlock said, without preamble, and Molly jerked awake.

Okay, not unconscious, just sleeping, thought John, but his eyes skidded over the room and didn’t see Oliver anywhere.

“Oh,” Molly said. “Home already? I must have dozed off.”

“Where’s Oliver?” John demanded, and actually looked behind the sofa as if he thought Oliver might have crawled under there.

Molly blinked at him in sleepy bewilderment. “What?”

“Where is Oliver?” John repeated, thunderously.

“John,” Sherlock inserted, calmly. “Stop yelling at her. He’s upstairs in his cot. Go and get him.”

“Upstairs in his cot?” John echoed, because that made no sense to him, because they would never have had Oliver in his cot this early, Oliver wouldn’t be sleepy this early, Oliver wouldn’t—“Why is he in his cot?” asked John, but turned and took the stairs two at a time before Molly could answer.

He heard her say to Sherlock, confused, “Why? What time do you normally put him to bed? It seemed to be bedtime to me.”

Oliver was sitting up in his cot. He had a book on his lap that he was apparently looking at by way of the nightlight. His skull was sitting next to him, also looking at the book. Oliver looked at John and John could have sworn he looked relieved to see him. And, indeed, he lifted his arms for him immediately, saying, sounding pleased, “Papa.”

John pulled him up and out of the cot and held him tightly and pressed a kiss against his head and tried to take a deep breath to slow his racing heart. Stupid, stupid, stupid, of course Oliver was perfectly fine.
“No bed,” said Oliver, sounding disgusted he’d been subjected to it. “Sodding bed.”

John laughed helplessly and pressed another kiss into Oliver’s hair. “I know. Sorry about that. Come on, you can come downstairs and make a mess with your dad.”

“Yes,” agreed Oliver. “Skull.”

John leaned over and retrieved it and walked downstairs with the baby.

“Oh, he’s not sleeping?” Molly said.

Oliver gave her a look that said You’re lucky I like you.

“I told you: He doesn’t really sleep,” John said, giving Oliver to Sherlock since he was reaching for him. “It’s apparently genetic.”

“We don’t need as much sleep as ordinary people, do we, Ollie?”

“Why don’t you just say ‘mere mortals’?” said John, jokingly.

“Sodding sleep,” said Oliver, firmly.

“His vocabulary’s quite something,” Molly remarked.

“Yeah, Sherlock’s fixing that, isn’t he?” John sent him a look.

“His vocabulary will right itself once it expands sufficiently,” Sherlock sniffed, confidently.

“Well, I’m off,” Molly said, and walked over to Oliver. “Sorry I made you go to bed, Ollie.”

“Moll,” Oliver said, fondly, and touched her cheek in something like a caress.

Molly grinned. “You’re a sweetheart,” she said, and kissed his cheek.

“Bye bye bye,” he said, because he thought that farewells were improved by repeating the syllable bye as much as possible. “Bye bye bye bye bye.”

“Bye,” said Molly, still grinning, and John walked her out.

“Thanks,” he said. “Seriously. Sorry I…” He waved his hand vaguely, embarrassed.

Molly shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. Everything’s okay, right?”

“Fine,” John said, because it was, he was just an overreacting idiot.

“It’s just not usual that Sherlock is the calm one of you,” Molly pointed out. “If something was wrong, you know you could ask for help?”

John smiled at her, suddenly very touched. “I do. And Sherlock would be the first to tell me that. Thanks for watching Ollie.”

“Anytime. He’s lovely.”

“You’ll be okay getting home?”

“Oh, Mycroft promised me a car.”
“What? When?”

“He texted me.”

“He texts you now?”

Molly shrugged. “Yeah?”

John supposed he shouldn’t be surprised by that. He made sure she got safely into a car that was recognizably one of Mycroft’s, even texting to make sure that Mycroft had sent it. And then he went back upstairs, where Oliver was pointing out diagrams in the book Molly had brought him, Sherlock explaining what each of them was.

John went into the kitchen to put the kettle on and made them tea and carried it out. Oliver had moved on to a puzzle. He never actually put the puzzles together. He just examined the pieces very closely and arranged them in stacks whose logic was known only to him.

Sherlock was sitting in his chair watching him. He took the tea John handed him and sipped it as John settled himself in his own chair. And then he said, “Are you feeling better?”

“That was ridiculous,” said John. “Can we not talk about it?”

Sherlock’s eyes flickered over him, and John knew they were deducing every little thing about him. But Sherlock just said, “Fine.”
Chapter 50

John curled into the momentary stillness of Sherlock Holmes post-orgasm and said, “You know, it wouldn’t bother me if he preferred chemistry.”

Sherlock didn’t respond.

“Oh, come off it,” said John, and kissed his chest. “I know you’re not sleeping. You only sleep after sex when you’re getting the flu.”

“John, if he wants to be a doctor, I think that would be a good thing.”

“So would I. I’m just saying that you seem to be very hopeful that he follow in my footsteps, and I find that very sweet of you, but I actually wouldn’t care.” Yes, it was nice, John thought, but he genuinely didn’t mind if Oliver wanted to be a chemist like Sherlock. “I don’t doubt my influence on him. I don’t feel superfluous.”

“I didn’t think you did,” said Sherlock.

And said nothing else.

John sighed. “This is going to be one of those conversations, is it? Where you make me work hard for every little nugget of information?”

“You knew it was going to be. That’s why you waited until we were together in the dark.”

“Habit,” said John. “Do you know how many habits I’ve developed with you, Sherlock Holmes?”

“Yes,” answered Sherlock, without hesitation. “I keep track of all of them.”

“In your mind palace?” asked John, curiously.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Is there a whole room devoted to my habits?”

“Yes,” said Sherlock. “It’s a lovely little gallery with French windows to a garden. Very bright. The sun shines in. It’s a little like the light in the south of France.”

John was momentarily surprised. “Really?”

“Yes, really. What did you think?”

“It’s an actual palace, your mind palace.”

“That’s why it’s called that, John.” Sherlock sounded irritated.

John was fascinated. “So my habits are in a sun-drenched gallery. Where’s the rest of me?”

“You’re the west wing,” said Sherlock.

“I’m a whole wing.”
“Of course you are. And Oliver’s the north wing.”

“And what about the knowledge you use to solve actual crimes?”

“South wing.”

“What’s in the east wing?”

“The east wing’s closed,” said Sherlock, shortly.

“Ah,” said John, and kissed his chest again and let it slide.

He thought Sherlock wouldn’t say anything else, but after a while Sherlock spoke again. “I didn’t think about becoming anything but a chemist. Ever. That was what I wanted. From the time I could understand that adults had careers. I wanted to be a chemist.”

“You’re not a chemist,” John pointed out, after a moment.

“No. Then Carl Powers died and the police were rude to me and I thought, ‘I’ll show them, I’m going to solve every sodding crime in the book.’”

“Of course you did.”

“But I liked it. I like it. I do. I can’t imagine doing something else. My parents didn’t approve of it, ever, but by then they were able to dismiss it as just another sign of my sociopathic tendencies. So when I went to university, what did I study? I studied chemistry.” Sherlock fell silent.

John thought of Sherlock’s chemist parents, of Sherlock wanting to be some sort of detective and of studying chemistry at university nevertheless in an effort to please them. “Well, it’s come in handy, hasn’t it?” he said, to try to lighten the tone.

“Yes. But I want Oliver to have the entire world open to him. I don’t want him to pick chemistry because it’s mine. I don’t even know if it is mine, to be completely honest. I’m good at it but I would have been good at anything. Of all the things encoded in my DNA, I’m not sure ‘chemistry’ is one of them. So he should be anything he wants. He should be a doctor if he wants.”

“Or something wildly different.”

“An actor,” said Sherlock.

“A dancer,” teased John.

“Shut up,” said Sherlock.

“A chef,” continued John. “We could use a chef in the family.”

“I agree, a chef is desperately needed.”

“Shut up,” John rejoined, echoing Sherlock, and planted another kiss on his chest, smiling into it.

“What if he becomes a bureaucrat?”

“I’ll shoot Mycroft if that happens,” said Sherlock. And then, “We should think harder about Oliver’s mother. So we can answer questions about her.”

“Only lies have details. A wise man told me that.”
“Was it me?”

John chuckled. “No, it was Anderson. Of course it was you.”

“Still. We should come up with something. There are only going to be more questions. You want him to join a playgroup.”

John half-sat up so he could look down at Sherlock, surprised. “What?”

“Oh, don’t even pretend you don’t,” said Sherlock. “I know every thought in this silly little head of yours.” He reached out and tapped John’s head.

John ducked out of his way. “I mentioned that months ago. I haven’t brought it up since.”

“You mentioned it because it’s important to you. You’re not a prattler, you know. You never talk about anything casually. You pretend you do, but everything you bring up is very important to you, otherwise you wouldn’t invest the effort into putting it into words. You don’t see the point of sharing every thought in your head, just the big ones. So you mentioned it, so I remembered it.”

“In the west wing?”

“North, actually. But that’s beside the point.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. If you took him to a playgroup, people would want to know about him.”

“Why? Why couldn’t we just say we adopted him?”

“Because, for obvious reasons, he looks just like me.”

“Right. So we used your sperm and a surrogate.”

“How did we decide on the surrogate?”

“We…picked a name out of a hat?” John finished, lamely.

Sherlock gave him a look. “Point to me.”

“We should just say it’s none of their business. That’s what you would say, anyway.”

Sherlock looked almost startled by the logic of that. “It is what I would say.”

“See? That’s what I mean: Only lies have details. He’s our son. The personal negotiations of our sexual reproduction are our business. Why should we answer any questions at all?”

“You’re right.”

“Oh, damn, I wish you’d let me get my mobile so I could have recorded you saying that.”

“Hilarious,” said Sherlock, as John settled himself back down onto the bed. Sherlock rolled onto his side so he could face him.

“So the playgroup thing,” prompted John.

Sherlock took a deep breath. “I’m not trying to be difficult with you. I just… The world is an impossible place, and we’re going to have to send him out into it soon enough, and can’t we just
keep him, for a little while, here with us, safe and sound and happy and loved and just *him*?”

This, John thought, had far more to do with Sherlock than it had to do with Oliver, but John thought that Oliver was doing just fine and he was willing to give Sherlock time to come around. So John said, “Yes. It’s fine.” And then, “Thank you for tonight.”

Sherlock tipped one corner of his lips up in a smile. “You already did.”

“That was without words. This is with words. Thank you. I needed that.”

“I know you did. I forget that you do. Remind me.”

“I intend to. Even if you do behave like a prat every time.”

“You’d be suspicious if I didn’t.”

“True.” John hesitated, then said, “I think we should tell Lestrade.”

“He knows you need socializing every once in a while. It’s why he goes for pints with you.”

“I think we should tell him about Oliver.” Sherlock didn’t say anything, so John kept talking. “Everyone else knows. He’d keep it a secret. He wouldn’t tell anyone. And it’s putting your brother in an uncomfortable position, having to lie to him.”

“To be honest, I can’t believe Mycroft hasn’t already told him,” remarked Sherlock.

“Mycroft doesn’t have our permission to tell him. Regardless of what you think about him, he’s trying to do what we decide we want to do when it comes to Oliver.”

Sherlock took a deep breath. “Can we make this decision later? You know I trust Lestrade, I’ve just… grown used to not having it be an issue. It’s one more person who’ll look at Oliver like a curiosity.”

“None of the people we’ve told do that. Not Mrs. Hudson, not Molly. They all just love him. So would Lestrade. Lestrade adores him. It’s not going to change his mind about him.”

“Yes, it is. He’s not going to stop and wonder about unknown mothers that could be influencing Oliver. He’ll expect him to be just like me, because why wouldn’t he be?” said Sherlock, bitterly. “That’s what I don’t want for him. I’ve never wanted it for him. I want him to be *him*, whatever he wants to be, whoever he wants to be. It’s hard enough given what he is. I want to minimize the number of people who treat him like that.”

“Do you think we treat him like that?”

“Of course not.”

“Neither would Greg,” Sherlock said nothing. John let the silence fall for a moment, then said, “I’m not saying we have to tell him tomorrow. I just… See what you think about the idea. I don’t think one more person knowing is going to be our tipping point.”

There was a pause.

Sherlock said, “He’s okay, you know. He’s safe.”

John didn’t want to talk about this, but he couldn’t resist saying, “No, he’s not.”
“He’s as safe as we can make him, and that’s the best that we can do, and you know that.”

John took a deep breath and turned his face into Sherlock’s chest. Sherlock was warm and solid and only about a year earlier John would never have imagined that he would have known these things about Sherlock, that he would have been able to turn to him for comfort and Sherlock would, in fact, have been very comforting. “Thank you,” he mumbled.

Sherlock held him tighter. John felt him brush a kiss over his head. “Now you’ve thanked me multiple times.”

“Now I’m thanking you for being the grounded one when I need you to be. When I’m being irrational, because I didn’t want to take him and hide him and wrap him in cotton wool, but I can’t stop panicking all the same, thank you for being calming and sensible and normal.”

“Well, don’t make a habit of it. It doesn’t come to me naturally and I dislike it.”

John chuckled and moved off Sherlock’s chest, settling next to him. “You know, sometimes I go whole days and don’t think about him,” said John, on a sigh. “Do you think we’ll just have sudden flashes of worry about people like him for the rest of our lives?”

“Probably,” said Sherlock.

“You’re such a reassuring bloke to be married to,” John told him, fondly.

Sherlock rolled, half-covering John. And it was reassuring, all that contact. Trust Sherlock to know it was better than a million words would have been.

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The rain continued. The lack of interesting crimes also continued. Sherlock embarked on a project to compare the contents of puddles in all the different parts of London. Like clockwork, every afternoon, John would get tired of all of the sulking and suggest that they continue their experiment. John did not go with them, after the first time, where he got soaked by a passing taxi and then was forced to juggle several vials of dirty water and got snapped at for mixing them up. So he sent Sherlock off with an umbrella and an Oliver wrapped in a raincoat and a pair of wellies, and they returned soaking wet.

Not that John had the heart to take Sherlock to task for it, since they always came back glowing with delight over the excursion, and Oliver was in a terrific mood as John gave him a bath, telling John wisely about everything he and Daddy had done. John only understood some of the words but he felt like it was a higher proportion every day, and Oliver was getting better at naming parts of London. John suspected Sherlock was carefully teaching him London geography as they went over the streets. He was also adept now at puddle and wet and rain and raincoat and rain boots and vial and water.

One day, though, Oliver was fussy and nothing pleased him, not even the mouse detective book or Mrs. Hudson’s biscuits or Sherlock proposing that they go and witness an autopsy. Oliver cried and complained and threw his skull across the room and tipped over a stack of Sherlock’s notes that Sherlock really shouldn’t have had in such ready access (although John admitted that telling him that probably hadn’t been the best response to Oliver’s action).

“He is being completely illogical,” Sherlock bit out, trying to re-organize his notes.

Oliver half-whined, half-cried at him and ripped at a page of one of John’s medical books, which he never did because he was normally too busy reverencing those books.
John pulled the medical book out of Oliver’s hands, which caused a full-fledged wail, and said, “He’s bored.”

“Bored? This flat is full of his toys. We can barely move, there are so many toys.”

Everyone in this flat was in a strop, thought John. Truthfully, Sherlock hated when Oliver cried and reacted very poorly to it. John said, “Maybe he’s tired. This is the sort of crying he does when he’s tired. I’ll give him a bath.” John leaned over and picked Oliver up and paused and looked at him.

“He’s not tired,” Sherlock grumbled. “It’s nowhere near his bedtime. He’s just being difficult.”

“Yeah,” said John, not sure what Sherlock had said, and hurrying into the bathroom with Oliver, where he quickly brushed the back of his hand up and over Oliver’s forehead. Warm, John thought. He was definitely warm. Yes, he’d been crying, and that always made him warmer than usual, but John was a doctor, and he could recognize a fever when he saw one.

Oliver cried half-heartedly, annoyed sounds of protest, and John looked at him and thought, Yes, he was being difficult because he didn’t feel well. John should have realized much earlier. And what to do about it? If he went back into the sitting room and told Sherlock about it, it would provoke a major panic. Oliver was already unhappy, he didn’t need Sherlock’s panic on top of it.

John looked at Oliver and Oliver looked back, sniffling miserably. He even looked flushed, now that John was properly looking at him. And his eyes were rimmed with red, tired and heavy.

“Alright, love,” John soothed him, hoping he didn’t sound panicked himself. Because he wasn’t panicked. Of course he wasn’t. He was a doctor and it was a very low fever and it was going to be fine.

John closed the bathroom door and turned the tap on to fill the tub and then, convinced Sherlock wouldn’t be able to deduce he was doing it, he took Oliver’s temperature. 38.5. Which was warm but not alarmingly warm.

“Okay,” John whispered, keeping his voice down and hoping Sherlock wouldn’t be suspicious enough to come check on them. “I’m going to give you some medicine to get your fever down, and then I’m going to give you a nice bath, and then I’m going to put you to bed and you’ll feel better in the morning, okay?”

Oliver had stopped crying. He was still sniffling, but he was now watching with interest as John found the Calpol he’d stuffed in the cabinet.

“Ready?” said John, measuring it out.

Oliver looked at him dubiously but took the medicine. He looked reflective after swallowing, as if he hadn’t made up his mind about the experience.

“Good boy,” said John, and kissed his hair and then undressed him and gave him a bath, thinking.

He had to tell Sherlock. Surely he did. Sherlock would need to know.

But it was such a minor fever. Maybe it would be so minor that it would be so much of nothing that he wouldn’t need to tell Sherlock. He just didn’t want Sherlock to worry. John was a doctor, he knew a fever like this was nothing to worry about.

Oliver seemed cooler when he was done with his bath. Also sleepier. John took his temperature again and it was 38.3 and John, relieved, thought that was movement in the right direction. He
wrapped Oliver in a towel and took him upstairs to change him into a sleepsuit. Sherlock was still in the sitting room, having a snappish, one-sided discussion with the television.

John started to read Oliver to sleep, but he was asleep almost as soon as John sat down with him. Sick, thought John. Definitely. But maybe a really minor illness and maybe he would be so much better in the morning that this would all be a thing of the past.

John settled him in his cot and brushed a hand over his forehead. Not really warm. Good.

Sherlock was sprawled on the sofa. John joined him by picking up his feet and making space. Sherlock immediately replaced his feet, this time on John’s lap.

“What are you watching?” asked John, as a lion on-screen prowled after a gazelle.

“Some terrible nature program. They keep getting things wrong.”

John looked at him in surprise. “You know things about lions?”

“I had a case involving a murder in a zoo once.”

“How did I never know about that?”

“It wasn’t a particularly good one. Where’s Oliver?”

Why was Sherlock asking that question? John looked at him, wondering if he was suspicious. Surely it was obvious where Oliver was. “Sleeping.”

Sherlock didn’t look away from the television. “He went to sleep without his skull?”

John glanced around the room, spotting the skull lying next to the rocking horse. Oliver never consented to be put into his cot without his skull. “He must have forgotten,” John said.

“All right,” said Sherlock, but he sounded distracted by the program still. “Then again, he’s been out-of-sorts all day.”

Because he’d been coming down with whatever cold he’d managed to pick up, thought John but didn’t say. “I’ll take it up to him,” said John, and moved Sherlock’s legs out of the way, took the skull up to Oliver—still sleeping soundly, breaths possibly a little heavier than usual—and then went back to the sofa.

This time when John settled on it Sherlock crawled so that John got his head in his lap instead of his feet. John combed his fingers through Sherlock’s hair and said, “Serious? This is what we’re going to watch?”

“Better than Top Gear,” said Sherlock.

“We don’t have compatible television tastes, you and I,” sighed John.

“We can watch a film if you like.”

“Not in the mood to experiment?” asked John, wondering if Sherlock was coming down with something, too.

“Trying to get rid of me?”

“No. It’s just that you don’t usually suggest we curl up on the sofa together and watch a film.”
There was a moment of silence. Sherlock said, finally, “It was a trying day.”

He wasn’t used to losing his temper with Oliver, and it was clearly weighing on him.

John leaned over and placed a kiss onto Sherlock’s head. “Tell me what you know about lions,” he said.

He let Sherlock correct basically every sentence the narrator of the nature program said. And then he yawned and looked at the time and said, “I’m going to go to bed.”

“Mmm,” said Sherlock, without protest.

“What are you going to do?”

“I might read. In among the notes Ollie knocked over was an article I’d intended to read and never got around to. Might as well do it tonight.”

“If you feel inclined to sleep at any point, come to bed.”

“Yes,” agreed Sherlock, and rolled up so John could get off of the sofa.

John kissed his cheek and then went upstairs to check on Oliver one last time. Still sleeping soundly. John laid the palm of his hand against Oliver’s cheek. Not that warm, thought John. Nothing alarming.

He walked back down the stairs, and Sherlock said, “Is there something wrong with Oliver?”

John froze and wondered why he ever thought that he could hide something from Sherlock. “What? Why?”

“Because you never check on him before you go to bed,” Sherlock pointed out, lifting his eyebrows at him. He was still sprawled on the sofa, now holding the article he’d referenced.

“I don’t usually beat him to bed,” replied John.

Sherlock seemed to accept that point, shrugging a bit and turning back to his article.

And then John felt terrible about keeping it from him. That wasn’t fair. “He was out of sorts today,” John began, slowly.

Sherlock’s head whipped up, his eyes narrowed at John, and John swallowed the rest of what he was going to say. This was going to be a mess, thought John.

“Yes?” Sherlock demanded, when John didn’t immediately say anything more.

“Maybe just keep a closer eye on him tonight?” John decided, finally. “It’s not like him to be fussy like that.”

Sherlock nodded, looking suspicious.

John went into their bedroom and closed the door and sighed. Tomorrow was going to be exhausting, he thought.
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

Thank you to justlikeluna for the medical advice on this chapter!

Chapter 51

John woke to Oliver crying. In the few seconds it took him to wake up fully—and he used to be better at that, he was clearly getting old—he heard Sherlock’s feet on the stairs, jogging up to Oliver. And then John braced himself, holding his breath. Maybe Oliver would be absolutely fine and Sherlock would soothe him and put him back to sleep.

Sherlock’s footfalls descending the stairs were like thunder. No such luck, thought John.

The bedroom door was flung open and Sherlock said, urgently, “John.”

“Yeah,” said John, leaning over to turn the light on.

Oliver was in Sherlock’s arms, wailing miserably, his hair sweat-matted all over his head.

“Oliver’s sick,” Sherlock said. “He’s really, really sick. I mean, truly, honestly, it isn’t in my head, feel how hot he is.” Sherlock practically shoved Oliver toward John. Oliver cried harder in reaction.

John laid his hand against Oliver’s damp, tear-streaked cheek. He was warm. Warmer than John had felt him so far. “Okay,” John said, shifting into calmness. He was almost relieved that Sherlock was practically bouncing out of his skin. Sherlock’s hysteria always triggered an unnatural tranquility in John in reaction. “Come here,” he said, taking Oliver fully into his arms as he got out of bed.

“‘Come here’?” Sherlock echoed, in outrage, trailing behind John as he carried Oliver into the bathroom, jiggling him soothingly in his arms. “That’s what you have to say? ‘Come here’?”

“We’re going to take his temperature,” said John, evenly, retrieving the thermometer.

“Why?” demanded Sherlock.

John looked at him and said, “Data, Sherlock,” as he stuck the thermometer in Oliver’s ear. It beeped, and John glanced at the reading. 39. Warmer than John would have liked. “Okay,” he said, kissing the side of Oliver’s head, determined not to overreact. “Let’s take some medicine.” John opened the medicine cabinet.

“What did the thermometer say?”

“He has a fever.”

“I told you that. We should do something, shouldn’t we?”

“We are. We’re giving him medicine. Here you go, Ollie.”

Oliver cried and shook his head.
“He doesn’t want the medicine,” Sherlock pointed out.

“Well, he has to take the medicine. That’s how we get the fever down and that’s how he starts
taking it,” John commanded Sherlock.

“What makes you think I can explain that to him?”

“He’s your clone!”

“You think I listen to myself? The only person I ever listen to is you.”

John sighed in frustration and turned back to Oliver. “Come on, love. You did this earlier,
remember?”

“Earlier?” said Sherlock. “Earlier? Did you give him medicine earlier?”

“Help,” John said, handing Oliver over to him. “Hold his hands for me and keep his head still.”

“Is there anything about this that isn’t a terrible idea?” Sherlock snapped.

“Yoo-hoo!” called Mrs. Hudson.


“There was such a commotion,” said Mrs. Hudson, standing in the doorway to peer into their very
crowded bathroom. “Is everything alright?”

“No. Oliver’s sick and John’s giving him medicine.” Sherlock said it in disgust.

“And Oliver’s not taking the medicine,” John added, “because he is the clone of the most stubborn
human being on the planet.”

Sherlock glared at him.

Oliver cried.

Mrs. Hudson said, “Wouldn’t it be easier if you weren’t all stuffed into the bathroom on top of each
other?”

There was a moment in which they absorbed this, and then Sherlock carried Oliver out of the
bathroom as if that had been his plan all along.

“What can I do?” Mrs. Hudson asked John, anxiously. “Anything?”

“No. Thank you, though. He’ll be fine. Some of us are just panicking.”

“I can hear you!” shouted Sherlock from the kitchen.

“We’ll be fine,” John told Mrs. Hudson again, and walked into the kitchen.

Sherlock was sitting on the table, amongst all his science equipment, trying to keep hold of a
squirming Oliver, who clearly wished to make a break from all of the insanity. “I’m not panicking,”
Sherlock said. “I don’t panic. I never panic.”

“Tell your clone that,” said John.

To John’s surprise, Sherlock held Oliver out so that they were facing each other and said, firmly,
“Oliver. Stop it. This is irrational and inefficient.”

Whether because he understood or he was surprised by the tone of voice, Oliver’s protests ended in an abrupt hiccup.

“I know you don’t feel well,” Sherlock said, a bit more gently. “And I know it’s horrible. But Papa’s the very best doctor and he says you’ll feel better if you take the medicine and Papa is generally right a higher proportion of the time than other people are.”

High praise, thought John, sardonically, but he was willing to take it.

And then Sherlock went on. “Plus, when Papa says that things are going to be alright, what Papa really means is that he will make them alright, and you should trust that, always. He will always make everything alright.”

John stared at Sherlock, trying not to look like he was so touched by that sentiment that he was going to forgive every other irritating thing he’d done that evening. Sherlock looked at Oliver, who looked back at him and uttered another little hiccup of breath.

Sherlock’s expression softened. “Okay,” he said, almost under his breath, and pulled Oliver in and kissed the side of his head. “See? You’re okay. Papa will make it better, it’s what he does.” Sherlock turned Oliver so he was facing John and said to John, “There you go,” as if he had not said anything extraordinary at all.

John tore his gaze away from Sherlock and looked at Oliver and cleared his throat to shake himself out of it. “It’s just a little bit of medicine. You didn’t mind it before.”

Oliver gave him a look that said, *Yes, I did, it's just that I didn't know I did until after I took it.*

“Okay,” John conceded. “But was it really so bad? And didn’t you feel better afterwards?”

Oliver looked skeptical, but Sherlock was holding him firmly enough that John managed to get the medicine into him.

Oliver coughed dramatically as if he had never tasted anything as terrible in his entire life.

“Stupid,” he told Sherlock, firmly, an assessment of the medicine.

“Sodding stupid,” Sherlock agreed, because it was Sherlock’s quest to apparently make their child’s vocabulary composed of nothing but words other parents didn’t want their children to know.

“Don’t act like it was so horrible,” said John, “I’ve watched you eat dust.”

“For science,” said Sherlock.

John rolled his eyes and put the kettle on. “That should get his fever down.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“We’ll take him to hospital.”

“We shouldn’t take him now?”

“No. It’ll upset him and frighten him needlessly. His fever will come down the same way your fever came down, and he’ll be fine. You know why? Because he’s you.”
Sherlock didn’t really acknowledge that. He looked at the kettle and said, “You’re making tea?”

“I doubt I’ll go back to sleep now.”

Sherlock smiled. It surprised John. But that was definitely a smile. He ducked his head down to be near Oliver’s and said, conspiratorially, “This is what Papa does: he makes things better, and he also makes tea.”

John shook his head, amused, and turned to the cupboard to get the mugs down.

When the tea was made, he found Sherlock on the sofa with Oliver curled up on his chest. The television was on, although it was muted, and they were both watching it raptly. A cooking program, John saw. He put Sherlock’s tea down on the coffee table and then sat in his armchair and picked up the mystery novel he was reading despite all of Sherlock’s snide comments about it.

After a little while, Sherlock said, his voice low, “You knew he was sick earlier.”

John glanced over at him. Oliver was sound asleep, one hand clutching at the expensive fabric of Sherlock’s shirt. “He was a little warm when I gave him his bath.”

“You didn’t say anything,” Sherlock accused.

“I didn’t want to worry you. I thought maybe it might be nothing.”

“And now it’s something?”

“It’s a little more stubborn than nothing is. How is he? Still warm?”

Sherlock placed a hand against Oliver’s head and shook his head. “No. Not the way he was.”

“Good. That’s good. See? Nothing we can really do for it. He just needs to work it through. We’ll let him rest and make sure he drinks plenty of fluids. He’ll be fine.”

“You can go back to bed if you want,” Sherlock offered. “I’ve got him.”

John looked at Sherlock on the sofa, cradling their child. “I’m fine,” he said.

***

In the morning Oliver still did not have a fever. John was relieved, even if it was clear that he was also still sick. His eyes were glassy and dull and he continued to look miserable.

John said they were staying inside all day and Sherlock didn’t argue. He sat with Oliver and put together molecules for him and patiently wiped his nose whenever it ran and John was privately a little amazed by how well Sherlock was dealing with the whole thing.

Oliver napped in the afternoon, which was unlike him, but John took advantage of it to nap himself, curling onto the sofa. It seemed very cozy and self-indulgent, despite the fact that it was the result of his son’s illness, and John tried not to feel guilty for enjoying it. But it was raining outside, and the light filtering into the flat was dreamy and silver, and Sherlock was picking out an absent melody on his violin, and John slept.

When he woke Sherlock was still playing and the light in the flat was noticeably dimmer. John refused to open his eyes, preferring to linger in the vestiges of the nap. He listened to what Sherlock was playing, which was very pretty. He tried to remember if he’d ever heard him play it before.
Eventually his curiosity got the better of him. Yawning, he stretched and sat up. Sherlock was walking through the room as he played, his steps keeping the rhythm of the music.

“What is that?” John asked.

Sherlock glanced at him, but didn’t pause in his playing. “It’s Oliver’s.”

John smiled. “You wrote him a song?”

“Yes.” Sherlock’s tone dared John to mock him.

As if John was ever going to mock him for that. What had been wrong with everyone in Sherlock’s life before John had arrived in it? Sometimes it boggled John’s mind. “Well, it’s lovely,” he said.

“Ollie’s still sleeping?”

“Mmm,” Sherlock said, leaving off his playing abruptly. “I checked on him a few minutes ago and he was fine.”

“You can keep playing,” John said. “In case you were stopping on my account.” Not that Sherlock ever did, so that didn’t make much sense.

“No, that’s the end of the song,” Sherlock said. “It’s unfinished. He’s unfinished.” Sherlock shifted into the song John recognized as his, and John smiled and settled back onto the sofa.

***

The following morning Oliver’s nose was better but he’d developed a nasty cough. Sherlock hated the cough. Whenever Oliver coughed, Sherlock stopped whatever he was doing and just stared at him until he was done. John found it unsettling, so he couldn’t imagine how Oliver felt about it.

“It’s a cough,” John told him. “That’s all.”

“It could be pneumonia,” Sherlock said.

“It’s not pneumonia.”

“Oh, you’re an expert on pneumonia?” said Sherlock.

“Yes,” answered John. “It’s called ‘being a doctor.’”

“Well, I’ve had pneumonia.”

“Doesn’t make you an expert on it. And he’s just got a cough. It’s not pneumonia. I’ll get him some cough medicine.”

At the word medicine, Oliver looked up from his puzzle. “Sodding stupid,” he said, and made a face.

“I don’t think he’s going to be a doctor anymore,” remarked John.

“Oh, no, he’d love being a doctor. Doctors just get to give the medicine to everyone else.”

“Definitely a good motivation for being a doctor.”

“And he’s working on a puzzle right now of the thoracic vertebrae.”

Oliver coughed, and Sherlock did that staring thing at him again.
“Stop,” John said, and deposited himself directly on Sherlock’s lap, which startled Sherlock, because it wasn’t like John made a habit of that. “Stop staring at him like that. It’s creepy.” Point made, John vacated Sherlock’s lap, pleased when Sherlock blinked after him and not at Oliver, who started coughing again.

***

The following morning, John got out of bed and found Sherlock in the nursery, sitting on the floor by Oliver’s cot, doing something on his laptop.

“Okay,” John said, sternly. “This is not necessary. He can sleep without you in the room.”

“He was having a hard time sleeping,” said Sherlock. “He kept coughing. It was better when I was in here.”

John peeked in at Oliver, who was snoring through clogged nasal passages. Then he leaned down and took Sherlock’s laptop out of his hand and closed it.

“Come downstairs,” he said. “I’ll make you breakfast.”

Not that Sherlock was going to eat breakfast, but he did follow John downstairs, complaining the whole way about how rude it had been of John to take his laptop away. He sat at the table and looked over his experiments. John glanced at him, thinking he looked listless, and wondering if he was catching Oliver’s cold.

“When’s the last time you checked on those?” John asked him.

“I know,” Sherlock said, ruefully. “They’ve mostly been ruined now. It was a busy few days.”

“Mmm,” said John in agreement, cracking eggs into a pan. And then he paused, thinking. And then he turned to Sherlock. “Sherlock,” he said, sharply.

Sherlock looked up at him from his experiments.

“When is the last time you slept?” John demanded. Normally he kept much better track of that.

Sherlock opened his mouth and John swept his arm toward their bedroom and cut him off by saying, “To bed.”

“John—”

“You thought you could fly under the radar just because I was busy dealing with the other one of you, didn’t you?”

Sherlock shook his head. “I didn’t need to sleep. Oliver needed me to—”

John reached out and turned the stove off and said, “Come on. Bed.”

“I’m not tired,” Sherlock protested, as John pulled him out of his chair and prodded him down the hallway.

“Yes, you are. You’re overtired. You’re exhausted.” John pulled Sherlock’s pajamas out and handed them to him. “Here.”

"You're being ridiculous," complained Sherlock. “As if I don’t know when I’m tired.”
“You definitely don’t know when you’re tired,” said John, and began unbuttoning Sherlock’s shirt.

Sherlock brightened a bit. “Oh, are we going to—”

“Absolutely not. You need sleep.” John pushed Sherlock shirt off him and pulled the T-shirt over his head. It was remarkably like dressing Oliver.

“I’m not tired,” Sherlock said again.

“Fine. Just humor me then.” John pushed him onto the bed.

Sherlock went with a huff, and John untied his shoes and pulled them off and then followed with his trousers. By the time John was finished manhandling him to get his pajama bottoms on, Sherlock had somehow managed to fall fast asleep.

“Git,” John said, fondly. Then considered his abandoned breakfast and decided instead to crawl into bed with Sherlock, who rolled toward him automatically and dropped a heavy arm over him and snuffled into his shoulder, and John kissed his head and closed his eyes.

***

John didn’t sleep. He dozed a bit, enjoying having Sherlock sleeping next to him, and then he rolled out of bed and went back to his breakfast. As soon as he cracked fresh eggs, Oliver sounded a cry from upstairs, with his inimitable sense of perfect timing.

John went upstairs to retrieve him, finding him standing in his cot, a sniffling mess.

“Papa,” he said, in anguish, trying to communicate how terrible being sick was, and reached for him.

“I know,” said John, and picked him up and cuddled him. “You still feel terrible, don’t you?”

Oliver turned his face into John’s neck and coughed wetly.

Lovely, thought John, and changed him and went over every doctorly thought he had in his head. It was a cold, he thought. There was nothing he could do for a cold. And it was Oliver’s first cold. His little immune system was doing the best it could to address such an unusual occurrence. He hadn’t had a fever since the first night and his symptoms did seem to be progressing.

But all of the reasonable things John would have told a panicked parent didn’t help when he was the panicked parent. And he didn’t have Sherlock there panicking in order to force him to be calm in response.

John debated silently, not reaching a conclusion, and went downstairs and made breakfast. Oliver sat in his highchair and banged his skull again as he repeated, “Sodding sodding sodding.” John considered how he was going to break him of the habit of saying that, then considered how he was going to trick Oliver into drinking something, since Oliver was turning up his nose at milk—and John didn’t blame him, because John didn’t like milk when he was sick, either—and was uninterested in any type of juice John had given him.

John looked at the kettle and had a brilliant idea. He walked around to be in front of Oliver and said, “What about tea? Would you like some tea?”

Oliver recognized the word, of course. Oliver recognized all words that they had ever used even once, never mind a word they used as often as they used tea. His eyes lit up, showing interest in something for the first time in days. “Tea!” he exclaimed, as if wondering why he had never thought
to demand tea before.

John picked him up out of his highchair and set him on the edge of the counter, holding him in place firmly with one hand while he set about making tea with the other. “Let’s pretend that tea is a perfectly healthy and acceptable thing to give a baby,” John said.

“Yes,” Oliver said, gravely, watching the tea-making process raptly.

John gave him tea that was watered down, heavily sugared and ridiculously milked. John wasn’t sure giving Oliver sugary, caffeinated tea was the best idea, but he decided it was better than nothing, if Oliver would consent to drink it. When John presented Oliver with the tea, Oliver sucked it down immediately and then held his sippy cup out to John and said, simply, “More.”

John laughed and kissed the top of his head. Because it was just so lovely to see Oliver interested in something.

He made him another cup and then tried to interest him in toast. Oliver demanded jam and then spent the entirety of breakfast making complicated hieroglyphics with the jam and explaining what they meant to his skull. He sneezed and coughed and made a general mess of himself, but he seemed mostly content, and John left him to it while he ate his own breakfast and drank his own cup of tea—black, with a bit of sugar, which was a respectable, grown-up way to take his tea, he thought.

John cleaned up after Oliver, and then, listening to his labored breaths, said, “I wish you were old enough to properly blow your nose. I feel like you’d feel much better.”

Oliver said, “Skull,” and held it up to show John.

John didn’t know what he meant by that, but looking at him, he did have an idea, and John supposed it was worth a try.

So he carried Oliver, skull, and a couple of medical books into the bathroom and turned the shower on as hot as he could get it, sitting on the floor with the baby as the small room filled with steam.

“There you go,” he said, handing Oliver one of the books, and Oliver sat and traced the veins in the leg and breathed easier than John had heard him breathe in days.

The door leading into the bedroom opened and Sherlock looked down at them curiously. “Is there something wrong with the sitting room?” he asked.

“Daddy!” Oliver exclaimed at him. “Tea!”

Sherlock lifted his eyebrows at the baby and said, “I am not where tea comes from, Ollie.” And then he said to John, “Oliver wants tea.”

“Yes, I heard him,” said John, amused. “He takes tea like you, you know. It’s all milk and sugar. The ruination of tea must be genetic.”

“His good taste is genetic,” said Sherlock. And then, “Why are you in the bathroom, though?”

“The steam helps him breathe,”

Sherlock looked alarmed. “Is he having trouble breathing?”

“He’s all clogged up and can’t blow his nose. We might have to suction him.”

Sherlock blinked. Oliver looked up from his medical textbook in alarm.
“Suction him?” said Sherlock.

John didn’t understand the reaction to this. “Yes. You know. Suction his nose.”

“That sounds horrible!” exclaimed Sherlock, shocked.

“You’ve got jars of other people’s saliva in your fridge right now,” John pointed out, “and you think this is disgusting?”

“Not disgusting. It sounds like medieval torture! Where is your modern medicine?”

Oliver whimpered melodramatically and Sherlock picked him up and said, “I will not let Papa come near you with any sort of suction monstrosity.”

John rolled his eyes. “Oh, for God’s sake.”

Sherlock was ignoring him in favor of studying Oliver's face closely. “How are you feeling, love?”

“Papa tea,” Oliver told him, because clearly that had been the most important thing to happen in his day.

“Did Papa really make you tea?” Sherlock asked.

“Yes,” said Oliver.

“And did you like it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m glad.” Sherlock put him back on the floor and sat on the toilet and said to John, as Oliver started coughing, “He doesn’t seem better.”

“I think he is. He’s certainly got a bit more energy. He won’t drink anything, though, and that worries me.”

“You just said he had tea.”

“Only a bit. And tea is a diuretic. A minor one, but still. I’d rather he drink some juice. And a lot more of it than he has been.”

Sherlock made a sound of disgust. “You’re always so worried about things like eating and drinking.”

“Because they are surprisingly important to continued life,” remarked John. “Speaking of requirements of human life, you slept, like, an hour.”

“I didn’t need to sleep in the first place.”

“You were so exhausted you fell asleep before I could even get your trousers off.”

“Well, you weren’t taking them off for a good reason, so I got bored and nodded off.”

John shook his head and looked at Oliver and said, “I need him to start drinking more. If he doesn’t, we have to take him to the surgery. I don’t want him getting dehydrated.”

Sherlock steepled his fingers together and tapped them against his lips and looked at Oliver, who said to John, “Papa, that?” and pointed at his diagram.
“That’s the popliteal vein,” John told him.

“Will there be competent people at this surgery?” Sherlock asked.

“No, I’m planning on taking him to a surgery entirely staffed by unlicensed idiots using the practice as a front for a prostitution ring,” said John.

“Ah, I was wondering if you were referring to your surgery,” remarked Sherlock, mildly.

John gave him a look and answered Oliver’s urgent, “That? That?” with, “The superficial femoral vein. You were the one who wanted to take him to the hospital days ago.”

“I hadn’t thought it through. It was a moment of panic.”

“I thought you didn’t panic.”

“I don’t,” said Sherlock, firmly. He took a deep breath. “How many tests will they run on him?”

“Sherlock, the fact that he’s a clone isn’t going to show up in his blood tests.”

“I’m not worried about that. I’m worried about subjecting him to all of that if we don’t have to. Look, he’s quite content right now.”

John looked down at Oliver, who was leaning happily against him, still looking closely at the veins of the leg. John sighed and kissed the top of his head and said, “Why did you have to be the clone of an impossible person? Why couldn’t you be the clone of someone very cooperative?”

Oliver looked up at him and said, clearly, firmly, “Dull.”

John laughed. “Yes, I suppose so,” he agreed.

“Do you think he’s not getting better?” Sherlock asked, anxiously.

John decided he wasn’t going to mince words. “I think he needs to drink more. Reason with him about that.”

Sherlock nodded.

But no matter how persuasive he tried to be over the course of the day, Oliver continued to be stubborn about drinking. In fact, John couldn’t even convince him to take any more tea. He simply stopped drinking at all.

“Come on,” Sherlock pleaded with him, and John would have been distracted by the novelty of Sherlock pleading—outside of bed—if it hadn’t been for the fact that he was getting concerned. And Oliver’s refusal to drink was making him sicker. He grew more listless as the day wore on, more upset about everything. “If you don’t drink just a little bit, Papa’s going to make us go to a scary place with needles.”

“Don’t terrify him,” John said.

“I don’t understand it,” said Sherlock, as Oliver batted him out of the way. “It would make him feel better.”

“You didn’t want to drink when you were sick, either. I had to force you to choke down half a cup of tea.”
“Because it was terrible tea.”

“Because you were sick. Come here, Ollie.” John took him from Sherlock, held him close, and Oliver made distressed sounds of annoyance. “His throat’s probably bothering him,” said John, listening to how congested he sounded. “Probably a post-nasal drip irritating his throat and he doesn’t want anything else against the rawness.” John glanced at Sherlock, who was sitting on the floor, surrounded by every toy he’d used to try to distract Oliver that day. Sherlock looked anguished, like he was about to collapse from concern. “Hey,” John said. “Listen to me. This is okay.”

“No, it’s not,” Sherlock snapped. “He had a little cold and he was getting better and now we’ve failed him.”

“No, we haven’t. Sherlock, he’s sick. This isn’t our fault.”

“I took him out in the rain.”

John blinked. “What?”

“I took him out in the rain.” Sherlock ruffled his hair in agitation. “I kept getting him wet.”

“Sherlock. You know water doesn’t transmit cold germs.”

Sherlock gave him his *don’t-pretend-I’m-an-idiot* look. “It weakened his immune system. And I kept doing it to him, kept taking him out in the rain, kept getting him wet. You would have thought I was trying to get him sick.”

“You weren’t. Oliver, tell your dad he’s being an idiot.”

Oliver rested his head against the curve of John’s shoulder and looked at Sherlock. “Sodding stupid,” he said, and sneezed.

Sherlock looked at him, newly appalled at the ill-timed sneeze.

John said, “This wasn’t your fault, Sherlock. Except to the extent that he’s got your genes and so as a consequence he’s stubborn and doesn’t listen to anyone.”

“He should listen to you,” Sherlock said.

“You don’t listen to me all the time. You should, but you don’t. Like now, for instance. This is not your fault. You didn’t do this. I’m going to take him to the surgery and get him checked out and make sure he’s not dehydrated.”

Sherlock stood immediately. “Well, I’m going to with you, of course.”

“You don’t have to,” John said.

“You’re taking our child to possibly have a needle stuck into him. I’m definitely going.”
Chapter 52

John behaved as if he thought Sherlock was going to cause a fuss at the surgery. As if Sherlock had ever caused a fuss at the surgery. Sherlock had always been a model of patience and tolerance in the face of abject stupidity at the surgery.

John had called in a favor from Sarah, which meant they had to deal with Sarah. She gave him that smile she always gave him to pretend that she liked him when she had hated him from the very beginning. Sherlock didn’t smile back. Sherlock wasn’t interested in social niceties. He was holding Oliver, who had been heavily bundled up by John as if it was the middle of winter, and seemed too miserable to even complain about miserable. His breaths were heavy through his mouth and interspersed with coughing, and he had a fist clenched in Sherlock’s collar as if to anchor him there and make sure he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Hello, you lot,” said Sarah, although she was really only greeting John. “What can we do for you?”

John gave her his typical John-Watson-is-nice-to-all-people-even-idiots smile. “Like I said on the phone, Oliver’s sick.”

“I know, I’m sorry to hear that,” crooned Sarah. “What’s wrong with the little tyke?” She adopted that tone of voice people used to talk to babies.

Oliver hated that tone of voice unless it came from Molly or Mrs. Hudson, because Molly and Mrs. Hudson were in the small group of people who were excused silliness. Oliver shrank closer against Sherlock and turned his face fully into Sherlock’s shoulder.

“Don’t touch him,” Sherlock warned her, and took a step away from her just to emphasize the point. He had a sudden vivid memory of being touched constantly, by people who had never bothered to ask if he wanted it, who never did it lovingly or carefully or like he was anything other than a specimen, pick up an arm and jab in a needle. Oliver liked being cuddled and hugged and held and Sherlock didn’t want him to have any bad associations with touch.

Sarah lifted her eyebrows and looked at John. Sherlock knew that look. Get your husband under control, said that look. John ignored the look. Sherlock loved John fiercely. John said, “It’s just a cold, he had a fever a couple of days ago but it was mild and it didn’t last long. He’s just terribly congested at the moment and I think it’s draining down his throat and he’s refusing to drink anything. Or eat anything, but that’s less concerning, really, he’s not much of an eater under the best of circumstances. Anyway, I’m concerned he might be getting dehydrated. I know I can check for the signs myself, but I thought it best to get an impartial judge involved.”

John was speaking very jovially and Sherlock thought he was making it sound as if everything was fine and light and not the world’s most alarming situation. Sherlock said, “He’s been getting worse all day.”

“Because he hasn’t been drinking anything,” John added.

John was obsessed with the drinking thing, thought Sherlock.

“Okay. Well, then, let’s get you set up in an examination room and I’ll take a look at him.”
Sarah showed them into a room and then disappeared to do something or other. Sherlock didn’t care enough to deduce.

“Why is she examining him?” Sherlock demanded of John. “If he needs to be hydrated, let’s just get him hydrated.”

“She’s examining him because she’s a good doctor, Sherlock, and he’s her patient.”

“He doesn’t feel well. The last thing he feels like doing is dealing with tiresome people like her.”

Sarah came back into the room and gave him a bright look that told Sherlock she’d heard what he said.

He didn’t care. He had been sick not long ago, and dealing with Mycroft had been unbearable. He couldn’t imagine having to deal with this strange woman who didn’t like them.

“It won’t be long,” Sarah said, and walked around so she could catch a glimpse of Oliver’s face, still half-hidden against Sherlock’s coat. “What do you say, Ollie? Do you call him Ollie?”

“We do, yes,” said Sherlock.

Sarah lifted her eyebrows, giving him one of her looks again, and said, “Okay,” in a tone of voice that meant not okay you’re a lunatic.

“I don’t think it’s anything more than a cold,” said John, which Sherlock found alarming.

“I’d like to at least listen to his chest,” said Sarah.

“Oh!” exclaimed John, and Sarah jumped, startled, in reaction. “Stethoscope. Yes. He likes those.” John slipped Sarah’s out from around her neck, held it up to Oliver. “What’s this for, Ollie?”

Oliver turned his face a tiny bit more toward John. He eyed the stethoscope and said, suspiciously, “Deep breath,” and then coughed pathetically.

“Yes,” John agreed, beaming with pride. “Show Sarah how good you are at deep breaths.” John held the stethoscope up to Oliver’s chest and indicated that Sarah should put it in her ears. “Deep breath, Ollie, there you go.”

Oliver just coughed unpleasantly.

“It’s pneumonia, isn’t it,” Sherlock said, flatly.

Sarah took the stethoscope off. “It isn’t, actually. Just a bit of congestion. Not pneumonia.”

“His lips are dry,” John said, “and he’s been growing more listless the longer he goes without drinking.”

“Not moving in the right direction, but not terribly alarming. When was his last wet nappy?”

“This morning,” said John.


John blinked. “You did? Where was I?”
“Fussing about lunch.”

“And he was wet then?” John asked.

Sherlock nodded.

“You didn’t tell me.” John sounded accusatory and vaguely hurt.

Sherlock glanced briefly at Sarah and wished she wasn’t in the room. He could see now why a wet nappy would have been an important detail but in the midst of all the panicking they’d been doing, he hadn’t focused on it. It was incredibly out of character and he hated that Sarah was witnessing it. “You didn’t ask,” he said, a bit defensively.

“You are going to be as good as new, Ollie. Your dads are just panicking a little bit.” Sarah grinned at John as if this was adorable.

Oliver mumbled, “Sodding stupid,” against Sherlock, turning his face tightly into him again.

“What did he say?” asked Sarah, sounding as if she couldn’t be sure she’d heard him correctly.

“So he’s fine, then, isn’t he?” asked John, quickly, and Sherlock ducked his head down and whispered into Oliver’s ear, “Yes,” so that Oliver would know his assessment was correct. It was important to reinforce when Oliver made intelligent observations.

“Yes,” said Sarah. “You could try a salt-water flush to clear out his passages and see if you can alleviate the pain in his throat. And warm beverages might feel better to him. Tea, for instance.”

“We’ve tried, he’s been refusing it,” said John.

“Ice, then. Really, you should take a deep breath here. He’s fine. If he doesn’t have a wet nappy in the next four or five hours, take him to an A&E.”

John lifted his eyebrows and looked at her dubiously. “Four or five hours? You wouldn’t recommend taking him somewhere so we could hydrate him now, before he gets worse?”

Sarah cocked an eyebrow at him. “I’m sure he’ll start drinking soon. Do you want to stick unnecessary needles in your child?”

Oliver knew the word needle very well. “No,” he said, firmly, from Sherlock’s arms.

“Oliver’s spoken,” remarked Sarah. “And we can see who he takes after, can’t we?” Sarah looked at him pointedly.

Sherlock glared at her. He hoped Oliver was as well.

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“Well, that was pointless,” John said, putting their umbrella up and making sure Oliver was bundled well enough. Oliver coughed and sneezed and looked miserable. “Sorry I dragged you both out for nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing,” Sherlock said. “Oliver’s sick and Sarah’s an idiot. We can go to another surgery, if you like.”

John sighed. “No. She’s right that he isn’t really dehydrated if you just changed a wet nappy two hours ago. I should have asked you before I insisted we come here.”
“I should have told you. I didn’t think of it,” admitted Sherlock.

“Why would you have? *I’m* theoretically the doctor here,” grumbled John.

“John,” said Sherlock, calmly, as they started walking, John trying to keep the umbrella balanced over Oliver’s head. “Everything’s perfectly alright.”

“Why are you so calm about this?”

“Haven’t you noticed? Only one of us is allowed to panic at a time. This is your turn.”

“If you can be this calm, why aren’t you this calm *all* the time?”

“Because it would bore you to tears. It would bore me to tears, too.”

John rolled his eyes and they walked toward Baker Street in silence.

Eventually Sherlock said, “This is our regular puddle experiment time, isn’t it, Ollie?”

Oliver sneezed.

“No puddles for us today,” said Sherlock, as they walked. “But maybe we’ll treat hydration like an experiment, hmm? We’ll try all sorts of beverages. And all different flavorings. How many flavorings do you think we can come up with? This might be fun.”

Sherlock seemed bright at the prospect of an experiment. John hoped it brightened Oliver as well. He walked along with them, feeling out-of-sorts that he had let himself overreact. Sherlock hopped over a puddle and John heard Oliver giggle a bit in reaction, which was a good sign, John thought. Maybe they’d get him inside and Oliver would start drinking again and tomorrow he’d wake up good as new.

Sherlock practically skipped up the steps, ignoring John’s attempts to keep the umbrella over Oliver. John sighed and paused to lower the umbrella and shake it out. Something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention as he did so, but when he looked up to see it straight-on, there was nothing there. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just Baker Street, as Baker Street always was. No Peter Thorpe. And yet John stood half-in and half-out of their doorway and felt a creeping coldness on the back of his neck, where such things started.

“John?” Sherlock called down to him. “Leave the bloody umbrella, you look ridiculous with it anyway. Come up and help with the experiment.”

John took a deep breath and closed the door and made sure it was locked. He was behaving *absurdly* today. He had overreacted about Oliver and allowed Sarah to let him look like an idiot in front of both Sherlock and Oliver, and now he was pretending like he had instincts about government clone doctors. When nothing on the back of his neck had alerted him to Thorpe on the day Thorpe had actually shown up.

He walked up the stairs, where Sherlock had shoved everything on the kitchen table over and was now pouring various fluids into glasses. Oliver was standing on a chair watching the procedure.

The experiment took the remainder of the afternoon and most of the evening. John was relieved it kept the two of them busy, and even more relieved when Sherlock discovered that Oliver adored ice lollies. Sherlock poured water into test tubes and froze it and Oliver clenched them in flannel-covered fists, dripping water all over the place and having a blast. John was fine with that because Oliver was *drinking*, and Oliver actually started to perk up as the night wore on, much more like his usual self.
By eleven he was playing Cluedo with Sherlock. Which involved Sherlock showing him the cards and Oliver saying no to basically every single one and throwing it across the room, and then at the end Sherlock said, “Yes, well done, it’s a stupid game because it doesn’t acknowledge that the victim did it.”

John smiled at their ridiculousness and sprawled on the sofa and just watched them. He wasn’t in the mood to get involved himself, and both Sherlock and Oliver seemed to sense it, engaged in their own projects. Oliver spoke to Sherlock in long speeches about a structure Sherlock was building with the periodic table blocks, and Sherlock reacted to him, saying yes or no or hmm or really and sometimes responding in whole paragraphs. John wondered if Sherlock really understand what Oliver was saying better than John did or if he was just better at faking it, because Oliver never got annoyed at not getting his point across, and, indeed, he ended up collapsing onto Sherlock’s lap and watching contentedly as Sherlock followed his dictatorial demands about where the blocks should be placed.

“He’s falling asleep on your lap,” John said, finally, because it was true.

“I know,” Sherlock said, putting his finishing touches on his tower. “I’ll take him up in a second.”

John yawned and looked at his watch. Midnight. He thought how the day had started and thought it had been the longest day of his life.

Sherlock eventually got up with Oliver, who made a squawk of protest at being moved. John could hear him upstairs murmuring to him. He was telling him a story, John thought. Reading to him. Something. The sound of them upstairs was soothing. John went into the bathroom to get ready for bed, and he was just finishing brushing his teeth when Sherlock slipped into the bathroom behind him, wrapped his arms around him from behind, pressed a kiss into the nape of his neck. That was a move John performed on Sherlock frequently; he smiled at the reversal of it, which Sherlock had clearly meant to be comforting. How much comforting, John thought, had Sherlock done since the day Thorpe had spoken to him on the doorstep?

“Long day,” Sherlock mumbled into the back of John’s neck.

John looked at him in the mirror, smiled fondly. “Yes,” he agreed.

“Come to bed,” Sherlock said, and kissed his way along John’s hairline, up behind his ear, where he trailed off into a nuzzle.

“Sherlock,” said John, and turned in his arms. “I’m fine.”

Sherlock blinked innocently. “I didn’t say you weren’t.”

“Don’t treat me like glass,” said John. He was saying it lightly, but he meant it.

“I’m not. I never do.”

“I’m tired of this,” John said, suddenly. He hadn’t expected to say it, and he hoped Sherlock didn’t take it as a criticism.

Sherlock evidently didn’t. “I know,” said Sherlock, his eyes steady on his, as if he’d known this was coming.

John sighed. Of course Sherlock had known. What was even the use of talking to Sherlock sometimes?

“Get it out,” Sherlock said, as if reading John’s thoughts. Which he probably was. “You need to. Get
angry. Get furious. Tell me.”

“I feel like I’m on the edge of a panic attack all the time. And I don’t notice it until something happens that—Until I overreact over something that I should have known, until I’m standing in our doorway convinced that someone’s out there when no one’s there, until I think that someone’s drugged Molly and stolen our child, and then I realize that it’s been there all along, the panic, just always there, and I’m tired of it. I’m exhausted.” John hadn’t expected to talk so long, he hadn’t expected to have so much to say.

“Feel better?” Sherlock asked, after a moment.

“No,” John almost snapped. “I don’t. That’s the problem.”

“How long did it take you to stop seeing me every time you closed your eyes?” Sherlock asked, evenly. “After I jumped?”

John winced. Just what he needed, to dredge up other things he had to cope with. “Sherlock—”

“I’m just saying, you’re not patient with yourself. You’re not patient with how your mind has to process things.”

“Look at who’s talking about being patient with human brains,” John pointed out.

Sherlock shook his head a bit. “I’m impatient with other human brains. Your human brain happens to be my favorite, so I’m trying to get you to be kind to it.”

John thought abruptly he might cry, which was so ridiculous, so instead he pulled Sherlock in and put his face against his shoulder and said, “You’re such a ridiculous git, I can’t stand you,” which was the opposite of what he meant.

“I know,” Sherlock said.

“And you’re fine with this. You haven’t—”

“I wasn’t there,” Sherlock interrupted him. “You were the one who was there. Thorpe is nothing but an abstraction in my head, a story you told me, like a gunshot wound in Afghanistan. You were there, you dealt with him, he’s very real and very concrete. You’re always the one who has to experience the terrible things, because you’re the strong one. I just hear about them through you. So don’t judge yourself against me and how I’m handling it. I know it’s driving you mad, and stop it. I wasn’t there. If I’d been there, I would have had a nervous breakdown by now. The only way I’m keeping myself together is because they’ve all been abstract threats in my head, all of them, everything that could go wrong. Of course it’s worse for you. You looked into his eyes and you heard his voice and you were exposed with Oliver whilst it was all happening. I know you’re tired of it. But you’re not being weak, love. Stop being angry with yourself over it.”

Sherlock almost never called him love, John thought. He called Oliver love sometimes, but seldom used endearments with John. John didn’t doubt Sherlock loved him, it wasn’t like he needed a term of endearment to sell him on that, but still, it was nice to hear.

"Let's go to bed," John suggested.

“That’s what I said in the first place,” Sherlock pointed out.

John chuckled.
Oliver was better the next day, and even better the day after that. By the third day, when Lestrade called with a crime, John thought that Oliver was well enough to take him along. The outing did him good, and the crime was solved quickly, and Oliver flirted with all of the Met, basically, and John went to bed that night pleased.

It was raining again the following day, harder than it had rained the day before, and Sherlock and Oliver were both infected with a post-case sulk.

“Nothing will ever be interesting ever again,” Sherlock told the ceiling dramatically.

“No,” said Oliver. Then, “Yes,” apparently unsure which one would agree with his father, and then he pulled himself up to drape himself dramatically on Sherlock’s chest, staring up at the ceiling with him.

John looked at the pair of them and tried not to smile. “You need to get back into your routine. What about your puddle experiment?”

Oliver sat up immediately. “Puddle, Daddy,” he said, and pulled Sherlock’s hair.

“It’s raining, Ollie,” Sherlock told him.

“I thought that was the point of the puddle experiment.”

“He just got through being sick.”

“Days ago now. He’s fine.”

Sherlock turned his head to look over at John. “And you’re better.”

“Maybe talking about it helped,” John admitted.

“I was right as usual,” Sherlock told Oliver. “Make a note in your mind palace, love.”

“Wrong,” argued Oliver, doing it automatically, because sometimes he liked to practice his Sherlockian habit of being contrary just for the sake of doing it.

Sherlock got them bundled up and John sent them off with a smile and they came back crowing with pleasure over the puddle experiment and their outing and John shook his head and life at Baker Street settled all around him, warm and bright against the damp outside.
Chapter 53

Sherlock woke up sprawled on a cold, wet concrete floor. He registered that, and he would have found that alarming, if the more pressing occupation of his brain hadn’t been to roll himself over and vomit immediately. Then he rolled carefully in the other direction and curled into a ball and breathed past the fog in his brain.

Christ, he thought. What a terrible hangover. What had he taken yesterday? He tried to think, scrunching all the muscles of his face up with the effort of it, but he couldn’t recall taking anything. And yet here he was, clearly suffering from some sort of crash on a…cold, wet concrete floor…and what was he doing on a cold, wet concrete floor…because he didn’t…not anymore…he didn’t.

Sherlock opened his eyes and stared into darkness around him. There was the sound of dripping from nearby, and traffic from far away. Wherever he was, it was pitch black.

This was not a hangover. He hadn’t taken anything.

Nothing willingly.

Sherlock sat up, and even though he couldn’t really see anything at all, he felt as if the world tipped around him, and he reached out a hand flailing for something to grab onto. There was nothing, of course, and after a moment the dizziness and nausea passed and he realized that he was breathing hard and loud. His gasps were echoing all around him.

Big, he deduced. Empty. Think. God, he felt as if he was pulling himself through syrup that had infected his mind palace. What the sodding hell had happened?

A crime, he thought. He must have been investigating…something…and got kidnapped. But that made no sense. He didn’t investigate on his own these days. John would never let him. Someone would have been with him. If someone had been with him, then maybe someone was with him now.

Sherlock held his breath and listened hard but he could hear nothing but the dripping and the distant traffic. No one else breathing. And now his eyes were starting to adjust to the darkness. There were tiny chinks of light coming in from places. A warehouse, he realized. He was in a warehouse, windows had been boarded over.

Christ, that had taken him a long time to deduce. Inexcusable.

If he’d been kidnapped, why was he alone and unrestrained? Had they been that confident in the power of whatever drug they’d given him? Well. Possibly, he thought. Sometimes former drug habits could come in handy when it came to throwing off dosages. But still. If there was no one here, escaping was going to be the work of a few seconds.

He didn’t feel well enough to be stealthy about it. He took a deep breath and shouted, “Hello?” His shout echoed around him, bouncing off the walls. But there was no other response, no sound of a kidnapper alerted to his wakefulness and coming toward him. No sound of anyone else, either. And this didn’t make sense. Did it make sense? No. It didn’t make sense. What had he been doing that had got him here? He had to think, if he couldn’t think, then he wouldn’t be able to help John find him—

Oliver.
He’d been with Oliver. There hadn’t been a crime, or even a row with John that he’d stormed off after. He’d been with Oliver. On their way to a puddle. In a cab. It was the last thing he could remember. Being in a taxi with Oliver.

Everything inside of him went so cold that it felt as if his internal organs were slicing through his skin. When he stood he staggered to the side and nausea roiled inside of him again and he ignored all of it because he had been with Oliver.

“Oliver!” he shouted, and heard the panic in his voice, and winced, because he was going to terrify Oliver if he sounded like that. “Ollie?” he called, moderating his tone, trying to make it sound like he was just curious as to where he’d got to. He took a few steps forward, nearly stumbling because his balance was all over the place and it didn’t matter because he had to find Oliver.

Although Oliver would have responded to him, somehow, had he been there. It wasn’t as if they had ever played hide-and-seek with him, he wouldn’t have thought it was funny not to answer, he had never done that before.

So Oliver wasn’t there or Oliver was too hurt—or drugged—to respond, and Sherlock couldn’t decide which was worse, and he did fall to the floor then, tripping over his own feet in his rising panic. His palms skidded on the concrete, and that probably would have hurt if he’d been paying attention. He breathed the nausea back down and became aware of the mobile in his coat pocket. Still in his coat pocket. They hadn’t taken his mobile.

That was almost the most terrifying thing. They hadn’t restrained him, hadn’t taken his mobile, hadn’t been concerned at his ability to get help when he recovered.

Sherlock pulled out his mobile. There were thirteen missed calls and twenty-two mixed texts. Not good. Sherlock ignored all of them, using the phone as a torch, flashing it around the warehouse. It was large but it was empty. Completely empty. Nowhere for Oliver to be hiding. Nowhere for anyone to be hiding. A vast, empty, deserted space, and Sherlock was all alone in it.

If his hand was shaking when he dialed John on his mobile, he refused to acknowledge it.

The relief in John’s voice was tangible when he answered. “Sherlock. Where the hell have you been? If you’re going to disable the GPS in your phone, you should at least sodding answer it the first or second or hundredth time I call you.”

Disable the GPS, Sherlock thought, and drew his knees up and leaned his forehead against them. They’d left him with the mobile because they’d disabled the GPS, and by the time he could call for help, they didn’t care. They hadn’t wanted him dead. Well, hadn’t cared enough one way or the other, Sherlock supposed.

“So where are you?” John said, when Sherlock didn’t say anything.

Sherlock took a deep breath. “Is Oliver with you?”

There was a moment of silence that told Sherlock everything he needed to know.

“Wha…” John sounded uncomprehending. “Sherlock.” His voice was filled with steel now. “Where are you? What are you talking about? Start making sense.”

Sherlock managed to get himself to his feet. He forced himself to take a few steps toward the windows, because he had to get out of this warehouse. “I don’t know where I am,” he said, concentrating very hard to maintain his balance. “I’m in a warehouse somewhere. And they drugged me, so I’m not…working properly, the deductions are being slow.” Sherlock reached the door and
felt exhausted from the effort of it.

“Who drugged you, Sherlock?”

Sherlock ignored him. “Ring Mycroft. Have him track the cab that Oliver and I were in. Have him, I don’t know, ground the planes and stop the trains running and—” Sherlock managed to shove himself through the door. It wasn’t raining. It had been raining when he’d gone out with Oliver, on a puddle experiment excursion, and the ground was wet but it was no longer actively raining. Sherlock thought he should be deducing where he was but he couldn’t think of anything but that somewhere there was Oliver, somewhere that wasn’t with him and wasn’t with John, he was with people who had drugged him and what did that mean—

“Sherlock, you’re not making any sense. Where is Oliver? He was with you—”

“I don’t have him, John,” Sherlock snapped at him. What was John not understanding? And, really, John had to understand this, because any moment now Sherlock was going to have to stop to throw up again, and he didn’t have time to keep explaining things to John. He swayed a bit and then gave up and sat on the wet concrete outside the warehouse. “He’s not with me. They took him.”

“They…? Who?” John still sounded blank.

“Ring Mycroft. Tell him. I’m going to turn the GPS back on on my mobile. Have him send someone to get me, too.” Sherlock ended the call with John and forced himself to turn the GPS back on before he turned around and vomited again.

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“Sherlock,” said John, to nothingness on the other end. “Sherlock.” John almost rang him back, furious that he would call him and tell him he didn’t have Oliver and then just leave John with that knowledge. As if that was some kind of joke.

And then it seemed to slam into him, what Sherlock had said. He rang Mycroft.

Mycroft said, “Have you heard from him?” because of course John had called him when Sherlock had gone missing and of course John had been worried and of course John had thought it was all going to be nothing, of course it was all going to be nothing, Sherlock was going to call and say he’d accidentally put his mobile on silent, got so caught up in the experiment, forgot to get in touch, because that was how Sherlock was, that was always how Sherlock was, and Sherlock hadn’t done any of those things and they hadn’t panicked because before this because they were idiots and they should have known as soon as Mycroft had had difficulty tracking Sherlock’s taxi on the CCTV.

“He…” said John, and his voice trailed off, and he stared unseeingly out the window.

“John?” Mycroft asked, sounding a bit confused, a bit anxious.

John shook himself out of it. There was a crisis going on. And Oliver needed him. “Oliver’s gone.” John heard how hard his voice had become.

“Gone where?”

“I don’t know, Mycroft,” John snapped. “That’s your job, to find out.”

“But…where’s Sherlock?” Mycroft sounded bewildered.

“I don’t know. He said he’s turning the GPS back on on his mobile. Someone drugged him or
something and took Oliver. I don’t know, Sherlock wasn’t making sense. None of this makes sense. Mycroft, you study your CCTV, and you bring me back my son. Immediately. Do you understand me?”

“Stay in Baker Street,” Mycroft said, sharply. “Don’t go anywhere.”

Where was he going to go?

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Mycroft sent an enormous entourage to him. The sirens sliced through his head and the flashing lights didn’t help with his lingering nausea. Emergency personnel flooded over to him, taking his pulse and listening to his chest and shining lights in his eyes.

“I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m fine,” Sherlock shouted at all of them, and then undermined the proclamation by trying to stand up too quickly and pitching over onto the nearest paramedic.

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock looked up, grateful for a familiar face. “Lestrade. Where’s Mycroft?”

“He went to Baker Street to coordinate looking for Ollie. He sent me here to you. How are you feeling?” Lestrade ducked his head down, looking straight into Sherlock’s eyes in concern.

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said, impatiently, jerking away from him.

“Someone drugged you—”

“I’m fine. We have to find Oliver. Does Mycroft have any leads? Has he located the cab?”

“Let’s go to Baker Street.” Lestrade straightened and looked at the nearest paramedic. “You. Come with us.”

“I told you, I’m fine,” Sherlock said, and concentrated on not falling over as he followed Lestrade to the car.

“She’s taking some of your blood. We need to determine what you were drugged with, it might be a lead.”

That was a good point, thought Sherlock, and wished his brain would start working again. Any time now, he thought, and kicked at the door to the main sitting room of his mind palace, which was stubbornly closed, leaving an enormous gap in his memory from when he’d left Baker Street to when he’d woken up on a warehouse floor without his son.

“Sherlock, what happened?”

The car shifted into movement, sirens blaring. They were flying down the streets. Sherlock didn’t even bother to try to deduce where he’d been. Somewhere in London, he knew, because he’d been able to deduce that much, but he didn’t much care where else. He didn’t want to use any brain power to do anything other than try to remember what had happened to Oliver.

He shook his head a little bit in response to Lestrade, as he pushed his coats off and rolled up his sleeve to get the medic access to his vein. “I don’t remember,” he said, tightly. “I don’t remember anything. I woke up in a warehouse without him. That’s it.”

“Okay,” Lestrade said, soothingly, as if Sherlock wasn’t perfectly calm, which he was. “They’re
going to go over the warehouse with a fine-toothed comb. They’re going to find clues and they’re going to lead us to Oliver. Or the kidnappers are going to contact us and they’ll give something away. They’ve kidnapped the child of the cleverest man in London. They’ve got to be idiots, right?”

Sherlock blinked at him uncomprehendingly. “Why would the kidnappers contact us?”

“To make a ransom demand, of course,” said Lestrade.

Sherlock continued to stare at him.

This clearly alarmed Lestrade, who said, “Look, why don’t you just rest?”

Rest. He didn’t need to rest. He needed to think. But it was fine with him if Lestrade wanted to be quiet. He crouched in his mind palace and tried to pick the lock on that bloody door.

When they got to Baker Street, it was a mess. The street was cordoned off and looked like a crime scene, and Sherlock was momentarily horrified. He looked at Lestrade and said, flatly, “Is Oliver dead?”

“Sherlock,” said Lestrade, shocked. “I’m sure he’s fine. They didn’t kill you. They clearly want something from you.”

Lestrade wasn’t that good a liar, and Sherlock let himself untense a little bit.

He was steadier on his feet as he walked into 221, and he was relieved that the drug, whatever it had been, finally seemed to be wearing off. Mrs. Hudson was the first person who met him, at the top of the stairs.

“Oh, Sherlock,” she sobbed, and hugged him tightly, and that was very nice of her, but he wanted John. He realized suddenly that he’d been dragging himself toward John. John would help him find Oliver. He couldn’t get that door unlocked without John, John was always his key, John, John, John.

So Sherlock said, “Where’s John?”

And then John said, “Sherlock. Thank God.”

Sherlock barely had time to push out of Mrs. Hudson’s embrace before John was on top of him, clutching him close. His hands wandered through Sherlock’s hair, down over his back, as if cataloging him, whilst he pressed his face against Sherlock’s neck. Sherlock clenched his hands into fists in John’s jumper and pulled him in closer and squeezed his eyes shut and let his world re-orient itself.

John eventually stepped back and cleared his throat and said, “You look a mess.”

“I’ve had pleasanter drug experiences,” remarked Sherlock, dryly.

“Sherlock,” said John, and his voice choked on the word.

Sherlock shook his head. “We’re going to find him. They’re clearly idiots for thinking they could pull this off in the first place. So. Let’s find him.” Sherlock marched past John into the sitting room, stripping out of his coat and feigning a confidence he definitely didn’t feel. “Tell me what you know,” he demanded of Mycroft, finding him sitting at the desk. There was a buzzing army of Mycroft’s minions disturbing everything in the sitting room, stepping over toys. “If you touch that, my son will kill you,” Sherlock warned a minion who looked like he was getting ready to move Oliver’s laptop out of the way.
The minion hesitated, then scurried away.

“This is you getting in the taxi,” Mycroft said, and handed Sherlock a tablet on which was playing a CCTV feed.

Sherlock leaned in, watching it closely. There was him getting into the cab, Oliver in his arms. He was talking to Oliver, and then Oliver was talking back to him, and Sherlock’s attention was on Oliver. He hadn’t even glanced at the cabbie. He’d hailed a taxi and he’d got into the one that had come, the way he had with Oliver a hundred times before. Sherlock backed the feed up, watched it again, blocking out everyone else in the room, looking for clues. The driver’s face wasn’t visible. How could the driver’s face not be visible? How could nothing about him be visible? Sherlock backed the feed up, again and again and again, but he was no longer looking for clues, he was watching him with Oliver, he was looking at the curl of Oliver’s tiny hand into the lapel of his coat, at Oliver’s other hand clutching his skull, he was watching the way Oliver had giggled in response to something Sherlock had said. Sherlock couldn’t remember what he’d been telling him. He just watched himself smile on the CCTV, he watched himself brush a kiss onto Oliver’s temple, absentmindedly, the way he did constantly, and Oliver didn’t even register it, was looking into the cab, the cab Sherlock had put both of them into and then Oliver had—

“Sherlock,” said Mycroft, sharply.

Sherlock blinked and pulled himself out of it and looked up. Everyone in the room was staring at him. He wondered how many times Mycroft had had to say his name to get his attention. John was sitting next to him on the sofa, also looking down at the image on the tablet. Mrs. Hudson came in and put a cup of tea on the table next to him as if Sherlock was going to drink tea at that moment.

Sherlock gave the tablet back to Mycroft, because he didn’t think it would do him or John any good to stare at it any longer.

“Did you trace the cab?” Sherlock asked, shortly, as if he hadn’t just been staring uselessly at a video of him kissing his child in an endless loop.

“It’s a dead end. It was stolen. The cabbie knows nothing. He’s been thoroughly debriefed.”

“And you believe him?” Sherlock snorted.

“Yes,” Mycroft answered, firmly.

“Give me five minutes with that cabbie.”

“Absolutely not. I wouldn’t give you five minutes by yourself right now.”

Sherlock waved his hand impatiently. “Where does the cab go?”

“It goes with you. After being very clever about it.”

“What?”

“It takes you to a warehouse. It was difficult to track, they took a route that would make it most difficult for us to follow by CCTV. But we’ve pieced it together now. You’re carried out, clearly unconscious, clearly already drugged. The cab is then driven a short distance away and abandoned. In a CCTV blind spot.”

Sherlock stared at him. “Oliver wasn’t in the warehouse with me.” He hadn’t been, had he? Sherlock had looked, hadn’t he? But everything had been so…wavery and unfocused in the warehouse.
Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut and shouted in his head, *Bloody hell, think!*

“No. He wasn’t. Clearly the two of you were separated at some point. He must have been removed from the cab and taken somewhere else.”

“Well, that must have happened somewhere then,” Sherlock snapped, opening his eyes.

“We’re trying to determine where the hand-off happened. I told you: They were clever.”

“What is the *point* of you if you cannot find a *child* in this city? What is the point of all of your pathetic surveillance if you can lose your *nephew?*” shouted Sherlock. “How *incompetent an overlord* can you be?”

“Sherlock,” said Mycroft, very calm and very unruffled, and that undid Sherlock, he wanted Mycroft to shout back at him. But Mycroft said, “We’re going to find him,” almost pitying. *Pitying.* And then Mycroft said, “What happened after you got in the cab?”

Sherlock scrubbed his hands over his face and said, miserably, “I don’t remember.”


“Sherlock—” Mycroft began.

“If you say a sodding word about my smoking, I’ll light you on fire,” said Sherlock, turning to him. And then stared at the pack of cigarettes Mycroft was holding out to him.

“Don’t smoke them all at once,” Mycroft said, mildly. “You’ll make yourself sick.”

Sherlock didn’t want to take them. Sherlock wanted to refuse them. Sherlock also wanted to go into his bedroom and *cry.* When Oliver was somewhere probably crying at this very moment. And Sherlock *could remember nothing* and his brain was *failing* him and Oliver *needed* him and he was failing *Oliver* and Sherlock snatched the cigarettes out of Mycroft’s hand.

“The street’s closed off,” Mycroft said, which Sherlock had already known, but the reminder was welcome because he was a *mess.*

He practically fled down the stairs and he had the cigarette in his mouth and lit before he’d even burst through the front door. The first drag revived his nausea but he sucked in the smoke and let it burn and he squeezed his eyes shut when he exhaled.

“Hey,” John said from behind him.

Sherlock hadn’t even heard the door open, he was that much of a mess. “Can you leave me alone for a minute?” Sherlock snapped.

“No,” said John. “I can’t. Neither can Oliver. We need you to—”

“I don’t remember, John!” Sherlock whirled on him. “I don’t remember! I don’t remember him being taken from me, I don’t remember who took him, I don’t remember if I put up a fight or if I just let him go or if he cried or if he didn’t care, I don’t remember any of it. I got into a cab and I woke up in a warehouse and I *cannot remember what happened to him.* Okay? So that’s what you need to know and now you know it.” Sherlock took another drag on his cigarette, quick and tight.

“I don’t need to know anything from you, Sherlock. I need you to come upstairs and be with me in
this because I can’t do it alone right now. I don’t know what to do and—”

“And you think I do?” Sherlock cut in.

John looked helpless and lost and John never was either of those things. He said, “You know more about crime than I do. You know more about how to solve crimes than I do. Please, Sherlock. I don’t know how to save him without you. Please.”

Sherlock took a shaky drag on his cigarette. “It’s a door, and it’s locked, and I can’t get into the room. Nothing is working correctly. And Oliver’s out there somewhere and I can’t get my own mind to cooperate with me.”

“But that’s the key, right? Oliver’s out there somewhere. They wanted him alive. They’re not killers. They didn’t even kill you. In fact, they left you with everything you needed to be rescued. That’s a good sign, right?”

“Of course they want him alive, John,” Sherlock said, impatiently. “You know exactly who’s behind this.”

John was silent for a second. “At least they let him keep his skull,” he said. “And he’s valuable to them. The most valuable thing to them. They’re going to take good care of him, and he’ll have his skull, and he’ll know we’re coming for him. He’ll know, and we will. Right?” John took a sudden deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut. “Sherlock, don’t be clever, just tell me ‘yes,’ tell me I’m right, please just do it, I need to hear someone say it who isn’t me.”

Sherlock had no idea if any of this was going to be alright. He thought it likely that, wherever Oliver was, he was absolutely terrified, skull or no. But Sherlock knew that he could not deny John this. John needed this. Sherlock was the one who worried, Sherlock was the one who kept all the devastating possibilities in his head and assigned odds to each one and tried to avoid them. John was the one who needed not to do that. And John had asked him to do this for him. And Sherlock always gave John everything he could.

Sherlock tossed his cigarette away and stepped closer to John and said, quietly, “Look at me.”

John opened his eyes slowly, looked up at him warily.

Sherlock cupped his hands around John’s face and said, firmly, “He’s fine. They’re going to treat him like gold. And he’s going to gather the most ridiculous amount of evidence about them and he’ll tell us all about when he gets home, he’ll never shut up, he’ll write it all up on his blog and he’ll demand you make him tea to keep him awake through it.”

John looked so grateful that Sherlock’s heart literally hurt. He kissed John’s forehead and said, “Alright. Let’s go and find him.”

“Sherlock.” John caught his hand as he walked past him, stopping him from walking inside.

Sherlock glanced back, thinking he was about to say thank you.

But John said, “I know you fought for him. I know you did. I don’t know what else is behind that locked door in your mind palace, but I know that that’s in there. I’ll know it for you. We’re just going to…know things for each other, and for Oliver, until we get through this, okay?”

Sherlock, his throat tight, nodded. When they walked back into the flat, they walked in hand-in-hand.
Chapter 54

Chapter 54

Sherlock walked into the sitting room and said, “Everyone out.”

The people Mycroft had brought with him looked to him for guidance. Mycroft nodded, and John watched everyone start to file out of the room.

Lestrade looked uncertain, and John said, “Not you. You can stay.” And then he looked at Sherlock for confirmation, because, strictly speaking, they hadn’t really discussed this, but it was time for Lestrade to know now.

Sherlock nodded slightly, and waited until everyone other than the four of them and Mrs. Hudson had left. And then he said to Mycroft, “How much do they know?”

Mycroft shook his head. “Nothing but that my nephew has been taken.”

“You know who took him,” said Sherlock, flatly. “Find Thorpe and end this.”

“It’s not Thorpe.”

“Of course it’s Thorpe.”

“It isn’t. Do you think I didn’t know to look to Thorpe right away? I have a man on Thorpe right now. This is what Thorpe’s doing, live, as we speak.” Mycroft tapped away on the tablet, then turned it so John and Sherlock could see.

On the screen, Peter Thorpe was grainy but recognizable. John winced a little at seeing him again. And he was shaving.

“Where is he?” Sherlock demanded.

“Mongolia.”

“And you believe this?”

“I’ve verified it as many different ways as I can.”

“What was he doing when Oliver was taken?”

“Getting ready for bed. We have someone on him at all times, Sherlock.”

“He’s doing this from afar.” Sherlock paced frantically through the sitting room. “He has to be. It has to be him. Who else would be interested in Oliver?”

Lestrade spoke hesitantly. “I don’t know who this Thorpe person is, but Oliver has a powerful uncle and famous fathers, and you in particular attract a lot of attention—”

Sherlock whirled on him. “Oh, so this is my fault, is it?”

“No,” Lestrade said, calmly. “It isn’t. I’m just saying, it could be anybody—”

“It isn’t ‘anybody,’” Sherlock insisted.
“Once there’s a ransom demand—” began Lestrade.

“There isn’t going to be a ransom demand!” Sherlock shouted, and then mumbled, “For Christ’s sake,” as if he couldn’t bear the stupidity of the world anymore.

John sat on the sofa and tried not to look at any of the toys in the room. Meanwhile, Sherlock was picking his way through them with nervous dexterity.

“Greg’s right,” Mycroft said. “It could be—”

“He isn’t right!” exclaimed Sherlock. “He doesn’t even know what Oliver is, does he?”

“It could be unconnected to that,” Mycroft said, flatly.

Sherlock snorted eloquently, then turned and appealed to John. “What do you think?”

John was surprised to be drawn into it. John wanted to curl into a ball and make everyone stop talking. He wanted to go to sleep and wake up and have this be a dream. He wanted Oliver to demand something irrational and ridiculous and John was going to give him every single thing he wanted for the rest of his life.

John said, wearily, “I don’t know, Sherlock.”

Sherlock made a sound of pure frustration and tore his hands through his hair again and whirled back into his pacing.

“Can I ask…” said Lestrade, haltingly. “What’s going on?”

“John, can you?” said Sherlock, waving a hand at him as he came to a halt by the fireplace, drumming his fingers against the mantel restlessly.

“Oliver’s a clone,” said John, on a sigh, because he didn’t have it in him to have more finesse about it than that.

“He’s a what?” said Lestrade.

“He’s a clone. He’s Sherlock’s clone. That’s why he looks just like Sherlock.”

There was a moment of silence. John could practically hear Lestrade processing.

“But…you said he donated sperm.”

“I lied,” said John, simply.

“The mother who died in the car accident? The schoolteacher?”

“He doesn’t have a mother,” said Sherlock. “He has us.”

John said to Lestrade, “We couldn’t just go around telling people we were raising the first human clone. We didn’t want him to be raised as a specimen in a laboratory.”

“Actually,” said Sherlock. “That’s a thought. Would the woman who bore him have…?”

Mycroft shook his head. “I had her tracked down. She’s moved to the States with a new boyfriend.”

Lestrade said, “So who’s Thorpe, then?”
“The doctor responsible for the cloning,” said John.

“He threatened John,” said Sherlock.

“It was months ago,” said Mycroft, “and I sent him to Mongolia, where he’s remained. And I faked Oliver’s death, as you requested.”

“So what?” demanded Sherlock, hotly. “You think this is completely unconnected to the fact that he’s a clone? You think that someone just happened to steal the world’s only human clone?”

“I think someone stole Sherlock Holmes’s son,” Mycroft snapped. “I think that Sherlock Holmes’s son just happens to be the world’s only human clone.”

“And now we’re back to this being my fault again,” said Sherlock, furiously.

“Sherlock.” Mycroft sounded exhausted. “It’s not—”

“Where are you looking for him?”

“We’ve been trying to locate where the exchange might have taken place. Whilst we’re doing that, we’ve been working in concentric circles.” Mycroft’s fingers slid over the tablet again, showing the glowing map to Sherlock. John craned his head so he could see, too.

Sherlock said, “That’s nowhere near where I was found. I’d start there. They’re clever. They think we’d think they wouldn’t keep Oliver so close to where I was about to lead you, but that’s exactly what I’d do if I were them.”

Mycroft nodded. He stood, and John heard him go down the stairs, no doubt delivering the new search orders to his people.

Mrs. Hudson said, “I’ll make more tea,” even though no one had been drinking the tea. She disappeared into their kitchen, and John heard her making the tea.

Sherlock kept drumming his fingers against the mantel, until John finally said, “Please can you stop? It’s making me mental.”

Sherlock stilled his fingers, but walked around the room instead. John thought he was going to strangle him. Rather than strangling him, he decided he had to get out of the room. He walked into the hallway, paused at the bottom of the staircase leading to Oliver’s room and looked up it.

“Don’t.” Sherlock appeared in the sitting room doorway, watching him narrowly. “Going up there is a bad idea.”

“You need to stop pacing,” John said. “You’re driving me mad.”

The door downstairs opened, and Mycroft entered, followed by a few of his people. John sighed. He just wanted strangers out of his flat. He wanted his flat back to the way it usually was. Resigned, he went back into the sitting room and sat on the sofa. Sherlock sat next to him and took his hand, which was comforting, although John knew he was doing it mostly to try to keep himself still.

Mycroft walked into the sitting room and paused just inside the doorway, regarding the two of them. Sherlock’s hand tightened around John’s. “What’s wrong?” he demanded.

Wrong, thought John. Wrong, and gripped Sherlock’s hand so tightly he was sure he’d cut off circulation and stared at Mycroft.
“It’s actually a very good sign,” said Mycroft. “It gives us a starting point.”

“A body would give you a starting point,” Sherlock pointed out, flatly.

John shuddered, feeling light-headed, because he couldn’t think those things. “Jesus, Sherlock,” he said, stricken.

“Sorry,” Sherlock said.

Mycroft said, “It isn’t a body. We’ve located his skull.”

John went very still, felt Sherlock go still beside him.

“His skull,” John repeated, faintly.

Mycroft stepped aside, and one of his people walked into the sitting room, carefully held out the skull. John stared at it. It was Sherlock who eventually reached out and took it.

“Where did they find it?” John asked, unable to talk louder than a whisper, unable to look away from the skull.

“In an alleyway not far from here. It would have been a quick exchange, hidden from CCTV at precisely that point, but now we have a starting point to determine when Oliver re-enters the CCTV grid.”

Not far from here, John thought. Not far from here, his son had been kidnapped, and he’d had no idea.

“Why would they have left it behind?” Sherlock said, suddenly. “That doesn’t make any sense. It’s a clue. It’s the biggest clue. It’s like leaving an enormous breadcrumb in the forest.”

Mycroft hesitated. Then he said, “We think it’s likely they didn’t notice they’d left it.”

John was just continuing to stare dully at the skull, not really thinking much of anything beyond Oliver Oliver Oliver, but that was when Sherlock said, “Because he was struggling.”

John looked up at Sherlock, surprised. “What?”

Sherlock was talking to Mycroft. “That’s why you think they didn’t notice. He was struggling. He was fussing. He was putting up a fight.”

Mycroft lifted a single eyebrow and said, “Well, he’s you, isn’t he?” He sounded almost proud.

Sherlock even seemed to be almost smiling. “Someone will remember that. Someone will remember a screaming baby. They have to.”

“We’re looking for them now,” Mycroft confirmed.

John pulled his hand out of Sherlock’s, shrinking away from him, feeling ill.

And Sherlock somehow looked at him and beamed. “This is good news!” he proclaimed.

“Good news?” John snapped. “Good news that someone took our son against his will, that he fought every step of the way, that he’s angry and scared and we’re not there to comfort him? You think that’s good news?”
Sherlock’s expression faltered.

John stood and lifted a threatening index finger at Sherlock. “Do not try to stop me,” he said, and then he marched firmly up the stairs.

The bumblebee nightlight was on in Oliver’s room, because it came on automatically. John thought it enough light and didn’t turn the overhead light on. He stood in the glow of the bumblebee and looked at the outline of Oliver’s furniture. The room smelled like Oliver. John closed his eyes and breathed him in. If he was quiet enough, he thought he could hear Oliver, laughing downstairs while Sherlock monologued on something crime-related.

John refused to cry. Crying was for sad things, and this wasn’t sad, Oliver was going to be home soon, quickly, and it wasn’t going to be sad. It wasn’t.

John laid on his back on the floor and stared up at the ceiling and breathed in Oliver and did not cry.

The door opened and closed and John didn’t move. Sherlock laid on his back on the floor next to him and likewise stared up at the ceiling.

“He doesn’t have his skull,” John said, after a moment.

“We’ll take it to him,” said Sherlock.

“When I find these people, whoever they are, I am going to shoot them. All of them. Every single one of them. Right between the eyes. I want them to see me do it. And I’m not going to let you stop me.”

“I wouldn’t. I’ve never been the merciful one of the two of us, John.”

John closed his eyes briefly. “I thought they’d at least let him have his skull.”

“If it’s random, John, or just someone targeting us, do you know how numerous the possibilities are? How many strings I’d have to pull together to find out who took him and where he went?”

“That’s why you’re clinging to the idea that it’s Thorpe.”

“But, John, this is about him being a clone. Don’t you see? That’s why it’s good news that we found the skull.”

“Because there are witnesses, yes, you said,” John said, without interest.

“Because he was fighting. That means they didn’t drug him. John, they knocked me out with a seeming minimum of effort. Oliver’s smaller, he would have been even easier to knock out. They could have bundled him up and transferred him from the cab to the next car and no one would have looked up, no one would have noticed a sleeping baby, no one looks twice at a sleeping baby. But they didn’t. They left him awake and aware. And he would have been panicked, John. He would have been frantic. They’d already drugged me by that point, so I wasn’t responding, so he would have been scared, terrified, and you know how he is, you know how much noise he can make when he wants one of us.”

“Are you intending this to be comforting?” John asked, tightly. “Because it’s not.”

“And then they transferred a hysterical, flailing baby on a city street where he was sure to be noticed. Do you know why they did that, John? Don’t you see? Given a choice, a random kidnapper, a kidnapper seeking a ransom, would have drugged him immediately.”
John saw it suddenly. He looked over at Sherlock in the yellow bumblebee glow. “They wanted to keep his system clear for the tests.”

Sherlock smiled at him. “Yes. There are scientists behind this, John. Scientists who got hold of some sort of very effective temporary amnesia job to inject me with. They were confident of their abilities, confident of the drug, because, as you said, they left me alive, with the ability to be rescued. They’re thinking that I’m never going to remember.”

“Are you?”

“It doesn’t matter. This might not have been Thorpe, but it was someone. It was one of those scientists. It’s someone who knows about Oliver. That list is short. Mycroft is tracking every single one of them down right now. Do you see? That’s what I meant. It’s good news. They planned this, John. Meticulously. They knew when Oliver would be most likely to only be with one parent, they knew we were taking afternoons together for the puddle experiment, they knew exactly when to swoop in and snatch him, and that’s because he is literally the most valuable thing in the universe to them. They don’t love him, but they want him as safe and sound as possible, just as you said.”

John tried not to think about how terrified Oliver must have been to let go of his skull, of how terrified he must still be, wherever he was. He tried not to think about tests being run on him, experiments being performed on him, needles being stuck into him. He thought instead of what Sherlock had said. He focused on that.

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Thorpe had been the only scientist who had known where Oliver’s DNA had come from, according to Mycroft. Sherlock’s DNA had been given a number and inventoried. Mycroft had found out about Oliver when Sherlock’s DNA had gone missing from a standard inventory count. While other people had known about Oliver, no one else had known about the Sherlock Holmes connection.

So Mycroft had only sacked Thorpe. Thorpe was the only one who had broken a rule in using the DNA, anyway.

The other scientists who had been part of Oliver’s conception and birth were all still employed. And all of them had alibis. Or at least weren’t behaving out of the ordinary. They’d been at work all afternoon, were in their houses when Mycroft had them tracked down overnight.

“They hired someone else to do it, then,” Sherlock said. “Or they told other scientists who did it for them. There’s a connection, Mycroft, you know there has to be. I want you to track down the whereabouts of every scientist.”

Mycroft lifted his eyebrows at him. “Every scientist in the country?”

“Yes,” Sherlock retorted, belligerently.

“Why don’t we start with the scientists at the facility where he was born?” Lestrade suggested, playing peacemaker.

“It’s a starting point,” muttered Sherlock, who didn’t feel like being appeased since his son had now been missing more than twelve hours.

“Sherlock, take John to bed,” said Lestrade.

Sherlock blinked at him in slow surprise, wrapped his head around what he said, and turned to look at John. Who was curled up in his chair, sound asleep, hair cast golden in the dawn light creeping
through the window. How was he sleeping? Sherlock wondered in amazement.

“Greg’s right,” said Mycroft. “Let him get some rest. You should get some rest, too.”

“Some rest?” Sherlock echoed, thinking Mycroft had lost his mind.

“When I find the scientist, you’re going to want to be awake to deal with him, aren’t you? Fully alert?”

“I’m fine,” said Sherlock.

“You were drugged with a still unknown substance yesterday afternoon. You’re not fine.”

“I’m better. You’re trying to get us to go to sleep so that you can execute some sort of secret plan without us.”

“No,” said Mycroft, wearily. “In fact, I was going to sleep myself.”

“We should all sleep,” Lestrade proposed. “Just an hour.”

“I’m not tired,” Sherlock said, even though he was. This case was not affecting him like other cases, not giving him buoyant energy. This case was drowning him, dragging him under, draining him of energy instead of supplying it.

“Then just go and be quiet for an hour,” said Mycroft. “We just need the bloody break.”

Sherlock thought that was maybe possible. Nothing about what had happened to Oliver was making sense to him, and he needed to think it through. Maybe he could get his brain to reset from the drugging if he slept for a bit.

He pulled John up, who blinked as he woke.

“Is there news?” he slurred out.

Sherlock shook his head and absorbed most of John’s weight, nudging him forward. “We’re going to sleep for an hour or so.”

“But what if—”

“They’ll wake us,” Sherlock promised him, and then sent a dark glare at Mycroft, who nodded.

Sherlock got John into their bedroom and onto their bed. Then he got onto the bed with him and fought to get the duvet mostly over them. John turned into him, snuggled up against him, tangled their legs together.

“I love you,” he breathed into Sherlock.

“I know,” Sherlock said, and kissed his head.

“I don’t tell you enough,” said John.

“Yes, you do,” Sherlock assured him.

“Do you think we tell Oliver enough? Do you think he knows?” John sounded fretful about it.

“I know he does,” Sherlock promised him, and rolled a bit so that he could cuddle John closer. “Go
to sleep. I love you, too.”

“I know,” said John, sleepily.

“So does Oliver,” said Sherlock.

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Sherlock dreamed of a man. A man coming toward him. Swooping toward him. No turning toward him. A needle. A prick along his hand, the part that he could reach. Panic as Sherlock jerked back. Sherlock reached for the door, for the handle, but it was so far away, it kept floating farther and farther away from him. He lunged for it, the world around him unsteady, swerving back and forth, jerking him this way and that. Oliver cried. Oliver screamed, wild, panic sobs at the top of his lungs. There was another needle, a sharp pinch on the side of his neck. Sherlock clung harder to Oliver, held him closely, but Oliver was like smoke, like water, disintegrating in Sherlock’s arms, disappearing, and all Sherlock could hear was his crying—

Sherlock woke, breathing heavily, to the ghost feeling of Oliver’s fingers clinging to his coat, Oliver’s desperate wails echoing through his brain.

Sherlock pressed his hands against his ears and wished that that door in his mind palace had stayed locked.

When he’d got his breathing back under control, he realized he was alone in the bed and the sun was bright. How long had he been asleep? He suddenly jerked himself out of bed and into the sitting room, anxious at what he might have missed.

Mycroft was at the desk, still looking at his ever-present tablet. Lestrade was in John’s chair and Mrs. Hudson was in Sherlock’s chair and John was on the sofa, looking miserable. No news, thought Sherlock. No good news.

“Oh, Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson said, leaping up. “I’ll make you tea.”

“Where are we on the suspects?” Sherlock demanded, feeling disoriented by how deep his sleep had been, by the dream memory still reverberating through him.

“Nowhere, Sherlock. Every single one of them has been behaving completely normally. They all reported to work as usual, except for one of them, who is on her honeymoon.”

“When did she—”

“Four days ago, Sherlock,” answered Mycroft, anticipating the question.

“There was a needle,” Sherlock blurted out.


“There was a needle. The cabbie drugged me.”

“How do you know?” asked John.

“I had a dream about it.”

“A dream,” John repeated, dubiously. “That’s how we’re solving cases now, is it? Through dreams?”
Sherlock blinked at his tone, which was…angry. Which made Sherlock angry in response. “Sorry if I didn’t recover from being drugged as respectably as you would have liked.”

“So the cabbie turned around and somehow managed to prick you with a needle? You? Sherlock Holmes?” said John.

Sherlock tipped his head at him, confused, vaguely aware of Lestrade saying, warningly, “John.”

“No.” John stood, and Sherlock could tell he was properly angry now. He took an instinctive step back, bewildered. John had fallen asleep saying he loved him, and now he was furious, and what had Sherlock done in between those two moments other than sleep? “What are you doing?” John demanded of Sherlock. “You slept.”


“You slept. I have never, ever, ever known you to sleep on a case before. You stay up for a week straight if you have to, to solve a case. And now our son is missing and you went to sleep. In our bed.”

And it was about the sleeping. John was upset he’d slept. “This isn’t a case, John,” Sherlock snapped.

“No, if it was a case, if it was someone else’s child, you’d have solved it already,” John snapped back.

“Guys,” Lestrade said, trying to step in between them.

But Sherlock was hurt and guilty and this wasn’t fair. “Do you think I’m not trying to find him?” Sherlock demanded.

“I think you sat in a cab with him and let someone inject you with a drug,” John pointed out.

“I didn’t ‘let’ anybody do anything,” Sherlock retorted.

“I think if you were better about staying in touch, about leaving notes, about answering your bloody phone, I would have known something was wrong and raised the alarm much earlier,” John went on.

“This is not my fault,” Sherlock cut in, defensively, furiously. “Any of this. This is your fault.”

John blinked in astonishment.

Sherlock, dimly, heard Mycroft say, “Sherlock.” But Sherlock didn’t care. How dare John be angry with him for this, how dare John lay all the blame for it at his feet. Sherlock couldn’t have John doing that, he was doing it quite enough for both of them. Sherlock kept talking, feeling reckless, feeling vicious. Sherlock was furious and there was no one at the moment to yell at but John.

“You wouldn’t let us have security. I would have fled the country, I would have locked us in an underground fortress, but you wanted him to have a normal life. You said I couldn’t wrap him in cotton wool. Well, congratulations, John. That decision’s turned out splendidly, hasn’t it?”

“You kept telling me that he was safe!”

“I was lying, John! I had to lie to you! You needed it! Of course he wasn’t safe! He’s never been safe! You’ve never allowed me to make him safe! If it weren’t for you, I would have disappeared with him ages ago and he’d be perfectly safe right now.”
“Oh, boys,” said Mrs. Hudson at them, sounding anguished.

“Oh, right, if it weren’t for me,” mocked John, sarcastically. “If it weren’t for me, you’d’ve forgotten to ever even bother to feed him.”

“Right,” spat out Sherlock. “That’s right. I forgot. It’s only by the miraculous grace of John Watson that I haven’t accidentally thrown Oliver out a window.”

“You did manage to get him kidnapped,” John accused. “Because that is what you do. Destruction follows you everywhere. Chaos. Murders and crimes and you like it that way.”

“So do you!” Sherlock shouted back at him. “You love it. You’re attracted to danger. You would have left me long ago without the chaos.”

“Stop it,” Mrs. Hudson begged.

“Not when it comes to my son,” said John.

“Guys, seriously,” said Lestrade, but Sherlock barreled on blindly, because John hadn’t stopped yet, so neither was Sherlock.

“He isn’t your anything,” Sherlock snapped. “He’s my son.” He knew the minute it came out of his mouth that it was a step too far. He actually took a step back, closing his mouth and wishing he’d done it just slightly earlier.

The room was silent. John stared at him.

Lestrade stepped between them. “That’s enough,” he said, glaring between the two of them. “You do not need to be fighting each other, saying things you don’t mean and that you’re going to regret. Now apologize.” Lestrade looked between the two of them.

“You want me to apologize to him after what he just said to me?” said John, disbelieving.

“I’ll apologize,” said Sherlock, and stalked over to where he’d dropped his coat. “Sorry,” he said, scathingly, to John, as he twirled his coat on. “I’m so very sorry that I handed Oliver over to kidnappers yesterday. Forgive me. I didn’t think it would bother you. Oops.”

“Sherlock,” said John, as if he was going to say something, and Sherlock didn’t want to hear it.

“I also apologize for the fact that I haven’t been trying to find him. Didn’t realize it was important. Thought I’d work on my experiment on the effects of long-term refrigeration on different types of stab wounds. But if you’d rather I look for Oliver, I could do that instead.”

“Sherlock,” said John again.

“So sorry that I didn’t realize it was important that I not lose Oliver and that I find him. Also sorry for that time I set your favorite jumper on fire, but it wasn’t an accident, it was a terrible jumper. Sorry for never getting the milk, and for never cleaning the bathroom, and for refusing to allow you to get Oliver on a proper routine. Sorry for the time I broke the kitchen window—it wasn’t quite as accidental as I led you to believe—and also sorry for that time with the pig’s feet and the ice cream and the bathtub. Have I missed anything?”

“Sherlock,” said John.

Sherlock refused to listen. He felt as if he couldn’t listen. If he listened, he’d stumble over the breezy
speech he was delivering and he couldn’t stumble over it, he had to get out of the flat, as quickly as possible. “I’m sure I have missed lots of things. Well, sorry for all the things I missed, too. There. I’ve apologized. And now I’m off.” He concentrated on buttoning his coat.

“Where are you going?” asked Mycroft.

“Didn’t you hear? I’m meant to be looking for Oliver. What I’ve been doing so far to find him has clearly been rubbish.” Sherlock spared a brief glance at John, who looked back at him, expression unreadable except for anything other than exhaustion. He certainly didn’t make any attempt to protest.

So Sherlock turned and jogged down the stairs and went outside.

It was raining, and Sherlock turned his face up into it, welcoming the bite of it on his skin.

The street was still closed off, still crawling with Mycroft’s people. One of Mycroft’s ever-present cars pulled up, which was inevitable, Sherlock supposed.

“Where to, Mr. Holmes?” asked the driver, politely.

Sherlock had no idea. He didn’t want to go anywhere. He wanted to go back and say that he was sorry that he had told John that Oliver wasn’t his, but he was terrified to go back and say that and have John say that he wasn’t sorry that he’d accused Sherlock of being the cause of all of this. Really, what Sherlock wanted was to go back into his flat and find Oliver there. Can you take me back in time? Sherlock thought, but just said, hopelessly, “Bart’s,” because he couldn’t think of anywhere else to go.
Chapter 55

The door slammed behind Sherlock and John was torn between wanting to go after Sherlock so he could strangle him and wanting to go after him so he could hug him. And he didn’t want to do either of those things, so he stood in the sitting room, unmoving, terribly angry but extremely exhausted. Everything inside of him was twisted into tension and he felt as if he couldn’t breathe.

Lestrade said, carefully, “John—”

“No,” said John, and his voice didn’t even sound like his own to his ears. “It’s fine. We needed to have that out. Let him have his space. It’s fine.”

“No,” began Mrs. Hudson.

John shook his head a little bit, hoping it didn’t seem unkind, not too abrupt, and pulled himself out of the sitting room and up the stairs to Oliver’s bedroom. He shut the door behind him and sat with his back up against it and closed his eyes and breathed deep. It still smelled like Oliver. How much longer would it keep smelling like Oliver?

John sat there and felt as if the world swam all around him. There was Sherlock in his head, crossing a line that shouldn’t have been crossed, a secret line they always skirted, that Oliver was so wholly Sherlock’s and John was so entirely secondary to the united front of them. But John, as the thrum of his panicked anger faded, was aware that he’d started the fight, that he’d cornered Sherlock into fighting back, and Sherlock didn’t fight fair, of course he didn’t, he never had. But it wasn’t like it had been fair of John to accuse Sherlock of everything he’d accused him of, either.

John eventually opened his eyes and stood, his muscles creaking in protest. He must have been sitting for a while. He took one last deep breath of Oliver and then walked downstairs. Everyone was still in the sitting room, and they stopped talking as soon as he walked in, which meant they had obviously been talking about him.

“No news, I take it?” asked John.

“We’re monitoring everybody it could be, John,” said Mycroft. “Someone’s going to slip up sooner or later.”

John said, very calmly, “Do you know where Sherlock went?”

“Bart’s,” answered Mycroft, watching him closely.

John nodded and reached for his coat. “I’ll be back.”

***

Sherlock went to the laboratory at Bart’s where he’d met John for the first time. There was someone in it. The audacity of someone else to be in that laboratory. It was unbearable.

“Get out,” Sherlock snapped at whoever it was.

“Hang on,” he said, “I’m in the middle of—”

Sherlock walked over to the man’s petri dish and flung it against the wall.
The idiot jumped and then fled from the room, just as Sherlock had intended. He sat on a stool and closed his eyes and tried to sweep out his mind palace. He needed to air out the sitting room. He wasn’t going anywhere near the north wing. Or the west wing. Basically the only thing he could do was pace through the grand foyer and wait for the memory of that cab ride to dissipate from the sitting room.

The door to the lab opened and Molly said, needlessly, “Knock knock.”

Sherlock didn’t open his eyes. “Did they send you here to deal with me?”

“Yeah.” Molly sounded nervous. She didn’t normally sound so nervous around him anymore.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. She was standing just by the door and staring at him, wide-eyed. “I’m fine,” Sherlock said, sharply, because he didn’t like the way Molly was looking at him.

“Greg told me what happened,” Molly began, her voice small.

“Did he?” Sherlock sliced in. “Did he tell you that I got Oliver kidnapped from a taxi because I was too stupid to be paying attention?”

“No,” said Molly. “Sherlock—”

“I got in a cab, and I didn’t pay attention, and I let someone steal my child from me.”

“Sherlock—”

“And I can’t find him. I don’t even have any ideas. Any ideas I have turn out to be the wrong ones, red herrings, dead ends. I am just wasting everyone’s time and meanwhile people are doing terrible things to my son.” Sherlock suddenly swept his hand along the surface of the lab bench, bringing everything that was on it crashing down to the floor. Glass shattered and liquid ran everywhere and when the clatter had settled Sherlock had collapsed back into the stool and was covering his face with his hands and trying to take deep breaths.

Molly didn’t say anything. He thought she would. But she didn’t. And the silence stretched out all around them, for so long that Sherlock finally said what he’d been thinking all along, what he’d been worrying about all along, what even John had voiced for him.

“How can I not know where he is, Molly?” asked Sherlock into his hands, and his voice trembled on it. “He’s the most important…and I can’t find him…What sort of detective…Everything I am is useless.”

Molly still didn’t say anything. Molly left, the door opening and closing, and Sherlock took a deep, shuddering breath and kept his head in his hands because it was easier.

And then John said, “I’m sorry.”

Sherlock looked up immediately. John was standing in the lab. And Molly was not. Sherlock looked for her wildly, but she definitely wasn’t there.

Oh, God, was he hallucinating now?

“Molly was here,” said Sherlock.

“Yeah, she left when I came in,” said John.

Sherlock looked back at him and swallowed thickly and said, “John…”
“I’m sorry,” John said, firmly.

Sherlock shook his head. “No, you were right. You were just telling the truth. I’m sorry. Of course he’s yours. He’s so much yours. I never think of him otherwise. I didn’t mean it, when I said it, I was just being…a terrible, obnoxious person and I don’t know how you ever put up with me, but I’m sorry—”

“He’s not mine,” said John, walking slowly over to him, broken glass crunching under his feet. Sherlock fell silent, watching him. “And he’s not yours.” John leaned up against the bench next to Sherlock, looking down at him. “He’s ours. Yeah?”

Sherlock blinked up at him, suddenly horrified that his eyes were full of tears. “I’m so sorry,” he choked out.

John shook his head a little bit. “Shh,” he said, and brushed at Sherlock’s hair. “Stop it,” he murmured. “It’s forgiven. Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry, too.”

Sherlock leaned forward, pressed his face against John’s abdomen, and John held him there and kept his hands soothingly in Sherlock’s hair and Sherlock wanted to crawl inside of him. “But you were right,” said Sherlock into John.

“No, I wasn’t, Sherlock.”

“Yes, you were. Everything you said is true. This is all my fault. If I hadn’t got into the taxi with him, if I hadn’t been doing those stupid puddle experiments—”

“Sherlock,” John interrupted him, softly. “Did you mean what you told me back at the flat?”

“No,” Sherlock said, vehemently, and lifted his head to make sure John could see the truth of it on his face. “I didn’t mean it, John. None of it. Not even a little bit.”

“Alright,” John said. “Fine. I believe you. But then you need to return the favor and believe me when I tell you that I didn’t mean any of what I said, either. This isn’t your fault. None of it is. Horrible people stole him from you and you did nothing wrong. Do you remember when you told me that the Thorpe thing was hitting me harder because I was the one who’d seen him?”

Sherlock nodded mutely.

“You had the harder role here. I should never have exploited that, and I’m sorry. Get it out of your head, okay? You’re doing everything you can for him, and you love him more than your own life, and I know that and he knows that and I’m sorry I ever suggested anything different to you. I didn’t mean to yell at you today, I’m so glad you’re here with me. I want you to take the disagreement this morning and I want you to delete it from your mind palace. Just for me. Can you do that?”

Sherlock nodded again.

“Yes,” John said. “Because you’d do anything for me. For both of us. And I know that. And I’m sorry, love.”

Sherlock leaned his face back against John. “I’m more sorry,” he mumbled.

John chuckled and kissed his head. “Fine, I’ll let you win that one.”

Sherlock breathed against John and thought about Oliver and John held him to him and no doubt thought about Oliver, too.
John said, eventually, without judgment, “You made a mess.”

“Yes.”

“Did it help?” He sounded genuinely curious.

“Not really. You can try it if you like.” Sherlock straightened away from John, taking a deep breath.

“Maybe later,” said John. “When do you think is the last time we ate?”

“Are you hungry?”

“No. But we should eat. What good will it do Oliver to come back and find us both collapsed from dehydration and lack of sustenance?”

Sherlock stood. “I don’t have time to eat, I need to think.”

“I know.” John took Sherlock’s hand. “Maybe just toast. What do you think we should do about the mess?”

“Tell Mycroft to send someone. I’m surprised Mycroft let you come here unaccompanied, frankly.”

“He didn’t,” said John. “He sent some guards, but I left them outside the door here. I figured there was no need to have them come in with me.” John put his hand on the doorknob and looked at Sherlock. “Ready?”

But Sherlock drew to a stop. Sherlock stared at him.

John’s gaze turned quizzical. “Sherlock?”

“Because you were already inside,” breathed Sherlock.

“What?”

“You didn’t think you needed to bring them in with you, because you knew it was safe in here if they were there to stop people from getting in. But what if someone was already in?”

“What?” said John again.

“Oh, John, you really are the most fantastic conductor of light,” Sherlock enthused, and kissed him full on the mouth.

“Okay,” John said, bewildered.

“I know where Oliver is,” said Sherlock, breathlessly.

***

“He’s already inside,” Sherlock told Mycroft, standing on the sofa and tossing papers around the sitting room pell-mell.

“Yes,” Mycroft said, clearly just clinging to patience. “So you said. Multiple times. On the phone on your way back from Bart’s. And just now. But you haven’t clarified: already inside where?”

“One of these bloody top-secret institutions of yours.” Sherlock kept searching through papers, as if there was going to be a clue in one of them.
“We don’t have top-secret institutions all over, you know.”

“The one with the cloning program. Whichever one has the cloning program. They smuggled him in there before we raised the alarm, and so that’s where he is, just one more clone baby, only older, but no one’s going to notice him. They’re hiding him in plain sight.”

“There is no cloning program anymore, Sherlock,” Mycroft said.

Sherlock looked up at him. “What?”

“I closed down the cloning program once I found out about it, found out about Oliver. Did you really think I was cold enough to just stand by and let them keep killing babies?”

Sherlock stared at Mycroft. “You shut them down.”

“Yes.”

“So you’d know if there was still cloning going on.”

“Of course I would.”

“No, you wouldn’t. Because there’s a place that exists outside of spot inspections, outside of your domain, where the scientists do as they wish and there’s no accountability.”

“Baskerville,” said John, finally connecting Sherlock’s dots.

“Baskerville,” said Sherlock. “That’s where he is, Mycroft. He’s in Baskerville. Get us there.”

***

When the helicopter landed and John jumped out, Mycroft grabbed him by the arm and said, “Give me the gun.”

John tried to play innocent. “What?”

“Give it to me, John. In your state, you’ll kill everyone.”

“Yes,” Sherlock snapped. “That’s the bloody idea.”

“Not everyone in there deserves to be killed,” Mycroft snapped back. “I’ll get you into Baskerville, but I’m not letting you take a gun with you. Those are my terms. Give me the gun now, or wait for me to bring Oliver out to you.”

There was no way John was waiting to see Oliver. Not any longer than he had already waited for him. John pulled the gun out of the back of his trousers and gave it to Mycroft, glaring.

“Thank you,” said Mycroft, politely, and then nodded at the small army of men he’d brought with him.

John stuck by Sherlock, as they were marched into Baskerville. The commanding officer was different than when they had been there the first time, all those years ago. And what he said when Sherlock said, “Take me to where they’re keeping the clones,” was, “There aren’t any clones here.”

John moved with electric speed, pinning him up against the wall, arm at his throat. The idiot clawed at it and looked, horrified, toward the soldiers who had accompanied John and Sherlock in.
The soldiers looked uncertain.

“If you shoot John, my brother will not forgive you,” Sherlock said, harshly.

John said, “Answer his question. Where do you keep the clones?”

“The basement,” the commanding officer choked out.

Afterwards everything was just impressions to John. He could never remember it clearly. When the lift opened, there was none of the chaos John had expected. People looked up at them curiously, and John moved with Sherlock through rows of incubators. Most of them were empty, although a few held babies much smaller than Oliver, infants still, and John forced himself not to register them, not to think too hard about them, to keep going, because somewhere there was Oliver, somewhere in here, he knew it.

They reached the end of the room, stopped, turned back.

“He isn’t here,” said John, scanning back over the incubators.

“He’s got to be here,” said Sherlock. “They must be experimenting. You,” he snapped at a scientist who was watching them in confusion. “Where do you perform experiments on the babies?”

She bristled, offended. “We don’t—”

“Where do you collect your data?” Sherlock shouted.

And John heard it. Oliver’s voice. Calling “Daddy!”

John thought he was imagining it, but Sherlock turned, his eyes wide, and met John’s gaze.

“Oliver!” John shouted.

“Papa!” shouted Oliver back.

“Call for us, love!” John yelled, moving through the room, trying to see what they were missing.

“Papa!” shouted Oliver.

“That’s it,” Sherlock joined in the encouragement. “Keep calling!”

“Daddy!”

It wasn’t calling anymore, it was sobbing, and John almost kicked the wall in panic, because he behind that wall, John knew he was.

“How does this open?” Sherlock snapped, running his hands along it.

John moved without realizing he was going to, so quickly that the soldier never even had a chance to react. He swung the gun he stole from its holster in a neat arc and leveled it at the scientist’s forehead and he said, evenly, unflinchingly, while Oliver cried for them, “How do we get to the other side of this wall?”

The scientist burst into tears, which was not helpful. “Oh, bloody…” said John, in impatient disgust, and lowered the gun.

Sherlock said, “Got it!” and a door opened in the corner that had been merged into the wall, and they
The door opened into a large examining room, full of equipment of all shapes and sizes. There were two people in there, both with their hands up.

“We were only—” one of them said, and John didn’t care, didn’t pause, punched him without thinking and then pushed past him and into the room, where Oliver was shouting his name.

He was on an examining couch, and John rushed over to him, and he wanted to sweep him up into his arms but he couldn’t because he was strapped down. They had strapped him down. John didn’t grit his teeth because he didn’t want to panic Oliver any more than he already was.

“Shh,” he said, and tried to take stock of him. They’d shaved his head, and John had never seen him without dark curls, Oliver had had hair from his infancy, but the rest of him was recognizably Oliver, from the tears flooding out of his Sherlock-opal eyes to the trembling bow of his mouth as he gasped, “Papa.”

“Okay,” John said, and ran his hands over him, trying to be soothing, trying to check that he was unharmed. “It’s okay. I’m here. Shh shh shh. We’re right here. We’ve got you, okay?”

“John, you’re hyperventilating,” Sherlock said, evenly, sounding so calm, appearing on the other side of the examining couch.

John realized he was. He tried to take a breath. “They strapped him down.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, calmly. “Let’s get him out.” And then he looked at Oliver and he actually smiled, as his hands worked at the buckles. “Hello, love. You’ve had an adventure, haven’t you?” He said it brightly, and John knew he was trying to calm Oliver down instead of pull him into the panicked feedback loop that John’s sobbing breaths had added to.

“Daddy,” said Oliver, brokenly. Sherlock had got one of his arms free, and he reached up and grabbed it tightly into the lapel of Sherlock’s coat.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, and his voice broke on it, ruining the façade he was trying to project. “I’m right here, and I’m never leaving you again, okay? Never.”

John finished with the buckles on his side and pulled Oliver up immediately.

“Careful,” Sherlock said, trying to sound business-like when it was clear he was crying. “They’ve got needles in him and electrodes and—”

“Get them off,” John said, as Oliver clung to him and sobbed into his neck and said, “Papa,” and John kissed every bit of him that he could.

“Careful,” Sherlock murmured again, moving all around them and fussing with things and John didn’t care, John tried to hush nonsense at Oliver and not fall to pieces. Eventually Sherlock pressed a kiss to Oliver’s now-bald head. “Let’s take him home,” he said. “How does that sound, Ollie? Home? Mrs. Hudson will make you some biscuits and Papa will make you some tea.”

Oliver peeked out from John’s neck. He was still crying—John could feel the tears—but he was no longer sobbing hysterically. He was catching his breaths in hiccups. “Yes,” he said, tone wet with tears.

“Let’s go,” Sherlock said to John.
“Here,” John said, and handed Oliver carefully across to Sherlock. “Your turn for a cuddle.”

Sherlock held Oliver with one hand and John’s hand with the other, and they walked out of the room together. Oliver had his face pressed against Sherlock, breathing heavy but calmer breaths, and John listened to the beauty of Oliver breathing.

Mycroft’s people were swarming over the lab, and everything was chaos, and John didn’t care.

Someone stepped forward, crying, saying, “We just wanted data, you wouldn’t let us have—” but Sherlock tugged, pulled, kept John moving forward.

They met Mycroft coming out of the lift. He looked at Oliver and his relief was evident on his face. “Is he alright?” he asked.

Sherlock said, “I want this place burned to the ground, Mycroft,” and stepped into the lift.
Mycroft debriefed them on their way back to London. Oliver sat on John’s lap, leaning heavily against him, and listened, his eyes wide. John was sure he was understanding everything, and he couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or not. Mycroft was saying things that John didn’t care about, about the scientists having been involved in Oliver’s original cloning; how they had simply walked Oliver right into Baskerville, no questions asked, because of Baskerville’s special status; how Mycroft was going to change things. Sherlock was interrogating Mycroft, but John couldn’t bring himself to be interested in what was happening. He kept his lips on Oliver’s head and murmured to him, words of love and safety and comfort that he hoped were making more of an impact than the story Mycroft was telling.

It wasn’t terribly late when they got back to Baker Street, but John felt like it should have been the middle of the night. Lestrade met them at the door and looked at Oliver in relief.

“You got him.”

“Yes,” John said, and gave Lestrade an exhausted smile.

John saw Lestrade’s gaze linger on Oliver’s shaved head, but all he said was, “Good to have you back, Ollie.”

“Hi,” Oliver said, tiredly.

John started to walk up the stairs, then turned back. “Sherlock,” he said, blindly, because he felt like he couldn’t deal with anyone else anymore.

“Yes?” said Sherlock.

“Get rid of everyone,” John said, shakily. “Please.”

“You should really have Oliver checked out—” began Mycroft.

“John will check him out,” Sherlock said.

“He’s fine,” John agreed, wearyly. “He needs to be home and cuddled for a little while. I can’t make him go to a hospital right now. I’ll check him over more thoroughly but he’s fine. Here.” On a sudden whim, John handed Oliver to Mycroft.

Mycroft bundled him into his arms automatically, to keep him from dropping entirely, looking startled.

“Thank you, Mycroft,” John said, gravely. “For all the help. Thank you.”

Mycroft looked at Oliver, who looked back at him, wearing the expression of cautious worry he’d been wearing since they’d retrieved him.

Mycroft said, solemnly, “I’m sorry, Oliver. I failed you, and I won’t do it again.”

Oliver said, “Myc,” which as the first time John had ever heard him call Mycroft anything but client. Mycroft actually smiled at him, and then Mycroft leaned in and kissed the baby’s forehead, which
was more affectionate than John had ever seen him be. He handed Oliver back to John and said, “Greg and I will be back tomorrow. We’ll make sure everything’s alright.”

John nodded and turned to mount the stairs, hearing Sherlock following up behind him.

Mrs. Hudson met them at the top. Oliver saw her and reached for her immediately, saying, “Ma.”

“Oh, Ollie,” she said, and took him and cuddled him and sniffled against him.

John glanced over his shoulder at Sherlock. “Run the bath, would you?”

Sherlock nodded, and John heard him go into the bathroom. He put the kettle on and set out two mugs and a sippy cup, making the tea automatically.

Mrs. Hudson came into the kitchen, pressed Oliver’s head up against her and covered the ear facing outward, and hissed at John, “But why would they shave his beautiful hair?”

John measured out sugar and answered calmly. “Because they were attaching electrodes to his head to measure his brain waves and they wanted to make sure it was a perfect connection.”

“Oh, little lamb,” Mrs. Hudson tutted, and then said, “Well, you’re home now with your dads and safe. There you are, love.”

John glanced over at her, watching her hand the baby over to Sherlock, who had come into the kitchen.

“You three just have a nice, quiet evening together. I’ll bring up some biscuits and leave them and not disturb you.”

“Mrs. Hudson,” said John, stepping away from the kettle and stopping her before she left. He pulled her into a close hug and closed his eyes and said, “Thank you,” because she had been there with him, from the very beginning, for him and them.

“Oh, love,” she said, and smoothed a hand through his hair in a gesture that was extraordinarily maternal, and John’s mother had died when he had been at uni, so long ago that he had forgotten how lovely it could be feel to be comforted by a mother. He squeezed her a little bit tighter in reaction. And she said, “I never doubted you’d have a happy ending.”

John would have liked to say the same. But he had woken next to Sherlock that morning with the sour taste of a nightmare in his mouth, the weight of Oliver’s lifeless body in his arms, and he was not proud of the fact that he had resented Sherlock’s deep, even sleep enough that he had lashed out at him as soon as he had seen him awake.

The kettle clicked, and John made them tea, and Mrs. Hudson left, and John carried their tea into the bathroom and Sherlock put Oliver in the tub. For a moment Oliver just sat and regarded them, and then he reached out and splashed Sherlock directly in his eye.

“Lovely,” said Sherlock, dryly, the afflicted eye squeezed shut.

Oliver giggled and commenced to splashing much more energetically. He got water all over the bathroom, and Sherlock and John watched and got soaking wet and silently agreed it was the most beautiful thing they’d ever seen.

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Sherlock played for them. He started with Oliver’s song, and Oliver listened to him raptly, and Sherlock sang the notes for him as he played them, being careful with showing where his fingers were positioned on the violin. And then Sherlock transitioned into “Baa Baa Black Sheep,” which John had never heard him play before, because Sherlock generally thought that Oliver’s taste in music should be identical to Sherlock’s, even at such a young age. But he played it, and Oliver on John’s lap brightened and sat up straighter and sang along, slightly behind the notes Sherlock was playing. John decided he couldn’t stand this and cuddled Oliver close and pretended he wasn’t crying into the back of Oliver’s neck.

Oliver squirmed, offended, saying, “Papa. Baa Baa Blah Sheep,” as if he couldn’t believe John would bother him during such artistry. He slid off of John’s lap and gave John such a perfect Sherlockian look of *ugh, peasants* that it didn’t really help John’s tearfulness. Oliver toddled over to where Sherlock was playing by the window and pulled himself up onto the desk chair and sat and listened politely to a bit of flourish Sherlock was playing, before saying, “Daddy, Baa Baa Blah Sheep now.”

“Listen to this really beautiful little bit of Mendelssohn I’m going to play for you right now,” Sherlock told him.

Oliver stood on the chair, frowning, reaching for Sherlock’s arm. “Daddy, Baa Baa Blah Sheep now *please,*” he said, with the *please* delivered with the unmistakable disgust of *look what you’ve done you’ve made me have to say please.*

Sherlock gave in, and Oliver sat on the desk, satisfied, and sang along again, and clapped when they reached the end of the song.

“You’re welcome,” Sherlock told him, fondly, and kissed the top of his head. “Now can I play you some Mendelssohn?”

“I think you should learn I’m a Little Teapot,” John said, having managed to get himself under control, so that the smile he was smiling was only slightly watery.

“Don’t even get the idea in your head, Oliver,” Sherlock said, sternly, and then he didn’t play Mendelssohn, he played John’s song.

John smiled and leaned back in his chair. Oliver clambered down off the desk and retrieved his skull and his periodic table blanket and carried both over to John, where he directed exactly how he wished everything to be arranged and then climbed up, settling against John with a little sigh. He was clingier than he normally was, which John didn’t blame him for at all. John felt clingier than he normally was, after all.

John kissed Oliver’s head and tried not to focus on how very different it felt for it to be skin instead of a riot of curls. He said, softly, “You’re okay, Ollie.”

He didn’t expect Oliver to answer, but Oliver said, watching Sherlock raptly, “Yes.”

“Glad you agree,” said John.

“Love you,” said Oliver, and John had never heard him say that before, and he closed his eyes and rested his lips against him and breathed him in.

“Love you, too,” he said, and Sherlock transitioned into Mozart at the window.

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There was never any possibility of putting Oliver in his cot. John carried him into their bedroom, fast asleep, and stretched out on the bed next to him, and he was asleep, too, by the time Sherlock finished changing into his pajamas. Typical, thought Sherlock, looking at the pair of them. They were adorable, of course, but he wasn’t the least bit tired.

He retrieved his laptop from the sitting room and carried it to bed with him, where he sat and researched infant memory. Eventually Oliver shifted, and Sherlock looked down at him and watched him blink himself awake.

Sherlock put a finger to his lips and whispered, “Papa’s sleeping.”

Oliver glanced behind him at John, turned back to Sherlock, and said, “Silly.”

“Indeed.”

Oliver crawled over to Sherlock, insinuating himself into Sherlock’s arms and immediately trying to smash the keys on Sherlock’s laptop.

Sherlock closed the laptop and put it on the nightstand, and Oliver protested with, “Daddy!”

John stirred and Sherlock looked over at him, but he didn’t wake.

“Shh,” Sherlock said again, and rested his lips on Oliver’s head, annoyed that there was no hair on it anymore. It was irritating to him. They could take Oliver home and make him feel loved and safe but they still looked at him and knew that there had been a time when he hadn’t been there with them, when someone else had been in charge of him.

Oliver turned in his arms, pulling himself into standing, and suddenly reached out a hand to Sherlock’s hair, twisting into it and tugging. He was frowning as he did it, thoughtful. He reached up his free hand to his head, clearly making the connection, and he looked quizzical.

“They shaved it,” Sherlock told him, because he felt like Oliver deserved to know when things were confusing him. “Look, I’ll show you.” He picked up Oliver and carried him into the bathroom and showed him in the mirror.

Oliver stared, wide-eyed, alarmed, and then his lower lip trembled. And Sherlock felt horrified suddenly. He hadn’t even considered that Oliver would find it upsetting. Yes, they did, of course they did, they looked at Oliver all the time, but Sherlock hadn’t realized that Oliver had an idea of what he looked like in his head. Sherlock hadn’t thought that through. But of course he did. He could pick himself out in photographs, of course he knew what he looked like, and of course he no longer looked that way.

“Shh,” said Sherlock, stepping away from the mirror and trying to comfort him. “It’ll grow back. I promise. It’ll be fine, right? It’s all going to be fine. It’s all going to be just like it was.”

Oliver sniffled, eyes filled with tears, looking heartbroken, and Sherlock heard himself say, “Watch. I’ll show you.”

And then suddenly Sherlock was in the kitchen, retrieving scissors. He frowned at them, wondering how clean they were, deciding they were clean enough. He went back into the bathroom and settled Oliver on the toilet.

“Watch,” he said, and took a deep breath, and then cut an enormous lock of his hair off.

Oliver’s eyes widened. And then he laughed and reached for the lock of hair. Sherlock handed it to
him, and Oliver looked delighted. He looked up at Sherlock, eyes shining, and said, “More, Daddy.”

As if he was going to deny him that. So Sherlock cut and cut and cut at his hair, leaving a pile of dark curls on the floor around him. Eventually he looked at what was left and remarked, “Well. Papa’s going to help me shave the rest of it, though, it just looks ridiculous like this.” He studied himself unflinchingly. He had always been vain about his hair, and he thought that of course Oliver must have been the same way, and he liked the idea of shaving his head to match Oliver, an outward sign that they would heal together.

Sherlock sat on the floor, in the middle of the mess he’d made, and pulled Oliver into his arms, and spoke to him very seriously. “You might remember what happened to you. And you might not. It could go either way with trauma at your age. But if you remember, this is what I want you to remember: There is nothing, ever, that will keep us from you. Ever. If you are lost, we will always find you. If you call for us, we will always answer. Just like we did today. I want you to remember that. You are the most beloved, important, precious person in our lives, there will never be anything more beloved or important or precious than you. So just remember that. Don’t remember whatever they did to you, whatever they said to you, remember that you are ours and we are yours and we will protect you and when we fail we will save you and I am so sorry, Ollie. I am so sorry.” Sherlock leaned his forehead against Oliver’s, surprised at how much he could feel now that he’d cut so much of his hair off. He closed his eyes and held Oliver and said again, “I’m so sorry.”

“Love you,” said Oliver, and Sherlock smiled.

And then John said, “Oh, my God, what did you do to your hair?”

Sherlock looked up. John was blinking blearily in the light, staring in horror at Sherlock’s head.

“I’m proving to Oliver that it’s not a big deal to have your head shaved,” said Sherlock, defensively. “We’re going to grow our hair back together, Oliver and me. Isn’t that right, Ollie?”

“Yes,” Oliver said, and picked up a handful of Sherlock’s hair, showing it to John in delight. “Look!”

“Time will pass,” said Sherlock, “and our hair will grow back, and we’ll all get better.” He said it stubbornly, because he knew John had been fond of his hair, but he also knew that it would grow back, that nothing that couldn’t be fixed had happened over the past day, and they had got so lucky.

John said, after a moment, “I’ll shave yours if you’ll shave mine.”

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Mycroft eyed the collection of shaved heads in Baker Street but said nothing. He said to Sherlock, simply, “Do you want to hear what we’ve learned?”

John said, “I don’t want Oliver hearing it.”

Which of course caused Oliver to walk immediately over to Sherlock so that he could hear everything.

“I thought we might go for a walk,” Lestrade suggested. “Mycroft sent a small army to keep us safe.”

“You were saying you wanted to get him outside,” Sherlock said, because it was a beautiful day, the sun shining brightly, and John had been hesitant to leave Baker Street, where he knew they were safe, but Sherlock thought they had to leave Baker Street or they’d never leave.
“Quick walk,” John said, after a moment. “Not a long one.”

“It’ll be fine,” Sherlock assured him, firmly.

John nodded after a moment, picked Oliver up, walked toward the doorway, then backtracked to kiss Sherlock firmly, because he hadn’t kissed him before he’d gone off for the puddle experiment the other day, and it could have been the last time he’d seen him. “I love you,” he said.

“It’s going to be perfectly okay,” Sherlock told him.

“I love you anyway,” said John.

Sherlock smiled. “Yes. I know. It doesn’t matter that you didn’t say it that day. But I love you, too.”

“Thanks. Ready for a walk?” he asked Oliver.

“No,” said Oliver, pouting.

“Want to feed the ducks?”

“No,” said Oliver.

“We’re going anyway,” said John, unperturbed.

“Papa!” Oliver complained.

Sherlock listened to the door open and close and then said to Mycroft, “What have you learned?”

“They were part of the original team. Thorpe told them where Oliver could be located.”

“So we didn’t fake Ollie’s death soon enough.”

“It would seem not. Thorpe himself didn’t appear to have anything to do with the plan, although he no doubt told them hoping they would act. They insisted that they weren’t going to harm Oliver and they were going to return him as soon as they were done. Not killing you was their show of good faith.”

“Oh,” mocked Sherlock, “how polite of them not to kill me.”

“They think you’re being unreasonable, not allowing them to collect data from Oliver. They clearly don’t know you, you are never reasonable.”

Sherlock smiled faintly. “But how did they orchestrate it all?”

“What do you mean?”

“Stealing the cab, making sure to pick me up, spying on me in such a way that not even you noticed, determining where the transfer should take place so the CCTV wouldn’t be able to see, injecting me with enough drugs so that I wouldn’t be in pursuit immediately, getting me to the warehouse—I mean, there had to be teams of them.”

“There was a great number involved. We’re still tracking them all down. The news spread among the scientists fairly quickly.”

“What is your plan for dealing with them?” Sherlock asked.
Mycroft hesitated. “I’ve shut down Baskerville’s cloning program. And I’m requiring Baskerville to start making the usual reports. Their free rein is over.”

“But what are you doing with the scientists involved with Oliver’s kidnapping?” Sherlock asked again, patiently.

“I’d rather you not know. Suffice it to say: I will keep him safe, Sherlock. It’s every bit as important to me as it is to you. I know you don’t believe that. But it’s true.” Mycroft paused. “Please don’t ask me to shave my head to prove it, though.”

Sherlock snorted. “I doubt it would grow back.”

“Indeed.”

Sherlock sat and steepled his fingers and said, “To trick both of us…”

“It was meticulous planning,” Mycroft said. “And we were caught flat-footed.”

“We shouldn’t have been.”

“We won’t be again,” said Mycroft.

***

The weather was unbelievably gorgeous and John thought it apt, considering how happy he’d been all day. He had woken up to Sherlock and Oliver both sound asleep next to him and had managed to bring them tea in bed and they had lounged for a bit just enjoying each other. And now Oliver was being very interested in everything all around him, just the way Oliver always was.

“You’re going to have to buy him a hat for his head, now that he doesn’t have any hair,” remarked Lestrade. “You, too. You’ll get sunburnt.”

“It was a solidarity thing,” John said. “I think Sherlock felt like we needed to all be in this together, have some outward sign that we were all getting better.”

“I think it’s nice,” said Lestrade.

“Papa, no ducks,” Oliver said from the pushchair.

“I know, Ollie. He hates the ducks,” John told Lestrade.

“Sodding ducks,” said Oliver, passionately.

“Well, then,” said Lestrade.

“He really hates ducks,” said John.

“How did I not realize what he was,” said Lestrade, in amazement.

“It isn’t the kind of thing you would assume,” John pointed out.

“But he is so exactly him. Now that you’ve said it, it seems obvious to me.”

“He’s actually not exactly him. I mean, he is, in lots of ways, but in other ways he’s not very much like him at all.”
“Well, that’s nature and nurture,” said Lestrade.

“Yes,” agreed John. “And it’s exactly why it all happened, because they want to know these things.”

“How would they ever think they could know any of them without knowing the two of you as well?”

“Well. Sherlock and Oliver would both say that they’re idiots,” said John.

There was a moment of silence. Oliver was singing to himself. “Baa Baa Black Sheep” again.

John said, “We were going to tell you.”

“I know,” said Lestrade.

“It wasn’t that we didn’t trust you. We were being…so cautious, with who knew—”

“It’s okay, John.”

“Don’t be angry with Mycroft. He didn’t tell you because we asked him not to tell you.”

“John, I am so used to the secrets Mycroft keeps. I’m not offended by any of them.”

John decided to take him at his word.

Lestrade said, after a moment, “In a weird way, this makes so much more sense than the story you told me about where Oliver came from.”

“Yeah,” John said. “We would have a child in the most unique way in the world.”

“Sodding ducks,” said Oliver, darkly, and glared at them as they passed.

***

“John apologized, you know,” Lestrade said, toeing his shoes off.

Mycroft was staring at his tablet, but then Mycroft was always staring at his tablet, so it wasn’t like that deterred Lestrade.

“Well,” he amended. “He apologized after a fashion.”

“They were worried about telling anyone at all,” said Mycroft, apparently paying attention even though he did sound distracted. “It was nothing personal.”

“I didn’t take it personally.” Lestrade walked over to where Mycroft was sitting at his desk, leaned down and kissed the side of his neck. “You, though, paying attention to that tablet right now instead of me—that I’m taking personally.”

“Thorpe is dead,” said Mycroft, flatly, and put the tablet down.

Lestrade stilled, straightened. “Thorpe?”

“The doctor who originally cloned Oliver.”

“I thought he didn’t have anything to do with this, though.”

“So did I.” Mycroft looked grim as he rose from the desk.
“Then why is he dead?”
“Car accident.”
“You don’t believe that.”
“I don’t, no.”
Lestrade considered. “Could be a coincidence?” he suggested.
“The universe is seldom so lazy.”
“So…what do you think, then?”
Mycroft didn’t pace. Mycroft never paced. Mycroft stood and thought and then he admitted, “I don’t know.”
“We should tell Sherlock and John.”
Lestrade blinked. “Why?” he echoed. “Because they should know.”
“The doctor who created your clone baby, who has no connection with the recent kidnapping, was killed in a car accident.’ That’s what you want me to tell them?”
“No known connection,” Lestrade corrected him.
“He wasn’t connected. He had nothing to do with their plan. He told them of Oliver’s existence. That’s it.”
“Then who killed him? And why?”
“The answers to those questions will haunt John and Sherlock, for no good reason. Because I’m going to keep Oliver safe for them. I promised that once before and I failed them. I will not fail them again, Greg.” Mycroft, decision made, nodded and looked firmly at Lestrade. “We’re not telling them. It has no relevance to them. It’s safer if they don’t do something rash from a defensive position.”
“You don’t trust them, do you?”
“To not take Oliver and disappear entirely if they feel threatened? No. I don’t trust them. I’m aware he’s their first priority, and I approve of that. But I’m not going to spook them right now for no reason. It’s an odd curiosity, but it’s not a threat. Not while I’m watching. Let them settle, let them be happy.” Mycroft paused, and then he almost smiled. “Let their hair grow back.”
Lestrade regarded him. “But if one more out of the ordinary thing happens, you need to tell them immediately.”
Mycroft considered, then nodded. “Agreed.” Then, “Come to bed.”
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

Thank you to hobbitts for permission to use the art in the icon, and to everyone on Twitter who helped name the baby, and to everyone on Tumblr who was supportive and encouraging while I was going crazy over this, and to arctacuda, who's been reading this over for me and making sure it works and I'm not going crazy, and to flawedamythyst, who took one for the team and made sure that my British sounded, well, a bit more British (even as the document kept getting longer and longer until it took a ridiculous amount of time to even open).

And thank you, last but not least, to all of YOU. I can't believe how long and epic this ended up being, and I can't believe how delightfully all of you stuck around, week after week after week. My comment-replying record is abysmal at this point, but I've always, always, always enjoyed every single one that you guys leave for me. You were entertaining and thought-provoking and sweet and really you all get co-writer credit for helping to shape this story so much.

When I first started writing this story, my beta predicted it would be eighty chapters. Turns out it's only 57. This was apparently me being succinct.

Only not really, because this is not the end of Oliver, who will be coming back to a fanfiction near you before you know it. It's like at the end of the closing credits of a James Bond movie: Oliver Copernicus Watson-Holmes will return.

Chapter 57

“But I don’t want to,” said Oliver, not even bothering to look up from the train track he was putting together.

“Well, you have to,” said John, and almost winced at what a parent he sounded like.

“How’s your sister?” asked Sherlock, politely.

“She’s…okay.” John decided it was accurate, not too hopeful or too hopeless. “She says happy Christmas. Come on, Ollie. Coat on.”

“No,” said Oliver, stubbornly.

Sherlock, on the other side of the room where he was working on the opposite end of the train track, said, “Oliver has spoken.”

“Yes. I have heard him. I have noted his disagreement. And we have to go. Come on.” John leaned down and picked Oliver up.

“Yes. I have heard him. I have noted his disagreement. And we have to go. Come on.” John leaned down and picked Oliver up.

“Papa!” complained Oliver, and kicked his legs out in frustration.

“Two is such a charming age,” John remarked, dryly, and deposited him in Sherlock’s arms. “Corral him.”
“I don’t know why we have to go,” Sherlock pouted, while Oliver tantrumed.

“Because it makes your brother happy for us all to be together on Christmas.”

“But I don’t want to go to Myc’s,” wailed Oliver. “My train is here.”

“He gets this from you,” John told Sherlock.

“He gets everything from me,” Sherlock reminded him.

“George Orwell will be at Uncle Mycroft’s,” John attempted to bribe Oliver.

Oliver abruptly stopped his tantrum. He regarded John suspiciously. “Really?”

John nodded.

Oliver turned to Sherlock. “Really?”

Sherlock nodded.

Oliver considered. “Okay,” he said, and stood up and consented to have his coat put on him.

John shook his head as he buttoned the coat. “Do you think I’d lie to you?”

Oliver said, “I want my train.”

“You can bring your train with you but not the tracks.”

“That’s a good deal, Ollie, I’d take it,” Sherlock informed him, and knotted the brand new scarf around Oliver’s neck.

“I want to see,” Oliver demanded, but pleasantly, as he lifted his arms up for Sherlock.

Sherlock picked him up and showed him in the mirror, where they looked identically back at each other, matching scarves and matching coats and matching dark curls growing back in, not quite as long as they had been, but getting there, slowly, more every day. And if they still looked over their shoulders more than they used to, still panicked more easily and worried more intensely, John thought they were still allowed, that it would take more than a few months of safety before they settled into it. But as their hair grew back, so did their sense of security, slow and sure and creeping up on them. John was determined they would get there.

“Love it,” Oliver said about his new scarf, happily, which was his new proclamation of approval for things. Love it! he’d exclaimed over every present he’d opened that morning.

“Good, because I think you look very smart,” Sherlock told him, and kissed his cheek.

“I am quite the luckiest man in London,” said John to the pair of them, and he said it lightly but he meant every word.

Sherlock beamed at him as he turned from the mirror. “Not so, that’s me,” he said, and kissed him.

“Enough,” Oliver announced about the kiss, squirming in Sherlock’s arms.

“Mmm,” said John. “Not really.”

Sherlock grinned as he pulled away and straightened.
“Not at all, actually,” John remarked, as they headed out of the flat. “I thought you were going to make your last year’s gift a tradition.”

“There’s always Christmas night,” Sherlock promised, with a wink.

John followed them down and then to the car Mycroft had sent. “Lantern,” the driver said, which was their password of the day. Every day Mycroft texted a password to John and Sherlock, to be used before they got into any cars.

John ushered everyone into the car. Oliver was telling his skull they were going to see Georgie.

“I approve of his priorities,” Sherlock told John.

“He’s so you it literally hurts me sometimes,” sighed John.

Sherlock chuckled, not at all repentant.

When they got to Mycroft’s, Lestrade showed Oliver the new ball George Orwell had received for Christmas, and Oliver threw it in delight up and down the hallway, watching the puppy chase it.

“Is he ever going to stop being a puppy?” Sherlock asked.

“Is your baby ever going to stop wearing nappies?” countered Mycroft.

“He’s two,” John told him.

“We’re going to start toilet-training him tomorrow,” said Sherlock.

John lifted an eyebrow at him. “Oh, are we?”

“Yes,” sniffed Sherlock. “He criticized my form today.”

“He did what?”

“He criticized my nappy-changing form.”

John laughed. He couldn’t help it. “Did he tell you I’m better at it than you?”

“You’re not, you know,” said Sherlock, darkly, into his mulled wine.

“Of course not,” John agreed, while not at all agreeing.

“If he’s old enough to criticize how one changes his nappy, then he’s old enough not to be wearing nappies,” said Sherlock.

“Myc, come play,” commanded Oliver.

And Mycroft went.

John lifted his eyebrows. “Did you think you’d ever see that?”

“Oliver’s going to be very useful when it comes to handling Mycroft,” remarked Sherlock.

Mycroft threw the ball, and George Orwell retrieved it, and when George Orwell ran back with it there was a bit of a scuffle over the ball and then Oliver exclaimed, “Oh, no!”

“What happened?” John asked, as Lestrade restrained George Orwell.
“Myc!” said Oliver, trotting behind Mycroft as he walked up the hallway, cradling his hand.

Mycroft looked annoyed. “George Orwell bit me.”

“He didn’t mean it,” said Lestrade. “He was just enthusiastic.”

“Let me see,” Oliver demanded, tugging at Mycroft’s suit coat.

Mycroft obediently let Oliver see, showing him the small cut with its small amount of blood.

Oliver made a little distressed noise but then looked at Mycroft and said, seriously, “Deep breath.”

Mycroft blinked. “What?”

“Deep breath, Myc,” he demanded, obstinately.

So Mycroft took one.

“Good,” said Oliver, and then, “You’re okay,” in a perfect imitation of what John told him whenever he got into a scrape. He looked at John and Sherlock and said, soothingly, “Myc’s okay,” as if they had been worried about it.

“Thank you,” said John, gravely.

Sherlock said, in astonishment, “He’s so you.”

John was pleased. “Do you think so?”

“That was every bit you. I would have let Mycroft bleed to death.”

“Oh, stop it,” said John, but he knew he was blushing with pleasure.

Then Oliver reached out and touched the bit of blood and stuck his finger in his mouth experimentally.

John winced. “Oh, God, Ollie, let’s not do that.” He grabbed Oliver and took him away, which provoked complaining from Oliver, and John looked at Sherlock, “And that was entirely you.”

“Well,” said Sherlock, and smiled. “It’s nature and nurture.”

THE END.

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