The Bang and the Clatter

by earlgreytea68

Summary

Sherlock Holmes is a pitcher and John Watson is a catcher. No, no, no, it's a baseball AU.

Notes

So, later today I'll be posting the first chapter of the Sherlock baseball AU that I wrote because I'm a lunatic, and it occurred to me that possibly a brief introduction to the game of baseball might be useful. Thank you to kedgereel1 and nolaespoir, non-baseball people who volunteered to take a look at this for me!
A Guide to Baseball

You don’t need to memorize this. I don’t even think you need to understand this. The baseball fic isn’t really about baseball, and in fact they play very little of it. Like all of my fic, it has a flimsy excuse for a plot and is really just about emotional exploration. However, the characters do sometimes get jargon-y about their sport, so I thought maybe you might be curious and like a quick crash course if you don’t know anything at all about the game. I genuinely don’t think you need to know much about it to enjoy the fic. I had never even seen a tennis match before reading “A Study in Winning” (if you haven’t read this fic yet, GO NOW AND DO SO—I’LL WAIT), but it didn’t prevent me from loving it.

Without further ado:

Baseball is a game played over the course of nine innings. During each inning, each team gets a chance to play both offense and defense. When on defense, a team sends nine players out onto the field: three in the outfield, one at each of the bases, another extra player in the infield (called a “shortstop”), a pitcher, and a catcher. The pitcher pitches a baseball from the mound sixty-feet-six-inches to home plate. His object is to get an out, either by throwing three strikes (pitches the batter could have hit) or with a ball that the batter manages to hit but is either caught cleanly before it touches the ground or is thrown to a base before the batter can make it there. The batter is trying to get on one of the bases, either by hitting the pitch or by “walking” (when the pitcher throws four “balls,” which are pitches the batter could not have hit). Every time a batter manages to circle the infield on the bases and reach home plate again, a run is scored. A team stays on offense until the team playing defense makes three outs. Once the three outs are made, the teams switch places: the same players that had been batting go out to play the field, and the players that had been playing the field now take their turn at trying to get hits and runs. Only one player hits at a time. While that player is hitting, the rest of his team sits in what’s called a dugout, except for the pitchers, who generally sit in a separate area called a bullpen (more on pitchers below).

At the end of nine innings, the team that scores the most runs wins.

There are many different types of pitches and many different types of hits that can result from these pitches. I’m not sure you need to know a whole lot of detail about these in order to enjoy the fic. Nor do you need to know much about any of the positions besides pitcher and catcher, because in this fic Sherlock Holmes is a pitcher and John Watson is a catcher. I will tell you that a “home run” is a hit that leaves the baseball stadium, and it entitles the batter to circle all of the bases (first, second, and third) to cross home plate and score a run. (There is such a thing as an inside-the-park home run. Let’s not worry about that now.) A home run clears the bases of all runners. If the bases were “loaded” when the home run was hit (meaning that there was a runner on every single base), the home run is known as a “grand slam,” and it garners a total of four runs (one for each runner).

Each baseball team generally carries what’s called a “rotation” of five pitchers, meaning that a starting pitcher starts pitching a baseball game every fifth day. A starting pitcher’s workload varies according to age and ability, but generally you want your starting pitcher to carry you through at least six innings of work. Normally, a starting pitcher gets taken out of a game when he starts to get tired. Every pitcher is different, but the general rule of thumb is that a hundred pitches is the upper limit of what you should push your starting pitcher to throw. Once the starting pitcher leaves, relief pitchers come in to relieve him, the most specialized of which is called a closing pitcher or closer. A closer only comes in when the game is very close. Most closers will only pitch the final inning. This means they throw much fewer pitches in an outing than a starting pitcher does, but they also work more frequently than every fifth day. When the relief pitchers and closing pitcher aren’t
pitching in the games, they generally sit in the bullpen to watch the game until they are needed. The bullpen is on the field, but it’s separate from the dugout where the rest of the team is sitting, because the relief pitchers can use the bullpen to “warm up” before going into the game.

Sherlock is a starting pitcher, and he’s the best one on the team. People in the fic refer to him sometimes as the “ace of the staff,” which just means that he’s the best starting pitcher they have. This is why he has the “first” slot in the pitching rotation, which really only matters for the very first game of the season (“opening day”) and the playoffs (more on playoffs later).

John is a catcher. Unlike starting pitchers, many catchers play almost every game (a baseball season is 162 games; more if you make the playoffs). Catchers catch for the entire pitching staff. This means that the best catchers have to be good at managing personalities, because they have to work very closely with all of the different pitchers on the team: the other players on the team just kind of stand around in the field while the pitcher pitches, but the catcher is supposed to be working with the pitcher to decide which type of pitch to throw, which the catcher does by way of coded finger signals flashed from the safety of his glove behind the plate (okay, now that I’m typing this up, it sounds crazy, but it’s true). Sometimes the finger signals aren’t enough and the catcher will have to ask the umpire for a conference on the mound, so that the catcher can talk to the pitcher about their strategy. The umpires in baseball make the calls, deciding balls and strikes and outs.

Because of their role in “calling the game” (as this is known), the best catchers are also very good strategists. A really good catcher is worth his weight in gold, because good pitching wins baseball games, and a happy pitching staff is the key to a good season, and a good catcher will keep your pitching staff happy, so who cares if he ever gets a hit? (I say this as if it’s settled law, but it’s really just my settled law; I think pitchers and catchers are the most important people on a baseball team, even though hitters can frequently be flashier, so I made Sherlock Holmes a pitcher.) Some pitchers are talented enough or temperamental enough or quirky enough to have their own personal catcher who only catches the games they pitch. Some baseball managers (more on managers below) like that, because it’s a day of rest for the team’s regular catcher.

Major League Baseball is a sport played by twenty-six professional teams divided between two leagues: National and American. Each league has three geographic divisions (East, Central, West). The goal of the season is to win your division, which then propels you into playoffs, which culminate in a World Series. Baseball playoffs take place during the month of October and are commonly referred to as “October baseball” or even just “October” throughout the sport (and throughout the fic; if someone’s talking about “making October,” it means they want to make the playoffs). Before last year, each league also sent a “wild card” team to the playoffs. Last year, some new, complicated nonsense was instituted. I’ve ignored it in this fic. I’m following the old, simpler “one wild card team from each league” version. The “wild card” is the team with the league’s best record that nevertheless failed to win a division and so wouldn’t have made the playoffs otherwise.

The playoffs are three rounds that go like this: best of five (so first team to win three games advances to the next round); best of seven (so first team to win four games advances to the next round); best of seven (so first team to win four games wins the World Series).

Before reaching October, the baseball season starts with spring training, either in Florida or Arizona (in my fic it’s Arizona). This consists of the team getting together and playing a bunch of games that don’t count for anything, just to see how players are progressing and maturing and what the regular season roster should look like. Pitchers and catchers report to spring training first.

Some other points that you might like to know for the fic:
• Each team has an owner (or group of owners). Each team also has a general manager, or GM. The GM of the team is the guy who wears business suits and sits in the office doing the wheeling-and-dealing of the contracts and trade negotiations to get players. Each team also has a manager, who is very different from the GM. The manager of the baseball team wears a uniform and is basically the team’s coach. The manager sits in the dugout during the game and makes strategic calls about gameplay. The manager will decide, for instance, when a starting pitcher should be pulled in favor of a relief pitcher, in consultation with the pitcher, the catcher, and the team’s pitching coach, whose job is to take care of the pitching staff.

• Every major league baseball team has an affiliated “farm system” or “minor league teams.” These don’t play much of a role in the fic, but I think they get mentioned once or twice. Minor league teams are where the players play who aren’t quite ready for major league yet (think “Bull Durham,” if you’ve seen that movie).

• There is one difference between the American League and the National League. In the National League, the exact same players bat and play the field. In the American League, the pitcher doesn’t bat; he is replaced in the batting order by a “designated hitter” or “DH.” People will quarrel about this rule and what it means for the way the game is played, but there’s no reason to get into all that now. Its relevance to the fic is that I chose to put Sherlock and John in a National League team, because I wanted Sherlock to have to bat.

• Every year, in the middle of the baseball season, the two leagues play each other in an All-Star Game. The starting roster of the All-Star Game is voted on by the public (save for the starting pitcher, who is selected by the All-Star Game manager). The All-Star Game always takes place on a Tuesday. There are no games on the Monday before or the Wednesday following. This is referred to as “the All-Star break” or even just “the break” sometimes, because otherwise there is always at least one baseball game played every day from April until October. In fact, the days before and after the All-Star Game are the only days when no professional sports are played in the United States of America <-- fun fact. The night before the All-Star Game is the Home Run Derby, which is just a ridiculous excuse to watch good batters hit a lot of home runs. It’s not serious and doesn’t really mean anything and the players seem to treat it like a big, informal party.

• Baseball likes to hand out awards. The ones mentioned most often in this fic are MVP (Most Valuable Player), which is awarded annually to one player in each league and also awarded to a player on the winning team of the All-Star Game and each round of the playoffs, and the Cy Young Award, which is awarded annually to the best pitcher in each league. Winning either is a huge deal.

• I put John and Sherlock on a fictional team, because I found it easier. In the fic, their team is an “expansion” team, meaning a new team with no history, starting from scratch. John waives a no-trade provision in order to go to the new team. Not a huge story point, but in case you were wondering, it just means that John had built into his contract that he couldn’t be traded to another team without his permission. Trades are a big deal in baseball, which has a “trade deadline” built into the season, at the end of July. Trades are relatively easy to pull off before the deadline, they’re just a matter of negotiation. After the deadline, it gets much harder, because the players being traded have to clear “waivers.” This is complicated and not important. I think all you really need to know is that it gets harder to trade for a player after July.

• Baseball is a game of statistics. The characters don’t talk about them a whole lot, because I’m lazy, but every once in a while someone might mention Sherlock’s ERA or John’s batting average. I don’t think you really need to know what these are, but, in case you’re wondering, an ERA is an Earned Run Average. It’s calculated by dividing the number of runs scored while a pitcher is pitching by the number of innings the pitcher pitched. That gives you the average number of runs
scored for every nine innings a pitcher pitches, or his Earned Run Average (the “earned” has to do with the concept of “errors,” meaning it doesn’t count toward the pitcher’s ERA if the players behind him make mistakes on the field). The lower the ERA, the better (under three is very, very good; under two is ridiculous; under one is virtually unheard of). A batting average is calculated by dividing the number of hits a batter has by the number of times the batter has been up to bat. That provides you the percentage of time that a batter gets a hit. The batting average should be right around the .300 range. Unlike an ERA, the higher a batting average, the better. The highest batting average on record (for a season) was .406, to give you an idea of the scale of batting averages.

• For all that baseball is a game of statistics, baseball is a game of poetry, too. There are people who will say, rightly, that baseball is a slow game, that it drags, that not a lot happens. For many of us, that is its charm. It is a game with time for a lot of decisions to be made in a very thoughtful fashion, because it moves so slowly, and many people find poetry in the depths of the strategy. It is also a game with a lot of downtime, which makes it surprisingly fun to be in the field for it, because you can catch up with friends and run to get food without missing much. The best part of baseball, for me, is that its pace echoes the laziness of a long summer day—perfect, because that is when baseball is played. Baseball seems to be more popular in parts of the U.S. with four distinct seasons, and I am convinced it’s because baseball follows the rhythm of the seasons themselves: It begins with the hope of spring, when everything is fresh and new, and it keeps us company through the height of the summer, and it goes away again when the chill nips the air. John Watson really, genuinely loves the romance of baseball. Hopefully, by the end of this fic, you’ll catch a whiff of it. :-}
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

So. Here it is. The baseball AU. Because, yes, I thought the fandom was simply crying out for one of these. (No, this is not an April Fools’ joke.)

I do not think you need to know much about baseball to enjoy this fic. Let's face it, it's basically Sherlock Holmes and John Watson falling in love, which is something I'm apparently addicted to writing. However, if you'd like a brief primer, here's A Guide to Baseball. I will provide a different word of warning, though: I played around in this fic with family relationships, because that is the fun of writing a bunch of AUs, which means that Mycroft is less sympathetic in this fic than I usually make him. So, just, be forewarned. It was purposeful on my part. I wanted to see if I could do it.

Many, many thanks to arctacuda, not only for the beta but for writing most of this fic with me during a Red Sox game last year. Thanks also to the unknown people who sit around my season ticket seats, who had to put up with a debate on what Sherlock Holmes's at-bat music would be. Finally, this fic owes an unavoidable debt to jupiter_ash, whose brilliant "A Study in Winning" gave me the idea that a sports AU in this fandom could work.

The title is from U2's "Stay (Faraway, So Close)," which was on pretty much constant repeat during the writing of this fic: Three o'clock in the morning / It's quiet and there's no one around / Just the bang and the clatter / As an angel runs to ground. It has nothing to do with baseball. I just couldn't handle a pun, and I liked these lines too much not to use them. They seem to suit the fic to me, for reasons I can't quite articulate. Hopefully you eventually agree!

Happy Opening Day, everyone! The Red Sox beat the Yankees and everything! :-)

Chapter One

When his last contract had been negotiated, John Watson had assumed it was going to be the last contract of his life. He had insisted on a no-trade clause because he hadn’t imagined wanting to leave the team, start over somewhere else.

He couldn’t believe he was sitting on his patio looking out over the golf course, fairly sure that he was going to agree to the trade.

“Look, it’s probably going to be your last season, right?” said Mike. His contract was up next year, and they both knew there would be no more. “I mean, it’s up to you. It’s your call, you can just sit and collect the salary and—”

“Not play?” John interrupted, tightly. “I’ll sit and collect the salary from the bench in the dugout.” A foursome was putting on the nearest green. John watched a bloke in a garish neon yellow hat line up a terrible shot.

“There are worse ways to earn five million dollars, Doc,” Mike told him, forcing joviality into his
voice, as if this were all a big joke.

John bristled but told himself it wasn’t Mike’s fault. Mike was doing the best he could with a client who was washed up, had decidedly seen better days. John looked down at his trembling hand, flexed it, and tried to will it still. It was odd, most days his shoulder barely bothered him, and that was where the injury had been. It was the rest of it that he couldn’t shake, the tremor in his hand, the abrupt stiffness that could come over his leg sometimes when he rose from a crouch to try to gun down a runner at second.

He could stay where he was. It would be comfortable. Mike was right. He’d earn five million dollars with no effort and no expectation. The GM would write it off. Too-long contracts were made all the time. The payment of the last year was really considered deferred payment for your productive years, and John had had some pretty dazzling productive years. There might be grumbling from the fans, but he was generally well-liked from the goodwill he’d built up in his prime, and a catcher always had wisdom to impart to the next generation cycling in. A catcher could earn his keep just from sharing what he’d learned about calling a game.

“But you’d play in Austin,” Mike said, breaking into his thoughts. “It’s a new team, with a young pitching staff. They need a catcher like you. They need a player like you.”

“A troublemaker?” John asked, trying to make it sound light, but it did sound a bit tight and bitter to him. He had never been difficult, in his opinion. He had simply never suffered fools lightly, he didn’t care how much more money they made. The fans might have loved him, but he had teammates who were less convinced. Not the good teammates, but still.

“You are my second client today to describe yourself that way. Incidentally, the other one’s going to Austin, too.”

John looked at Mike for the first time, away from the terrible putting happening on the green. The sun was setting behind Mike, he had to squint to see him, and a breeze had kicked up. There might be a storm before nightfall, John thought. “Holmes?” he guessed. The signing had been splashy and attention-grabbing, meant to aggressively push the new team onto the map. John had seen him pitch, of course, from the opposite dugout. He had even faced him once or twice, when he’d been tossed into a game unceremoniously. They had not been pleasant experiences, those at-bats. Not from the batter’s perspective. From the catcher’s perspective, they had been things of great beauty. John had had great envy for the catcher, watching his series of commands translate into that gorgeous curve breaking over the plate, chasing itself out of the strike zone but taking the batter’s helpless swing with it. He hadn’t thought about Holmes, when Mike had mentioned Austin. He should have thought about him right away. Stupid. “What’s he like?” John had never met him. Holmes had a reputation for aloofness. He was a cool, precise pitcher and, apparently, a cool, precise man.

Mike shrugged. “Go to Austin,” he suggested, and took a swig from his beer bottle. “Find out.”

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Greg Lestrade had the harried look that John had never seen a major league baseball manager without. Everything about him was wrinkled and rumpled and rushed, but he also seemed extremely affable and good-natured and he welcomed John with a firm handshake. His office was full of half-empty boxes, including those on the guest chair, and they both looked at it, Greg looking rueful.

“Settling in?” John asked, blandly, as he leaned against the wall, because Greg was new to Austin, too.
Greg sent him a smile that was both sincere and stressed. “Trying to, anyway. How about you? Found a place yet?”

“Not yet,” John admitted. “Living out of a hotel room at the moment. Not a big deal, not like I’m not used to living out of hotel rooms.”

“Yeah, but houses are much better. Homier. Being houses. You need a realtor.”

“I have one, but we’re focusing on Austin. Spring training is just… Seems like a lot of effort to find an entire house.”

“You can’t possibly intend to live out of a hotel room for all of spring training. I mean, look at you, you’re a whole week early.”

“I wanted to check it out. Get comfortable. Not be jetlagged when I meet everybody.”

Greg looked him over. His gaze was kind but it was also penetrating, and John knew he was assessing. His GM had gone out and gotten him a catcher, a veteran who would know how to handle his young pitching staff, presumably, but with a nagging injury, so how many games would he actually be able to call for them? They’d met before, in vague, casual passing, but John was sure Greg had pulled in as much intelligence as he could about him. How good is he, really? Forget about his hitting, those days are passed, what’s he going to do with the staff?

“Are you spying?” Greg asked, finally, folding his arms and asking the question like it was a teasing joke.

“Spying?” John echoed.

“You know, reading up on your pitchers and stuff.”

“Oh. No, not really. I prefer to do that in person.”

“You could get started, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sherlock’s here early, too. He is spying, reading up on everybody. He loves that stuff. He uses stats to make deductions. It’s quite something to see.”

“Are you…friends then?” ventured John.

“No. I’m the only manager he’s ever had, yes. And he followed me here, yes. But that’s because he doesn’t like, as he told me, having to train new idiots, and I’ve gotten to the point where I’ll do. His words.”

“He sounds charming,” remarked John, dryly.

Greg smiled. “Sherlock Holmes is a great baseball player. And someday, if we’re very, very lucky, he might even be a good man. Anyway, don’t be surprised if you run into him while you’re wandering around the stadium. He might like you, actually. Fellow Brit. You could, I don’t know, go watch soccer together or something. It’s not like there’s a ton of you in baseball.”

“There are none of us in baseball,” John corrected. “And I’m not really British, I’ve lived here since I was 14. England is a vague memory.”

“Still got the accent,” Greg said, with a shrug.
No, he didn’t. According to his British mother, he lost the accent more with each passing day. But John thought it was a lost cause. The curiosity of his British-ness got talked about almost more than his batting average, really. He wondered if Sherlock had the same problem. Probably worse, since Sherlock hadn’t lived in America at all until he had started playing baseball.

“Well,” remarked John, “if I see him, I’ll ask him if he cares for a spot of fox-hunting.”

“Really?” asked Greg.

John rolled his eyes a bit. “No. Not really.”

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Austin had inherited the spring training complex from the team it had replaced. There were bits of it that were shabby, displaying the former owner’s indifference for the team, but Martha Hudson, the brand new principle owner of Austin, had made some repairs. Mostly to the field, which John appreciated, because who cared what the clubhouse looked like if the field was rutted and subpar.

John didn’t venture out onto the field proper. He leaned against the wall in front of the seats behind home plate and crossed his arms and regarded his view, over home, sixty feet six inches to the gentle rise of the pitchers’ mound, and sixty-six feet nine inches beyond that the square of second base gleaming white against the dark brown dirt it was sitting in. He knew that view so well, better than anything else in his life, much better, he admitted, than he knew even himself. So many things he was supposed to understand were an absolute muddle to him, but the view from behind home plate was crystal clear. He saw it in his sleep. John felt like he had spent his entire life on baseball fields. Home plate was so aptly named for him that he almost ached with it. He walked cautiously over to it, crouched behind it, looked at the view to the pitchers’ mound again, and frowned at the twinge in his leg, which did nothing but remind him that it was the last time he was going to show up to spring training with a season as a player ahead of him, that he was going to need to find another home and he had no idea what that might be.

He stood with more difficulty than he liked and left the field behind him, walked through the dugout and through to the clubhouse, which he had expected to be deserted by this time, except that it wasn’t. What it was was…colonized. John could think of no better word for it. There were piles of papers scattered through practically the entire room, and, perched on the back of an armchair with his long, elegant pitcher’s fingers steepled against his mouth, was the unmistakable figure of Sherlock Holmes. He did not look up when John entered the room, staring at a random pile of papers a little ways in front of him, oddly gathered in on himself. When he pitched, he was long and lithe and slender, but sitting in the armchair, he looked as if he would rather be gathered into a tight ball.

John paused, uncertain. Had he just interrupted something? He had the feeling he had but he wasn’t sure what, since Sherlock was just sitting there. And what should he do? Just leave? Introduce himself? Try to make small talk? Sherlock had a reputation for disliking small talk. Well, for disliking anything other than baseball, really. The season before, an anonymous teammate had given a sound bite to a reporter that had been unavoidable. You always know where you stand with Sherlock Holmes, because he doesn’t like anyone.

“Can I borrow your phone? There’s no signal on mine.”

John blinked in surprise. Sherlock had clearly spoken, but he still hadn’t looked at him. John looked from his figure on the chair, both still and restless all at once, to the landline telephone sitting right next to him on the table.
“What’s wrong with the landline?” John asked.

“I prefer to text.”

John fished his cell phone out of his pocket, not really seeing a way not to without coming across as unbearably rude, and glanced at it. He had a signal. He held it up. Sherlock held out a hand. Apparently he had no intention of budging from his perch on the armchair. John considered, then sighed and walked across the clubhouse to him, giving him his phone.

“Thank you,” said Sherlock, with the air of having accepted something he was owed anyway. His fingers flew over the keys, texting with an ease John could never hope to match. Honestly, John hated the phone. Harry had insisted he buy it, saying he had to get into the modern age.

John stood in awkward silence and thought maybe he ought to introduce himself. “I’m—”

“John Watson, yes, I know. Born in Northumberland, British mother, American father. Moved to Florida at the age of 14. Star catcher for your ‘high school,’ state championship in your last year. Successful ‘college’ career, as they say here, but decided against graduating in favor of your professional baseball career, having been drafted. Spent one year in the minors before being called up and establishing yourself quickly as an ace caller of games. Nicknamed ‘Doctor’ for your reputed ability to fix whatever ails a pitcher. You intend to retire after this year. And your injuries are primarily psychosomatic. There.” Sherlock handed him back his phone. “That covered most of it, didn’t it?”

John took the phone a bit dazedly. “How…”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous.” Sherlock leaped lightly off the armchair, looking much more like the pitcher John had seen, tall and graceful, all lean lines. Perched on the armchair, he had seemed very young, but now, clad in most of what was clearly an expensive suit, he seemed gathered and poised, like he was two seconds away from a fastball down the middle. “Most of it was Wikipedia.”

“You’ve been reading up on me?” John didn’t know whether that was flattering or—he considered the piles of paper all over the clubhouse—merely what Sherlock did. He thought of Greg saying that Sherlock liked spying.

“You intend to try to tell me how to pitch a game, so yes, I’ve been reading up on you.” Sherlock’s tone was dry and, underneath, sharp. A bit of a challenge there. John looked at him, wondering if he was one of those pitchers who thought he knew better than everyone. Then he considered everything he’d always heard about Sherlock Holmes and said to himself, Of course he is, don’t be an idiot. “Haven’t you been reading up on me?” Sherlock continued.

“No,” John said, honestly.

Sherlock made a face like he doubted John’s intelligence. He had an expressive face, but John had the impression that that was a red herring, a distraction, because Sherlock’s eyes were striking and pale and impossible to read. Whatever Sherlock was thinking, you didn’t know, and John had the impression that he was using the rest of his face to lull you into a false sense of security that you did know.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter,” Sherlock remarked, moving past him toward what was clearly his suit coat, thrown over one of the room’s other chairs, “as you shan’t be catching me.”

John turned to keep him in sight. “What are you talking about? Of course I’ll be catching you.”
Sherlock gave him a withering glare and pulled on the coat, which stretched the well-tailored white shirt he was wearing, buttons straining a bit. What the hell, thought John. That was practically indecent.

He realized suddenly that he was staring and hastily lifted his eyes. Sherlock’s gaze was narrow, his mouth pursed. Great, thought John. Fifteen years of hiding his sexuality, and he’d managed to go and give himself away to the most observant player in the league.

“How did you know about the last season thing?” John asked in order to hastily change the topic of conversation.

Sherlock’s eyes didn’t lose their considering glint, but he buttoned his suit coat and answered the question. “You’re in the last year of your contract. Past your prime to negotiate another big contract. And you waived a no-trade clause to come here.”

“Maybe I’m trying to start over.”

“Maybe. I think you’re trying to go out on your terms. You’re a proud man, that much is obvious. You’ll not beg, you’ll not skimp and save and try to squeeze one more year out of it. You’ve had a good career, a respectable career, and you want to go out on a high note, as much as possible, legacy intact. Brand new team, brand new pitching staff assembled who could use your expertise. And you just spent an hour staring at a baseball field looking soppy. So odds are: retirement. You’re not sitting down.”

“What?” John asked, thrown.

“You’re not sitting down. So your leg. Not bothering you.”

John glanced down. “It doesn’t bother me all the time.”

“Psychosomatic,” said Sherlock, dismissively, with a little shrug.

John bristled. Young players always thought older players’ injuries were all in their heads. Their bodies still did exactly what they wanted them to do; the talent was so overwhelming it was like a constant companion, it never let you down. Until the day when it did and the fear squeezed your heart because you knew it ended with you looking sopply at a baseball field for an hour and trying to figure out what you might be without the game you’d built your life around. “Let’s have this discussion again the first time you go 120 pitches and wake up with a dead arm.”

Sherlock smiled tightly. “I won’t do that.”

“Of course you won’t,” John agreed, mockingly, and folded his arms. “Because you’ve got some sort of magical elixir of youth?”

“No, because I’m clever. Well.” Sherlock looked pointedly at his watch. “I think this meeting has gone exceedingly well, don’t you? Your pile is that one over there.” Sherlock pointed. “In case you’re curious and want to kill time before heading back to your hotel. I’ve got a date I really can’t miss.”

John frowned. “How do you know about the hotel?”

“Ta,” said Sherlock, with a jaunty little wave and a wink.

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John considered his laptop and decided that he was going to feel like an idiot whether he did look up Sherlock Holmes or he didn’t look up Sherlock Holmes, so he might as well look him up.

Sherlock’s Wikipedia entry was loaded with dazzling stats—his ERA and WHIP and OBA, all so low that John tried to consider if he’d ever caught someone so low across the board; his winning percentage, which was equally impressively high—and with anecdotes from his career, including last year’s All Star Game when he’d reportedly started an infamous brawl in a bar the night before the game that had put the league’s star home run hitter, Moran, out of commission for two months. There had been conflicting reports about what had happened in that bar, with Moriarty, the league’s premiere closer, being the primary finger-pointer. Sherlock had stayed completely silent, which hadn’t helped matters. It had, however, given him an incongruous bad-boy reputation at odds with the rest of him, and had built up a loyal female following who called themselves Sherlock’s Sweeties. John thought that name was ridiculous, but he supposed the alternative was Holmes’s Hos and that was even more ridiculous.

John found himself watching a YouTube clip of a *SportsCenter* segment studying the Sherlock Holmes phenomenon in the weeks after the All Star Game. He had watched the segment at the time, but he had never thought he’d catch for Sherlock Holmes and so had had no interest in the oddities of his personal life. He watched the Sherlock’s Sweeties segment with interest now, though. Sherlock had Wagner played before his at-bats, and the stadium came to be filled with women in dramatic horned helmets with fake blond plaits. Intercut with clips of Sherlock pitching were brief sound bites from semi-hysterical women. “His ERA’s been climbing a bit in August, do you think it’s fatigue?” the reporter asked one of the women. “His mouth is pure sex,” the woman replied, a non sequitur if ever John had heard one, but then the segment switched to a close-up profile of Sherlock facing down a batter. His lower lip was caught between his teeth as he frowned in concentration and the camera panned slowly out, capturing all of him as he coiled into leashed energy and then flung the ball toward home, every angle of his body perfectly in place as he settled and watched the pitch find its way over the plate. The camera zoomed in again to Sherlock’s face, his mouth this time curved into a self-satisfied smile, and John decided that the woman’s comment was not a non sequitur at all. Sherlock Holmes’s mouth was pure sex, that could never be a non sequitur, and John probably shouldn’t be thinking about ways to knock that smugness out of it. Or ways to determine if the smugness was deserved.

John stopped the video and decided against watching any more videos of Sherlock pitching because that way lay madness. He turned away from his professional career altogether and tried to find something about where he’d come from, but his Wikipedia entry was bare bones, almost as if someone had wiped it clean. John had worked very hard to keep his personal life off the Internet—very hard, out of necessity—and whoever Sherlock had working on his behalf to do the same was damn good, he had to admit. It didn’t even have a place of birth listed for Sherlock beyond “England.” He had shown up in America at the age of 18, it claimed, out of nowhere, and he’d talked his way into a spot on a minor league team, where he’d blown everyone away so much that he’d been called up within six weeks. That had been six years ago. He had entered free agency with a huge splash and then surprised everyone by signing with Austin. It was a nice contract, but not a record-breaking contract, and, considering he was a pitcher on the brink of his best years, he could have looked for a record-breaking contract. Whatever Greg might say, John thought Sherlock’s relationship with his manager was probably fairly important, based on his career decisions.

Sherlock had, after his first season, insisted on a personal catcher, Victor Trevor, who caught for no one else on the pitching staff. Trevor was an unremarkable catcher. He was young, like Sherlock, and John didn’t know him very well, but he’d heard through the grapevine that Trevor’s best feature in Sherlock’s eyes was that he let Sherlock do whatever he wanted. Trevor had stayed put though, and, judging from Sherlock’s comments, he was in the market for a new personal catcher and had no intention of being caught by John like the rest of the pitching staff.
John considered, closing his laptop. If Sherlock wanted a personal catcher, odds were he’d get one. He was the staff’s ace, and it wouldn’t be a surprising request, certainly not to Greg, who’d been his manager his entire career. John wasn’t sure what the point would be in fighting against that. He could use a day off every five days, honestly, and Sherlock was an excellent pitcher, he could clearly call his own games. Why not just let him do it? Why start a fight with a brand new team right away? *Troublemaker,* he heard in his head, and sighed. Why not lay low? Work with the people who needed his help and let Sherlock and his mouth of pure sex and his way too tight shirts keep to himself.

Because Sherlock Holmes was an exceptional pitcher who was a constant also-ran for all of the very best of baseball’s honors. He had never won a Cy Young, never mind an MVP award. He had never even started the All-Star Game. He was brilliant, but he wasn’t quite all the way there yet, John thought. There was something he was missing, John thought.
Chapter Three

Chapter Two

Sherlock wasn’t in the clubhouse when John got there the following day. John confessed to being a bit disappointed. Over the course of one meeting and his Wikipedia research, Sherlock had become fascinating to John.

It occurred to John that Sherlock should always have been fascinating to him. The fact that he hadn’t been paying much attention to the pitcher everybody else in baseball was talking about was an indication to him of how much his head had been out of the game the past couple of seasons. What good was it knowing there were blindingly brilliant pitchers out there if you had a bad leg and were never going to catch a game for them?

Now he was on Sherlock Holmes’s team, and he wasn’t sure he was going to relinquish catching him without a fight. He had woken up that morning feeling more determined about that than he had about anything else in ages. Sherlock Holmes was too good a pitcher for him to just shrug his shoulders at, as if catching for him didn’t matter. Sherlock Holmes was a wet dream of a pitcher. Although it was probably best not to think of him in exactly those terms.

John went through the motions of his usual workout, barely noticing what he was doing because his mind was on Sherlock, on how to convince him, and whether to try to convince him or just go to Greg. Would that infuriate Sherlock to such a degree that they would be enemies? Sherlock was young, at the top of his game, charismatic if he felt like making the effort. John was sure he could easily lead the pitching staff, turn them against John, and then every single game he tried to call would be an endless war. It would be much better if he could get Sherlock to trust him.

John headed back toward his locker, intending to grab a fresh towel to bring to the shower with him, and couldn’t help the fact that he froze when the object of all his thoughts that morning turned out to be in the clubhouse. He wasn’t dressed in a sharp, expensive suit. He was, in fact, wearing baseball clothes and a glove in which a baseball was nestled, and he was standing in front of his locker looking oddly off-kilter.

Which gave John the confidence to tilt his head at him and say, curiously, “Are you throwing?”

“Just a few,” Sherlock replied, with forced casualness.

John lifted his eyebrows and glanced pointedly around the clubhouse because there was no one else there to catch for him.

“All right,” Sherlock snapped. “Fine, I was hoping you might feel like catching.”

John tried not to look amused. From the darkening glower on Sherlock’s face, he didn’t think he was accomplishing it. “You could’ve just asked Greg to get you a practice catcher.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Sherlock replied, impatiently. “You know I’m not supposed to be throwing, so I couldn’t have asked. And you call him Greg? Why?”

John paused in tousling his sweat-damp hair with a towel. “That’s his name.”

Sherlock seemed to absorb that then lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “Hurry up,” he said.

“I haven’t said I’ll do it.”
“Oh, stop it. Of course you’ll do it. You’re desperate to catch me.”

This annoyed John. “Am I?”

“Yes,” Sherlock replied, simply, as if it were just a truth of the universe.

And since it was a truth of the universe, John decided there was nothing he could say in response. “Greg’s going to know you’re throwing, you know. Almost immediately.”

“I’m not throwing many. Just a few. By the time he gets down to the field, we’ll be done.”

“So I don’t need to change.”

“No. Let’s go.” Sherlock, apparently deciding the conversation was over, flattened his head of curls with a baseball cap and headed out of the clubhouse.

John grabbed his own baseball cap and smashed it onto his head, then grabbed his glove and jogged after Sherlock. “Do you want me to—” John began, walking over behind home plate.

“Just catch the ball,” Sherlock clipped out at him.

John made a face at Sherlock’s back as he headed toward the pitcher’s mound, then said, “Fine,” and dropped into a crouch. It was a little bit ridiculous, not being sure whether Sherlock wanted him to set up inside or outside, high or low, whether he was in store for a fastball or a curveball or a slider or another type of pitch entirely. And John had an idea that most of this was a test that he needed to pass.

Sherlock stood on the rubber. He lifted his glove, his face half-hidden behind it and his hand settling in to grip the baseball. There was an unnatural calmness to him suddenly, like a deep inhalation, and John found himself holding his breath. Then Sherlock kicked into a flurry of controlled, well-practiced motion, and the ball collided with John’s glove with a satisfying thump. John hadn’t even needed to move an inch. Straight down the middle fastball, he thought. Impressive velocity, but it would have been knocked out of the park.

John threw it back without comment, and, testing, nudged his glove along the outside edge. Sherlock executed a stunningly beautiful slider that drifted exactly into his glove. Once again, John didn’t have to move a muscle. The third pitch was a dramatic curveball, in the dirt, nowhere near John’s glove, but John felt like that had been a test, too, to see if he could actually catch a ball. The fourth pitch was another quick fastball, this one well off the inside corner, and John again had the sense that Sherlock had done that on purpose. Four pitches in, and John could tell from the precise way that Sherlock moved when he pitched that he must seldom make mistakes. Half of baseball was poetry; Sherlock, though a lovely sight to behold, was clearly working with the other half of baseball that was science.

Sherlock’s tenth pitch was a slightly messy changeup. Messy only in comparison to his other pitches. John had studied Sherlock’s repertoire. The changeup was by far his weakest pitch, although John thought it not unlikely Sherlock exaggerated his poorness with the pitch in order to catch batters unaware with perfect changeups every so often.

“That’s ten,” John said, standing up, but Sherlock had already stepped off the rubber.

He nodded once, brusquely. “Yes. That was good.” He looked preoccupied.

John hazarded a guess. “Did you figure it out?”
Sherlock looked surprised. “Figure what out?”

“You needed to think about something, so you threw a few pitches to clear your head. So did you figure it out? Does it have to do with that text you sent from my phone, about ‘messy delivery concerns’ and ‘lack of improvisational skill’?”

A frown flickered over Sherlock’s features. He looked as if he were debating whether or not to chide John for looking at a text that he had, after all, sent from John’s phone. John was unrepentant. He should have deleted it if he was that concerned about it.

They were in the clubhouse by now. Sherlock had removed his cap immediately and was tousling at his hair. John thought there must be a streak of vanity there. He recalled the absurdly expensive and well-tailored suit. Maybe more than a streak.

Before Sherlock could respond to John’s question, a woman’s voice called out, “Yoohoo!”

John started in surprised, looking toward the doorway of the clubhouse, through which entered an older woman dressed in a purple dress that looked like it could have been decades old. She caught sight of Sherlock and an unmistakable look of delight lit up her features.

“Sherlock, dear!” she exclaimed, and swooped upon him with a hug. John, astonished, watched Sherlock return the hug, even brush a kiss over her cheek. “Mr. Lestrade said you would be down here because you were pitching when you weren’t supposed to, naughty boy.” She swatted at him playfully then finally noticed John. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “I didn’t mean to interrupt!”

“Mrs. Hudson,” said Sherlock, “have you met Doctor Watson? He’s a catcher.”

“John, please,” John corrected. “And I’m the catcher.” He gave Sherlock a brief, pointed look before gallantly pressing a kiss to Mrs. Hudson’s hand.

Mrs. Hudson fluttered a bit, flustered. “So lovely to meet you in person.”

“Mrs. Hudson owns the team,” explained Sherlock.

John knew that. She’d sent him a gift basket after the trade had been executed with a note apologizing for not being there in person, and then they had spoken briefly over the phone when he called to thank her. What he was less sure about was how well Mrs. Hudson seemed to know Sherlock. And he wasn’t sure how to broach the topic. So how do you two know each other? Seemed a bit blunt. He should have spied on the new owners after spying on Sherlock last night but it was part of how far out-of-touch he’d let himself grow with baseball, that he had no idea if Martha Hudson had been connected with Sherlock’s previous team. Judging from the current warmth between them, John thought she must have been.

At any rate, it seemed obvious to John that he was intruding upon what Mrs. Hudson had intended to be a private conversation. “I’m going to take a shower,” he said, grabbing his towel. “It was nice to meet you face-to-face,” he told Mrs. Hudson, politely.

She smiled at him warmly as he moved past her.

The shower, thought John, could be a bit hotter, but it still felt heavenly. John stood under the spray and closed his eyes and replayed Sherlock’s pitches. He was a gorgeous pitcher, thought John. Catching for a pitcher during practice was always only a shadow of a game situation. The thought of catching Sherlock in a game, of shaping all that talent into a series of beautiful outs, into a win that would be a work of art, made John itch for baseball to start in earnest. It hadn’t occurred to him until that moment how much he had stopped looking forward to baseball season.
John had not expected Sherlock to still be in the clubhouse when he got out of the shower. But he was, lounging deep in the armchair he’d been sitting on the day before, dressed in another sharp suit. The shirt was purple this time, stunning against the pale cast of his skin, and John was suddenly very, very glad he’d thought to wrap a towel around his hips.

“Did you shower?” he asked, abruptly self-conscious. Everything had been completely on the up-and-up, but still. The whole thing was inconvenient. All these years of playing baseball, he had never once been attracted to a teammate.

“I didn’t need to. That was ten pitches, it was nothing, didn’t even break a sweat. Are you busy?”

“I’m…” John wasn’t sure what the question was. “Well, I’m not dressed.”


“What are you proposing?”

“A situation I’d like your input on. Since you already know what I said in my text yesterday.”

“You sent it from my phone. You should have bloody deleted it if you’re so clever.” The bloody in the sentence surprised him. Sherlock’s accent must have been reviving latent Britishness in him, thought John. His mother was going to be well pleased.

Sherlock lifted his eyebrows, too, but said nothing about that. “Don’t come if it’s not convenient. Actually, no, come anyway, even if it’s inconvenient.”

John shook his head and tried to pretend he wasn’t intrigued beyond belief. And, anyway, he wasn’t busy. “Fine, I’ll come along.”

“Excellent,” said Sherlock, and settled into his chair.

John paused in front of his locker, feeling foolish. “Do you mind?” he asked.

Sherlock looked genuinely surprised. His eyes flickered down the length of John’s body, as if taking in his relative nakedness for the first time. That did wonders for the ego, thought John, dryly. Not that he liked being ogled, but, well, it was nice every once in a while. “Oh. I suppose.”

Sherlock stood. “If you’d rather, I’ll wait for you in my car.”

Sherlock walked out of the clubhouse. John watched him go, fancying that you could tell just from his walk what sort of fabulous pitcher he was. Then he took a deep breath, thought, John, you are losing your bloody mind, then thought, Oh my God, stop it with the “bloody” nonsense, then, But he is bloody hot, isn’t he?, and then, Bloody hell, and reached for his clothing.

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Naturally, Sherlock’s car was an Aston Martin convertible, a sleek, liquid silver color, and Sherlock was sitting in the driver’s seat looking for all the world like it was not a remarkable car at all. John had to admit that people who looked like Sherlock did look like they should be driving Aston Martin convertibles.

He paused by the passenger seat door. “You’ve got a DB9? Seriously?”

Sherlock tipped his head down so he could make eye contact with John over his sunglasses, his pale gaze as striking and disconcerting as it always was. “And you know exactly what a DB9 is, clearly, so stop throwing stones from your glass house and get in.”
John couldn’t suppress the amused twitch of his lips, and he wished he was more confident of his ability to leap over the door into the seat. He reminded himself he was 35 and had not exactly been easy on his body throughout his life, and opened the door to slide in like a proper elderly person. “I didn’t peg you for the Queen and country type,” John remarked, as Sherlock shifted the car into drive. Manual transmission, John noticed. Very British indeed.

“I’m not,” Sherlock replied. “That’s a terrible deduction.”

“British car,” John pointed out.

“Best car,” Sherlock responded, with a glance in John’s direction, and then he turned his attention to the road ahead of him and gunned it.

John reached instinctively for the seatbelt he hadn’t yet fastened, watching in something that was half-fascination and half-terror as Sherlock kept accelerating, coaxing the car up its gears. They were racing toward a red light with a line of cars, and John looked from it to Sherlock’s hand, settled confidently and casually on his gearbox. John looked back at the approaching line of cars, almost thought to say something, bit his tongue, and Sherlock decelerated finally, moving smoothly back down the gears.

“Was that to teach me some sort of lesson?” John asked, a little bit breathless and possibly a lot aroused.

“No, that was driving,” Sherlock answered, shortly.

“Ah. My mistake. You know, for a pitcher who’s not terribly showy, you make up for it off the field.”

Sherlock frowned out his windshield. “I’m not a showy pitcher?”

“I didn’t mean it as an insult. You’re a brilliant pitcher, just not in the way crowds usually notice. You don’t strike a lot of people out.”

Sherlock snorted disdainfully. “The strikeout is not always the best approach for a pitcher to take toward a batter.”

“I know that.”

“And people are idiots. I don’t care what people think.”

John wasn’t sure if he believed him or not. He wanted to, but in his experience there was no one in the world who didn’t care about what anyone thought. Surely Sherlock had someone he wished to impress. He dropped the subject. “So where are we going?”

“You’re a doctor.”

John paused. “You know I’m not actually a doctor, right?”

“John, I think it would make future conversation between us much easier if you would grasp the fact that I’m a genius.”

Sherlock announced it like a flat truth. “Oh,” said John, wryly. “Would it?”

“Yes. I am aware you are not a medical doctor. You have a reputation for being adept at diagnosing pitchers.”
“Yes,” agreed John, slowly, and ran over every pitch Sherlock had thrown, trying to find any issues. “Are you…” He trailed off, unsure how to even phrase that question. If that was how Sherlock threw when he was off, John didn’t know what to make of him.

“No me,” Sherlock clipped out, impatiently, “another pitcher. I thought you might wish to give your professional opinion.”

“Okay,” said John, but he still wasn’t entirely sure what Sherlock was talking about.

They lapsed into silence. Sherlock drove, well, flashily, but John supposed that matched his car. John wished the whole thing was annoying instead of ridiculously sexy.

Sherlock finally parked the car in…a high school parking lot. John sent him a confused look, but Sherlock was already getting out of the car, not even sparing a glance for him. John followed him, and was even more surprised when they were met by Greg, who looked equally surprised to see John.

“Hi,” he managed.

“Hi,” John replied, cheerfully. “I have no idea what I’m doing here.”

Greg looked at Sherlock, who was ignoring both of them and striding confidently to the high school baseball field. He looked back at John. “There’s buzz around this pitcher,” he explained.

Greg seemed to consider that explanation enough, because he took off after Sherlock, who was now leaning on the fence behind the backstop. The game hadn’t started yet. The pitcher was playing lazy catch with the third baseman and laughing about something.

John stood next to Sherlock and said, “He’s a high school pitcher.”

Sherlock almost smiled at him, and John hadn’t been trying to get a smile out of him but he considered it a victory nonetheless. Sherlock didn’t smile much, and John hadn’t even realized that until he’d been on the verge of seeing one. He suddenly wanted very badly to make Sherlock smile, or even laugh. He almost wanted it more badly than he wanted other things. Almost.

“Perfectly sound analysis,” Sherlock responded, “but I was hoping you’d go deeper.”

“What are we doing here?” John asked.

“Proving a point,” answered Sherlock.

“I’m supposed to be catching a major league baseball team.”

Sherlock shrugged. “What do you think of him?” He nodded toward the pitcher on the field.

John sighed and watched him. The first batter was just stepping to the plate. The pitcher wound up and threw. Fastball. Blistering fastball. John thought that fastball would give Sherlock’s a run for its money. It was right down the middle, but the batter seemed to never even see it. The second pitch was another fastball, and the batter flailed for it wildly, nowhere near it. The third was a final fastball, high and away and the batter never had a chance.

John narrowed his eyes, watched the next three pitches result in another strikeout. The third batter managed to get his bat on the ball, but it was an ineffective dribble that barely made it to the grass before the catcher ran it down.
“Thoughts?” asked Greg.

“You want my thoughts?” John realized.

“Yes, you diagnose what’s wrong with pitchers. What’s wrong with him?”

“Feel free to say there’s nothing wrong with him,” Greg contributed.

“Well, his fastball is quite something,” John began.

“Exactly,” said Greg.

“But it’s the only pitch he has,” John finished.

“Exactly,” said Sherlock.

“We’ll teach him other pitches,” insisted Greg. “With that one to work with—”

John shook his head. “His mechanics are wrong. He’s going to blow that arm out.”

“We’ll fix his mechanics—”

“And lose his fastball, so what would be the point?”

“Did you tell him to say this?” Greg demanded of Sherlock.

“No. That’s Doctor Watson’s professional opinion. Well done, Doctor.”

“Sherlock,” John started, because he had the unpleasant feeling he’d just been a bit used here. He didn’t mind giving his professional opinion, but he could have been filled in before he’d been dragged there to disagree with his new manager.

“Our job here is done,” said Sherlock, casually. “Good evening, Lestrade.”

John smiled tightly at Greg as Sherlock walked off. “He’s my ride,” he said, and then hurried after him. “Sherlock,” he began again.

“You did very well,” Sherlock said, a bit condescendingly, and John was bristling with indignation until Sherlock cut off his burgeoning annoyance with, “Dinner?”

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Dinner was a tiny, hole-in-the-wall place that was nonetheless packed to the gills. Local hangout, thought John. Not a touristy place at all. Sherlock’s last team, like John’s, had done spring training in Florida, so John had to wonder how long he’d been in town to have found this place.

He asked, as soon as they were settled into a table tucked into the window, “How did you find this place?”

“Obvious,” replied Sherlock, dismissively, frowning thunderously at the menu.

John felt awkward, both for asking a question Sherlock apparently deemed too stupid to respond to and for the displeased expression on Sherlock’s face. “If you’d rather go somewhere else—”

“No, this place is fine. Are you hungry? You should get something to eat.”
John hesitated. “Well, I was going to get something to eat, yes. Seeing as how we’re in a restaurant.”

“Good,” said Sherlock, as a waiter came over to them. Sherlock gestured to indicate John should order first.

“The fettuccine alfredo,” John ordered, and glanced across at Sherlock, trying to determine if he should have a glass of wine. It wasn’t like a glass of wine would get him drunk, he thought. It wasn’t like a glass of wine would make him lose his head and crawl into Sherlock’s lap in that stupid sexy car he had and kiss that gorgeous mouth of his until he made little fluttery gasps of John’s name.

“Water,” John told the waiter, firmly.

“And I will have a cup of tea and some tiramisu. Hot tea, not the cold stuff people insist on serving here.” Sherlock handed across his menu and practically waved the waiter away.

“You’re not eating,” John pointed out, in surprise.

“Yes, I am.”

“Tiramisu?”

“It’s food, John.”

“And tea?”

“I’m British. Queen and country, remember?” Sherlock wasn’t smiling but it looked like he could be, and John considered that a minor victory. He was going to have to work himself up to full-fledged smile.

And he thought he might have time to do it in. Sherlock had suggested dinner and wasn’t even hungry. The evening was looking up. He wished he’d ordered wine, after all.

“How do you know Mrs. Hudson?” he asked, conversationally.

“She owned a small number of shares of my last team,” Sherlock replied. “I was able to offer her assistance at one point.”

“Assistance? Does she have a lot of need for a world-class pitcher off the field?”

“I am hardly a uni-faceted person,” said Sherlock. “I can perform many services.”

John grinned at him and hoped it wasn’t a leer. “I bet you can.”

Sherlock sucked in a breath, regarded him with those unreadable eyes, and for a second John froze. Was he reading everything entirely wrong? Maybe this wasn’t a date after all? Maybe this was just Sherlock being polite. This was why he never got involved with baseball players, why he never even thought about getting involved with baseball players. In the span of a day, Sherlock Holmes had apparently caused him to lose his mind. He weighed the advantages of babbling, quickly changing the subject, but the water arrived, blessedly, and John gulped some down and told himself to stop flirting.

Sherlock was busy making a face over his tea when John stopped giving himself his internal talking-to.
“Not up to snuff?” John guessed.

“It never is here. The water’s never the right temperature. No one has proper kettles,” Sherlock grumbled.

“You must get dreadfully homesick,” John realized.

“Homesick? Because I expect people who claim to serve tea to serve me tea? You think that means I must be homesick?”

“Yes,” John replied, simply.

Sherlock’s gaze was sharp for a moment, then he said, “Ah, yes, of course. Your mother. Likes a proper cuppa, your mother, when she’s feeling ‘homesick,’ does she?”

“I’m just saying that I make a pretty brilliant cup of tea, if I do say so myself.” John shrugged a bit.

“Oh, excellent,” said Sherlock, looking pleased, and John had the uneasy feeling that he’d just gained himself a new job for the season. “Your accent is extraordinarily suggestible, you know. You barely had any at all when we first met, but you’ve been slipping back into it more and more.”

“My mother will be so pleased,” replied John.

Sherlock smiled. It wasn’t an enormous smile, nothing so over-the-top as a grin, but it was a genuine smile. It made a striking difference in his appearance. Sherlock was always extraordinary looking, but the smile made him…lovely. Beautiful in a much more approachable and realistic way. Not beautiful like the spill of stars over the night sky, beautiful like a person whose neck you could nuzzle as you pulled him close for a cuddle.

John relaxed fractionally, and tensed at the same time, because the smile was enticing, and that was alarming, seeing as how he wasn’t supposed to be flirting with him. “How’d you get started doing this anyway?” John asked, curiously. “It’s not like British baseball players are a dime a dozen.”

“I might ask the same question of you. But I already know the answer.”

“Oh, you do?” John cocked an eyebrow at the arrogance.

“Of course I do. You moved to this country at the age of 14. Not an easy time for a sociable person like yourself to make a move. You would’ve wanted friends, you would’ve wanted to fit in, so you started playing baseball. I suppose it makes sense given your build, you wouldn’t have started playing American football to fit in.” Sherlock shrugged, as if to say, so far so obvious.

John considered this. It wasn’t a bad deduction, he thought, as deductions went. “I grew up playing baseball, though. I didn’t just start when I moved here.”


“Exactly. My father used to watch the games when I was a kid; I grew up with it. He desperately wanted me to be a pitcher, but he’s come to terms with my being a catcher. Why did you say it like that?”

“Say what like that?”
“You would’ve wanted friends, you would’ve wanted to fit in.’ Isn’t that what everybody wants?”

“Is it?” asked Sherlock, lifting an eyebrow, and then the food arrived.

John’s pasta was delicious. Sherlock stuck his spoon into his tiramisu, but looked otherwise disinterested in it, pushing it to and fro while his disconcerting gaze stayed on John.

“What?” John asked, feeling a bit self-conscious. It would be one thing if Sherlock were looking at him with lust or desire, looking at him like he could eat him up with a spoon, but Sherlock was looking at him as if he were a…Rubik’s Cube, John thought.

“You regret it,” announced Sherlock, definitively.

John had no idea what the hell he was talking about. “Regret what?”

“Not becoming a doctor. It’s why you hate your nickname so much. The look in your eyes whenever I use it, and the fact that you correct it every time it comes up, you hate it quite a lot. So that didn’t come from you, it came from someone else, and it wasn’t someone you liked, it wasn’t someone you respected, it was someone being mean to you, mocking you. You were pre-med in college, but you gave that all up, and you regret that, so you hate the nickname.”

“First of all,” said John, “the nickname is stupid, okay? It’s just…stupid.”

“Eloquent,” remarked Sherlock.

John glared at him. “And I don’t regret it, not really, I just…I wish we got more than one life, you know? I wish I could know what would have happened if I’d gone that route. I was good enough to play professional baseball, and it seemed like a lark. I’d do it for a couple of seasons, make some money, make my dad proud, and now it’s fifteen years later—”

“And you’re staring at the conclusion of your identity and wondering if you’d just become a surgeon if it wouldn’t have been a more normal life for you.” Sherlock pushed his tiramisu away decisively. “Normality is far overrated, John. You’d just be bored.”

“Oh, really?” John asked, archly. “You know that much about me from just these past few hours of acquaintance?”

Sherlock snorted. “I knew that much about you after five minutes of acquaintance.”

“How?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I’ve asked, haven’t I?”

“I already told you: You didn’t sit down that day we met at the clubhouse. Your leg wasn’t bothering you. Psychosomatic. You’d forgot all about it. And you’d forgot all about it because you were interested in me, you were intrigued. I bet you thrive in game situations, close games. Normality would stifle you, John. It would bore you to tears. You like to feel a bit out of your element, you like to have to adapt to it, you take great competitive pleasure in encountering something unusual and beating it. You know how I know? Because you’re not in any pain right now.”

John stared at him. Because it was true. He wasn’t in any pain. And he should have been, at least a bit sore, but he wasn’t at all. John blinked and tried to think what to say.
Sherlock looked smug and finally leaned over and took a bite of tiramisu.

John stabbed a piece of chicken, feeling slightly out of sorts that Sherlock had reason to be smug, ate it, and then decided to change the subject. “What was all that about back there at the field with Lestrade?”

“I told you. Proving a point.”

“Proving a point to who?”

“Whom,” Sherlock corrected, almost absently. “To Lestrade, of course. I told him all that about that pitcher. I could tell just from the stats and poor quality video I was sent.”

“Is that something you do a lot? Scout high school pitchers?”

“Not in person, I’m seldom near enough to where they are to make that practical.” Sherlock was eating his tiramisu in earnest now. John could tell he only had half his attention.

“And the point of bringing me was…?”

“Second opinion, Doctor.”

John chewed his pasta reflectively then said, “So does this mean I’m allowed to catch you?”

“It means there’s no other catcher around,” Sherlock responded.

“Before the end of the season,” John said, “I’ll have you pitching a perfect game.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows flickered upward briefly, and then he said, “I already planned on pitching a perfect game this season anyway.”

John grinned. “You’re your own number-one fan, aren’t you?”

And there it was: a bona fide genuine grin in return, flashed at John, in the instant before Sherlock’s pornographic mouth fastened around a spoonful of tiramisu. The effect of it made John so light-headed that he momentarily reconsidered every decision he’d made in his life that had brought him to this point, sitting opposite a pitcher he was supposed to catch, simmering slowly with lust. Then Sherlock’s tongue darted out to lick up a bit of whipped cream at the corner of his mouth and John thought, sod it, he was clearly the most brilliant decision-maker of all time to be enjoying this moment.
Chapter Three

Sherlock drove him to his hotel without John telling him which hotel he was staying at.

“Did Lestrade tell you?” John asked, twisting in the passenger seat of the DB9 to face Sherlock.

“No, I merely observed your room key. That’s the problem with you, you know: You see, but you don’t observe. But don’t worry. Nearly everyone is an idiot.”

“Well,” remarked John. “Now I feel much better about everything.” John sat for an odd, awkward moment wondering if he should try to kiss Sherlock, then reminding himself he wasn’t on a date with Sherlock, that he didn’t date baseball players. And, even so, he found himself saying, “Thanks for the ride and dinner. And thank your girlfriend for loaning you out for a bit.” Fishing, fishing, you are so obviously fishing, John.

Sherlock lifted his eyebrows at him. “Girlfriend?” he said. “Not really my area.”

“Oh,” said John, hope blooming strong in his chest, even though there should have been no hope, because he didn’t date baseball players. “Boyfriend then? Which would be fine,” he added, hastily. More than fine. Much more than fine. He wanted to make sure Sherlock didn’t think he was one of those homophobic baseball players.

Sherlock regarded him closely. “I know it would be. But no.”

“You said you had a date the other night,” John pointed out.

“A figure of speech. It was a date with Lestrade to go over scouting reports. Lestrade was being typically moronic.”

John felt his tongue dart out to lick his lips completely involuntarily. Dammit. “Fine. You’re unattached. Like me. Good.” Oh, God, why couldn’t he just die? Why couldn’t an asteroid come hurtling out of the sky and kill him?

There was a long, terrible pause. Then Sherlock said, very carefully, “John, while I’m flattered by your interest, I think you should know that I consider myself married to my work.”

John felt himself flush. He actually looked up at the sky, hoping to see an approaching asteroid. He didn’t. He looked back at Sherlock, feeling very much like the idiot Sherlock probably thought him to be. He opened his mouth to say something.

Sherlock didn’t let him. “I appreciate the lengths you must have gone to to keep your sexuality a secret. I’ll respect that.”

John decided there was nothing to say to that but, “Thank you.”

“Now that that’s out of the way,” Sherlock replied, “would you like to move in with me?”

John blinked. “You’re…sending some mixed signals right now.”

“Not like that,” Sherlock bit out, impatiently. “It wouldn’t be sexual. It’s just that sometimes I get tired of talking to my skull.”
“Your…skull?”

“You have the rare gift of silence; you don’t always have to be babbling all the time.”

Which was true. They had spent much of the conclusion of dinner and all of the drive to the hotel in companionable, comfortable silence. John tried to think of a response.

Sherlock kept talking. “I’ve a house here. Surely more comfortable than a hotel room. Anyway, think about it.”

“Oh,” said John. “Yeah, sure.” He finally stepped out of the car and gave Sherlock a little wave as Sherlock punched the car out onto the main road.

He had absolutely no intention of thinking about it. Living with that man would be an unqualified disaster. It was the worst idea he’d ever heard. Not sexual, John mentally scoffed. Everything about Sherlock Holmes was sexual, from the bed-tousled mop of his curls to the intriguingly large feet.

John was not going to think about living with him at all.

***

John was thinking about it the following day, mostly because he didn’t see Sherlock that day and he realized that he missed him. That was crazy. He missed a man he had just met. And, worse, a man he had just met who had a reputation for being aloof and unlikeable. He had lost his mind. For the span of a few hours that day, John let himself consider moving in with Sherlock Holmes.

The day after that, Sherlock had still disappeared from the clubhouse, and John had stopped thinking kindly of him. He was doing this on purpose, John thought, an absence-makes-the-heart-grow-fonder sort of thing. Sherlock had wrapped him in unexpected, heart-buzzing intimacy and then deliberately created distance between them when he hadn’t immediately gotten his way. He was a spoiled brat, John thought, and he wasn’t going to waste time thinking about him.

Then spring training started formally, and John met the rest of his pitching staff and the three young kids fighting for the back-up catcher role behind him, and Sherlock still was missing from the clubhouse. John asked Greg about it, once, and Greg shrugged and said that Sherlock came and went as he pleased. John didn’t like that idea, since the most important thing about training a young staff was to instill in them the value of discipline, and the conspicuous absence of the staff’s ace undermined John’s message pretty convincingly.

By the end of his first week with them John gratefully accepted Greg’s offer of a drink and followed him to a fairly family-oriented sports bar where they were unlikely to run into anyone else on the team. John slumped exhausted into a booth and ordered a beer. He had forgotten what a fresh, green staff was like. And his leg hurt, a persistent ache from the catching he’d done that week, more than he had done in a long time.

“So what do you think?” Greg asked him, taking a sip of his beer.

John leaned his forehead on his hand and sighed, “Jesus Christ.”

“If he were on the pitching staff we’d be in better shape,” Greg replied.

John started laughing and couldn’t stop, and Greg joined him, and when they’d finally caught their breath, John wiped tears away from his eyes and took a long pull on his beer and realized that his leg hurt less. Sherlock was right, which was annoying. Most of his injuries were psychosomatic.
The thought made him say, “Where the hell is Sherlock, Greg?”

Greg shrugged and said, “I told you, he—”

“That won’t work.” John shook his head. “It can’t work, not with a staff like this. He realizes he’s not one of a lineup, right? He’s…it. Does Dimmock have him on any sort of routine?”

Greg lifted his eyebrows at John. “Dimmock?”

Greg looked so perplexed by what John had said that John actually clarified, slowly, “Dimmock. The pitching coach.”

“I know who you’re talking about, it’s just…” Greg shifted in his seat. “You’ve met Sherlock, right? You think there’s anyone telling him what to do?”

John drew his eyebrows together. “I think there should be someone telling him what to do.”

“Fine.” Greg sent him an expansive gesture, an open invitation. “You try it.”

There was a thrum of adrenaline at work in John, his body’s reaction to a week of hard work. It was spring training, the very start of a new season, everything was entirely fresh, and John was with a new team with a new staff to make his own. He wasn’t going to let Sherlock Holmes ruin his chances, he was not. “Fine,” agreed John. “Where does he live?”

Greg blinked at him. “You’re not serious.”

“I am serious. What’s the worst that can happen? He’s not going to shoot me.”

***

Maybe Sherlock was going to shoot him.

John stood at Sherlock’s front door and listened to the gunshots coming from inside the house. He looked at the house number, which was definitely the address Greg had given him, and those were definitely gunshots coming from inside.

Probably John should have called the police. What he did instead was incredibly stupid, which was to ring the doorbell.

There was a long pause, then the gunshots resumed. John next did another incredibly stupid thing, which was to try the door, find it unlocked, and step inside.

The front rooms were completely empty, but John followed the noise to the back of the house, where a large kitchen opened onto a family room area. The entire area was drowning in…things. Stuff was everywhere. John couldn’t even begin to catalog it all. It was like an avalanche of stuff, like stepping into a pawn shop. And on the couch, lounging on his back in a T-shirt, pajama bottoms, and an old-fashioned dressing gown was Sherlock Holmes. He had a gun in his hand, which he was lazily firing, eyes half-closed, into the wall across from him, on which, in yellow spray paint, someone—presumably Sherlock—had drawn a perfect pentagon. Home plate, thought John. The gunshots were clustered over it.

“What are you doing?” John demanded without preamble.

“Bored,” sighed Sherlock, without even bothering to open his eyes. He seemed not the least bit surprised that John had wandered in.
“Bored!” Sherlock shouted at him, and abruptly leaped off the couch. “Bored! Bored! Bored!” He punctuated each word with a gunshot toward home plate.

“Stop it,” John commanded, and Sherlock made a face at him but dropped the gun and collapsed back onto the couch. John crouched and picked up the gun. “The neighbors are going to call the cops.” He clicked the safety into place and put the gun on top of a tottering pile of papers on the kitchen island, glancing at them briefly. Mathematical equations, they looked like to him.

Sherlock waved a hand negligently. “They’re used to it.”

*Used to it,* thought John, and shook his head and went into Sherlock’s kitchen. He had an electric kettle, once John had plowed a path through detritus to get to it, and in the oven, for whatever reason, a box of teabags. John set about making them tea. He found milk in the fridge—along with a well-worn baseball glove—and generously milked his tea and then Sherlock’s tea as well, because he seemed like the type. Then he carried the mug over to the coffee table, unceremoniously shoved some papers off, and put the mug down. He sat with his own mug of tea in the chair opposite.

Sherlock had turned his head away from contemplation of the ceiling, was staring at the mug on the coffee table. Then he lifted his gaze to John, his pale eyes glittering. “You made tea.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m good at making tea,” John answered, simply. “Now sit up, drink it, and stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

Sherlock stared across at him, his expression inscrutable.

“Sherlock,” said John, a bit sharply.

Sherlock sighed, sat up, and reached for his tea.

John watched his first swallow, then began, “What’s all this about being bored? You wouldn’t be bored if you showed up at spring training.”

John had never truly heard the word *ugh* said out loud before, but Sherlock said it then and made a face at his tea. “Spring training, *I hate* spring training, do you know how incredibly boring spring training is?”

“I happen to like spring training.”

“Oh, of course you do,” Sherlock groaned. The *You’re an idiot* was implied.

“It’s a clean slate, a fresh start—”

“Please stop talking to me in poetic clichés. Americans are always talking about baseball in poetic clichés. It’s pathetic. It’s a game of *math.* It’s *physics.*” He indicated his piles of paper briefly. “It isn’t bloody *poetry.* And spring training is the worst time for all the stupid sodding poetry. Oh my God, *I hate* spring training, and you are being *boring.*” Sherlock collapsed back onto the couch.

“Sit up,” John said, very quietly and very evenly, “and drink the tea I made for you before it gets
cold, because I will not listen to a word of complaint about cold tea from you ever again if you let that tea get cold.”

Sherlock looked over at him, and his expression was plainly readable this time: startled surprise. John kept his gaze on him, unblinking, until Sherlock snaked a hand out and pulled the mug over to settle on his chest. Not quite drinking it, but close enough.

“If baseball is boring you, pick another topic,” John commanded.

Sherlock sat up slightly, just enough to take a hesitant sip of his tea. “Where did you learn how to shoot a gun? And why?”

“What makes you think I know how to shoot a gun?”

“You’re comfortable with guns. You picked it up and put the safety on. If you didn’t know how to shoot a gun, you would’ve been squeamish.”

John allowed that that made sense. “I’m never going to be a pitcher. But it turns out I’m a pretty good marksman.”

Sherlock regarded him, nodded once, and then sipped his tea again.

John let silence fall and glanced around the room. It was complete and utter chaos. Most of it was paper goods: notebooks and loose-leaf sheets and magazines and newspapers and books. Some of it was inexplicable to him: a kitschy elk-head lamp that hadn’t yet gotten mounted onto the wall, for instance. There was a violin set on a chair to the left of the fireplace, and on the mantelpiece was a skull. What looked like a bona fide human skull. John suddenly thought back to Sherlock’s odd suggestion of cohabitation. It’s just that sometimes I get tired of talking to my skull.

John’s eyes flitted around the room again. He glanced at the bullet holes in the wall. He looked at Sherlock, who had closed his eyes again but was still sipping his tea. Something slotted into place for him, made perfect sense suddenly. Aloof and unapproachable Sherlock Holmes was lonely.

John didn’t think Sherlock would ever say it, wasn’t even sure Sherlock himself realized it, but the room was insular and single-faceted. It was the room of a man living too much in his own head because he didn’t have to make space for other people. He literally talked to a human skull on a mantelpiece because he had no one else. John no longer thought Sherlock had been manipulating him; he thought Sherlock had been too incredibly bored to leave this room in days.

“When is the last time you ate?” John asked. There had been no food in the fridge other than the milk, which had been on its expiration date and yet had barely been touched.

“Ate?” Sherlock echoed vaguely, looking up at the ceiling. “I don’t know. Recently, I’m sure. Mrs. Hudson brought biscuits, I think. It was… I was trying to calculate… Your career makes no sense. You have a reputation for being a fixer, a caretaker, a doctor of pitchers, but those pitchers never know anything about you.” Sherlock turned his head to pierce John with a searching look. “The things they say in interviews about you are either platitudes or flatly untrue. You’re much more alone than you pretend to be to everyone.”

“I prefer ‘free spirit,’ and you’re one to be talking about this.”

“Ah, but I don’t give the impression of being approachable and affable and the life of the party until the moment it becomes clear that I’ve no intention of letting anyone in. You have trust issues.”

John had been told that before. His therapist said it explained why he was a catcher. He liked to be
the one in control of the entire ballgame. Literally. “You know me remarkably well for having shared one dinner and ten pitches.”

“The ten pitches were more important than a dozen dinners,” Sherlock said. “Ten pitches. I should know everything about you.”

“Should you?” John was irritated. “Tell me, then.”

Sherlock shook his head. “No, no. I want my full money’s worth from this house call. What ails me, Doctor Watson?”

“You’re spoiled, self-indulgent, arrogant beyond the point of usefulness, and you haven’t properly eaten anything in days so you’re stroppy as a result. Also,” he pointed to the violin, “you’re a musician. You have an artist’s soul. You’re not as purely scientific as you pretend, and you’d like baseball a lot more if you let yourself embrace the poetry of it.”

“Obvious, obvious, unfair, obvious, and more poetry,” Sherlock ticked off.

“Prescription,” John continued. “I’m going to order us Chinese food. And you’re going to come to the field tomorrow.”

“I am definitely not coming to the field tomorrow.”

“Yes, you are. I need you to meet the rest of the staff. You’re their ace. You have to take a leadership position.”

“A leadership position?” Sherlock practically screeched it. “I don’t do ‘leadership positions.’”

“You’re doing one this season, with this pitching staff.”

“For what possible purpose?”

“Because I want to win a World Series,” John confessed. “I want to do it, just once, and I’ve only got this season left to do it in. And I’m not going to lose it because you’re too stuck-up to set an example for the rest of the staff. So we’ll have Chinese food tonight, I’ll make you more tea afterward, you’ll go to bed—in a bed, not here—get a good night’s sleep, and in the morning you’ll help me whip the staff into shape, because I cannot do it alone, Sherlock, and you’ve got reams of equations here that you can use to help me more accurately determine the odds I’m facing in getting this done.”

Sherlock looked at him for a moment. “You’re an optimist,” he accused, as if John were really a murderer.

John considered. If he were truly an optimist, he suspected he’d feel better about his chances for getting Sherlock Holmes into bed. “You have to be an optimist in baseball. If you weren’t, you’d never pick up a ball again.”

“I manage to do it.”

“You’re more of an optimist than you want people to know.” He pointed again. “Violin.”

Sherlock grumbled something under his breath, then got up and swiped the violin off the chair. “It’s just an instrument. I learned as a child. You’re leaping to many conclusions about my character based on the fact that my mother thought all boys of a certain class should know how to play a musical instrument.”
“Oh, stop it,” John smiled at him. “You love that violin, I can tell, there’s no point in hiding it. Sit down, I’ll order us food, and you can give me a little concert while we wait for it to be delivered.”

“I don’t play in front of people.” John looked a bit surprised at the flatness to Sherlock’s tone. “I spend my whole life performing in front of people,” Sherlock continued. “I draw the line at bringing the violin into it.”

“Fair enough,” John agreed, after a moment. “So I’ll order the Chinese food and we’ll just sit and talk. Or not talk, if you prefer.”

Sherlock sat. He was still holding his violin, although it seemed like he’d forgotten he was holding it. He studied John keenly then said, “Will you stay tonight at least? If you won’t move in.”

John pointedly did not let himself look at the skull. He said, “If you want me to.”
Chapter Five

Chapter Four

Sherlock sat curled into the side of his sofa, holding tea John Watson had made for him, watching as John Watson shuffled through pieces of paper on the kitchen counter looking for takeout menus. John Watson was in his kitchen, searching, undeterred, through the mess Sherlock had made, determined to get Sherlock food. John Watson had walked into his house, uninvited, whilst he’d been shooting at the wall, and had mildly told him to stop, had made him a cup of tea, and now was ordering him dinner. Sherlock stared at him as he muttered good-naturedly over the mess, stared at the mop of sandy blondish-brownish hair on his head, stared at the movement of his fingers over the papers, simply stared, and thought, for very much not the first time: John Watson, what are you?

The entire situation was filling Sherlock with an odd sort of anticipation, almost unbearable because Sherlock didn’t know what the anticipation was for. Eventually Sherlock thought if he watched John search through his kitchen anymore, he might start squirming on the sofa, so he said, “We could just look on the Internet.”

John looked as if the idea of the Internet had never occurred to him before, which was ridiculous since John had a blog. A silly blog that hadn’t been updated in months, but still a blog. He clearly knew about the Internet; he should have thought of it straightaway. But the look on John’s face when he looked up at Sherlock’s words was…delight and chagrin and amusement and self-deprecation, and Sherlock thought, also for very much not the first time, John Watson, what is your face?

“The Internet,” he said. “Right. Do you have a laptop?”

Sherlock pointed to it silently, and John walked over to grab it, pulled it open. Sherlock watched him with fascination. John Watson’s hands on his computer. Why should that sight be so compelling?

“Password,” John told him.

Sherlock uncoiled himself from the sofa, set his tea down, and walked over to where John was holding the laptop out toward him. He was taller than John by several inches. From the proximity and angle he was at, he could look down on John’s eyelashes, could appreciate that John’s eyes were a deep, dark blue. Sherlock, loath to get caught staring, entered his password and retreated back to the relative safety of the sofa. John was strangely unsettling to him. He wanted to keep him as near as possible but also maintain a healthy distance, all at the same time.

The truth was, if he was being brutally honest, that John Watson was the most interesting thing to have happened to the world around him in simply ages. He had no idea why, and that was the best thing about the entire conundrum. On paper, John was mundane in the extreme. His career had been impressive, but certainly not exceptional. His reputation was so solidly respectable as to be downright dull. Not a single interview Sherlock had read of or about John had a single noteworthy thing to say. And yet Sherlock could not get him out of his head. It made absolutely no sense. How could this man who should have been tediously ordinary have turned out to be so alluringly extraordinary? Sherlock was used to everyone else in the universe missing the obvious but this overlooking of John Watson was too much to be believed. John was amazing. He was completely unimpressed with everything about Sherlock that everyone else found reliably off-putting. And, somehow, he inspired an urge for confidences in Sherlock. He had let Sherlock ferry him around
whilst barely flickering an eyebrow in reaction. He had walked into the middle of gunshots and made a cup of tea.

Sherlock stared across at him and wanted to tell him he wasn’t allowed to leave until Sherlock had worked out how he had even come to be there in the first place. And what about him made him so deliciously intriguing.

“What do you want to eat?” John asked him.

Sherlock was annoyed. Why should he be thinking about eating when there was John Watson to think about instead? “Whatever,” he said, waving his hand about.

“You are going to eat whatever food gets put in front of you, so you might want to rethink having a say in this,” John warned him.

Sherlock wanted to say that he would decide if he ate food or not. But he knew unerringly that somehow he would end up eating food if John wanted him to eat food. So he said, “Fine. Beef and broccoli.”

John nodded his approval, and Sherlock watched him click through the screens, placing their order, his eyebrows drawn together in concentration. John squirmed a bit, pulling out his wallet, locating a credit card, typing in information slowly and painstakingly.

“What?” John glanced at him briefly.

Under normal circumstances, Sherlock hated repeating himself, but it was clear that John needed all of his concentration on the remarkably poor typing he was doing, so Sherlock let it go just this once. He waited until John was finished, then asked again, “Do you write your own blog?”

“Oh, the blog. God, I haven’t done anything with that in—”

“Seven months and three days.”

John blinked at him. “Okay then,” he agreed.

“Do you write it yourself?”

“As opposed to?”

“Paying someone else to write it,” Sherlock explained, impatiently.

“If I’m paying someone else to write it, he’s doing a terrible job.”

“Why haven’t you written anything in seven months and three days?”

John sighed, closing Sherlock’s laptop and setting it aside. “Because nothing ever happens to me, Sherlock.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “You don’t like talking about this.”

“Because it’s…stupid. Having a blog is stupid.”

“I have a blog,” Sherlock pointed out, a bit affronted.
“Yeah, I’ve read it. That’s not a blog, that’s a math textbook.”

Sherlock frowned and shook his head. “Baseball is so mathematical. Why does everyone try to pretend it’s not?”

“It’s not that we’re pretending it’s not, it’s just that it’s not very interesting to read about math.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Sherlock informed him.

John looked amused. Sherlock filed this away in his memory palace. *John Watson’s face, amused.* He already had more space devoted to the expressions of John Watson’s face than he quite cared to consider. What, he wondered, would happen if he made John laugh? Sherlock had never labored under any such impulse before, but he abruptly wanted to be the sort of person who made other people laugh. He cast about in his head for some remembered witticism, but he’d ruthlessly deleted all of them, which he was now regretting.

“Is it because of your homosexuality?” asked Sherlock.

The startled look on John’s face was as far away from amusement as one could get, and his voice sounded strangled when he choked out, “What?”

“Is that why you don’t update your blog? Afraid you’ll give too much away?”

John appeared to give this serious thought. “Maybe,” he answered, slowly. “Possibly. I’ve never thought of it in quite that way before, but you could be right.”

Sherlock thought that he and John were opposites, and maybe that was why he was so drawn to him. Wasn’t that what people said? Trite people with their trite expressions? Opposites attract? Well, Sherlock supposed it was true of magnets. Maybe it really was true of people, too. Sherlock had spent his entire life refusing to be what everyone wanted him to be. It was how he’d ended up a baseball player in the first place. John had spent his entire life pretending to be what everyone wanted him to be.

Sherlock said, after a moment, “The tea was excellent, by the way.”

John cocked his head at him, looking thoughtful. “You’re quite something to have a conversation with. Anyone ever told you that?”

Sherlock felt the grin that creased his face. It felt odd and out-of-place and *wonderful.* “What do you think?” he said.

And John grinned back at him, and Sherlock felt the sort of joy he normally only felt after a particularly brisk inning’s work. John smiling at him gave him the equivalent adrenaline rush of a six-pitch inning. Interesting. He needed to examine that further.

John stood up, spoiling the moment, because Sherlock wanted to make him sit there smiling at him for long enough that Sherlock got tired of bask ing in it. John moved confidently into Sherlock’s kitchen, pulling open cupboards and drawers. Sherlock shifted on the sofa to watch him.

“Your silverware drawer is full of dirt,” John remarked.

“Samples from throughout the league.”

John glanced at him, still rummaging through Sherlock’s things, and somehow Sherlock didn’t mind this at all. “You use that information when you pitch?”
“I use all the information I can find when I pitch,” Sherlock replied, simply.

“If your silverware drawer is full of dirt, then of course you keep your silverware in the microwave,” commented John, having opened the microwave.

Sherlock shrugged. “Why not?”

“Most people would use their microwave to reheat leftovers.”

“Most people lack imagination.”

“What do you eat?” John leaned on the kitchen counter and looked at him. “There’s nothing in this house but tea, milk for tea, and cookies to serve with tea.”


“So American I’m going to force you to eat some McDonald’s or something. Would you rather me clear your coffee table or your dining room table?”

Sherlock was vaguely surprised to realize that he had a dining room table. But he supposed that that made some sense, that that table would be considered a dining room table. “Dining room table,” he said confidently, and John, to his surprise, swept all the papers off the table in one fell swoop, sending them cascading to the ground. Sherlock bit off a cry and leaped over the back of the sofa, staring at the mess of papers.

“What?” John asked, confused.

“You’ve…made a mess!” Sherlock pointed out. He was almost too shocked by the fact that John had just done that to even think about being furious over it.

John looked pointedly about the room. “I’ve made a mess?”

“Don’t be absurd, this is all organized, of course.” Sherlock crouched down, began gathering papers together.

“Of course,” agreed John, dryly, and placed silverware on the table.

“What are you even doing?” Sherlock asked, beginning to lose his temper now.

“We are going to sit at this table and eat dinner like normal people, and you are not even going to begin to pout at me at least until dinner is over. After dinner I’ll help you clean everything up.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” said Sherlock, carrying the disturbed papers over to the mantelpiece and fastening them into place with the knife he found there. “You are not going to touch anything else in here.”

“Fine.”

“And why wouldn’t we use chopsticks?”

“I wasn’t sure if you knew how to use chopsticks.”

Sherlock gave him a look he hoped was appropriately withering.

The doorbell rang. “Sit down, that must be the food,” said John.
Sherlock sat at his new dining room table, staring at its wood grain and thinking that he liked it better when it was covered in papers. John returned with food and commenced setting it out on the table. There was a lot of food. Much more food than just two people needed.

Sherlock eyed it. “Who else is coming?”

“No one.” John tossed him some chopsticks. “Beef and broccoli,” John said, handing the container over to him. John pulled another container over to himself and settled in, dipping his chopsticks in and emerging with noodles. Sherlock watched him take an enthusiastic bite, and then John looked at him and commanded, “Eat.”

The thing was, the food did smell good, and before Sherlock knew it he’d devoured a ridiculous amount of beef and broccoli, a fair amount of pork lo mein, a respectable amount of sweet and sour chicken, a few bites of fried rice, and two egg rolls. When he had had enough, he put down his chopsticks, leaned back in his seat, looked at John, and said, “Why do you care about the World Series?”

“Because it’s the World Series.”

Sherlock shook his head. “That isn’t an answer. Someone told you to care about it, so you care about it? It’s not even the World Series; no other countries even take part. So why do you care about this misnamed series of games, seven more games in a season of one hundred and sixty-two?”

“Because it’s the World Series.”

“You’ve already said that.”

“Because it’s the one thing in baseball that you get just by being the best. Just by being that good at what you do. The rest of it, there’s an element of popularity to it that can’t be avoided. MVP and Golden Glove and All-Star Game selection, how can you ever know if people think you’re that good or if people just like you? But if you win a World Series, you will know that at one point you were part of the nine people playing the best baseball. You just were. It’s undeniable.” John picked up a fortune cookie. “Plus, you get a really cool ring out of the deal.” John didn’t open the fortune cookie. He turned it over in his hand, looked across at Sherlock. “It’s hard for you, I know. It’s why you don’t get the romanticism of the game. You weren’t a child when you fell in love with it. For me, there is always going to be that little boy moment of being woken in the middle of the night by my dad to watch the World Series, and it was baseball in October, when the year was dying and you instinctively felt like baseball shouldn’t be played, and it was one last hurrah, one last rage against the dying of the light, the playing of baseball one more time, and the ones who won would be the last memory of summer that you would take with you, that you would cling to all through that long winter, the finale. Yes, I want to win the World Series. I want some little boy somewhere to go to sleep one night thinking about my team, my World Series. If you’d grown up with it, you would feel that way, too.”

Sherlock wasn’t sure he would. He never did seem to feel things the way other people did. But he could vividly see the little boy John had been, dreaming about playing in the World Series, wanting to do it. And he could vividly see the man John was, dreaming about being the best. Already, Sherlock felt as if there was little in the world he wouldn’t do to make John Watson happy, and this apparently would. “What,” he said, “would you need me to do?”

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Sherlock shuffled through his papers with an efficiency that led John to suspect there actually was
an organizational method at work, and then he plastered a bunch of them over the bullet-riddled home plate on the wall with tape. Then he gathered himself into a ball on the couch, knees tucked in to his chest and dressing gown pulled around them, steepled his fingers against his mouth, and settled himself into what was clearly deep thought. John looked from the determination of Sherlock’s face to the pieces of paper on the wall, which he could tell were various scribbled notations on the rest of the pitchers in the rotation, and decided it was probably going to be a while, so he might as well make them tea.

Sherlock didn’t touch his tea. John drank his steadily and, when he was done, he plucked up the nearest piece of paper. It was, however, nearly incomprehensible to him, so he mostly watched Sherlock instead. Sherlock was looking much more alert and engaged and alive. John credited the enormous amount of food he’d inhaled for some of that, and the fact of having a project for the rest of it. Sherlock was clearly one of those people who needed to be kept busy at all times.

Eventually Sherlock blew out a little breath and spoke around his fingers. “This is everyone?”

“Only the pitchers,” John pointed out. “Not any of the hitters.”

“If the pitcher is good enough, you shouldn’t need any hitters,” Sherlock replied dismissively, eyes never moving from the wall.

“Okay,” said John, deciding they could disagree about that later. “So what do you think?”

Sherlock ruffled his hands through his hair, not that it made it any more unruly than it already was. It was clearly an absent-minded gesture, not calculated for seduction. Nevertheless, John’s mouth watered just a bit, a situation not helped by Sherlock abruptly fixing him with that pale, sparking gaze. “You’re not winning the World Series this year.”

Sherlock said it with such flat conviction that John couldn’t help but smile. “It’s not that bad.”

“It is that bad. That isn’t a pitching staff. That’s a hodgepodge collection of people who fancy they can pitch, half of them too young to know what to do and the other half too old to listen to what to do.”

“Spot on,” said John, his voice laced with amusement.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at him. “And you think that’s funny?”

“I think it must be so tough for you to be in baseball,” John responded, honestly. “You’re such a pragmatist. You’ve got all these pieces of paper around you with all these statistics, and you think you can predict right now that we’ll never be the last ones standing in October. And you might be right, of course. You’re probably right. But everyone else in baseball is clinging to that shred of possibility, that slice of hope. You might not get a hit nine out of ten times at bat. But every time you step into the batter’s box, it’s that one time you’re hoping for.”

“If your batting average were .100,” remarked Sherlock, matter-of-factly, “I’d advise you to get another career.”

John laughed. “Exactly. That’s exactly what I’m talking about. This team’s a mess. It’s been pieced together from the bones of other teams. It’s our own little Frankenstein’s monster. And no new team has ever won the World Series their first year. That tells me that that’s what we should be aiming for. Maybe this team has just been waiting for us to come along.”

“What, Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson?”
“Exactly.” John smiled at Sherlock, who still looked dubious. Then John stood and stretched. “Come on. It’s late. You’ll be of no use to me if you don’t get some proper sleep.”

“I could win every single start and still be of no use to you, given the rest of the pitching staff,” Sherlock pointed out.

“We’re going to whip them into shape, you and I,” John threw back, confidently, heading for the stairs because he assumed the bedrooms were upstairs.

Sherlock had a surprisingly neat and inviting guest bedroom. Not that Sherlock was much of a host. He didn’t even bother telling John where the guest bedroom was, just disappeared into what was presumably his bedroom and shut the door. So John fended for himself and then slid into bed. But even though he should have been tired from the long week, he lay awake forever, imagining that, in the silence of the house, he could hear Sherlock breathing.

***

John woke early the next morning, but Sherlock woke still earlier. John knew this because when he emerged from the bedroom, the door to the room Sherlock had slept in was standing open. John couldn’t resist peeking into it briefly on his way past. Compared to the chaos of downstairs, it was practically Spartan.

Sherlock was sitting on his sofa. There were even more pieces of paper taped up on the wall, and he was frowning at them in concentration, his fingers steepled against his lips.

“Morning,” John managed around a yawn, and absently ruffled at his sleep-tousled hair on his way into Sherlock’s kitchen. “Is there coffee?” Sherlock’s pot was empty, so John assumed there wasn’t coffee. And, come to think of it, he hadn’t seen any coffee in the cupboards. And what was that in the coffeepot, anyway? He asked. “What is this in your coffeepot?” Sherlock didn’t respond. “Sherlock.”

“Hmm?” He answered without taking his eyes off the wall. “The outer leather of a baseball.”

“I can see that. Why is it in your coffeepot?”

Sherlock tapped his fingers against his lips and ignored him.

John sighed. “Forget it. We’ll stop for coffee on the way to the field.” He leaned against the kitchen counter and regarded Sherlock, who was looking crisp and put-together, black pants, pearl-gray shirt. He looked much better than he had the night before. He had obviously showered, and his hair was still damp as it curled over his collar. He looked, frankly, good enough to eat, which was annoying. John had slept in his clothes and had to improvise a toothbrush.

“Maybe if Rothchild could learn a decent change-up,” said Sherlock.

“What?” said John, and looked at the pieces of paper on the wall.

Sherlock abruptly hopped off the sofa. “Let’s go.”

“What?”

Where?”

“The field,” Sherlock replied, impatiently. “Isn’t that what you wanted me to do? Go to spring training?”

“But,” said John, and glanced at his watch because it was early to head to the field. Which didn’t
matter because Sherlock was already striding out of the room. John hurried after him.

Sherlock walked over to the DB9, stood at the driver side door, and frowned as John unlocked his own car. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Going to the field,” John answered. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“In that?” Sherlock regarded John’s car as if John were proposing to ride a cockroach to the field. John glanced at it. It was a Mercedes, and really quite a respectable car. “This is my car.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Get in here,” said Sherlock, and pulled open the door to his Aston Martin.

“Sherlock—”

“Driving to the field in that will ruin the tone of the entire day. Get in my car.”

“I didn’t say you had to ride with me. I’ll meet you—”

“Absolutely not. As I’ve said, it will ruin your day. Get in.” Sherlock started his car.

John admitted that engine did have a nice, seductive purr to it. “But I’ll have to come back here, after, to pick up my car,” John pointed out. This carpooling to the field idea really didn’t make any sense.

“So?” Sherlock had slid on a pair of sunglasses. He revved the engine and looked over at John, one arm extended, his wrist casually resting atop the steering wheel. John wondered if he knew the picture he presented, if he did it on purpose, knowing it was impossible to resist such a tableau.

John sighed and gave up, walking over to the Aston Martin and sliding into the passenger seat. “Don’t get us killed,” he said, pulling on his seatbelt.

Sherlock made a dismissive noise and punched the car out of the driveway energetically enough to make John grab at the door and wish that the way Sherlock drove didn’t make him wonder if he was that adventurous in bed.

When Sherlock parked the car at the field showily, he said, “Now that’s a ride to work in the morning.”

“You’re an absolute maniac,” John told him.

Sherlock grinned irrepressibly, as if he thought that made him adorable, and the truth was that it did.

“Reckless as hell,” John continued.

“Do you still need a cup of coffee?”

“God, no.”

“Excellent way of kicking a drug habit, this car,” Sherlock said off-handedly, and got out, leaving John blinking after him.

“Wait,” John began, wondering if there was more to that story than Sherlock was letting on.

“Hurry up,” he called back, “I want to play catch.”
The game of catch was lazy and leisurely. There was no conversation, just the stretch of silence that Sherlock seemed to enjoy so much. He caught and threw with very little effort, his mind apparently elsewhere, and John let himself fall into the easy rhythm of the game. It had been a long time since he had played catch to just play catch, without consciously readying for something else, without watching the other player’s motion to make sure there wasn’t an injury lurking. John felt like he was eight years old again, the only little boy catching fly balls that his father hit to him on the nearby soccer field. It was lovely. He watched the arc of the baseball against the blue sky overhead and thought of how unexpectedly delighted he was to be on this brand new team. He wanted to play again, and baseball, he realized, had stopped being something he played and started being just something he did for work. Making this move had been the smartest thing he’d ever done, he thought.

Eventually, Sherlock caught the ball and didn’t throw it back. He walked toward John, who waited for him, and then he said, “Let’s throw.” He walked past John, on his way to the pitchers’ mound. John walked to home plate and had barely settled into position before Sherlock tossed his first pitch. Then a second and a third. He was moving more fluidly than he had the first time John had caught for him, John realized, and wondered if Sherlock had been tense for that session, and why that would have been. No warm-up, John supposed. Or had it been something akin to first date nerves, throwing for a new catcher for the first time?

John counted pitches, stood up at ten, and started to say they should finish up, but Sherlock waved him down, saying, “It’s fine, I’ll throw a few more.”

At twenty, John again suggested they stop, and Sherlock again frowned and shook his head, saying a bit more impatiently, “I’m fine.”

At thirty pitches, John didn’t say anything, but he wondered what Sherlock’s workout regimen was like, or if Sherlock even had a workout regimen.

Sherlock threw his forty-third pitch, a beautiful slider, then stepped off the mound and stood for a second, hands on his hips, regarding John. Well, he was probably just regarding home plate, truth be told. John just wished that appraising, assessing look was directed at him, together with the nod of approved satisfaction that followed. John headed toward him. Sherlock wasn’t breathing hard, and although the heat had coaxed a sheen of sweat onto his skin, kissing the absurdly over-exaggerated bow of his upper lip that Sherlock’s Sweeties were always going on about, he looked fresh and energized, not at all tired.

“Do you have any sort of pattern to your practicing?” John asked him.

“I have a pattern, yes. Most things on this planet have a pattern. The world is an astonishingly mathematical place.”

“Baseball included.”

“You’ve been paying attention.” Sherlock’s voice was warm with approval. “Do you think they’ve been?”

“Who?” John asked, turning to look in the direction Sherlock was looking.

Which happened to be the dugout, where what looked like the entire pitching staff had gathered and was staring at them.
“You’re going to win a World Series with a pitching staff who goes open-mouthed at seeing forty-three consecutive strikes thrown,” remarked Sherlock, sardonically.

“You didn’t just throw forty-three consecutive strikes.”

“Yes, I did.”

“You’re delusional,” said John.

“That makes two of us,” replied Sherlock, and looked from the dugout to John and actually winked. “Come along, Doctor Watson. Let us tell all these lucky fellows that they’re about to have career seasons.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

It's been mentioned, very briefly, that John Watson's father in this story is a Bostonian. Because I am a Bostonian. Because the city taught me and gave me many things, and my love for baseball is only one of them. Tonight, in some weird way, I feel like I am posting this in gratitude to the city and its people, without which I would never have thought to write a baseball AU in the first place. I send to all suffering tonight hugs.

Chapter Five

Sherlock lectured. It involved a whiteboard that he covered in crowded equations, erased, and then covered again. The rest of the pitching staff stared at him, and John was sure they comprehended none of it. John comprehended only bits and pieces of it himself, mostly related to the conclusions about pitching that Sherlock was reaching. How Sherlock was backing up these conclusions remained a mystery to him, but the conclusions themselves were fairly sound and John agreed with most of them, just on instinct and experience. Really, though, as much as John tried to pay attention to the lecture, Sherlock’s voice was incredibly distracting, and he found that vast periods of time passed where he wasn’t bothering to translate the words, just letting the timbre of his cadence wash over him.

Eventually, John interrupted Sherlock, as he erased the whiteboard a second time and looked prepared to fill it with even more equations, saying, “I think maybe that’s enough for today.”

“It was enough twenty seconds after I started speaking,” Sherlock retorted, and frowned at the pitching staff as if he found them a very poor audience.

“I don’t see why we need to be condescended to this way, anyway. An entire lecture on the physics of a hit?”

It was Cadogan West who asked the question, a bit of a journeyman veteran, and John thought of Sherlock’s assessment of pitchers too old to accept being told what to do.

“And you’d have a career ERA 2.34 points lower if you stopped trying to strike batters out all the time and realized the more favorable odds of permitting a base hit on a serviceable slider instead of inevitably failing to blow a poor fastball by the batter that then gets hit out of the park,” said Sherlock. “So you really should have been paying attention to the physics and the statistics that I just taught you.”

West frowned, and John stepped in before the situation could completely deteriorate. “Let’s just save the rest for tomorrow.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed. “Tomorrow I’ll tell all of you exactly what you’re doing wrong.” And, as if that settled everything, Sherlock turned and disappeared into the showers.

There was a beat of silence that was then swallowed up by buzzing enthusiastic talk. John wasn’t sure any of the pitchers had enjoyed the lecture, but he thought they had gotten the point John had wanted them to: that Sherlock Holmes was taking an interest in the team, was willing to work hard
to win, was taking an interest in them. Even if it seemed to be an odd, esoteric, cool sort of interest. Well, he was Sherlock Holmes, John supposed. If he didn’t live up to his reputation as an odd, esoteric, cool sort of person, he would have lost half of the aura he carried with the rest of the staff.

John stood and walked over to his locker, leaving the bubble of the conversation behind him. He needed to shower himself, but he wasn’t keen on the thought of showering while Sherlock was showering. He wasn’t supposed to be attracted to Sherlock. He was a bit crashingly attracted to Sherlock. He stood in front of his locker and considered the problem this was presenting.

Greg saved him by coming up to him with Dimmock, the pitching coach, in tow. Dimmock looked slightly stunned, but Greg looked completely flabbergasted. “How did you get him to do that?” Greg asked, awe in his tone.

“Are you kidding? He loves lecturing. He loves the sound of his own voice.” Who can blame him? John added, silently.

“No, no, no. You got Sherlock Holmes to come to spring training.” Greg paused, letting that sink in. John lifted his eyebrows at him. “How?”

“I asked him to,” John said, honestly.

“You don’t understand.” Greg shook his head, as if trying to clear it. “Sherlock doesn’t do things like this.”

“I asked him nicely,” John clarified, with a shrug.

“Sherlock hates spring training.”

“No, Sherlock hates being bored,” John corrected. “And he’s not like the rest of us, he didn’t grow up with this romanticism drilled into him, ‘Ooh, it’s spring training, the very words are magical, full of hope and dreams and possibilities.’ He’s bored to death because it doesn’t mean anything, and separate it from the poetry the way he does and you can see his point. So I gave him a project. He doesn’t need to get into pitching shape—he’s clearly already there—so he needs to get the rest of them into pitching shape.” John gestured to the pitching staff. “So, spring training is no longer quite as boring to him as it used to be.”

Greg stared at him. He stared at him for so long that John finally demanded, a bit belligerently, “What?”

“Lestrade,” inserted Sherlock, “shut up.”

“He hasn’t been saying anything,” John said, honestly.

“He’s thinking. It’s annoying. Are you ready to go?”

John looked at Sherlock, who was clearly ready to go, back in his pearl gray shirt and black trousers, back to looking good enough to eat. He’d at least wet his hair, and John couldn’t help but think that was his vanity striking again, getting the hat-flatness out of it. Sherlock’s obvious preoccupation with his hair made John itch to run his fingers into it, muss it up, twist curls into his fists, and make Sherlock as thoroughly debauched as his hairstyle seemed to promise he would be. Sherlock’s ridiculous attractiveness was kind of annoying.

“I have to take a shower,” John told him.

Sherlock made an impatient motion with his head. “Take one at home.”
“Home?” echoed Greg, looking between the two of them.

“He means my hotel room,” John said.

“Actually, I mean my house.”

John looked at him.

“You have to go back there anyway to pick up your dreadful car,” Sherlock pointed out, blandly.

“I’m not living with you, you know,” John blurted out.

“Who said you were? Let’s go. See you tomorrow, Lestrade.” Sherlock breezed his way out of the clubhouse, clearly expecting John to follow.

Which, cursing, he did. “Sorry,” he said to Greg and Dimmock. “He’s annoying and also my ride.”

Greg continued to stare. Dimmock was looking progressively more annoyed.

John hurried to catch up with Sherlock.

“Head down,” said Sherlock, “and don’t answer questions.”

“What are you talking about?” asked John, but Sherlock just pushed the door open.

There were reporters. A lot of them. Many more than should have been covering the spring training.

“What the hell,” he murmured, under his breath, automatically smiling for the paparazzi cameras.

Sherlock didn’t pause at all. He marched straight past them, ignoring the questions they called out to him, questions about whether he actually cared this time, whether he was going to make an effort, if he had any response to Moriarty’s latest sound bite that he and Sherlock were the same except Sherlock was boring. Sherlock never even glanced toward them as he walked. John did glance at them, he couldn’t help it; he had never seen anything like that in his entire career. Except possibly at the All-Star Game. Maybe it was like that at the World Series, but he’d never gotten that far.

The reporters didn’t pay much attention to him. They continued to shout questions in Sherlock’s wake. John reached Sherlock’s car, where Sherlock had already gotten in and turned on the engine, and Sherlock shifted as soon as John slid in. The car was careening out of the parking lot before John had even managed to close the door.

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John stood under the spray of the shower in Sherlock Holmes’s spare bathroom and wondered exactly how he’d gotten there. He should have gotten in his car. He should have gotten in his car and driven away and been back in his hotel room right now. And instead he decidedly was not. He was losing his mind. But Sherlock had been silent on the entire drive back to his house, and he had been tense, his fingers closed almost painfully around the steering wheel. Normally Sherlock drove so casually, drove like a virtuoso, drove like a man who played the violin, and John didn’t really like to see Sherlock upset. When Sherlock was content, he was breathtaking. John saw it whenever he caught for him, had seen it again when Sherlock had been lost in his equations, pleased with his thoughts. When Sherlock was restless and displeased, John felt answeringly jarring and unsettled. John wanted to do whatever he could to coax him out of it, get him back into his quicksilver
rhythm of dazzlement. And, apparently, if the astonishment on Greg’s face was anything to go by, the ability to pull Sherlock out of displeasure was not particularly common.

John turned to let the heat of the water hit his troublesome shoulder and wondered what was wrong with him. He barely knew Sherlock. He’d had only a handful of conversations with him. And yet he wanted to know everything about him. He wanted to know the meaning of Sherlock’s offhand remark about drug habits. John didn’t think it was steroids. Sherlock was whippet-thin, John knew from his research of him that he’d always been so. He wanted to know if he was always that dogged by reporters. He wanted to know how Sherlock had ever ended up playing baseball in the first place. He wanted to hear him play that violin. He wanted to make him more tea. He wanted to ask him why Sherlock had gone to spring training because John had asked him to. He wanted to know what Sherlock was like after a victory, after a defeat, after a shag—

John opened his eyes and ruthlessly quelled that thought. He had to stop that. He had to stop thinking things like that. Everything about this was dangerous. He had to get away from Sherlock Holmes, he had to get his head clear of him, he had to.

John reached out and adjusted the temperature of the water so that it was freezing cold.

***

Sherlock lay on his sofa, his fingers steepled against his lips and his eyes closed, and listened to the shower shut off over his head. John would be a quick dresser, Sherlock thought. Certainly he’d worn nothing so far that indicated he gave any particular thought to his clothes. He would be imprecise about drying, too, Sherlock concluded. He would come downstairs in certainly not more than two minutes, still damp in places. He wondered what John would say if Sherlock catalogued those places. You could have dried the small of your back a bit more thoroughly, he would say, and what would John say in response to that. His dark blue eyes would go a bit wide, possibly. His mouth might set in a firmer line. John had a stubborn mouth. Even when he was not being stubborn, even when he was smiling, the stubbornness lurked there, in the creases of the lines around it. Sherlock let that thought spin away, went back to his mental catalogue of what John would look like when he emerged fresh from the shower. His hair would be all mussed, hastily finger-combed because there were no other implements upstairs for him to use. John Watson’s untidy hair made Sherlock’s stomach feel odd. He was going to have to examine that further.

John marched into the room right on schedule.

“Oh, good,” said Sherlock, without opening his eyes. “I could do with a cup of tea.”

“I’m going to need to go get myself clothes,” John announced, dully predictable. Sherlock had known that was coming.

“I left a dressing gown out for you,” Sherlock replied, mildly.

“I am not walking around wearing your dressing gown.”

“Why not?”

“I am going back to my hotel room, I am going to put on clothes I haven’t slept in, and I’m going to properly brush my teeth.”

“And then you’ll come back,” Sherlock concluded.

“Sherlock.” Sherlock, his eyes still closed, felt John move over to sit on the chair across from the sofa, could feel his gaze intent on him. “I am not living with you.”
“You’re the only one who keeps saying that,” Sherlock pointed out. “Do you think you’re living with me?”

“No, because I’m not.”

“It’s just that you seem to feel the need to say out loud, fairly often, that you’re not living with me, and I’m not sure why something that is true would need to be said so often. You don’t see anyone walking around inserting into conversation every so often, ‘The sky is blue.’ If they did that, you’d ask them if there was reason to doubt the veracity of that statement.”

“You seriously want me to move in here with you? You don’t think people will talk?”

“People do little else. And I thought you weren’t living with me.”

“I’m not. I’m just saying that if I were to move in with you—”

“Which you’re not,” inserted Sherlock.

“Exactly. Which I’m not. But people would talk.”

Sherlock sighed and opened his eyes and held out his hand blindly while keeping his gaze on the ceiling. “Pass me my computer.”

“It’s on your stomach,” John replied.

Sherlock waggled his fingers meaningfully, not seeing John’s point.

He heard John sigh heavily and get up, and then he felt the laptop get plucked off his stomach and inserted into his waiting hand. He opened it, shifted just enough to be able to see the screen, Googled their names, and handed the computer across to John. “They’re already talking,” he said.

He listened to John’s silence as he scrolled through the web pages. “What the hell?” John said, finally. “Because I left in the same car as you? We are on ESPN, for God’s sake.”

“Don’t worry,” Sherlock said to the ceiling, “they don’t think we’re gay lovers.”

“This headline says I’m the Sherlock-whisperer.”

“Boring,” Sherlock announced.

“Did you set this up?”

Sherlock, for the first time, forgot himself enough to turn a frown onto John. Which reminded him of why he’d been avoiding looking at him, because the sight of John was not conducive to his thought processes, and that never happened, ever. But it happened with John. Sherlock had been unable to look at him throughout his lecture because John threw his focus, just the sight of him. Sherlock turned away from him again. “Set what up?”

“All the reporters at the field.”

“I never go to spring training, John. Word got out I was there. I didn’t set it up. You did when you made me go to spring training. Dinner?”

Sherlock heard John close the laptop and take a deep breath. “If we don’t have dinner, what are you going to eat?”
“Nothing,” Sherlock answered, honestly.

“What did you do before you met me?”

“Didn’t eat.”

“And how did you not die?”

“Sheer force of will,” answered Sherlock, only half-joking.

He heard John stand up. “I’m going back to my hotel room,” John announced.

This was a less desirable outcome than the one Sherlock would have preferred, where John didn’t leave, but it was more desirable than an outcome where John left and didn’t come back, so he clarified that. “And then you’ll come back for dinner.”

“And then I’ll meet you somewhere for dinner.”

“Fine,” Sherlock agreed, immediately, before John could change his mind. “I’ll text you.”

“How do you know my cell phone number?”

Sherlock closed his eyes. “Don’t ask stupid questions.”

“I’m not living with you, you know.”

“The sky is blue,” responded Sherlock, and listened to John walk out of the house and close the door.
As he drove back to the hotel, John found himself thinking that his car was kind of dull. And then he cursed himself for thinking it. There was nothing wrong with his car. So it wasn’t…flashy. He wasn’t a flashy person. He had never been a flashy person. He was the person who blended into the background. A fifteen-year career as a professional baseball player and his face had never appeared as the lead story on ESPN; he had never been hunted by reporters. They followed the players who drove Aston Martin convertibles and made an effort to be a larger-than-life personality. Not that John thought Sherlock’s larger-than-life personality was an act. He thought Sherlock really was the odd, impossible way he was.

And he found that alluring. There was so much wrong with him, he couldn’t even begin to list it, he thought.

He was walking through the lobby when the woman called his name. This was such an unusual occurrence that he couldn’t help but stop in reaction.

She walked up to him, held out her hand without preamble, and said, “I’m Sally Donovan.”

“Okay,” he agreed, slowly, shaking her hand and not bothering to introduce himself, since she clearly knew who he was.

“I’m covering the team,” she continued.

“You’re a reporter,” he clarified.

She nodded briskly. “So you’re a friend of the freak’s now?”

“I’m…who?”

“Sherlock Holmes. You’re a friend of his now?”

John was busy digesting the fact that this woman had just called Sherlock, casually, the freak. “Uh, I don’t know, I haven’t thought to put labels on—”

“He doesn’t really have friends, you know. So what’s it all really about?”

“What’s all…what?” John felt like he didn’t know what to make of this conversation.

“Did you just follow him home one night? Like a stray dog?”

John felt his anger start to kick in. “Look, I don’t know what it is you expect me to say, but you’re not getting any sound bite from me about Sherlock Holmes, okay?”

“You’re not his friend. He doesn’t have friends. So who are you?”

“I just met him,” John said, defensively, because wasn’t that what he kept saying to himself? “And I’m his catcher.”

“Being his catcher doesn’t mean you have to be his friend. I covered him with his last team. I’ve been covering him since the beginning. Bit of advice: Stay away from him. He’s a psychopath.”
“Why would you say that?” Sherlock seemed like a lot of things, but John wouldn’t have described him as a psychopath.

“Does he seem normal to you? Anyway, off-the-record advice from me to you: Be his catcher if you have to but keep your distance.”

And, with that, Sally Donovan walked off.

John stood in the lobby staring after her, bewildered. What had that been about? Completely unsolicited, and, it seemed to John, unfair. Sherlock was odd, yes. He wasn’t a psychopath. He wasn’t a freak. Unkind words to throw around about someone when he wasn’t even there to defend himself.

John went to his room and found a change of clothing, because nothing some random reporter had said was going to cause him to cancel the dinner plans. His phone dinged with a text from Sherlock, with the name of a restaurant and then, *It has a website. On the Internet. With directions. SH.* It was a sarcastic text, John knew, and it didn’t matter, his heart gave a little leap at it, at the prospect of the dinner ahead of him, and he found himself giving second thoughts to the outfit he’d selected. Okay, he was clearly looking forward to this dinner so much that Sally Donovan could possibly have told him Sherlock Holmes was a murderer and he wouldn’t have given it a second thought. And this was why he couldn’t move in with Sherlock. The idea made no sense to begin with, but he couldn’t move in with a man he felt like this about when that man had already made it clear that he was only interested platonically. That way lay utter madness. He couldn’t do it.

And when had he actually started considering this in any sort of serious way? He barely knew Sherlock. He hadn’t had a roommate since he’d been called up. Why would he be thinking about having one now?

He knew why. Because he was attracted to Sherlock, yes, but, more dangerously, he liked Sherlock. And it was clear, from what John had read, from Sally Donovan in the lobby, that, for whatever reason, not many people did. Yes, Sherlock was crazy and frustrating and infuriating, but he was unbelievably interesting, unlike anyone else John had ever met. John couldn’t imagine ever being bored of him, of the rapid-fire way his mind worked, of the insane things he said and did. He would be on his toes all the time, and John liked that. Sherlock was right, he liked being challenged; he thrived on it and always had. And Sherlock was the very definition of “challenging.”

Plus, John thought Sherlock needed a bit of taking care of. He thought no one had ever made the effort to do it before. Sherlock was a sublime pitcher, but he needed some discipline pressed into his routine to make him truly shine up to his potential. He needed someone to make sure he ate and make sure he slept and keep him from getting so bored that he sank into depression. Despite his nickname, it had been a long time since Doctor Watson had encountered a pitcher who needed his attention as much as it was clear Sherlock did. And Sherlock wasn’t even fighting that, had asked John to move in with him. Sherlock clearly knew he was lonely, even if he wasn’t saying that out loud, even if the only person who would ever be allowed to see that was John.

John changed, these thoughts chasing each other through his mind, and then gnawed on his bottom lip as the elevator took him down to the lobby. What was this train of thought? He needed to stop this. He wasn’t going to move in with Sherlock. He wasn’t. He wasn’t. *A lifetime of being so incredibly careful with his sexuality that he was fairly sure not even his parents suspected, and now he was going to risk it all by moving in with a man he wasn’t even sleeping with? A man who was plainly difficult to get along with? That was ridiculous. He told himself to pull himself together and handed his claim ticket for his car to the valet.*
The car that drove up wasn’t his. It was a sleek, black town car. The back door opened and a woman’s voice commanded from the dimness inside, in a cool British accent, “Do get in, Doctor Watson.”

John looked around. The valet had conveniently disappeared. Actually, the entire front of the hotel was deserted. John steeled himself and ducked his head into the car. There was a single woman in the backseat, dressed in a business suit, tapping away at a BlackBerry. She didn’t look up at him.

What was it with mysterious women accosting him all of a sudden? “Sorry,” John said, and then wondered why he was apologizing for interrupting her when she was the one who’d driven up and started giving him commands. “But…what?”

She glanced at him, looking extremely bored. “Get in. You must understand that you don’t have a choice.”

John leaned out of the car, looked around again. Still deserted. He put his head back in the car. “Did you get everyone out of here?”

She sighed and tapped away at her BlackBerry.

John considered his choices. He could raise the alarm and never find out what this was all about, or he could satisfy his curiosity. He slid into the car, closed the door, and said to the woman, “Is this about how Sherlock Holmes is a psychopath and I should stay away from him?”

She just looked at him then went back to typing as the car slid into motion.

John persevered, deciding to go to something more basic. “What’s your name, then?”

“Er,” she said, without looking up. “Anthea.”

“Is that your real name?”

“No,” she answered, unapologetically.

“I’m John,” he offered, a bit stupidly.

She confirmed that stupidity. “Yes, I know.”

“Any point in asking where I’m going?”

“None at all,” she replied, still unapologetic.

John sighed and looked out the window. He didn’t know the area, but they were driving through an industrial section, and he doubted this was the way to Sherlock’s restaurant choice.

Eventually the car drove straight into a warehouse and drew to a stop. Anthea made a motion with her head indicating he ought to get out of the car.

“Okay,” said John, more to himself than to her, and took a deep breath and opened the door.

There was a single man waiting for him, dressed in a suit and leaning on an umbrella. Beside him was a chair.

He said, gravely, “John.”

“Okay,” John said in reply.
“Have a seat, John.”

Another British accent. John hadn’t had so many British accents around him in twenty years. This was definitely about Sherlock. So John refused to sit down and lifted his eyebrows and said, “You know, I’ve got a phone. I mean, very clever and all that, but you could just phone me. On my phone.”

“When one is avoiding the attention of Sherlock Holmes, one learns to be discreet, hence this place. Your leg must be hurting you. Sit down.”

Actually, his leg wasn’t hurting him. John gritted his teeth and said, “I don’t want to sit down.”

The man peered at him. “You don’t seem very afraid.”

“You don’t seem very frightening.”

The man laughed. “How very brave of you. Bravery is by far the kindest word for stupidity, don’t you think? What is your connection to Sherlock Holmes?”

Bingo, thought John. “I’m his catcher.”

“Aside from the professional. The two of you have been a bit inseparable, especially by Sherlock’s standards. Might we expect a happy announcement by the end of the week?”

Everything about that particular turn of phrase was a bit too close to home for John’s comfort. “Who are you?”

“An interested party.”

“Interested in Sherlock? Why? I’m guessing you’re not friends.”

“You’ve met him. How many friends do you imagine he has? I am the closest thing to a friend that Sherlock Holmes is capable of having.”

“And what’s that?”

“An enemy.”

“An enemy?”

“In his mind, certainly. If you were to ask him, he’d probably say his archenemy. He does love to be dramatic.”

John looked pointedly around the deserted warehouse. “Well, thank God you’re above all that.” His phone dinged with a text message and he glanced at it. Come at once if convenient. SH. He must be late for dinner, thought John.

The man did not look amused. “I hope I’m not distracting you.”

John slid his phone back into his pocket. “Not distracting me at all.”

“Do you plan to continue your association with Sherlock Holmes?”

“I’m his catcher,” John pointed out.

“Beyond that.”
“I could be wrong, but I think that’s none of your business,” said John, evenly.

“It could be.”

“It really couldn’t.”

“If you were to…continue your association with him, I’d be happy to pay you a meaningful sum of money on a regular basis to ease your way.”

“Why? In exchange for what?”

“Information. Nothing indiscreet. Nothing you’d feel…uncomfortable with. Just tell me what he’s up to.”

“Why?”

“I worry about him,” said the man, in the least comforting, most sinister tone of voice ever. “Constantly.”

“That’s nice of you,” quipped John.

“But I would prefer for various reasons,” continued the man, as if John hadn’t spoken, “that my concern go unmentioned. We have what you might call a…difficult relationship.”

John’s phone dinged again. If inconvenient, come anyway. SH. “No,” said John, reading the text.

“But I haven’t mentioned a figure.”

John slid his phone back into his pocket. “Don’t bother.”

The man looked distinctly unamused. “You’re very loyal very quickly.”

“No,” said John, although he didn’t know why he was behaving as if that were an insult. “I’m not. I’m just not interested.”

“Could it be that you’ve decided to trust Sherlock Holmes, of all people?”

“Who says I trust him?”

“You don’t seem the kind to make friends easily.”

It was true. He never had been. Maybe Sherlock wasn’t the only lonely one. John set his jaw firmly and asked, “Are we done?”

“You tell me,” said the man. “I imagine people have already warned you to stay away from him, but I can see from your left hand that’s not going to happen.”

“My what?” John couldn’t resist asking, and hated himself for it.

“Show me,” said the man, and John held up his left hand. The man reached for it.

John jerked it away. “Don’t.”

The man lifted his eyebrows, and, after a moment, John consented for him to touch his hand. “Remarkable,” the man breathed.

“What is?” John practically snapped, annoyed he had let the conversation reach this point.
“You have an intermittent tremor in your left hand. You’re under stress right now, and your hand is perfectly steady.” The man dropped his hand and sent him a smile John didn’t like. “Welcome back,” he said, and then he walked away, swinging his umbrella jauntily.

John stared after him until Anthea stepped forward, still tapping away on her BlackBerry. “I’m to take you home,” she said.

“Actually,” John replied, after a second, “I’m going to a restaurant.”
Chapter Seven

The restaurant was a bit bigger than the last place, but not by much. And John had no idea what type of food it was. He waved away the help of the hostess and wended his way to the table where Sherlock was seated, slumped down, fingers steepled against his mouth in what John was recognizing was his thinking pose.

“Hello,” John said, sliding into the chair opposite him.

“I think that Rothchild can be taught, and Phillips can pitch passingly well if he stops with that ridiculous delivery that’s going to destroy a tendon, but West is a complete idiot, he lowers the IQ of the entire street when he talks.”

“Oh,” said John. “Are we jumping right into this? Can we talk about something else first?”

He felt Sherlock narrow his eyes across the table at him. “You didn’t drive your car here. Why not?”

“Because I met a friend of yours.”

Sherlock looked shocked. “A friend?”

“An enemy,” John corrected.

Sherlock’s expression lost the surprise. “Oh,” he said. “Which one?”

Who was this man, and what was his life that he was shocked at the idea of having friends but didn’t blink twice over having enemies? “Well, your archenemy, according to him. Do people even have archenemies?”

Sherlock ignored the question. “Did he offer you money to spy on me?”

“Yes,” John answered.

Sherlock regarded him. “Did you take it?”

“No.”

“Pity, we could have split the fee. Think it through next time.”

John sighed. “Who is he?”

“The most dangerous man you’ve ever met and not my problem right now. West is my problem—”

“No, no,” John interrupted him. “We’ll get to West. First we’re dealing with this. Who is he? Do you know? Is he some sort of…strange stalker fan? Do you get those?”

“If you consider women slipping me knickers in obvious ways they consider to be extremely stealthy to be strange stalker fans, then yes, I get those.”

“Yeah, speaking of women, I met another one of your biggest fans.” At Sherlock’s raised eyebrows of mild interest, John provided, “Sally Donovan.”
Sherlock made his *ugh* noise of disgust. “Sergeant Donovan.”

“She was in the army?”

“No, I just call her that because she thinks she can order everyone around.”

“Why not General?”

“I don’t want to give her that much credit. Are you ready to order?”

John followed Sherlock’s glance to the waiter who arrived at their table. John hadn’t even looked at the menu yet. He passed his eyes over it hastily. “This,” he said, pointing at random. “And because I know he didn’t order anything, he’ll have this, and this, too. Thanks.” John handed his menu to the waiter.

“How did you know I didn’t order anything?” Sherlock asked, curiously.

“Because I know you,” John replied, calmly. “What sort of food is this, anyway?”

“Malaysian,” Sherlock said, without interest. “And I’m not hungry.”

“You chose this place, so you’re eating the food. Don’t you want to know what Sally said?”

“I already know what she said.” Sherlock waved his hand around dismissively. “Can we talk about baseball now?”

John looked at him, elegant and impatient across the table, and thought of how many people had warned him not to like this man, had warned him that this man was unlikeable, and how Sherlock knew that and accepted it. John realized that despite all of this he wanted to talk baseball with him. He wanted to talk about lots of things with him. He liked this man, he liked this man too much, and he hated being told what to do. He didn’t know his mind was made up until he said, “I’m going to move in with you.”

Sherlock just said, “I know. Now let’s talk about this rotation you envision.”

***

Sherlock spent the following day telling every single pitcher on the team exactly what he was doing wrong. He was in his element, and that night he ate a full meal enthusiastically, without John even having to prompt him. The day after that, he finally pitched himself, demonstrating proper form, proper grip, proper motion. John had one of the other catchers catch for him because John wanted to see the demonstration for himself, and it was gorgeous. John knew that, to Sherlock, it was entirely algorithmic, that the positioning of his fingers just so would result in *that*, but John had never seen anything that personified the poetry of baseball more than Sherlock Holmes in motion.

Living with Sherlock was surprisingly easy. John actually forgot after only a few hours what it had been like to live alone. Sherlock took up entirely too much room for one person, was annoyingly overdemanding, rude, and petulant, prone to silent sulks and unexpected fits of temper that had him hurling barbed insults wildly around the house, but John, weirdly, found the chaos comforting. It seemed to suit him. He thought this was alarming and probably a sign he needed therapy, but he liked life with Sherlock. It was as if, to balance Sherlock’s melodrama, John was required to be calm and grounded. He had never felt more *right*. His entire career had been a search for the next accolade, but now, suddenly, he was content in the maelstrom of the pitcher whose house he was sharing. He liked the violin music at three o’clock in the morning, it made his insomnia seem less
lonely. He liked making Sherlock constant cups of tea, because he was making tea for two instead of one. And he especially liked it when Sherlock smiled at him. Sherlock never smiled when they were at the field, ever, but he smiled at John when they were home, just the two of them, small rusty smiles, his bow of a mouth seemingly unused to the motion of curving. When Sherlock was in the mood, he talked to John constantly, babbling streams of words that always, eventually, devolved into terse questions that he spit at John while studying him, narrow-eyed. John always felt as if Sherlock was giving him quizzes at these moments. He was never sure whether or not he was passing them.

The press did not seem to think anything of the new living arrangement. They’d picked up on it, of course—it would have been hard to hide it, really—but Sherlock Holmes was at spring training, so clearly John Watson was a fantastic influence on him and, if he needed to be a live-in support system, who were they to say anything? Genius loves an audience. John caught sight of Sally Donovan once or twice. She always shook her head at him and once shouted a suggestion that he should take up fishing.

John ignored her. He refused to think about the mysterious man in the suit. He thanked the baseball gods—the only gods he believed in—that no one had yet suggested that he and Sherlock might be having sex. Not that they were having sex, but, well, they had plenty of sex in John’s imagination, and he wasn’t confident he could dodge questions about their relationship without blushing at this point. He had never spent so much time in the shower. Sherlock drove him to distraction effortlessly. One of Sherlock’s knowing smirks was enough to get him hard on its own. At times Sherlock would explain things while absent-mindedly fondling a baseball in his hand, and John had to look elsewhere for fear of giving himself away. If Sherlock noticed, he said nothing. Sherlock seemed to notice everything, but maybe this was a willful blind spot on his part. John needed to believe that in order to be able to face him over the breakfast table every morning. At least John was enough of a professional to keep himself under control behind home plate. It was the only way he wasn’t behaving like a teenager. Sherlock pitching may have been one of the hottest things John had ever seen, but he was handling it very well, by God.

The rest of the team showed up, and like every other team John had been on he liked some of them and disliked others. Sherlock, of course, hated each and every single one of them. John was treated to a detailed lecture on their faults during the drive home that night, and another exasperated query into whether he really believed he could win the World Series with this team. John thought Sherlock had never previously considered baseball to be a team sport and had no idea what to make of this new insistence that he think of it in such a way.

On the night before his first start of spring training, John asked him if he had any routines to follow. Sherlock was curious about the question.

“Like what?” he said, cocking his head.

“I don’t know. Special foods, lucky movies, something like that. Some sort of superstition.”

Sherlock snorted. “Superstition. Don’t be ridiculous, John.”

“Don’t tell me you’re not superstitious. Oh, of course you’re not superstitious. Bloody hell, I’m going to have to be superstitious for the both of us.” John could feel his accent getting more pronounced the longer he lived with Sherlock. His mother was surely going to notice the next time he spoke to her. John considered this while he automatically made them tea, trying to figure out how to explain the Sherlock-ness of Sherlock.

Sherlock made his ugh noise. “What is this?”
John came out of his deep train of thought to realize that he had handed Sherlock his cup of tea, only to have it rejected. “Oh,” said John. “I wasn’t paying attention. What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s green tea. The night before a game you’re serving me green tea.”

“Drink the tea, it could be good luck.”

“Or it could be cursed,” Sherlock muttered, darkly.

“I guess we’ll find out tomorrow,” John rejoined, cheerfully.

***

John was nervous the next morning. Sherlock, of course, noticed.

“Why are you nervous?” he asked, frowning over the cup of tea John handed him in what had become their morning routine.

“I’m not nervous,” John denied.

“Don’t worry, no one expects you to get any hits or anything like that.” Sherlock blew on his tea and sipped it.

“Well, thank God expectations are low,” John drawled.

“All you have to do is catch the balls I throw at you. You’ll be fine.” Sherlock shrugged, lifting one shoulder, elegant, slouched in the chair and dressed in pearl gray again. Sherlock seemed to favor the pearl gray shirt. John preferred the plum one.

He looked so disinterested and relaxed that John couldn’t help but ask, “Don’t you ever get nervous?”

“Over what?” Sherlock looked as if he thought that John’s question was a waste of his time to consider, that it should never have been asked in the first place.

“Pitching.” It was the first time he’d be seen by his new team’s fans—whatever number of them might exist. The first time he’d pick up a ball as the undisputed ace of a rotation, with all the responsibility that entailed. John thought nerves would be reasonable. John was nervous at catching a game for him for the first time, even a game that meant nothing, an exhibition in which Sherlock would barely pitch and probably didn’t even care about the outcome. John had stayed up late that night studying all the information he could find on the batters they would be facing, as if cramming for a quiz, wanting to make sure that Sherlock didn’t scoff at his moronic pitch choices.

“Why would I get nervous over pitching?”

“Are you going to tell me it’s just a game?”

Sherlock looked at him evenly. “No, I’m going to tell you it’s just an equation.”

John laughed, because he should have seen that coming.

***

John was no longer laughing after the first inning. It was an eleven-pitch first inning, and it was a thing of beauty, except that John had called only one of those pitches. The rest of the pitches had been elegantly executed and nothing like what John had requested. He’d been darting all over
home plate like an idiot trying to catch things he wasn’t expecting, and he didn’t much appreciate it.

“Didn’t you learn the signals?” John hissed at Sherlock when they got back to the dugout.


“No. Not the other team’s. Ours,” John bit out, through gritted teeth.

Sherlock lifted the towel up and over his head, letting it fall down to obscure his face. “I need to go to my mind palace,” he said from behind it.

“I hate your bloody mind palace,” John said, louder than he intended, drawing looks from everyone else in the dugout.

“I have made a note of that in your room of the mind palace,” responded Sherlock, lazily.

John walked away fuming, but, aware of the eyes on him, sat down casually and smiled around easily and pretended everything was just fine.

The second inning took a mere seven pitches, none of which John had called. He jogged to catch up to Sherlock before he’d even managed to walk off the field. “You’re just flat-out ignoring me,” he pointed out.

“Aren’t you on deck?” Sherlock asked, and walked away from him.

John frowned because he was on deck but didn’t feel at all like batting. He felt as if he barely saw any of the pitches thrown at him because he was too busy being furious at Sherlock.

The third inning contained a sharp line drive that clearly irritated Sherlock (his next pitch was all jerky instead of his usual fluid motions) and took him fifteen pitches to get through. John called two of them, but he knew that that was mere coincidence. Sherlock was clearly not paying the slightest attention to any of the signs John was giving him.

“Sherlock,” John said, jogging to catch up to him again. “Seriously.”

“I’m on deck,” Sherlock said, and walked away from him to the batter’s circle.

Sherlock didn’t get a hit but had an impressive twelve-pitch at-bat where he fouled off pitch after pitch after pitch, and he looked smug when he got back to the dugout. John thought he’d really like to punch him.

The fourth inning took thirteen pitches, and Sherlock said, before John could say anything at all, “That’s it for me,” and disappeared to the clubhouse.

John caught a few more innings on autopilot, furious. He had never discussed calling games with Sherlock, but that was John’s job, and if Sherlock had intended to not let him do it he should have said something. Of course, now that John thought about it, he didn’t know why he’d ever thought Sherlock would let him call the game. He was an idiot for being as caught off-guard as he was about it.

John showered quickly, barely acknowledging anyone else on the team. He wasn’t even sure if they’d won or lost, although the clubhouse was crowded when John emerged from the shower, so he assumed the game was over. Greg seemed to want to talk to him, tried to catch him.
“Where’s Sherlock?” asked John, cutting him off. “Is he still talking to the press?”

Greg lifted a wry eyebrow. “You think Sherlock talks to the press after he pitches?”

Of course not. John really was being an idiot today. “Do you know where he is?”

“Haven’t seen him. John—”

“Not now.” John pushed past him, heading toward the players’ parking lot, where Sherlock was leaned up against the DB9, his arms casually folded. “What the hell was that?” John demanded, stalking up to him.

“Not a bad first start is what it was,” Sherlock answered, blandly.

“Shut up,” John snapped at him.

“But you asked me a question—”

“Not a single sign!” John shouted, and he poked a finger in Sherlock’s chest for emphasis. “Not a single one!”

Sherlock looked down at the finger with mild interest. “Not true. Every once in a while you had a decent idea.”

“I am going to strangle you. With my bare hands. You’re insufferable. How did Victor Trevor ever put up with you?”

Something shuttered in Sherlock’s eyes, something that, up until that point, had been open. But it was like a switch being thrown. Sherlock was still leaning casually, he didn’t change his posture, but his gray eyes turned harder than they’d been. “You’d have to ask him that.” Sherlock moved then, stepping out and away from him, and John realized for the first time that, in his anger, he’d practically pinned him against the car.

Sherlock moved around the car to the driver’s side, slid in, and started it. John stood and tried to determine if there was anything else he wanted to say, anything else he should say, what exactly that argument had accomplished, and whether he should get into the passenger seat since Sherlock was technically his ride.

Then Sherlock gunned the car away, answering most of those questions.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Somehow I find myself posting, on consecutive days, chapters where John and Sherlock are in a bed together talking. I repeat myself...

This chapter contains references to brain tumors in a light-hearted fashion, but I do not intend it to seem as if I am trivializing brain tumors, which are, of course, serious and I send all good wishes and thoughts to all those fighting them.

Chapter Eight

If there was a bright spot to the argument with Sherlock it was that it happened so quickly that no one was out in the parking lot to witness it. John stood for a moment staring after him in shock then threw his hands up in the air with a swear and stalked back into the clubhouse.

Greg cornered him, and John realized there was no reason not to talk to him. “Did you want something?”

“Yes. Two things, actually. Could you talk to the press because Sherlock didn’t? And Dimmock and I want to go over a few things with you after that.”

Just what he needed, a press conference and then a meeting with his manager and pitching coach. On the heels of what should have been a triumph and instead had turned out to be an incredibly frustrating day.

John gave the press platitudes about Sherlock’s pitching performance and hedged all questions about his relationship with Sherlock. At least the questions were about his professional relationship and not whatever weird personal relationship they had going on. Then he sat for longer than he wanted to while the clubhouse emptied out, going over analyses of the pitching staff. They were the same analyses Sherlock had done, only Sherlock had inevitably reached better conclusions, which John shared with Greg and Dimmock without bothering to credit the source because he was still annoyed with Sherlock.

When he finally dragged himself out of the clubhouse, he was exhausted in a way he hadn’t been in a long time, and it was then that he remembered that he didn’t have a car. He was about to turn back and ask Greg for a lift when a black car pulled up smoothly in front of him, the door swinging open.

“Get in,” said the ominous man in the suit from the warehouse.

“You again,” said John.

The man looked grimly unamused. “Yes. Me again. Get in.”

“Doesn’t seem like the wisest life choice,” remarked John.

“Do you make wise life choices, Mr. Watson?” asked the man, mildly.
John acknowledged the fairness of the point with a wry quirk of his eyebrow.

“Come now, my brother has gone off in a strop and left you without a means of transport, the least I can do is give you a ride to his house.”

“Your brother?” echoed John, in disbelief.

“Yes, of course.” The man looked as if this should have been obvious.

“Sherlock is your brother?”

“Unless the DNA tests lied.”

“He’s never mentioned having a brother.”

“I’m not surprised; I try to avoid mentioning him as well. He’s always been so resentful. You can imagine the Christmas dinners.”

“Yes,” said John, automatically, then, pausing to really think about it, “God, no.” He couldn’t imagine Sherlock at anything so distressingly pedestrian as a Christmas dinner. With a family.

“Get in, won’t you? You’re wasting my time, and I’m a very busy man.”

“You don’t seem very busy. You seem to spend a lot of time threatening me.”

“Well, what else is family for? And I take umbrage at the characterization of ‘threatening.’”

John considered the man inside the car, and even though it made him possibly the stupidest human being alive, he sighed and slid in. If he got kidnapped, it would delay having to go home and have the rest of it out with Sherlock, which he wasn’t looking forward to.

“I must say, it took you much longer to reach this point than most people who know Sherlock.”

“What point?”

“The I’d-rather-die-than-face-him point.”

John opened his mouth to protest that wasn’t true, and then realized that maybe it was a little bit, and then felt bad. “It’s just that he’s challenging.”

“Oh, I grew up with him. You don’t need to tell me.”

“There’s not really anything wrong with him, he’s just a bit challenging.”

“Yes. And you like a bit of warfare in your life, don’t you?” The man smiled at him knowingly.

John might like a bit of warfare in his life, but he liked it on the field. He wasn’t relishing quarreling with Sherlock. At least, not this sort of quarrel. Not a quarrel about cleanliness of the kitchen, a serious quarrel with hurt feelings involved. He looked across at the man and said, “Who are you, anyway? Sherlock’s brother, yes, so you claim. I don’t even know your name.”

The man hesitated. “It’s Mycroft.”

“Mycroft,” repeated John, flatly. “Well, now I know you’re for real. Nobody could make that up.”

“What’s he like to live with? Hellish I imagine.”
John considered. “I’m never bored.”

“Good.” Mycroft Holmes smiled at him. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

John was no longer sure.

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John expected to find Sherlock on the couch, either actively sulking with loud silence or shooting at the wall again. Sherlock was not on the couch. He was not anywhere on the ground floor. John walked through it twice, even looking in a couple of the closets, as if it made any sense that Sherlock would hide in a closet.

Finally, John gave up and trudged upstairs and noticed that Sherlock’s bedroom door was closed. Not closed tightly, but closed over in a way it never was when Sherlock wasn’t in it, when he typically left it standing wide open. It hadn’t even occurred to John that Sherlock might be upstairs in his bedroom. Sherlock seemed to seldom use his bedroom.

John knocked. He didn’t really expect an answer, so he ignored the fact that he didn’t receive one and nudged the door open anyway. Sherlock was on his back on the bed, fully dressed in a pair of black pants and the pearl gray shirt. He was even still wearing black dress shoes.

“Hey,” John said from the doorway.

Sherlock said nothing, nor did he look away from his contemplation of the ceiling.

John sighed. Sherlock wouldn’t make it easy would he?

John walked into the room, around to the other side of the bed, where he pulled Sherlock’s desk chair out and sat in it. He regarded Sherlock, who hadn’t moved a muscle.

“It’s my job,” he said, finally. “It’s my job, and you have to let me do it.”

Sherlock said nothing, even though John gave him time to speak.

“It’s a team sport, you know,” he continued, eventually. “Have you ever even bothered to think of it that way? It’s not just you out there, winning games by yourself, throwing the pitches you feel like throwing because you find them intellectually interesting. There are eight other people out there who all have jobs, me included, and you don’t let any of us do them.”

Sherlock stayed stubbornly silent.

John sighed again. He contemplated telling Sherlock he’d met his strange brother and that he didn’t know what to make of that. But he found himself voicing the fear that had been nagging at him. “I don’t know,” he said, pinching at the bridge of his nose where a headache was developing. “I just don’t know if this is going to work. Maybe it’s not.”

Sherlock said nothing, and John sighed again and stood and headed out of the room. He paused again in the doorway, looking back at the unmoving Sherlock.

“You’re not nearly as good as you could be, you know. I don’t think you’re nearly as good as you think you are in your head. It isn’t all a mathematical equation.”

John walked to his bedroom followed by nothing but Sherlock’s continued silence.

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John closed Sherlock’s bedroom door. The click of it gave Sherlock the opportunity to huff an impatient sigh toward the ceiling. He hadn’t wanted to do that when it might be possible that John would hear. Not that John was the most observant person, but still, even John noticed some things.

But now that he could sigh impatiently, he found that, well, he couldn’t. He couldn’t summon up all the impatience that he should have been feeling. It seemed to have deserted him. All he could focus on was John saying, I just don’t know if this is going to work. What had he meant by that? John had said a lot of nonsense Sherlock didn’t care about, all that stuff Americans always talked about when they talked about baseball because Americans were completely irrational about baseball. The only thing Sherlock had cared about was that: I just don’t know if this is going to work. What. Had. That. Meant?

Sherlock had been taking stock all evening, sorting through all of his data, reaching conclusions. He was used to reaching conclusions quickly. He never leapt to conclusions; that was a fatal mistake made by idiots (i.e., everyone else). But he reached them quickly, and they were generally correct. His conclusions in the wake of that day’s baseball game were that his slider needed a bit of work, and John Watson could not possibly leave. He could no longer imagine playing baseball without John Watson. Honestly, he had been seriously contemplating giving baseball up prior to that season. It was more the horror of having nothing to do that had driven him to sign a new contract than a desire to continue playing baseball. But now he had John Watson, and things were interesting again. John Watson was absolutely not allowed to put any distance between them. Sherlock was determined this not happen. He would play baseball just to keep being able to spend time with John. He would play baseball however John wanted him to play baseball.

Sherlock rolled himself off his bed. He needed to just tell John that. He needed to simply announce to him, You are not allowed to move out. Things are interesting now. You will stay here. That is all. Sherlock was prepared to say that he didn’t care what happened on the baseball field so long as John didn’t move out.

John’s bedroom door was open, which seemed almost like an invitation since John normally kept it closed when he was asleep. Sherlock paused in the doorway. Now that he was there it seemed ridiculous to just start talking. John was clearly asleep. His breaths were deep and even and untroubled.

Sherlock considered and then decided that he should wait for John to wake up before telling him all of this. And what better place to wait for John to wake up than in John’s bed?

Sherlock found this logic impressive, frankly, and settled himself confidently onto the empty side of the bed. The movement woke John immediately. Sherlock heard the hitch in his breathing, sensed the flinch of wakefulness, knew this was his cue to deliver his speech, and found himself unable to do so. He froze on the bed, waiting for John to kick him off of it, and wondered why he had thought this a good idea. Was he getting stupid? He had a flash of sudden panic that maybe he was losing his mind and getting stupid.

John’s voice, when he spoke, was calm and sleepy. “Did you want something?” He sounded unsurprised that Sherlock had crawled into bed with him.

Sherlock felt so swamped by some unnamable pressure in his chest that he blurted out, “And I’m supposed to just do whatever you say?”

John shifted slowly over onto his side so he could look at Sherlock. Sherlock did not move from his back, watching John warily and surreptitiously out of the corner of his eye.

“No.” John spoke patiently and evenly. “Neither one of us bosses the other one around. We work
together. It’s called teamwork. And it doesn’t surprise me that you’re confused about this basic concept; your brother doesn’t seem like the type to encourage a friendly game of catch in the backyard.” John’s voice was sarcastic.

Sherlock let slide all of the Americanisms in that sentence, sounding so incongruous in the increasingly British accent of John’s voice, and focused on the mention of his brother. Of course. Another visitation. That was such a Mycroft thing to do. “You ought to ignore him,” Sherlock said, a snap in his tone.

“Who?”

“My brother.”

“You never even told me you had a brother.”

“Why would I tell you that?” asked Sherlock, irritably.

“It’s the sort of thing friends tell each other, you know.”

“You never told me about the lesbian older sister named Harry who has two children and whom you clearly adore,” Sherlock pointed out.

“How do you know about all that?” John sounded dazed.

Sherlock ignored him, focusing on something else entirely. “Are we friends?”

“What would you say we are?” Now John sounded confused.

Sherlock considered. He had long found that he was less dependent on labels than other human beings. He found them useful for understanding how people categorized themselves, and thus how their behavior could be compartmentalized and predicted, but he seldom stopped to put labels on his relationships with others. Was he friends with John? He had never considered anyone a friend before. The idea was novel. He turned it over in his head trying to get used to it.

When Sherlock stayed silent, John sighed and, apparently deciding Sherlock wasn’t going to respond, continued, “We’ll work on it. That’s the only thing we need to do. We’ll just work on it together. We’ll get there. Now go to sleep.”

John seemed to settle more deeply, definitively, into his pillow. Sherlock felt all the pressure inside of him lift, feeling absolutely buoyant. John was talking about doing things together, with all of his customary optimism. Doing things together.

Sherlock stole a glance at him. His eyes were closed. On his side, facing Sherlock, they were very near each other. One of his hands was resting on top of the duvet, between their bodies. Sherlock stared at it. With a fierceness that took him entirely by surprise—and Sherlock had never been surprised before he’d met John, that was the marvel of John—he realized he wanted to touch it, wanted to curl his fingers into John’s and feel them curl around his in response. Would they fit? What would that feel like? What would John do in response? Sherlock actually felt his hand twitch of its own accord, as if it thought if it moved quickly enough it might be able to circumvent the steadfast logic of his brain and reach John.

To keep that from happening, Sherlock rolled onto his side and tucked his hands underneath himself. He waited for John to tell him to leave, because surely that would happen, but John didn’t stir at all. Sherlock stayed where he was, as still as possible, hoping that John forgot about his presence, and studied John in the dim moonlight. He would just wait until John fell asleep, he
thought. When John fell asleep Sherlock would get up, go downstairs, and write out his mental notes from the game that day.

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John woke gradually, to a morning-bright room and Sherlock in his bed.

For a moment, John considered whether he was still asleep and dreaming. But Sherlock was fully dressed, on top of the covers, and John’s dreams about Sherlock didn’t go that way, so he was probably awake. And then the late-night conversation came back to him. So late-night that it had seemed like a dream. Sherlock knowing about Harry, which had been strange, although not as strange as Sherlock having no idea how teamwork or a partnership should function. Even though, as John had noted, he should have expected that, given the oddity of Sherlock’s brother. John doubted the Holmes household had been warm and supportive, doubted Sherlock had been able to learn anything about teamwork from such a place.

And then, after that, Sherlock had fallen asleep in John’s bed, just as if it was supposed to be that way.

John didn’t quite know what to make of it all. But, hell, he’d never known really what to make of Sherlock. He thought about him constantly, of course, and he’d developed some vague theories, but Sherlock was fleeting and difficult to pin down. Every time John thought he had some kind of understanding of him, something else happened and made John reevaluate everything.

He looked very young while asleep, the sharp angles of his face smoothed out. He was sleeping very carefully, arranged on his side, hands tucked under his cheek, as if he’d posed that way. John thought it possible Sherlock had fallen asleep that way and not moved an inch the entire night, stubborn enough to keep himself in still submission so as not to wake John, even in his own slumber. His hair had tumbled forward over his forehead, half-draped over one closed eye, and he was in desperate need of a shave, and his ridiculous lips were parted slightly, and, relaxed and free of tension, they were absurdly lush. John looked for a moment at the pouting curve of the bottom one, wondering if he could lean over and nibble on it ever so slightly, just a quick tug, and then draw away quickly and pretend ignorance if Sherlock woke and was confused. John quickly dismissed the thought. He’d never get away with it. Sherlock would call him on it, and he’d never live it down.

Or Sherlock would respond, open his mouth, invite him further in, and John would press him down into the mattress and never let him back up for air, would just never breathe again. And Sherlock didn’t even want John, Sherlock had made that clear, so if Sherlock kissed him back he would be sleepily, automatically, kissing back a ghost, and John wouldn’t even care, he’d take it, he’d always take from Sherlock absolutely anything he could get.

He was so pathetic. He should never have moved in with Sherlock, and he should never have gotten himself into this situation, and it would be convenient if he could just get over it. Sherlock was hot, yes. He was also obstinate and impossible and infuriating, and John should’ve been over it by now, he really should have been. Dammit.

John dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. Sherlock breathed in his bed next to him, incredibly close, incredibly far away.

John rolled himself out of the bed quickly, wanting the distance. Sherlock didn’t even stir. He was still sound asleep when John got out of his shower. So John left him to it and went downstairs, where he got coffee started in the new, thoroughly clean coffeepot he had bought—thoroughly clean only because Sherlock hadn’t yet had an opportunity to do something daft to it, thought John.
—and then realized that he’d left his cell phone on the counter, and that it was indicating a new voicemail.

Curious, John listened to it. It was his sister. *Johnny! Off to a great start, I see! We were all watching, and it was a fantastic game. Listen, Clara and I have the most amazing surprise for you. Are you ready? We’re coming to visit with the kids. Two weeks from now, I’ll e-mail you the complete details. Can’t wait to see you, love you lots, call me back. Oh, and we’re coming whether you call me back or not, just fyi.*

John deleted the voicemail and stood for a second, staring at his dripping coffee and tapping the phone nervously against his mouth. Harry was going to see immediately how much John wanted Sherlock, and Harry was going to tell him what John already knew: that he had to move out and end this insanity before it got to be entirely too much.

John thought of Sherlock crawling into his bed and squeezed his eyes shut. Possibly, it was already entirely too much.

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Sherlock woke with the sure knowledge that things were *wrong*. The mattress was wrong. The pillow was wrong. The smell of the bed was wrong. Sherlock frowned and refused to open his eyes. He wanted to go back to sleep. He had been very happily asleep. He had been in the middle of a dream about…something. He was losing the edges of it now. It had been something…

The bed smelled of John. Sherlock realized that abruptly, remembered crawling into bed with John, the midnight conversation, and his eyes flew open. Yes. John’s bed. John’s room. He had fallen asleep waiting for John to fall asleep. He had *fallen asleep*. Sherlock had never *accidentally* fallen asleep before. Never. This was unheard of. This was impossible.

John was not in the bed with him. Sherlock reached out and touched it. Cold. He’d been up for a while.

Sherlock rolled onto his back. And the light in this room was wrong, he thought. The angle of the sunlight slanting through the blinds was impossible. Sherlock looked at his watch to double-check the time.

11:02. Sherlock stared at the watch face. *Eleven-o’clock in the morning. After eleven o’clock in the morning.*

Sherlock nearly tumbled out of John’s bed in haste. *Eleven-o’clock.* The list of impossible things happening that morning was so dizzying that, were he religious, he would have thought the end of the world must be approaching. He had *accidentally fallen asleep. In John’s bed. And had then slept so soundly that he hadn’t stirred when John had woken. So John had found him there. Accidentally sleeping. And then Sherlock had slept until eleven o’clock in the morning. Sherlock. Who had never slept more than a few hours altogether ever in his life.*

Sherlock hurried down the stairs, trying to come up with explanations or at least excuses. He had to have something to say, some reason to give for this humiliating behavior on his part. Maybe he was sick. Maybe he was dying. Yes. It could be a brain tumor shifting his behavioral patterns. That was probably what was wrong with him.

John was standing over the stove in the kitchen, frying something. He looked entirely relaxed, as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening. In fact, he looked up at Sherlock and smiled and said,
“Oh, good. Just in time for lunch. You slept through breakfast, which was a scintillating meal of toast, so be sad you missed it. Grilled cheese? I was making myself one quickly.”

Sherlock looked at him. The late morning sunlight was strong through the kitchen window. John’s hair glinted more golden than usual in the force of it. His eyes were squinting the tiniest bit in reaction to the light, hinting at the lines that came out fully only when Sherlock managed to make him laugh, which was a more difficult task than Sherlock had ever thought it would be when he had made it a personal goal of his. Sherlock recognized the curve of that particular smile, which was a smile he’d never seen John direct at anyone else, and Sherlock watched for it avidly. Something about that particular smile was specially reserved for Sherlock, or at least had been so far, and Sherlock was desperate to discover what it was to make sure that it always stayed specially reserved for him. He was jealous of John Watson’s smiles, which John handed out easily to most people. Sherlock wanted this one for himself. This rare, precious smile he wanted to lock away so he could admire it at his leisure, whenever he wanted.

And he wanted to taste it. The thought was sudden and shockingly unexpected. He wanted to know what John Watson’s smile tasted like. Which was absurd. Smiles didn’t taste like anything. Or did they? For genuinely the first time in his life Sherlock wanted to kiss someone. He had kissed people, more out of curiosity than desire, and there had been no taste involved, really, other than the unpleasant taste of, well, someone else’s saliva in one’s mouth. Certainly not a taste Sherlock had enjoyed or thought to crave the way other people seemed to. But John he wanted to taste. His smile, the corner of his lips, the inside of his mouth, the tip of his nose, his eyelashes, the delicate shell of his ear, the military precise line of hair along the nape of his neck, the path of his laugh lines, the hollow under his jaw, the crease in his forehead when Sherlock exasperated him—this was a partial list of the parts of John Watson Sherlock wanted to taste just on John’s head.

Sherlock reached behind him and sat heavily in one of the dining room chairs.

John lifted his eyebrows at him. Eyebrows, thought Sherlock. He wanted to taste John’s eyebrows, too. Wanted to taste them raised, wanted to taste them furrowed, wanted to taste the left and the right, his synapses felt like they were clawing over each other in their eagerness to acquire all this data. He sat and stared.

“You okay?” asked John.

Sherlock even wanted to taste John’s voice. Which was impossible. And not entirely accurate. Sherlock wanted to bathe in John’s voice. Sherlock wanted to wrap it all around himself, he wanted to clothe himself in it, he wanted to live in John’s voice, especially in those moments when he said Sherlock’s name.

“I think I have a brain tumor,” Sherlock said, and it sounded like a croak to him.

John smiled at him. “You don’t have a brain tumor.” He turned away, started assembling a second sandwich.

“I’m fairly certain that I do.”

“You don’t. You’re perfectly healthy. You just had a full physical.”

“Brain tumors can grow quite quickly, you know.”

“You’re mad as a hatter,” John continued, removing one sandwich and placing the next one in, “but it isn’t because you have a brain tumor. Here. Eat.” He slid the plate with the sandwich in front of Sherlock.
“I’m not hungry.”

“Is that because of your brain tumor?”

John looked amused. Sherlock was extremely irritated by him and also wanted to nuzzle his nose between the buttons on the terrible shirt John was wearing, because John’s chest was decidedly on the John Watson Tasting List that Sherlock was working on. “You don’t know that I don’t have a brain tumor.”

“I do. Because I’m a doctor, remember?”

“You’re a baseball doctor,” Sherlock reminded him, scathingly.

“Eat your sandwich.” John tapped the edge of the plate.

Sherlock took a sulky but obedient bite without any interest. It tasted like sawdust. It didn’t taste like any part of John’s body. Sherlock knew he was leaping to a conclusion without data there, though. *John, do you taste anything like grilled cheese? Let me just lick your finger so I can see.*

John sat in the chair adjacent to Sherlock’s. “Is this about sleeping so late?”

Sherlock focused on taking another bland bite. “No.” This wasn’t quite a lie. It wasn’t *entirely* about that.

“You don’t sleep nearly enough. You don’t eat nearly enough. I genuinely do not know what you did without me.”

Sherlock studied his sandwich. John’s sandwich was burning in the frying pan. Sherlock was unsure if John wasn’t noticing this or if he didn’t care. Sherlock said, to a crisp bit of crust, “He didn’t put up with me.”

“What?”

“Victor Trevor. He didn’t put up with me.” Sherlock took another bite and chewed as slowly as possible, to stall the conversation entirely. He didn’t know why he’d said anything at all.

John was silent for a long moment. Sherlock didn’t look at him. He didn’t want to deduce what John was thinking. He didn’t want to *know.* Which was so incredibly unlike him that he once again considered the possibility that he had a brain tumor. It was looking more and more likely, in his opinion.

“Too bad,” John said finally, lightly. “He’ll regret that when we win it all in October.”

“Delusional,” sighed Sherlock, and managed to make himself look at John. The force of him at close range was astonishing, his eyes very dark blue at this near distance and very steady. Sherlock felt wide awake and drowsy all at once. He wanted to sit there forever and just *look.* “Your grilled cheese is burning,” he forced himself to say. He *sounded* tired, but his energy level was running so high he could barely sit still.

“My sister is coming to visit,” said John.

Sherlock felt thrown. He felt, for the second time that day, like he had just woken from a dream he’d been enjoying, without being ready to leave it behind.

“I thought I should warn you,” John continued. “I know you already know everything there is to
know about her—although I’ve no idea how—but I thought I should let you know to brace yourself for the special level of insanity Harry brings with her everywhere she goes.”

Sherlock was incredibly annoyed. This was decidedly Not Allowed, the presence of other people around them. Sherlock barely tolerated the rest of the team. John’s sister would distract him, and Sherlock did not like for John to be distracted. Sherlock liked John all to himself.

John lifted his eyebrows again. “Well, that plainly destroyed your good mood.”

“I was never in a good mood,” Sherlock snapped.

“You were in a very good mood. Sleep apparently agrees with you.”

“I don’t sleep.”

“You slept last night.”

“Because I have a brain tumor.”

“Good. That’s the excuse I’m going to use for you when you’re rude to my sister,” said John, and stood and fetched his own grilled cheese.

Sherlock scowled at him and added all of his vertebrae to his Tasting List.
Chapter Nine

John expected him to be at the field. Even on days he wasn’t pitching. On all days when there was a game. John expected him to be at the field. You pitch every five days but I need you every day, John told him. Sherlock thought this was ridiculous. John kept making them absurdly early lunches. Sometimes Sherlock ate them, other times he didn’t, but always after lunch he went with John to the field. Earlier than that, even, if it was a day game.

Sherlock hated this. It was the most boring thing he had ever done. It made him want to quit baseball entirely. Then John inevitably smiled at him, that smile that was rare and precious and just his, and Sherlock thought, fine, he would play baseball a little bit longer.

John liked having him in the dugout, not in the bullpen, and John talked to him after every half-inning, sitting next to him and discussing the pitch choices. The first time he had done this Sherlock had been irritated, because wasn’t it enough that he was sitting there at all, now he had to make conversation? But he gradually came to understand that this was John’s way of making them a partnership. John was trying to learn the way he thought. Sherlock thought this was adorable of him, to even attempt such mimicry. John was the most adorable creature who had ever existed.

Baseball being played by idiotic people who were not John was still hideously boring though.

John did not catch Sherlock’s second start. Sherlock didn’t know whether to be pleased or annoyed about this. The young catcher who replaced John didn’t dare call a single pitch, so Sherlock threw exactly the game he wanted to pitch and was very pleased with his efforts. John was quiet afterward, quiet on the drive home, and Sherlock wondered if he’d done something incorrectly, failed some sort of test, if John was now upset and about to leave. Sherlock had never been confused before John, and now he was almost constantly confused. But Sherlock had never wanted anyone to stay before John. Sherlock had not had to learn anything new in years. Now he was learning John, and he was finding it harder going than anything had ever been before. His frustration level was out of control, but his pride was refusing to let him back away. In an odd way it was his pride that led him to ask, that night, “Are you angry?” where normally he would have been too proud to admit that he didn’t know the answer to that question, to any question. John just shook his head and went to bed early but seemed fine the following morning, making him tea as usual and forcing food on him, so Sherlock decided John had been jealous over Sherlock’s smooth pitching effort with a catcher who wasn’t him. Sherlock wanted to tell John that if he just let Sherlock do as he pleased it could be that easy all the time.

John didn’t catch Sherlock’s third start, either, but he did at least talk to him during this start, questions about the pitches. Sherlock was annoyed because he didn’t like having to answer stupid questions, but it was John, so he bit his tongue and answered as politely as he could manage.

John, thought Sherlock, sitting in the dugout during another dreadfully boring game, was really the most annoying person Sherlock had ever met. And that was saying something because he’d met some incredibly annoying people. But John would not leave his head, and that made him more annoying than everyone else. Sherlock found it difficult to focus when John was around, and John was always around, but Sherlock found it impossible to focus when John wasn’t around, so he sought out his presence at all times.

The pitcher on the mound—Sherlock had no idea who it was and didn’t care—executed a truly appalling breaking ball that turned into a solid base hit. It actually hadn’t been a bad idea for a
pitch on John’s part, thought Sherlock, but it had been delusional of him to think the pitcher could have pulled it off. John was frequently delusional. John was optimistic to an astonishing fault. John thought all things could be accomplished, all evidence to the contrary. John was so bloody annoying, really, he honestly was.

John had jogged out to the pitcher’s mound, was standing there having a discussion. The pitcher had tipped his head down, leaned in to be closer to John, and Sherlock frowned and drummed his fingers against the dugout bench and disliked this pitcher who was currently close enough in John’s proximity to notice that his dark eyes were actually blue. Sherlock preferred for that to be secret knowledge, possessed only by him.

And he was about to lose John for the weekend. Sherlock frowned more deeply. John’s sister had arrived. With much fanfare. With her wife and the two children. There were strains in the family: John’s sister drank too much, there were frequent quarrels about it, the children alternated between being cloyingly obedient or stridently rebellious. Sherlock had taken all of that in with a glance upon meeting them briefly before the game. John had no idea of any of it, that much had been clear. John looked at Harry with unadulterated affection, eyes so soft you could swim in them, and Sherlock had hated her immediately for not deserving it. It had been on the tip of his tongue to point that out, but he hadn’t because John looked happy. Sherlock liked John happy, even when he hadn’t caused it, and that was because John was annoying.

It had been the first day they had arrived separately at the field, and there was some sort of family dinner happening after the game. John had given him a perfunctory invitation, and Sherlock had said, honestly, that he would rather slice off a piece of his own liver and study it under a microscope. John had laughed and said, “That bloody brain tumor,” the way he always did when Sherlock did something he found exasperating, but at least he said it with the tone of voice Sherlock wanted to taste, so that was fine.

They were going to lose, thought Sherlock, mentally assessing the statistics of their starting pitcher, their lineup, and the other team’s lineup, and deciding their odds of winning this game, at this point, with this score, were less than three percent. Bit of a damper on the family dinner, thought Sherlock. The existence of the family dinner was a bit of a damper on Sherlock’s entire life, though, so Sherlock felt he was justified in simply having enough of the game and leaving. It was the first game he’d left early in weeks. As he had never previously appeared at games at all unless he was pitching, he thought he had completely earned the early exit.

Sherlock was not at all surprised to see the black sedan blocking in the Aston Martin. John’s family was being annoying, it only made sense that Sherlock’s family would be annoying as well.

He stalked over and tugged the door open without waiting for it to open for him. He wanted the upper hand in this encounter.

“What do you want?” he snapped.

Mycroft looked up mildly from the sheaf of papers he was reading. “Sneaking out early?”

“No sneaking out, no.”

“John will not be pleased.”

“What do you want?” Sherlock asked again.

Mycroft folded the papers over, placed them carefully next to him on the seat. Mycroft always did everything carefully, deliberately. He had been that way since they had been children. It was
maddening and Sherlock hated it. “He’s interesting, your John.”

Sherlock wanted to say, Not mine. He also didn’t want to say, Not mine. So he said instead, “Move your car or I’ll ram right into it.”

“And harm your precious vehicle? Hardly. He hasn’t left yet. By what sorcery are you accomplishing that?”

“Move your car, Mycroft,” said Sherlock, and slammed the door closed, wishing he hadn’t lost his temper. He stomped over to his car and got into it and revved the engine threateningly.

Mycroft folded. The sedan pulled smoothly away. Sherlock should have seen this as a triumph, but he merely scowled, feeling itchy with displeasure, and when he pulled out of the parking lot he turned the Aston Martin the opposite direction of home and pressed the pedal down to the floor.

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Sherlock had disappeared, but John was preoccupied with Harry and assumed, fairly or un-, that Sherlock was just off sulking. After all, he had been decidedly disapproving of the entire idea of John going off to dinner with his family. A sulk seemed in order.

And dinner was, well, kind of lovely. Harry was in fine spirits, and Clara was a touch quieter than John remembered her being but she smiled at him nonetheless, and the kids babbled with enthusiastic delight about everything about the game, which had been, frankly, dismal, but they didn’t think so. Matt, who was eight and no longer called Matty, he told John firmly. Sophie, who was also eight and still called Soph, so that was a relief at least. They were not exactly twins, as Harry and Clara had each carried one of them, but they had been timed to be close together in age. And John didn’t understand how they had changed so much in just the few short months since he had last seen them. He had to be better about keeping in touch. He really had to be.

He said as much as they exited the restaurant together.

“You should update your blog,” Harry said, and gave him a playful shove. “It’s the worst blog I’ve ever read.”

“I don’t have anything to say. Nothing really happens to me.”

“What about this Sherlock pitcher?” asked Clara. The kids were ahead of them and engrossed enough in a disagreement they were having to not be paying attention to the conversation.

“What about him?” asked John, lightly.

“What about him?” Harry swatted at him again.

“Ow,” said John, not meaning it. “Stop it.”

“You’re living with him.”

“Not like that.” Harry and Clara were two of the very few people who knew about John’s homosexuality. John had never even bothered coming out to his parents. It had seemed like a lot of fuss to make over a lifestyle that his career was never going to allow him to really have anyway.

Harry raised her eyebrows in something like a leer. “Oh really?”

“Really. Seriously. There’s nothing going on.”
“But you want there to be.”

John was sure his tone had given him away. “No,” he said, too quickly, and Harry narrowed her
eyes with speculation. “He isn’t like that.”

“Then why are you living with him?” demanded Harry.

John wished she would drop it, although he’d known she would ask. “It seemed easier.” John
hesitated. They were nearly to the car now, where the kids were waiting patiently for them.
“He’s…I…” John didn’t know how to put it. I like him. A lot. Which made him sound besotted or
something. John wasn’t besotted.

Well, John amended, thinking of how he had watched indulgently the day before as Sherlock had
ruined the brand new coffeepot by growing mold in it on samples from inside somebody’s shoe. He
wasn’t besotted all of the time.

Oh, God, yes, he was.

“John,” said Harry, and John realized he had stopped walking, was thinking about how he was
utterly besotted. He wasn’t just attracted to Sherlock, that would have been normal and logical,
Sherlock was ridiculously good looking, everyone knew that, and when he pitched he was so
painfully sexy John couldn’t stand it, but John was besotted with him. He didn’t just tolerate every
mad thing Sherlock did; he was actually fond of them.

John looked at Harry and shook his head. “It’s not what you think.” And it wasn’t, he thought, in
horror. Harry was thinking he was engaged in some sort of torrid affair. John had barely ever even
touched Sherlock. He was bloody pining for him, for God’s sake.

“I want to meet him,” said Harry, decisively. “Really meet him. Not just that whatever-it-was
before the game thing.”

John had known that this was inevitable. It didn’t mean he wasn’t dreading it. He looked at his
watch without even registering the time. “He might be home,” he said.

“Excellent. Kids! We’re going to meet Sherlock Holmes!”

Matt and Sophie were both enthusiastic about this. He was Sherlock Holmes, after all. He was the
best pitcher in Major League Baseball, by some estimates.

Sherlock wasn’t home. For a moment John was a bit worried about that. He considered texting
him, making sure he was okay, and then thought that made him seem like a nervous, clingy mother
hen. Because Harry seemed determined to wait, John proposed a game of Wiffle ball in the
backyard.

He’d bought the Wiffle ball set in anticipation of the visit. He had memories of joyous afternoons
as a very young child, in an English village where such a thing was incredibly unusual, playing
Wiffle ball with Harry and their father, with improvised rules for a three-person team. So they
divided up, Matt and Sophie and Clara against John and Harry, and they played in the stretching
light of sunset, arguing good-naturedly over balls and strikes, making outrageous, ridiculous plays
in the field that were thoroughly unnecessary.

“It was a foul!” John insisted to Sophie, as she rounded the bases enthusiastically.

“No, no, no,” she countered, giggling. “It was a home run.”
John caught the ball as Harry threw it back to him and playfully tackled Sophie, tagging her to the ground. “You’re out!”

“It was a home run!” she protested, breathless with laughter. “It was an automatic home run!”

“Cheater!” Matt accused, joining in his sister’s fight. “You’re cheating!”

“Hey,” said John, rolling onto his back and grinning up at Matt, “I’ll throw you out of the game.”

“You can’t be the umpire and the pitcher!” exclaimed Matt.

“Cheating!” chorused Sophie.

“Oh, look, it’s Sherlock Holmes,” interjected Harry, a twinkle to her tone.

John felt his eyes widen, and scrambled a bit to see past Matt. Sherlock was indeed standing on the back patio, dressed in one of his sharp suits, watching them. The pornographic bow of his mouth was drawn tight, and his posture seemed tense.

“Sherlock!” Harry continued, walking determinedly over to him, and John struggled to his feet to intervene before the whole thing became disastrous. “It’s so good to really meet you. I mean, that didn’t count before the game.”

Sherlock was wearing sunglasses, so John couldn’t really read his expression. He could tell that Sherlock shifted to look at him as he dashed onto the patio.

“Hi,” John said, a bit out of breath from, well, everything.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock asked. He sounded the way John thought John ought to sound when he caught Sherlock pouring their milk over patches of grass outside.

John glanced over his shoulder, taking in Clara standing casually with the Wiffle bat and Matt and Sophie, looking tumbled and grass-stained and uncertain as to whether Sherlock’s arrival was going to end the game. He looked back at Sherlock. “We’re playing baseball.”

Sherlock’s mouth curled with what was unmistakably distaste. “That is not baseball.”

John thought of the game he knew Sherlock loved, with its mathematical precision, its odd jagged measurements, its physics and algebra and endless statistics. This, John knew, wasn’t baseball to Sherlock. This game with an ever-changing pitcher’s mound, with no walks allowed, with hits that were either home runs or outs, with a shortstop who also played first base who also played center field. This was not Sherlock’s type of baseball.

But it was John’s. And he thought it was a type of baseball that Sherlock should be introduced to: baseball without the carefully thought-out rules but with a joy too huge to be wrestled into a formula. Sherlock should play baseball like this, John thought. Sherlock should understand what John thought of when he thought of baseball. Their partnership would be better for it.

He grinned at Sherlock, and Sherlock actually flinched a bit, as if anticipating.

“It’s definitely baseball,” John said, and reached for Sherlock’s hand. “Come on, you’re going to play first.”

“First?” Sherlock’s voice was almost like a yelp. John had never heard that tone out of him, that normally velvet baritone he had upset so. “I don’t play first.”
“You can’t pitch. It’s a game of Wiffle ball. Come on.” John tugged him into the backyard, otherwise known as the Wiffle ball field, and over to the corner of the house that was acting as first. “This is first—” John began, turning back to him.

Sherlock was not looking at him. Sherlock was staring at John’s hand in his.

“Oh,” John said, realizing and suddenly horrified. He let go of Sherlock’s hand immediately. “Sorry, I, uh, yes, um.” John cleared his throat and swept the now Sherlock-less hand through his hair. “This is first.”

Sherlock said, “Where?”

“Here.” John pointed at the house.

“That’s the house, John.”

John was relieved that Sherlock seemed to be behaving normally. “It’s also first base. Okay, stay there.” He backed away from Sherlock, over to the pitcher’s mound.

“And do what?” Sherlock looked torn between confusion and annoyance. Or maybe they were the same expression for him.

“Play first.”

“But I don’t play first.”

John turned his back on him. “Okay, whose turn is it to bat? Not yours, Soph, you were just up.”

“I’m getting a do-over because you were cheating.” Sophie stuck her tongue out at him.

“Brat,” said John, with a grin, and wound up very dramatically and then lofted the ball easily in front of Sophie.

Sophie swung the bat, sending the ball rolling back to John, who turned and tossed it to Sherlock, who caught it in what was obviously a reflexive motion and then tapped it all over the house. Sophie paused halfway down the baseline, watching him a bit open-mouthed.

“What are you doing?” John asked.

“Well, as this is a house and not a base, I don’t know which part I have to tag to make an out, do I?” responded Sherlock, belligerently.

John’s mouth twitched.

“Are you laughing?” Sherlock demanded. “Because these are your bloody stupid rules to this game you’ve invented that isn’t baseball.”

“I’m not laughing,” John denied, which was blatantly untrue. He wanted to say, My God, you are bloody adorable, but he didn’t because that would reveal how very far gone he was, and how it was so much more than just lust, and how what he wanted to do was press Sherlock up against the ridiculous wall that was first base and kiss him until he relented and laughed as well, that helpless giggle he sometimes had if John managed to surprise him by being amusing.

So, instead, John said, “Give me the ball.”

Sherlock did.
John turned away from him. “Okay, that’s two outs.”

“One!” protested Sophie. “You were cheating before!”

“Who’s up next?” asked John, unrepentant.

“Try a curveball, John, I’d love to see it,” deadpanned Sherlock from behind him.

“Shut up,” John said, good-naturedly, without turning around, and threw his next pitch.
Chapter Ten

Eventually it grew too late to play. The lights in the backyard cast weird shadows on the field, and John and Clara and Harry said the game had to be called because of safety concerns. This got groans from Matt and Sophie and a dry comment from Sherlock about the purity of John’s version of baseball, true to the original idea that baseball should only be played in daylight. John ignored him and herded everyone out to their car. The kids were tired and a bit whiney, and John was relieved, because it meant Harry only had time to say, “We’re going to talk about…that,” with a wave toward the house, before Clara called her to get into the car.

John knew they were going to talk about…that. He wasn’t looking forward to it at all.

John turned and went back into the house. Sherlock was sprawled on the couch, his eyes closed and his fingers steepled against his lips. It was his deep-in-thought look or his pretending-to-be-deep-in-thought look. John knew it was used for both things, but he wasn’t yet able to spot when Sherlock was faking.

“Tea,” said Sherlock, a pronouncement.

John wondered if Sherlock thought tea just magically appeared whenever he said it by name, if he realized that it required John to fill kettles and mugs and locate teabags and check on the state of the milk. Wryly, he walked into the kitchen and filled the kettle without a word, both because that was just what he did when Sherlock said tea and because, well, Sherlock had enjoyed himself at the Wiffle ball game, even as he’d pretended to sulk, and John was still a bit light-headed from the memory of Sherlock arguing balls and strikes with an uncowed Sophie.

The kettle clicked, and John made them tea and carried the mugs out to the living room, where he put Sherlock’s on the coffee table and sat in his chair opposite the couch with his own mug.

“The tea-making form is truly terrible,” Sherlock said, without opening his eyes or making a move toward the tea.

“My tea-making form?”

“My tea-making form.”

“I was going to say, you drink an awful lot of my tea to be criticizing my technique now.”

“Your tea-making form is fine.” Sherlock waved his hand dismissively, still not opening his eyes, then went back to steeple mode. “Your pitching form is atrocious. All the time you spend around pitchers and you haven’t learned…” Sherlock trailed off with a sigh, as if the amount of things John hadn’t learned was overwhelming. “Then again, there are professional pitchers with poorer form than you, so I suppose I shouldn’t criticize.”

“You always criticize,” said John, and sipped his tea.

Sherlock opened his eyes suddenly and smiled at him, looking startlingly normal and very irresistible. “I don’t criticize your tea-making form.”

John’s mouth was dry. He cleared his throat and took a too-large gulp of too-hot tea. “Yes, you do,” he said, around the scalding in his mouth. “Sometimes you do.”
Sherlock was staring at the ceiling, the smile gone, his fingers tapping against his lips again. He made a noncommittal hmm noise, and then, as if picking up the thread of the conversation again, “Only when necessary.”

John supposed Sherlock always thought he was only criticizing when necessary. “Well, your first-base form is nothing to write home about.”

“I don’t play first base.”

“I don’t pitch.”

“But you catch.” Sherlock turned onto his side suddenly, his unusual eyes fastened onto John, all blue and green and gray, and God, what color was that supposed to be? People shouldn’t have eyes like that. “You catch, and you claim that I should be listening to what you have to say, about what pitches I should throw, and how can you pretend to know anything when you can’t pitch?”

“I have a different perspective. That’s the point. I don’t pitch. I sit with the batter and the umpire, I’m closer to the strike zone, and I don’t think exactly like you, and sometimes that’s a good thing. Sometimes people who aren’t you have good ideas.”

Sherlock considered him. “Rarely,” he said.

“Sometimes. And all I’m asking is for an acknowledgment of that ‘sometimes.’ Maybe you let me call the game unless you think I’m being an idiot.”

“That’s what I did last time.”

“You let me call three pitches.”

“Yes, those were the only three when you weren’t being an idiot.”

“Sherlock,” sighed John.

“Why is it so important to you anyway? You’ve very good at being a target—”

“Catchers aren’t targets,” John snapped. “I mean, not entirely. Your catchers always have been because you’ve managed to intimidate all of them, but you’d be a better pitcher if you let yourself be two heads instead of one. You’d be a better pitcher if you let yourself think that sometimes baseball isn’t all logic and math, sometimes it’s that.” John swept his arm toward the French doors that led to their patio.

“That was a mess, John.”

“You had a good time, and don’t even bother trying to deny it. You had more fun doing that than I’ve ever seen you have while pitching a game. Do you even like pitching?”

John had asked it rhetorically, but Sherlock answered it seriously. “I don’t know.”

This gave John pause. “You don’t know?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it. I’m good at it.” Sherlock shifted to look back at the ceiling, his hands back into steeple position.

“You’re…you,” John said, unable to think of a more effective adjective. “You’d be good at anything you put your mind to, really. Why, of all things, did you pick baseball?”
“Because it annoyed my brother,” Sherlock replied, absently, as if it didn’t even matter.

“Your brother Mycroft?”

“I don’t have any other brothers.”

“Well, how was I to know that? You never even told me about the brother you had.”

“Boring,” said Sherlock, waving his hand to wave the topic away.

“Annoying your brother isn’t a reason to become a baseball player.”

“No? Pleasing your father was the reason you became a baseball player. It’s the same thing.”

“It isn’t actually the same thing, and that wasn’t the whole reason.”

“It was at least 79 percent of the reason, John.”

“You’re just making that statistic up.”

“I never make things up, especially not statistics.”

“Yes, you do,” John said, confident and dry, and sipped his tea.

After a moment, Sherlock turned his head and smiled at John again, one of those real smiles that John only ever noticed Sherlock use with him.

“You left the game early today,” said John.

Sherlock shrugged. “It was dull.”

“You hate being at the field when you’re not pitching.”

“It’s dull.”

“You should quit baseball.”

Sherlock’s eyes were sharp on him. “Why?”

“Because you don’t like it. You should do something you like. Life’s too short to do something that bores you as much as baseball bores you.”

“Baseball doesn’t bore me when I’m playing it with you,” Sherlock said, simply, and John’s heart stopped beating in his chest.

“Oh,” he said, sounding strangled, and then cleared his throat self-consciously. “Oh,” he said again.

Sherlock looked back at the ceiling, as if that had not been a remarkable thing to say.

“It must be your brain tumor,” said John, feeling fidgety in Sherlock’s steady, calm silence.

Sherlock made another one of his noncommittal noises. The fact that his mind had moved beyond the conversation was betrayed by his next statement. “Your sister has a burgeoning alcohol problem.”

John blinked at him. “W-what?”
“I thought you should know.”

John stared at him. “What makes you think—?”

“I don’t think, I know,” Sherlock interrupted, shortly. “You should ask Clara about it, she would tell you.”

John sat there for a second, holding his mug and trying to analyze everything Harry had done that day. She hadn’t even drunk at dinner. None of them had, because John didn’t really drink during the season and Clara had never been a big drinker, and yes, Harry did usually like a good cocktail or a glass of wine, but Harry hadn’t even indulged at dinner. Harry was…fine. Harry was absolutely fine. Sherlock was wrong.

How often was Sherlock wrong?

John looked across at him, unmoving on the couch, staring at the ceiling. His brain had already moved onto other things, no doubt, this little nugget of information thrown out there casually, like everything else in Sherlock’s head.

“It upsets you when I pitch,” said Sherlock, confirming John’s suspicions.

“What?” John was still dazed. “No, it doesn’t. I can’t talk about this right now.”

“You don’t talk to me after I pitch. You avoid me after I pitch.”

“I really can’t talk about this right now,” John said, crossly. “What did you mean about my sister?”

Sherlock looked at him in surprise. “I meant what I said, of course. I always do.”

Sherlock was infuriatingly calm about all this, not a shred of empathy, which John should have anticipated but it still made him swiftly angry. Now he was angry with Sherlock. Not after he pitched, when he was aching with so much desire for him that he had to avoid him or completely lose his sanity and tear both their clothes off.

John stood. “I’m angry with you now. This is me angry with you. I’m not angry with you after you pitch.”

Sherlock half-sat up, glaring. “Angry at me? I’m not the one with a drinking problem.”

“You’re missing the point,” said John, heading out of the room.

“You’re misplacing your anger,” Sherlock shouted after him.

Sherlock was probably right about that, so John made sure to slam his bedroom door for good measure.

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Sherlock played his violin. John wanted to go down and snap at him because it wasn’t nice violin music like Sherlock sometimes played in the middle of the night, slow and dreamy. It was violent, jarring and angry music, and it made John lie in bed and frown at the ceiling. He was playing it just to irritate John, and John didn’t want to go down and give him the satisfaction of having succeeded. Eventually, Sherlock must have gotten bored, because he stopped playing the violin, but John never heard him come up to bed. John tried to sleep, tossing and turning and staying stubbornly awake.
Eventually, as the sun was rising, he gave up and went for a run. He didn’t see Sherlock on his way out the door, and that was fine. He didn’t really want to talk to Sherlock at the moment.

He ran until he was so exhausted he wanted to collapse, and then, for good measure, he ran a bit longer, before turning back and running home. He was annoyed, upon coming up the street, to see his sister’s car in the driveway. Really? Already? Sherlock’s car was not there, so she must have chased him away.

John collapsed on the front step to try to put off the moment when he had to talk to his sister, but she must have been watching for him, because she opened the front door and handed him a bottle of water.

“Thanks,” he said, accepting it and taking the opportunity to gulp down at least half of it, which delayed having to say anything to Harry.

Harry sat next to him on the step. “So,” she said, drawing the word out teasingly. “Sherlock.”

John closed his eyes briefly and wished the biggest thing he had to worry about at the moment was Sherlock.

“He’s a little strange. A lot strange.” She said it frankly, not really in condemnation.

“He’s a bit unique,” John allowed.

“You’ve been waiting for him.” Harry leaned back on her elbows. “No wonder it took you so long. God knows there’s only one of him.”

“I haven’t been— What does that even bloody mean?” John asked, irritated.

Harry looked at him in open amusement. “You sound so British. Do you even realize how much you sound like him? How much he’s rubbed off on you? Mom said your accent had picked up, but I wasn’t prepared for this. For any of this. You’re in real trouble here, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t call it trouble,” John said.

“No. Maybe not. He’s in love with you, too, you know. Did you know that? You should have known that by now, but you don’t act like you know that.”

John shook his head. “He isn’t in love with me.”

“He sees everything, but you’re the only person he watches. He doesn’t ever really take his eyes off of you, not willingly, not for more than a second.”

John shook his head. “I confuse him, I intrigue him. It isn’t love.”

Harry snorted. “That’s what love is, Johnny. You don’t know.”

“I resent the implication that I’ve never been in love.”

“You’ve never been in love the way you’re in love right now, and don’t even bother to try to pretend otherwise. You look at him like a soppy teenager. God, that whole game last night, I wanted to be like, ‘Just make out already.’ You were having enough sex with your eyes as it was.”

John bristled. John bristled at the idea that everything Harry was saying was entirely correct, except for the bit where Sherlock, who had so firmly told him he wasn’t interested in him, was somehow possibly nonetheless still interested in him. “I wasn’t having sex with my eyes.”
“Yeah, you were. Eye-sex. All over the place. Not that I blame you. He’s got great eyes. But yeah, bit X-rated. Written all over your face. You’re an open book, Doctor Watson.” Harry patted his knee condescendingly.

John looked at her, all sunny and casual like nothing was wrong, but there were shadows under her eyes, a hollow gauntness to her cheeks that John hadn’t noticed before. John thought of Clara, quieter than usual, smiling only when smiled at. Clara’s eyes used to follow Harry, the same way Harry thought Sherlock’s followed John. They didn’t anymore, and maybe Sherlock was right, maybe that wasn’t just the natural result of an aging relationship, maybe…

“Is everything okay, Harry?” John asked.

Harry faltered, just for a second, but John saw it, before the smile was plastered back on. “Absolutely. Why wouldn’t it be?”

John studied her, squinting in the brightness of the sun. “How much are you drinking?”

Harry stiffened, straightening up. “Why would you ask me that? What did Clara say to you?”

John felt his stomach sink straight through the front step of the house, settling somewhere into the earth’s crust. “Nothing,” he said.

“She must have said something. God, I told her not to mention anything, I told her not to, but she couldn’t just—”

“It wasn’t her,” John repeated, firmly.

“Then how else would you—”

“Sherlock,” he said.

There was a moment of silence. “Sherlock? How the hell can he presume to know—”

“Apparently he takes his eyes off me long enough to be able to see that my sister is developing an alcohol problem,” John said, his voice hard.

“It’s nothing,” Harry said. “It’s nothing.”

“How can it be nothing? If your wife is worried, and someone who barely knows you saw it immediately?”

“You didn’t notice.”

“Because I’m an idiot and I didn’t want to notice. God, Harry, what do you need? Rehab?”

“Stop it. Stop being so dramatic. It’s nothing so— Look, you don’t really drink, neither does Clara, you’re blowing this all out of proportion.”

“Since when is Clara prone to blowing things out of proportion?”

Harry stood up, looking really properly furious with him. “You don’t live with her, you know. You’re not married to her. You don’t know—”

“So she’s making it up?” John asked, amazed by how calm he sounded.

“No, she’s—I mean, yes. Yes, there’s nothing to— God, you should really just mind your own
“Since when do we do that?”

“Since now,” Harry flung at him. “This was supposed to be a fun visit, you know. You weren’t supposed to ruin it.” She stomped over to her car, getting into it and gunning it out of the driveway and down the street.

John sighed and leaned his head back against the door, closing his eyes. He tried to think what he should do about Harry. Talk to Clara, he supposed. Harry had always liked drinking a little too much, but John had always dismissed it as…Harry. But if Sherlock had noticed, and if Harry and Clara were quarreling over it… When Sherlock had said it, John had known it was true right away. John had wanted to be surprised, but he recognized that he had always secretly been worried this was coming. And now here it was.

He heard the Aston Martin pull into the driveway. Sherlock must have been spying on when Harry was going to leave. John kept his eyes closed because he really didn’t want to have to talk to Sherlock at this moment. He sensed him come and stand over him on the front step. Loom, really. John kept his eyes squeezed shut.

“Here,” said Sherlock.

Curious, John gave in and cracked one eye open to see what Sherlock was giving him. It was his baseball glove.

“Let’s play catch,” said Sherlock, and dropped the glove on the front step next to John and walked around the side of the house.

***

“Harry wouldn’t come.”

Clara stood framed against the setting sun at the other end of the field, standing on the very edge of the dugout. Matt and Sophie were running the bases with the team’s young, energetic, up-and-coming shortstop. John felt exhausted. He hadn’t slept at all the night before, he’d gone on a run that had lasted way too long, he had played a game of catch with Sherlock that, while helpful in working through his stress, had been extremely energetic, and then, to boot, he had just finished catching most of a baseball game. John ached all over, including in bits that weren’t physical. He wanted to lie down and sleep forever.

He forced himself forward and stood next to Clara, squinting out with her at the kids.

“What did you say to her?” Clara asked.

John took a deep breath. “What do you think I said to her?”

Clara was silent for a long moment. “John—” she began, turning to him.

He turned to her in response. “Don’t you dare try to sugarcoat it for me,” he interrupted her, low and furious. “How long has it been going on? You should have called me immediately.”

“It’s private,” Clara said, stiffly.

“She is my sister. And you shouldn’t have to be dealing with it on your own.”
Clara met his gaze for a second. She looked brittle, as if, if John pushed just a bit, she’d shatter into a million pieces. John wondered briefly how long she’d been holding herself together like this.

She looked away. “It… I thought I could fix it. Thought she would fix it. Why call you when… This trip’s a new start. She’s promised…”

“How many times has she made you that promise and broken it?”

Clara watched the kids. “I won’t let her. Not this time.”

“What can we do? What should we do? How bad is it?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, John.”

“How am I going to know—?”

“How do you know anything about it at all? Is it really that obvious? I thought… I thought she’d been doing so well. At least so much better than…” Clara trailed off.

“You can’t keep me in the dark about this, Clara,” John said, eventually. He couldn’t tell if he was being gentle or if he was just so exhausted he couldn’t be anything but gentle at the moment. “I can help. Anything you want. For you and the kids. You know that I would.”

“Actually, I don’t know that.” Clara looked at him, her blue eyes wide and expressive. “She’s your sister. How was I to know if you would…”

“Did you think I wouldn’t believe you? Did you think I wouldn’t do anything in my power to save all of you? Her best interest is you and the kids. Of course, Clara. Of course.”

After a moment, Clara nodded, looking away again. “I’ll… keep that in mind,” she said.

John let silence stretch between them. Eventually he said, “Tomorrow’s the last day of your trip. If you could get Harry to…”

“We’ll be at the game tomorrow. I promise. Are you going to catch? Sherlock’s pitching, isn’t he?” Clara looked at him with what was an attempt at a teasing smile, although it was barely a shadow of what it would normally have been.

“Oh, God,” said John, realizing. “You’re right, it is Sherlock’s day tomorrow. I haven’t even thought about whether I’d catch him or not. It didn’t go well the last time I caught for him.”

“So you’ve been avoiding it. That’s not like you. You always tackle everything head-on. Like… this. I’ve always admired that about you, honestly. Harry doesn’t do that. Harry goes roundabout. I wish she wouldn’t.” Clara cut herself off and took a deep breath. “But you, avoiding him like that, it’s not like you.”

It wasn’t. John knew that. He leaned against the dugout fence and said, slowly, watching Matt and Sophie sliding experimentally into second base under the shortstop’s tutelage, “I’m not just his catcher. And sometimes I think I don’t want to be his catcher if it means I can’t be… everything else. And I don’t know if I can be his catcher and still be… everything else.”

“Can I ask you something?” Clara asked, bluntly.

“I don’t know,” John answered, warily. There were only so many questions about Sherlock he wanted to answer.
“Is he good? At pitching. Is he good?”

“He’s…” John considered, blowing out a breath. “He is the best I have ever played with. Possibly the best I’ve ever seen in person, honestly.”

“Twenty years from now, when you’re looking back on your career, you don’t want to say that you didn’t catch the best pitcher you ever met because you were scared. Won’t look good in the interviews,” Clara said, frankly.

John laughed, more a release of nervous energy than because it was funny. Clara wasn’t being funny. What she was being was right.

John hugged and kissed Matt and Sophie good-bye and promised to see them the next day, and then he dragged himself to his car. He and Sherlock had gone to the field separately that day, by tacit agreement. They actually hadn’t exchanged a single word, not through the game of catch, not even afterward. John thought Sherlock was hesitant to say anything for fear John would lash out in misplaced anger again. John sighed. He really owed Sherlock an apology for that. At any rate, John really wished Sherlock had driven them. He really wished he could just crawl into the passenger seat of the Aston Martin and let Sherlock be in charge of getting them home. It was the only thing Sherlock was ever in charge of, really. God knew John would have to come up with something for dinner because that would never have even occurred to Sherlock.

John was relieved to get home. He was even more relieved when he opened the door to the sound of Sherlock’s violin, and it wasn’t angry and lashing, it was something very pretty that John had heard him play before and that he particularly liked.

John walked to the back of the house. Sherlock was standing by the doors leading to the patio, looking out at the yard as he played. He gave no indication that he heard John come in but John knew he must have because Sherlock never missed anything that happened. John took advantage of Sherlock being on his feet to commandeer the couch that Sherlock usually controlled, sprawling out on it and closing his eyes.

Sherlock stopped playing, right in the middle of the song.

“Don’t stop,” John protested. “I like that song.”

“I know,” said Sherlock, and John, wondering if he’d played it purposely just for his homecoming, opened his eyes and looked at him. Sherlock was fidgeting with his bow and watching him with those surreal eyes of his.

“When did you start playing in front of me?” John asked, suddenly. “You wouldn’t, at first, but now you… When did that start?”

Sherlock shrugged. “You’re not an audience. You’re just…you.”

John held his gaze. John wanted to say I’m sorry I snapped at you last night. But he thought suddenly that he didn’t need to say that. Sherlock had already moved past it. He had moved past it when he’d handed him his baseball glove. “I shouldn’t have played catch with you today,” John said.

Sherlock looked surprised. “You needed a game of catch. That’s how you process things. Baseball is your violin.”

“The fact that baseball isn’t your violin is what’s wrong with you and baseball,” John sighed. “But you’re pitching tomorrow. That wasn’t an easy game of catch. I didn’t even think of it.”
Sherlock shrugged again. He hadn’t moved from his position by the patio doors. “I’ll be fine.”

“God, you’re so young,” said John, and scrubbed a hand over his face with a yawn.

“You’re not as old as you think you are,” Sherlock replied.

“I’m very old in baseball years.” John looked at him and thought of the end of his career looming and Clara’s words and said, “I was thinking of catching you tomorrow.”

Sherlock blinked. Other than that, he had no reaction. “Really?” he said, his voice completely unreadable.

“I thought we could give it another try.” John paused. “If you’d rather not—”

“No. That would be fine.” Sherlock’s voice was extremely neutral.

“Okay,” John agreed, after a moment.

Sherlock put the violin back under his chin and resumed playing the song he’d been playing, as if there had never been a pause.

John decided that, well, that settled that. He closed his eyes and listened to Sherlock’s violin and thought he’d get up and figure out their dinner situation as soon as the song was over.

But the next time he opened his eyes it was morning and the blanket from the back of the couch was tucked around him. He spent quite a bit of time trying to determine if he’d pulled it over himself in a sleep-addled doze the night before, or if it was possible Sherlock had pulled it over him. He never came to any solid conclusion on that.
Greg Lestrade could count on one hand the number of times Sherlock had ever shown up in his office. He was the only manager the kid had ever had, and Sherlock had apparently thought enough of him to follow him to a brand new team, but, until he had heard that (reported on ESPN, because God forbid Sherlock pick up a phone and tell him something like that personally), Lestrade had actually never thought they were close. He hadn’t even thought Sherlock liked him. They had still never even discussed Sherlock’s sudden desire to sign with Lestrade’s team.

So to say that Lestrade was surprised to find Sherlock in his office was an understatement. Lestrade was astonished. In fact, Lestrade jumped a mile because Sherlock couldn’t come at a normal time, instead he was waiting there first thing in the morning in Lestrade’s chair.

“Jesus,” said Lestrade. “What the hell are you doing? Since when do you get here this early?”

Sherlock was perched in the chair, feet up underneath him, fingers drumming impatiently on the arms. “The barista’s taken. And beneath you. Honestly, Lestrade, you act out against your wife’s infidelity in the dullest, most predictable ways.”

“You’re so delightful,” said Lestrade, and put his coffee cup down on his desk. “This has improved my morning so much, I can’t even tell you.”

“I need another physical. I called Molly myself, but she said that I had to disclose it to you, contractually. Boring.” Sherlock waved a hand and then instantly replaced it on the arm of the chair, fingers still drumming.

Lestrade narrowed his eyes at the drumming fingers and then sat in the guest chair in his office. “A physical? Why? There’s nothing wrong with you. You just pitched a gem of a game yesterday.”

Sherlock looked interested. “Did you think that went well?”

“Sherlock, you pitched six innings of shut-out baseball, threw seventy-seven total pitches, forty-five of those for strikes, and only gave up two hits. What about that didn’t go well?”

Sherlock considered. “The two hits.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” said Lestrade. “What is this about? I thought things were going well. You seem to be getting along with Watson, at least, and that’s more than I could ever say about you and any other catcher.”

“Do you think we get along?”

“I think I didn’t see him throw anything at a wall after the game yesterday, including his fist, and that’s not generally how people who catch you behave after a game with you, so yeah, I think that was a real improvement.”

“Yes, he thought so, too,” muttered Sherlock, managing to make it sound despicable. “He thinks we make a good team, or some such nonsense.”

“Teamwork isn’t nonsense on a baseball team, Sherlock.”
“Oh, shut up, you sound like an idiot,” Sherlock complained.

“Why do you want a physical?” asked Lestrade, deciding it was time to get this conversation back on track.

Sherlock took an uncharacteristically long time to answer. “I think I have a brain tumor,” he mumbled, finally.

Lestrade had to duck his head to hear him, and even then he was sure he’d translated incorrectly. “Sorry?”

Sherlock raised his voice. “I think I have a brain tumor,” he said, more clearly.

“A brain tumor?” Lestrade couldn’t hide the surprise in his voice. “What would make you think that?”

Sherlock inhaled through his nose. “I have my reasons.”

“Have you been getting headaches?”

Another moment of hesitation. “No, but that’s not as common a symptom of a brain tumor as one might think.”

“Maybe not, but it’s usually why people think they have brain tumors.”

Sherlock drummed his fingers on the arms of the chair and said, finally, “Well, you said it yourself.”

“Said what?”

“I get along with John.”

Lestrade wasn’t following. “And that makes you think you have a brain tumor?”

Sherlock made an exasperated sound of pure disgust, one of his perfect *ugh* noises. “Since when do I get along with people, Lestrade? I never get along with anybody. Ever. I don’t mind John. It’s nice to have him around. He doesn’t prattle on the way other people do. He listens when I speak and the things he does say are reasonably intelligent and mostly interesting. He’s very good at making tea. He has terrible taste in classical music, but at least he doesn’t mind it in the middle of the night. He is unduly optimistic about baseball, but he’s actually quite good at it and he has some not bad ideas about calling a game. I mean, he misses almost everything of importance, but he actually does really well with shaping a game. Do you see what I am saying here?”

Lestrade stared at him, things clicking into place, things he should have recognized so much sooner. The way Sherlock *looked* at John, the way he hung on his every word, on his every movement, the way he was so desperate for John’s approval—Lestrade had never seen Sherlock behave like that before, and he should have started thinking about that so much sooner, but he had had a whole team to build from the ground up, and for once Sherlock wasn’t the most demanding member of that team, and that had been *nice*. Lestrade had thanked God for John Watson and simply let Sherlock fade into the background. “I… Yes, actually.”

“I just gave you a list of things that *don’t bother* me about John Watson. An entire *list*. Not just one thing about him I find tolerable, I find *everything* about him tolerable. The other night he fell asleep on the sofa and I put a *blanket* over him, Lestrade. *I* did. I am clearly dying. I have a brain tumor, possibly pressing on my frontal lobe. Clearly a fast-growing one, the fast-growing ones are...
most likely to cause behavioral changes.”

Lestrade looked across at him, deadly serious in his perch in Lestrade’s chair, fingers still fidgeting about. And he said, slowly, “Sherlock, you don’t have a brain tumor. You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. “Oh my God, now you’re just being ridiculous.”

“You think that’s more ridiculous than the idea that you have a quickly growing brain tumor pressing on your frontal lobe?”

“Yes,” Sherlock snapped. “I do. There isn’t any such thing as ‘falling in love,’ anyway. I mean, not really. It’s all just chemical reactions; they can be controlled and moderated.”

“Oh, can they?”

“Yes. They can.”

“You’re doing an excellent job controlling and moderating your chemical reactions while you tuck Watson in at night.”

Sherlock scowled. “I told you that’s the brain tumor. You can’t control and moderate a brain tumor.”

“You do not have a brain tumor,” Lestrade said, confidently. “You’re infatuated with John Watson. You’re smitten.”

“Smitten?” repeated Sherlock, in horror.

Lestrade felt a great deal of satisfaction in having come up with a word that alarmed Sherlock so much. “Yes. Smitten. I think you’re being adorable, frankly.” Lestrade couldn’t help the smile in his voice. It was kind of adorable, Sherlock with this enormous crush. No wonder he followed Watson around like a puppy dog. It could be a problem in the clubhouse, this manifestation of homosexuality, but Sherlock wasn’t likely to push Watson up against any walls anywhere, and Watson wasn’t gay, so there was really no harm done with any of this, just the lovely sight of Sherlock, flustered.

Sherlock made another of his ugh sounds. “Just stop talking,” he commanded.

“But I’ll call Molly and get you scheduled for a physical, just so we can rule out the brain tumor explanation.”

“Thank you,” said Sherlock, primly. A primness that was undermined when Sherlock had to hop off the chair.

Lestrade managed to wait until he heard the elevator arrive for Sherlock before collapsing into laughter.

***

John couldn’t sleep.

It was past midnight, which meant it was the final day of spring training. What had been the best spring training of his life. Not really stats-wise, although he’d been respectable as far as hitting went, and his pitching staff, while not yet lighting the world on fire, had great potential. All of the
hard mathematical nuggets that Sherlock liked about baseball, if you judged John’s spring training by those then it was nothing special. But by all the rest of it, all the intangibles John loved, it had been, quite simply, amazing.

John wanted there to be reasons for that. It had been the last one of his career, so he had been determined to enjoy it. He liked his new team, he liked the feeling of hope in the clubhouse, he liked Lestrade as a manager and Dimmock as a pitching coach, he liked his pitching staff. But it had all boiled down to one undeniable fact, and he knew it: He had met Sherlock Holmes during this spring training. And that had made all the difference.

And now he didn’t want it to end. This magical spring training seemed stolen to him now. It was all going to be different once the season started. He had a house waiting for him in Austin. His realtor had picked it out, sent him photos, and it looked like something he would like, but John was not excited about it, John’s stomach sank every time he thought about it. He couldn’t just go on living with Sherlock, that was ridiculous, but if Sherlock had suggested it, he would have said, Yes. Please. Absolutely. He wondered what Sherlock would say if John told him what he knew now was true: I am absolutely crazy for you. I will take anything you want to give me, just to be close to you. You don’t have to reciprocate, it’s all fine, just let me love you this way, this terrible unattainable way, it’s better than nothing.

John sighed and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and swore in his head. God, he was in such a bloody mess. He was helplessly in love, with a teammate, which he’d sworn never to do, and with Sherlock, which was somehow even worse because, well, it wasn’t just helpless, it was also hopeless.

Sherlock didn’t knock on the door. Sherlock walked straight into his bedroom and onto his bed without a word.

John wished that Sherlock’s next move would be to roll on top of him and kiss him until they could no longer breathe. But he knew it wasn’t going to be, and that was what was so bloody frustrating about all of this. Sherlock would literally crawl into his bed, but he would never do anything there and it was horrible.

“What?” asked John, trying not to sound short-tempered even if he was.

“You can’t sleep,” said Sherlock. His voice was low and close in John’s ear, and John thought that they needed to both fall asleep before just Sherlock’s illegal voice coaxed him into an embarrassing situation.

“How did you know that?” asked John, resigned.

“Your breathing.”

“Do you stand outside my room listening to me breathe?”

“Only sometimes,” said Sherlock.

What the hell kind of answer was that? Why was he determined to drive John insane with wanting? “What do you want?” John asked.

Sherlock was silent for a second. His breath hitched.

There was a hesitancy to him that had John turning his head, trying to see him for the first time. He was only a silhouette in the dark room, a darker darkness radiating heat and uncertainty all mixed together. John wished he could see him. He stared hard, harder, willing himself to make out the
expression on Sherlock’s face, in Sherlock’s madness-inducing eyes. John knew it was probably just his imagination, probably just wild wish fulfillment on his part, but Sherlock’s hesitation felt…*heavy* to him. It made John think that, if he held his breath long enough, Sherlock would shift toward him, just a signal, and then John could uncoil, could spring, finally, could taste the bow at the top of Sherlock’s lips and press his tongue against the mouth that held that *voice*.

“Sherlock,” said John, slowly, a prompt, a question, a plea.

There was another aching moment of silence before Sherlock said, “Do you really think there’s a chance?”

John tried to think what Sherlock could be referring to. “A chance for what?”

“The World Series.”

Baseball. He was talking about baseball. John made himself settle back into the mattress, forced his heart rate down, told his blood to go back to its usual path, thank you very much. “I do, yeah. Well, we’ve got you, and that’s a start. Unless you’re not healthy.” John frowned, recalling. “Yes, I read today that you’d requested a physical. Are you worried about something? I wish you’d just *tell* me if you were worried about something; I’d rather not read it online.”

“Says the person with a blog,” said Sherlock.

“I never update my blog.”

“I know.”

“How do you know? Do you check it?”

Sherlock didn’t even answer that question. “I did tell you about the physical.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I told you I thought I had a brain tumor.”

John couldn’t conceal his surprise. “That was about the brain tumor? Really? You were still worried about that?”

“I wasn’t *worried*, I just thought…”

“You were that convinced about the brain tumor?” This was amazing to John. Sherlock didn’t otherwise strike him as being prone to hypochondria. “Well? What was the diagnosis?”

Sherlock was silent for a moment. “I don’t have a brain tumor.”

“There you go, then. That’s good news, isn’t it? You don’t sound like it’s good news.”

Sherlock made a noncommittal noise. “John,” he said.

John closed his eyes. Sherlock saying his name, low and intimate in his bed, was really the best and worst thing to have happened in a long time, all at once. “Mmm,” he said, because he knew a response was called for.

“Tell me why you love baseball.”

“That isn’t something I can tell you easily. It’s not something I can put into words.”
“Is it because of your father?”

“Yes. Maybe. But not entirely.” John thought, keeping his eyes closed, wrapped in this moment with Sherlock. “The thing about baseball is that, even when you’re playing it, there’s so much time when there’s nothing happening. It’s like baseball isn’t just what is, it’s what is not. It exists not just in syllables but in the pauses between syllables, in the breaths.”

“It’s like music,” said Sherlock, suddenly.

“How so?”

“Music isn’t just the notes, music is the rests, too. It’s the moments in between the music. What is music but the reshaping of silence? You need to have both.”

“Yes,” John agreed. “Like that.”

“It really is like music to you.”

“A symphony,” John said.

There was a long moment of silence. Then Sherlock said, his voice softer than it had been, “I wanted to be a detective.”

John opened his eyes. He still couldn’t see Sherlock any better, but he felt him roll a bit closer, onto his side to face John. “What do you mean?”

“When I was a boy. You said earlier that I could’ve been anything I wanted. I wanted to be a detective. I wanted to solve mysteries, puzzles.”

“Why didn’t you do that?”

“Most people are so boring, John.” Sherlock sounded sad and tired. “Most mysteries aren’t mysteries, most puzzles are already solved. And life is so dull, so dull…” Sherlock trailed off.

John thought of the mention of drugs, so very early in their relationship. He didn’t want to bring it up now, but he thought he saw where it was fitting in. “And baseball?”

“I like games. This is a game. And my brother hates it. He said the rules were incomprehensible. So I taught myself the rules, and then I taught myself how to pitch. And here you find me.”

John felt suddenly sorry for him. He understood what it felt like, taking one step down a path and then blinking and finding that you were too far along to turn back now. He thought of medical school, so long ago he could barely remember ever wanting to go. “You could still go be a detective.”

“What will you do?”

“When?”

“After you retire.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it. One thing at a time.”

“You could go to medical school.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”
“You’d be an excellent doctor.”

“Because I’m an excellent catcher?”

“I didn’t say that,” said Sherlock, but John could tell he meant it as a joke.

“Look at you. Making jokes. You’re a regular comedian in the middle of the night.”

Sherlock chuckled, a sound that crept under John’s skin. John wished Sherlock would leave; he wished Sherlock would come closer.

“Why can’t you sleep?” Sherlock asked.


“Is it because of the season starting?”

“Are you nervous?” John asked him, instead of answering.

“About pitching? Never. That’s just mechanics, John.”

“Just math.”

“Exactly. I leave the music to you, when it comes to baseball.” There was a pause. “That’s why we make a good team.”

John smiled into his pillow. “We do, yes.”

There was a long silence.

John said, “Are you going to go to bed?”

Sherlock said, “Do you want me to?”

*Yes,* John thought. *No.* “I don’t know,” John said, and that was ridiculous, he might as well carry a flashing sign with him that read *I love you too much to behave like a rational person anymore. How did you do that to me?*

Sherlock sucked in a breath. “I’ll go,” he said, and John saw his silhouette shift.

John reached out and grabbed him, thinking *Idiot* even as he did it. But he said, “No. Don’t. Stay. It’s fine. Last night, right? It’s fine.” What was he even saying? There was another bed in the house, Sherlock’s own bed, but instead John was telling him to stay in his own.

Luckily, Sherlock was Sherlock and didn’t seem to find this odd at all. He settled back into John’s bed confidently and said, “Okay.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Twelve

Sherlock woke feeling well-rested in a way he normally didn’t. In a way he normally wouldn’t. He credited this to John’s bed, and he allowed himself to revel in it, but then, as he let wakefulness gradually wash over him, he began to take in data from his surroundings, and he realized that John was much closer than he had been when they’d fallen asleep.

Sherlock opened his eyes.

Yes. Right there.

John must have rolled in the night, onto his side, facing Sherlock, and there was only the barest amount of space between them. If Sherlock shifted just a little bit…he could kiss him.

The thought was a startling one. He’d meant to think something more prosaic. He could touch his hair, perhaps, or his shoulder. But no. What he wanted was to finally taste him, and he wanted to start with his mouth. He looked at it, lips slightly parted in sleep, lower lip jutting out just a bit in what seemed to Sherlock to be an invitation. It would really be so easy, he thought, to just do it, just press his mouth there and see what John tasted like. It would take almost no effort on his part, and he suddenly couldn’t think of any reason why he shouldn’t do it. He didn’t have a brain tumor. His sudden obsession with tasting John was apparently just that: an obsession with tasting John. How was he ever going to get it out of his system without tasting John? He’d meant to mention it the night before, but the close, dark intimacy had choked him. He’d thought it would make things easier, the middle of the night, already on a bed, but instead it had been too much, like learning to swim in water that was twenty feet deep. Now, in fresh daylight and with John asleep; now seemed perfect.

Sherlock held his breath as he tipped his head, hoping that John wouldn’t wake up before he could accomplish this. What would he do if John woke up? How would he explain this?

John did not wake up. John stayed sleeping. Sherlock considered his angle, shifting himself slowly downward on the bed, cognizant of John’s nose and the obstacle it could present. John didn’t stir. And then, once he had them lined up exactly the way he wanted, he leaned forward and pressed his lips against John’s.

For a moment, he stayed just like that, frozen, absorbing the sensation of John’s lips. Sherlock had been kissed before but he had never initiated a kiss. He had always just permitted the taking; he had never before attempted to take. And he had never anticipated doing it with someone who was sleeping. And he hadn’t anticipated that, his mouth pressed against John’s, his brain would stop being helpful and just shout at him, You’re kissing John Watson! as if that wasn’t already obvious to him.

Sherlock moved slightly, accepting the invitation of John’s lower lip and kissed at it, caught it between his lips with a bit of pressure, just to see—

And then John woke up. Sherlock felt it. He froze, John’s lip comically halfway in his mouth, as if John wasn’t going to notice that. Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut, as if by no longer seeing John,
John would not see him. He was behaving like a complete imbecile, he thought, and contemplated how he was going to back out of this.

And then an amazing thing happened. John’s lips parted further and kissed Sherlock back. Sherlock gulped down a thready breath, feeling all turned around and upside down, a bit as if the bed had suddenly appeared on the ceiling and he had to reevaluate the theory behind gravity. And then John really kissed him, and then John really kissed him, with tongue, and it was better than Sherlock had imagined, it was better than anything ever. Was this how other people felt when they kissed? This? There was more flooding his senses than he could possibly catalogue, John’s taste and smell and touch, and John’s hand came up and cupped around Sherlock’s head, holding him in place, and John kissed harder, and it wasn’t just about the tasting anymore, Sherlock wanted to be tasted. Sherlock wanted everything, no, he corrected himself, mostly he just wanted John, and he tried to kiss back and take mental notes and mostly his head was an alarming jumble the equivalent of a scribble on a piece of paper.

John moved without breaking the kiss, pressed Sherlock back into the mattress, settled himself over him, all while kissing, kissing, kissing. Sherlock realized he was concentrating so hard on trying to kiss John back that he’d forgotten to breathe and he was light-headed, or maybe he was just light-headed, and he hated to do it but he tore his mouth away from John’s and gasped in a breath. John let him get just the one breath before he kissed him again, and Sherlock decided he didn’t care, he could give up breathing, breathing was boring anyway, breathing was the opposite of John, who was John.

Sherlock realized his hands were in John’s hair, the better to keep him where Sherlock’s mouth could get prime access to John’s mouth. Sherlock also realized that he’d hooked a leg around John’s hip to keep him closer, to keep him hard against him where Sherlock was hard against him, and Sherlock did not recall doing any of this, apparently his body knew just what to do, just how to respond, his brain was not needed at all.

John was scrabbling with Sherlock’s shirt, his hands suddenly shockingly hot spread across Sherlock’s belly. Belly, thought Sherlock. A vulnerable spot. A good place to go in for the kill. And then, Shut up, you’re not needed! shouted the rest of his body to his brain, deciding to arch up into John’s caress on the vulnerable skin of his belly, to whimper into his mouth. No, no, no, his brain protested, it wasn’t supposed to get this far, you were just supposed to taste his lips before he woke up and that is quite enough of all of this and—

“Stop,” Sherlock heard himself manage to gasp, and then was immediately torn because he didn’t know if he’d meant it or not. He thought he both meant it and didn’t mean it. He was feeling… overwhelmed, frankly. He had not thought far enough ahead to this, he had not managed to anticipate that John would respond this way, and this had to be examined and categorized and John’s hand was still very low on his abdomen, fingers creeping beneath the waistband of his pyjama bottoms. John had drawn back, frozen, was no longer kissing him, was panting for breath.

“Right,” he said, his voice rough and strangled, and he rolled off of him, still panting, and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes.

Sherlock stared at the ceiling, confused by everything. “I didn’t mean…” he tried to start, but he didn’t know what to say. What he wanted to say was, I didn’t think you’d kiss me back. Do you want to kiss me back? Do you want me? But it seemed inexcusable for him to admit that he wasn’t sure, that he hadn’t read any of the clues, that it had seemed so absurd to him that John Watson would want him that way that he hadn’t allowed for it. People wanted him that way, oh, yes, innumerable amounts of them, but people were not John Watson. John Watson was his own Venn diagram.
“Sorry,” said John. His voice was muffled. Hands over his face. “I’m sorry, I—”

“Don’t,” said Sherlock, hearing the neutrality in his tone and marveling at it. He sounded so very calm, when his mind was a frantic scribble of a run-on sentence with improper grammar. Written in ancient Greek, the most common word being Πολύτοκος. Sherlock rolled himself out of bed without knowing he was doing it. His body was really very alarmingly good at doing things without being consciously told by his brain. Sherlock wasn’t sure he approved of this newly found ability. “That was me,” Sherlock’s voice told John, even and unruffled, and then he even managed to walk himself out of John’s room and into his own, all without being sure that was what he wanted to do. Maybe what he wanted to do was turn back to John’s bed and kiss him, take top this time, lick at his mouth until he’d finished deducing exactly what was composing John’s taste.

But no. He kept walking, into his bedroom, and then he frowned at his unslept-in bed and said, furiously, to himself, “Idiot.”

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John was alternating between fury and humiliation. He was furious because Sherlock had been kissing him, and that should never have been happening, and that was unfair. Sherlock was sending the most mixed signals John had ever received in his life and that had to stop. John tried to convert most of his escalating sexual frustration into fury; he thought that could be very productive. And then the rest of him was thinking that yes, Sherlock had woken him by kissing him, but it hadn’t been a very hard or determined kiss, it had been tentative and uncertain, and a normal person would have drawn back and said, What are you doing? A normal person would not have immediately pounced on Sherlock and groped him.

But that wasn’t fair. John was in love with Sherlock. How did Sherlock expect him to react? Ah, and there was that fury again. Lovely.

John showered and dressed and went downstairs with his jaw and fists clenched because he and Sherlock had to have a serious discussion that John was sure was going to turn into an argument. And then he found himself completely disarmed by the fact that there was a cup of tea sitting on the dining room table.

John looked from it to Sherlock. Sherlock was standing in front of his wall of statistics, sipping his own mug of tea. John looked back to the tea, back to Sherlock, back to the tea. He blinked. This was so staggeringly unlikely that he had no idea how to interpret it. It was the third time that morning Sherlock had pulled the rug out from underneath him. It was not as pleasant as the first time but not as unpleasant as the second.

“You made tea.” John sounded like someone was standing on his windpipe. He cleared his throat.

Sherlock made a noncommittal noise and made a note on one of his pieces of paper.

“I didn’t even know you knew how to make tea.”

“Oh course I know how to make tea, John,” said Sherlock, dismissively. “It’s a highly scientific process, you know. Chemical reactions.”

Chemical reactions, thought John, and sipped his tea. It had been fixed perfectly. John didn’t think Sherlock had ever noticed how John fixed his tea. John heard Harry’s voice in his head. He sees everything, but you’re the only person he watches.

John looked back at Sherlock, back to him now as he flipped through more pieces of paper.
“Sherlock,” John started, unsure what he was going to say next. About what happened? Or didn’t happen?

“Ryan is too timid,” Sherlock said, without turning around. “If he’d just throw like he meant it, he’d throw forty-two percent fewer pitches per out.”

John paused. “That’s in his head. He’s a kid. He’ll gain confidence and—”

“It’s a mechanics issue,” Sherlock said, impatiently. “During his delivery he—”

“Sherlock,” John said, a little sharply. “Sometimes issues aren’t physical, sometimes they’re entirely mental.”

There was a long moment of silence during which John watched Sherlock’s unmoving back. Then Sherlock said, “Like your leg.”

John felt himself go as still as his last comment had rendered Sherlock. “What?”

“Your leg hasn’t bothered you this entire spring training.” Sherlock finally turned away from the wall and faced John fully.

John found himself looking at Sherlock’s absurdly pretty mouth as it sipped at his tea, thinking, That mouth was kissing me this morning. Kissing me quite energetically. Before it said “stop.” What the hell.

“John,” said Sherlock’s mouth.

John shook himself out of it, tore his focus back to Sherlock. “What?”

“Your leg.”

“I don’t have an explanation for that.”

Sherlock smiled. “I do.”

So damn smug. John wanted to hit him. “What the hell was that all about?”

“What?” asked Sherlock, innocently.

As if John was going to mistake something as vivid as the sound Sherlock made with John’s hands on him for a dream. John could never have imagined such a detail. “Shut up,” he snapped. “If you pretend to be stupid for this conversation, I swear to God, I will throttle you.”

Sherlock looked a bit crestfallen. He worried at his lower lip, which made John want to scream at him. John couldn’t figure out if he was being coy or honestly didn’t know how attractive he was. “I made you tea,” said Sherlock.

“That wasn’t actually what I was hoping to get out of you this morning, I’ll be honest.”

Sherlock looked sadly at the tea and John felt suddenly apologetic for not being more grateful for the tea.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s lovely tea.”

“Didn’t I fix it perfectly?”
Wait, how had he gotten off on this tangent? “The tea isn’t what I wanted to discuss.”

Sherlock hesitated. Sherlock said, “I don’t have friends, John.”

“That’s because you’re a bit of an irritating bastard,” said John, matter-of-factly, not seeing where this was going.

“I’ve just got one,” said Sherlock, meaningfully, looking at him with those bloody blue-gray-green eyes, all ethereal and puppy-dog at the same time.

John put down his teacup. “Okay,” he allowed. “That’s fair enough. You don’t want to jeopardize this. I understand. You should understand the mixed signal you’re sending to me when you warn me off of you and then kiss me awake.”

Sherlock opened and closed his mouth. Then he said, “Well… If it’s… It won’t happen again.”

John wasn’t sure that was actually the outcome he’d wanted from this conversation. Actually, he knew it wasn’t. John wasn’t getting any of the outcomes he wanted right now. This didn’t bode well for the season. “Well, we won’t be living together anymore, so that should be easy to accomplish.”

Sherlock said, “Oh. Right. Yes. Of course,” and John looked at him swiftly, wondering if Sherlock had thought otherwise. “You got a house then.”

“You didn’t deduce that about me?” John drawled.

“You hadn’t made up your mind to take it yet,” Sherlock replied.

Because he’d been holding out hope Sherlock would propose a continuation of their current situation, which seemed like the worst sort of madness at the moment. “I’ve made it up now.”

Sherlock regarded him and then said, “Right. Well, I can work with Ryan on his mechanics, I suppose, if you insist, but maybe we will give him a couple of starts and see if it’s mental, as you claim.” Sherlock turned back to his statistics, presenting John once again with his back.

John wondered if that was supposed to be the end of it, then. Do a bit of passionate making-out in a bed one morning, never mention it again. It actually seemed like something Sherlock might think would work.

John looked at his tea. Maybe Sherlock would make it work. John didn’t really know what had gotten into Sherlock that morning but maybe Sherlock had been half-asleep, maybe the stop had come when he had fully woken up. Maybe Sherlock was horrified at his behavior, or at John’s behavior, and maybe the only thing to do was to pretend it had never happened. John already knew this was going to be a problem for him, because there had not yet been a moment when he had not been thinking about it, and he couldn’t imagine there ever being a moment when he didn’t think about it.

John said to his cup of tea, confidently, taking no pleasure from it, “It’s mental.”

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Sherlock Holmes had analyzed the physics of a good pitch long before he’d ever held a baseball. He’d thrown out all the formulas he’d ever seen and started from scratch, examining in-depth the composition of a baseball, the irregularities of the stitching, the precise effects of humidity or cold. He studied grips and the adjustments to be made thereto, the length of fingers and fingernails, the
size and position of calluses. Where to place one’s feet, where to have one’s head. Where one’s gaze should be aimed.

By the time he actually picked up a baseball, he had thrown thousands of pitches in his head. Had thrown them all perfectly. He knew exactly what to do. So he picked up the baseball and he did it. There was no problem of translation from brain to body. Everything had worked perfectly in harmony.

Then one morning he snogged John Watson awake and his brain and body had been pushed out of alignment and as a consequence Sherlock Holmes was having the worst bloody start of his entire career. Which wasn’t as awful as an awful start from someone else, Sherlock knew, strictly speaking, but he watched the home run sail out of the stadium on the first pitch, his eyes narrowed, and his brain stamped its feet in a bit of a tantrum over the location of that pitch while his body said, Go to hell, John would have shagged us by now, you’re an idiot.

Sherlock got out of the inning with just the one run, but he felt like he was pitching by the skin of his teeth, fighting for every bit of the precision that usually came to him so effortlessly. He needed his head to be full of math, full of the batters at bat, full of statistics, and instead his head was full to bursting of John Watson. He needed to delete him but he couldn’t. He had tried, and tried, and tried. Instead, he had swept off every cluttered shelf of his mind palace to store minutiae about John, and, as a result, he could barely remember how to pitch, never mind focus on it.

“You okay—?” John began, jogging down the dugout steps after him at the end of the first inning.

John, weight settled over him, delicious, and Sherlock had said “Stop.” Sherlock didn’t even turn to look at him. He grabbed a towel and snarled, “Do not,” and pulled it over his head, collapsing to the bench and closing his eyes and trying to envision the next three batters.

He couldn’t even remember who they were, but John’s fingertips brushing their way into his pyjama bottoms, oh, that he remembered, every sodding breathless detail.

His batters went down in order, which didn’t give him nearly enough of the break he needed to get his mind palace straightened up now that John Watson had swept through smashing everything, and he pulled himself grimly back to the mound. He got himself a lucky strikeout off an over-eager batter before giving up two quick hits and another run. He managed to get them out of the inning with no further damage, but it was not pretty.

“Sherlock,” John began, during the inning break.

“Can’t talk,” Sherlock said, from under his towel.

“Yes, you can. Would you listen to me out there?”

“I am,” Sherlock lied.

“You’re not. You’re too wound up and you’re caught in your own head right now. Let me call the next batter, it’ll give you a chance to stop over-thinking.”

Sherlock grunted, with absolutely no intention of letting John call anything. That was insulting. The problem wasn’t Sherlock’s choice of pitches, it was his execution, and he got out of the inning with no runs, but it was no prettier than the previous inning had been, and, with the way their batters were hitting—or not—Sherlock felt like their two-run deficit would be far too much to overcome.

John whipped the towel off his head during the next inning break. “What is wrong with you?”
Sherlock looked at John. *Your face,* he wanted to say. *You. You have your own house and mine is very empty, and no one makes me tea, and there is no bed but mine, and I bloody hate you.*

“Nothing’s wrong with me.”

“You’re battling for every single pitch out there, which isn’t like you. Relax into your mechanism, you’re not flowing. How many pitches have you thrown in your career? You know how to do this. Just throw.”

“Oh my God,” said Sherlock, through gritted teeth, glaring at him. “Is that your assessment, Doctor?”

“It’s a pep talk,” said John. “If you were listening to me instead of being furious, you’d understand that. You are the cleanest, most elegant, most beautiful pitcher I have ever seen. You’re over-thinking something right now. You’re not being you.”

“You’re on deck,” Sherlock snapped at him, because it was true. He pulled his towel back over his head.

He heard John sigh and move away. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited until he heard John’s ridiculous at-bat song, *Hungry Like the Wolf.* What was that choice? Then Sherlock took his towel off, tried to take a steadying breath, and went to the plate with the strains of his chosen Wagner in his ears. He grounded out to the shortstop and thought, *This pitcher is perfect through three. Bloody fantastic.*

In the fourth inning Sherlock gave up another run and, what was worse, he had a twelve-pitch at-bat battle that left him feeling a bit knocked around. His pitch count was crawling higher and he knew, when John didn’t bother him the next inning break, that John was having a whispered consultation with Dimmock about what to do, and that infuriated Sherlock. Then they finally managed to get a hit, only it was Anderson who got it, and Sherlock despised Anderson more than anybody else on the team, and Sherlock was even more infuriated when he got back out to the mound. He gave up a sharp hit on his first pitch and then walked the next two batters.

And then John called for a time-out and jogged out to the mound. Sherlock stood there, furious at the interruption. If he was going to pitch a terrible game, he just wanted to get it over with.

“I know what it is,” John said, and Sherlock thought he couldn’t *possibly.* “You didn’t have green tea today, did you? You always pitch better when you have green tea.”

“I always pitch better when you *make* me have green tea,” snapped Sherlock from behind his glove. “And anyway, your silly superstition isn’t the problem.”

“No, the problem is you haven’t let me call a single pitch,” John hissed.

“You don’t know how to call pitches.”

“Neither do you from the looks of that scoreboard.”

“Your at-bat song is unutterably moronic,” said Sherlock.

“Oh, excellent, childish insults. If you would just *let me call a pitch*—”

Sherlock suddenly jabbed his glove toward John’s chest. “I cannot let any more of *you* into my head, do you understand? You are *all* that is bloody *in there.*” Sherlock turned in a tight little circle on the pitcher’s mound, his domain, hoping it would calm him down. It didn’t. “I cannot *delete* you,” he accused. “You keep coming back. Everything is *you* and *you* and *you* and *you.*” He
gestured with each you, desperately, in John’s general direction. “There is no more of you. There is simply no more of you that I can bear. Can’t you see?”

John was staring at him. For a moment he was absolutely speechless. Then he said, “Sherlock—”

And then the umpire was there, telling them to hurry things along, they didn’t have all day to have their little domestic squabble.

John frowned at the umpire, then turned back to Sherlock, leaning in to murmur, “Calm down and trust yourself. You’ll be fine.”

Only, thought Sherlock, watching John march back to home plate, replacing his helmet, he definitely wasn’t going to be.

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Sherlock was done after six innings, although, honestly, John knew he had been done after the first pitch. He had never seen Sherlock so rattled and uncertain of himself. That first pitch had been an obvious mistake, left out over the plate, exactly where it shouldn’t have been thrown. John had known right then that Sherlock was off, he had never seen him make a mistake like that, not all spring training. With a regular pitcher, John would have said it was nerves. It was Opening Day, it was a brand new team, a brand new set of fans, a brand new stadium, but Sherlock didn’t get nervous over things like that. It seemed unlike him. And the more mistakes Sherlock made, the angrier he got over the whole thing, which had then snowballed into whatever that had been on the pitcher’s mound. John didn’t know what that had been. He still didn’t know.

Sherlock disappeared from the dugout after the sixth inning, so John didn’t get a chance to ask him. He played the rest of the game, which a terrible performance by the relief pitchers quickly turned into a romp for the other team. Not that it really mattered, because it was Sherlock who got the loss. The other pitcher, obviously inspired by his tremendous luck in catching Sherlock Holmes on an off-day, had pitched the game of his life. They had never had a shot.

Opening Day loss, thought John. Not how you wanted to inaugurate a stadium.

John was surprised that Sherlock was in the clubhouse when the team filed dejectedly in. He shouldn’t have been, really. Sherlock was too much of a control freak to take his eyes off a game he’d been involved in, even after he’d been relieved. Of course he’d watched the rest from the clubhouse, changed out of his uniform and back into his expensive, well-tailored suit, his hair freshly washed and artfully tousled out of hat flatness. And John, seeing him with the game over, abruptly had enough free thought processes to focus on what Sherlock had said, and he decided he was half perplexed and half cross. It was just more mixed signals, wasn’t it? Stick his tongue down his throat, pretend it never happened, then accuse him of taking up too much space in his brain. What was Sherlock even talking about? John had been studiously avoiding him since everything had happened. How much space could he possibly be occupying in Sherlock’s enormous, quicksilver brain?

Sherlock slipped out of the clubhouse quickly, before anyone could talk to him. John went to follow him but was cut off in the hallway by Lestrade, who cornered him against a wall and said, “That’s enough, okay?”

John, still more focused on Sherlock’s escape, looked at him in confusion. “Enough what?”

“Sherlock’s little crush on you. I thought it was kind of cute, but when it’s distracting him from his game as much as he was distracted tonight, I no longer find it amusing. So stop it. Got it?”
John blinked at Lestrade. “Sherlock’s crush?”

“Yes. He’s obviously in love with you, and you’ve been encouraging it, leading him on a little bit. I’ve seen those little bedroom looks you give him that make him lose his train of thought, and you know what? I really don’t care, at all, what happens outside the confines of this stadium, but it needs to not affect your jobs and it is right now, so stop stringing him along. Or, I don’t know, do whatever sex thing he likes, but fix this. I need Sherlock Holmes back.”

John stared at Lestrade. “Does he do this often? This…”

Lestrade snorted. “Are you kidding me? I’ve never seen him give the time of day to a teammate before you. I didn’t even realize he was gay. And I don’t care that he is, and I don’t care what you are. But it stays outside this stadium.” Lestrade nodded at him once, firmly, as if confident his views had been clearly conveyed, and then stalked into the clubhouse.

John, eyes wide, forced himself not to sag against the wall and spend the next little while enjoying the fact that Lestrade thought Sherlock Holmes was in love with him and that he should, as Lestrade so artfully put it, do whatever sex thing Sherlock might like. Instead, he sprinted down the hallway and out to the parking lot, where Sherlock’s Aston Martin was sitting idling, its escape route blocked by a Hummer.

John grabbed at the passenger side door, found it locked, and knocked on the window. Sherlock ignored him. John knocked harder, tapping Sherlock’s name in Morse code.

Sherlock rolled the window down. “Morse code?” he said.

“How do you know Morse code?”

John leaned over and unlocked the car door and slid in, putting his window up as he did so.

Sherlock grimaced with annoyance. “No. Get out of the car. We’re not doing a debriefing on that game. Bloody Anderson with his bloody Hummer blocking the bloody exit, how can he be so bloody stupid?” grumbled Sherlock, and leaned on his horn, as if Anderson were anyone near enough to hear.

John looked at Sherlock’s irritated profile and thought of Lestrade’s words. He thought of how rattled and uncertain of himself Sherlock had been on the pitcher’s mound that night. As rattled and uncertain as he’d been the morning he’d kissed John awake? That was possible, and John had never really thought of it that way before. Maybe none of this was Sherlock sending mixed signals. John had assumed anyone with the devoted following Sherlock had inspired would have an advanced degree in mixed-signals-sending. But maybe Sherlock really was unsure. Maybe he was in uncharted territory, and John had been much less than understanding about the whole thing.

Sherlock didn’t do this often. Lestrade had never seen him do it before. Maybe he was scared. God knew John agreed with him that the whole thing was a bit terrifying. He had woken to Sherlock kissing him extremely tentatively and had immediately got him underneath him and stuck a hand in his pants. Maybe that had just been a bit too much. After all, Sherlock hadn’t exactly seemed happy for John to be moving out. And Harry had said...And maybe it hadn’t been teasing on her part, sisterly wishful thinking. Sherlock, on the pitcher’s mound tonight, said he was better when John made him green tea. Maybe Sherlock missed him. Maybe Sherlock wanted him. Maybe Sherlock was in love with him. Him. John Watson. John swallowed and stared and wanted, oh, God, did he want for it to be true.
Sherlock was drumming his hands impatiently on the steering wheel. He turned to look at John. “What’s got into you? I thought you’d be full to the brim with accusations of how I didn’t listen to a single one of your pitch calls. What? What are you staring at?” Sherlock sounded increasingly miffed, the longer John was silent.

“You.”

“Well, I can bloody well see that, can’t I? Why are you—”

John muffled the rest of what Sherlock had been about to say by leaning impetuously over the gearbox and kissing him mid-rant. Sherlock made a noise of surprise in the back of his throat, and then he made a noise of approval and kissed John back, his hand coming up to settle on the back of John’s neck, fingers gripping to hold him in place. John had intended to keep the kiss short and sweet, winningly persuasive, but that noise Sherlock made had John trying to twist for better access. Stupid gearbox in his way, and then the steering wheel, and they didn’t fit, and if anybody opened the door they were going to find John Watson half-sprawled over Sherlock Holmes.

John pulled back, just a bit, just enough to taste the skin under Sherlock’s jaw, to scrape his teeth along the stubble there. Sherlock had showered, but he hadn’t shaved. “Do you think it’s just you?” John murmured into his skin. “It isn’t just you.”

“John,” said Sherlock, breathless, not protesting, his hand pulling John closer, and John nosed Sherlock’s curls out of the way and bit at the jut of his jaw underneath his skin. Sherlock gasped, arching, and John’s thoughts spiraled into thoroughly inappropriate places, into untucking that shirt and unbuckling that belt and unbuttoning those pants and making Sherlock Holmes come in the front seat of his Aston Martin in the parking lot of the baseball stadium, a few yards from where a post-game press conference was no doubt going on.

John squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his hands into fists. One of his hands was in Sherlock’s hair, he realized when he ended up with a fist closed into it. He pulled his thoughts away from their meanderings, because that wasn’t what he’d intended, it wasn’t the direction he’d wanted to go. He leaned his forehead against Sherlock’s, ignoring the uncomfortable press of the gearbox against him, and panted for breath along with him.

“My head is full of you, too. I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone in my life.”

“How…?” Sherlock sounded confused, uncomprehending, around the heavy breaths he was sucking in. A hand was playing in John’s hair, tousling it up into spikes and then smoothing it back down again.

John didn’t really know what he was asking, so he just went on, keeping his forehead against Sherlock’s and his eyes closed. “You’re not sure about this. But I am. And it just occurred to me that you might not know that and I should tell you.”

There was a moment of silence. Sherlock said, “What are you sure about?”

“You,” said John. “I’m sure about you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sherlock replied, his voice still rough and uncertain. “No one is ever sure about me.”

“It’s crossed your mind, once or twice, that I’m not like everyone else. So I wanted to make sure you knew, for certain, that it’s true: I’m not.” John straightened a bit, looking down at Sherlock, whose eyes were wide open and staring as if he’d just received the biggest shock of his life. Maybe
Uncomfortable, John retreated back to the passenger seat. Sherlock stared at him, his lips red and a bit swollen from kisses. John wanted to lean back in and kiss him until they both forgot where they were, forgot who they were. John opened the car door instead, because he didn’t want it that way, hurried and furtive, fumbling in a car, hoping no one would happen upon them. And he didn’t think Sherlock wanted it that way either.

John leaned back into the car. Sherlock still looked stunned, so John said the only thing he could think of to say, which was, lamely, “Call me.”

Chapter End Notes

That ancient Greek word Sherlock thinks? It's "John." :-)

he had.
Chapter 14

Chapter Thirteen

John Watson wanted him.

Normally, after a loss, Sherlock was consumed by one thought and one thought only: How had the game been lost? Almost always, the game was lost by the rest of the team being idiots. Every so often it had been lost because a batter had had the day of his life and caught up to a pitch he should not have been able to (not because Sherlock was ever wrong, of course). But, after this loss, he could think of nothing other than the whirling dervish of a thought that John Watson wanted him.

He did not remember driving home, and he ignored Mrs. Hudson’s call to him that he should really eat. He closed himself into his flat, sat on his chair, and curled himself into a ball, pulling his knees into his chest and wrapping his arms around them.

It made sense, in its own way. The sort of sense that lightning striking made, after the fact. Impossible to predict and wildly unlikely before its occurrence, but some sort of sense when all was said and done. It was possible he should have seen it. Indeed, maybe he had seen it. When you eliminate the impossible, the remainder, however improbable, must be true, and Sherlock had eliminated most other explanations for John’s behavior other than that he just wanted Sherlock.

But that was the most confusing thing, actually, upon consideration. Sherlock had been desired before. He had, to his disgust, been named the sexiest player in Major League Baseball by some ridiculous poll. He was no stranger to lust being directed toward him. It didn’t go the way John was acting. From everything Sherlock knew of John—and Sherlock was right in his assessment of John’s character, he knew he was—John was stubborn and single-minded. If John wanted him, why hadn’t John kissed him so much sooner than he had? In fact, until that night, John had never initiated a kiss at all. If John wanted him, Sherlock should have found himself shoved against a wall at some point during their cohabitation, ravished on the sofa, ogled in bed. And he never had been. John had never behaved like that.

John had behaved, honestly, as if he’d liked Sherlock, and Sherlock had spent some time puzzling that out, trying to determine John’s ulterior motives and reaching the conclusion that maybe it was possible John just liked him. John liked him, and John wanted him, and the improbability of all of that was so incredibly high that Sherlock had mistaken it for impossibility, a rare logical fallacy on his part, but maybe most of his rare logical fallacies concerned John.

So John Watson wanted him. And Sherlock unmistakably wanted John Watson. It wasn’t a brain tumor; it was simply him, wanting John. He didn’t just want him sexually, although that was proving itself far more intriguing than Sherlock had ever thought of sex before. He was beginning to think he wanted at least an entire week in bed with John to catalogue everything he needed to catalogue. But he didn’t just want that. He wanted every single solitary molecule of John Watson. He wanted the breath as it left John’s body, the carbon dioxide itself; he resented all of it going out into the rest of the world to people who weren’t him. Every piece of John should belong to Sherlock. And Sherlock thought that every piece of him should belong to John in return. The rest of the world was too dull to be borne. It could just be the two of them, wrapped up in a happy cocoon. Maybe Sherlock would solve crimes and John would finally go to medical school, and every so often they would play catch in the back garden because John would miss baseball if it was eliminated from his life entirely.

The thought suddenly took Sherlock’s breath away, and he pressed his lips against his knees and
squeezed his eyes shut and allowed himself to realize that he’d been thinking this all along. Or at least for several weeks now. That something about him had decided on John immediately. He had maneuvered John into moving in with him, and he had never intended to let him go, ever, he had planned out their lives together already, and the implication of the whole thing had just taken him much longer than usual to grasp. It would have been humiliating if it wasn’t so bloody *marvelous*. John wanted him, he wanted John, suddenly everything about the future was *exciting* instead of drab, and Sherlock thought if he let himself start laughing he would never stop, he would expire in a silly froth of giddiness.

Now that that was settled, there was only the matter of letting John know. He roused himself in a sudden burst of energy and thought to shower and dress carefully, in the plum shirt he knew was John’s favorite.

Finding John’s new house was as easy as pie. It had been frighteningly easy to deduce exactly which area of the city John would choose and which house John would end up in. John, Sherlock thought, could be trusted to get his own taste just slightly wrong, his self-image just a bit skewed. John longed for a traditional house as if it would be able to push him into a traditional lifestyle, so the house was bland and unremarkable, and Sherlock thought what John needed was a one-of-a-kind house, just like him. They would find something in London, thought Sherlock, something cozy and Victorian with rooms where intimacy would be undeniable. Fireplaces, Sherlock decided. He was so sick of all this warm weather in America. He wanted London’s biting fog and a fireplace to chase it away. That’s what he wanted. And John. Who would love it.

John was home, his boring Mercedes parked in the drive, and Sherlock knocked confidently and impatiently on the front door. In a fit of whimsy, he started tapping John’s name in Morse code.

John opened the door looking like he didn’t think it was as charming a joke as Sherlock had intended. “Where the bloody hell have you been?” John snapped at him.

Sherlock blinked. “What?” he said, which he hated to say under usual circumstances, but it was called for here.

“I have been worried sick about you. And I didn’t think it was my place to stalk you by calling you or showing up at your house. I left the ball in your court, but you could have at least shown up at the *field*, even if you didn’t want to——”

Sherlock decided that John was babbling and it was completely irrelevant to anything they were supposed to be doing, so he leaned forward and kissed him quiet. Sherlock thought he was getting much better at this initiating-kissing thing, if John’s immediate response, ferocious and gratifying, was any indication. John’s hands closed into the lapels of Sherlock’s suit jacket and pulled him forward into the house, slamming the door behind him. Sherlock used his forward momentum to push John against the wall, captive. John hooked his fingers into Sherlock’s belt loops and pulled him closer than Sherlock would have ventured on his own, and Sherlock immediately saw why, because that felt *heavenly*. He pushed even closer, and John made a desperate noise into his mouth, his hands frantically untucking Sherlock’s shirt.

Sherlock tore his mouth away. “I’ve been thinking,” he gasped.

“Oh, shut up about thinking,” said John. “You think too bloody much.” John dragged his mouth down Sherlock’s neck, and who knew that would feel so divine?

Sherlock tipped his head back, giving him access, swallowing with difficulty. John was unbuttoning his shirt now, and Sherlock was holding on for dear life. Somewhere along the way here he’d lost the upper hand. “A fireplace,” he said, vaguely, trying to grasp at the disintegrating
ability to think coherently. “Catch in the back garden.”

John pushed Sherlock’s coat off of him, didn’t quite achieve the same for his shirt. “I’ve been thinking, too,” he said, coming back up from his study of Sherlock’s collarbone to nip at his lips again. “You, me, a bed, those pitcher’s fingers of yours, that ridiculous voice you have…” John trailed off into a kiss, and Sherlock got momentarily distracted by it, the slide of John’s tongue, the intoxication of his taste.

Then Sherlock registered what he had said, pulling his mouth off of John’s to try to speak. John refused to let him, capturing his mouth again in fervent little bursts, so that Sherlock spoke around kisses. “Fine—but—I’m—beyond—that,” he managed. “You’re thinking—small—you should think—oh, my God.” He twisted his fingers into John’s T-shirt and completely lost his train of thought, caught between trying to determine how John’s hand had found its way into his pants without his knowledge and between an extraordinarily primal urge to arch into his touch.

“Tell me to think bigger,” John murmured in his ear, his voice rough and a bit mockingly amused, and instinct won, Sherlock thrusting to meet the stroke of John’s hand, which then abruptly disappeared. “Bed,” John commanded. “Now.” He gave Sherlock a small shove, gentle, but Sherlock was off-balance enough to rock backwards as if John had used much more force. He turned to look after John, who walked toward the staircase, pulling his T-shirt up over his head and dropping it on the balustrade as he went. He paused halfway up, glancing back at Sherlock, who was frozen into place. “Aren’t you coming?” He lifted his eyebrows with the inflection.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, hastily, making his legs work again. He was ashamed by how little he could think. It was so unlike him, but he couldn’t help it, every thought he tried to have trailed off into John.

He followed John into his bedroom, and he tried to pay attention to it, to deduce things from it, but he felt slow and clumsy and stupid, standing there only half-dressed and no doubt looking ridiculous, whereas John looked fantastic, fumbling at the nightstand with something that he dropped with a laughing swear. “I,” John announced, retrieving what he’d dropped and placing it carefully at the edge of the nightstand, “might be a bit out of practice with this. Don’t hold that against me.” He said it with mock gravity, walking over to stand in front of Sherlock.

Sherlock tore his eyes away from the nightstand—lube, condoms, of course, he should have known John would be perfectly prepared—and looked at John. His eyes were a darker blue than ordinary, dark enough to be nearly as black as his dilated pupils. His hair was sticking up all over his head in the softest-looking, most ridiculous spikes. Had that been Sherlock’s doing? Sherlock didn’t remember. He gave in to impulse and reached out and began smoothing it gently, astonished that he could just do this, that John would let him, not just let him but close his eyes and lean into him a bit.

Sherlock said, matter-of-factly, now bringing his fingertips from John’s messy fringe down to John’s right eyebrow, over his cheekbone, through his stubble, “I’m a quick study, as you know, but maybe we could keep it a bit simple and uncomplicated just now.”

John made a drowsy, contented, distracted sound, and then blinked his eyes open. “Wait. What?”

Sherlock kissed him, keeping his eyes open until he saw John’s eyes close, because he didn’t want to get caught up in the whole thing now, he didn’t want to bring a halt to any amazing thing that was happening. He wanted John, he wanted John desperately, and he could do this. Surely there was no trick to this, it wasn’t like he didn’t understand the concept, the same way he had understood the concept of a fastball long before he’d ever thrown one. But still, it wasn’t just science, it wasn’t just equations, he wanted it to be but it wasn’t. John touched him and he trembled
all over, a tremor he couldn’t quite explain, not just from John’s hand on his ribcage, not even caressing, just a brush of his hand.

They were on the bed somehow, Sherlock didn’t remember how they’d got there, they had to have walked, surely, somehow, scientifically, logically, it made no sense for them to have simply teleported to the bed, but his head was an absolute jumble.

“Sherlock,” John was saying, not in passion but as if he were seeking to start a conversation. “Sherlock.” Sherlock kept recapturing John’s mouth every time he managed to tear it away. John was on top of him, and Sherlock was determined that he not pull back, something he could have achieved better had he ended up on top of John and he would need to remember that the next time he teleported onto a bed with John. “What—?” Sherlock muffled John’s voice with his mouth, and John, easily distracted, kissed him back.

Sherlock clutched at John, at his back, at his hips, curling him closer, and there was a brush of friction, just the right sort of friction, and suddenly there was blinding clarity. Forget about how they’d got on the bed or what complicated tricks John would expect him to know, there was friction, that was all there needed to be and there was nothing more important than it. It was as if a switch turned on in Sherlock’s head. Why had he ever thought about anything else, ever, anything other than this bed and this man and this friction?

Suddenly frantic, he pushed ineffectively at John’s jeans, not quite recalling how one got jeans on and off. Couldn’t John just teleport them off him the way he’d apparently teleported them to the bed? He was probably doing a messy, terrible job of it, because John stopped kissing him and glanced down and said, “What are you doing?”

“Isn’t this the objective?” Sherlock snapped at him.

John’s eyes widened a bit. “Yes, but is there a rush?”

Sherlock groaned at his stupidity. “There is an enormous rush. This is all very pressing and urgent, for God’s sake, get me out of my trousers.” It was impossible to do it elegantly with John currently sprawled on top of him the way that he was.

“Careful with the sweet nothings, Sherlock,” said John, “they might go to my head.”

Sarcasm, was that sarcasm? As if Sherlock was going to process sarcasm at the moment. Especially since he’d managed to figure out the riddle of John’s jeans, managed to shove them down far enough to get enough access to make John hiss something incoherent and then, suddenly frantic himself, scramble at Sherlock’s trousers.

Excellent, thought Sherlock, pleased, trying to lift his hips enough to help, but that was really the last coherent thought he had, because then everything mattered or nothing mattered, he wasn’t sure, but there was John’s hand, John’s skin, John, and that mattered, and maybe that was everything. John’s face pressed against his neck, John’s voice into his skin, a word, over and over, Sherlock heard it dimly, vaguely, through a great fog, and it was important, or it wasn’t important. His name, he thought, it might have been his name. John’s voice, Sherlock’s name, John’s hand, and then there was an orgasm, impossible to analyze but blindingly, shockingly, indecipherably fantastic.

Sherlock was vaguely aware that John finished himself off himself, straddling him, and Sherlock thought vaguely that he was going to have to learn sexual manners and whether that was a violation. He was also vaguely aware that John collapsed over onto his chest, panting hot and damp with sweat. Sherlock clawed his way up through the layers of lazy pleasure that had thrown
themselves over him and managed to reach fresh air, gasping it in eagerly. John was heavy and uncomfortable and sticky and wonderful.

Sherlock tried to time how long they lay there, still and breathless, by counting the heartbeats thudding in his ear. John finally said, thickly, “Jesus,” and managed to roll off of him. “There’s tissue…somewhere…”

John lifted a hand in what might have been a gesture, before letting it fall heavily to the mattress. Sherlock closed his eyes because it seemed like too much effort to keep them open. Think, he thought. He should really be thinking.

His stomach growled. “I’m starving,” he said, because it had just occurred to him.

“Jesus,” said John again. His breaths were still heaving.

Forget about the heartbeats. Sherlock, floating, counted John’s breaths. “Sex makes you unusually religious,” Sherlock remarked, sleepily.

“You’re using words with many syllables,” John managed.

Sherlock chuckled, and then Sherlock slept.

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When John recovered enough to have thoughts again, to use words with many syllables the way Sherlock had been doing, he said, “Sherlock, what did you mean, ‘simple and uncomplicated’?” Because that had been confusing to John, in his lust-addled state. How was he supposed to know what that had meant? How had he been supposed to think?

Sherlock snored in response, a soft snore, and John initially thought he was faking, because Sherlock had never snored any of the other times they’d shared a bed.

“Sherlock,” said John, a little annoyed, and managed to prop himself up on his elbow. But Sherlock was clearly really sleeping. He was sound asleep, as a matter of fact. There was even a bit of drool involved. John did not believe Sherlock’s ego would have allowed him to drool knowingly in front of John. So John sighed and indulged in a bit of admiring Sherlock, in his bed, trousers and pants messily down around his shins, plum shirt unbuttoned but only half off, hair an obscene disaster. He was the most gorgeous thing John had ever seen, and he looked utterly debauched, and that was because he was in John’s bed.

“Lucky bastard,” John told himself, under his breath, wondering how he had gotten this lucky. Had he been a saint in a previous life?

John forced himself to glance beyond Sherlock to the clock on the nightstand, noting the time. John supposed there was time to let Sherlock take a nap before they had to be at the field. He rolled out of bed and retreated into the bathroom to clean himself up, returning with a washcloth for Sherlock. Sherlock did stir when John touched him, muttering, “Busy wallpaper. Makes a room cozy,” before turning his face into the pillow and resuming his soft snoring.

What the hell was that about? John shook his head fondly as he finished pulling off Sherlock’s clothing and pulled the duvet up over him. Then he went downstairs. Remembering that Sherlock had said he was starving, John made him tea and a sandwich, falling into old habits. Sherlock never ate properly. And Sherlock had disappeared off the face of the planet for four days. Sherlock probably hadn’t thought to eat in all that time. John brought the food up to the bedroom and left it
on the nightstand. Sherlock was still sleeping, burrowed under the duvet, only his hair visible. He was a much more sprawling sleeper after sex, John thought, and went to shower.

When John was done showering, Sherlock was still sleeping. John looked at the clock again. He really should get to the field, but he hated to wake Sherlock, who was still snoring softly, still sound asleep. John considered. He thought again of Sherlock’s four days of disappearance. He probably hadn’t slept. Well, the team had played three games with no sign of Sherlock in the dugout, what was a fourth?

John left Sherlock sleeping in his bed, and tried not to skip down the stairs over that. Sherlock Holmes is sleeping in your bed. When you get back from this game, you’ll probably have more sex. He didn’t quite succeed.

He called the game through a haze of post-orgasmic distraction. Get through these batters as soon as you can, and then you can go home. Their bullpen was a little bit of a disaster, it was clear even this early in the season. They were young and rattled by the way their season had gone so far, and John found himself trying to give a pep talk in the eighth inning and wanting to say, Can you just strike this batter out? I’ve got a hot, naked man in my bed right now.

John had been sticking around after the games, doing post-mortems with Lestrade and Dimmock the pitching coach, but, for obvious reasons, he was not interested in it that night. Lestrade still managed to grab him before he could slink out the door.

“Listen,” John began, “I’m—”

“Have you seen Sherlock?” Lestrade asked, shortly.

John thought it was possible he blushed to the tips of his ears. “What? No. I mean— I don’t— I haven’t—” Had sweaty, messy, fantastic sex with him. John cleared his throat. “Why?”

“Because he’s supposed to pitch tomorrow. It’s not unusual for him to just disappear between starts, I just send Mrs. Hudson over to remind him that his pitching day is coming up, but Mrs. Hudson went over today and he wasn’t there, and he’s not answering his phone, so now he’s missing. Have you seen him?”

“I, uh,” said John, and rubbed at the back of his neck. “He’ll be here tomorrow. I’ll make sure of it.”

Lestrade looked at him closely. John wanted to say, You know that sex thing you told me to take care of…? But Lestrade just nodded and left him alone, and John drove home as quickly as he dared.

Sherlock’s Aston Martin was still parked in front of the house, and John hadn’t realized how worried he’d been that it would be gone until he sighed in relief at the sight of it. Sherlock was still there, in his house. Possibly dressed by now, but John would take care of that. John thought it was possible his mouth was watering over it.

The house was pitch dark and quiet. John paused in the entryway. “Sherlock?” he called, and received no answer. He glanced around him, and then decided it seemed more likely Sherlock would still be in the bedroom, so he walked up the stairs.

Sherlock was still in his bed, still curled under the duvet. He was no longer snoring, and he had apparently woken enough to eat, because the sandwich had disappeared and the mug of tea was empty, but he was still sound asleep and now taking up most of the bed. John watched him sleep
for a second then decided to strip down to boxers and a T-shirt, forcing Sherlock to make room for him on the bed. Sherlock mumbled a bit of a protest before incorporating John into his sleeping territory, sprawling on top of him. John thought he shouldn’t find that as adorable as he did, pushing at Sherlock’s legs and arms and torso until he was semi-comfortable.

“Fog,” muttered Sherlock, into John’s chest, and then settled back into sleep.

John smiled and followed him.
Sherlock was still sleeping when John woke up. At some point during the night they’d shifted, and John found himself blinking into awareness with his nose pressed into Sherlock’s shoulder. It was bright in the room, and John experienced a sudden moment of panic. He’d slept like the dead, propelled there by sex and baseball, and the deepness of his sleep made him feel as if he’d been asleep for years. He had no concept of what time it might be, and he lifted his head quickly to check.

It was early. Still quite early. They had lots of time before they had to be at the field.

John put his head back down against Sherlock’s shoulder but he couldn’t recapture sleepiness; the jolt of adrenaline that made him check the clock had caused it to dissipate. Plus, now he was aware again of the marvelous wonder that was the fact that Sherlock was in his bed. How had he spent all night sleeping, with Sherlock naked beside him? *John Watson, you are getting old,* he told himself. He shifted away from Sherlock, not far, just enough to be able to watch him sleep, which was something only someone crazily besotted would do, and John was okay with that, John had come to terms with the fact that he was crazily besotted with Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock remained the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. As if that had been going to change now that he’d had sex with him, John thought. If anything, he thought Sherlock was *more* beautiful now, and that was ridiculous. He was *soppy,* he thought, pulling up a word from his childhood. He’d have to ask Sherlock if he was using it correctly, but it sounded apt. *Soppy.* That’s what he was. He wanted to reach out and trace the delicate bow of Sherlock’s mouth, wanted to make it gasp out those divine noises it had made yesterday, wanted to watch it close over his skin, but he also didn’t want to wake Sherlock. John had lived with Sherlock for a while and had never known him to sleep so soundly for so long a stretch. John didn’t know if he should be flattered or concerned. Either way, John laid on his stomach, head on his pillow, and watched Sherlock across from him, looking completely unguarded and dangerously his, taking slow even breaths. John never wanted another day in his life that didn’t start this way, he thought, and fear squeezed tightly in his chest that Sherlock might not agree, that Sherlock might grow bored. Sherlock’s attention span was voracious.

John pushed the fear down. *Don’t panic over problems that don’t yet exist,* he warned himself. Maybe Sherlock would grow bored eventually, but surely not today. Surely John had at least one more day of this coming. Surely.

Sherlock woke up eventually, doing it slowly, gradually, his lips twitching and eyelids flickering and then his eyes fluttered open. His eyes were very, very blue, clear and unbroken, like a summer sky. John had never seen them so purely one color. He wondered if this was what they were like in the morning, before all the emotions of the day painted them in shades of gray and green. Sherlock took him in, silent, his gaze completely level. His eyes might be the cleanest color John had ever witnessed, but that didn’t make them any easier to read, thought John.

“Good morning,” said John, keeping his voice low because it seemed appropriate. He didn’t want to disturb the pleasant, warm cocoon they were wrapped in at the moment.

“Good morning,” Sherlock replied in that bloody voice, sleep-roughened and there in his bed, and John forced himself not to shudder in reaction to it. He had to learn how to control his reaction to that *voice.* Sherlock frowned, just a bit. “You always wake up before me.”
“No, I don’t,” John said, because he didn’t. When they had lived together, he had normally woken to find Sherlock already fully dressed and in the living room ranting about something.

“You do when we sleep together.” Sherlock looked displeased, as if he was offended by this.

“It’s a fairly small sample size. It’s not because you’re terrible to sleep with.”

Sherlock looked even more offended. “I didn’t think it was.”

“I mean,” continued John, enjoying this now, “you do snore a bit, and you pretty much take up the whole bed—”

“I don’t—I don’t snore,” sputtered Sherlock.

“—not to mention the drooling,” continued John.

“The what?” yelped Sherlock.

“Do you know how much sex we’re going to have to have to make sleeping with you worth it for me?”

First eye color change of the day, and he got to watch it close-up, thought John, watching Sherlock’s eyes darken a bit, his pupils dilate. “How much?” Sherlock asked, his voice even rougher than it had been.

“Mmm,” said John, because he didn’t really have an answer. As much as is humanly possible. He wanted to roll Sherlock from his side to his back and kiss him, hard, but that was never going to stop at kissing and John knew it. John lifted his head to look over Sherlock to the clock.

“Are you worried about the time?” asked Sherlock.

“Yes.”

“Why? Can’t we just do it quickly?”

“I’m not going to get offended by that,” John told him, putting his head back down.

Sherlock looked impatient and annoyed, and John realized it was directed mostly toward himself. “I don’t mean to offend you,” he said, and then, almost under his breath, “Bugger.” He rolled onto his back, tangled his hands into his already epic hair, and looked up at the ceiling, then rolled back onto his side toward John, all in one fluid motion. “I learn very quickly. I only need to be told anything once.”

John blinked, bewildered by this sudden assertion. “Okay,” he agreed.

“But you need to just tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“When I am running afoul of sexual etiquette.”

John looked at him. Sherlock looked very serious. “Sexual… Okay, number one, I’m not entirely sure what that’s supposed to mean. Or what makes me an expert in it. Number two, since when do you worry about etiquette?”

“I worry about etiquette.”
“You definitely do not.”

“When it’s you, I do.”

“No, you don’t.” John paused. “Wait, is this you how you behave when you worry about etiquette? What are you like with everyone else?” John paused again, his brain still processing. “Why are you different with me than with everyone else?”

“If I kiss you now, would it be a violation of sexual etiquette?”

“You don’t need to ask for permission to kiss me.”

“I haven’t brushed my teeth,” said Sherlock.

“Oh, sod that,” said John, because suddenly he wanted Sherlock so much he couldn’t breathe. The look on his face, in his eyes, when he’d said, When it’s you, I do… John reached for Sherlock, but Sherlock cut him off, meeting him more than halfway, rolling on top of him and kissing him ferociously. John had very much wanted to kiss Sherlock, but apparently Sherlock had wanted to kiss John more, because John was having a hard time keeping up, was having a hard time doing anything but just let Sherlock taste and taste and taste, until Sherlock finally pulled back.

He’d somehow, at some point, moved so that he was straddling John, knees on either side of him, and he propped himself up on one arm and looked down at John and said, “Why are you worried about the time?”

“Violation of sexual etiquette,” panted John, looking at Sherlock’s kiss-swollen mouth. “You can’t kiss me like that and then try to have a conversation without getting me off in between.”

“Oh,” said Sherlock, looking interested. “I see.” And then, just like that, he was wriggling himself farther down, pushing the duvet off the bed to give himself room to work.

John blinked, because he hadn’t really expected that to be the result of what he’d said. Not that he was complaining, mind you. “Wait a second,” he said, propping himself up on his elbows. Sherlock had settled himself at eye level to John’s groin. John thought that Sherlock looked as if he were about to whip out a microscope, he was studying the area in question so closely. That really did nothing to stop the rush of blood flow directly under Sherlock’s nose, as if wanting to give him something to look at, worthy of all that scrutiny. “You don’t have to—” John began.

Sherlock said, simply, “This seems the most expedient way,” and reached for John’s boxer shorts.

John helped him strip them off without really having made the decision to do that, then looked back down at Sherlock’s dark head, now directing narrow-eyed attention to John’s obvious erection. John resisted the urge to squirm as Sherlock just continued to look. “What are you doing?” he asked, eventually, weakly, because if Sherlock was going to do it, it would be best if he would just bloody well do it.

“Collecting data.”

“We so need to work on your dirty talk,” John told him.

“You’re not going to be dismissive of the importance of the collection of data in 307 seconds,” Sherlock informed him.

John lifted his eyebrows. “Really? You think you can get this done in five minutes?”
“Five minutes and seven seconds. I could do it in less, but I’ve decided five minutes seems decent and the seven seconds is just me showing off.” Sherlock glanced up at him, looking almost bored, and ridiculously confident and sure of himself. John thought men with eyes like that should not be allowed to look during sex; it made him think Sherlock was being optimistic if he thought John was going to last five minutes, seven seconds.

Sherlock reached out and closed a hand around John. John’s eyes closed involuntarily and he thought, Sherlock thinks you can last five minutes, don’t be a bloody teenager about this. And then suddenly Sherlock was there, hot and wet and “Oh my God,” said John and squeezed his eyes shut because the visual was going to be too much and he needed to last five bloody minutes here, it was a point of pride.

Sherlock pulled off, and John collapsed backward in something almost like relief. Air, he thought, gasping, if he could just get some air.

“You can feel free to tell me if I’m doing something right, but I highly doubt I’ll do anything wrong,” Sherlock said.

John looked down at him blearily. “Stop talking,” he begged, because the effort of trying to follow a conversation now seemed impossibly huge.

Sherlock smirked at him, one side of his mouth edging up, and John groaned and closed his eyes. Sherlock hadn’t even touched him, and he groaned and closed his eyes. He wanted to tell him that he’d made a mistake, Sherlock should keep talking, he was too close to handle anything else at the moment. But Sherlock’s voice wasn’t going to help that situation, and it didn’t matter, because whatever data collection Sherlock had been engaging in had been bloody brilliant. He had John wavering on the knife’s-edge of an orgasm in what should have been a humiliatingly brief period of time, if John had been able to measure time at all. But time had vanished for John, all things had vanished but Sherlock and his mouth. Where had he learned that? And Sherlock was teasing him, holding him back, refusing to give him the nudge that would push him over the edge. It was exquisite, the breath-holding wind-up of the anticipation, and it was going to drive John absolutely insane. He clutched at Sherlock’s hair but Sherlock pulled his hands out of it and he found himself clutching at the sheets instead. He was begging, he knew he was begging, he could vaguely hear words tumbling out of his mouth, and he wondered what ridiculous things he was offering if Sherlock would just stop the agony and let him—let him—Sherlock could have pushed him over the edge with the brush of a feather, but he shoved him over it hard. John really wasn’t sure what happened after that except that it was pretty much the best thing ever, and the next thing John could process he was embarrassingly boneless on his bed, sweat cooling on his skin, and Sherlock was looming over him.

“Three hundred and seven seconds. Can I have a conversation with you now?” asked Sherlock.

John closed his eyes, not just because he couldn’t possibly find the energy to keep them open but also because just looking at Sherlock was too much for his over-sensitized body to handle at the moment. “I’m never letting you out of bed,” he croaked. “Never ever.”

“That’s a bit impractical,” said Sherlock.

“Not really,” said John. “You’re going to bloody kill me in short order if you keep doing that to me, so it’s not going to take very long for ‘never ever’ to end, in my case.”
There was a moment of silence. John, feeling both weightless and very heavy, let the aftermath buzz through him.

“I…” said Sherlock, trailing off. “I thought you’d… Sorry.” He was speaking stiffly. “I thought you’d enjoy that. That was my intention. I…”

He sounded uncertain and confused, and that penetrated John’s scattered state. He forced his eyes open to look at him. He was probably fretting about the accuracy of his data collection, thought John, and loved him so much that he had to stop panting for breath, just for a moment, caught in a wave of dizziness. He let his eyes close again. “Sherlock,” he said. “We’re going to give me a little bit of time to recover, and then you’re going to do whatever the hell that was to me again.”

There was another moment of silence. “That’s good then, right?” Sherlock prompted.

John was starting to realize that silence out of Sherlock wasn’t a good sign, meant that he was out of his depth in some way that he didn’t like. Sherlock speaking after a silence had a vulnerability to his tone that made John’s chest ache. He wasn’t sure how it could possibly be true, given that he was enormously talented and ridiculously good-looking and generally everything that would support the enormous ego he usually presented, but there were times when John was sure Sherlock was the most vulnerable person he’d ever met.

“It’s very good, Sherlock,” he said. “Silly man.” With a monumental effort, he forced himself over the short expanse of bed to reach Sherlock, draping on top of him and nuzzling into his chest. “Can’t you deduce that?”

More silence. John waited for Sherlock to process things through enough to talk to him again. “I was thinking at least a week,” said Sherlock, and he spoke into John’s hair, his mouth resting against John’s head.

“A week?” John didn’t follow.

“I thought it would take at least a week of being in bed with you before I’d let you out. It didn’t occur to me to aim for ‘never ever.’”

John yawned and chuckled and planted a brief, affectionate kiss on Sherlock’s chest. “You’re thinking small,” he mumbled, settling into him, thinking he would not have expected Sherlock’s angular body to make such a glorious pillow. “Think bigger.”

“John, why were you worried about the time?”

John didn’t translate the words. He listened to them rumble through Sherlock’s chest, listened to the seductive curl of Sherlock’s accent brushing around him. He should make Sherlock read to him, he thought. Poetry.

Sherlock shook him. John made a protesting sound, burrowing harder and more stubbornly into his chest.

“John.” Sherlock’s voice was sharper. “You were worried about the time.”

“Was I?” asked John, sleepily.

Sherlock sat up, which had the effect of causing John to tumble unceremoniously off him.

“You know,” John complained, glaring up at him, “not all of us slept for eighteen bloody hours last night, okay?”
Sherlock twisted, looking for the clock on the nightstand. “Eighteen hours,” he repeated.

“Yes.” John rolled over, burying his face in his pillow. It was not as comfortable as being on Sherlock’s chest had been, but Sherlock was being difficult.

“Did I really sleep for eighteen hours?”

“Yes. Go downstairs and play the violin and let me take a nap,” John complained.

“The violin isn’t here, John, remember? We’re in this incredibly dull house you’ve purchased, and, John, open your eyes and look at me and tell me what day it is.” Sherlock pulled John’s pillow out from underneath him.

John opened his eyes and stared at Sherlock. “The day,” he remembered, suddenly. “Oh my God, you’re pitching today. What time is it?” John sat up, pushing Sherlock out of his way to do it.

“Is it the fifth day already?”

“Yes. Where were you for four days?”

“I was home. Obviously.”

“You didn’t come to the field. You should have come to the field. What were you even doing? Did you even bother to eat or sleep?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Possibly. I was thinking.”

“For four straight days?”

“Apparently, if your calendar-keeping is correct.”

“Oh what?”

Sherlock gave him a look. “Don’t ask stupid questions, John.”

John stared at him, his thoughts getting all derailed again, and that was all he needed, to go down that path again and get so addled he completely forgot that they were supposed to be going to work. He consciously shook himself out of it, rolling out of bed, finding the boxers Sherlock had pulled off of him, and pulling them back on. “We need to shower. Separately. Then we need to eat something, you especially, God, how are you supposed to pitch on whatever it is you’ve been eating? Have you even been practicing? How much throwing is it going to take to get you warmed up? How did you feel after the last game, anyway?” John was busy collecting clothing to change into, and he was caught completely off-guard when he turned away from his closet directly into Sherlock, who then closed his mouth over his in a quick, fierce kiss. “What the hell?” John said, when Sherlock had pulled back.

“You said I didn’t need permission to kiss you,” Sherlock pointed out.

“No. You didn’t. You don’t. That’s fine. But when you kiss me I stop thinking, and I need to think just now.”

Sherlock looked at him curiously. “So it happens to you, too?”

“What does?”

“The inability to think.”
“Does it happen to you?” John actually found that incredibly flattering. He couldn’t imagine Sherlock’s brain turning off like that.

“Is it typical for that to happen?” asked Sherlock, ignoring the question.

“Well, I don’t know. Does it usually happen to you?”

“No. Never. It’s just you. You’re the first.”

John stood in his bedroom, rumpled and filthy, and stared at Sherlock Holmes, who was completely naked, and tried not to just push him back on the bed. He tried to process what Sherlock was saying, so matter-of-factly, like it was nothing.

“Go on,” Sherlock said. “Weren’t you just terribly keen on showering?”

John nodded dazedly, and Sherlock stepped back to give him room to pass. John showered with his head a blur, trying to make sense of everything that had happened since the day before and coming up empty-handed in that attempt. None of it made sense. How could he possibly begin to explain the fact that, somehow, he was the first person to ever make Sherlock Holmes lose his train of thought? Him?

John got dressed and brushed his teeth and looked at Sherlock, who was still lying naked on his bed, looking delectable and absolutely unselfconscious.

“When you said you wanted to keep things ‘simple and uncomplicated,’” said John, slowly, piecing it together finally, “you meant the sex, didn’t you? Not the emotional entanglement from the sex, you meant literally the physical aspects of it. You wanted it kept simple.”

Sherlock shrugged, looking nonchalant as he picked himself up off of the bed. “You turned out to be vocal, responsive, and fairly easy to read. I’m not worried about that anymore.”

John turned to keep him in sight, as he walked past him into the bathroom. “Why were you worried about it at all?”

Sherlock reached to turn on the shower. “Momentary lapse of accurate self-assessment. Don’t worry, today was a successful experiment otherwise.”

“I’m not worried,” said John, “I’m trying to figure out… Are you…? How much…?”

Sherlock disappeared into the shower and made one of his ugh sounds. “Oh, John, just ask the question already. Never mind, I’ll answer it for you. Heterosexual sex, a bit. Homosexual sex, none at all. That was an unforgiveable oversight.”

John absorbed this, leaning against the bathroom counter and wishing he hadn’t been out of his mind with lust before so that he actually could have bothered to be a bit more sensitive to Sherlock’s experience level. “Have you never been attracted to a man before?”

“I’ve never been attracted to anyone before,” Sherlock replied, as if this were not a major revelation. “Is this the only shampoo you have?”

John curled his fingers around the bathroom counter and tried to breathe. The bathroom was quickly filling with steam, making it even more difficult. Sherlock’s head poked around the shower curtain, holding the shampoo bottle and looking at him curiously.

“I don’t get it,” John managed, staring at him, his hair flattened to his head. “You could have
anyone you wanted. Why me?"

“The treatise is unfinished at the moment.” Sherlock held up the shampoo bottle, wagging it a little bit. “John. Seriously. This shampoo? Really?”

John blinked and tried to focus. “Well, we’re not all as vain as you.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and disappeared back behind the shower curtain.

John stood frozen and attempted to add this new information to everything else he was trying to process. His brain was on absolute overload.


“Lucky for me I’m going to get one tonight, isn’t it?” John tried to make it sound light but did not succeed.

Sherlock didn’t answer, disappearing from the bathroom, no doubt in search of his clothing.

“You should borrow something of mine,” John said, following him into the bedroom.

“Excellent idea,” said Sherlock, “considering how similar we are in height and build.”

“At least let me wash what you’re wearing.”

Sherlock glanced at the clock. “Have we time for that?”

“While we eat.”

“You’re going to insist we eat, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Here.” He handed Sherlock a bathrobe.

“Well, this is just ridiculous,” said Sherlock, frowning at it. “I’ll just stay naked.”

“You absolutely will not,” John told him, firmly. “It’s sexual etiquette to be dressed when on a timetable.”

“You’re making up the rules of sexual etiquette to suit yourself,” Sherlock accused, but he took the bathrobe.

John gathered up the clothing and carried it to the washing machine, then herded Sherlock down the stairs, where he made him a cup of green tea.

Sherlock made his ugh noise. “I really despise green tea.”

“Did you drink green tea before your last start?” John asked, simply, slicing up a tomato to put in the salad he was making.

“No.”

“Did you win your last start?”

There was a sulky moment of silence. “No. But that was your fault!”

“And you didn’t drink your green tea,” John concluded, wisely, and put the salad on the table,
along with a bowl of pasta.

Sherlock ate, twirling the spaghetti around his fork. He was silent, but he didn’t seem to be sulking, and John was just relieved he wasn’t complaining about how boring food was.

“You should move into my flat,” Sherlock said, eventually.

“Why don’t we just get married?” John countered, dryly.

“Fine,” Sherlock replied, evenly, without even looking up from his spaghetti.

This gave John pause. He stared at him. “Sherlock—”

“I don’t care whether we get married or not,” Sherlock said, “but it’s absurd to even consider the idea that we wouldn’t live together. If you give me 307 seconds, I’ll prove to you why.” Sherlock took a large, confident bite of pasta.

“How long are you going to be smug about that?” asked John.

Sherlock gave him his stupid-question look and continued to eat his pasta.

John hesitated. “Look, I’m not denying we live well together. I just…” He trailed off, looking at Sherlock. Somehow, in a matter of weeks, you’ve become the most precious thing I’ve ever had, and this is all so new and intense, and I’m terrified of pushing things and losing it. I am bloody terrified. That was what he wanted to say.

What he did was wince, slightly, at a twinge of pain in his leg, and now was really not the time for his leg to decide to start bothering him again.

Sherlock’s eyes were sharp on him. “You’re overthinking. You do better when you’re playing things just a little bit unsafe. You like danger, you like unpredictability, you like pushing just a little too far. When you pretend you don’t like those things, your leg bothers you.” Sherlock took a matter-of-fact bite of pasta.

“This isn’t making me want to live with you,” John pointed out.

Sherlock shrugged. “Three hundred and seven seconds.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” muttered John, and went to check on Sherlock’s clothing.

Once Sherlock was dressed and they were both ready, they stepped outside together.

“Put your keys away,” Sherlock said, remotely unlocking the Aston Martin.

“I don’t think we should arrive at the field together,” said John.

“We almost always arrive at the field together; it’ll look more suspicious if we don’t,” Sherlock pointed out. “Anyway, my car’s been at your house for over a day now. Hardly inconspicuous. Not that most people on the planet are observant enough to notice.”

People would notice. John stood on the front walk, his leg twinging at him a bit, and thought how he had spent his entire career being hidden, and now he was sleeping with one of the most conspicuous men in baseball—a man who didn’t seem to much care about hiding anything at all.

“People will talk,” John said.
“People do little else,” Sherlock reminded him, as he had once before, and then slid into the car.

John listened to the DB9 purr in reaction to Sherlock, went a little weak at the knees, thought a wise, sane, safe man would take his own car to the field, and slid into the Aston Martin’s passenger seat. Sherlock said nothing, didn’t even look at him, just shifted the car into drive and drove the way he normally did. All that precision, thought John. Pinpoint accurate, razor sharp. He pitched like that, and he drove like that, and he absolutely, in John’s very vivid personal experience, carried it into bed with him. John turned his head to the window and closed his eyes, hoping that Sherlock wouldn’t notice the shift toward arousal, although of course Sherlock would notice, he noticed everything.

“Do you think we’re emotionally entangled?” Sherlock asked, suddenly.

A small part of John’s brain stopped thinking about sex. “What do you mean?”

“You said it earlier today, about the emotional entanglements of sex. Do you think we’re emotionally entangled?”

John forced himself to look over at Sherlock’s profile. It hurt. It actually hurt him to look at Sherlock. Not a twinge in his leg or a tremor in his hand but an expansiveness that it felt like his ribcage could not contain. John was definitely emotionally entangled with Sherlock. He was more than emotionally entangled. He was something else entirely.

“Don’t you?” he managed.

Sherlock did nothing for a moment, then he nodded, once, looking satisfied.
Chapter 16

Chapter Fifteen

Just because they’d had a bit of fantastic sex didn’t mean that Sherlock was going to do the post-game press conference when John brought it up. That was John’s main takeaway from the brilliant game Sherlock pitched. He was going to have to work on his wheedling skills. Surely he could come up with the equivalent of Sherlock’s 307 seconds. He was no slouch in bed, thank you very much.

Those were the things John was thinking when he was supposed to be answering questions about the game, and he realized how much his attention had dangerously wandered when Lestrade said, “John? John,” and he blinked to find himself the focus of a couple of dozen pairs of expectant and slightly irritated-looking eyes.

“Sorry,” he said. “What was the question?”

“I said,” answered Sally Donovan, belligerently, “that it wasn’t as clean a game as Sherlock Holmes usually pitches. Would you say he was distracted by something?”

John watched her warily, not liking the direction of the question. “No, I wouldn’t,” he answered, shortly. “He won, didn’t he?”

“He made mistakes.”

“He’s human.”

“He doesn’t make mistakes when he pitches.”

“Excess energy,” John bit out at her. “He was pressing a bit after the last start.”

“Last start was also an unusual start for him. Was he distracted last start?”

“No.”

“He’s not hurt, is he?” Sally asked, sweetly.

“He’s fine.”

“He requested another physical—”

“He’s fine,” John repeated. “It’s a new team and a new catcher and a new season. He’s settling in.”

“Lot of sharply lined hits tonight.”

“Um,” said Lestrade, looking surprised by the rapid-fire exchange. “Maybe we should take the next ques—”

“He was throwing hard. It’s easier to get a sharp hit when the pitch is coming at you as fast as he was throwing tonight. Most of the time the hitters were missing, weren’t they?”

“Yes, it was an unusually high number of strikeouts for Sherlock Holmes, who isn’t known as a strikeout pitcher. Your influence?” Sally practically batted her eyelashes with innocence.
John hoped he wasn’t visibly bristling. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“New catcher, as you said. Is he letting you call his pitches? Are you setting him up for more strikeouts? The rumors say the lack of showy strikeout numbers is the reason he’s been missing the Cy Young award.”

“I thought the rumors said he’d been missing the Cy Young because he’s an arrogant prick,” said John, dryly, and there was a ripple of appreciative laughter in the press room that Sally did not take part in.

“Do you call his pitches for him?”

“We collaborate. It’s a partnership. It’s called teamwork.”

Sally made a suggestive hmm noise and said, “Would you say his pitching performance tonight was…exuberant?”

John looked levelly across at her. He would, yes. Sherlock had been full of energy, an excess, as John had said. His early inning pitches had been a bit all over the place until he’d burned it off and reined things back into his usual precision. Sally was absolutely right, it had been a well-pitched game and he’d gotten the win, but Sherlock normally pitched cleaner, tighter. Sherlock didn’t normally pitch exuberantly. Sherlock didn’t normally pitch like he enjoyed the game of baseball. It had, honestly, been a refreshing change for John as a catcher. Sherlock had been a dream to catch from the first time John had ever crouched down behind the plate for him, but he was more fun when he was enjoying himself, when his pitch choices had an edge of playfulness to them that was leaving the batters even more baffled and off-kilter than usual.

But John did not want to say anything like that to Sally. He did not want to say what he’d been thinking all game: Does this have anything to do with me?

He looked at Lestrade and said, “Take the next question.”

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“Not quite your best performance,” Sherlock said when John slid into the passenger seat of the Aston Martin.

“Well,” said John, “she was being irritating.”

Sherlock shifted the car into drive and took off without looking at John. “She’s a cow,” he said, shortly. “And she hates me.”

“Why?”

“People don’t need a reason to hate me, John. You seem to be unable to grasp that.”

There was something clipped about Sherlock’s tone, something that had John tipping his head at him. It was late, and it was dark in the car, and Sherlock was nothing more than a profile, really, flashes of illumination on his pale face cast by headlights on the other side of the road.

“You okay?” said John, unsure what could have transpired to make Sherlock not okay.

“Fine,” he answered.

John lifted his eyebrows, considering that answer. “It was a good start, didn’t you think?”
“I got the win,” Sherlock replied.

John read between the lines. “But you didn’t like the start?”

Sherlock suddenly accelerated quickly enough to press John back against his seat. John looked out the front of the windshield.

“Okay,” he said. “Not necessary to kill us. We can stop talking.”

Sherlock said nothing, nor did he slow down. John frowned, unsure what could possibly have brought on a sulk.

“What did I say at the press conference that upset you?”

“Nothing, John. I’m not upset.”

“Okay,” said John, slowly, making sure that Sherlock knew what he really meant was not okay. What the hell, he thought, running over it in his head. Was it the Cy Young comment?

Sherlock was silent in the loudest possible way. John was trying not to get angry in response, because that wouldn’t be productive. He knew from experience that mainly Sherlock’s sulks just needed to be soothed through ignoring them, but this was a far more personal sulk from where he was sitting. He’d been anticipating some lazy, leisurely sex, not this.

Sherlock pulled up in front of John’s house and did not turn the car off.

“Seriously?” said John, turning to him, and he could hear the edge to his voice. “You’re not even coming in?”

Sherlock spoke without looking at him, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel. “You just caught a baseball game. You’re not as young as you once were. Your muscles are sore. Sex seems ill-advised—”

“Shut up,” John interrupted the clinical recitation. “What the hell is this about? The Cy Young comment was a joke, Sherlock.”

Sherlock actually looked at him quizzically, which John considered a victory, because Sherlock had not once looked at him since he’d gotten in the car. “The Cy Young comment. Why would you think I’d care at all about the Cy Young comment?”

“Fine, there was something else I said that you cared about.” Sherlock looked away from him again. John was utterly bewildered. “I said—Jesus, all I said was that you were human. Is that not allowed in the world of Sherlock Holmes?”

“It was a terrible game, John,” Sherlock snapped, suddenly, and John could see him close his eyes, in the washed-out glow of the streetlight next to them. “I pitched a terrible game.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I was all over the place. I’ve never thrown such a messy fastball in my life. I threw with more accuracy the first time I held a baseball.”

“Sherlock, your adrenaline was spiking. It happens. You needed to settle it out—”

“It doesn’t happen to me,” Sherlock practically shouted at him, and then he drew in a quick inhale, tightening his hands around the steering wheel.
John’s eyes widened. “All right, calm down,” he said, a bit alarmed now. Sherlock seemed on the verge of a bona fide crisis.

“That isn’t how I pitch,” Sherlock said. “That wasn’t a game Sherlock Holmes would pitch. Sally Donovan was right to ask you about it. That wasn’t me.”

John thought of Sherlock in his shower, calmly telling him he’d never been attracted to anyone before. Maybe, John thought, all of this was suddenly catching up to him. Maybe it was starting to overwhelm him. And the thing was, John didn’t want him to be able to catch his breath. Not if he was going to turn all the emotion off. John wanted him just like this; he wanted him more like this. John thought there were reserves of joy in Sherlock that hadn’t been tapped yet, that somehow no one had ever bothered to try to reach, and John was determined to get there.

John considered his approach. “Then who was it?”

Sherlock finally opened his eyes and looked at him in exasperation. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t,” John retorted, calmly. “It looked like you, to me. So give me your evidence that it wasn’t.”

Sherlock exhaled in frustration. “It wasn’t. Do you know how many strikeouts I threw tonight?”

“It wasn’t a career high.”

Sherlock’s glare was withering. “It was more than I’ve thrown since my first season.”

“Right, which was probably the last time you enjoyed pitching.”

Sherlock was silent for a moment. He looked away again. “What does that matter? Objectively speaking—”

“Was it the game of your life? No. Were you brilliant out there? Yes. That was the best I’ve ever seen you pitch.”

“Well, you haven’t seen me pitch well,” Sherlock countered, bitterly. “I haven’t pitched well since I’ve met you.”

John shook his head. “You’re wrong. I don’t mean it’s the best I’ve seen you pitch to me, although it is, I mean it’s the best, ever.”

“Ah, yes, because you followed my career so closely before we became teammates.”

“Of course I did. You’re you. Everyone’s been watching you from the moment you first stepped on a mound.”

“Right,” Sherlock agreed, dryly, looking out the windshield. “Everyone had an opinion, I know, I’ve read them all.”

“I never gave you mine.”

Sherlock sighed. “You may as well. You don’t seem any closer to getting out of the car.”

“I thought you had the best mechanics I’ve ever seen, but I thought you looked like it was a job.”

“It is a job.”
“No, it’s not. It’s the most fun we’ll ever have in our lives, and someone pays us for it. Sherlock, you’re brilliant with your algorithms, you are, but do you know what you did tonight? You surprised me. And you surprised the hitters, genuinely. You were unpredictable from the very first pitch. You didn’t need your best stuff, because you had them all so off-balance that it didn’t matter. You don’t just need physics to be a good pitcher, you need imagination, you need recklessness, you need to care. We will get there, you and I, Rome wasn’t built in a day, but that was bloody you tonight. That’s who you’re supposed to be as a pitcher.”

Sherlock was silent and indecipherable in the driver’s seat, staring straight in front of him. “I suppose you are now the foremost expert on Sherlock Holmes.” He said it with the merest echo of sarcasm, as if full sarcasm was too much for him to achieve at the moment.

“I know that you are not nearly as cold and calculating as you would like people to think.” John had never meant anything so sincerely in his life. “You are not nearly as cold and calculating as you would like to think. You know how I know that? Because I know how you kiss me.”

Sherlock licked his lips. John braced himself for whatever was coming next, but what happened next was Sherlock just looked at him. It was no doubt a trick of the harsh lighting, but his eyes looked so nakedly open they were translucent. He is terrified, John realized. As terrified as you are, only you’re used to being terrified pretty much all the time, and he never lets himself feel anything.

John took off his seatbelt and shifted slowly, watching Sherlock carefully, like he was a skittish horse that might shy away. Sherlock watched him back and did not move. John leaned his head into the curve of Sherlock’s neck, breathed him in. Sherlock stayed extremely still.

“It’s a mess,” John murmured into his skin. “I know it is. It isn’t the way you’d want it, all clean lines and straight edges. But that’s okay. It’s emotional entanglement, Sherlock. It’s supposed to feel like this.” John lifted his head, drawing his nose up Sherlock’s skin. Sherlock turned his head toward him, and it was so easy to kiss him, just a small sip, waiting. Waiting for the moment when Sherlock lifted his hands to cup John’s head and kissed him back with all the desperation he’d had when he’d kissed him on John’s doorstep. It had been the moment when John had known that Sherlock was worth all of the minor irritations, because Sherlock felt like that about him, it had all been in the way he kissed. John had never been kissed like that in his life, and John didn’t even think Sherlock was aware how much was in his kisses.

Sherlock drew back, just a breath, not enough to be a protest. “You don’t understand. Caring isn’t an advantage, John.”

“Yes, it bloody is,” John growled at him, firmly. “The biggest advantage. Now shut this car off and come inside.” John tried to sound confident about it, but he found himself holding his breath. He was too close to Sherlock’s face to really be able to read him clearly, not that he ever really could. There was an agonizing moment of utter stillness between them.

Then Sherlock took a deep breath and reached for the ignition.

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John was sleeping. Sherlock was not. This was a relief to Sherlock, who had never slept so much as he had since he had started sharing a bed with John. He hadn’t even slept so much as a child. According to his mother, who was fond of complaining about it to anyone who would listen, Sherlock had basically never slept, ever.

Sherlock slept when John Watson was sleeping next to him, and why should that make a
difference? Logically, scientifically, what did it matter that John was next to him? Frequently, most of the time, they weren’t even touching, so it wasn’t some subconscious soothing of skin next to skin (not that Sherlock had ever previously found someone else’s skin against his to be soothing instead of upsetting). Maybe it was the rhythm of John’s breathing? Maybe it had an almost hypnotic effect on him? Sherlock frowned. He had, in younger days, had to share sleeping space every so often. He had not found other people’s breathing to have therapeutic effects then.

Sherlock lay on his back and looked up at John’s boring ceiling. John was curled next to him, half on his side and half on his stomach. They were not touching, but John was close enough that Sherlock could feel his even exhales against his bare shoulder. Sherlock lay there, listening to and feeling John breathe, and thought that he couldn’t explain John. It wasn’t that John was a delicious puzzle for him to solve, it was that John was, by definition, unsolvable. John’s presence, the ripple effect it seemed to hold over Sherlock, these were things that Sherlock could not solve. They surprised him. They sat there in the middle of his life of logic and taunted him. These are the things you cannot explain. Look at them throwing off all the patterns.

There was an odd sort of tension in Sherlock as a result of this. His mind palace was in complete disarray. Whole rooms had been redecorated and crowded with John; other rooms had had sheets thrown over their furniture, apparently settling into being closed off for good. Sherlock felt as if he had been completely split in half, as if part of him was standing in the entrance hall shouting for order, and the other part of him was gleefully painting the walls the color of John’s eyes. It was disconcerting. John was disconcerting. Sherlock wasn’t sure of himself when with him, couldn’t position himself on his internal map. John was right, it was messy. But John was wrong in the assumption he seemed to be making that such a condition was foreign to Sherlock. Sherlock had been an internal mess before. He had enjoyed it then as much as he was enjoying it now. And then there had been an accidental overdose, and disapproving family members by a hospital bed, and a visit to rehab, and a careful sweeping out of his mind, until all that had been left was the idea that maybe he should do something completely mad and move to America and play this strange game called baseball that he’d learned all about whilst there had been nothing else to do. Baseball had drugs testing. Baseball had seemed safe. Baseball would keep him orderly and organized. Baseball was a clean, well-laid-out game. It was, most of the time, polite and orderly. Everyone had a specific role, a place to stand, and they stayed there, barely moving, the whole time the game was played. There was no chaotic up-and-down-the-field-ness, there was only a pitcher on a mound and a batter at a plate a perfect sixty feet and six inches away, and algebra to get the ball between one and the other.

In the beginning Sherlock had been taken with the mathematical intrigue of baseball. He had surrounded himself with statistics, and he had enjoyed it. And then he’d realized that, no matter what he did, baseball was never entirely mathematical. It was taunting that way. There was always some inexplicably outlier statistic that threw him off, and that tiny bit of disorganization had irritated him. He was never going to pitch perfect baseball, such a thing was impossible. Not improbable, impossible. And the challenge had gone out of baseball. Sherlock could pitch well enough to win, well enough to impress almost everyone who watched him, but Sherlock was bored, he was dreadfully bored.

And then John Watson.

Sherlock inhaled hard, staring up at the ceiling.

“What?” John’s voice was rough and blurred with sleepiness.

Sherlock hadn’t even noticed the shift to wakefulness in John’s breathing pattern. He hadn’t
“Nothing,” he said, dismissively, to the ceiling.

John shifted, curling up against him. “Not nothing,” he said, his voice low in the dark quiet of the room. “Never nothing in your head. Tell me just one of your thoughts.”

Sherlock considered. John planted a kiss on his chest whilst he waited. “I hate this house you’ve bought.”

“Why?” asked John, and kissed his chest again.

“Because you don’t like it.”

John paused, lifting his head to blink at him. “I like it fine.”

“No, you don’t,” Sherlock told him.

John shook his head a little bit and planted another kiss on Sherlock’s chest. Well, less a kiss than a lick, that time. John, Sherlock thought, had an agenda in mind, and Sherlock was, undeniably, quite all right with that. “Tell me another thought.”

“You’re going to leave for the road trip tomorrow night.”

John’s tongue had gotten sidetracked by a nipple. “Mmm,” he said. “You’re leaving, too.”

“I don’t normally come on road trips until it’s my turn to pitch.”

“Don’t worry,” John said, giving up pretense and moving to sprawl completely on top of Sherlock. “I’ll make you come on this road trip.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Really, John, don’t you think such innuendo is beneath a man of your intelligence?”

“Innuendo is not what is currently beneath a man of my intelligence.” John waggled his eyebrows in the most ridiculous leer.

“Oh my God,” said Sherlock, trying not to sound like John was adorable, because he was not.

John grinned at him. His grin was almost irresistible. Sherlock looked back at the ceiling, refusing to be goaded into smiling back. He was thinking serious thoughts, damn it. “My intelligence?” prompted John, and kissed the hollow behind Sherlock’s ear.

Sherlock refused to shudder in response. “Yes, average.”

John chuckled against Sherlock’s skin. Sherlock refused to squirm with the vibrations of it. “You’re such a bastard,” John said, fondly. “Tell me something nice.”

Sherlock looked up at the ceiling and said, honestly, “You have lovely eyes.”

John’s nuzzling stopped completely, John stilling on top of him. Sherlock wondered if John had genuinely not expected Sherlock to ever say anything nice to him. Sherlock always told the truth, and there were a lot of nice truths about John. John just didn’t see them. John lifted his head to look down at him. “You’re the one with the lovely eyes.”

“You think that because you don’t get to look at your eyes all the time, so you have a skewed perception of what they look like. You generally have a skewed perception of yourself. It’s why you think you like this house. It’s why sometimes your leg bothers you, even though there’s
nothing physically wrong with you. Your body is psychosomatically reflecting your misperception of yourself.”

John looked at him for a moment, and then said, “I suppose you are the world’s foremost expert on John Watson now.”

“I’ve held that title for quite some time, do catch up,” Sherlock replied, mildly.

John’s expression was unreadable. There was so much going on in it that Sherlock couldn’t untangle all the different threads. John just said, “My God, Sherlock.”

“What?” asked Sherlock. He had never asked *What*? so much as he had since meeting John.

John didn’t answer. John leaned down and crushed his lips to Sherlock’s in a bruising kiss, and then there wasn’t any more talking for a while, just half of Sherlock whistling cheerfully as it cleaned out another room in the mind palace to fit in more details about John’s tongue and the other half of him sitting on the first step of the grand staircase in resignation.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Full disclosure: I didn't research how baseball players room on road trips. I fail. So I just made it up. Because I'm lazy like that.

Chapter Sixteen

Sherlock hated road trips. The hotel proprietors were always touchy if you shot holes in their walls, and the maids were always destroying the careful experiment conditions of the baseballs he left in the bathtub. Initially Sherlock had gone on road trips out of curiosity, but when they turned out to be the dullest things imaginable he had stopped, and Lestrade had raised no protest. Sherlock suspected the team had probably wanted him to stop tagging along on road trips, and normally Sherlock would have striven to annoy the rest of the team as much as possible, but it was much nicer to sprawl on his sofa and sulk at the world.

Now, however, the idea of sprawling on the sofa and sulking at the world had lost a bit of its appeal if John wasn’t there to experience the sulk with him. So, if John was going on the road trip, Sherlock decided he would go on the road trip, too, and sulk from John’s suite. Hesitant and halting, John said something about them needing to have separate suites, and Sherlock had understood John’s need to hide them and had agreed to separate suites with no intention of spending any time at all in his own.

Which meant he was indeed in John’s suite when his brother walked in. Sherlock had been sprawled on John’s sofa, staring at the unfamiliar light pattern on the ceiling. John was at the field, getting ready for a night game. Sherlock thought he would probably attend because he had nothing better to do. He now wished he’d gone to the field with John, even though it had been ridiculously early, because it might have saved him a visit from Mycroft.

Sherlock scowled at the ceiling, thinking that even he recognized that as being wishful thinking on his part. If Mycroft wanted to speak with somebody then Mycroft spoke with that person. Sherlock had spent his entire life trying to avoid that truth. He’d never once been successful.

“Isn’t this a cozy picture?” said Mycroft, silkily.

“It’s a fairly standard picture, Mycroft, really,” Sherlock replied, without looking away from the ceiling.

“You on the sofa in a teammate’s suite?”

Sherlock tried to refuse to be goaded. “Me on the sofa.”

There was a moment of blessed silence.

“Well, this is very interesting,” said Mycroft.

“No, it isn’t.”

“Indeed it is. The thing about Mummy is that she worries about you so very much. Always asking
me if you’ve succumbed yet to all the temptations she imagines are around you. How silly of her to be worried about drugs when she should have been worried about John Watson.”

“Stop it,” said Sherlock.

“Sherlock, you know what this is. It’s transference. You have an addictive personality, and this ‘Doctor’ Watson is the latest obsession to drift across your consciousness. You’re prone to this, and you know it. You’ll grow bored with him the way you grow bored with everything, only he’s a person, not a game, not a controlled substance.”

“Stop it,” said Sherlock, again.

“What are you going to do when he stops being interesting to you? What are you going to do with him?”

Sherlock decided to say nothing to that. To say stop it again would be mocked, he thought.

“You don’t do anything by halves. You never have. You’ll want to possess him, all of him. You’ll want to keep him. Do you think he wants to be kept, your Doctor Watson?”

“If you say his name again, I’ll shoot you. I’ve a gun under this pillow.”

Mycroft had the nerve to sound amused when he replied, “I’ve no doubt.” Mycroft took a deep breath, a preface, Sherlock knew, to departure, thank God. “Well. You’re looking well, aside from this destructive relationship you’ve embarked on. Mostly destructive for him, of course. You’ll find a way to pull through just fine, you always do. I should put some money aside to give him for therapy afterward.” Mycroft’s voice was dry. He seemed to think Sherlock was going to say something in response to this. Sherlock kept staring at the ceiling. “Pitch well tomorrow,” he said, apparently acknowledging the extent of Sherlock’s stubbornness.

Sherlock listened to the door click shut as Mycroft departed. He did not look away from the ceiling.

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Sherlock never showed up at the field. John wasn’t exactly surprised by that. Sherlock was never going to actually enjoy being at the field, and Sherlock was always going to be vague about being the places he said he was going to be, thought John. Lestrade had said that he never missed a start but, other than that, Lestrade had never seen Sherlock unless he was in the middle of causing some sort of problem. As John had now spent enough time with Sherlock to know that the closest thing he had to a friend was Mrs. Hudson, John thought Sherlock must have been spending a lot of time alone, and, although he thought Sherlock would probably deny it, he had probably been incredibly lonely. No wonder he had wanted John to move in almost immediately. Sherlock had probably wanted to leap on the chance of finding someone he could bear to be around.

So John wasn’t alarmed when Sherlock didn’t show up at the field. But he was confused when Sherlock wasn’t in his suite. He walked through it, calling his name, although he’d expected Sherlock to be directly on the sofa, where John had left him. Sherlock didn’t move much unless compelled. John thought of it in terms of physics: A Sherlock at rest tended to stay at rest.

John stood in the middle of his empty suite, thought, and went to Sherlock’s suite, knocking on the door. “Sherlock?” he called, but there was no answer, and John thought that he didn’t much want to stand around in the hotel hallway making a ruckus at Sherlock’s door. People would definitely talk then. So he pulled out the key Sherlock had given him. They had split their keys up, one to each of
them, almost as soon as they had checked in.

Sherlock was on the sofa in his suite, staring at the ceiling. He didn’t move a muscle in reaction to John opening the suite’s door.

This was not at all unusual, in John’s experience, so John simply said, “Hello. You didn’t come to the field tonight.”

Sherlock didn’t reply. Again, not unusual. John glanced at him as he walked over to the suite’s window to draw the curtains. A sulk? Or just deep in thought planning for his start the next day?

John walked over to stand directly behind Sherlock’s head, looking down at him. Sherlock’s gaze stayed focused on the ceiling. “You’re pitching tomorrow. Do you know what that means?
Superstition: We’ve got to start the day off with three hundred and seven seconds worth of really good sex.” He grinned and leaned over to brush an upside-down kiss over Sherlock’s unresponsive mouth.

Which was when Sherlock said, “We have to talk.”

John drew back but did not entirely straighten. “Okay, now, see, for someone who isn’t supposed to have much relationship experience, you’ve perfected the opening to the break-up conversation,” John remarked, calmly, and then he walked over to the room’s armchair and sat in it.

Sherlock shifted on the couch a bit, enough to face him. “I’m serious.”

John turned the television on. “No, you’re not. You think you’re serious, but I’m not the only one in this relationship with a skewed self-perception, and, as the world’s foremost expert on Sherlock Holmes, I feel that I ought to inform you that you like me quite a lot.”

“Oh my God,” said Sherlock, his voice containing so much disgust that John actually looked at him in surprise. “You say that as if that’s all there is to it.”

“That is all there is to it, Sherlock,” said John, evenly.

“You’re hiding us,” Sherlock bit out. “You’re afraid to be seen with me, you’re so worried what people might think.”

“We’ll figure all the complications out.” John shut off the television and gave Sherlock his full attention. “Is that what this is about?”

“No,” said Sherlock.

“Then what? You like me, I like you. The end. That actually happens far less frequently than you might think.”

“I don’t just like you. Do you understand? I am incapable of ‘liking’ people. That isn’t how I operate. I… You…” Sherlock made his ugh noise and turned onto his back and ruffled agitatedly at his hair. “You’re the foremost expert on Sherlock Holmes. You tell me.”

John looked across at him and thought of things he hadn’t brought up yet. “Tell me about the drugs, Sherlock.”

Sherlock made a dismissive noise.

“You need to tell me—”
“That has nothing to do with anything.” Sherlock turned his head suddenly, fixing John with a piercing, squirming, colorless glare. “You want to connect dots in your feeble little brain. You want to make this all textbook psychology, like every strop I have must be connected to my damaged, recovering-addict psyche.”

“Or whatever caused the addiction in the first place. Am I wrong about that?”

“I didn’t realize your medical degree was in psychiatry.” The sarcasm was scathing. “And the drugs have nothing to do with this. This is about you. You are…ridiculous. Do you realize? Do you see?” Sherlock sat up suddenly, jumpy with the force of his conviction in what he was saying. “I am not this person, John. I am not this person who has ‘relationships,’ exchanges casual, aimless kisses, and flirts about three hundred and seven seconds of good sex.”

“You could have fooled me,” inserted John, still calm.

Sherlock ignored him, caught up in his rant. “I possess things. I keep them. I don’t let them belong to anyone else. I don’t share. You say I like you, as if it’s that simple, as if I can keep it that simple. Yes. I like you. The way I like baseball. The way I’ve liked any number of things. So I will take you, and I will conquer you. I will puzzle you out, I will strip you bare, until I and only I know every single little thing there is to know about you, until you are mine, completely, inexorably. I will need you to belong to me entirely. And then, when I am done, you will bore me. Do you understand? Can you understand? Are you capable of it?”

“I’m not stupid, Sherlock,” John said, more sharply than he’d said anything else so far in this conversation.

“Where do you get that idea?” Sherlock rejoined, dry as dust. “So then, you understand. Let us stop, here, now, before it goes any further.”

There was silence in the suite. John considered. “Because you like me too much,” he concluded. Sherlock liked him too much to hurt him later down the line. Sherlock was doing this preemptively, that much was obvious.

“Because this is already tedious,” spat out Sherlock, and then energetically flopped back onto the couch, turning his back to John and drawing his dressing gown around him like blue silk armor.

John sat and blew out an exhale. His fingers drummed against his knees. He counted to ten and kept his anger down and tried to consider how to get Sherlock out of this latest bullheaded idea of his. And then an insidious little voice curled up inside him. Did he want to get Sherlock out of this? Was he just going to spend this entire relationship refusing to let Sherlock break up with him? What sort of relationship was that? Where was his self-esteem, his sense of self-preservation? He was embarrassingly in love with Sherlock, and had been for a while now. Maybe it was time to stop making an idiot of himself over someone who kept trying to push him away.

John didn’t want to believe that. He didn’t think he believed that. Sherlock cared about him, possibly more than he’d ever cared about anyone before, astonishingly. John couldn’t let that go. John couldn’t let Sherlock let that go. At least, he thought he couldn’t. And was that his job? Protecting Sherlock Holmes from himself?

John stood up. “I need some air,” he announced, but it had probably been a waste of air to say anything, because there was no response from the figure on the couch.

***
John had no real idea where he was going in search of the air he’d announced he’d needed. He stepped out of the hotel into the brisk April night and stood there, frowning and contemplating what he ought to do. He couldn’t turn right around, march back into Sherlock’s room, and kiss him. But he also couldn’t turn around and go to his own room. He liked neither of these options. He kind of wanted Sherlock to follow him out of the hotel and apologize, but it seemed more likely that he would get struck by lightning while waiting for him.

“Good evening, Doctor Watson,” said a woman to his left.

John looked at her. She was vaguely familiar. When the black car slid up, he placed her and rolled his eyes. John didn’t wait for the door to open, he leaned over and jerked it open and said to Sherlock’s brother, “You.”

Mycroft Holmes looked at him with mild interest. “And how are you this evening, Doctor?”

“I am not a doctor. You realize that, right? And what are you doing here?”

“I merely wanted to ascertain that you were all right,” replied Mycroft, smoothly.

John looked at him, and something clicked into place for him. Why wouldn’t he be all right? On tonight as opposed to any other night, why would Mycroft Holmes think he wasn’t all right? “Wait a minute,” he said. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

Mycroft lifted his eyebrows.

“You went to see him today and you got this idea in his head that, I don’t know, he’s going to destroy me or something if he lets himself love me the way he—”

“Get in the car,” Mycroft snapped, and John considered it a bit of a victory that he’d gotten Mycroft to snap at him.

He got into the car, closing the door behind him, and it slid away immediately.

“You’ve just left Anthea back there,” John pointed out.

“Anthea can handle herself,” Mycroft clipped out. “There are things you need to know about my little brother.” He said the phrase little brother the way one might say wart with the hair growing out of it.

John frowned. “No,” he said, “there’s really not. Nothing I could learn from you, at any rate. You don’t even like him.”

“He is a difficult man to like.”

“I’ve found him to be the opposite.”

The corner of Mycroft’s mouth turned up in what might have been a smile on someone else but was merely a sneer on him. “Yes, isn’t that…remarkable.” His tone was flat.

“He is much more than you give him credit for being, you know. He is much more than you let him be. Because that’s where he’s getting it from, isn’t it? This strange…reluctance in him, he’s getting it from you, you’re messing with his head.”

Mycroft looked almost bored. “You’re giving me far too much credit.”

“Did you go see him today?”
Mycroft hesitated.

“What did you tell him?” John demanded.

“John—” Mycroft started.

“What did you say to him?” John interrupted, his voice deadly quiet.

Mycroft regarded him for a long moment, narrowing his eyes. “You are…not what I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

Mycroft’s eyes flickered over his face. “Not you.” Mycroft took a deep breath. “He will inevitably grow bored with you. He does with everything, you know. Even the drugs. It’s how he ended up in an overdose situation in the first place: trying to recapture the blush of first romance.”

There was a shuddering creep under John’s skin at the way Mycroft’s accent, edged in sarcasm, turned the words into sharp weapons. John shook it off. He was going to get out of this car and go back to Sherlock’s room and crawl onto him and kiss him and kiss him and kiss him until the sound of the word overdose stopped reverberating through his brain, kiss him until Sherlock knew, Sherlock understood, that the possibility that John might never have met him was an unacceptable one.

“I am not a drug,” John said. “I am much tougher to shake than a drug. I am much more stubborn than cocaine or heroin or whatever the bloody hell it was. And the only thing ‘wrong’ with Sherlock is that he has feelings, something you clearly don’t have.”

Mycroft was looking at him in something that might have been a very pale shadow of astonishment. “Your file has alarming gaps,” he murmured. “But, of course…I should have seen…You thrive on unpredictability, on challenge, of course…”

John decided he wasn’t going to sit here and get talked about instead of talked to. He leaned over and thumped his fist against the dividing wall behind which was the driver. “Stop this car!” he shouted, hoping the driver could hear him.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to your brother, to tell him that you’re an idiot.”

“We’re not through here—”

The car had pulled to a halt. John opened the door and put one foot on the pavement, to make sure the car didn’t take off again. Not that he thought it would stop Mycroft or the driver, but it might give them pause. “We are most definitely through. You come near him again, you will be amazed at how much you’re underestimating me. Are we clear, Mr. Holmes?”

Mycroft regarded him evenly for a long moment, then the corner of his mouth tipped up, and this time it did look like a smile. “Very. Good evening, Doctor Watson.”

John stepped out of the car, slammed the door, and stepped back as it slid smoothly away.

Then he looked around and wondered where the hell he was and how he was getting back to the hotel.

***
John walked into Sherlock’s hotel room and didn’t wait for Sherlock to react. He didn’t expect him to react. Sherlock would surely just ignore him, that was Sherlock’s standard operating procedure. So John didn’t wait for anything. The suite was dark, the lights from the city outside barely filtering through the drapes John had imperfectly closed earlier. John nonetheless walked swiftly across the suite to the couch, where Sherlock was still lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

John leaned over Sherlock. He got a moment’s satisfaction of seeing Sherlock register surprise before he was too close for Sherlock to be in focus, and then what he did was kiss him, catching in his mouth the sound Sherlock tried to make, whatever its purpose had been. And, after a heart-stopping second, Sherlock responded. John had thought that he would. Sherlock was an absurdly responsive kisser. It made Sherlock the best kisser John had ever encountered. John had thought, naively, about the other people he’d kissed in terms of their technique. He wished he’d known that he should have been looking for the one person who, when kissed by John Watson, sighed and kissed back as if the continued turning of the Earth depended on the depth of their kiss.

John lifted his hands to frame Sherlock’s face. Sherlock’s cheeks seemed shockingly hot, but John knew it was more that his hands were cold from the long walk. Sherlock didn’t flinch, though. Sherlock rolled toward him, squirming on the couch, lifting a hand to the back of John’s neck to try to pull him more firmly onto him. John tried to comply but the hotel couch was much too narrow and much too small, and he ended up half-draped over the couch and half-sprawled on the floor. And God, his neck was probably going to start protesting if they kissed in this position much longer, but he Didn’t. Bloody. Care.

When he thought that there was no way Sherlock would let him pull back, he pulled back. He was right. Sherlock nearly tumbled completely off the couch in an effort to recapture his mouth.

“You don’t get to preemptively break up with me,” John told him. “That’s not how it works.”

“Shut up,” Sherlock responded, annoyed, and tried to kiss him again.

“No.” John pressed a finger over Sherlock’s lips, used it to push Sherlock slightly away from him.

Sherlock scowled at him, that bow of a mouth petulant and pouting, his eyes pale sparks in the room’s half-light, and John loved him so much he couldn’t…couldn’t.

“Sodding hell,” John breathed, or sighed, or prayed.

Sherlock drew his eyebrows together, drew in breath to speak, and John knew it was going to be a question. John didn’t want questions, he wanted Sherlock.

John leaned forward, rested his forehead against Sherlock’s, closed his eyes, took a deep, trembling breath, and Sherlock went silent at the action. “I am yours,” John told him. “Don’t worry about keeping me. You’ve got me. That’s fine with me. I’d like to see you try to get me to leave you.”

Sherlock was silent for another moment. Then he said, his voice deep in the stillness of the room, “Well, don’t make it a challenge, John.”

“I’m serious,” John said. “I’m so very serious.”

Sherlock fluttered a sigh that drifted over John’s cheek. “John Watson.” Sherlock nosed his way behind John’s ear. “You’re an idiot.”

John thought that he wasn’t. John thought that he was the cleverest person he knew, because he was, somehow, the only person to have looked at Sherlock Holmes and have seen Sherlock Holmes. “I’m keeping you right back,” John informed him. “That makes me a genius.”
“No, still an idiot,” Sherlock responded.

“Let’s go to bed,” John suggested.

“Three hundred and seven seconds?”

“Much, much, much longer.”

“That’s optimistic of you, John.”

“Shut up,” said John, and kissed him again to make sure he did.

***

John woke to Sherlock playing the violin in a chair at the foot of the bed. It was John’s favorite piece, the one Sherlock tended to play when he was trying to be nice to John. John thought it would have been nicer not to be woken in the middle of the night by the violin, but, well, it was Sherlock, so you took what you could get.

Sherlock watched John. John watched Sherlock finish playing and then lower the violin and bow. Sherlock looked thoughtful. He wore his dressing gown, hastily pulled on and loosely knotted, and nothing else. His dark hair was even more of a riotous mess than usual, sex-pushed-and-pulled into knots. It made John think filthy thoughts. Well, the dressing gown made John think filthy thoughts. The hair wasn’t helping matters. Sherlock’s eyes were helping even less, picking up the gleam of city lights through the window and staring steadily at John.

“What is that piece?” John asked, finally, clearing his throat.

“It’s Tchaikovsky.”

“It’s pretty.”

“You have terrible taste, John.”

“Especially in sleeping partners. Speaking of which, come back to bed.”

Sherlock inhaled deeply through his nose, then carefully put the violin and bow down and crawled his way onto the bed.

“You should ditch the dressing gown,” John suggested.

Sherlock didn’t answer. He settled on his pillow and looked at John, that same steady, assessing gaze.

John resisted the urge to say What? He wanted desperately to know what was going on in Sherlock’s hyperactive brain, but he also didn’t want to disturb it before the train of thought was settled, the conclusion reached. “So now you don’t even bother to leave the room to play the violin in the middle of the night,” John noted. “Should I be taking this as a good sign or a bad one?”

“You cheated,” Sherlock answered. His tone was mild, curious, not accusatory.

John lifted his eyebrows. “When?”

“Tonight. With all of this. You cheated. You said to me the other night: I am not nearly as cold and calculating as I would like to think. You know that because of how I kiss you. What is it about how I kiss you?”
John shook his head. “I don’t want you to change a single thing about how you kiss me.”

“It isn’t fair. You know if you kiss me I don’t think properly. I told you that. You’ve been exploiting it. I’d rather you didn’t.”

That, thought John, was a fair point, and he experienced a twinge of guilt over it. “Sorry. I am sorry. But I don’t want you to think about this. Think about the start tomorrow, or later today, I guess. Think about that all you want. Don’t think about this, about me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re all I can think about.” Sherlock sounded impatient and disgusted.

John smiled. “Can I kiss you?”

“No. What did Mycroft say to you?”

John blinked. “How did you know I talked to Mycroft?”

“You fell asleep and stopped kissing me,” Sherlock remarked, dryly. “Big mistake, John, because then I started thinking again.”

“You know, one of us did play a baseball game today,” John defended himself.

“You played a baseball game yesterday now, John, and tell me what Mycroft said.”

“Your brother’s an idiot, Sherlock.”

“I’ve always thought so,” Sherlock agreed, approvingly.

“You want to be happy. You want to be joyful. It’s so obvious about you. Do you want to know what it is about the way you kiss me? That’s what it is about the way you kiss me. I’ve never met anyone who kisses with as much want as you kiss. Not passion or lust or desire, it’s… You want this, you want me, more than anyone I’ve ever met. I have no idea why, but if you think I’m going to let that slip through my fingers… I don’t understand how no one beat me to this, to you. Who told you that you shouldn’t be you? I can only imagine it was Mycroft. Well, he’s wrong. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with you. You’re amazing. It’s just that you have more heart than he does, and he doesn’t understand it. But you are remarkable and incredible and fantastic, and don’t let Mycroft tell you otherwise.” John stopped speaking.


“What do people normally say?”

“Piss off.”

John smiled. “And you like me quite a lot. Don’t even try to deny that.”

“You got all that from how I kiss?” Sherlock asked, sounding impressed.

“Not how you kiss,” John corrected. “How you kiss me. What do you get from how I kiss you?”

Sherlock appeared to give this serious consideration. “That I don’t mind having your saliva in my mouth.”

John shouted with laughter.

“Well, you needn’t get all… smug,” Sherlock pouted a bit. “It’s a stupid thing to be making
deductions about. The whole thing is stupid.”

John grinned and then snuggled up to him, fitting himself against him with a yawn. “Can we sleep now?”

“And I don’t have a large enough sample size,” Sherlock continued, and John could hear the frown in his voice. “I’d need to collect more data—”

“If collecting more data means kissing people who aren’t me, forget about it,” John said, sleepily, and, eyes already closed, nuzzled Sherlock’s shoulder.

“It wouldn’t mean anything—”

“Not even for science.”

Sherlock huffed his John is so unreasonable sigh. “Fine,” he said, belligerently.

“I’ll tell you all the data you need to know, right now.”

“Oh, really?” Sherlock’s voice was mocking.

“You know how it feels when you kiss me? That’s not how it would feel if you kissed someone else.”

Sherlock was silent for a bit. “And what does that mean?”

“I don’t know. Think about it and tell me in the morning,” said John, and tucked his head into Sherlock’s neck.
Chapter Seventeen

Sherlock thought about it, with John’s head pillowed on his chest. Sherlock could feel every little bit of John’s deep, even breaths as he took them, from the exhalation against his skin to the expansion of his lungs and ribcage against his side. John had been sound asleep for a while now. Sherlock wasn’t the least bit tired. Sherlock was trying to determine how he’d ended up, well, here. He had, very explicitly, very viciously and expertly, sent John away. He had been planning on an empty bed that night. Well, he hadn’t been planning to go to bed at all that night. John had, once again, surprised him.

Sherlock moved, carefully, gingerly, sliding out from underneath John for the second time that night. Sherlock had learned the art of this. John was a decently heavy sleeper, and if Sherlock replaced his body with his pillow, John would fall back into a deep sleep almost immediately with minimal protest.

So, that accomplished, Sherlock walked out into the suite’s living area, pulled the drapes open, and sat curled into an armchair, watching the cityscape absently and going over the data in his head.

Fact 1: John Watson was incredibly stubborn. John Watson’s stubbornness was not to be underestimated. Sherlock had underestimated it earlier that day. Sherlock never made the same mistake twice.

Fact 2: John Watson was decisive. John Watson made up his mind and then employed his stubbornness to get what he wanted (see Fact 1, above).

Fact 3: John Watson had decided that he wanted Sherlock Holmes, and he was employing his stubbornness to get him (see Facts 1 and 2, above).

Fact 4: If Sherlock grew bored of him, John would not leave, not without a fight, not without a painful, prolonged fight (see Facts 1, 2, and 3, above).

Sherlock considered his first four facts. He adjusted Fact 4. When Sherlock grew bored of him, Sherlock thought. He had never known himself not to eventually grow bored of anything that had initially caught his interest. Boredom stalked him, nipping at his heels, breathing down his neck.

Sherlock stood and walked back into the bedroom and looked down at John. Just looked at him for several long moments. Then he walked back out into the living area and resumed his perch, pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them.

Fact 5: I cannot imagine growing bored of John Watson.

And he couldn’t. He had just confirmed that. He could have sat and stared at John for the rest of the night, easily. For the rest of the week. For the rest of their lives. This was all just Mycroft, Mycroft’s voice echoing in his head. Sherlock shoved him firmly out of his mind palace and slammed the door.

Sherlock leaned his head against his knees and thought of the flat in London, the cozy one he could imagine so clearly, with a fireplace and busy Victorian wallpaper, where John would sit in an armchair and study medical textbooks and Sherlock would play the violin from by the window, and every once in a while they would play catch in the hallway and get yelled at by their landlady (in his head, his landlady was always Mrs. Hudson, he couldn’t imagine ever having another one).
Sometimes, Sherlock thought, he would practice pitching into the fireplace, and John would fuss about that and kiss him to stop him from doing it, because John was good at that and because Sherlock liked that. He’d have to make sure John didn’t stop kissing him just because Sherlock had told him to stop using it to his advantage. Sherlock would come up with a way to think whilst John was kissing him. It would be a delicious challenge.

Sherlock closed his eyes. He thought of John Watson, his hands cold from London fog the way they had been cold when he’d walked in that evening. John in a coat and a ridiculous jumper. John would favor terrible jumpers. Maybe they would get a dog. John would probably like a dog. He thought of John Watson, who had no very great talent as a baseball player but had managed to become a decent one nonetheless through sheer force of will. Fact 1, thought Sherlock, drowsily.

John Watson was so stubborn. Sherlock could just let him be stubborn. Sherlock could just tell him, This is what I want, all of this, a flat and fog and a fireplace and you, you in all seasons, you at all times of day and all times of night, you whenever I look up, you. He could tell him this, all of this, and then step back, relax, rely on John Watson’s stubbornness to get it for him, for them. John could be trusted. John would make sure he was happy. John would make him happy. Happy, joyful, Sherlock was so tired of wanting, he was exhausted. Sherlock could just give it all to John, and John would never let him go. If Sherlock let him then John would let Sherlock keep him forever. Sherlock knew he would. Fact 5, thought Sherlock…

Sherlock woke without realizing he had ever fallen asleep. He was still curled in the chair, only the position had grown awkward with the passage of time, and he ached a bit as he straightened himself out. Dawn was graying itself across the sky in front of him. Sherlock stood and walked around the living area, thinking John would have his head if he was stiff for the start. He considered crawling back into bed with John, but he was feeling restless and…awkward. Which he admitted was an unfamiliar enough feeling that he wasn’t even sure it was an accurate term for him to have arrived at. But things had seemed so clear in the darkness, and now what he was thinking was that the day before he had told John he was tedious to get him to leave. Sherlock thought that, in terms of etiquette, that probably hadn’t been the politest thing to do.

Tea, thought Sherlock. He would make John tea.

Sherlock contemplated their kitchen. There was no kettle. Bugger, thought Sherlock, irritated. There was a coffee pot that confusingly had tea bags sitting next to it. How was anyone supposed to make tea in a coffee pot? Sherlock frowned at it in annoyance, then gave it up and walked into the bedroom and got dressed to the sound of John snoring a bit from the bed. He’d have to tell him about the snoring, thought Sherlock, since John had been so smug about the alleged snoring he claimed Sherlock did.

Sherlock went down to the lobby, where the ridiculous chain coffee shop was being manned by a bleary-eyed teenager who yawned at him and clearly had no clue how to make a proper cup of tea. Ridiculous country.

“And what temperature is that water?” he demanded.

The teenager blinked at him idiotically.

“It’s true what they say,” Sherlock told him, scathingly. “It does make you go blind.”

The teenager looked startled and horrified, and Sherlock gave him a grimly satisfied smile.

“Leave the kid alone,” said Lestrade behind him.

“You are always so kind to baristas,” Sherlock replied, without turning around.
“There isn’t anything wrong with being kind to people,” Lestrade answered. “Ready for your start today?”

“Of course,” Sherlock answered, absently, drumming his fingers against the counter.

“We missed you at the field yesterday,” Lestrade continued.

“No, you didn’t.” Sherlock was watching the idiot teenager put teabags into cups.

“Yes, we did.” Lestrade sounded a bit surprised. “Gotten kind of used to having you around.”

Sherlock looked at him for the first time, curious. “Why would you have got used to that?”

“I don’t know. God knows it’s not your sunny disposition,” muttered Lestrade.

“Sir?” the imbecile teenager ventured, hesitantly. “Uh, your teas, sir?”

“They can hardly be called ‘tea,’” Sherlock informed him, coldly, but snatched the cups anyway.

He turned to say good-bye to Lestrade and noticed the path of Lestrade’s eyes, on the two cups of tea Sherlock was holding, one in each hand.

“Two cups of tea,” Lestrade pointed out, needlessly.

“Yes. Well done. You can count as high as two, I have always wondered.” Sherlock made his voice as bored and cutting as possible, because he really didn’t want to get into a conversation about why he was getting two cups of tea at just past dawn in the hotel lobby.

“You’re getting him tea,” said Lestrade, incredulously. “You’re getting him…”

“Do stop talking, you’re lowering the IQ of this entire hotel lobby and it wasn’t very high to start with.”

Lestrade was grinning at him now. Lestrade, thought Sherlock, was insufferable.

“Good-bye,” he said, in a very dignified manner, walking away from him crisply.

“I’ll have a—” he heard Lestrade say to the moron teenager, and then, “You know what, wait a second.”

Sherlock punched at the elevator button, desperate for it to arrive before Lestrade reached him.

It didn’t.

“Sherlock,” he said, catching him.

“You can’t possibly have anything more to say to me,” Sherlock told him. “Your problem is that you talk too much and inevitably end up revealing your innate stupidity.”

Lestrade ignored him. Lestrade had learned to ignore him. Few people reached that point with him, and Sherlock invariably hated those people. “I want you to know that I don’t care, okay? I wanted to make sure you knew that. I mean, keep it out of the clubhouse, but I really don’t care one way or the other. I’m not going to say anything to anyone about any of it.”

Sherlock wanted to say it wasn’t any of Lestrade’s business. He wanted to say it had never occurred to him that Lestrade would be an idiot over this, he had plenty of other things to be an
idiot about. But he knew that John would be concerned about this, so Sherlock forced himself to say just, “Good,” and if it came out a bit short, well, it was the best he could do.

“To be honest, though, I think it’s fantastic. I think he’s fantastic.”

Sherlock punched at the elevator button again in order to keep from saying that he hadn’t been waiting for Lestrade’s endorsement. He was going to snog John as soon as he got back to the hotel room—he deserved it for how bloody well behaved he was being.

“And he’s clearly good for you,” Lestrade continued, because it was too much to hope for that Lestrade would ever take the bloody hint that Sherlock didn’t want to be talking to him, that was why Sherlock had to just say these things, and then that statement gave Sherlock pause. He stared at the elevator doors, and Lestrade said, “Wait, I take it back: He’s clearly spectacular for you. I’ve never seen you so…”

The elevator doors slid open with a ding. Sherlock cut his eyes over to Lestrade and his unfinished sentence.

“Happy,” said Lestrade.

Sherlock took a deep breath and stepped onto the elevator. As usual, he thought, Lestrade had missed the entire point, which was: Was Sherlock good for John? Did Sherlock make John happy? Sherlock was at a complete loss when it came to the answers to those questions. Clearly John thought so, but John suffered from a skewed self-perception.

Sherlock was still thinking about it when he walked back into the suite to find John up and sitting in the armchair Sherlock had slept in, watching something doubtlessly inane on television. He looked up at Sherlock, his hair still mussed and his eyes still sleepy, and Sherlock deduced that he had just woken, had stumbled out into the nearest chair and turned on the television automatically.

“Where’d you go?” he asked, blurrily, still not quite awake, and then, eyes falling on the cups in Sherlock’s hand, “Did you get tea?”

“According to the ‘barista,’ yes, he considers this tea.” Sherlock handed John his. “I’m sure it’s terrible. It was made by a complete imbecile.”

John caught Sherlock’s hand around the cup, refusing to let it go, looking up at him curiously.

“You don’t have to apologize.”

Sherlock tried not to scowl at being so obviously seen through. “It’s just tea, John,” he said, a little shortly, and tugged his hand free and sat on the sofa.

“Did you get yourself green tea?”

“No, you know that I hate green tea. And the green tea has nothing to do with the pitching.”

“If you’re going to get rid of an old superstition, you have to replace it with a new one. So. You make the tea on your gamedays. That’s the new superstition.”

“But I didn’t make this tea,” Sherlock pointed out.

“You’re so bloody logical,” John said, and put his tea down in favor of crawling onto Sherlock’s lap.

“I just went through a lot of effort to get you that tea,” Sherlock said, half-heartedly, as John kissed
that spot underneath his jaw that he knew Sherlock loved. John, thought Sherlock, was ruthless in these matters.

“You walked downstairs,” John pointed out, and deliberately carded his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, another failsafe technique.

“And I had to interact with people. Like Lestrade.”


“My, everyone’s so quick this morning,” said Sherlock.

“So Lestrade noticed? What did he say?”

“That he doesn’t care, that he’s not going to tell anyone, that you’re fantastic and good for me.”

John turned his face into the curve of Sherlock’s neck and breathed for a second. Then he lifted his head back up again. “It’s just a few months, Sherlock. It’s just a few more months, and then I’ll be retired, and you can tell everyone to go to hell like I know you’re dying to do. Just a few more months.”

“John, it honestly makes no difference to me at all,” said Sherlock. And then he hesitated. John talking about his retirement was his perfect opening. Tell him, his internal monologue prompted. Tell him about the flat in London, tell him how much you want. But the words choked in his throat, terror seizing him. And what if John says no? What if John doesn’t want to follow you to London? What will you do then?

“Sherlock,” John said, looking a bit puzzled, and Sherlock swallowed and wondered what the expression on his face looked like. He shook his head, as if to say, Nothing going on here, I’m not having some kind of internal breakdown over you. John brushed his fringe off his forehead and said, “Don’t leave while I’m sleeping. Don’t…be gone when I wake up. You scared me.” John kissed the bridge of his nose.

I never want to leave you, ever. Don’t let me, was what Sherlock wanted to say. Instead, Sherlock cleared his throat and leaned over to put his untouched tea down on the end table. “Superstition,” he said, and John lifted his eyebrows. “I pitch today. That means I owe you 307 seconds of spectacular sex this morning.”

“Really? Tea and sex? Your gamedays are the best days ever.”

Sherlock was pushing John off of him, not that it was a difficult task. He stood and reached for John’s tea, handing it to him. “Both at the same time, even,” he told John.

“You’re absolutely mad.”

“Say that again in 307 seconds. Oh, and try not to get tea on the sofa,” said Sherlock, and dropped to his knees.

***

The National League player of the month in May was Sherlock Holmes. After a shaky up-and-down April, Holmes tore up the month with a 5-0 record and a no decision while keeping an ERA under 2.00. He settled into a routine of having no predictable routine at all. Sometimes he went for strikeouts in the early innings, trailing off into the middle innings, and other times he started off
with ground balls to the shortstop and ratcheted up to strikeouts on the second time through the order. Commentators and opposing batters have suggested that, at times, he has walked batters deliberately just to show off how easily he could get a double play ball.

Austin has embraced their enigmatic, compelling starter. It is said that the mark of a great pitcher is that he can make a baseball game feel like a rock concert on the days when he starts, and right now the biggest parties in baseball happen in Austin on a Holmes day. The Austin chapter of Sherlock’s Sweeties is far better organized than previous chapters have been, devoted to shouting out the opening of specific arias depending on the outcome of the at-bat. It isn’t pretty opera, but it is a pretty damn interesting baseball game. Irene Adler, the self-proclaimed president of the fan club, has managed to make herself a bit of a cult figure in Austin, thanks in large part to a stunt in early June when she called for all of Sherlock’s Sweeties to attend a game in their battle dresses—which turned out to mean naked. The commotion this caused actually resulted in a delay of game. Holmes looked none too pleased.

But, other than reading the varying levels of his scowl from the dugout, Holmes has remained as close-lipped as ever. His true opinions of everything from his virulent fanbase to his resurgent catcher remain unknown. He doesn’t grant interviews, and he doesn’t do press conferences. He keeps his head down in the clubhouse and ignores all reporters’ questions evenly. His teammates’ assessments of him vary, from an assumption that he’s “shy” to a declaration that “he does his job and doesn’t cause trouble, so who cares if he’s not the friendliest guy?” Don Anderson, the team’s shortstop, does echo familiar criticisms of Holmes: “He’s arrogant and stuck-up and thinks he’s the best baseball player ever born and the rest of us aren’t fit to tie his shoes. Actually, he’s basically a psychopath.” But, all in all, Austin’s opinions of Holmes seem markedly less bitter than previous teammates’. When asked if credit for that should be given to John Watson, Greg Lestrade, Holmes’s longtime manager and current Austin manager, doesn’t exactly deny it, saying merely, “Don’t forget we have four other starting pitchers, too.”

Watson is far more accessible than the ace of his staff, having taken to handling all of his pitchers’ press conferences, a habit first developed in reaction to Holmes’s unapproachability. Watson now represents the only statements coming out of Austin’s relentlessly improving pitching staff, giving the team an appearance of polished unity that seems to breed a healthy clubhouse, even if it is centered around as polarizing a personality as Holmes. Indeed, Watson’s great talent seems to have been neutralizing Holmes as a force. Holmes pitches every fifth day and spends the rest of his days with his head bent in deep conversation with Watson, if he is spotted talking to anyone at all. Word from the Austin clubhouse is that Holmes and Watson are “inseparable,” and that Watson’s opinion is “the only opinion Holmes cares about in any way.”

Clubhouse gossip is the only way to learn anything about Holmes and Watson these days. For all his easygoing openness as the pitching staff spokesperson, Watson is increasingly reticent on the topic of Holmes. During the middle of Holmes’s tremendous May, Watson gave the press a now famous quote: “Do we sometimes have a discussion on the mound where I say to him, ‘Let’s really mess with this next batter’s head,’ and then we do it just because we can? Yes. Maybe.” In the wake of the stir the quote caused, Watson retreated into just-the-facts-ma’am mode when it comes to Holmes, refusing to give away anything at all beyond statistical basics. Reporters express frustration. “The Holmes-Watson dynamic is clearly the key to this team and the story of the season, and no one has any idea how it’s working. Watson won’t even answer questions about what they talk about, and Holmes doesn’t answer any questions at all. It’s a bit freakish if you ask me,” complains Sally Donovan, who covers the team.

One thing is clear: However the Holmes-Watson dynamic is working, it’s working on both ends. Holmes has always been one of the game’s premiere players. He is, this season, blossoming into a greatness whose door he has been knocking on for years. The catcher nicknamed “Doctor” for his
ability to fix ailing pitchers had little to fix when it came to Holmes’s mechanics, as separate from Holmes’s clubhouse chemistry with his team. In reality, it is Watson who is the true revelation happening in Austin. A little-known catcher who put together a few decent years last decade and was long considered past his prime, Watson is experiencing an inexplicable resurgence, with a career-best batting average, a league-leading and astonishing 64% caught stealing, and a national profile he’s never before enjoyed. In fact, today National League All-Star Game manager Esteban Diaz confirmed the results of the fan vote, and John Watson, for the first time in his career, will be starting an All-Star Game. His starting pitcher? Sherlock Holmes.
Chapter Eighteen

The article was the first thing John Watson spotted on the kitchen table that morning, the newspaper having been folded open to it for his benefit. But it was far from being the only thing on the kitchen table. Sherlock’s experiments on rainwater having been pushed aside—John didn’t know the point of them and had stopped asking—there was now a pile of newspapers and magazines clustered there. John regarded it for a moment in silence. From the living room came the sound of Sherlock’s violin. Had Sherlock gotten him all the newspapers? It seemed unlike him. Sherlock was ruthlessly unsentimental about his own career, kept none of his press clippings or even any of his more important baseballs. Maybe Sherlock had decided to be sentimental about John’s career, though?

John carried the first newspaper into the living room with his tea and said to Sherlock’s back, “The newspapers? And stuff?”

“Not me,” replied Sherlock, without turning around and without breaking stride in his violin-playing. “Mrs. Hudson.”

That made much more sense. Mrs. Hudson was very sweet. At first, when Sherlock had suggested they share Sherlock’s place rather than John’s house—which Sherlock maintained they both hated, only John was too stupid to have realized that yet—John had agreed that it would be fine in order to save the epic sulk he feared otherwise.

And then he’d found out that Sherlock lived in an apartment over Mrs. Hudson’s garage. John had refused, digging his heels in, but Sherlock’s pouting had indeed been monumental, and John had eventually relented and saw immediately why Sherlock had been so determined. The apartment suited Sherlock. He had somehow already filled it with so many scattered belongings that John couldn’t imagine that he’d ever lived anywhere else. And Mrs. Hudson plainly doted on Sherlock. John thought that Mrs. Hudson’s fussing over him was unnecessary to Sherlock’s ego and also thought that Mrs. Hudson’s fussing over him was exactly what Sherlock needed. John had not yet met Sherlock’s mother, and Sherlock never mentioned her, but John was willing to bet she hadn’t doted on Sherlock.

Mrs. Hudson fluttered in and out of the apartment with food and groceries and tea, always reminding them perfunctorily that she wasn’t their housekeeper. John had realized immediately that there was no way they could maintain for Mrs. Hudson the façade of just being good friends. The apartment had two bedrooms, but Mrs. Hudson was in and out so much that John was convinced it was only a matter of time before she walked in on something at least mildly inappropriate. It turned out, though, that hiding it was not at all necessary. In fact, Mrs. Hudson had seemed to have known right away, and John had wondered if Sherlock had mentioned it to her. When John brought it up, Mrs. Hudson looked at him in surprise and said, “Sherlock doesn’t talk about his personal life. But he mentioned you to me, just once, just something you’d said to him at the field, and I knew immediately he was over the moon for you. I’ve never heard him mention anyone by name, ever.” Mrs. Hudson said that like it was so simple, unpacking groceries from a bag. “It’s so good he has you. I’ve always worried about him. The only person he’s ever had is that terrible brother of his, and he doesn’t count. But now he has you, so we can worry about him together, so it’s half the worry for each of us.” Mrs. Hudson had smiled at him brightly, and John had started to ask if she could keep it quiet, but then Mrs. Hudson had cut him off by saying, “My lips are sealed,” and pretending to zip them shut and throw away the key. And then she’d told the
press she had two studio apartments over her garage, which had helped a great deal with the suspicious nature of the living arrangements. Mrs. Hudson was the only other person John had ever seen Sherlock demonstrably affectionate with, and John completely understood why.

“That was nice of her,” said John, settling into what had become his chair. “I’ll have to thank her. Are you excited?”

“About?”

“The All-Star Game.”

“Not particularly.”

John regarded Sherlock’s back. They had been cohabitating for several months now, and for the most part John had grown used to Sherlock’s quirks, but there were times when John still found Sherlock touchy and difficult to read. Like now.

John sighed, concluding, “I bet you don’t see the point.”

“I see the point,” said Sherlock, stiffly, after a moment. “It’s an honor to be selected.”

“You’re saying that for my benefit.”

“You’re delighted. You should be. It’s a good thing, John.”

“A good thing for small people with small brains like me,” remarked John, without rancor, and sipped his tea. “You’ve gone before.”

“Yes,” answered Sherlock, briefly.

“You’ve never started before. Surely you’re pleased about that. You’re having the season of your career so far.”

“You promised me a perfect game.”

“Give me time. Baseball’s a marathon.” John watched Sherlock play his violin, the sun making a halo out of his riotous curls. John loved to watch Sherlock play the violin. Sherlock always moved with grace, but John couldn’t let himself enjoy it on the baseball diamond anymore. There were too many sharp eyes on him, watching his every move. There were already too many photos for John’s liking, photos of the two of them in which John was sure his heart was in his eyes, in which he thought everyone would look at the way he was looking at Sherlock and know. So, at work, John refused to let himself think too hard about what a beautiful pitcher Sherlock was. Which meant he appreciated the violin-playing a great deal. It was always private, and always gave John the opportunity to sit and admire Sherlock, the lean, gorgeous, elegant lines of him as he coaxed beautiful music from the instrument. Usually, Sherlock playing the violin led to sex. John actually glanced at his watch to check the time.

Sherlock hit a sour note, which made John wince and look up at him in surprise. Sherlock never made a mistake playing the violin. Sherlock himself seemed irritated by it. He screeched the bow along the strings and then turned from the window and stalked across the room to place the violin gently on his chair. No matter how upset he was, John had never seen Sherlock mistreat the violin.

“You okay?” John asked him.

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said, and disappeared into their bedroom and slammed the door.
John lifted his eyebrows. “Okay,” he said to his cup of tea, and looked through the rest of the newspaper. Sherlock in a mood was best left to get himself out of it. John wondered idly if Mrs. Hudson would stop by with some freshly baked cookies. That would make up for Sherlock’s mood.

John’s phone buzzed with a text. John expected it to be Sherlock, texting to tell him to come into the bedroom and fetch his slippers for him or something. It was Clara. John had never really made the fight up with Harry, and nothing emphasized that more than getting a text from Clara instead of her. Congrats on the ASG! read the text. And then a smiley face. John looked at the text. He thought it was trying too hard to be normal and cheerful. John had been ignoring the Harry situation, half because he didn’t know what to do about it and half because he had just wanted to be enjoying this honeymoon period with Sherlock. He had never had a relationship that had made him so incredibly happy all the time. Just looking at Sherlock and thinking how, amazingly, he was his, filled his chest with joyful buoyancy, and he had been selfish enough to want to relish it. John stared at the text for a long time before slowly typing back a simple Thanks. God, he was a coward.

He kind of wanted to ask Sherlock how he had kicked his drug addiction, but they never talked about the drugs. John thought it was understandable that it wasn’t one of Sherlock’s favorite topics of conversation, the same way John appreciated that Sherlock didn’t ever want to talk about John’s psychosomatic leg injury, which now bothered him so seldomly that he sometimes forgot he had ever had it.

The thought of Sherlock’s past, though, brought up a foggy memory of stalking his Wikipedia entry when they’d first met. The All-Star Game brawl with Moran.

John got up and walked into their bedroom. Sherlock was laying on his back in the middle of the bed, staring up at the ceiling, his fingers steepled together in his thinking pose.

“You’ve received a text from Clara,” said Sherlock.

John ignored this. “You got in a brawl with Moran at the last All-Star Game.”

“She sent you platitudes, so now you’re worried about Harry,” continued Sherlock.

John looked at him in the bed. He was whippet thin, and there was strength there, yes, surprising steel, but John could think of no one he knew less likely to start a brawl. “A brawl? Seriously?”

“You should stop worrying about Harry. You’re excited about the All-Star Game, think about that instead. Leave Harry until after the season; it won’t make a difference.”

“We’re not talking about Harry, Sherlock,” John said, firmly.

Sherlock sighed up at the ceiling. “Do you think I can’t hold my own in a fistfight, John?”

John snorted. “I think you probably know some ridiculously obscure form of karate.”

Sherlock flickered a smile at the ceiling.

“Is that why you’re not excited about the All-Star Game? Because Moran will be there again?”

Sherlock looked up at the ceiling for a long moment, then he shifted his gaze to John, ocean-blue-green-gray and just as unfathomable, just as unerring and undeniable. “Don’t worry about Moran,” he said. “Don’t worry about me. Don’t worry about Harry. Don’t worry about anything. You’ll start the All-Star Game and you’ll have a fantastic time. I’ll start with you. You’ll have fun. It’ll be poetry for you. It’ll be a symphony.”

There was something he was missing, thought John. Something about Moran. But he was also
aware Sherlock was offering him this to be nice to John. Sherlock couldn’t have cared less about the pomp and circumstance of the All-Star Game selection, but he knew it meant something to John, and he wanted John to enjoy it, and John didn’t want to belittle the gift being offered. After the All-Star Game, thought John, they’d talk about Moran. Until then, he’d just keep Moran away from Sherlock Holmes. Easily done.

***

John’s birthday.

Sherlock stared at the date on the top of the newspaper he’d retrieved that morning from where it had been left at their hotel room door. He’d known, of course, that it was John’s birthday, he hadn’t forgotten, he just didn’t know what he was supposed to be doing for John’s birthday. He didn’t know what John would expect. Sherlock tried to think of everything he knew about American birthday traditions. A cake ought to be involved, and candles, and a gift of some sort, but Sherlock had no gift to give John. He’d considered it, but he had no idea what that gift might be, what the social expectations were.

Sherlock took the newspaper back into their bedroom, where John was sprawled on his stomach and snoring lightly, and crawled onto the bed with it and waited for John to wake up, which he did with drowsy snuffling, instinctively nosing his way closer to Sherlock, curling toward his warmth.

“You awake?” he mumbled, finally, into Sherlock’s T-shirt.

“Yes,” Sherlock affirmed.

“Mmmm, good,” said John, and pressed a wet kiss through Sherlock’s T-shirt.

“Were you not going to do that if I wasn’t awake?” asked Sherlock, amused.

“Oh, no, I was doing it either way,” John responded, nosing Sherlock’s T-shirt out of the way to press an open-mouthed kiss just to the left of his belly button.

Sherlock looked down at his sleep-tousled gold-brown head moving over him and said, “You are going in quite the wrong direction.”

“Uh-uh,” John denied, around his tongue, lavishing attention on the trail of hair leading downward.

“This is definitely the right way.”

“I would agree with you on almost every other morning, but today is your birthday and I really do think we should have this situation the other way around.”

John froze and then lifted his head up, managing to look comically startled whilst sprawled between Sherlock’s legs. “How did you know that?”

“How did I know it’s your birthday?” Sherlock couldn’t believe John was asking him that.

“I’ve never told you.”

“It’s on your Wikipedia, John.”

“Oh, bloody hell, it is,” John realized. “Damnit. I didn’t want you to know.”


“I don’t want a big fuss made over it.”
“Oh, darn,” said Sherlock. “Now I have to cancel the huge surprise party I was hosting after the game tonight.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Please, John, of course I’m joking.” Sherlock rolled his eyes and squirmed and wriggled and coaxed until he got John farther up his body, sprawled over his chest, catching his weight as best as he could. “You should know that I am never going to throw you a surprise party.”

“Thank God,” said John, and kissed him.

Sherlock let himself be distracted for only a few moments—maybe closer to a minute—before easing John out of the kiss and saying, “Why?”

“Why what?”

“You would never have thought that I’d make a big fuss over this. Why didn’t you want me to know?”

“Because you are so young that you still think birthdays in this business ought to be celebrated, and I didn’t really want to be reminded of that,” said John, wryly.

Sherlock considered this. He thought he could tell John that he wasn’t old, but John would dismiss this as further evidence of their age difference. He thought he could try to wave away the age difference, but that would provoke a conversation about the age difference that Sherlock thought wouldn’t be productive, so he said instead, “Well, I, for one, think we should celebrate the few birthdays we have left where you’re virile and strong.”

“You are a bastard,” John told him, but he leaned down and kissed him anyway.

***

John sent All-Star Game tickets to his parents and to Harry and Clara and the kids. He couldn’t not. It was his last All-Star Game, and he was starting. He had to include his family, even if he was feuding with Harry and had been less than forthcoming with his parents about Sherlock.

Sherlock was curious about that fact, but he didn’t seem to harbor ill will about being a secret.

“Why wouldn’t you come out to your parents?” he had asked. “Surely the fact that you have a homosexual sister would make the conversation easier.”

“No. I don’t know. Somehow it feels different for me. There are all these expectations on the son. The baseball-playing son.”

Sherlock shrugged, as if indifferent to the entire situation, which miffed John enough to say, “Why haven’t you come out to your parents?”

“I didn’t know I was gay,” pointed out Sherlock, calmly, and then, thoughtfully, after a second, “I didn’t know I was anything.”

John shook his head a bit.

“You always shake your head when I say that,” remarked Sherlock, matter-of-factly. “Like I’m lying about it.”

“I don’t think you’re lying. I just can’t believe my tremendous luck that nobody prior to me
thought to thoroughly seduce you.”

Sherlock lifted his eyebrows in what looked like genuine amusement. “John, people have been thoroughly seducing me almost constantly for a decade now.”

“Ah,” said John, dryly, thinking that the Sherlockian ego was well and truly intact.

“You’re just the only one I ever wanted to actually accomplish it.” Sherlock continued, casually, the way he always said things like that, as if they were nothing. Which made John drag him to bed and thoroughly seduce him.

But he knew that he surprised Sherlock, on the Sunday night before the All-Star Game, by knocking on the door to his suite. Separate suite, thought John. They still always had separate suites. They never used both suites anymore, but the presence of John’s family in the same hotel had led him to go to his own suite, and then he had walked around it finding it cavernous and empty and lonely and now he found himself knocking on Sherlock’s door.

Sherlock answered, dressed as impeccably as he always was, in the plum shirt today. He took in John’s suit.

“Don’t criticize the tailoring,” John told him, and watched him swallow whatever he’d been about to say. John pushed his way into the suite. Sherlock’s jacket was folded over the back of the couch, and he’d already managed to colonize much of the floor of the living area with breakdowns of American League batters. “Taking this whole thing seriously, aren’t you?”

“Good practice for the World Series,” Sherlock pointed out.

John stuck his hands in his pockets and forced himself to look at Sherlock. “I think you should come to dinner with us.”

Sherlock watched him closely, barely a flicker of reaction in his eyes. “All right,” he agreed, mildly.

John frowned. “That’s it? ‘All right’? No…surprise? No ‘Are you sure about this, John?’”

Sherlock was already pulling his jacket on. “You’re not sure about it. This isn’t how you behave when you’re sure about things. And you’re almost always sure about things. You’re extremely decisive. I’ve never seen you dither so long about something as you have about this.”

“I haven’t been dithering.”

Sherlock ignored him. “But you want me. Isn’t that what you told me you’d decided? You wouldn’t let me preemptively break up with you. You want me and you want this and you’re stubborn about the things you want, so I knew eventually you’d stop dithering and you’d come to the conclusion that you have to get this over with sooner or later. So no, I’m not surprised. Shall we go?”

Sherlock was walking to the door. John had expected to have a little more time to get used to what felt like his sudden decision on his part. “Wait,” he protested. “Can we just—?”

“No,” Sherlock snapped, abruptly, and turned back to him. “We can’t. I detest indecision, you know. I hate checked swings. If you’re going to strike out, bloody commit to it.”

John blinked, then rose to meet Sherlock’s anger. “You’re a pitcher, of course you think that way. Nobody expects you to get any hits.”
“That doesn’t mean I don’t try.”

“Are you seriously going to have an argument with me about this right before dinner with my parents?”

“No. I wasn’t going to have an argument with you about anything. I was merely going to go to dinner. But then you went and second-guessed everything, again, and—”

“This is not an easy decision, Sherlock. This is not something you just…do on the spur of the moment. And I’ve done it on the spur of the moment here—”

“The spur of what moment? We’ve been shagging for three months and five days. Exactly what about this is ‘spur of the moment’ by any definition of that phrase? It’s not like I suddenly snuck up on you on the airplane or something. You have known about me for literally months. This shouldn’t be ‘spur of the moment,’ all this time later. You should have made this decision ages ago. I can’t believe you haven’t. I hate that you haven’t.”

“It’s my decision,” John pointed out, hotly. “There’s no requirement that I act on a timeline—”

“It isn’t a question of timing, John,” Sherlock retorted. “It’s the fact that you’re behaving this way about it. I don’t care that we’re a secret to the rest of baseball, I genuinely don’t. That makes perfect sense to me, it’s none of their business. But you’re close to your parents. Closer than I am to mine, at least. You actually talk to them on a regular basis. And you haven’t mentioned me to them. Not even obliquely. You have deliberately not mentioned me. You have omitted me.”

John narrowed his eyes. “Do you eavesdrop on my conversations?”

“Of course I do, John, don’t be an imbecile,” Sherlock answered, impatiently. “But that isn’t the point.”

“If I told them about you, Sherlock, they would know, immediately, how I feel about you. Do you understand me? It would be obvious. It is obvious. I can’t talk about you objectively. People bring you up and I grin like a complete fool. Do you even watch my press conferences? It’s ridiculous. I look like a blushing schoolboy on the topic of you, and the press might be too stupid to draw conclusions from that, but my parents wouldn’t be.”

“If that’s true, then your parents know already. And who cares?” Sherlock sliced in, sharply. “Why should you care? So your parents would know. Is it because they would know you were gay? Or is it because they would know it was me?”

John stared at him. The silence in the hotel room was ringing following Sherlock’s shout. Sherlock suddenly fidgeted, looking uncomfortable, as if he’d just realized how much he’d given away there, that he hadn’t intended to give away so much. He moved away from the door, over to the window of the suite, presenting John with his back. John turned to watch him. “Sherlock,” he said. “It’s not about you.”

“Isn’t it?” Sherlock leaned against the window, talking to the city outside.

“No,” John insisted. “It’s not.”

Sherlock sighed heavily.

“Hey.” John, his voice sharp, stalked into the living area, trying to force Sherlock’s still, unmoving form to look at him. “Don’t pretend you know more about me. Not on this.”
“World’s foremost John Watson authority,” Sherlock reminded him, dully. “I do know more about you. I always know more about you. You have skewed self-perception. And I’ve been making deductions. You tell them everything that brings you joy. Everything. Normally that’s about baseball, because it used to be that baseball was your great source of happiness. But you tell them everything, you exult, you should hear the detail you go into on a particularly good at-bat, a particularly well-called game. Me, you never mention. Me, you dismiss, brush aside when asked. And I thought, Would you do that if you had met someone normal? If it wasn’t me? If it was someone who…was normal?”

Idiot, idiot, idiot, John told himself and squeezed his eyes shut and closed his hands into fists and hated himself. Because he knew that someone at some point had told Sherlock that there was something wrong with who he was, and John had been so determined to never do that to him, and he had managed to get Mycroft entirely out of their lives and Sherlock relaxed and open with him and now he had ruined everything by being a coward with his parents.

He opened his eyes. Sherlock was still leaning against the window, still looking down at the city below. “If I had met someone normal,” John said, his throat aching with regret, “I would never have told my parents about him, because there would have been nothing to tell. It had to be you, Sherlock. It was only ever going to be you.”

“Your parents are knocking on your hotel room door,” Sherlock replied.

John heard it then, a dull knocking from down the hallway. “It isn’t because of you.”

“You said,” Sherlock responded, mildly.

John hated the mildness. Sherlock had shut down, wrapped himself in intellect, the way he did when he was hurt. John recognized the tactic and hated that he had inspired it. He took a few steps closer to Sherlock, carefully. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I made you think, or feel—I’m sorry. Come to dinner.”

“Definitely not.”

“Sherlock—”

“You’re feeling guilty now. I didn’t mean to do that. I meant to give you time. I meant to see if you would—I didn’t mean to—I have batting statistics to study.”

Sherlock never cut himself off, never stumbled over his words. John felt powerless and terrible. “Come to dinner,” he said again, helplessly.

Sherlock shifted just slightly, just enough to meet his eyes. His were flat and gray. “No,” he said, firmly.

John thought pushing the issue might make things worse. He chewed on his bottom lip nervously and tried to think how he was going to fix it. “It isn’t about you, Sherlock. I mean, it wasn’t—I didn’t—I’m so sorry.”

“I heard you the first, second, and third times you apologized. You should really go to dinner, John.”

John hesitated. He didn’t want to leave things like this. He wanted to brush a quick kiss over Sherlock’s lips, but he was terrified Sherlock would flinch or draw backward and he couldn’t deal with that rejection. Maybe he should just go to dinner, he thought. Maybe he would go to dinner, and they would both settle down over the course of the evening’s separation, and then when he got
back from dinner Sherlock would listen to his apologies and actually believe them and it was all going to be fine.

Distantly, down the hall, his parents had now started calling for him through the door. Any minute now they were going to decide he had died and call hotel security.

“Okay,” he said, because he didn’t have time to think about it anymore. “Please make sure you order yourself something to eat.”

Sherlock didn’t even bother to lie about it. He just rolled his eyes. John thought the odds Sherlock would eat that night were slim to none. He’d have to remember to bring him something to eat when he got back. A peace offering was definitely called for, anyway.
Chapter Nineteen

When John closed Sherlock’s hotel room door behind him, his parents turned immediately and, seeing him, descended upon him.

“Oh, Johnny,” his mother said, smothering him in a hug and kissing both his cheeks. “How silly of us, we had the wrong room!”

“No, no,” John assured them. “You had the right room.”

“Then what were you doing in that room?” his mother asked him.

Which was a logical question. “Nothing. Doesn’t matter.” Then he winced at himself, because he knew Sherlock must be eavesdropping. “Let’s go to dinner,” he said, hastily. “I am starving.”

He herded them to dinner, responding automatically to everything they were telling him: praise over the All-Star Game start, a disagreement they were having with the neighbor over the lemon tree on their mutual border, the fact that they were planning a visit to England to visit his mother’s sister, who wasn’t doing well. Harry and Clara met them at the restaurant with the kids, providing welcome relief from John being the center of attention. His parents doted on Matt and Sophie, and John watched Harry closely. Harry mostly ignored him. They had been civil with each other but not overly enthusiastic. Clara, eager to smooth things over, chattered enough for both of them. John pushed food around on his plate.

“I thought you were starving,” his mother reminded him.

“I…” John shook his head, at a loss. I had a fight with my boyfriend before coming to dinner. Over the fact that you don’t even know I have a boyfriend.

“Come on, Johnny,” said Harry, into the water she was pointedly drinking, “isn’t this your moment of triumph? And here in Boston, could there be anything better? Aren’t you pleased, Dad?”

“Of course I’m pleased,” their father replied. “But it doesn’t matter, I was proud of John before all this.” His father beamed at him.

John managed a smile in return and pushed his food around some more and wondered if he was ever going to get old enough that he would stop paying attention to whether his father was proud of him. He wondered if Sherlock had ever been young enough to pay attention to whether his father was proud of him.

John had his food boxed up to bring back to the hotel. Maybe he would force-feed some of it to Sherlock, he thought. The rest of the family ordered dessert. His father talked to him about baseball, moving from Home Run Derby predictions to strategy for the game on Tuesday.

“How much does Holmes listen to you, anyway?” He asked it as if he thought the answer was going to be not at all.

John bristled a little bit, automatically. “More than people think,” he retorted.

His father looked surprised. “Okay. I was just asking.”
John took a deep breath and toyed with the coffee he’d ordered and not drunk. “He listens to me,” he said, more calmly. “It really is a lot of teamwork. He calls more pitches than I’d normally let a pitcher call, but he’s good at it, so it’s fine. We respect each other.”

“Do you have a plan for the game, then?”

“I’m sure he has a plan. I plan a bit less than he does. He’s science, I’m poetry. You know. Like the two halves of baseball.”

“That’s flowery-sounding.”

“Well, that’s my job, as the poetry side of things.”

His father shrugged. “Well, it seems to be working.” His father studied him assessingly. “You still thinking of retiring?”

“I’m not just thinking of it, I’m planning on it.”

“I didn’t know if maybe this season…” His father trailed off.

John knew what the rest of the sentence was. He knew everyone was thinking it. But John also knew this season was a fluke, and he wanted to go out on this unexpected high. The only thing that worried him was how Sherlock would feel about it. They never discussed anything past the current season, John out of fear it would start a fight, Sherlock probably out of willful ignorance that there was anything to discuss.

“No,” he answered, shortly, and called for the check, hoping the rest of his family would take the hint.

They didn’t. Not for at least another half an hour. And then they were saying such long good-byes to each other that Clara suggested they all go to a hotel to hang out, and John’s room was the obvious place, being a suite. The last thing John felt like doing was entertaining the family, and he tried to plead exhaustion, but they all pointed out that the only thing he had to do the next day was watch other people hit home runs at night, so he could sleep all day if he wanted. John wanted to shout at them, But I have to go apologize to my boyfriend! but couldn’t. In the meantime, Harry was looking at him closely, as if she knew exactly what was on John’s mind and was determined to be as difficult as possible.

John confronted her about it, hissing at her as they walked through the lobby, “You know, you could get everyone to go back to their own hotel rooms.”

“Why?” she asked, innocently. “So you can go have sex?”

“No,” John snapped.

“What are the two of you whispering about?” their mother interrupted.

John plastered a smile on his face. “Nothing,” he said, innocently.

The kids ran around the suite and generally made a mess of things. Harry sat with their parents, talking about something, and Clara helped John make coffee in the kitchen.

John forced himself to stop being selfish for a little while. “How are things? Really?”

“They’re…okay,” Clara said, carefully.
“Look me in the eye so I can believe you.”

Clara did as he asked. “They’re okay. Really. We’re…getting there.”

John studied her eyes and believed her and nodded shortly. “Good, because if it was otherwise, you would have called me about it, right?”

“Right. What about you? How are things? Really?”

“Fine,” John lied.

“Look me in the eye so I can believe you,” said Clara.

John looked her in the eye. “I’m starting an All-Star Game for the first time in my life. Things are better than fine.”

“I wasn’t talking about baseball.”

“Oh, look, the coffee’s done,” said John, deliberately obtuse and thinking that he had started picking up Sherlock’s terrible avoidance techniques.

Clara sighed and rolled her eyes but let him dodge.

John spent the rest of the night the way he’d spent dinner: letting his family’s conversation wash over him. He sat with coffee he didn’t drink and thought of Sherlock, how he’d left things with Sherlock, how he shouldn’t have left things like that with Sherlock. How he could have had Sherlock next to him at that very moment, deducing exactly what was wrong with Dottie Benson’s old greyhound in the story his father was telling. He could have, but he had been too much of a coward, and now he was in danger of losing everything. For the first time, he considered the possibility that Sherlock might not forgive him for this. For the first time, he considered the possibility that Sherlock might be right, and what he had taken for fear at disrupting his parents’ vision of him had actually been frightened shame that his parents might very well understand his homosexuality but might not understand the man he’d chosen as a mate. And John loved Sherlock, John knew he loved Sherlock. How could he have ever wanted to keep him a secret from his parents? How had he not made him feel that John would sing his praises from rooftops? Sherlock was difficult and unusual and amazing, and John should have been showing him off, he really should have been, and how had he been such an idiot, and how was he ever going to get Sherlock to forgive him for this?

By the time John’s mother came and sat next to him, he had made up his mind, definitively. The evening was winding down, the kids sleepy and quiet in front of the television in his bedroom, and his father talking with Harry and Clara in a low voice about the plans for tomorrow, and John thought his mother was coming to tell him good night, and he turned to her, suddenly frantic that she not leave until he got this out.

“Mum,” he started.

She smiled at him and brushed his hair off his forehead. “You’ve let this get shaggier than usual,” she noted. “Is that Sherlock’s influence?”

John blinked, startled at the mention of him.

“He has lovely hair, that man,” she continued. “You can tell even though he’s wearing a hat most of the time. He has been a marvelous influence on you.”
John drew his eyebrows together and tried to figure out what she was talking about. “Because I wear my hair a bit longer now?”

She looked amused. “Because you’re happier than I’ve ever seen you. I’ve really never seen you look so well. I’ve never heard you sound so well. And that’s not just because he brings your accent out.”

John stared at her. “Mum,” he started again.

“Darling, please,” she interrupted him, and brushed at his hair again. It was a soothing gesture that made him feel like a little boy again, like everything would be fine, even the mess he’d made with Sherlock. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice? You’re my son. Everyone else might not notice, but I see the way you look at him. And the way you talk about him.”

“I never talk about him,” John pointed out, because he didn’t, Sherlock had been right to call him out on that.

“Exactly,” his mother agreed, with a knowing smile. “You have been foolish, dear boy. You should have said you were in love with him long ago. What did you think we would say? Did you think we would condemn you? For loving someone?”

“I…” said John, and felt like such an idiot he couldn’t even begin to formulate a sentence.

“You must be very in love with him,” she remarked, watching him closely. “You’re terrified of him.”

It was the most accurate thing John had ever heard. He was terrified of Sherlock Holmes, of the amount of power he held over John’s entire being. “I’m mad about him,” John confessed. “You’d think I was a teenager or something. He literally makes me feel like a teenager.”

His mother smiled at him like that was charming and adorable instead of awful and scary. “You should have brought him tonight.”

“I know. I should have. We had a row about it, actually.”

“Which explains why you’ve been in a strop all night.”

“I haven’t been in a strop,” John denied, automatically. “I’ve been… He’s…” John stopped, trying to think how to explain.

“Something else,’ was Harry’s assessment, I believe. The children are full of fascinating stories about him, you know. I was honestly anxious to meet him in the flesh.”

“He’s fantastic, Mum,” said John. “He’s utterly fantastic. I don’t even know how I could be so lucky, or why he would look at me and see anything that he… He’s just fantastic. But he can be a bit much. He can be a bit… He can be a bit Sherlock,” he finished, helplessly.

“But he makes you happy,” said his mother.

“Yes,” John answered, honestly. And then, after a second, because it was true, and he had to tell someone, “He makes me giddy.”

“Then, John, thank God he’s a bit Sherlock, in that case.” His mother stood and planted a kiss on the top of his head. “Go and make up the row, love.” And then she raised her voice and called to his father, “Rob? We’re going.”
And there were rounds of hugs and kisses and promises to see each other the next day, and then finally John was alone and able to go in search of Sherlock.

He had a key to Sherlock’s room, but he knocked because he felt like Sherlock might appreciate the ability to make the decision to let him in.

Sherlock did eventually open the door, although he left him waiting a while, as if to test John’s commitment to this course of action. When he finally did open the door, he was dressed in a T-shirt and pajama pants and bathrobe. In a normal person, this might have indicated bedtime, but John knew it indicated depression in Sherlock, and felt even guiltier.

“How was dinner?” asked Sherlock, politely, as if they hadn’t quarreled about it.

“I brought you food,” said John, and held it up.

Sherlock glanced at it without interest and walked away from the door.

John reached out and caught it before it could slam shut. “Can I come in?”

Sherlock looked over his shoulder at him in mild surprise before collapsing in his patented Sherlock way onto the couch. “Why wouldn’t you be able to? You normally come in my room. Well,” he considered. “There’s me picking up your appalling talent for cheap innuendo.”

John walked into the suite and wished he could see that dig as a good sign. “Sherlock,” he said.

Sherlock steepled his fingers and looked at the ceiling and did not respond.

John sighed and went to heat up the food in the microwave, then came back out with it.

“I’m not hungry,” said Sherlock.

John sat on the floor by the couch and put the food on the coffee table. “I couldn’t eat tonight, either, you know.”

“Don’t be nervous, John, I’m sure you’ll do just fine in the game. Just let me pitch, if it comes to that.”

“Shut up,” John said, because he couldn’t help it. “Just stop it.” Then he sighed and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, giving up on even the idea of eating. “I hate the bloody All-Star Game. It’s like a wedding or something. There’s so much pressure on it that everyone ends up snapping at each other.”

Sherlock did not respond, even though John waited.

“Can you look at me?” he requested, eventually.

Sherlock did as he asked, shifting onto his side on the couch to face him and look at him passively.

“I told my parents about you.”

Sherlock continued to look at him evenly.

“You were right. I should have told them so much earlier. I didn’t because I’m an idiot. And you know I’m an idiot, you tell me that all the time, so you’re not allowed to be angry at me because of it.”
Sherlock breathed and blinked but none of it seemed to be in reaction to what John was saying.

John took a frustrated breath. “You’re you, Sherlock. And you’re everything I’ve ever said to you, you’re magnificent. And I’ve no idea what it is you see in me. And maybe I’m not ready to answer that question yet.”

There was a long moment of silence. “What question?” asked Sherlock, finally, and John knew the effort it took Sherlock to admit he didn’t know the answer already.

“The question of why you would ever put up with me.”

“But what is there to put up with?” It was one of those guileless things Sherlock did sometimes, genuinely not seeming to realize how much it made John’s heart hurt, the idea that Sherlock actually thought John was perfect. Sherlock sounded honestly quizzical at the concept that there was anything about John Watson that needed to be merely tolerated.

“God,” said John out loud, thinking it not for the first time. “I need to be better so that I can deserve you.”

Sherlock shook his head. “I need to be better for you.”

John shook his head back, then said, “I’m so sorry, Sherlock. I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I never want to hurt you. I’m so sorry.”

Sherlock was unmoving on the sofa, watching John, and John found himself holding his breath, waiting for a decision from him, a gesture, anything. Finally Sherlock took a deep shuddering breath and said, “Tea.”

John could have wept with relief but all he said was, “Yes. Definitely. I’ll find us tea.”

***

Sherlock had had a lot of time to think that night. He was aware that thinking time used to be all the time for him, and then John had walked into his life, and Sherlock somehow found himself living in his head less than he used to, and not even minding that. He was always thinking—John could turn off layers of Sherlock’s brain, but he had never managed to turn off all of it, a fact Sherlock was actually relieved about—but it wasn’t the deep, all-encompassing thinking that Sherlock knew he had been prone to before John. John was always able to penetrate, to get a plate of food through the fog, or a cup of tea, or a kiss. But John had been off with parents he didn’t want to introduce to Sherlock, and Sherlock had thought, all night. And what he had thought had been this:

He didn’t. Sodding. Care.

He didn’t care if John Watson locked him in a room somewhere and never acknowledged his existence to anyone else in the universe, as long as John Watson kept coming back to him. The truth of this was alarming, but, then again, according to Mycroft and Mother, Sherlock had never had any sense of self-preservation. He would do whatever John wanted if John would just stay. This was so the opposite of the situation Mycroft had predicted. Far from being bored with John, Sherlock was desperate to avoid the crushing boredom that would result if John left. He had always been like this with John, he knew, had always twisted himself into knots to make sure he didn’t have a reason to walk out. He had let himself relax too much, let himself get complacent. He couldn’t, in hindsight, believe the risk he had taken in letting himself get angry with John. It had been so reckless of him. John might walk away and never come back, and all because Sherlock had got miffed about not being introduced to his parents. As if Sherlock had ever in his life wanted to
meet more people. He knew entirely more people than he’d ever wanted to meet in his lifetime as it was.

John had come back, had apologized, and Sherlock was vaguely aware that it was possible the apology was merited. John had hurt him in not being proud enough to show him off, and Sherlock had managed to convince himself, in his love-addled brain, that he was something that John might want to show off, which had been stupid of him. Sherlock was many things, and most of them made him better than everyone else he knew, but none of them made him good showing-off material, especially not for John Watson, the only person Sherlock knew who was… John Watson. John had come back and apologized and Sherlock had really wanted to say, *Oh my God, forget about it, I was so stupid for saying anything at all, never walk out that door and leave me behind ever again.* Those particular words were the sort of words Sherlock would never say. His sense of self-preservation was low but it wasn’t *non-existent.* So instead he’d said, “Tea,” forcing himself to, forcing himself to test his ability to let John walk out the door again, to let John come back to him again. The minute John was gone Sherlock found himself in an advanced state of panic that he was being an idiot again. He prowled around the room, pacing desperately, and eventually texted John because he couldn’t help himself.

*Where are you? ~SH*

The reply took long enough that Sherlock was in the middle of composing another, longer, more demanding text when it came.

*Is this a trick question?*

Sherlock frowned. What did that even mean? *No. ~SH*

*I’m getting tea. As you requested.*

*It’s taking a long time. ~SH*

*I’ve been gone literally two minutes. I had to wait for the elevator.*

*Come back. ~SH*

John did not reply. Sherlock tapped his finger anxiously along the edge of his phone and stared at its dark screen, willing it to light up with an incoming text. It did not. *Oh my God,* he thought. *You have chased him away. You were overwrought and demanding and now John is not coming back.* Sherlock flung his phone to the carpet in a fit of self-fury. At which point the phone dinged with a text and Sherlock threw himself onto it in a desperate panic.

*Sorry, was ordering. Coming back now.*

Sherlock stared at the words, making himself comprehend that, organizing the grammar of the sentences in his head because that made sense. *Dropped subjects,* he thought. *Sorry.* Old English word. Rooted in Old High German.

The phone dinged again.

*I am waiting for the elevator. Fyi.*

Sherlock put the phone on the coffee table, sat on the floor with his back against the sofa, put his head in his hands, and took a deep breath. He was a *mess,* he thought. He was an absolute *mess.* John would leave just to get away from how *messy* Sherlock was making things.
The door clicked open, John nudging his way through awkwardly while cradling two paper cups of tea, and Sherlock lifted his head and looked at him.

“You knew I wasn’t going to make the tea in the room, right?” said John.

Sherlock didn’t even bother to translate the words. He leaped to his feet and bounded over to John and pushed him back against the door and kissed him with all the desperation he was feeling, pouring it into the kiss, surely John would be able to taste it. He was distantly aware of the fact that John entirely dropped the cups of tea, and that hot tea splashed everywhere, running along the carpet and spilling over Sherlock’s bare feet and Sherlock flinched and shifted his feet away but kept kissing John, leaning into him more heavily, tugging at the undershirt he was wearing under his button-down. John’s hands were in his hair, and at first he was using the grip to pull him closer, but then he used the grip to try to pull away.

“What…” he panted, pupils blown wide, staring at Sherlock.

Sherlock shook his head and kissed him again, hands at John’s belt. He was good at this now, he knew he was. And John liked sex. Sex would wipe John’s brain clean of any thoughts he might be having about leaving for good.

John caught at Sherlock’s hands, pulled them away, and turned his head away from the bruising assault of Sherlock’s mouth at the same time. “Stop,” he managed.

“How can you not know how eloquent you are when you kiss? How can you think you’d kiss me like that and I wouldn’t know immediately that something was wrong? Now stop it. I thought we’d… I thought… I’ve apologized, right? I thought we were okay.”

“Sherlock.” John wrapped his arms around him, pulled him in tighter, closer. It wasn’t the least bit arousing; what it was was comforting, and Sherlock snuggled fiercely into him. “Oh my God,” said John, softly, with the air of having just figured something out, and then he turned his head, tipped it, Sherlock felt his nose in his hair, the brush of his lips over his head. “You weren’t even angry with me, were you? You were angry with yourself for bringing it up.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sherlock began, trying to lift his head up, but John wouldn’t let him, pressing it
back into his neck.


Sherlock tried to take the advice because maybe that was true, he did feel like he was gasping a bit. John sighed and leaned down to brush kisses up Sherlock’s neck, murmuring in between them, “You’re mine, you’re mine, you’re mine, you’re mine.” He finished with his lips against Sherlock’s head again, and said, raising his voice a bit, “I’ve already told you that I’m yours, I know you understand it, but I think you need to hear the rest of it said out loud: You’re mine. I am yours, and you are mine. I will never leave you, and I will never want you to leave me. Do you understand me?”

Sherlock took a deep breath and lifted his head. John let him this time. “John,” he started.


Sherlock did as requested, kissing him up against the door, and Sherlock fist ed his hands into John’s shirt where it fell over his hips and leaned into him and drank him in.

“Good,” John said, when the kiss had drawn to a close and Sherlock had pulled back a bit. “That was better. Come on now, there’s tea everywhere.” John brushed another quick kiss over his lips before nudging him back a bit.

Sherlock, feeling awkward and overexposed, watched John pick up the destroyed cups and shake his head over the state of the carpet.

“They’ll accuse us of having wild parties,” remarked John, carrying the cups over to the trash bin, “when all it is is tea. The British version of a wild party, I suppose. It’ll be all over the tabloids tomorrow.”

Sherlock said nothing, watching him solemnly and raptly.

“Don’t look at me like that,” John said. “Like you’re memorizing. Are you leaving me tomorrow?”

“Of course not,” Sherlock answered, offended.

“Good. And I’m not leaving you. So stop looking at me like that. Tomorrow we’re going to meet my parents.”

“We don’t have to—”

“Of course we do, they’re desperate to meet you.” John took his hand, tugging him toward the bedroom. “You will be you. If you are not you, I will make you be you by being as infuriatingly witless as possible.”

“You could probably accomplish that without trying,” noted Sherlock, with a bit less enthusiasm than he would normally deliver the line but it was all the enthusiasm he could muster at the moment.

“Ah,” said John, rifling through their suitcases, “that’s more like it. After we meet my parents, if you’ve decided you can still put up with me, I’ll reward you with something pretty fantastic.”

“What?” asked Sherlock, because he couldn’t resist.
“Your choice. Be thinking of it while you’re being tormented by my parents. And then after that we’ll go to the Home Run Derby. And then after that we’ll play in an All-Star Game. And then after that, eventually, you’ll introduce me to your parents and I’ll punch the both of them for being morons.” John straightened from the suitcases and turned to face Sherlock. “How does that sound?”

“Acceptable,” said Sherlock, when what he meant was heavenly.

John smiled as if he knew what he meant. “Now there’s nothing for it, you’ll just have to sleep naked.”

Sherlock made a conscious effort to try to recapture the casualness that had existed between them before he had panicked it out of existence. “How presumptuous of you.”

John’s relief in Sherlock’s effort was visible. “Says the man who just threw me against a door,” he rejoined, his tone playful and affectionate.

“If you want me naked, you should at least have to work for it.”

“I bought you tea,” John pointed out. “And then you spilled it all over yourself.” John walked over to where Sherlock was standing by the bed.

“I believe you spilled it, technically,” said Sherlock, watching John’s hands settle on the waistband of his pajama bottoms.

“Scientifically speaking, you were definitely the cause of the spilled tea.” John pushed at the pajama bottoms, dropping them to the floor. “Scientifically speaking,” he continued, now pulling Sherlock’s T-shirt up over his head, “you might just be the cause of everything wonderful that’s happened to me.”

Sherlock recognized that John was still trying to make him feel better, and he appreciated that. It was part of what made him need to have John around, how much John tried to make him feel better, always. “You include spilled tea in the list of wonderful things that have happened to you?”

John grinned, wicked and irresistible. “It gave me an excuse to get you naked, didn’t it?” he said, and pushed Sherlock easily back onto the bed before practically pouncing over him, straddling him, leaning his head down until his nose brushed against Sherlock’s, and his eyes, dark and blue, were all Sherlock could see. “You are so very much mine,” he said, firmly. “Every bit of you.”

Sherlock looked up at him, feeling wide-eyed and vulnerable and so in love. He didn’t know what to do with it. He needed to understand it and had so far been unable to unlock it. “Prove it to me,” he said. “Scientifically.”

So John did.
John slept, because John slept every night; Sherlock found it incredibly boring. Sherlock lay awake next to him and watched him sleep and marveled at the level of trust involved in sleeping with another human being. And John had given that trust to him. You’re mine, John had told him and had clearly meant it, meant it with a certainty that dazzled Sherlock, made him have to squeeze his eyes shut and count to ten just to prove that he could still do something as simple as count, that John hadn’t swept every single thing out of his mind palace with that one proclamation. You’re mine, and Sherlock had mentally handed him the keys and said, There you go. Run of the place.

Eventually, Sherlock got out of bed, showered, and dressed. He chose the plum shirt on the theory that it was John’s favorite, so it might also be John’s parents’ favorite. Then he left John still soundly sleeping and walked out into the living area and ordered up an enormous room service breakfast, a little bit of everything on the menu, and a pot of coffee and a pot of tea. It arrived only a few minutes before the knock on the door Sherlock had been expecting. Sherlock took a deep breath and glanced briefly at himself in the mirror on the opposite wall, tousling his hair over his forehead a bit more dramatically, before walking over to answer the knock.

John had his mother’s eyes and his father’s mouth.

“Hello,” Sherlock said to them, as pleasantly as he thought he’d ever said anything in his life. “Won’t you come in?” He gestured, falling back on politeness his mother had tried to drill into him as a child and he’d spent a lifetime rebelling against until this odd moment of meeting another man’s parents in his living area while that man slept in his bed in the other room.

John’s parents both looked surprised, which pleased Sherlock, because he knew they had been expecting to surprise him, and he was always satisfied when he turned the tables on people. It was part of why he loved John so desperately, because he could seldom accomplish it when it came to him.

John’s parents walked in and looked at the small feast Sherlock had had arranged over the suite’s dining area. Then they looked back at Sherlock, startled.

It was John’s mother who spoke. “You were expecting us.”

“I suspected,” Sherlock replied, smoothly. “John has a love of immediate confrontation as well.”

There was a moment of silence, and then John’s mother held her hand out formally. “I’m Fiona,” she said, and Sherlock had the impression this was a stamp of approval from her. “And this is my husband, Rob.”

“Sherlock Holmes,” said Sherlock in response, even though he knew it was unnecessary. “Please have a seat. Hopefully there will be something to your liking.”

John’s father was staring at the food. “Did you order everything on the menu?”

“Yes,” answered Sherlock, briefly. “Tea or coffee?”

“Tea, of course,” said Fiona.

“Bless you for ordering coffee,” said Rob.
Sherlock poured for each of them and nudged their mugs across the table, then poured tea for himself and took a croissant he did not intend to eat, simply to have something to do with his hands.

“He should have brought you to dinner,” Fiona said. “Don’t think I didn’t scold him for that.”

“That was his choice,” said Sherlock.

“He was being rude. I do hope he apologized.”

“He did, but it wasn’t necessary.” Sherlock wished they would stop talking about dinner. He wished they would start talking about anything else. What did people talk about with parents? He tended to simply insult his parents. He didn’t really want to start insulting John’s parents.

“Where are you from?” Rob asked.

“London,” answered Sherlock, thinking, Oh, of course, people must talk about things like this with parents. “And you’re from here.”

“Originally, yes.”

“Your accent isn’t quite…” Fiona trailed off. “I know it’s been a while since I lived at home, but…”

“Harrow,” explained Sherlock, shortly, but, to his relief, Fiona had no reaction to that other than to nod.

“Your family here for the All-Star Game?” asked Rob.

“No,” answered Sherlock.

“Why not?”

“Because they’re not from Boston,” Sherlock noted.

Rob looked confused.

“He means they don’t care about baseball,” Fiona told him.

“What does that have to do with it?” asked Rob.

“Are you nervous about the start tomorrow?” asked Fiona.

Sherlock thought John was more like Fiona than Rob. Physically, he resembled Rob more strongly, but personality-wise Sherlock saw much more of John in Fiona. “No. I am never nervous about baseball.”

“It’s just math,” said Rob.

Sherlock looked at him in pleased surprise. “Exactly.”

“Something John said to me last night. That you’re the science side, and he’s the poetry side.”

“Yes, John talks about baseball entirely in clichés. I blame you for that.”

For some reason, Fiona seemed to think that was hilarious and collapsed into laughter. Rob
frowned at her.

“He’s right, though, Rob,” she gasped. “That is how you talk about it. I mean, it’s just a bloody ball and a bloody bat.” Fiona looked across at Sherlock, those dark blue eyes that so resembled John’s twinkling at him, as if they were now secret conspirators in a club of British People Forced to Deal with Baseball Lovers. “You are delightful.”

Sherlock normally tried to conceal whenever someone shocked him, but he couldn’t help it. He blinked and heard himself say, “That is something no one has ever said to me before.”

“Not even John? How thoroughly stupid of all of them. Rob, go and fetch us a newspaper.”

“You already read the newspaper this morning, Fiona.”

“Rob, go and leave us alone so I can intimidate Sherlock about dating our son.”

Rob sighed heavily but stood and exited the room.

Sherlock looked at Fiona warily, assessing the odds that he was about to be excoriated and whether he should employ harsh methods in response.

Fiona caught him off-guard by saying, “Sherlock. It’s an unusual name.”

“Family name,” said Sherlock.

“I looked you up on the Internet last night. Do you know your name means ‘bright hair’?” Fiona’s eyes moved up to his dark curls.

“Yes, well, just the first way in which I disappointed my parents,” replied Sherlock, stiffly.

Fiona looked at him. “John’s absolutely right about you.”

“In what way?”

“When John was five years old, he found an old cloak of my grandmother’s that I had in the attic. It was black velvet, an old-fashioned opera cloak, very dramatic from an adult’s point of view, never mind a child’s. John decided the cloak was magic. John decided, with the aid of that cloak, he was positive he could fly. He leapt out of a tree and broke his leg.”

“His leg,” Sherlock repeated, slotting *psychosomatic injury* into *callback to an old injury that no longer exists* in his head.

“I had this curious, risk-taking little boy. And he fell out of a tree one day and he…stopped jumping out of trees. John’s natural inclination is to jump out of trees all over the place, but he never lets himself. He does exactly what he knows he’s supposed to do, exactly what everyone expects him to do. I never intended for him to learn that lesson. He taught it to himself, and, once taught, I didn’t know how to unteach it. You are the first tree I’ve seen him leap out of in thirty years. So he must have decided at some point that you’d be worth the broken leg.”

“His leg,” Sherlock repeated, slotting *psychosomatic injury* into *callback to an old injury that no longer exists* in his head.

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Sherlock knew most of this about John’s personality. John thrived on taking risks and seldom let himself do it. John, left to his own devices, chose the safe path and made himself miserable. John needed prodding. Sherlock had figured that out almost immediately. But it still made him uncomfortable to have it pointed out that it wasn’t Sherlock prodding John to take risks, Sherlock *himself* was the risk. Sherlock cleared his throat and said, “Is this the ‘don’t break his heart’ speech?”
“God, no. It was going to be, but now that I’ve met you I can see very clearly that you wouldn’t. So this is a different speech.” Fiona leaned forward and took Sherlock’s hand. Sherlock was too startled to do anything more than gape at her. “If he breaks your heart, you come tell me and I’ll talk sense into him. Sometimes Watsons are idiots who don’t know how to get what they want. You should have seen how long it took me to get Rob to bloody kiss me, never mind marry me. You make him happy. I won’t let him think himself out of that.”

Sherlock stared at Fiona and thought that the poor woman had everything entirely mixed-up and wrong. Normally he didn’t disabuse people of their delusions but he felt compelled to do it when it was John’s mother. “I’m not sure I’m quite as good for him as you think.”

“Sorry,” said Fiona, mildly but with a trace of steel underneath. “But did you know him before you met him?”

Sherlock considered that. It sounded like a riddle. “No,” he answered, slowly.

“No. And I did. So I think I’m the authority on whether or not you’re good for him.” Fiona let go of his hand and leaned back in her chair. “Are you going to eat that croissant?”

Sherlock looked down at it. He hadn’t touched it. “I don’t think so.”

“Can I have it?”

Sherlock offered it across a bit dazedly.

Fiona bit into it with relish.

And that was when John walked into the living area, yawning and ruffling his hair and saying, “Did you order—Mum.”

“Good morning,” said Fiona, and took another enthusiastic bite of the croissant.

John looked at Sherlock, then turned around without another word and disappeared back into the bedroom.

“Please go and tell him how nice I was to you, and also that I expect to see the two of you for lunch before the Home Run Derby.” Fiona stood and then made Sherlock even further off-kilter by leaning down to kiss his cheek. Sherlock really could do nothing in reaction but watch her walk out of the suite.

John must have heard the door close, because he came marching out into the living area. He’d pulled jeans on, although he hadn’t bothered to comb his hair at all.

“What was that?” he demanded, and gestured to the door his mother had just exited through.

“I knew they would try to catch us off-guard this morning.”

“How did you know that?”

“Because it’s something you would do. You like having people off-guard.”

“Well, so do you,” retorted John.

“I didn’t say it was a bad characteristic of yours,” Sherlock pointed out.

“Why didn’t you tell me you thought this was going to happen?”
“I wanted to get through it by myself. I didn’t want your…expectations on it.”

“You could have told me that; I would have respected that.”

Sherlock just looked at him.

“All right, fine,” John allowed. “But you could have warned me. I walked right out here.”

“You weren’t naked.”

“I was wearing your dressing gown.”

“You weren’t naked,” Sherlock repeated.

John sighed and sat in the chair his mother had just vacated. “What did she say to you?”

“That I’m to tell her if you break my heart so she can have words with you.”

“Did you tell her I’m not going to break your heart?”

“I told her you snore,” said Sherlock.

“But I don’t,” insisted John, and then looked at the food spread on the table. “Did you order everything on the menu?”

“Yes.”

John laughed and said, “Well, I suppose I may as well have some French toast, then.”

***

“I could,” remarked Sherlock, leaning back on the grass, propping himself up on his elbows, “predict the outcome of every single pitch.”

John shook his head, chuckling. “No, you couldn’t.” They had sequestered themselves at the edge of the viewing area for the Home Run Derby. The view wasn’t the best, but it was less crowded, and John knew Sherlock would have preferred to skip the event altogether and was only there because John wanted to see it, so John was being nice to him with the more secluded viewing position. Players had come up to exchange pleasantries with John and conspicuously drop hints about being introduced to Sherlock. Sherlock had lain on his back on the grass with a baseball cap pointedly over his face, so John had let him be and accepted everyone’s congratulations. With the event finally getting underway, though, most people had settled into viewing positions away from where Sherlock and John were, flanked by children and television cameras. John was aware there was a camera trained on him and Sherlock. He had tried to get away from it, but they were the starting pitcher-catcher team, Sherlock had an enormous and devoted following, and there was endless curiosity about their relationship. There was no way John could entirely get them away from the camera’s glare, so he was just going to have to guard his reactions to Sherlock.

It was going to be harder than usual, because John was in a spectacular mood. Lunch with his family had gone well. Whatever Sherlock had done at breakfast that morning had completely won his parents over. And Sherlock had taken one look at Harry and seemed to relax a bit, which made John think that Harry really was making an effort. All in all, John could not have imagined a better day. And the icing on the cake was that Sherlock was in a good mood, too. More relaxed than John had ever seen him in public, really. John looked at him, lounging on the grass, eyes hidden behind sunglasses, his baseball cap next to him so that it wouldn’t ruin his hair, and thought he looked
content and comfortable and good enough to eat. The only thing, John thought, which could possibly improve this moment would have been the ability for him to crawl onto Sherlock and kiss him.

“All right,” said John, looking away from Sherlock and back to the batter so that it wouldn’t be obvious to all the viewers at home that he really wanted to be watching the Home Run Derby from Sherlock’s lap. “Tell me the outcome of the next pitch.”

“It’s going to be an out,” responded Sherlock, lazily.

It was. John looked at Sherlock, who was back to sprawling on his back. He’d pushed his sunglasses up to perch in his thicket of hair and his eyes were closed. “You’re not even looking,” John accused.

“What makes you think I have to look to be able to predict the outcome?” asked Sherlock, without opening his eyes.

“Well, that’s as much as you know, because that was a home run,” John lied.

Sherlock’s lips curved into a smile. More of a smirk, really. Smug and self-satisfied. It was the same way he looked after 307 seconds in bed, right before John wiped it off his face, of course. “Liar,” said Sherlock. “You think I wouldn’t be able to tell immediately from the noise level in the stadium?”

John wanted him with an ache that was painfully slicing. John picked a few blades of grass and threw them at Sherlock to keep from kissing that bloody stupid smirk of his. They landed on Sherlock’s face, and he shook his head a bit in reaction to shake them off, his smile widening into a grin.

“Good aim,” he said.

“That was my fastball grip,” John told him.

“Poor velocity, John, you’d be hit out of the park. The way the next pitch is going to be.”

There was a sharp crack of the bat, and John watched the ball arc its way out of the stadium. He turned more fully toward Sherlock, tugging up a fistful of grass as he did so. “Lucky guess,” he said.

“I never guess.”

“Yes, you do.” John opened his fist over Sherlock’s face, fluttering blades of grass over him.

Sherlock laughed, pushing grass out of his mouth as he did so. John felt pleased. He was always pleased when he made Sherlock laugh. And making him laugh in public was so rare that John wasn’t sure he’d ever accomplished it before. Sherlock must be very happy indeed. John wanted to bottle it up, wanted to keep him like this forever.

“Why, look who it is: the inseparable Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson.”

John had been looking down at Sherlock, so he saw immediately the reaction the comment provoked in Sherlock. It wasn’t just tension entering his body, it was…preparedness. John turned in annoyance, ready to punch whoever had showed up and destroyed the languid and alluring Sherlock Holmes he had just been admiring.
“Jim Moriarty,” said the baseball player looming over him, blocking the sun so that John could barely make out his silhouette and had to squint at him. “Hi.” He sing-songed the word in a way that put John immediately on edge.

“Did you want something?” Sherlock asked. John knew he was affecting boredom but his voice was sharp and tight nonetheless.

John looked at him. He’d sat up next to him and pulled his sunglasses down out of his hair, back over his eyes.

“Don’t I always?” asked Moriarty, and John, his eyes adjusting to the brightness behind Moriarty, saw the grin that twisted his features. It was not a pleasant grin. The grin was directed at John, but there was something about Moriarty’s attitude toward Sherlock, something John couldn’t put his finger on, that made John shift just slightly, putting himself between Sherlock and Moriarty a little more overtly. “Look at you,” said Moriarty. “Not at all what I expected.” He turned to Sherlock. “Really, Sherlock? Someone so ordinary?” Moriarty shook his head, full of mock sorrow. “And I thought we had such a special something.” Moriarty looked back at John. “Then again, there’s a way in which ordinary people can be adorable. Maybe I should get myself a live-in one like you.”

“What is this about?” asked Sherlock, sounding less bored now, even sharper and tighter than before.

John looked between them, utterly lost.

“It’d be so funny,” mused Moriarty, still studying John’s face.

“What do you want?” demanded Sherlock.

“Can you stop talking about me like I’m not here, please?” John requested, losing his temper, because Sherlock had been very happy and now Sherlock decidedly wasn’t, and John wasn’t inclined to be forgiving of Moriarty for that.

Moriarty crouched, which put his face on level with John’s and saved John the effort of squinting into the sun to see him. John found himself looking into dark eyes that seemed bottomless and completely empty. John thought it possible he’d preferred the squinting. Moriarty’s eyes bored into his. “You’ve shown your hand, Doctor Watson,” Moriarty said.

“Do you have a point?” asked John, shortly. “If not, by all means, stand here with your back to the field like that, I’m rooting for a ball to hit the back of your skull.”

Moriarty looked at him and smiled, one corner of his mouth tipping up. John didn’t like the smile. Neither, it was clear, did Sherlock, because Sherlock leaned over, putting himself directly between John and Moriarty, and said, in a tone of voice closer to a snarl than anything else, “Go.”

John had tipped back a bit to make room for Sherlock. He looked at Moriarty around Sherlock’s head. Moriarty had turned his unpleasant smile onto Sherlock. “People do get so sentimental about their pets,” Moriarty remarked, and then stood up. “Ciao, Sherlock Holmes,” he said, casually, as if that had not been the strangest conversation John had ever seen two people have.

“Catch you later,” Sherlock replied, with an admirable effort toward breeziness.

John watched Moriarty walk away. No one else had really seemed to be paying attention to the encounter. On the field, whoever was batting hit into another out. John looked at Sherlock, who was still crowded into his personal space, looking narrow-eyed after Moriarty. “What the hell,
Sherlock?

“Doesn’t matter,” said Sherlock, briskly.

“Sherlock—”

“Doesn’t matter,” Sherlock repeated, and picked himself up off the ground, brushing grass off himself.

“No, Sherlock—” John watched Sherlock stride away after Moriarty. “Hey!” John called after him, but Sherlock didn’t turn around, and John didn’t want to attract any more curious looks than they already were. He frowned and sighed and rubbed a hand over his face in frustration.

On the field, the batter hit a home run.

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Sherlock followed Moriarty swiftly, dodging through the baseball players sprawled on the grass, until Moriarty finally turned around to face him at the entrance to the press tunnel. Moriarty was getting ready to drawl something in that disinterested way he had and was clearly not expecting Sherlock to slap both of his hands onto the wall on either side of Moriarty’s shoulders, trapping him. Sherlock had surprised Moriarty before, in the bar at the All-Star Game the year before, with Moran, and it was always a satisfying thing to do.

Moriarty blinked, and then recovered, looking amused. “Oh my.”

“If you do anything to him, anything at all, I will absolutely destroy you,” Sherlock told him, calmly, a simple fact.

Moriarty’s eyebrows lifted. “You? No, you won’t. Not you. You’re on the side of the angels, of the ordinary people like little John Watson. You could be so great, and you’ve chosen to be boring.”

“I may be on the side of the angels, but don’t think for one second that I am one of them.”

Moriarty stared at him. He blinked slowly. The amusement faded from his face. He inhaled to say something but Sherlock cut him off.

“Leave John out of it.”

“The way you left Moran out of it?”

“That was your own stupidity, putting him in the line of fire like that. This is about the two of us. This has always been about the two of us.”

“Well, of course. Everyone else, Sherlock, everyone else on the planet, that’s all just collateral damage.”

“People are going to get hurt.”

“That’s what people do!” Moriarty suddenly shouted at him.

The people standing closest to them looked at them curiously.

Sherlock dropped his hands from the wall, straightened, said mildly, “Tell Sebastian I said hello,” which contorted Moriarty’s features into predictable fury.
Moriarty closed his hands into fists. “I will burn the heart out of you,” he threatened, his voice low with intense rage.

Sherlock regarded him for a second impassively, then turned and swept his way out of the tunnel. The press was everywhere, all around him, focused on the Home Run Derby, but several looked his way anyway because he was Sherlock Holmes and that was how things went. Sherlock turned to the nearest player, not even sure who it was. Someone who knew who he was, surely, and that was the most important thing.

“I was just talking to Jim Moriarty,” confided Sherlock, his voice louder than necessary but his head tipped as if he were imparting a great secret. All around him, he could sense reporters leaning toward him.

The player he was talking to blinked at him in obvious surprise. “I…oh?” he offered.

“And he was saying that his arm was giving him trouble. He’s not sure if he’s available for tomorrow. Such a shame, isn’t it?”

The player looked shocked. “Really?”

Sherlock turned and left the field, left the stadium entirely.
Chapter 22

Chapter Twenty-One

Sherlock never came back. John was annoyed enough about that to refuse to go after him. It was his last Home Run Derby, he was determined to enjoy it. So John sat by himself on the grass and watched until the bitter end, having no idea what was happening or who was winning. At one point, an ESPN reporter wandered by and asked if he’d give an interview.

Sure, thought John, feeling reckless, and allowed himself to be mic’d up.

“…John Watson with us,” said the voice in his ear. “How are you enjoying the Home Run Derby, John?”

“Oh, it’s fantastic,” John said, hoping they weren’t going to ask him to predict the end, because he had no idea who was even left in it at this point. “I’m, you know, just sitting here, drinking it all in.”

“Still talking like a man who’s retiring.”

John smiled straight into the camera they’d stuck in front of him. “Still a man who’s retiring,” he noted, and there was laughter in his earpiece.

“Even with your career season that you’re having?”

“Out with a bang,” John answered, simply.

“Where’s Holmes?”

“Getting ready for tomorrow’s start, of course,” John lied, smoothly.

“Is he good to go?”

“Of course.”

“Last year he called the All-Star Game ‘an astronomical, immeasurable amount of pointless, bombastic stupidity all gathered in one place.’”

“That sounds like Sherlock,” John allowed.

“We were surprised to see him at the Home Run Derby at all, when he was with you earlier. Your influence?”

“I convinced him it could be scouting.” John paused, then decided if Sherlock was going to abandon him without a word then John could be a little more honest about Sherlock than he normally was, in retaliation. “Actually, Sherlock lacks an appreciation of the poetry of baseball. I’ve been trying to indoctrinate him.”

“How’s that going?”

John gave a little despairing laugh that, as calculated, provoked laughter from the booth. “Check back with me at the end of the season.”

“What’s the secret to your success as a battery?”
“He listens to five percent of what I say; I ignore him whenever he insults me. Works like a charm.”

It was more than he’d said about his relationship with Sherlock, ever, and he could tell that the booth members were practically having orgasms over having caught John Watson in a talkative mood.

“Does he insult you a lot?” asked a different questioner.

“Honestly, I make him a lot of tea. If he’s drinking tea, he’s not talking, hence not insulting.”

“How very British of you.”

“Yes, yes, we’re walking stereotypes,” John agreed, good-naturedly.

“What’s the worst thing he’s ever said to you?”

John hesitated, then said, relishing it a bit more than he should have, “He told me once I was tedious.”

“That’s the worst?” There seemed to be surprise from the booth.

“In context it was, yes.”

“Don Anderson says he’s a psychopath.”

“He’s more like a high-functioning sociopath. Anderson should do his research.”

There was more laughter from the booth.

Someone said, “What are conferences on the mound like?”

“UN negotiations,” John replied.

Around chuckles, another question lobbed to him. “You’ve caught some good pitchers in your career, John. Some might even say great pitchers. How does he rate?”

John unseeingly watched a home run sail over Fenway’s Green Monster. Dammit, he thought. Lie about this. You have to lie. You can’t tell the truth. He flickered a self-deprecating smile toward the camera, taking a deep breath, and then he didn’t lie. “He’s the most infuriating, impossible, brilliant, arrogant, elegant, talented, frustrating, strangle-worthy pitcher I have ever met. In other words, it’s true, he’s my favorite.” There was laughter from the booth, and John thought maybe he’d pulled that off. “Shh,” he added, “don’t tell the rest of the staff.” More laughter.

“So, if you had to pick one pitcher to catch for the rest of your career, it would be Sherlock Holmes?”

“If I had to pick one pitcher to catch for the rest of my life, it would be Sherlock Holmes,” John answered without thinking, and then thought, Oh, oops, that may have been going too far. He cleared his throat, hoping his panic wasn’t showing on his face, backtracking the proclamation a bit. “But you said ‘career,’ and that’s just what I’m doing. I have a half-season left, and it’s with this pitching staff, and I honestly can’t think of a better way to go out.”

“Yeah? You like your staff?”

John was relieved he’d managed to get the questioners away from the topic of Sherlock. “I like the
whole team,” John answered, honestly. “You’ll see when we win the World Series.”

“The World Series? In your first year?”

They were laughing at him, but John knew it wasn’t serious laughter. Halfway through the season, and they had the wild card lead and were within striking distance of their division. What John was saying wasn’t laughable, and he knew they knew it. “Wait and see,” he said.

“Holmes was seen talking to Moriarty on his way out. No love lost between those two. Do you know what that was about?”

No. He had no idea. “Sherlock doesn’t tell me everything,” John responded, trying not to sound as irritated as he was.

“We’re hearing rumors Moriarty might have to sit tomorrow out. Know anything about that?”

“You’d have to ask Moriarty.”

“All right, well, we’ll let you enjoy your Home Run Derby. Thanks for talking to us, John, and good luck tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” said John, and handed the earpiece back to the technician who’d set it up.

“Great interview,” she told him, and the cameraperson gave him a thumbs-up.

“Thanks,” said John, and watched them move off. Then he wished he was confident enough that there were no cameras on him to slump a bit, but he wasn’t, so he stayed exactly as he was, posed to look relaxed and comfortable, and wondering why the bloody Home Run Derby took so long.

He split a cab with two other players who wanted to ask him questions about Sherlock Holmes the entire drive back to the hotel. John was exhausted and not in the mood to answer questions about Sherlock Holmes. The drive seemed to take forever.

To his relief, Sherlock was in his room. He was watching ESPN, unmuted, which gave John a bit of a pause as he walked through the door, because Sherlock never watched ESPN, he hated their “nattering.”

But John decided they had bigger issues. He was torn between wanting to go over and collapse against Sherlock the way he’d wanted to do all day and being furious with Sherlock for standing him up at the field. The fury won for the time being. “What the hell was that, Sherlock?” he demanded.

Sherlock didn’t look at him. Sherlock kept his eyes on ESPN. “You gave an interview.”

“Did you leave me at the field to come back here and watch the Home Run Derby by yourself? Why didn’t you say something? I would have come with you.”

“I didn’t want you to come with me.”

John tried not to show how much that stung. “Oh,” he said. “Right. Obviously.”

“We need to be seen together less.”

“Okay. That should be easy, seeing as how we live together and work together and sleep together.”

Sherlock looked at him then, muting the television with a vicious click of the remote. “You don’t
understand, John.”

John stalked over to the couch, standing over Sherlock. “Then make me.”

“You were throwing grass at me.”

“That didn’t bother you at the time.”

“I’m not talking about whether or not it bothered me,” Sherlock spat out.

“Who else would it bother, Sherlock? Moriarty?” There was a flicker in Sherlock’s eyes that John thought he needed to ruthlessly pursue. “What the hell happened between the two of you?”

“Nothing.”

“You know, all the times you insult my intelligence, I’ve never felt anywhere near as insulted as I do now. I am not actually as stupid as you think I am in your head.”

“Neither is everyone else, John!” Sherlock shouted at him.

John blinked in surprise. “What does that even mean? What are you talking about?”

Sherlock stood and looked at his watch. “I need to go out.”

“What?” John had never known Sherlock to have a drink anywhere, ever. Sherlock was already walking toward the door. John stared after him. “A drink with who? Moriarty?”

“No, a drink by myself, John.”

“You don’t do that.”

Sherlock whirled, stalking back over to John. “I do it now,” he bit out, furiously. “Do you know why?”

“No,” John responded, hotly. “I have no idea what’s going on right now, frankly.”

“He called us inseparable. Do you know why he did that?” Sherlock picked up the laptop that had been lying on the sofa, turned it to face John. It was open to ESPN’s Page 2 blog. There was a photo of John and Sherlock, at lunch with John’s family. They’d gone to Quincy Market, and they’d spent money to get a secluded table, but it hadn’t mattered because the shot had been snapped as they’d been coming out of the restaurant. The rest of the family had, of course, been with them, but the photographer had captured the moment after they’d exited. John had been holding the door for all of them. He was still holding the door, and Sherlock was walking through it, and he’d leaned down to say something to John, something that had John grinning in response, their gazes locked, looking for all the world like they’d been out on a date together. The caption was Inseparable: Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, spotted sightseeing together in Boston ahead of the All-Star Game.

“That’s why he did that,” Sherlock continued. “And you’re the one who cares about this, so I’m trying to fix it for you, because you were throwing grass at me and then went and gave an interview where you called me your favorite pitcher ever whilst looking all starry-eyed like I was your favorite matinee idol.”
John swore, taking the laptop out of Sherlock’s hands. There was no story with the photo, just the caption. “Are there more of these?”

“I have no idea. Probably. Now, I’m going to have a drink.”

“Sherlock.” John looked up at him, stalking back to the door of the suite. “Where?”

“Anywhere I can be seen and photographed without you. We need to be seen without each other.”

“Sherlock. Wait. Can we talk about—?”

The door closed on his question. John sighed in frustration and tossed the laptop down on the couch. He turned back to ESPN, which was showing his own face. Feeling a bit sick, John unmuted it. *He’s my favorite*, he said on the screen, and God, thought John, that wasn’t even the most incriminating part of the interview. John turned it off before he could see any more and thought it was possible Sherlock was right and he was the stupidest human being on the planet.

***

Sherlock avoided the hotel bar because it would be full of players who would bother him. But he didn’t go far because he wanted to make sure a photographer could tail him. So he walked to the hotel across the street, took a conspicuous seat by the window, and ordered a martini because he thought it would be showy. He drank it without tasting it, tolerated a couple of autograph-seekers, and allowed the few baseball players who had ventured to the bar to talk at him for a little while. When they asked about John, he forced himself to be sneering and dismissive. And then, when he was sure that there would be enough people talking about his solo jaunt, he walked back to the hotel.

For some reason, he was so tired he felt like he could barely stand upright, could barely keep his eyes open. He passed the bar, still crowded, and walked over to the elevator bank, just desperate to get back to his room without having to talk to anybody else. He pressed the button and waited whilst the elevator took an excruciatingly long time and the dull roar from the bar pressed into his ears and the martini sloshed around unpleasantly in his stomach. He wanted John; he felt like he could not get to John quickly enough; he wanted to crawl to him and say into his skin that John was his favorite, too. In the span of two days, he’d gone from wanting John to show him off to being horrified that John had suddenly started showing him off.

“Sherlock,” said a voice behind him. A woman’s voice, pleasant and familiar.

Sherlock’s mind was moving sluggishly. Not one of the Sherlock’s Sweeties. He knew that voice. He placed that voice. John’s mother. He turned toward her. “Mrs. Watson,” he said.

“Fiona, remember?” she responded, a smile wide on her face. She was holding a cup of coffee and a small bag. Decaf latte. Snack before bed. She’d sit up with it and the chocolate chip cookie and read until she got tired, whilst her husband would snore next to her with the television droning in the background. Obvious. Sherlock finished deducing all this and looked up from the cup to Fiona’s face, to find her smile had vanished. “Is everything all right?” she asked him, anxiously. “You look utterly wrecked.”

Sherlock shook his head dismissively, waving his hand about. “I’m fine,” he said. The elevator door opened. He said, “I’m not fine.”

“Get in the elevator,” Fiona said, firmly, so he did. She waited until the door closed before saying, “What is it?”
“I won’t be able to stop it,” Sherlock said, dully, wondering why he was saying any of this. “Maybe I could, if John could—but John is terrible at this. He’s terrible at this. Why he wants to—when he can’t—but it is what he wants, and I’d give it to him, but I can’t stop it.”

The elevator door opened on what was plainly Fiona’s floor. Sherlock hadn’t even hit the button for his floor, he realized.

“Come,” Fiona ordered. “Tell me everything.” Fiona waited until Sherlock stepped out of the elevator, and then, feeling stupid, he thought there was nothing for it but to follow her to her room. She opened the door and said, briskly, “Rob. Sherlock has come to ask for advice.”

“I really haven’t,” Sherlock protested. “I really should—”

“Sherlock, get in and close the door before you’re photographed.”

Sherlock stepped in quickly, wondering why that hadn’t occurred to him before that.

“Here.” Fiona thrust a chocolate chip cookie into his hand.

He took it without knowing what else to do. Rob had shut off the television and was sitting up in bed, looking at him expectantly. This was the strangest situation Sherlock had ever been in in his life. He took a bite of the cookie and considered. Swallowed. Said, “I might be about to break his heart.”

“I’m sure you’re not,” said Fiona.

“I can’t…protect him from this.”

“That isn’t your job.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No. It’s your job to be there for him. You can’t keep him safe from everything. It would be impossible.”

“This might be my fault.”

“I’m sure it’s not.”

“It is a bit.”

“Not really.”

“The two of you are at an impasse,” Rob pointed out. “Let’s move on.”

“It might help if we knew what this was about,” Fiona said. “If it’s private, that’s fine. But if it would help…”

Sherlock thought. He ate his cookie. “Well. You already know. You were worried about being photographed, so you already know.”

Fiona looked at him consideringly. “John values his privacy.”

“That’s an understatement,” remarked Rob.

“John is currently dating the most high-profile player in the game of baseball,” said Sherlock.
“And he was throwing grass at me today.”

“Why was he doing that?” asked Rob, in confusion.

“Because he’s…” Sherlock trailed off, unsure what the end of the sentence was.

“Because he’s in love,” Fiona finished for him, and Sherlock tried to wrap his mind around that, words they hadn’t yet said, and Sherlock was sure they were true, or desperately wanted to believe they were true, something like that. “And because, for all he values his privacy, John’s always been prone to wearing his heart on his sleeve.” Fiona took a sip of her latte, put it on the dresser, and folded her arms. “You tell him this from me: Tell him that he’s only hurting himself, trying to pretend.”

“What was the thing with the grass?” asked Rob. “I don’t get it.”

Fiona rolled her eyes and said to Sherlock, “Off you go,” and before he knew it Sherlock found himself back in the hotel hallway, still exhausted and a bit dizzy but with a half-eaten chocolate chip cookie in his hand as proof that the odd interlude had actually happened.
John was in bed when Sherlock came in. He wasn’t sleeping. He’d given it a try, but it had been clear he wasn’t going to fall asleep without Sherlock in the bed, possibly wasn’t going to fall asleep even with Sherlock in the bed. So he was lying in bed watching a terrible movie he’d come across and ignoring ESPN, where his ridiculous besotted interview about Sherlock was on practically constant repeat and making him feel sick.

He heard the door to the suite open and close, and he muted the television and waited, hoping that Sherlock would come to bed. He at least came into the bedroom, although he leaned against the wall just inside the door and looked at John, making no move toward the actual bed. The light from the television flickered over him, and John could tell even by its feeble glow that Sherlock looked exhausted.

“The rumors will start tomorrow,” Sherlock said, eventually. “Probably they’ve already started tonight. There isn’t really anything I can do about that.”

John turned off the television. He looked at Sherlock: exhausted, worried, his. “Come to bed,” he said.

There was a pause before Sherlock crawled onto the bed next to him.

“At least take your shoes off,” said John, “if you’re not going to get undressed.”

“You know what I’m saying to you, right?”

John sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face. “Yes. I know what you’re saying. Honestly, we were lucky the rumors stayed quiet for as long as they did. We’ve been…reckless.”

“And you’re a terrible actor, John. You’re terrible at it.”

“I know.” John sighed again, rolling to his side and drifting closer to Sherlock. “I had the best day,” he said, honestly, his throat hurting with the weight of the honesty, with how wonderful it had all been. “Until the moment you left. It was the best day. Really. I couldn’t… You left, and I was irritated with you for leaving, and I gave the interview because I was annoyed with you.”

“What did you think was going to annoy me about the interview?” Sherlock sounded honestly perplexed.

John laughed. Said so bluntly, it did sound idiotic. “I have no idea. I wasn’t being rational. The ‘tedious’ thing, I guess. I thought it might make you flinch, if I reminded you of that.”

“You destroyed the effect of that by continuing to talk.”

“I know I did. What can I say? I’m foolish when it comes to you.”

Sherlock hesitated. John sensed it through the darkness. He thought of the nights during spring training when Sherlock had crawled into his bed, he thought of laying next to him aching with want and unable to act on it.

“You said lovely things,” Sherlock said, finally, carefully, as if unsure of himself. “They were
lovely, beautiful things.”

John moved, because now he could. He tucked himself against Sherlock’s chest and marveled as Sherlock adjusted subtly to fit him there. All those nights he’d lain awake, unable to sleep, because he had wanted this man, he had genuinely never seen it happening. John closed his eyes and cuddled closer to Sherlock and said, “I meant every single word.”

“I know,” Sherlock replied. A beat. “So did every viewer at home.”

John chuckled, because it was, on some level, ridiculous. “That bad?”

Sherlock shifted, tangling their legs together. “What do you want to do about this?”

“What is there to do about it?”

“We can try to quell the rumors.”

“How can we do that?”

“Well, I started it tonight, going out without you. You could date someone, I could date someone.”

John was silent for a very long moment. He went over everything in his head. He said, eventually, slowly, choosing his words, “I never wanted to be The Gay One. You know? I never wanted to be… I wanted people to say, ‘Oh, John Watson, he was a decent catcher, had a few good seasons, didn’t he? Was pretty good at fixing broken pitchers.’ I didn’t want people to say, ‘Oh, John Watson, he was the one who was gay.’ I wanted a legacy that was more than… I can’t help who I’m attracted to, I can’t help being gay, but I felt like I could control the career I was going to have, I could make it a non-issue, why shouldn’t it be? The way it would have been a non-issue if I wasn’t gay. I just wanted to be a baseball player. I actually like being a baseball player. I know you don’t understand, but I—”

“Shh.” Sherlock’s hand soothed its way up and down his arm. “I do understand. I understand you. I don’t care, you know I don’t care, but I understand that you do care, and that’s enough for me.”

“And before there was you, I thought I’d just pretend forever. I thought that I could. It didn’t seem likely to me, that anything like this would ever come along.”

Sherlock was silent, and John wished he would say something, because he wanted to know Sherlock’s reaction to that. Sherlock’s fingers skimmed over his arm, and finally Sherlock spoke. “Your mother said to tell you that you’re only hurting yourself, trying to pretend.”

John blinked up at the ceiling. “You talked to my mother about this?”

“I ran into her in the lobby. I apparently did not look my best. You know I don’t understand, but I—”

John tried to make sense of this stream-of-consciousness explanation, then gave up and made a noise of frustration, similar to Sherlock’s ugh noise. He must be picking up on that, he thought. “I just don’t know why it has to be so complicated.” He moved, dislodging Sherlock’s stroking hand, in order to prop himself up enough to be able to look down at him. “You’re you. Look at you. You’re… gorgeous. You’re amazing. You’re clever and you’re unforgettable. You’re the sexiest player in baseball, and you could have absolutely anyone, and do you know how much it kills me not to be able to say to everyone, ‘Back off, he’s mine, yes, that—’” John gestured vaguely in the air, taking in all of Sherlock—“that entire incomparable being has chosen me”? Do you know how much I long to say that?”
Sherlock’s eyes were picking up whatever light there was in the room, gazing up at him solemnly. “You could do that, John. You could do that tomorrow. You could do it now. Ring ESPN and tell them just that. Tell them to call me for verification and I’ll say, ‘Yes, absolutely, why has anyone in the history of time ever chosen anyone other than John Watson for a partner?’ Or not. Don’t say anything. We’ll come up with a plan we can live with to stop people talking. I genuinely don’t care, either way, I’ll do whatever you want, but I need for you to—” Sherlock cut himself off.

“What?” asked John. “Be honest with me. Don’t hold anything back about this. We’ll never get through this if we’re not honest about it.”

“I need for you to be happy, John,” Sherlock said, quickly. “I don’t care what it takes, I don’t care what you need for me to do to get you there, but I need for you to be happy. I can’t bear it if anything about this makes you unhappy, anything about me.”

John was a little bewildered by this. How could Sherlock, quick and perceptive as he was, have any doubt that nothing about him made John even slightly unhappy? “I’m very happy. Can’t you tell? Come on, I’m a terrible actor, so you say,” he teased, gently.

“I can tell. That’s the problem. You were so happy today. I could tell you were so happy. The happiest I’ve ever seen you.”

“That’s funny,” remarked John.

“What’s funny about it?”

“I thought the same thing about you today.” John leaned down, brushed a brief kiss over Sherlock’s mouth.

“And you’re not happy now,” Sherlock continued.

“Yes, I am.”

“Not as happy as you were. And that’s my fault.”

“How is any of this your fault? Even a little bit your fault?” Sherlock was very still underneath him, and John made connections he should have made much sooner. He drew back. “What does Moriarty have to do with this?” He saw Sherlock’s silhouette shake its head but he persisted. “What does Moriarty have to do with you?”

Sherlock shook his head again.

“Sherlock.” John drew back, sitting up. “What the hell happened at the All-Star Game last year?” John leaned over, turning on the light. “You want to make me happy? Here you go.” John lifted his palms toward Sherlock in a prompting, invitational gesture.

Sherlock made his ugh noise and put his arm over his eyes against the harshness of the lamp. John thought he might try to dodge and not respond, but instead he said, sounding miserable, “It doesn’t really have anything to do with last year’s All-Star Game. Last year’s All-Star Game was…well, he would say it was collateral damage.”

“Collateral to what?” asked John, patiently, because Sherlock was at least talking now, and that was a good sign.

Sherlock was silent for a moment. “You have to understand how boring I find baseball. Under normal circumstances…I understand how you feel about it, so you have to make yourself
understand how I feel about it. And the truth is that I don’t care about it. I was so bored, after the first few games, after the novelty had worn off. I was selected for the All-Star Game that year, and I went because it was something to do.”

John remembered the game. He barely remembered Sherlock at it, though. Remembered the selection, which had made sense because Sherlock’s rookie season had been genius. Remembered vaguely that Sherlock hadn’t pitched that year, had been held in reserve in case the game went into extra innings.

“I never ended up playing,” Sherlock continued. “I sat in the bullpen the entire game, bored, so bored, but Moriarty was there, and he was bored, too, and we talked. I was showing off. I said that I had statistical analyses that could predict the outcomes of a vast majority of baseball games. I mean, there were margins for error, of course, nothing in baseball is quite that straightforward, I know that’s what you love about it. But I’ve always been able to hold the equations that matter in my head about this game. I’ve always been able to predict, with decent accuracy. So I told Moriarty this. Like I said, I was showing off, and he was…the only person to be interesting in a very long time. He told me to prove it. No one, John, has ever told me to prove something without my immediately doing whatever it would take to prove it. Do you understand?”

John understood enough to be able to draw conclusions. “You proved it.”

“Of course I did.”

“And Moriarty was betting on the games.”

“I didn’t know he was, at first. I suppose I should have. But it wasn’t like I was doing anything like that with the information. It wouldn’t even have occurred to me to… Why would I…? Anyway, yes, that’s what he was doing.”

“Sherlock, that can get him banned. Forever.”

Sherlock barked harsh laughter. “You think Moriarty got his hands dirty? You think Moriarty ever even came close to getting his hands dirty?”

John drew another conclusion. “Moran.”

“Exactly. You are scintillating this evening, John.”

“All right. Who cares? Moran, Moriarty, who cares? We can go to the Commissioner with this—”

Sherlock took his arm away from his eyes, looking at John for the first time. And John was surprised to see that Sherlock was angry. When he spoke, his words were harsh and quick and raw, like the breaths he was taking. “No, we can’t, John. The information came from me. I was young, and I was stupid, and it came from me. I call the Commissioner of Baseball, about Moran, about Moriarty, about any of it, and there’s no way they go down without dragging my career along with them. And there’s a lot I don’t care about when it comes to this ridiculous game, but I am bloody good at this. I’ve done fantastic things, and I deserve every single accolade, every single record, every single statistic, and I will not have them stripped from me. I will not.”

John regarded him. And understood. He’d feel the same way, if it was him. Hell, he was trying to protect his career by keeping his homosexuality a secret, and theoretically that would do nothing official to tarnish his career. He couldn’t imagine facing down a legitimate threat to everything he’d done. And Sherlock might not care about the storied history of the game he was playing, but Sherlock cared about his accomplishments and deserved to. John nodded, to show he understood,
and Sherlock seemed to marginally relax.

“You stopped feeding the information to Moriarty,” John concluded.

“Of course I did.”

“He hates you.”

“I don’t have time to worry about what he thinks about me.”

“Yes, you do. That’s why you reacted the way you did when he showed up at the field today. You were so obviously concerned he’d do something to me, and it’s because of this, isn’t it? This is him, these rumors. I mean, they’ve been simmering, percolating, and I didn’t help things, but he’s going to give them the nudge they need to tip over the edge.”

Sherlock exhaled in the direction of the ceiling. “We had this little spark, you and I. I was watching it for you, making sure it stayed contained, because I knew you cared about it. All he had to do was blow on it, just a little bit. We’re going to have a wildfire soon.” Sherlock took a deep breath. “And he always said he’d burn the heart out of me.”

John was suddenly furious. He wished Moriarty was in front of him, because he would kill him for this. No wonder Sherlock had been an aloof, standoffish, reluctant baseball player, human being. Who wouldn’t be, with a first and only “friend” who had done all this? No wonder Sherlock had been so guarded about the size of his heart, so cautious about giving away any little piece of himself, any hint of how deeply he felt things. John thought of how long it had taken Sherlock to relax around him, of how easily Sherlock could still close himself off and up with alarming alacrity, and he hated Moriarty with the coolness of a fatal bullet.

“I don’t want it this way,” announced John. Sherlock looked at him, looking a bit surprised at his obvious fury.

“I don’t want the fact of us to be some sodding pawn in some chess game Moriarty thinks he’s playing with you. That’s not fair. We are ours, we belong to us. How dare he—?”

“No,” John snapped. “Of course not. I am just saying that it should be ours to control, ours to tell the way we want to. We won’t hide forever. I never thought we would. But I thought I could have this one last season to my career, one last hurrah of being just John Watson, just to see what people would say about me at the end of it all. And if this was just something that happened, I would be fine with this, but I won’t have Moriarty take it away from me.”

“See,” groaned Sherlock, and covered his eyes with his arm again. “This is all my fault. If I hadn’t—”

John pulled Sherlock’s arm away from his eyes. “It is not your fault,” he said, firmly. “You were eighteen, you were a kid, fresh out of rehab, bored, lonely, and this is not your fault.”
Sherlock looked momentarily startled, and then scowled. “I wasn’t—”

“Oh, stop it. I’m the world’s foremost expert on you, remember? Not you.”

“You didn’t even know me then.”

“I don’t think there was any time in your life when I didn’t know you. I’ve known you forever; I was just waiting to meet you.”

Sherlock blinked up at him. “I want to tell you that doesn’t make sense, but I can’t.”

John smiled. Then he started laughing.

“What?” asked Sherlock.

“Nothing.” John shook his head, still laughing. “You just…delight me.”

Sherlock looked pleased. “Good, then.” And then troubled. “I wish I knew how.”

“You just do. Don’t overthink it.” John leaned down and settled himself back into the perfect-fit of Sherlock’s angles. Breathe, he thought. This is all yours, all this joy and happiness, and it’s going to stay all yours. No one is going to take it from you, least of all Moriarty.

“What do you want to do tomorrow?” Sherlock asked, eventually.

John didn’t want to think about it anymore. John wanted to fall asleep just like this, surrounded by Sherlock. He wanted to wake up the same way. He wanted to do it the rest of his life. He rubbed his cheek against Sherlock’s chest. “I want to wake up with your heartbeat in my ear.”

“That can be arranged.”

“And your hand sneaking its way into my pants.”

“That can definitely be arranged,” Sherlock agreed.

“I want to start an All-Star Game. I want to have the game of my bloody life. I want you to have the game of your life, too. Sod all the rumors for the day. For the night. We’ll go out afterward, somewhere loud and raucous. We’ll let people toast us. We’ll get roaringly drunk. You will make me keep my hands to myself in the cab, but you’ll give up as soon as we get back here, and I will rip your suit off of you as soon as you close the door to the suite. We’ll probably never make it to the bed.”

Sherlock appeared to be pretending to give this serious consideration. “Fine,” he said, eventually, with mock gravity. “That’s a plan that could work.”

John giggled and kissed Sherlock’s chest, through the expensive fabric of his shirt, trying to get at the heartbeat he could hear.

“What will we do the day after tomorrow?” Sherlock asked.

John settled back onto Sherlock’s chest and closed his eyes. “Find a woman for one of us to date,” he said.
Chapter Twenty-Three

_Warming up in the bullpen_, said Fenway’s PA system, _starting catcher for the National League, John Watson, and starting pitcher for the National League, Sherlock Holmes._

John heard the introduction vaguely, waved vaguely to the television crowd he knew must be watching him. If Sherlock heard it he gave no indication, drifting into his wind-up with a slight jerk that John knew was purposeful because he was hoping the AL was paying attention in the other bullpen and reporting that Holmes looked less smooth than usual. Sherlock played more head games while pitching than anyone John had ever met. John loved him for all of them. And he was also pleased that he now knew the difference between Sherlock faking something wrong and Sherlock actually having something wrong. Although he needed to react the same way to each or the deception wouldn't work.

Sherlock caught the ball and didn’t pitch it back, fiddling with the baseball cap he hated and walking over to where John stood to meet him.

“Here’s where I express concern over the jerk you’ve developed at the end of your motion.”

“Terrible, isn’t it?” responded Sherlock, blandly.

“Are you ready?”

Sherlock didn’t even bother to respond. John knew he considered it a stupid question. “Are you?”

John took a deep breath and shook out his bad leg, flexed his bad hand, even though neither one of them ever bothered him anymore. Old habits. “Yes.”

“John.” Sherlock paused with his hand on the door to Fenway’s bullpen, blocking John’s path out onto the field.

John looked at him quizzically.

“This is your All-Star Game. I wanted you to remember that. You are here, at Fenway Park, which I know is the stadium of every single one of your childhood dreams about baseball, and you’re starting the All-Star Game for the National League. I just wanted to remind you of that.”

John stared at him for a moment. And then he grinned. “Look at you.”

Sherlock looked a bit uncomfortable. “What? Look at me what?”

“Being all sentimental about baseball,” John teased.

“You’re the one who’s sentimental about baseball.”

“And you’re encouraging it.”

“Because I don’t want you to forget, with everything else that’s going on, how much you wanted this.”

John regarded him for a moment and thought it was probably one of those moments when he was being a terrible actor, but he couldn’t help it, he couldn’t imagine loving him any more than he did.
right at that moment. *Here in this moment, here in this place, John Watson,* he thought to himself, *you have everything you could ever have imagined wanting.* “Let’s go win a game at Fenway,” he said.

Sherlock winked at him and then pushed the bullpen door open, and they walked across the outfield together, with cameras flashing all around them.

“Let’s let them hit me tonight,” Sherlock said. “I’ve always wanted to play with a decent shortstop behind me.”

“Where would be the challenge in that, Sherlock?” John asked, as they walked into the dugout.

“Good?” Esteban Diaz asked, coming over to them.

“Good,” John answered, because he knew Sherlock wouldn’t.

Sherlock surprised him, though. Instead of sitting and keeping entirely to himself in his own little world, the way he usually did, Sherlock leaned against the railing at the front of the dugout and watched every single pitch that was being thrown with a voracious curiosity.

John knew by now what that look on Sherlock’s face meant and didn’t bother him, but he did wonder what was up with the uncharacteristic behavior.

Sherlock had an absolutely blazing four-pitch first inning, helped by every single batter swinging at the first pitch.

“Idiots,” Sherlock said, as he met John at the opening of the dugout. “Where do they get their scouting reports?”

“They don’t want to give you time to out-think them off-balance. They’re figuring their best shot is the first pitch you throw, before you’ve gotten too much into their heads.”

“It’s a stupid approach. I throw good first pitches. They’d be better off getting me irritated by drawing the at-bats out; I’d be more likely to lose my patience then.”

John looked at the National League players all around them. “And you’ve just given all of our competitors the world’s best scouting report on you,” he remarked, dryly, which provoked laughter from the rest of the dugout and some scattered applause.

Sherlock shrugged, unconcerned, and John knew he just considered it more of a challenge. He went back to leaning up against the dugout fence, watching closely again. John leaned next to him, silent, watching the back-and-forth of the baseball game. *This is your All-Star Game,* he thought. *Pay attention to this.*

They had a good inning. After two quick outs, they wrangled a hit and then a walk.

“That’s me on deck,” John remarked, pushing back from the fence.

“John.” Sherlock didn’t move and never took his eyes off the field, but he spoke quickly and firmly. “He’s shaken. He didn’t expect that to be a walk. He doesn’t feel he’s getting the outside corner call, and he’s panicking about it, so he’s going to be heavily inside to you the entire at-bat. You have a reputation for being a poor slider hitter, but that’s an undeserved reputation. You can hit a slider. And I’m telling you that you’re going to see one, first pitch, slider on the inside corner. Don’t let him back you off the plate. Turn on it and push it out. It’s actually an ideal pitch for you.”
John stared at him in surprise.

“Watson!” somebody barked from behind him.

“Yeah,” John said, dazedly. “I’m coming. Sherlock—”

“Hurry up,” Sherlock snapped, impatiently. “I’m right, go out there and prove it.”

John had a sudden flash that he didn’t want to be the thing that proved Sherlock wrong. Not in this instance. Maybe some other time he would relish winning a fight against him. Just now, he stood at the plate in Fenway Park. He had the bases loaded, the result of a beautifully executed bunt by the hitter ahead of him that he beat to first. The pitcher was clearly rattled. The catcher had jogged out to him, and they were having a consultation. They were not from the same team, the AL starting battery, and John knew that made the conference awkward and stilted and not terribly helpful.

John stood by the plate, waiting, thinking, *Sherlock thinks it’s going to be a slider, inside corner. Sherlock thinks you can hit a slider. When is Sherlock ever wrong? He’s right that all you need to do is push it. It doesn’t even need to find a hole out there. You can just hit a sacrifice fly. Nobody would think less of you for that. You’d have an RBI in the All-Star Game.* John glanced toward the first-base coach, who did nothing but clap twice to indicate that it was John’s at-bat to do as he wished. It was early in the game, Sherlock had been so incredibly dazzling in his first inning, and the American League pitcher was so clearly rattled. The National League was relaxed. It was not a time for strategy. John glanced toward Sherlock, who was steadily watching the AL pitcher and not John.

The umpire went out to break up the conference. The catcher jogged back, looking a bit harried.

John settled into his batting stance. *Slider, inside corner,* he thought. *It’s going to be a slider, inside corner. Don’t think yourself out of it, just swing the bat and push the ball*—He hit it in exactly the perfect spot, with exactly the right force. He felt it immediately. In fact, it was so perfect that he couldn’t even begin to think about moving. He wanted to stand there by home plate, finishing up his swing, relishing the perfect vibration of the bat in his hand.

The catcher stood up next to him, pushing his helmet off his head. John was dimly aware of this, as he stood there watching his ball sail into the first row of seats. *What the hell,* he thought, in disbelief. *Did I just hit a grand slam in Fenway Park during the All-Star Game?* He looked at the umpire, who was making the signal for home run, and he forced himself to move, to start his trot around the bases. *Do. Not. Faint,* he told himself, firmly, and kept one foot in front of the other. First base, then second, then third, and the crowd was roaring in his ears, and he was doing a home run trot at Fenway Park in the All-Star Game. The three players who’d been on base were waiting for him at home plate, and they leaped atop him as he got there, and he laughed because he couldn’t help it. The dugout met him, throwing out ecstatic congratulations, and John felt giddy and delighted.

Sherlock was still leaning against the dugout fence, still watching the flustered AL pitcher. “Well done,” he said, mildly, without looking at John, but he didn’t fool John for a minute.

“Smug,” said John.

Sherlock said nothing, but John could see the amusement lurking in his eyes.

“If you can do that all the time, why don’t you?”

“Because I can’t. Tonight is your lucky night, John Watson.” Sherlock straightened from the
dugout fence. “And that’s the third out. Let’s go.”

John, feeling like he was walking on air, took up his position behind home plate and did some lazy warming-up with Sherlock, who had been sitting in the dugout for a while and had only thrown four pitches all game. It showed, too, because Sherlock’s first pitch was an uncharacteristic mistake, hit sharply into the hole between second and first. The runner ended up on first, and Sherlock seemed inordinately concerned about him, throwing over twice to cut his lead, which he almost never did. Sherlock normally ignored any runners he allowed.

John called for a time-out and jogged out to the mound. Sherlock waited, frowning at the runner on first as if he’d personally offended him.

“Okay,” John said, holding his glove to his mouth so no one could read his lips. “Shake that off. Who cares about the runner? You’re letting yourself get distracted.”

“Am I?” asked Sherlock, not bothering to hide his own lips.

“Yes,” John replied. “Let’s get a double play right now; he’ll be gone.”

Sherlock nodded once, shortly, and John retreated back to home.

And Sherlock threw back over to first, apparently concerned that the runner might possibly be thinking about stealing second. Bloody stubborn git, John thought, frowning furiously, and finally Sherlock threw a pitch, a fairly bad one, far outside, and the runner at first took off for second, and John came up flinging the ball toward second.

“Out!” the umpire roared, from the tangle of limbs that was second base.

Sherlock looked at him from the pitcher’s mound and, unusually, grinned. John blinked at him in shock and then realized exactly what had happened there.

When the inning was over, John waited for him at the dugout steps and hissed, “You let that runner get on base specifically so I could throw him out.”

“Of course I did,” Sherlock replied, unconcerned. “Did you think that was an accident?”

John shook his head, thinking it was hopeless and Sherlock was fantastic and he wanted to shove him up against the wall and have his way with him, many different ways with him. John was certain that would be allowed once the game was over, which pretty much made what was already shaping up to be the best day of his life inconceivably better.

The score was still 4-0 as they trotted out for the bottom of the fourth. Well, John was trotting out. Sherlock had paused and was speaking to Esteban in rapid-fire Spanish.

“What was that about?” John asked when Sherlock joined him on the dugout steps on the way to the field.

“Nothing.”

“You don’t even talk to our own manager during a game, never mind a strange manager. And you speak Spanish?”

Sherlock gave him his don’t ask stupid questions look and walked out to the pitcher’s mound.

Sherlock dispensed with the first two batters with the efficiency he’d displayed all game, aside
from his deliberate mistake with the runner in the second, which, honestly, had thrown off the AL so much that it might as well have been strategy. And, for all John knew, it had been strategy and not just a little gift to John.

But now, with the third batter of the inning up, suddenly they couldn’t get on the same page. Sherlock shook him off and shook him off and shook him off. They hadn’t had such a huge pitching disagreement in ages. John admitted he was annoyed about it. It was the bloody All-Star Game, couldn’t Sherlock just be cooperative for once? Fine, thought John, throw whatever you want. He put his glove in a neutral position.

Sherlock stood on the mound, unmoving, and even from the distance he was at, John could tell he was frowning and unhappy. What the hell.

John called for time again and jogged out to the mound. “What’s the matter?” he demanded from behind his glove. “Are you tired? Do you need a second to breathe?”

“No.” Sherlock had lifted his glove as well, which he so seldom did that John lifted his eyebrows in response. “This is our last inning. Esteban told me before we came out here. So I want you to breathe. I want you to realize that you were voted in by the fans, and it had nothing to do with me. I know you’ve been thinking, in your head, that they just wanted me here and thought they had to ask you along to accomplish it, but it’s not true. They wanted you, and you deserve to be here, and this has been your All-Star Game, John Watson.”

The thought slammed into John, and he realized that he had managed to forget, and trust Sherlock to realize that. He turned from Sherlock, stepped back to stand beside him, and looked up, at Fenway all around them and the sky above that. The crowd noise rushed up to fill in, no longer blocked out in his head automatically by the activity of playing baseball. Cameras flashed all around them, dazzling. Sherlock stood next to him, silent, and John wondered what he was thinking. Because John’s head was a dizzying collage of childhood memories and his own career highlights, all entangled in one huge mess, and he felt drunk with the fact that the only thing he’d ever found in his life that he loved more than baseball was the man currently standing next to him. And as much as he was going to miss this game, he would miss it far less because he’d found this man.

John turned back to him. “Thank you,” he said, gravely. “For everything. All of it. Aside from all the rest of it, this has been…the biggest honor. I mean, it’s meant the world, to catch you. Forget everything else. It’s always…I don’t tell you that often enough.”

“You tell me every single time I throw a pitch at you, John. Never think I don’t know.”

John looked across at him for a second and then nodded, too overwhelmed by everything to come up with any other response. He walked back to home plate, pressing firmly into his memory, to be cherished forever, every single step he took. He felt Sherlock’s eyes watch him all the way back.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Four

The champagne was flowing a bit too liberally. Sherlock, suspecting that a drunk John was a John who would try to nibble on his neck in public, stayed out of John’s way. Sherlock tried not to make it look like outright avoidance—he thought that would look almost as suspicious as a public snog at this point, honestly—but he circled along the edges of the crowd, watching John in the center of it out of the corner of his eye.

Sherlock knew that it was suspicious he was even there, that a wiser move on his part would have been to go back to the hotel. But John had been giddy and already half-drunk on delight, and he had cornered Sherlock and begged, *Come just have one drink, it’ll be brilliant*, and how could Sherlock ever have said no to John in such a state? John was happy, and keeping John happy had become Sherlock’s primary preoccupation. So Sherlock found himself at a bar full of baseball players, and he thought nothing could more blatantly scream to the universe, *Sherlock Holmes is in love with John Watson*.

Sherlock had one eye on John and one eye on Moriarty, who was brooding into a glass of whisky. When he finally came up to Sherlock, Sherlock merely raised an eyebrow and said, “I’ve been waiting all evening.”

“I like to play hard to get,” he said, and leaned against the bar and looked at John. Sherlock deliberately did not follow his gaze, but he knew where John was in the room, and he knew Moriarty was looking straight at him. “An injury rumor is so pedestrian, Sherlock.”

“Rather like a gay rumor,” rejoined Sherlock, evenly.

“Not when one is true and one is not,” Moriarty’s eyes flickered momentarily from John to Sherlock. “I expect better of you, my dear.”

“What can I say? I had better things to do than think of…you.” Sherlock put deliberate emphasis into the word and was pleased when Moriarty reacted, eyes narrowing as he turned fully to Sherlock.

“John Watson’s fairy tale season,” Moriarty spat out. “All-Star Game MVP. I bet you’re thinking that you couldn’t write yourself a better story. Do you know what you’re forgetting?” Moriarty took a step closer. “Every fairy tale needs a good old-fashioned villain. And I owe you a fall.” Moriarty smiled silkily. “You’ve been keeping one person safe all this time. You’re about to discover how much more difficult it is to keep two people safe.”

Sherlock refused to be baited. As if he hadn’t seen all of this coming; as if he hadn’t been braced for it from the moment Moriarty had come upon them at the instant that John was teasing him and he had been laughing in response; as if he hadn’t known immediately that, seeing *that*, Moriarty would make it his mission in life to destroy it. Sherlock had been ready for this. Sherlock wasn’t just going to war. As far as he was concerned, it had already been declared, he’d fired the first volley and dug out his trenches. Moriarty was still engaging in diplomatic conference intrigue, not yet in receipt of the full intelligence about the state of affairs. Sherlock was pleased.
“Is that why Moran isn’t here tonight?” he asked, blandly.

Moriarty looked extremely unamused, which gave Sherlock a vicious amount of pleasure. “I’ll be seeing you very soon,” he promised, as he walked away.

Sherlock smiled and inclined his head a bit in farewell, and Moriarty looked fuming, and John suddenly said, sounding decidedly drunk, “Sherlock,” as he slid onto the bar stool next to him.

Sherlock looked at him, feeling a strange mixture of fondness and terror all at once. “You’re slurring,” he said.

“Sherlock has a built-in slur,” John told him, making sure to pronounce his words very carefully. “So does champagne. That was clever of whoever named champagne, don’t you think? Clever of whoever named you, too.” John’s eyes lingered on the errant curl Sherlock could feel tumbling over his forehead. “You have fantastic hair,” said John. Then, looking back at Sherlock’s eyes, “Did your mother name you?”

“I have no idea. I never asked.”

“Your mother is terrible,” said John. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“I can wait a very long time for you to meet her,” replied Sherlock, dryly.

“Do you think people are reading our lips?”

“Are you planning on saying something inappropriate to me?”

“I’d love to,” said John, wistfully. “Take me home.”

Sherlock considered that it would just be the latest in a long line of the day’s giveaway moments between Holmes and Watson. Luckily, it wasn’t like John did anything incriminating whilst they waited for a taxi, or even whilst they rode back to the hotel. He did drape himself over Sherlock and suck on his earlobe whilst Sherlock was opening the door to the suite, but the hallway was empty and Sherlock swung him easily inside.

“Mmm,” said John, contentedly, into Sherlock’s neck. “Would you play the violin?”

“Would you like me to?”

“We’d wake everyone up, wouldn’t we?”

“Yes.”

“Then no. But if I said yes, would you?”

“This is your night,” Sherlock told him, truthfully, nudging him toward the bedroom. “I’d do anything you wished.”

“I love that you play the violin in front of me,” John said, allowing Sherlock to guide him onto the bed. He made a clumsy fist in Sherlock’s shirt to keep him from moving away. “Never play in front of anyone else, okay?”


“Everyone has terrible taste in music.”
“No, you have terrible taste in music.”

“Duran Duran are geniuses.”

“If that’s your definition of ‘genius’ then it’s no great compliment when you use the word for me, is it?”

“The Red Sox have good music. They have a good song. Austin needs a song. We need a song, Sherlock.”

Sherlock, having pulled John’s trainers, socks, and jeans off, had moved up to his shirt, giving John the opportunity to wrap his arms around his neck and pull him awkwardly down against him. “A song for what?” asked Sherlock, into John’s skin.

“For when we win. Can they have the Wagner?”

“No, they most certainly cannot, the Wagner is mine.”

“Are you undressing me so you can have your way with me?” John asked, as Sherlock pulled back and pulled his shirt off of him.

“No, I’m undressing you so you can sleep, because you are very drunk.”

“I’m not,” John protested, drunkenly.

“Very, very drunk,” said Sherlock, commencing to undress himself.

John yawned and stretched on the bed and closed his eyes. “Maybe a little bit,” he allowed, sleepily. “Not very. You know what’s fantastic, Sherlock?”

Sherlock shut off the lights and got into bed next to him. “Baseball,” Sherlock answered.

“Mmmmmmyes, baseball is fantastic. So pretty, so lovely. But that’s not what I meant.”

“No?” Sherlock humored him. “What did you mean?”

“I meant you. You’re fantastic. So pretty, so lovely. Like baseball. Better than baseball. You are better than baseball.”

Sherlock was silent for a second. He stared up at the ceiling and waited until he felt like he could speak without betraying the depth of his emotion over that. John Watson. Saying he was better than baseball. “Now I know how drunk you are,” he said, finally, trying to lighten the moment.

“No, I mean it.” John cuddled up against him. “You are the best. The best. The best pitcher, the best person. I waited my whole life for you. I never thought you’d come. What took you so long?”

Sherlock buried his head against him, feeling oddly like he was on the verge of crying. “You’re so very drunk, John,” he said, desperately. “Stop talking and go to sleep.”

“I mean it,” said John, but he sounded drowsier, and Sherlock thought he might finally be taking Sherlock’s advice. “Sherlock, when the season’s over?” He was definitely slurring his words a bit now, and Sherlock thought it was sleep creeping over him more than alcohol at this point.

“Don’t talk about it now, John,” Sherlock whispered. “Don’t worry about it now.”

“Can we go to London?” he asked, muzzily.
Sherlock stopped breathing.

John spoke in disjointed phrases, around soft, sleepy breaths, barely loud enough for Sherlock to hear. “Bet you love London… Bet you’re…*spectacular*…in London…take me…we’ll…” John faded entirely.

Sherlock took a careful breath. Words crashed together in his head, his synapses too overloaded to even form a sentence. *Let’s move to London, let’s get a flat, a cozy one, with a fireplace, and a dog, and wallpaper, and a back garden for catch.* Those were the words whirling through him but when he spoke into John’s slumber, the words he whispered up to the dark ceiling above him were, “I love you.”

***

John woke to the sound of Sherlock’s violin in the other room and the awareness that he wanted to die. His head was pounding and his stomach was leaping all around and his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth, and maybe, if he asked very nicely, Sherlock would put him out of his misery and kill him. Maybe, if he lay very still, he would start to feel better.

He did not feel any better. Eventually what he felt was the pressing need to go to the bathroom, which was inconvenient. With great effort, he forced himself out of bed and into the adjoining bathroom. And did not die in the process. He brushed his teeth in order to try to get the aftertaste of champagne out of his mouth, and then, because he felt gross, he decided to give the shower a tentative try. He didn’t take a shower so much as the shower took him, frankly, as he just stood there and let the water pound at him and made very little effort toward washing up. But he felt marginally better when he stepped out of the shower, and he pulled on a T-shirt and boxers because that was about the level he was operating at, and then, because it felt like that kind of day, he pulled the duvet off the bed as well and wrapped himself in it as he stumbled queasily out into the living area.

Sherlock was still playing as John collapsed on the couch, his head and stomach protesting his being upright any longer, and John placed the song after a moment. *Hungry Like the Wolf.*

John pulled the duvet up over his head and said into the couch cushion underneath him, “I am going to *kill* you.”

Sherlock finished the song before saying, “I do hope you’re clever about it. I’d hate to be murdered in a boring way.”

“Of course you would,” mumbled John, and then he pushed the duvet away from his head and turned so he could see Sherlock. Sherlock was studying his violin in that way he sometimes had, the way other men might inspect a beloved car for nicks and scratches. “Sherlock, I had a fabulous dream last night.”

“Did you?” Sherlock asked it without interest. As a rule, John had discovered, Sherlock wasn’t interested in dreams. He found the subconscious unreliable and mistrusted it. If Sherlock dreamed, he never shared them with John, and he tolerated John’s discussions of dreams only in the most absent-minded way, or else with active dislike.

“I dreamed that I was named the most valuable player of the All-Star Game,” continued John.

Sherlock smiled at that and put his violin down.

“I also dreamed that I’m living with a magnificently talented pitcher,” John went on.
“None of that is a dream,” said Sherlock, and dropped a newspaper on John’s chest.

It was a photograph of the two of them from the night before, both of them standing at the pitcher’s mound looking out over Fenway. Their backs were to the photographer, Sherlock’s number 2 on the left and John’s number 21 on the right, side-by-side. The headline was *Holmes and Watson Steal the Show.*

John smiled. He couldn’t help it. “That’s a nice picture of the two of us.”

“Oh, there are so many more where that came from. We are all over the Internet, John. We have a devoted following.”

There was something about Sherlock’s tone that made John groan. “Oh, God. How bad is it?”

“We’ll have to do damage control quickly. Put a rumor like that in people’s heads and suddenly everything looks suspicious.”

“Because everything *is* suspicious,” said John, looking reluctantly at the laptop Sherlock handed him. “‘Johnlock’?” he read. “What’s that?”

“That’s us.”

“Huh,” said John, and scrolled along the blog Sherlock had open. It was, at least, a favorable blog, giddy in its joy over their relationship. It was full of photographs of the two of them, and Sherlock was right, every single one of them looked incriminating. At the top of the page was an animation of John sprinkling grass over Sherlock’s face. It played in endless repeat, and John winced as he watched it. Underneath were more photos from the night before: John and Sherlock leaning up against the dugout fence together, identical intent expressions on their faces; John and Sherlock in a conference on the mound; John and Sherlock deep in conversation at they crossed the Fenway outfield; John and Sherlock smiling at each other in the Fenway bullpen. And that was just from the All-Star Game. John couldn’t even imagine how many more there were.

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about scrapbooking our relationship,” commented John, trying to make light of it. “Everyone else is doing it for us.”

“We can issue a denial of the rumors.”

“No. No denial. When we eventually confirm the rumors, we’d look like idiots.”

“What are we going to tell the team?”

“Nothing, unless it becomes an issue. I only care if it becomes an issue.”

“I still think one of us should start dating someone. And since you’re a terrible actor—”

“And you’ve got a line of women wrapped around the block eager to get you into bed, it should be you,” finished John, dryly.

“Unless we just don’t and let this go the way it’s going.” Sherlock gestured to the laptop.

John sighed, put the laptop on the floor by the sofa, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can we talk about this when I don’t have a hangover?”

“I take it you’re hung over now.”

“Brilliant deduction.”
“Then no, we can’t talk about it when you don’t have a hangover, because we need to talk about it now.”

John knew Sherlock was right and hated that Sherlock was right. “Can we issue a statement that says something like, ‘Go to hell, this is none of your business’?”

“We can issue a statement saying whatever you like.”

John sighed again. “You’d love to issue a statement telling everyone to sod off. That would be precisely your style. I don’t want to talk about us at all. If you start dating someone, would that allow us to not talk about us, just for the rest of the season?”

“It would probably allow us to talk about us less,” said Sherlock.

John considered, looking up at the ceiling, letting the silence stretch.

Sherlock said, eventually, “Are you up for company?”

“Company?”

“Your family will be coming by to congratulate you.”

“Oh,” he realized. “Right. Of course.” John sighed and frowned and Sherlock’s face suddenly swam into his vision.

“Don’t,” said Sherlock.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t make that little unhappy face, I can’t stand it.” Sherlock sounded honestly distressed at the sight of it. “Tell me more about the magnificent pitcher you were shagging in your dream,” he prompted.

John laughed, because he couldn’t help it, and Sherlock looked pleased, so John knew that had been Sherlock’s objective and loved him desperately. “I didn’t say I was shagging him in my dream, I said I was living with him.”

“Was he attractive?”

“Tall, dark, and handsome,” John said, hooking a finger into the collar of Sherlock’s shirt.

“Then don’t be an idiot, John, shag him.”

“I am not quite up to it at the moment. Perhaps he’d settle for a kiss,” suggested John, pulling Sherlock down for one.

“Mmm,” said Sherlock, contentedly, and nuzzled underneath John’s jaw. “He might.”

“I love you, too,” John said, feeling terrible that he’d been too discombobulated to say it back the night before.

Sherlock froze, his head popping up so quickly that he might as well have been in a jack-in-the-box. He stared down at John and said, sounding strangled, “What?”

John drew his eyebrows together quizzically, puzzled by this reaction, but before he could respond, a knock sounded on the door. His family, John thought, as predicted.
Sherlock had been leaning over him, but he half-rolled off the couch at the knock. John sat up, watching as Sherlock opened the door and said, briskly, “Sorry, can you come back later?” and closed it again.

John blinked. “Sherlock—” he began, in surprise.

“Why would you say that to me?” Sherlock demanded, stalking back to the living area. He didn’t come back over to John. He paced swiftly up and down in front of the windows.

John stared at him. “I… What is going on here? Didn’t you say it to me last night?”

“You weren’t supposed to hear that. Or remember it. Why don’t you ever just do what I think you should be doing? Why do you have to keep surprising me?”

John watched his frantic pacing, confused. “I’m not sure I understand what the crisis is here. I said it back—”

“Don’t just say it back because you feel obligated—”

“Do you think that’s why I said it back?” John interrupted, sharply.

Another knock sounded on the door.

“Oh, bloody hell,” said Sherlock, and then raised his voice to shout, “Go! Away!” He turned back to John. “I didn’t intend to say anything at all to you last night. I was just…trying it out.”

The knocking on the door was persistent and steady. John was torn between wanting to shake Sherlock and wanting to shake his family for not taking the hint.

Sherlock did not seem to be suffering indecision over who to shake. He stalked over to the hotel room door, saying, “Did you not hear me? I said—Oh.” Sherlock swallowed whatever his words were on something like a hiccup, and John tried to turn more fully on the couch to see what was happening by the door.

A woman walked confidently into the hotel room, tall and dark and handsome, and John knew without even needing the confirmation of her saying, to the gaping Sherlock, “Sherlock, is that any way to greet your mother?”

Chapter End Notes

Boston’s win song, as referred to by John: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBAt-SPosWs
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

As N&N followers know, I am moving 1300 miles next week. As I expect my life to be CHAOS, I will probably skip posting. Think good moving vibes! :-)

Chapter Twenty-Five

John had wanted to meet Sherlock’s mother. He had wanted to do it when he didn’t have a nagging headache, a stubborn queasiness, uncombed hair, and a duvet wrapped around a T-shirt and boxers that, to be completely honest, he wasn’t entirely sure had even been clean to begin with. And naturally Sherlock’s mother was all sleek elegance. Every Holmes John had ever met shared the trait. Sherlock was the only one who made it at all approachable. And John was aware that, for whatever reason, he was actually the only person who had ever found it approachable in any way.

At any rate, Sherlock was uncharacteristically speechless, and to make a bad situation worse, John’s mother marched in looking offended, although John wasn’t sure if she was offended by Sherlock having refused her entry earlier or by Sherlock’s mother barging her way into the room. John also wondered just how much of their argument had been overheard by those in the hallway, but he thought he had to stop wondering about that or the tips of his ears would go telltale red.

“Clearly they are not receiving visitors right now,” proclaimed John’s mother, as if she had suddenly been dropped into a costume drama. John actually blinked at her in surprise.

Sherlock’s mother said, “I am not a visitor,” and then turned laser-eyes on John. They were Sherlock’s eyes, disconcertingly so, a cold crystal blue focused on John with a detached edge of annoyance. John did not realize how much he’d gotten used to the warmth in Sherlock’s gaze until that moment. “Who are you?” she demanded of John.

John, kneeling on the couch to look over the back of it, with a duvet slipping off his shoulder, said, unsure what else to say, “John Watson?” He actually offered it like a question, as if he needed her to confirm that for him.

She frowned at him, and he half-expected her to say, No, Unacceptable name. I shall call you Hamish instead, but Sherlock came to sudden life and stepped in front of his mother, cutting off her chilly gaze and saying, “What do you think you’re doing here?”

“Ah, now there’s the greeting I expected,” drawled his mother, and John knew that sarcastic tone so well that he actually winced. He wished Sherlock’s mother, who he had been hating all this time for whatever insane thing she’d done to make Sherlock as lonely and closed-off and terrified as he very clearly was, didn’t actually remind him strongly, painfully, of Sherlock. “Get dressed properly; you can take me to tea.”

John looked at Sherlock, who was dressed in his usual bespoke suit, with a bright white shirt for contrast, and wondered what the hell she considered John, if Sherlock wasn’t properly dressed.

“I am dressed properly, and I’m not taking you to tea,” said Sherlock, calmly. “You are going back to England. There’s a British Airways flight from Logan to Heathrow in six hours and twenty-two
“Six hours and twenty-two minutes is plenty of time for me to deduce everything about this most recent mess you’ve made, as you well know.” She deliberately stepped to the side to fasten her gaze meaningfully back on John.

John bristled at the obvious characterization of himself as a *mess*.

His mother apparently bristled as well, because she cut in and said, icily, “We are *all* going to go to tea.”

Sherlock’s mother drew herself up to her full height, which was considerable, almost Sherlock’s height. Taller than John and John hated her a little more for that. “We most certainly are not,” she said, turning to John’s mother, and then, “Sherlock, who *is* this woman—oh.” She glanced at John and then back to his mother. “Ah. I see. Of course. Maybe we *shall* all go to tea.”

John’s mother was stonily glaring at Sherlock’s mother. John thought that they were never going to be able to combine Christmas dinners. “John,” his mother clipped out without looking at him. “Get dressed. Now. We’ll go get a table.” She turned on her heel and marched out of the suite, taking the rest of John’s unashamedly staring family with her.

Sherlock’s mother looked at Sherlock. “Do hurry, Sherlock, I’ve only six hours and twenty minutes left now,” she announced, before tossing her head haughtily and striding out of the suite.

She closed the door behind her, but Sherlock, for good measure, walked over, opened it, and immediately slammed it.

John hesitated, unsure what to say. He didn’t think Sherlock wanted him to say anything, and he wasn’t sure there was anything he could say to make things better.

“What should I wear?” he asked, awkwardly, eventually.

Sherlock *finally* turned away from his contemplation of the door. His eyes were stormy, and his mouth was twisted in pronounced disgust. “What were you going to wear today?”

“I… Jeans, I guess.” He hadn’t really thought about it. He wondered if Sherlock thought he spent much time thinking about his clothing.

“Wear jeans, then.” Sherlock waved his hand around dismissively.

“Your mother seems to think—”

“I do not care what she thinks,” Sherlock clipped out. “We are going to go have a cup of tea with her. We are not going to speak to her. Then she will leave.”

“That doesn’t seem…” Sherlock glared at him, and John trailed off, leaving *like the best idea* unsaid. He figured he could just ignore Sherlock’s directive. He could be as polite as possible and get Mrs. Holmes to stop thinking of him as being a mess. He was going to start this project, he thought, by combing his hair.

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Sherlock’s mother—what was her *name*? John should have asked Sherlock, but Sherlock had not looked as if he was in the mood to answer questions—had commandeered a table by the window looking out over the entire restaurant and the street. John wondered if she’d done that on purpose
to expose them to as much paparazzi documentation of this event as possible.

Utter silence was reigning at the table. John’s mother was frowning heavily into her cup of tea. John’s father was staring out the window as if he was wishing he were out there and away from all the discomfort. Harry and Clara and the kids were nowhere to be seen, and John wondered if they’d made excuses and run away, because he thought that had been brilliant of them.

Sherlock’s mother narrowed her eyes at John’s outfit, which consisted of jeans and an old red button-down shirt. She said, “That took long enough,” dubiously, as if she didn’t understand just why it had taken so long.

Sherlock said nothing, simply sat in the empty chair on his mother’s left. John sat in the empty chair next to Sherlock.

“Sherlock, you didn’t change,” his mother said.

Sherlock said nothing, studying the menu with unnecessary scrutiny.

Sherlock’s mother looked at John and said, bluntly, “Who are you?”

John blinked, because hadn’t they already been through this? “John Watson,” he repeated.

Sherlock’s mother grimaced. “I heard you the first time. You say that as if it’s supposed to mean something to me. How do you know Sherlock?”

John stared at her and finally just managed a croak of “What?” Because he and Sherlock were currently the biggest story in baseball, and, in a baseball city like Boston, they were splashed on the front of every newspaper.

Sherlock’s mother looked disgusted and turned her attention to Sherlock. “Oh, Sherlock, really,” she said.

“I will have a cup of tea,” Sherlock told the waiter who appeared. “Hot tea. Tea made with boiling water, not tea made from water in a coffee pot. Do you think you can manage that?”

“Yes, Mr. Holmes,” said the waiter, clearly someone who watched more baseball than Sherlock’s mother did. “And you, Mr. Watson?”

“I’ll have tea as well. I’m not quite as particular as he is but if you’re going to boil the water anyway, I’ll take the boiled water version.” John smiled at the waiter to try to make up for Sherlock’s shortness.

“And anything to eat?”

The thought made John want to crawl under the table. “No,” he said, firmly.

Sherlock didn’t even bother to respond. He looked pointedly out the window, ignoring everyone else at the table.

“You didn’t answer my question,” said Sherlock’s mother, sharply, as the waiter moved away.

John realized that she was addressing him, and thought back. “Oh, the ‘how do I know him’ question?” This seemed ridiculous. “You can’t deduce it?”

Sherlock snorted beside him, a sound of startled amusement. “She won’t deduce anything to do with baseball, John.”
“Oh, dear lord,” said Sherlock’s mother. “Is this to do with baseball? Really? This is ridiculous. When are you giving up this foolishness and coming home?”

John tried not to get as annoyed as he wanted to get. “It isn’t foolishness, you know, he’s the best pitcher in the entire game.”

“Yes. The entire game. Of baseball. What an honor it must be, to be the best at a pointless game.” Sherlock’s mother sipped her tea.

John took a breath, prepared to retort that actually it was a huge honor, but Sherlock’s shoe brushed against John’s ankle in what was obviously a don’t even bother gesture, and Sherlock’s mother spoke into the moment of John’s hesitation.

“Your brother’s gone absolutely mad,” she told Sherlock. “Hence why I had to come myself. He claims that any further interference by him would be futile. What could you have possibly done to convince him of that?”

“I convinced him of that,” John inserted, hotly.

She looked at him coolly. “You did?”

“Yes.”

She sighed and turned back to Sherlock. “Sherlock—”

“I did,” John insisted, ignoring Sherlock’s foot stomping down on his own. “I told him to stay away from Sherlock, because do you know what he does? He gets in Sherlock’s head. I’m sure he learned it from you. And he makes Sherlock think stupid, untrue things, which, again, I’m sure he’s getting from you.”

Sherlock’s mother stiffened. “I’ve never thought anything stupid or untrue in my life—”

John laughed, harshly and humorlessly, and Sherlock’s mother stiffened further, and John’s mother said, almost reluctantly, “John,” as if she thought she should head off the collision she saw coming, and then Sherlock said, sounding almost bored, “He’s my catcher, Mother.”

Both John and Sherlock’s mother turned to him in surprise at his sudden speaking.

“That answers your question about how he knows me. He is my catcher. It’s actually literally his job to defend me, hence his assistance with Mycroft, hence his conduct right now. It’s his instinct. He’s very good at it. It’s rather nice. And I am fine. I am absolutely fine. Better than I’ve ever been in my life. Largely because I haven’t had to deal with you. So the sooner you get back on a plane to Heathrow, the less I’ll feel like tracking down some cocaine just to get myself out of this misery. Oh, look, it’s some imitation of tea.”

The waiter, who had put the cups of tea down at precisely the moment Sherlock had mentioned cocaine, blinked at him, managed a wan smile, and then scurried away. John wondered how long it would take that particular comment to make its way onto the Internet, and he supposed he should just be grateful that Sherlock hadn’t been busy talking about their sex life at that moment.

“As you have already discerned,” continued Sherlock, sipping his tea, “that is John’s mother and that is John’s father. We’ve just finished an All-Star Game. John did very well. In fact, he was named Most Valuable Player. He’s a bit hungover, and this was supposed to be a lazy day of celebration for him, and instead he’s sitting here having truly execrable tea with you, so you understand why he might not be inclined to listen to you. Not that he would be under the best of
circumstances, but these circumstances are far from John’s best. He and I have a flight of our own to catch in three hours and fifty-seven minutes, and I for one would like to salvage what’s left of this day. So.” Sherlock stood, scraping back his chair. “Please do report back to Father that, despite my lack of tie, I otherwise look well. If you wish, you may follow the details of my life at johnlock.net. It’s disturbingly accurate.” Sherlock turned on his heel, sweeping away with that characteristic elegance he had, calling back, mockingly, “Laters!”

His mother watched his departure with narrowed eyes, but John didn’t. John leaned over and said, swiftly, keeping his voice low in case the waiter was near, “I have made it my job to make him happy. And he is. If you do anything to try to ruin it, I will, first, make sure that you fail, and second, make sure that you never think to try to do it again. That’s what I told Mycroft, and that’s what I’m telling you. Do not underestimate me.”

“I think that’s quite enough,” Sherlock’s mother clipped out at him.

“So do I,” John agreed, grimly, and stood as well, turning to follow Sherlock out, and then turning back abruptly. “No, you know what? It’s not enough.” He leaned back toward Sherlock’s mother again so he could drop his voice again. “He’s fantastic. I don’t understand why you didn’t tell him that every day.”

She lifted her eyebrows at him. “You really think Sherlock’s ego needs help?”

“When it comes to some things, yes. He has no idea who he is; he’s just figuring it out now, because you didn’t give him the chance to figure it out before. I won’t forgive you for that.”

“I don’t care about your forgiveness, Mr. Watson,” she told him, dismissively.

“You should,” he said, and then he really did turn and stride out. As he left, he heard his mother say, sweetly, “Well. It was so nice to meet you.”

***

Sherlock was standing at the window when John walked into the suite. He was holding his violin, but he wasn’t playing it.

“You okay?” John asked, closing the door.

“Of course I’m okay,” Sherlock answered, without turning from the window. “Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“No reason,” muttered John, as Sherlock started playing the violin. It was something sad and plaintive. It definitely wasn’t Tchaikovsky. “Look,” John said, raising his voice to be heard over the violin. “We can row about your mother, or we can row about my having said ‘I love you’ back. Your choice.”

Sherlock played the violin, his back to John.

John sighed. “Or I guess you can just keep playing the violin and we can row about nothing.” Sherlock didn’t respond to that, so John sighed again and walked past him into the bedroom. He decided what he needed was a real shower, unlike the dousing under water he’d given himself that morning, so he took three Advil in an attempt to get the headache to flee and then took an extra-long hot shower, delaying the moment when he would have to go back out into the living area and force Sherlock to talk about something.

When John emerged from the bedroom, feeling better than he had all day, Sherlock had not moved
from his position by the window, and he was still playing sad music on his violin. John fastened his watch on his wrist and said, “I am going to go say good-bye to my family. Do you want to come?”

Sherlock didn’t dignify that with a response.

John shook his head and walked to the door, then thought better of it, turned back, and walked over to stand behind Sherlock, leaning up quickly to press a kiss to the back of his neck, at the curling line of his hair. He had the satisfaction of Sherlock’s bow slipping, of a sour note scratching through the suite.

“I do love you,” John said, stubbornly, because this whole thing was ridiculous. He wasn’t even sure if they were arguing about it or not, but if they were then it was a ridiculous thing to be arguing about.

Sherlock didn’t respond, but then John didn’t expect him to and didn’t wait for him to. He simply said, “I’ll be back in a bit,” and left Sherlock, recovered enough to be playing pretty violin again, standing by the window.

His sister opened his parents’ hotel room door when he knocked, and said immediately, “John. What the hell was that?”

John was almost grateful for Sherlock’s crazy mother since it was the first thing that had made him feel even a little bit normal around Harry. He shook his head wearily as he stepped into the room. “I have no idea.” He looked at his parents, who were busy doing last-minute packing. “What did she say after I left?”

“Absolutely nothing,” said his mother. “She stood up and left without a word. And she left us with the check!”

John winced. “I’m sorry about that. How much was it?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” responded his mother, distractedly, folding a shirt, “nobody got anything more than tea, but she was horridly unpleasant.”

“She certainly wasn’t a walk in the park,” John agreed, and looked at Matt and Sophie, who were sitting by the window looking half-confused and half-bored. “So, off home, are you?”

They nodded at him.

“I just stopped by to say good-bye and have a safe flight and come and see me again before the summer’s over, yeah?” He dropped a kiss on both of their heads in turn before turning to hug Clara.

“Does that invitation include me?” asked Harry, almost shyly, when he turned to her.

“Oh, God, don’t be absurd,” John said, because despite everything he loved her fiercely and he wanted everything back to normal. “It always includes you. Always. I only ever love you.” John pulled her into a crushing hug. “I’m already dating one of the most absurd people on the planet, I can’t have you get irrational, too, do you hear me?”

“Speaking of,” said his mother, as John released Harry and turned to her, “where is Sherlock?”

“He is upstairs, playing the violin and refusing to talk.”

“Because of his mother?”
“I think, but who knows since he isn’t talking.” John leaned forward to hug her.

“Make him talk,” his mother said, returning the hug. “That’s your job.”

“I’m aware.”

“And when he’s in a better mood, give him a hug and kiss from me, will you?”

“He will have no idea what to make of that, so yes, definitely.”

“Looking forward to the postseason,” his father said, pulling him into a half-handshake, half-hug.

“Why would you jinx us like that?” complained John.

“You’ll be fine.” His father looked at him closely as he released him, and John paused, confused by the gaze. “And I like Sherlock. I know your mother’s been fawning all over him, but I didn’t know if you were wondering what I thought, and I like him.”

“Yes, you must be sure to bring him to Christmas, John, you can’t let him go home to that terrible family,” added his mother.

“I doubt he goes home for Christmas, Mum,” said John.

“Then you must make sure he doesn’t spend it alone. Make him come with you.”

John thought that it felt a bit optimistic of his mother to be planning Christmas with Sherlock when John felt as if Sherlock had completely withdrawn from him. Sherlock, he thought, would come home with him for Christmas and spend the entire time sulking silently with his violin. But he said good-bye to everyone again and walked back up to the suite.

Sherlock was still playing the violin.

“I’m starving,” John said. Sherlock said nothing. “Why, yes, I am feeling much better, and I haven’t eaten anything all day, so we should definitely get something to eat,” continued John, imagining Sherlock’s side of the conversation. Sherlock kept playing. “Sherlock,” John sighed, “really, you have to talk to me eventually, we live together.”

Apparently, “eventually” had not yet arrived for Sherlock, so John left him and went in search of food. He brought some back for Sherlock to eat, but Sherlock ignored his cajoling about it, and they went to the airport in silence. Sherlock actually didn’t seem angry; he seemed thoughtful, as if he were working something through, so John left him to it. He was furious with Sherlock’s mother for provoking what, for John, seemed like a regression back into thinking too hard instead of feeling, but he had convinced Sherlock to just love him and be happy before and he was confident he could do it again.

Sherlock was really a champion at the silent treatment. John had never met anyone half as good, could never imagine anyone being half as good. Sherlock never seemed bothered by the stretch of silence. John thought it possible that he genuinely forgot, at times like these, that anyone in the world existed but him. He was silent, silent, silent throughout the flight and the cab ride home. John gave a prayer of gratitude for the fact that they were starting a homestand after the All-Star Break. He didn’t want to deal with trying to fix whatever had happened between him and Sherlock while also dealing with a road trip.

Mrs. Hudson greeted them, scurrying across the yard shouting “Yoo-hoo!” but Sherlock didn’t stay to greet her, vanishing immediately through the door leading to their apartment.
Both Mrs. Hudson and John looked after him.

“Oh, dear,” said Mrs. Hudson.

“Don’t take it personally,” said John, turning to the luggage Sherlock had left him with.

“Did something happen in Boston? I thought it looked like everything went so well!”

“His mother showed up.” John decided to leave off And I said that I loved him and apparently that was the wrong thing to say.

“His mother?” Mrs. Hudson echoed, sounding shocked.

“Yes. Have you ever met her?”

“No. He never talks about her. Honestly, I assumed she was dead. He never talks about family, and I’ve only ever seen his brother come to visit him.”

“Well, she is very much alive, and she is not very nice.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” said Mrs. Hudson. “Well, I’m sure you’ll get him out of it.” Mrs. Hudson smiled at him confidently, and John wished she wasn’t so confident, because it was a bit terrifying to have to live up to that expectation.

Sherlock was collapsed into his thinking pose on the couch when John finished struggling up with the luggage.

“Thank you for the help,” said John, sarcastically. Sherlock gave no indication that he heard him. And John decided that it had been a bloody exhausting couple of days and that, if Sherlock was just going to ignore him all evening, he might as well go to bed.

So he did. It took him a while to fall asleep, but the next thing he knew after that was Sherlock whispering his name urgently.

“John. John.”

“What?” he asked, muzzily. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock whispered back. “I wanted to see if you were awake.”

John processed that sleep-slowly. “I wasn’t,” he pointed out, eventually, a little annoyed.

Sherlock was silent next to him in the bed.

“Okay,” John said, after the silence had stretched what he felt to be an inordinate amount of time. He propped himself up on his elbow, striving to see Sherlock through the darkness in the room.

“Did you seriously just wake me up so you could ignore me again?”

“Again?” Sherlock sounded quizzical.

“Yes. Like you’ve been ignoring me all day.”

“I haven’t been ignoring you.”

“You haven’t spoken a single word to me since your mother left.”
“I was thinking.”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive,” retorted John, and resisted the urge to kick Sherlock out of bed, because he didn’t want to be petty, but he wasn’t in the best mood at the moment. Being unceremoniously woken for no apparent reason did that to a person. He flopped back down onto his pillow and made a big show of turning away from Sherlock and settling the blankets back around him.

“I didn’t know what to say, John,” Sherlock said, after a moment. “I don’t have words for this. I spent all day trying to think of the words for this, and I don’t have them. This is the best I can do.”

“What ‘this’?” John asked after another moment of silence between them.

“I don’t…” Sherlock was speaking slowly, and he sounded frustrated almost to the point of tears, and John realized suddenly why he was doing this in the middle of the night, because he wanted the protection of the darkness around them. “Love is a chemical reaction, you know. It’s…studied. It’s…fact. The chemicals, in your body, they…” Sherlock took a deep breath. “It’s the same with cocaine. The same sort of chemical high. And with sex.”

“And with baseball,” added John.

“For some people. For you. You… You are… I…” Sherlock took a ragged breath. “All the things I did to stop being bored, God, John, you cannot imagine. And then I met you, and there was this rush, right? This…permanent high. A safe high. One I could keep in my pocket and use until I’d absolutely exhausted you. And I warned you I would. I warned you that I would keep you and keep you and keep you until the day I grew bored, but I’m not bored. I haven’t been. Every morning I wake up and I look at you sleeping next to me and I can’t breathe because you are there, and the whole day is a marvelous, thrilling adventure because you are there, and you will smile at me, or you’ll kiss me, or you’ll quarrel with me, or you’ll do something astonishing I can’t even predict. And I haven’t been bored, I’ve not once been bored, but I’ve stopped feeling…I’ve stopped feeling high. In the beginning my mind palace was a mess, you have no idea, rooms were in complete disarray and there were streamers hanging from the chandelier. It was like someone had had a rowdy party in it the night before, but now everything’s been repainted and put in its place and there are more rooms about you, there’s a whole bloody wing about you, but it isn’t a mess, it isn’t like it was with the cocaine, it isn’t… It’s not… It’s so neat and orderly and gorgeous, everything’s gorgeous, and I am so…so… Oh, for God’s sake,” Sherlock bit out, finally, clearly annoyed with himself.

John rolled slowly on the bed so he could face the solid silhouette of Sherlock next to him.

“Sherlock—”

“No. Let me get it out. You’re miffed you’ve been ignored all day, well, this is why. This is the best I can do, and I’ve been thinking about it for hours. This is the clearest, the cleanest, the most straightforward I can make this, so just hear me out on it, this took all day and night. I have been high, John. I have been… And there was always this edge of thrill, that’s why I loved it so much. It was dangerous, it was pushing the envelope, and that was so…so… I remember with clarity, like it was just this morning, how every single molecule of my body felt on a high, and it isn’t how I feel with you, not anymore. With you I’m just… And I thought, I was so sure, that I knew what love was, and it’s supposed to be… I mean, it’s not… I was just trying it out, the other night, when I said that I loved you. I’m not sure it’s accurate, John. I didn’t mean to put that label on it. I’m not sure what it means to you, what you think it means to you, but I’m not sure it’s how I feel about you, I’m not sure it’s right.”

John was silent for so long that he was worried Sherlock was going to give up and get out of bed,
but he needed that long to pull himself together, to come up with some response, because he didn’t
know what to say. “How do you think you feel about me?”

“That’s what I’m saying, John,” Sherlock answered, impatiently. “I don’t have words for it.”

John considered. He wanted to say, *I think I make you happy, Sherlock. I think that’s what this is. I
think you’re just happy, and you’re not used to it, and you don’t know what to call it. And I think
you love me so much that you don’t think it’s love because you never thought love would be like
this. I think you’re telling me that you love me too much to call it “love.” But it’s okay, because I
never thought love would be like this, either, and I am fine with thinking we need a better word
than just “love.”* But he also didn’t want to say it. He didn’t want to say anything at all. He wanted
to kiss Sherlock until they were both trembling with the force of all of it. He understood why
Sherlock was so frustrated. There was nothing he could say with words that was anything like how
John *felt* at the moment.

“Do you want us? Do you want this?” John tried to get his voice above a whisper, but he couldn’t.

“I want you, us, this more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life, John. And I used to be a drug
addict, so that’s saying something.”

“Fine,” John said, and rolled onto Sherlock, straddling his chest. “Then as long as that’s true, we
don’t need any words for any of this. Don’t worry about the words, Sherlock. You tell me
everything I need to know when you kiss me.” And he leaned down and proved it.
Chapter Twenty-Six

John woke to an empty bed, which was not at all unusual but still, he would have thought Sherlock would have stuck close, given the night they had had. He poked his head out of the bedroom to ascertain that Sherlock was in the living room, frowning at his bulletin board.

“Good morning,” he called around a yawn, and got a dismissive hand wave as a response. Apparently everything was back to normal, thought John, and took a shower.

When he next emerged from the bedroom, Mrs. Hudson was in the living room, which wasn’t unexpected, but she was also frowning at the bulletin board, which definitely was unexpected.

“What do you think, Mrs. Hudson?” John asked, good-naturedly, as he checked to see if Sherlock had made coffee (naturally, he had not). “Would the fastball be an effective out or result in a home run?”

“What?” asked Mrs. Hudson, blankly.

“The bulletin board,” said John, switching the coffeepot on and walking back out into the living room to discover that Sherlock’s bulletin board didn’t have a single baseball-related item on it. Instead, it was covered with photographs of women. He looked at Sherlock. “And what’s all that?”

“Candidates,” answered Sherlock.

“Oh,” John realized, and sighed. “I hate every single person in the world who isn’t us.”

“Welcome to my usual state of being,” answered Sherlock, without irony.

“John,” said Mrs. Hudson, a tsk of sympathy in her voice. “Sherlock’s been explaining to me. Really, this all seems so terrible. I don’t care if I have gay baseball players on my team.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson, I appreciate it,” said John, because he didn’t know how else to respond to that.

“Mrs. Hudson’s been giving her opinion on the choices,” explained Sherlock.

John regarded the bulletin board glumly. “How do you even know all these women?” He hardly ever saw Sherlock speak to anyone who wasn’t him.

“Well, I don’t. But I will, if necessary.” Sherlock sounded confident of his ability to pull any or all of these women.

John looked at him and allowed that he probably should feel confident of that.

Sherlock was looking back at him. “This is still what you want to do, isn’t it?”
“No, it isn’t what I want to do.” John paused. “I don’t want to force you into this if you—”

“No,” said Sherlock, with sudden steel in his voice. “I was willing to keep us secret, because you wanted it, because I didn’t really care. I didn’t feel passionately one way or the other, and you clearly did, and that was fine with me. But this…I won’t have us not be secret because of Moriarty. It’s our decision, and I will do whatever it takes to make sure he doesn’t take it from us.”

John heard the threat in Sherlock’s tone, looked back at the bulletin board, and said, “I need coffee.” He retreated to the kitchen and made a mug for himself and one for Sherlock. “Mrs. Hudson,” he called, “did you want coffee?”

“I’m just on my way out,” Mrs. Hudson called back. “Don’t mind me!”

So John carried out his two mugs of coffee, just as Mrs. Hudson was exiting the apartment. He put Sherlock’s coffee down on the desk and sipped his own and said, “When you say ‘whatever it takes’…”

Sherlock looked at him without comprehension.

John sipped his coffee again and said, “You’re not going to sleep with these women, are you?”

Sherlock made a face. “For God’s sake, no. Don’t be ridiculous.” Sherlock looked at the bulletin board then back at John, curious. “Would it bother you if I slept with them?”

John rolled his eyes in exasperation. Only Sherlock would ask that as a serious question. “Of course it would bother me!”

“It wouldn’t mean anything. You’d know that it didn’t mean anything.”

“That doesn’t matter. Maybe we should have established this as a ground rule, but I thought it went without saying: You don’t have sex, of any sort, in the presence of people who are not me.” John considered, deciding he probably needed to be more precise. “No orgasms, yours or other people’s.”

“Agreed,” said Sherlock with utter seriousness, as if that was something that had needed to be said out loud.

“No kissing, either,” John added.

Sherlock cocked his hip against the desk and folded his arms and smiled at him. “You’re possessive.”

John spoke into his coffee and hoped his ears weren’t turning pink. “Yes.”

“You’re jealous.”

“I don’t have anything to be jealous of. Do I?”

“No. But I mean that you’re prone to jealousy. You’re a jealous person.”

“Not unreasonably so,” John defended himself. He thought he probably had the normal jealous impulses; it was just that Sherlock was very far from normal.

Sherlock reached for him, pulling him in solidly up against him, jostling the coffee a bit. John arranged himself in the circle of Sherlock’s arms, stubbornly protective of his coffee.
“Good,” said Sherlock, sounding extremely pleased. “I am very possessive as well.”

John was a little relieved to hear it. “Good. We match. Let’s be possessive of each other. Now tell me who you want to date.”

“Irene Adler,” answered Sherlock, readily. “She is The Woman.”

***

The good thing about playing in Austin was that it almost never rained. But, unfortunately, they had to go on road trips, and they had to endure rain delays sometimes. Sherlock had been lucky enough not to have one yet in the middle of a game, so it made sense that he was due. That didn’t make him any more pleasant to deal with, though. With two outs in the fifth, they pushed the game into delay, and Sherlock stalked all around the dugout, his pitching arm thrust into the sleeve of a jacket to keep it warm, snarling out little irritated puffs of breath.

After twenty minutes of this, Lestrade sidled up to John and said, “Get him out of here.”

“It’s only been twenty minutes. He’ll kill you if you don’t wait a little bit longer before pulling him.”

“I’m not going to pull him, but he needs to be out of this dugout or there is going to be homicide. Get him out of this dugout and calm him down.”

John glanced to Sherlock, who had rounded the far end of the dugout and was resuming a stalking pace up the length of the dugout again, heading in their direction. He didn’t really relish trying to talk sense to him in such a mood. He’d honestly avoided him since they’d been yanked off the field. He may have been sleeping with Sherlock, but he was no fool and knew to avoid him when he was in a mood. So he sighed.

“Oh, and…keep it respectable,” Lestrade offered, awkwardly.

John rolled his eyes and stood up and intercepted Sherlock. “Come on,” he said, a hand on his shoulder, turning him toward the dugout exit.

“Wait,” Sherlock protested, digging his heels in. “It’s only been twenty minutes, I can still—”

“Not taking you out, just getting you out of the damp for a few minutes,” said John, giving him a shove to get him moving.

Sherlock muttered something John couldn’t decipher, consenting to be pushed a little way into the hallway that led to the dugout, before rounding on him. “What sort of climate is this?”

“It’s a British climate,” John pointed out. “You should be used to this sort of thing.”

Sherlock waved his arms about in a wildly dismissive gesture. “If I wanted this climate, I’d go back to London. What is the point of this climate without London?”

“Honestly, I never understood the point of the climate in London,” remarked John, sliding to sit on the floor with his back propped up against the wall. He wasn’t sure what he could do to make Sherlock calm down—what respectable thing he could do to make Sherlock calm down—so he thought he might as well just sit here and let him rant it out. If they had been home, John would have long ago gone out to get some air and leave Sherlock to his own devices but here he was stuck.
“I was perfect, John. I was perfect, through four and two-thirds, and now this.” Sherlock threw his baseball cap to the ground, the better to be able to tangle his hands in his hair.

John looked at him and felt terrible for him. With the All-Star Break behind them, Sherlock had devoted himself to the perfect game goal with a renewed vigor, and now, with his first start, was stuck in a nasty rain delay. “I know,” he said, sympathetically. “We’ve still got half a season left, you’ve got plenty more starts.”

“Oh, shut up,” Sherlock whined, but then he collapsed to the floor next to John with such dejection that John couldn’t even feel upset about it.

John looked at him and felt mostly annoyed that he couldn’t offer him any sort of physical comfort, couldn’t cuddle into him, rest his head on his shoulder, breathe kisses over his throat and get him to uncoil and feel better. John didn’t even dare take his hand, sitting in the hallway of a Major League Baseball stadium as they were. Operation Irene Adler was moving slowly, because Sherlock said it would be suspicious otherwise, and scrutiny was still close and severe.

“Tell me about London,” John offered, looking at Sherlock’s profile as he tipped his head back against the wall. The line of his throat was ridiculously alluring, and John looked away, to the opposite wall.

“Capital of England and the United Kingdom,” answered Sherlock, dully. “Originally settled by the Romans. Population of over eight million people, all but two or three of them, maybe, incredibly stupid.”

“Not that,” said John, and risked nudging Sherlock’s shoulder with his because he couldn’t help it. “Tell me about you in London.”

“Me in London.” Sherlock turned his head to look at John. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I was just making conversation. Forget it.”

“I hate ‘making conversation,’” said Sherlock.

“I know,” said John. “Forget it.” John leaned his own head back against the wall and closed his eyes. Outside, he could hear the rain continuing to drum down on the tarp on the field, the rest of their teammates murmuring together.

“I really like Piccadilly Circus,” said Sherlock, eventually, surprising him.

“I could see that,” replied John, after a moment.

“When’s the last time you were there?”

“Years ago. I was a boy. You’ll have to take me sight-seeing.”

Sherlock scoffed. “Boring.”

“Not the usual sights. Where would you take me? Tell me. Piccadilly Circus. Where else?” Now that Sherlock had started talking—and sounded calmer about the conversational topic—John wanted to keep him going.

“Covent Garden,” said Sherlock. “To hear Wagner, hopefully.”

“Not Tchaikovsky?”
“I’d try to expand your horizons. I play Wagner very well, but maybe you need to hear a whole orchestra play Wagner.”

“All right,” John allowed, not so much amused as...as charmed and besotted and ridiculously in love, he thought, which was his normal state of being these days. “Where else?”

“There’s this little Italian restaurant I know, I think you would like it.”

“Do you eat the food there?”

“When they force me to.”

“This place sounds delightful,” agreed John, fervently.

Sherlock smiled faintly and tipped his head back against the wall again, closing his eyes this time. “All the places everyone else refuses to see, all of its beautiful underbelly, we’d do all of that.”

*How romantic*, John wanted to say, but didn’t, mindful of their surroundings. “How charming,” he said instead, and Sherlock opened his eyes and looked at him and smiled in genuine amusement.

“It will be. I’ll make it be so.”

“The terrifying force of your will.”

“Like my perfect game and your World Series. I will make all these things be so,” said Sherlock.

“I believe you,” said John. “I believe in Sherlock Holmes. It should be this team’s catchphrase.”

“I’m quite content with it just being John Watson’s catchphrase,” said Sherlock. “I want a flat, John.”

“What do you mean?” asked John, quizzical at the change in topic.

“In London. A cozy flat, with a fireplace and busy Victorian wallpaper, cluttered and crowded, room for a violin and a skull and medical books and lots of cups of tea, and a back garden for games of catch. That’s what I want.”

John looked at him for a long moment. Sherlock’s tone was intent, and his eyes were sharp, and John understood what he was being told but didn’t understand why Sherlock would have chosen *this moment here* to tell him this, to tell him what he wanted, to bring up the fact that it really wasn’t anything John had ever thought about, moving back to London, being away from this game. *Medical books*, Sherlock had said, and *games of catch*, and those were John, in Sherlock’s ideal London flat, tucked into Sherlock’s vision of his perfect future, and John’s throat felt closed and his chest felt tight at all of it because he hadn’t realized how very far ahead Sherlock had been thinking and, bloody hell, why couldn’t Sherlock have brought this up when they were somewhere private and could talk about this? “Sherlock,” he started, helplessly, trying to think of what to say.

Something in Sherlock’s eyes shuttered, immediately. He didn’t move but John felt as if space magically appeared between the two of them. John almost went to grab Sherlock back, to pull him against him and make him see that it wasn’t rejection, it was just *surprise*.

And that was when Lestrade called in, “Holmes! Watson! They’re taking the tarp off!”

Sherlock stood immediately, retrieving his cap.

“Sherlock,” said John. “It’s not— It’s just that—”
“No,” said Sherlock, with forced casualness. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s go.”

John sighed, frustrated, and followed him out, but Sherlock’s perfect-game spell was broken and he gave up two quick hits. John trotted out to the mound for a pep talk, and Sherlock stood glumly and frowned at the runner on first and didn’t respond in any way when John said, “Sherlock, everything you said, we just can’t talk about it here; it doesn’t mean it doesn’t sound lovely.” And when John tried to catch him at the inning break, after he’d given up two runs and Lestrade had decided to pull him, Sherlock just said he was stiff from the rain delay. But he left the stadium immediately, which he would never have done unless it had nothing to do with stiffness and everything to do with a flat in London crowded with medical books and a violin.

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Sherlock was in bed when John got back to the hotel room. Not even on the couch, which John had expected, but in bed. This was bad, thought John, contemplating his still form, his back to him, his carefully even breathing.

“I know you’re not asleep,” said John, but Sherlock said nothing in reply, and John sighed and moved into the room and didn’t get onto the bed because he didn’t want to crowd Sherlock. He leaned against the dresser and said, “It was surprise, Sherlock. It wasn’t disapproval, it was surprise. We were sitting in the middle of a baseball stadium, and you have never brought that up before, and I was just taken aback. I didn’t know how to react, and I didn’t know how I could react, in the middle of that stadium with you. That was all it was.” Sherlock was unmoving on the bed. John paused to give him an opportunity to say something, and, when nothing was forthcoming, continued, “A flat in London, huh? Violin and medical textbooks and a back garden for catch?”

There was a very long moment of silence.

“Sherlock,” prompted John.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sherlock said, muffled against the pillow.

“Yes, it does,” he contradicted, evenly. “Why didn’t you tell me all of this before? You’ve never mentioned wanting to move back to London.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Sherlock again, and finally moved, rolling onto his back, and the fact that John had interrupted his sulk was telling that it was more than just a sulk, that it was somehow deeper and worse than that. “I don’t know why I said anything about it at all. It’s this…folly.”

“You like London,” noted John. “You miss London.” He had drawn that conclusion at their first dinner, when Sherlock had pouted about tea, and he had somehow managed to forget about that. It made sense that Sherlock imagined a future in London, Sherlock clearly imagined himself in London, and he had slotted John into it. And John had never given a thought to living in London, but he had honestly never been able to imagine himself anywhere but behind home plate. In a few short months that life was going to be over, and what was better than starting over with Sherlock in a cozy flat in London, with medical textbooks and a back garden for catch? He’d assumed he would hang around baseball, get a job as a pitching coach somewhere, he would probably be very good at it. But it would require him to leave Sherlock, and he wasn’t interested in that. In that case, maybe a bit of medical school during the off-season was a good idea.

Sherlock said nothing. He stared at the ceiling.

John walked over to him and straddled him, knees settled on either side of his abdomen. He braced his hands on either side of Sherlock’s head and leaned over him, catching his eyes, making himself
unavoidable. Sherlock looked a tiny bit surprised and a whole lot wary. John said what he should have said ages ago, what he knew had been true ages ago. “I am all in with you, Sherlock. Austin, London, Mozambique, wherever you want.”

Sherlock looked up at him for one long, silent moment. And then he said, “Mozambique?”

“Shut up,” said John, and kissed his lips briefly before fluttering kisses over his eyelids. “Don’t bring up things like this in a baseball stadium, Sherlock,” he murmured over his skin. “You should have brought it up long ago. How long have you been thinking it?”

Sherlock was moving his face to catch John’s kisses. “I was going to tell you the day I first went to your house in Austin, but you were too focused on sex.”

“Oh, yes, I was the single-minded one focused on sex. Poor you, you must have felt utterly ravished.” John finished processing what Sherlock had said and drew back a bit. “Wait, you were going to tell me then?”

Sherlock’s eyes flickered open slowly. “Yes.”

“You knew then? That we would be like this?”

“You didn’t?”

John considered, and decided that yes, maybe he had always known. Maybe he had been too scared to admit it. “You should have told me then.”

“I tried to. As I said: your preoccupation with sex intervened.”

“I haven’t heard you complain too vociferously about my preoccupation with sex.”

“Vociferously,” repeated Sherlock, and shifted meaningfully against John.

“You love it when I use big words,” remarked John, and kissed him, not deeply enough to lose the thread of the conversation, so he could keep talking around Sherlock’s lips. “Tell me more about this flat.”

“It’ll have a good location.”

“Something better than real estate.”

“Two chairs in front of the fireplace. You’ll have a cozy, squishy armchair. We’ll look all over for it and find it abandoned in a second-hand shop, in the very back, half-off.”

“Mmm,” said John, and kissed his way down Sherlock’s neck, saying, “You’ll have something sleek and modern. Black leather and chrome. You’ll pay a ridiculous amount of money for it and you’ll perch on the back of it and put your shoes all over it.”

“I thought we’d get a skull to put on the wall,” said Sherlock, pulling John’s shirt over his head and tossing it aside. “To keep my skull company when we’re not home.”

“I thought I’d solve crimes. Be a detective. The way I wanted. And you’d help me when you weren’t in class.”
“This sounds fantastic,” John encouraged, pushing Sherlock’s T-shirt up as far as it would go without having to perform too much wriggling. “Tell me what happens when we get home from solving a crime.” He adjusted his position, stretching out now and pressing a kiss in the center of Sherlock’s breastbone.

“The day would be foggy and raw, but we’d come home in the evening and the fire would be lit in the fireplace.”

“Who would light it?” asked John, around slow, wet kisses.

Sherlock’s hands clenched reflexively in his hair. “Mrs. Hudson.”

“Mrs. Hudson?”

Sherlock moved underneath him, both languorous and impatient. “She’s our landlady.”

“Oh, of course.”

“Because it’s foggy outside, I’d propose playing catch in the hallway.”

“Does Mrs. Hudson approve of that?” asked John, and pushed his hand underneath the waistband of Sherlock’s pajama pants.

Sherlock’s hips arched to meet his touch, as he gasped, “N-no.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” said John, and stroked, watching Sherlock’s head roll on the pillow, his hands clench into the sheets. “What else?”

Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut and gasped, “You’d blog.”

This surprised John. He lifted an eyebrow. “About?”

“Me. Us. Anything. The point is that you’d have something to blog about, that you wouldn’t think that nothing ever happened to you, you’d have a fantastic life with fantastic things in it that you’d want to shout from the rooftops.” Sherlock finished on a garbled noise in the back of his throat, thrusting now in earnest to meet John’s rhythm.

John looked at him and felt that this all must be a dream he would wake up from at any moment, because where had Sherlock come from. Tell me about your perfect future, John had said to him, in effect, and what Sherlock had said was all about him: You’d do this with me and that with me and you’d be so happy you wouldn’t be able to keep it inside. And that was Sherlock’s perfect future: to have a happy John Watson.

“Tell me about the bedroom,” prompted John, when he thought he could trust his voice to be somewhat steady, and then he replaced his hand with his mouth.

Sherlock made a strangled sort of sound, and John pulled off. “Tell me.”

“There’s a…a bed,” Sherlock managed.

John pulled off again. “Oh, good, we’re not going to have to sleep on the floor?”

Sherlock opened his eyes and glared at him. “Would you focus?”

John grinned. “Tell me about the bedroom, Sherlock. Tell me about this bed,” he said, and went back to work.
Sherlock seemed to have gathered himself in his moment of glaring, because he spoke in a more collected way now, even if he spoke around increasingly fast pants of breath. “The bed is huge—it’s enormous—because you insisted—that I sprawl too much when I sleep—which is a lie—a headboard for you to grab during sex—” John hummed his approval of that, which caused Sherlock’s hand to catch in his hair, tugging at him. “—we’d have a disagreement about décor—about what to put on the walls—I’d want my judo certificate—but you wouldn’t want that—because you’d want something sentimental—a photograph of the two of us—maybe the one from the—from the—from the All-Star Game, but I—I—periodic table—John.”

John waited until Sherlock had collapsed into the mattress, was no longer taut with tension, before saying, “What was that about the periodic table?”

“Mmmph,” said Sherlock, which made John preen a bit and drop a kiss on his hip as he moved up his body.

“God,” noted John, conversationally, “my preoccupation with sex is so irritating, isn’t it?”

Sherlock opened one eye in an imitation of a glare and then reached out and pulled John heavily to him for a clumsy kiss.

John pulled back. “This busy Victorian wallpaper you mentioned—is that negotiable?”

“Absolutely not,” said Sherlock, “you’ll come to love it.”

“I bet I will,” reflected John, looking down at Sherlock underneath him, and Sherlock grinned and flipped them over.
Sherlock sent the e-mail on the penultimate night of the road trip. Their closer had just blown a save, and John had been involved in a nasty collision at the plate in an attempt to prevent that blown save, which was going to result in a plethora of nasty bruises. As it was, he felt like one gigantic open scrape, and he was reminded again that he was getting to be far too old for this game. He was sitting gingerly on the couch in the suite, trying to find a position that didn’t hurt, and watching Sherlock slouched every which way in casual, youthful elegance, typing furiously on his laptop. John never knew Sherlock to complain of soreness, no matter how many pitches he threw. It was bloody irritating. If John didn’t love him so much, he would hate him.

“What are you typing right now?” John asked, and it came out belligerently, because he hurt and he was in a terrible mood and he wished they didn’t have another game the next night.

“You should take tomorrow off,” Sherlock said, without looking up from the laptop, reading John’s mind in that way he had.

“I’m not taking tomorrow off.”

“I know you’re not. But you should. You are stubborn.” Sherlock over-pronounced the word in a paradoxically absent-minded way, concentrating on his laptop.

John snorted. “You’re one to talk. What are you typing?”

“An e-mail.”

This surprised John. He’d assumed Sherlock was working on one of his eternally math-drenched blog entries. “An e-mail? To who?”

“To whom, John,” corrected Sherlock, still absent-minded, typing so quickly John was convinced he was faking it.

John huffed out an impatient sigh. “Fine. To whom?”

“Don’t say ‘fine’ as if I’m being unreasonable. I didn’t create the rules of grammar.”

“I don’t know why you’re so sodding preoccupied with grammar but can’t remember whether the sun goes ’round the Earth or the other way around.”

“Oh, who cares?” asked Sherlock, closing his laptop. “It could go ’round and ’round the garden like a teddy bear, if it wants.”

“Nursery rhymes,” said John. “You remember nursery rhymes, but not elementary school science.”

“Primary school, and Irene Adler.”

John blinked at the name. “What?”

“I just e-mailed Irene Adler.”

“What? Why?”
“Because I’m supposed to be dating her. Come on.” Sherlock stood up, beckoning.

“No, wait, where? Because I am in absolutely no state for sex.”

“No sex. I won’t need you for sex anymore, I’m dating Irene Adler.” Sherlock took his hand, tugging him up. His catching hand, John noticed. Trust Sherlock to know that his throwing hand was bloody *killing* him at the moment.

John let himself be tugged upward and winced as he did it, every muscle throbbing at him in protest at having been moved.

Sherlock cocked his head at him. “You’re a mess,” he said. “You ache everywhere, don’t you?”

“Don’t rub it in,” John told him, between clenched teeth.

Sherlock shook his head. “I don’t know how you play every day. Pitching is much the more civilized position.” Sherlock pulled him into the bedroom. “You were never big enough to be a catcher, anyway.”

Like John hadn’t heard that before. “Yes, thank you for your expert opinion, Sherlock.” Sherlock had led them into the bathroom. “What are you doing?”

“Hot shower,” said Sherlock, turning it on. “Your muscles are tensing up, you need to keep them loose or you won’t even be getting out of bed tomorrow, never mind catching a game.” Sherlock pulled John’s T-shirt up over his head, and John acquiesced with a sigh.

“I wish you weren’t dating Irene Adler,” he said.

“Fine.” Sherlock dropped to a crouch, untying John’s sneakers. “I’ll break up with her once you get in the shower.”

“You can’t. That’s not what I meant.” John sighed again, obediently toeing off his sneakers when Sherlock nudged carefully at his legs. “I wish you could date Molly Hooper. She’s a nice girl.”

“Which is why I can’t date her,” said Sherlock, pushing John’s jeans and underwear off with practiced familiarity. “You’d fret about how I’m breaking her heart; it would be a disaster. You don’t care about Irene Adler, which makes her perfect. In you go.” Sherlock pulled back the shower curtain.

“Join me,” said John.

“You said no sex.”

“Not for sex, for company.”

“Two people in a shower who aren’t having sex is dreadfully unpleasant, John.”

“I hate it when you suddenly decide to be practical,” grumbled John, stepping into the shower.

Sherlock caught the forearm of his throwing hand, lifting it and looking carefully at his wrist. “Molly examined this?”

“Yes,” answered John, shortly. “And it isn’t broken. Unless you think you can tell better than an X-ray.”

“I don’t think it’s broken, but I thought it might be severely sprained. Hmm.” Sherlock sounded
dubious but dropped John’s arm and stood beside the tub and said, “I’ve been e-mailing Irene about Sherlock’s Sweeties events. Implying I want to improve my public image, interact with the fans more.” Sherlock made a face.

“I love so much when you’re forced to say Sherlock’s Sweeties,” remarked John, turning his face into the shower, which he had to admit felt heavenly. He leaned over and nudged the temperature up some.

“Anyway, I think I’ve piqued her interest. The thing about Irene that makes her convenient is that I don’t have to date her; I just have to string her along. She has an inflated opinion of her seductive powers. She’ll see me as a challenge.”

“She’ll see you as gay,” said John, turning his back to the spray and dipping his head forward to let it pound on his neck.

“I won’t let her. She’ll see me as playing hard-to-get.” Sherlock leaned up against the edge of the shower, out of the spray but in full view of John.

“You’re letting in all the cold air,” John remarked.

“Sorry, did you want me to leave?”

“I hate when you ask questions you already know the answer to.”

“I always know the answers to the questions I ask.”

“No, you don’t,” said John.

“Do you want me to hit Vladimir next time I face him?” asked Sherlock, referring to the runner who’d mown John down.

“Only if you’re not working on a perfect game at the time,” John joked, and flinched as the temperature of the water dropped abruptly to something below lukewarm.

Sherlock leaned past him to push the temperature way up again, drenching his shirt as he did so, and John caught him with his good hand and pulled him in for a kiss before he could back out to dry land. Hot water ran in rivulets through Sherlock’s curls and down his face and into John’s mouth as it moved over his, and Sherlock pushed the shower curtain out of his way. When the water ran cold again and they eventually shut it off the bathroom floor resembled a pond.

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“John,” said Sherlock, driving his Aston Martin far too fast, the way he usually did. “You should know.”

“This can’t be good,” remarked John, putting his head back against the seat. It was so late at night that it was really early in the morning, and it had been a long road trip. John was just looking forward to being home.

“I had Mrs. Hudson move your things out of the bedroom.”

John opened his eyes and looked at Sherlock’s profile. “What?” he asked in alarm. “Why?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not breaking up with you.”

“How reassuring.”
“It’s for when Irene comes over.”

“Why is Irene coming over to our house?”

“Because I’m dating her,” Sherlock explained, patiently.

“Why can’t you spend all your time at her house?”

“Because she won’t let us.”

“How do you know all this? You haven’t even gone on a date with her yet.”

Sherlock gave him a look, then turned back to the road.

“Hang on, what are you going to be doing with her at our house? No kissing, remember?”

Sherlock sighed. “I’m going to be playing hard-to-get, John. It’s going to drive her mad. She’s going to do everything she can think of to crack me.”

“Oh, well, this sounds delightful,” drawled John.

“Yes, you might want to spend time elsewhere, given your jealous streak.”

“I’m going to be having lots of tea with Mrs. Hudson, aren’t I?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Your choice.”

John swore. “I hate Moriarty for forcing us into this.”

“You ought to hate the society we live in.”

“That’s too exhausting, I’ll focus on Moriarty.”

“Don’t worry about Moriarty.”

Something about his tone had John sitting up. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said, John, I know you understood me.”

“What are you planning with Moriarty? Sherlock, I swear to God, if you do anything foolhardy—”

“I won’t.”

“If you do anything at all—”

“Don’t worry about Moriarty,” Sherlock repeated.

“Sherlock—”

Sherlock sighed. “Do I need to distract you?”

“Not while you’re driving.”

“Then.” Sherlock seemed to think that was the end of the matter.

John looked at him, narrow-eyed. He was clearly up to something with Moriarty, and there was no way John was letting him rush into something foolish. John didn’t bloody care about Moriarty in
the long run, he only cared about Sherlock, and about the fact that what he had with Sherlock couldn’t be ruined, it couldn’t. John was quickly reaching the undeniable conclusion that Sherlock was the most important thing in his life. He was, frankly, more important than baseball, more important than anything about his career, and maybe it was time to just admit that. He wasn’t a besotted teenager, throwing his life away on a man who wasn’t worth it. He was an adult, and he was in love in a way he’d waited his whole life to be in love, and what was he doing?

“Sherlock,” he began. His tone must have given him away, because Sherlock’s eyes cut over to him in a way he didn’t always look at him when he started speaking. John took a deep, nervous breath and licked his lips. “I think I want to call it off. Operation Irene Adler. I think I want to call it off.”

Sherlock downshifted his ridiculously sexy car and pulled them off to the side of the road. There were no other cars around. The sky was just lightening off in the distance, dawn starting to approach. When Sherlock turned to face him, his features were just barely visible, intent and calculating. “John,” he said.

“No, I do,” John repeated. “I think I want to.”

Sherlock regarded him, eyes like the London fog he liked to talk about. “You only get one shot at this. If you call it off, that’s it. You know what that means. It won’t go away. It will only get worse. And we’ll have to deal with it. And I thought that wasn’t what you wanted. I thought you wanted me to get rid of it, to let you have this one last season, to take it out of Moriarty’s hands. If this is because you’re panicking because it’s about to get underway, then—”

“I want you,” John said, firmly, his voice steady with conviction. “That’s what I want. I want you. I don’t care about Moriarty, or Irene Adler, or my career, or baseball, or what anyone else thinks. I want you. I want you more than anything else. I want us. And I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize it. And I’m scared that this whole thing, lying to ourselves, lying to the public, living this fake life, that it will fracture us, that we won’t be able to pull through it, and I wouldn’t ever forgive myself for— The way it’s been, with the questions we’ve been dodging, can’t we just keep doing that?”

Sherlock’s gaze was sharp. “And what if Moriarty escalates?”

“Then we’ll come out, I guess. We’ll say, ‘Yes, we love each other, how does that matter at all?’”

“It will matter. What do you think the team will say?”

“Can you stop playing devil’s advocate for one bloody minute and just be with me in this relationship? Do you want to date Irene Adler?”

“Of course I don’t want to date Irene Adler.”

“Tell me what you want, then.”

Sherlock hesitated. “I want you to be happy. And I don’t want you to regret—”

John unbuckled his seatbelt and launched himself forward at Sherlock, kissing the words out of his mouth. Sherlock caught him, kissed him back.

“No regrets,” said John, finally, pulling back enough so he could see Sherlock. “Do you know why it was so important to me before? My career, this game? Because I didn’t have anything else, Sherlock. Because I didn’t have you. For this blink of baseball history, you and I have been the best battery in the game, and I don’t sodding care if nobody else remembers that because all they say
about us is that we were shagging each other all over baseball, because I will know, and I will still have you, and there are far worse things in the world than having to face questions about our sex life for the rest of my life. So let Moriarty leak it. Let him say whatever the hell he wants. Moriarty can’t take the most important thing from me, which is you.”

Sherlock was silent for a very long moment. Then he said, “It’s late. You’re tired—”

“Shut up,” John said, fiercely. “I mean it.”

Sherlock kissed his forehead suddenly, and John tried to think if he’d ever done that before. John never doubted Sherlock loved him, but Sherlock was seldom demonstratively tender like that. Even when he did take care of John, such as forcing him into the shower that night, he did it with a brisk practicality that foreclosed the affection behind the action. But he kissed John’s forehead and then breathed against his temple, “I’m not sure I deserve you.”

John swallowed past the lump in his throat and forced lightness into his voice when he replied, “I’m not sure you deserve me, either. Make sure you spend the rest of our lives trying to deserve me.”

“You should blame me—”

“Well, I don’t,” John interrupted, calmly, and pushed his fingers through Sherlock’s thick hair, combing it soothingly. “I don’t. Not for Moriarty. I’ll blame you for other things, I’m sure. Things that are your fault. But not for this.”

Sherlock took a breath. “We’ll get through this.” He said it like a vow, low and determined against John’s skin.

“Yes,” John promised him in return. “We absolutely will. We’ve got three months left on this season. We’ll win the World Series, and then we’ll take off to London and that flat. Now take us home, at some speed less than ‘breakneck.’”

Sherlock cleared his throat and settled back behind the steering wheel. After a moment, he shifted out of park and they drove in complete silence back to Mrs. Hudson’s. Sherlock parked the car and they sat for a moment, in the brightening dawn creeping up over them.

Then Sherlock took a deep breath and said, “You should know.”

“Oh, God,” groaned John. “Are we back to that again?”

“I think Irene Adler is going to be in our bed,” said Sherlock.

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Irene Adler was in their bed, pretending to be sound asleep. John sighed and went to the other bedroom, mumbling something about being too tired to deal with any of this. Sherlock closed their door and leaned against it, crossing his arms, and said, “Irene. How good of you to break into my flat.”

Irene stretched like a contented cat, all purrs and claws, and opened her eyes. “Freshly laundered sheets, Sherlock. How gentlemanly of you.”

Sherlock acknowledged that with a brief smile. “Want a drink?”

“Do we have to leave your bedroom to get a drink?” asked Irene.
Sherlock smiled again and opened the bedroom door and headed into the kitchen. John had wine and a corkscrew, and Sherlock was pouring the wine into glasses when Irene emerged, wearing nothing but one of his shirts that she’d taken from his wardrobe. She yawned and stretched so that the shirt’s fabric pressed more closely against her breasts and then accepted the glass he handed her.

“Nice kitchen,” she remarked, meaning the opposite, as she looked pointedly at one of his experiments.

Sherlock thought it was a good thing he wasn’t interested in a relationship with Irene, because they really would never have worked together. “I know you’ve done enough snooping to know that the sitting room is cozier.”

“The bed is coziest,” said Irene, with a wide grin.

Sherlock gave her another tight smile. He was already sick of it. “The sitting room it is,” he said, and walked into it and settled in his chair.

Irene followed, as he knew she would, and for a second he thought she might try to sit on his lap but she seemed to think better of it and took John’s chair across from him and sipped her wine.

Sherlock looked at her and then slid off his chair. She blinked, startled and intrigued, and watched him as he kneeled in front of her and leaned slowly forward, placing his mouth at her ear in what could have been a caress. “I know that you bugged this flat when you got here,” he murmured.

“I—”

“Shhhh,” Sherlock breathed into her ear. “Tomorrow we’re going for coffee. Somewhere neutral. I’ll text you the place. And you’ll tell me what Moriarty has on you, and I’ll tell you how we’re going to take him down.” He leaned away from Irene, resumed his seat, sipped his wine.

“I—”

Irene looked across at him for a long moment. Then she nodded and sipped her own wine.

***

Sherlock couldn’t sleep. He sat in what was normally the unused spare bedroom and watched John sleep and tapped his mobile against his lips and ran through his options and made a decision, finally. He scrolled through his contacts and hesitated just a moment before sending the text. Then he got up and left the room, walking into the sitting room and scrawling John a note. At the field. Need to throw. Come join me. –SH He left the note where he knew John would see it and left the flat confidently.

When he got to the field the black car was already waiting for him, and Sherlock couldn’t help the dry smile his lips twisted into. He got out of the Aston Martin, locked its doors automatically, and then strode over to the car. The door opened for him before he got there, and Sherlock slid in.

His brother lifted an inquisitive eyebrow at him.

“Still on standby, Mycroft?”

“Your little performance in Boston did nothing to soothe Mummy’s fevered concerns,” Mycroft noted.

“And you can govern the country just as easily remotely as you can in person?”
“I don’t govern the country, Sherlock.”

Sherlock snorted.

“Going to tell me what it is you need? Summoning me is quite unprecedented. A favor, Sherlock? Really?”

Sherlock took a deep breath and didn’t speak until he thought he could open his mouth and not say something hateful. He didn’t want to ask Mycroft for a favor—he never had before and he didn’t want to start now—but he had decided he had no choice. John was too important to stand on ceremony when it came to these things.

“Someone’s bugged the flat,” he said, finally.

Mycroft’s other eyebrow lifted to join the first. “Enthusiastic paparazzi?”

“Something like that,” Sherlock hedged.

“You want me to sweep it?” Mycroft guessed.

Sherlock swallowed. “I want you to sweep it and set up your own surveillance.”

Mycroft stared at him. “For what?”

Sherlock hesitated. “In case I miss it being bugged again. You’ll know.”

Mycroft continued to stare. Then he drew his eyebrows together. “Is this about Moriarty?”

“This is about John,” Sherlock countered, which wasn’t quite a lie.

“You’re willing to be under my surveillance? Something, I will remind you, you have resisted loudly and vociferously at every other point in your life?”

“And it’s never stopped you,” Sherlock retorted.

“You John’s a bit overprotective, you know. What will he do if he finds out I’m bugging your flat?”

“You expect John to find out, do you? And here I thought you were so good at being stealthy, Mycroft. Size notwithstanding.”

Mycroft frowned at him, a twitch of displeasure crossing his face, and Sherlock notched a hit for himself in their verbal fencing match. “What is this about, Sherlock?”

“We find ourselves targets of interest. If someone has to be spying on us, I prefer it to be you. At least I know you’re not going to sell it to the press. Mother would have a heart attack, and everyone knows that you never dare to upset Mother. Good day, Mycroft.” Sherlock reached for the door handle.

“Sherlock, if you were in trouble, would you tell me?” asked Mycroft.

“Absolutely not,” Sherlock answered, cheerfully, and got out of the car.
Chapter 29

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sherlock changed into his uniform for purposes of throwing and then settled deep into one of the clubhouse’s armchairs to wait for John to get there.

Lestrade arrived before John and lifted his eyebrows at him. “You’re not usually the first person in the clubhouse.”

“Yes, very observant of you, Lestrade,” drawled Sherlock, annoyed to have to talk to yet another person who wasn’t John.

“Where’s your better half?”

“Home. Or on his way here. One or the other.”

Lestrade had walked over to stand in front of the armchair, and now he hesitated and dithered and looked generally undecided about something.

Sherlock sighed and said, “Out with it.”

“The rumors are…” Lestrade stopped, as if trying to find a word.

“Persistent,” Sherlock supplied.

“To say the least.”

“Given that the rumors are true, that’s not surprising,” Sherlock pointed out.

“No one’s asked me yet, not outright.”

“They’re all professional sports writers, and what does our personal life have to do with any of it?”

“They’re going to ask eventually. Eventually it’s going to become so much of a distraction that they’ll feel justified. Eventually the size of the story, the first gay players in baseball, and they’re a pitcher and his catcher, it’s going to be too much for them to resist breaking anymore, Sherlock.”

“We aren’t the first gay players in baseball. Don’t be an idiot, Lestrade. We wouldn’t even be the first out gay players in baseball. There was Glenn Burke before us, but everyone just ignores him, and let’s not even get into how wrong that is. And Donovan’ll be the first one to ask about it. She’s always hated me. Did you know she’s shagging Anderson? Hypocrite,” muttered Sherlock.

“Sherlock,” said Lestrade, sounding exasperated.

“What is it that you want me to say?” demanded Sherlock.

“What I should say.”

“You should say the truth. Of course.”

There was a moment of silence. “And John’s okay with that?”

Sherlock frowned in annoyance. “Would I do anything John wasn’t okay with?”
“I don’t think so, but please remember that this caring you is still very new to me.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes.

Lestrade spoke again after another moment of pointless hesitation. “If the two of you are going to go public, then you need to go public here in the clubhouse first, to the team.”

“We’re not going to hold a press conference,” said Sherlock, impatiently.

“But you’re going to confirm everything, so you should think about talking to the team first.”

Sherlock said, “Ugh. The team will be miserable. They’ll be nice to John, of course, everyone loves John, and they’ll have no problem with John being gay. Their only problem will be the fact that he’s chosen me.”

“What does it matter what they think,” Lestrade inserted, calmly, “seeing as how John clearly has chosen you.”

Sherlock hated it when Lestrade made good points. So instead he ignored him.

Lestrade knew when he was being ignored. He sighed. “All right, well, talk to John about it, see what he wants to do, okay? In the meantime, how are you? How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” said Sherlock, waving his hand about, hoping Lestrade would take the hint and be swatted away like a fly.

He did, with another heavy sigh, like Sherlock was tremendously difficult to deal with. Well, who had asked him to come down and talk to him anyway?

Luckily, John was the next person into the clubhouse, although he led with questions along the same line as Lestrade had finished with. “You okay?”


“Yeah, well, it was a long travel day yesterday.” John was giving him an assessing look. “You don’t usually throw the day before you pitch.”

“I don’t have much of a routine, you know that. And I felt like throwing,” Plus, added Sherlock, silently, I needed to get you out of our bugged flat. As things went, the clubhouse wasn’t much better. He wanted to get John out to the bullpen, where they would be reliably alone at this time of day. So he said, “Hurry and change, I’ll wait for you in the bullpen.”

John eventually joined him in the bullpen, and Sherlock threw a few pitches, automatically, without really thinking. The point of this had not been pitching, and truthfully he wasn’t normally in favor of a throwing session the day before he pitched, so he didn’t want to overdo it in the name of the espionage Moriarty was forcing him to engage in.

So he carefully threw ten not-very-hard pitches then walked over to where John rose from his crouch, pushing his mask off and looking sardonic. Sherlock wasn’t fooling him, clearly.

“What the hell is this about, Sherlock?” he demanded as soon as Sherlock got close enough.

“There are going to be photos of me at a coffee shop with Irene Adler,” said Sherlock, without preamble.

John looked alarmed. “What? Why? Did the two of you go to a coffee shop last night?”
“No, but I’m going to meet her at one this afternoon.”

John’s face hardened now. “No,” he said. “I told you not to—”

“It has nothing to do with tricking anyone. I need to talk to her.”

“About what?”

Sherlock lifted a shoulder in a casual shrug. “Sherlock’s Sweeties things.”

“You’ve never taken any interest in anything Sherlock’s Sweeties related. This is about Moriarty.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t tell me not to worry about it. I worry about you.”

“And I am absolutely fine. I am no longer a naïve eighteen-year-old, John. I’m not going to do anything to ruin anything.”

John didn’t look convinced.

Sherlock decided to rush headlong into the next point before John could say anything else. “The photos might help buy us a little bit of time, though, because someone’s finally going to come right out and ask the question sooner rather than later, and you should be thinking about what you want to do about the clubhouse situation.”

“There shouldn’t be any clubhouse situation. This is ridiculous. What should it matter that we’re sleeping with each other?”

“It shouldn’t. People are morons.” Sherlock almost leaned down to brush a casual kiss over John’s lips but caught himself. John looked at him in alarm, and Sherlock, feeling an answering alarm, took a step away from him. When had that become so automatic a thing for him to do that he nearly did it in public like that? Sherlock cleared his throat and took the baseball cap off his head and said, “Be thinking about how you want to handle it.”

John nodded and cleared his own throat. “Please be careful with Irene Adler.”

“She’s not going to pull a gun on me at a coffee shop.”

“We’re baseball players, Sherlock, not mobsters.”

“Or detectives.”

“Is that what you expect solving crimes is going to be like? Guns all over the place?”

“It’s a good thing that you’re such a good shot, isn’t it?” said Sherlock. “I’ll be back by the time of first pitch,” he promised, and left John leaning against the wall of the bullpen.

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They weren’t quite fighting but they weren’t quite not fighting, either. Sherlock was refusing to divulge what his meeting with Irene had been about, and John didn’t know what was worse: the idea that Sherlock was lying to him and was moving forward with the plan to date Irene, or the idea that Sherlock was up to something major and wasn’t telling John what it was. Either way, John was not pleased, and he had let it be known he wasn’t pleased, and although they had not had any sort of loud row about it, they were not having the smoothest game of their partnership. Pitch
calls had turned into wars of John’s signs and Sherlock’s frowning shake-offs, and it was clear from the very first inning that this was not going to be Sherlock’s perfect game. And John didn’t even try to make it any better. Usually he sat next to Sherlock in companionable silence when the team was batting, but he sat on the opposite end of the dugout, pointedly, and Sherlock put a towel over his head and pretended not to notice he wasn’t there because he was the world’s most stubborn human being.

Lestrade came up in the third inning, when they were losing by two, and began, haltingly, “Is he…? Are you…?”

“It’s all fine,” John told him, firmly. “He’s a bit off tonight, that’s all. He can’t be perfect every night.”

Lestrade stole a glance at the glowering presence of Sherlock. “Well. No.”

“There are theoretically batters on this team,” Sherlock said, loudly, clearly very aware of Lestrade’s whispered consultation with John, “who are theoretically capable of hitting.”

This caused massive amounts of grumbling from the rest of the team, and John sighed and said to Lestrade, “Please just drop everything, you’re making it worse. I’m handling it.”

“You’re not ‘handling’ me,” Sherlock told John during a conference on the mound in the fourth inning, when Sherlock was surrounded by loaded bases and in an even more terrible mood than he had been during the bottom of the third.

“No, I agree, I’m doing a very poor job of it at the moment, but that’s mostly because you’ve started keeping secrets.”

Sherlock looked frustrated and irritated. “I’m not keeping secrets, John—”

“I don’t want to hear your semantics justification for why you won’t tell me what’s going on with Irene. I also don’t want to use conferences on the mound for relationship stuff, okay? Get yourself a nice double play, you’ll be fine.” John turned on his heel and stalked away before Sherlock could say another word, because he didn’t want Sherlock to say another word.

He didn’t even bother to call the next pitch. Sherlock had gotten himself into the bases loaded mess, and John knew the fury he’d be subject to if John tried to take control here and tell him what pitch to throw, so he let Sherlock decide for himself. The pitch Sherlock threw actually wasn’t bad, designed to provoke a ground ball or a line drive, which was what they needed. It was just bad luck. The batter connected sharply, the crack of a well-hit ball echoing through the stadium, and it all happened so quickly, before any of them could hope to have any reaction time. The line drive went straight to Sherlock, hit him solidly on the side of his head, and he crumpled immediately to the ground.

John didn’t think. He couldn’t. He couldn’t think of the fact that there was a baseball game going on, that there were outs to be made and people running the bases. He ran to the pitcher’s mound, throwing his mask off, shaking his glove off his hand, and sliding to his knees next to Sherlock’s unmoving body. Sherlock was breathing, his chest rising and falling gently, and John thanked God for that in a brief, fervent prayer.

“Sherlock,” he said, and shook him. “Sherlock. Come on, love, open your eyes, hmm?” Sherlock’s eyelids flickered, and he frowned with the effort, but he did open his eyes. “There you go,” said John, encouragingly, although Sherlock didn’t look quite able to focus on him, blinking frantically.
“John?” said Sherlock, sounding dazed and not at all like himself.

“Yes. It’s me.” John held up two fingers. “How many fingers am I holding up?”


Not promising, thought John, as Sherlock’s eyes fluttered closed again.

Dimmock and Lestrade and one of the trainers had now made it to the mound.

“Ask him what inning it is,” said Dimmock.

“I can’t do that,” John snapped, although he was honestly surprised by how calm he sounded, “because he’s not actually conscious right now.”

Sherlock did seem to be making an effort to be conscious again, his eyes opening and then closing again almost immediately. “I’m fine,” he slurred out.

“You’re definitely not fine,” John informed him.

“I’m taking John’s side on this one,” said Lestrade, as the trainer leaned over Sherlock and fiddled with him. Lestrade turned, gesturing for a stretcher. John realized the ambulance had driven out from the outfield and that the rest of the team was gathered in a loose circle in the infield, trying to figure out what was going on.

The paramedics ran over with the stretcher. Sherlock was out again as they hefted him onto it, although he seemed to rally a bit once he was on it, opening his eyes briefly and scrunching up his face in a frown immediately, and John wondered how much his head was hurting him to be provoking that reaction from him. John went to follow the paramedics as they jogged toward the ambulance, but Lestrade caught his arm and John looked at him impatiently.

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked Lestrade.

“I’m going with him,” said John. He thought that should be obvious.

“No, you’re not. John, we’re in the middle of a game, and it’s not your—”

“I am going,” John bit out, through gritted teeth, “with him, and if you try to keep me out of that ambulance I will punch you right here on this field, I swear to God.”

Lestrade looked at him for a moment, then apparently believed him, because he dropped John’s arm and said, “All right. Go,” and nodded toward the ambulance.

John took off like a shot, following into the back of the ambulance just before they closed the door.

“You’re coming with us?” asked one of the paramedics, shocked, because there was really no precedent for this.

“Yes,” John said, setting his jaw again in preparation for arguing, but the ambulance, anxious to get off the field, just jerked into motion.

Sherlock seemed to be more awake, although he was still blinking his eyes as if he couldn’t quite focus. But he said, “John?”

“Yes.” John pushed past a paramedic, who looked at him in annoyance, and settled by Sherlock’s head. “Right here.”
“Tell them no narcotics,” said Sherlock, scrunching up the features of his face into another wincing frown again.

One of the paramedics snorted. “You must have a massive headache, you’ve got to take something.”

But John caught the subtext of what Sherlock was saying, and thought of drugs in Sherlock’s past, of overdoses and addictions and withdrawals, and said to the paramedic, “Nothing strong.”

The paramedic shrugged. “Well, I guess it’s his head.”

“Is the game over?” Sherlock asked, muzzily.

John looked at him in alarm, since he’d just been pitching the fourth inning. “No, the game’s not over.”

“Then why aren’t you catching?”

“Because you don’t remember what inning we were just in and there’s no way I’m letting you out of my sight until you start making sense again.”

“Okay,” Sherlock agreed, sleepily, instead of protesting that he always made sense, and John’s chest actually clenched with fear over how out-of-character he was behaving.

“Try to keep him awake,” the other paramedic said to him, and leaned over to give Sherlock a mild shake. “Come on, Sherlock, stay with us.”

John nodded his understanding of what the paramedic was saying and said, “Sherlock, talk to me.”

“Mmmm,” mumbled Sherlock. “I’m fine, I’m awake.” He opened his eyes briefly, focused on John, and then closed them again. “You’re spinning, stay still.”

“I will do my best,” said John, and resisted all of the urges he was having, to brush his hand through Sherlock’s hair, to take Sherlock’s hand, to put his head down next to his.

“Is the game over?” Sherlock asked again.

“No,” said John, trying to be patient and not sound panicked. “Fourth inning, remember? It was in the fourth inning. But you got hit in the head by a line drive, so we’re taking you to the hospital.”

“I’m fine,” said Sherlock, eyes closed.

“Talk to me, Sherlock.” John tried to fish for something baseball-related for them to discuss, but he didn’t want to quiz Sherlock on the algorithm of a good curveball, and Sherlock didn’t have unmathematical things to talk about where baseball was concerned, nothing like a favorite stadium to pitch in or a pitching mentor or anything like that.

“About what?” asked Sherlock, barely enunciating the words, losing the ts on the ends.

The paramedics were no longer fussing. Apparently Sherlock’s vitals checked out and there was nothing to be done until the CT scan at the hospital. John had been in baseball long enough to know how concussions worked, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t terrifying to have Sherlock being so very not himself.

“Anything you want,” John told him, deciding that Sherlock could pick whatever topic he felt like and babble on about it until they got to the hospital.
“You are the world’s most delightful human being,” said Sherlock, and John’s eyes widened. He looked at the paramedics, who looked back at him with eyebrows raised.

“Pick another topic,” John said, desperately.

“But you’re my favorite topic,” Sherlock replied, stubbornly.

“That’s, um, nice, but—”

“Come to bed,” suggested Sherlock.

John looked at the paramedics. “He’s disoriented.”

“Not for sex, though, because my head is killing me,” continued Sherlock, slurring his words but not quite enough to make them incomprehensible.

The paramedics’ eyebrows lifted farther.

“Very, very disoriented,” said John. “Or making a clever joke. Or…” John sighed and rubbed his hand over his face and said, “Or you’re the first eyewitnesses to the biggest baseball story of the year. Congratulations.”
They weren’t letting him into Sherlock’s room. The frustration of this was immense. John knew that even if he said *I’m his boyfriend* instead of the obvious *I’m his catcher*, it wouldn’t make a difference. Molly Hooper sent him a sympathetic look as she was hurried through but it didn’t change the fact that John was slumped into a chair in the waiting area, with the rest of the catching gear he’d stripped off in a pile next to him. At least it was a private waiting area. They’d at least taken that much pity on him in the middle of this disaster.

John really should have expected Mycroft Holmes to arrive, and yet, at the same time, it had been so long since he’d thought of him that he’d forgotten all about him. Mycroft looked at him with a faint frown, as if appalled at the dust-tumbled state of him, and then turned to the receptionist. John sighed and ran his hand through his hair for the thousandth time that night.

Mycroft was murmuring to the receptionist, and John wasn’t paying attention until Mycroft said, “Mr. Watson.”

John looked up. Mycroft was regarding him from the door he was holding open. The door behind which was Sherlock’s room, somewhere.

Mycroft made a small gesture with his head, by which John understood he was supposed to go through the door.

John wanted to ask a question, but decided he didn’t want Mycroft to change his mind, so all he did was dart through the door. It clicked closed behind him, with Mycroft still on the other side of it. Not tagging along, then. John wanted to turn back to thank him but decided it was best to keep moving.

Luckily, Molly was standing in the hallway, and she looked at him in delight. “Oh, John, I’m so glad they let you in.” She looked knowing and sympathetic, and John thought there must not be a person left in the world who didn’t know that he was in love with Sherlock Holmes.

“How is he?” John asked, deciding to head off any inquiries about their relationship.

“How? Conscious. In a bit of pain. But he’s more lucid than he was, according to the reports I got from the paramedics. Doesn’t remember much about what happened. You should go in. He can handle visitors, and he’d be happy to see you.”

John nodded briefly, remembered to thank her, and then walked into Sherlock’s room.

The room was dark, the only light coming from a nightlight that had been turned on in the adjoining bathroom, and John moved forward cautiously, feeling for the seat by Sherlock’s bed.

“How is he?” guessed Sherlock.

“Didn’t mean to wake you,” John responded, keeping his voice low.

“You didn’t. I’m wide awake, but the lights were absurdly bright so they turned them off. You would not believe the headache I have.”

“I saw the line drive, so I would believe it,” replied John, giving in to what he’d wanted to do all
along and brushing his hand carefully through Sherlock’s hair, hoping it was soothing to Sherlock but mostly focusing on the fact that it was soothing to John to feel Sherlock’s head completely solidly okay. Sherlock didn’t wince or move away, so as much as his head was aching, it apparently hadn’t yet translated to a bruise. Or, at least, not where John’s hand was.

“I don’t remember it.” Sherlock sounded confused and frustrated. “I remember you on the mound, but I don’t even remember what you said, what we talked about. I was watching you walk back to the plate, and then I was in a hospital with people shining lights in my eyes and asking me who the president of the United States is. It was a bit like being on drugs again, honestly.”

John kept stroking over Sherlock’s hair, because Sherlock had by now turned into it. “But without the withdrawal to follow.”

“Tell that to my head.”

John leaned down and kissed Sherlock’s temple carefully, hoping it wasn’t too terribly bruised. Sherlock sighed instead of flinching. John pulled back, satisfied that Sherlock was okay. He certainly seemed far more like himself. “Did you know who the president of the United States is?” he asked, curious, because it seemed like the sort of irrelevant tidbit of news Sherlock would delete.

“Of course I didn’t. Why take up space in my brain with that? I’m not even American. But I was able to tell them my ERA and my win-loss percentage, so they seemed content with that.”

“Ridiculous,” said John, fondly, shaking his head.

“Did we end up losing?”

“I haven’t talked to Lestrade.”

“What do you mean? Weren’t you there?”

“Wasn’t I where?”

“At the game. Catching. Honestly, John, which one of us has the concussion?”

John licked his lips and answered, “I didn’t stay to finish the game.”

Sherlock was silent for a moment. “What do you mean you ‘didn’t stay’? Where did you go?”

“I came here, of course. With you. In the ambulance.”

There was another moment of silence. “You came in the ambulance.”

John wanted to point out that he could tell Sherlock was still recovering based on the amount of repeating Sherlock was doing. Instead he said, “Yeah. I had to. You weren’t making any sense. You always make sense. I was absolutely terrified. You should have seen the way you crumbled immediately…”

“I’m fine,” said Sherlock, not exactly tenderly but reassuringly, nonetheless.

“Now you are,” John agreed. “You weren’t. You very much weren’t. There was no way I was letting you… So I went in the ambulance.”

“Well, that’s one way to get the story out there,” Sherlock remarked, after a second.
“You also mentioned our sex life in the ambulance in front of the paramedics.”

“They’re bound by privacy laws,” said Sherlock.

“You know that but not who the president of the United States is.”

“Which is more relevant to our actual lives? Speaking of privacy, how did you get in here?”

“Snuck in through the ductwork,” said John.


“Oh, stop it,” said John, good-naturedly. “I didn’t sneak in through the ductwork. Mycroft let me in.”

“Mycroft who?”

“Do you know more than one Mycroft? Or is this a concussion side effect?”

“Mycroft my brother? Let you in?”

“Yes.”

“And where is he?”

“I don’t know. Either in the waiting area, or not in the hospital at all. He didn’t follow me.”

“Mycroft let you in and then didn’t follow you,” Sherlock mused, wonderingly.

John let him muse about this, letting the conversation lapse for a bit. Then he ventured, “We were quarreling about the Irene thing. That’s what we were talking about on the mound, in the conference you can’t remember.”

Sherlock made an indifferent noise to that.

“Sherlock—”

“I’m not dating Irene. I’m not doing anything with Irene. Did you have your heart in your throat when I was unconscious today?”

“Of course I did. Don’t change the subject—”

“What would you have done, to save yourself that moment of panic?”

“Anything,” said John, because he would have. He thought of how they’d been quarreling when it had happened, and how he would never have forgiven himself if the last words he ever spoke to Sherlock were harsh and impatient.

“I am saving myself that moment of panic over you. So leave it.”

“Sherlock—”

“Leave it. I’m sick. I’ve had a concussion. How dare you argue with me. You’re supposed to be keeping me calm. I’m supposed to be resting. Ow, my head.”

“You don’t fool me for a minute,” said John, without heat.
Sherlock’s hand snaked out and grabbed John’s, tugging at him. “Come to bed,” he half-whined.

“Yeah, that’s what got you into trouble in the ambulance.”

“Did I suggest something filthy? I’ll let you tell me what it was, so we can store it for later when I don’t have a headache.”

“You didn’t suggest anything filthy.”

“Well, that’s rather disappointing, then. Really, get into this bed, you’ll feel better.”

John wasn’t aware he wasn’t already feeling better, until Sherlock pointed it out, and then he abruptly realized he wanted nothing more than to be in bed with Sherlock until Sherlock’s breaths forced their rhythm onto his.

“The story’s already out anyway,” remarked Sherlock. “Getting into my bed isn’t half as damning as getting into my ambulance.”

“You have that very backward,” John responded. “Also, that bed isn’t going to fit two of us.”

“It’ll fit two of us if you lay in it properly,” said Sherlock.

That depended on your definition of “properly,” thought John, but gave in and crawled into bed with Sherlock. He was a mess from the game, smelly and sweaty and gross, but Sherlock merely curled into him with a contented sigh.

“You didn’t let them give me narcotics,” he said, muffled, into John’s shoulder after a moment.

“You told me not to.”

“Did I? I’m glad I remembered it.” There was a pause. “Anyway, thank you.”

John put his lips in Sherlock’s hair and said, “Anytime.”

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In the fourth inning of his last start, Sherlock Holmes was hit in the head by a line drive and sent to the hospital with a concussion. Although Holmes now has a clean bill of health and has had a successful throwing session, Austin manager Greg Lestrade has confirmed that he will miss a start, “just to be on the safe side.” Holmes is currently the best pitcher in baseball, leading the majors in ERA, second in wins, second in opponent’s batting average, and fifth in strikeouts. His missed start—and the suspicion that it hides continued question marks about his recovery—should be the biggest story in baseball.

And yet it isn’t.

In fact, it isn’t even the biggest story about Sherlock Holmes, who, through a mutual spokesperson, confirmed a homosexual relationship with his catcher John Watson after Watson dashed into the ambulance to accompany Holmes to the hospital. Rumors had been furiously swirling about the pair for some time, fueled by their legendary inseparability, which extended to their living arrangements. Speculation in baseball, however, doubted that the pair would ever respond to the rumors one way or another—an assumption that the couple proved very wrong.

They have provided no other statements. Watson’s post-game press conferences have been devoid of references to his personal life. Not that there haven’t been questions, but they don’t get
responded to, cut off by Lestrade. Both Watson and Holmes have said nothing further about their relationship, other than to confirm that it exists and to request—one senses the request was made with full knowledge of its futility—respect for their privacy.

The seismic shift of baseball’s first out players has been felt throughout the game and the nation. Signage about the issue was so vociferous at Austin games that stadiums have begun cracking down on fans who bring such signs to the field, in an attempt to try to keep peace. Opinion seems as split on the issue as the nation is about the larger issue of homosexuality in general. There are a large number of people who don’t see its relevance to who Holmes and Watson are as baseball players, but there are also numerous people who have vowed never to support Austin in the wake of the announcement.

The team itself appears to have cracked a bit but is so far holding together. Aside from growing concern that the team’s closer, Manny Ruiz, might not be totally healthy—the result of a few blown saves—the team has continued to win, maintaining its position in the standings. Team owner Martha Hudson, long known to be one of Holmes’s inner circle, and the one who actually persuaded him to come to Austin for less money than he was being offered elsewhere, perhaps unsurprisingly issued a team statement in support of Holmes and Watson, noting their “prowess as baseball players of unparalleled talent in the middle of an exciting pennant race.” The attempt to turn the attention back to their professional lives is an admirable one, but it hasn’t yet succeeded. For now, the sports shows aren’t discussing Holmes’s very good Cy Young chances or Watson’s unexpected career resurgence—or, if they are, they’re discussing whether either phenomenon is keyed to the development of the personal relationship between the two.

Lestrade has spoken on the matter in his official capacity, responding to a single question about the relationship by saying that he doesn’t comment on his players’ personal lives unless they affect their field performance, and noting that he has had no complaints whatsoever about Holmes and Watson where that was concerned. Although no one can argue with Lestrade that his star players have remained the best players on his team, regardless of their sexuality, the existence in the clubhouse of a gay relationship has put an inevitable strain on team chemistry. Much as the fans are split on the issue, Austin as a team seems split as well.

Shortstop Don Anderson has been the loudest to come out against Holmes and Watson. “How can you have a clubhouse with a couple of [homosexual men] in it?” he complained to reporters shortly after the press announcement. “What’s to stop them from ogling all of us?” For every Anderson on the team, though, there is an equally loud supporter. Mike Ryan, for instance. Currently the number two starter behind Holmes, Ryan started off the season in relative obscurity, a mediocre pitcher that no one was talking about. He credits Holmes’s and Watson’s influence for the stellar season he’s been having, said that he has never felt uncomfortable in the clubhouse with either one, and told reporters, “If people asked me about my sex life with my wife, I’d be offended. I don’t see how it’s any different to be bothering Sherlock and John about it.” There is enough support in the clubhouse that Ryan has been officially named the spokesperson for those players who support Holmes and Watson but don’t want to get in the middle of the melee by de-anonymizing themselves. Ryan’s blog posted a statement on behalf of “Austin Team Members in Support of Our Teammates Sherlock Holmes and John Watson,” an unwieldy name, to be sure. The statement was frankly and straightforwardly supportive before trying, much as Hudson’s statement did, to turn the attention back to the field. There has also been a statement of support from a large group of other baseball players, both anonymous and named, supporting the relationship. There appears to be no such corresponding group opposing the relationship, although some have spoken on the record against it. For his part, the Commissioner of Baseball has stated only that he does not comment on players’ personal lives.

As Holmes hasn’t had a start since making the announcement, it’s been difficult to turn the
attention back to the field the way they seem to want to. Watson, perhaps showing the strain of the maelstrom, has entered a slump that is not at all unusual in baseball but is poorly timed so as to be currently noteworthy for him. He has been subjected to some taunts and jeers, but there have also been some standing ovations. Watson himself looks as if he would prefer neither and would rather just be playing baseball in the relative anonymity he enjoyed until recently.

A team spokesperson has reported that sales of Watson’s and Holmes’s jerseys have enjoyed a sharp uptick since the announcement, perhaps the best indicator that they’re going to weather this storm just fine. Irene Adler, self-appointed head of Holmes’s large contingent of female fans known as Sherlock’s Sweeties, agrees that the announcement should only increase the players’ popularity. “Honestly, it only makes him hotter. Watson, too. We’re considering starting a related group, Watson’s Wenches.”

In the end, Holmes and Watson may have found themselves at the forefront of gay rights, but in a couple of weeks we’ll be well into August. Playoff berths will be on the verge of being clinched, and Austin sits prettily in striking distance. Their legacy might be their very public breaking of the homosexual barrier in baseball, but Holmes and Watson might prefer it to be leading a new team to a World Series in its first year. Let’s hope for their sakes that one doesn’t impact the other.

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“Watson’s Wenches?” said John, and put the newspaper down to frown at Sherlock, who was not paying the slightest bit of attention to him, leaving his glare unappreciated. “Did Irene run this by you?”

Sherlock, slumped on the couch in the living area of the latest hotel suite, plucked a string on his violin.

“Sherlock,” said John.

“There is something wrong with Ruiz,” answered Sherlock. “Something very wrong. Has he seen Molly? Not that Molly’s the most brilliant of doctors, but at least she theoretically has a medical degree and would be something. There’s something wrong with his shoulder; he’s favoring it in his mechanics and needs to fix it.”

“Molly says it’s regular wear-and-tear.”

Sherlock snorted. “It isn’t. He should go out on the 15-day DL, take a forced rest. We can’t win the wild card without a closer. I’m the only pitcher on the team capable of going nine innings.”

“You’re not going nine innings anytime soon unless your pitch count is under a hundred.”

Sherlock made his dismissive ugh sound. “Is this about the concussion again?”

“No, it isn’t about the concussion, it’s about the fact that you’ve got to last all the way through October, and you’re already on pace to pitch more innings than you have any other season in your career. Regardless of what those idiot homophobes are saying about it, we can’t win anything without you. And why are you talking about the wild card? We’re going to win the division.”

“No, we’re not.”

John sighed and rolled his eyes and decided not to fight him on that. He threw the newspaper down onto the coffee table and slumped dejectedly into the armchair he was currently occupying, eyeing the newspaper belligerently and feeling listless and irritated in an aimless, useless way.
“Irene doesn’t run everything by me. We barely speak.”

John didn’t look away from the newspaper. “You looked awfully cozy at the coffee shop,” he responded, not even surprised Sherlock had suddenly answered that question.

“I don’t know why you read the newspaper,” Sherlock remarked. “It always puts you in a terrible mood.”

“There is nothing else to do!” John pointed out, a bit more loudly than necessary, and Sherlock raised his eyebrows in mild reproach at that. “We can’t go anywhere because everyone follows us around now and asks us crude, ridiculous questions.”

“They’re idiots,” Sherlock inserted, evenly.

But John was on a roll and refused to be interrupted. “We can’t even go to the field, because when we get to the field there’s always someone around spying on us as if we’re suddenly going to start making out on the pitcher’s mound.”

“You could go to the field without me. That would eliminate the possibility you’d be ‘making out’ with somebody on the pitcher’s mound.”

“No, it wouldn’t, since, if you listen to Sally Donovan, there’s some belief that we must be sex-crazed maniacs who would make out with anything that breathed.”

“Don’t listen to Sally Donovan. She’s a hypocritical idiot who’s having an affair with Anderson, and I’m shortly going to use that to shut her up.”

“And now we’re blackmailing people,” sighed John.

“We’re not doing anything,” Sherlock replied.

John scrubbed his hands over his face. “I hate everything about this,” he said. “Everything. I even hate getting text messages of support from family and friends. I don’t want text messages of support. I want to just live a normal, obscure life like I had before. Do you know why all of this happened? Because we didn’t have sex the morning of your last start. This is why you don’t break a superstition, Sherlock.”

“To be safe, maybe we should just start having sex every morning,” remarked Sherlock.

John didn’t want to be amused by that. He didn’t want to not be in a bad mood. He grunted indifferently, closed his eyes, and hoped Sherlock would get up and come kiss him.

Sherlock didn’t. “The way I see it,” Sherlock said, from his stubborn position on the couch, “we have three options for how we spend the rest of the day until we have to go to the field. One, you continue to sulk and ignore the obvious issues with Ruiz. Two, we have sex.”

“One sounds like a horrible option,” John said without opening his eyes. “And I’m only doing two if you plan to put a bit of effort into seducing me, because I’m in a terrible mood.”

There was a knock on the door, and John opened his eyes and lifted his head to look at it in surprise.

“Ah,” said Sherlock. “There’s our third option now.”

***
The third option involved a wig. John stared at it in confusion but got the point that this was a plan Sherlock had to get them out of the hotel, and he figured that Sherlock, given how casually he talked about things like blackmail, was much better at subterfuge than he was so he should just go along with the plan. Anything to get them out of the stiflingly close quarters of the suite seemed like a good idea, anyway.

They left separately, which made sense to John, and they left out of a fire escape door that was neither a back nor front entrance of the hotel, which made him able to be ushered into a black car with tinted windows with a great deal of ease. John almost expected Mycroft Holmes to be sitting in the car waiting for him, but he wasn’t. John hadn’t seen Mycroft since he had orchestrated it so that John could get to Sherlock’s hospital room. John had asked Sherlock to thank him, but Sherlock had only snorted, so John doubted that any thanks had been communicated, which made John feel a bit bad because thanks were definitely called for.

“Do you know where we’re going?” John asked the driver, as they navigated through the streets. John didn’t know the city they were in especially well, so it could have been anywhere.

“Yes, but I’m not supposed to tell you,” he answered.

“Of course not,” said John, but he said it good-naturedly, leaning back in his seat and watching the world go by outside the window. He already felt a thousand times better. Trust Sherlock to have been smart enough to know that he needed a genuine distraction, a mystery, a surprise. John had one of those moments that he’d been having since news of their relationship had broken where he really itched to grant an interview to one of the many people requesting one, just so that he could let the world know that, every so often, Sherlock Holmes was kind of the best boyfriend. John sometimes thought it was harder to keep silent about Sherlock now that everyone knew than it had been when it was a secret.

The car eventually pulled into the parking lot of a high school, driving around the back and pulling up adjacent to the school’s baseball field. As John opened the door, he noted Sherlock leaning against the backstop, eyes hidden behind sunglasses, holding his glove and John’s.

John walked up to him, glanced at the high school baseball field, and thought of Sherlock taking John along on that scouting trip with Lestrade. “What’s this? Reference to our first date?”

“A happy side effect,” replied Sherlock, handing John his glove. “You badly need a game of catch. Do you realize how snappish you get the longer you go without access to a proper game of leisurely catch? I’ve got an algorithm for it. We must be sure to have a massive back garden at the London flat.”

John looked from Sherlock to the inviting baseball field. It was a bit unkempt, the grass burnt and intruding onto the infield, and it was the most beautiful thing John had ever seen. For so many years baseball fields had been home to him, the only place on the planet where he totally relaxed, where he got to be himself, and the worst part of all of this was that he’d lost that, and he hadn’t even realized how much he’d lost it until that moment. But Sherlock had realized, and Sherlock had found them a field and planned an outing for them, because John needed a game of catch.

John looked back at him. “Sherlock,” he started, but he didn’t even know what to say, how to thank him for the gesture. What he wanted to do was press him back against the backstop and kiss the breath out of him, but he thought of the fact that they were in public, even secluded as it seemed, and decided that probably wasn’t the best move.

Sherlock shook his head, as if reading his thoughts, which he probably was, and said, “Don’t say anything. Come and throw the ball to me.” And Sherlock turned and walked onto the field, into the
John followed him, pulling his glove on, and Sherlock tossed him a long, lazy fly ball that he had to run a playful amount to catch, and John felt so much inside of him unwind that it should have been ridiculous. He threw the ball back, slightly over Sherlock’s head. Sherlock jumped a bit to catch it, and John grinned and sent him a mocking thumbs-up, and Sherlock shook his head and let loose with an imitation of a fastball that John almost missed.

“You’re showing off,” John called to him, tossing the ball back to him.

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed. “I’m a show-off; it’s what we do.” But his next throw was back to lazy and leisurely, this one right on the money.

They went back and forth, back and forth, sometimes serious, sometimes light-hearted, sometimes absent-minded. John thought he should really stop them, that Sherlock’s arm must surely be getting tired, but it was such a relief to throw with no one watching, no one jeering or cheering, just him and Sherlock and the arc of a baseball through the air.

John had sometimes, once in a while, been worried about retiring. He tried not to let himself think about it too much because he didn’t want to, but he did worry about saying good-bye to the game, about finding out who he was without it. But as he played catch with Sherlock in a high school ball field, he realized that he’d discovered already exactly who he was without it: He was this. He was John Watson, with Sherlock Holmes, and in the future there would be no baseball games, but there would always be this. It was going to be enough for him, he knew it with sure certainty, it was always going to be enough for him.

Eventually, John caught the ball and didn’t throw it back. He left it nestled in his glove and walked over to where Sherlock was standing. Sherlock waited for him, presumably watching him from behind the sunglasses.

“How’s your arm?” John asked him.

“Don’t worry about my arm; it’s fine. How are you?”

John thought of how they were in public and how much he didn’t care, because Sherlock had brought him to a baseball field to throw with him because he’d been out-of-sorts, and Sherlock gave every indication of wanting to do that for the rest of their lives. John fist a hand in the front of Sherlock’s shirt and kissed him. Sherlock made a small sound of surprise but kissed him back. Sometimes they kissed and it was filthy and single-minded and it only led to one place, but they kissed now sweetly and tenderly, and John tried to tell him with every brush of his tongue, every sip of his lips: I love you, I love you, I love you. He drew back a breath, rubbing his nose against Sherlock’s and saying, firmly, “Thank you,” before leaning in and pressing his lips back to Sherlock’s again.

Sherlock’s gloveless hand had come up, was cupping the back of John’s head. When John finally ended the kiss, he kept it there, his fingers tangled in the hair on the nape of John’s neck.

John leaned his head down into the curve of Sherlock’s neck. “Sod them all,” he said. “That can be on the front page of every single newspaper if they want.”

Sherlock didn’t really respond to that. He took a deep breath, and John listened to the pounding of his heart against him. “Are you ready to go win a baseball game?” Sherlock asked, finally.

John said, “Yes.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Thirty

John had seen injuries come on slowly, insidiously, a torturous decline, and the day Mike Ryan refused to be taken out of the game in favor of the closer because he wanted to protect his lead was the day John realized he had to admit Ruiz was injured. He’d been putting it off, despite Sherlock’s continued protestations about it, because he’d had quite enough to deal with, considering his new status as Champion of Gay Rights. But Ruiz had been steadily blowing saves, and John couldn’t have his pitchers straining themselves to compensate for it. He had a meeting with Lestrade and Dimmock and everyone agreed to put Ruiz on the fifteen-day DL.

Except that, when he got back from the fifteen-day DL, he still wasn’t right. Sherlock had made two starts in the interim and pitched at nearly his old level of brilliance, nary a flinch from him at being back on the mound, and that had been good news, but the lack of a dependable closer was starting to get to the team, and the diagnosis on Ruiz that finally came in was not good.

Sherlock’s bulletin board was crowded with upcoming batters and obscure equations only Sherlock could understand, but on the right-hand side John had tacked up the league standings, and Sherlock had left it. Every day they were home John watched them lose ground. The day they fell out of the wild card, Sherlock said, bitterly, “A team can’t get by on one good pitcher and one passable one. We need a closer.”

John agreed, although he didn’t know what was to be done about it. They were late into August, there wasn’t much time left to make up the ground they’d lost, and the team was tired, disgruntled, morale low with the loss of Ruiz. John kept hoping Sherlock would pitch a perfect game and get them out of it, give them a bit of an emotional lift, but Sherlock had been nibbling around the edges of perfection, not quite getting it to slot into place yet.

Eventually Lestrade called John over just as he was getting done warming West up for his start. “I need to talk to you about the closer situation,” said Lestrade, shifting all around uncomfortably.

John lifted an eyebrow. “Do you have any ideas? Because Pomoko’s clearly not working out. Not everyone’s cut out to be a closer, you know, takes a special sort of…bloodthirstiness.”

“We think we can get Moriarty,” Lestrade blurted out.

“Speaking of bloodthirstiness,” remarked John, slowly, processing.

“Ben’s been sniffing around, he thinks Moriarty’s gettable, and it’d be a huge coup, the best closer in baseball right now, and we need him, we need him badly.”

“Yeah,” agreed John, “only your ace pitcher hates him. And vice versa.”

“I know.” Lestrade looked anxious. “I was hoping you could smooth that over.”

“You realize I’m just gay,” John pointed out. “I’m not magic.”

“He will listen to you, John. You are the only one he will—”

“I don’t want Moriarty on the team. Forget about Sherlock. I don’t want him on the team. He’ll be bad for team chemistry, and he’ll be disastrous for Sherlock. We can still win without Moriarty; we can’t win without Sherlock.”
“No offense, John, but Sherlock only pitches every fifth day. Moriarty, as a closer, would have a bigger impact.”

“Sherlock’s the leader of this team—”

“You’re the leader of this team,” Lestrade cut him off, quietly. “Sherlock’s louder, so he attracts more attention, but you’re the man every single one of them looks to for direction. If this gay story had broken with anyone but you at the center of it, it would have been a complete disaster.”

“You don’t think this has been a complete disaster?” asked John, in disbelief.

“No, I think it’s been pretty damn impressive, frankly. Opinion on Sherlock is split, but opinion on you is universal. They respect you, and they’ll listen to what you say, Sherlock included. He might pout more about it than the rest of them, but he’ll listen to you in the end.”

“I disagree with a lot of that, but it doesn’t matter,” said John. “I don’t want Moriarty on the team. I’m not convincing anyone it’s a good idea, because it’s not a good idea.”

Lestrade looked exasperated. “What could you possibly have against Moriarty?”

John thought of Sherlock, naïve and vulnerable and sharing confidences. “It’s personal, okay?”

“No, it isn’t okay,” snapped Lestrade. “Because this is about your little gay love affair spilling over into the business of baseball, which is not okay with me. I don’t care what the hell goes on with you and Sherlock in the privacy of your own home, but I’m not running my team like this is a high school and you two are prom king and queen and decide who gets to be popular and who’s kicked out of your clique. He’s the best closer in the game. There are lots of people who have personal issues with Sherlock, but you’d agree with me that they’d be stupid not to snatch him up if he was available, because he’s the best there is. How can the same not apply to Moriarty?”

“Because there’s nothing wrong with Sherlock. Moriarty is…a terrible person.”

“You think there’s nothing wrong with Sherlock because you’re in love with him. The rest of baseball thinks he’s a pretty terrible person. It’s all a matter of perspective, John. Change yours.”

“You’re wrong,” insisted John. “You don’t even believe that. You like Sherlock, and I know you don’t like Moriarty, and this is a mistake, to pull the trigger on this deal based solely on statistics and not to take your gut feeling about this into account. And you know it’s wrong.” John set his jaw. “I’m not telling him. You’re going to tell him yourself.”

“John—”

“No,” retorted John, sharply. “That’s about my little gay love affair spilling over into the business of baseball, which is not okay with me. If I wasn’t sleeping with him, you’d never make me tell him. That’s your job as his manager, not my job as his catcher. And I’m not going to do it as a favor to you because I’m his boyfriend, either. You talk to Sherlock, you do it when he gets here, and you leave me out of it, the same way you would have before. I wouldn’t want my sex life changing the way your clubhouse runs, Lestrade, right?” John asked the question with a hard edge of sarcasm, and then turned suddenly, calling almost blindly to the first pitcher he saw, “Oi! Jeremy! Grab your glove, you’re throwing a few.”

“Jeremy’s throwing?” asked Sherlock, and John turned again, surprised to see him, standing in the dugout frowning.

“When did you get here?” said John.
“Just now. Why? And why is Jeremy throwing?”

“Jeremy’s throwing because I need a game of catch. Don’t worry, I won’t over-exert him. In the meantime, Lestrade’s going to explain to you why I need a game of catch.” John fixed Lestrade with a hard look. “Aren’t you, Lestrade?”

Lestrade looked furious in return but John didn’t care. As John stalked off, he heard Sherlock say to Lestrade, “Uh-oh. You’ve managed to upset John. That does not bode at all well for this conversation.”

***

Sherlock never considered it a good thing when John was upset. If he was the cause of it, he suffered inevitable guilt over it, even if he was right, and he didn’t approve of that. If he wasn’t the cause of it, he suffered an inevitable compulsion to want to kill the person who had caused it, and he thought John probably wouldn’t approve of that. Sherlock could probably pull it off without getting caught, but John still wouldn’t be happy to know he’d done it, even with the best of intentions (i.e., John’s lack-of-upset-ness).

So Sherlock frowned at Lestrade and waited for him to speak and hoped he looked sufficiently thunderous to make Lestrade regret upsetting John.

“Maybe we should go to my office,” Lestrade hedged, being fidgety.

Sherlock frowned a little harder, trying to deduce what Lestrade might say that was going to be so earth-shattering as to have upset John and to have the potential to upset Sherlock as well. It wasn’t like they were going to stop playing baseball, or be forced to break up or something. Was one of them dying? No, that would have provoked a different kind of emotion in John.

“No,” he replied. “You told John here, you can tell me here.”

Lestrade looked away, out to the field, then to his shoes, then to the field again, anywhere but at Sherlock. And he said, “We’re trading for Moriarty.”

Sherlock felt his eyes widen in shock. He was almost never shocked these days. Pretty much it only happened when John Watson caused it. It was almost more shocking that he was shocked. “I can’t have heard you correctly,” he said, seizing on the one thing that actually made sense.

Lestrade looked grim and still didn’t meet his eyes. “You heard me correctly.”

“But…we’re past the trade deadline. You’ll never get him through waivers.”

“We did.”

“You got him through waivers? Oh. Wait. Of course. Stupid, stupid, of course you could get him through waivers, nobody wants him, he’s like poison to a team. Why would you ever pick him up, Lestrade; how insufferably moronic can you be?”

Lestrade dared to look at him then. “We need a closer, Sherlock.”

“Bloody hell, I’ll be the closer.”

“You’re a starter.”

“I could be a closer.”
“Stop it. It’s done now. We needed a closer, he’s the best closer in baseball, and we’re going through with the trade.”

“I won’t work with him,” Sherlock asserted, stubbornly.

“Yes, you will.”

“Or what? You’ll sue me? Trigger some ridiculous clause in my contract? Oh, dear.” Sherlock tsk’d dramatically and looked at his throwing arm. “I do think I felt something pop in my shoulder. My arm feels quite dead. Don’t think I’ll be able to throw for a while.”

“You’ll play with him,” Lestrade told him, quietly, evenly, firmly. “because you want John to win a World Series. And this is the team you have to win it with, and you know that. This is your season. So you’ll play with Moriarty because you know we can’t win the World Series without an ace. The same way we can’t win it without a closer. We can’t win it for John.”

Sherlock stared at him. And then he managed, “That’s emotional blackmail.” Because it was. It suddenly became clear to him why Mycroft had always said caring wasn’t an advantage. It wasn’t.

Lestrade was right, Sherlock couldn’t bear not to get John his World Series, and that meant making whatever team he had at his disposal work, even if that team included Moriarty.

“John’s fighting back against this out of some sort of misguided loyalty to you,” Lestrade continued.

Sherlock looked out at John, playing catch in the outfield with Jeremy Glennane. He said, “He’s fighting back against this because he’s clever and this is an idiotic idea.”

“It’s the team he has. You want to win the World Series, you work with it. And you make sure he does, too.”

Sherlock didn’t want to win the World Series: John did. Sherlock tightened his hands into fists and clenched his teeth together and wished he could kill Lestrade or throw a tantrum or find some cocaine. He turned his head away from John, looked back at Lestrade. “This is a mistake. I’m telling you right now that it’s a mistake. Bring Moriarty in. Fine. Keep him away from me, and keep him away from John. I’ll make sure we still win the World Series, and then I will walk out of this contract, and I will walk out of baseball, and I will leave you with Moriarty.”

Lestrade looked a little incredulous. “That’s it? That’s your threat?”

“That’s the worst threat there is,” said Sherlock.

***

The lack of sleeping coming from the other side of the bed was extremely loud. Sherlock never stayed in bed when he couldn’t sleep. Sherlock got up, got his violin, played music through the wee hours, thought himself through whatever it was. Most of the time, John spent those nighttime concerts with his head buried under his pillow, wishing to sleep through the racket. Every once in a while he begged Sherlock to stop playing, usually by distracting him with other things. John never thought he’d lie in bed wishing Sherlock would go somewhere and play his violin.

John rolled toward Sherlock, not quite touching him, looking at his silhouette. He was on his back, looking up at the ceiling.

“Shut up,” said John, softly.
He could envision the frown Sherlock was making. He could hear it in Sherlock’s voice, when he replied, “I didn’t say anything.”

John reached out and traced a finger along the curve of Sherlock’s ear, knowing it by heart in the darkness. “You were thinking,” John responded, still soft, feeding Sherlock a line he’d heard him say.

Sherlock huffed out something that could have been laughter, caught by surprise. John, pleased to have accomplished that much, leaned forward and kissed the ear he’d just been tracing. Sherlock didn’t move away, but he didn’t move closer, either. He didn’t react at all.

John rested his head next to Sherlock’s on Sherlock’s pillow, crowding him a bit, testing. Sherlock didn’t object, which John considered another good sign. So John picked up Sherlock’s hand and threaded their fingers together and murmured, “Don’t worry about him, love.” John brought their joined hands to his lips, brushed a kiss over the knuckle of Sherlock’s index finger. “What can he do to us, hmm?”

“Quite a lot,” responded Sherlock, dryly.

“Nothing that would make me leave you,” John said, firmly. “Nothing that would make you leave me.”

“You say that as if that’s the worst thing that could happen.”

“It is.”

Sherlock rolled to face John, keeping their hands intertwined. “I can think of so many things that would be worse.”

“That’s because you think too much.”

“This is a game. He wants to be on our team. He’s gone to an awful lot of trouble to get himself there.”

“You think this is part of a master plan?”

“Yes.”

“A master plan to do what?”

“I don’t know. To do something worse.”

“And I suppose you’re trying to develop a master plan to counter his master plan?”

“Of course.”

John sighed. “All this  planning, all this  game-playing.”

There was a moment of silence. “I got you involved in all this and I—”

“Stop it, Sherlock,” John interrupted, harshly, and miraculously, Sherlock actually did stop talking. John tipped his head until it nudged against Sherlock’s. “Tell me about London,” he said.

“I’ve told you everything there is to know about London,” replied Sherlock, sounding exasperated.

“No, you haven’t. That’s why you love London: because you’ll never know everything there is to
know about it. So tell me something about it. Tell me something you love about it.”

Sherlock sighed and was silent for long enough that John thought he wasn’t going to respond. But then he did start talking, a story about a cup of tea and a day-old newspaper and some connection between the two of them that John didn’t worry himself about. He listened to Sherlock’s voice and kept his hand firmly in his and imagined all the worse things Moriarty could do.

***

The first terrible thing that Moriarty did involved Wagner. In retrospect, John thought that this should not have been as surprising as it was, that the evil he’d been bracing himself for would concern classical music, and that Sherlock would react as if it had been an attempted assassination on the Queen.

“The Wagner?” he bellowed at Lestrade when Lestrade brought it up. They’d been summoned, the two of them, to a special meeting in Lestrade’s office. John thought that special meetings that involved only the two of them were never a good sign. Sherlock was pacing in tight little circles around Lestrade’s tiny office, his hands tearing through his hair in agitation. “He cannot have the Wagner.”

“He claims that it would be the perfect closer entry music. He wants it to complement your choice. He says you can pick another bit of opera, or maybe something else, and it’ll go nicely with the Wagner when he comes in to relieve you. He suggested Tchaikovsky.”

Sherlock stared at Lestrade, his eyes wide and his mouth open, and John thought that, from the expression on his face, this was the most shocking thing Sherlock had ever heard. “Tchaikovsky?!?” he choked out, as if he wasn’t getting enough oxygen, and John thought he might collapse dramatically.

“Yeah.” Lestrade looked incredibly confused by Sherlock’s overwrought reaction to all of this. “Something wrong with Tchaikovsky?”

“He wants me to use Tchaikovsky as my music? You might as well cover me in maple syrup and roll me around in icing sugar!”

“Uh,” said Lestrade, and looked uncomfortably at John, “I don’t really want to know about—”

“Oh my God, it has nothing to do with our sex lives.” Sherlock rolled his eyes so hard John winced. “It’s saccharine.”

Lestrade hesitated. “What is?”

“Tchaikovsky.”

“Can we move off the topic of the music, please?” Lestrade requested.

“Look, it’s obvious Moriarty is doing this to see how much power he has,” John contributed, “and you’re playing right into his hands by even bringing this up. This is Sherlock’s team, not Moriarty’s, and it’d function a hell of a lot better if you’d nip this in the bud right now.”

“I don’t decide whose team it is, John, the players do.”

“They take your lead. Go back to Moriarty and tell him the Wagner belongs to Sherlock, and he can use the Tchaikovsky.”
“No, never mind, let him have it,” inserted Sherlock, suddenly, sounding much calmer than he had ten seconds earlier.

John looked at him in surprise. “What?”

Sherlock was looking hard at him, that look that meant that the million thoughts going on behind those indescribable eyes were ones John wasn’t sure he wanted to know but definitely needed to know. “Let him have the Wagner. I’ll come up with something else. It’s your team.”

“What?” said John.

“It isn’t my team. You always think it’s my team. It’s your team. They pay attention to you. They follow your lead. It’s your team, and you’re right. You’re sitting here so calm and unruffled, and that’s what we need to be, we need to be exactly like that. This is what Moriarty wants, he wants me to dig in my heels about the Wagner, or sulk about it; he wants to throw me off. So let’s not let him.” Sherlock looked at Lestrade. “Tell him he can have the Wagner. I’ll come up with something else to use and get back to you. Also, tell him he’s not going to be relieving me.”

Sherlock pulled open Lestrade’s office door and walked through it.

John sighed and looked at Lestrade. “This is a nightmare and it’s just beginning. You are an idiot to think this can work.”

“He’s a fantastic closer, John.”

“Not everything in life is about baseball.”

“Which is what is the problem with this team right now,” Lestrade retorted, and John flinched a little bit, because maybe he did think that part of the stumbling the team was doing was as a result of the interpersonal rapids the team was negotiating.

John left Lestrade and caught up with Sherlock, who had gotten stuck waiting impatiently for the elevator.

“Brand new stadium,” he complained as John came up, “and they managed to find an elevator from 1902.” He hit the button a few more times.

John watched him. “Is this you being calm and unruffled?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” snapped Sherlock.

“You can’t pitch nine innings a game for the rest of the season.”

“Watch me.”

“Sherlock.”

“Then I’ll make sure they’re blow-outs, one way or the other. I’m not giving him the satisfaction of coming in and finishing things out for me.”

“It’s his job.”

The elevator finally arrived, and Sherlock darted onto it, as if he thought maybe he could get it to leave without being stuck with John on it, too. John stepped calmly onto it behind him.

“I’m not going to let you throw your arm out trying to prove a point. I don’t even know what point you’d be trying to prove. He screwed you over years ago and got under your skin, and he’s been
exploiting it ever since because he can and because you’re letting him. Ignore him. He’s childish
and stupid and we have baseball to play. You are the most beautiful pitcher I have ever watched
throw and I will not take even the slightest risk of him depriving the world of that. Plus, I can’t win
the World Series without you.”

Sherlock stared at the buttons for the floors as the elevator moved excruciatingly downward, then
he actually smiled a bit. He looked over to John. “I’m your favorite.”

“Yes,” said John, relieved at the smile. “You’re my favorite. You are pure poetry, and I won’t let
anything get close to jeopardizing that.”

Sherlock shook his head a little bit, looking serious again. “You think it’s all childish games; you
don’t understand why I’m so concerned about it. Because it all seems like childish games until he’s
holding the means of the destruction of your career in his back pocket. And I don’t really care
about my career, but you care desperately about yours, and he knows that, so please be careful. I’m
not worried about me or my ridiculous poetic pitching motion. I’m much more worried about
you.”

“I’m one of the world’s first gay baseball players,” remarked John, trying to keep it wry and light.
“What could Moriarty possibly do to ruin my career given that?”
Chapter 32

Chapter Thirty-One

Moriarty arrived in the clubhouse. Sherlock smiled at him and shook his hand and was generally so pleasant that he didn’t even sound like Sherlock. Everyone else in the clubhouse looked at him in disbelief. Moriarty grinned at him like he thought the whole thing was hilarious. Sherlock offered to make him a cup of tea.

When the game started, Moriarty went off to the bullpen and Sherlock settled in the dugout the way he usually did, dropping the overly gregarious act. John was sure he looked completely normal to everyone else, maybe even to Moriarty. If he made love a little more desperately that night than he usually did, John didn’t mention it.

John offered to help Sherlock with the choosing of a new song, which had to happen quickly since Sherlock was pitching the following night. Sherlock refused the help by saying, scathingly, You’d probably choose something by the Smiths and everyone would want to kill themselves, and John, refusing to be baited by a Sherlock who he knew was very on edge, had merely replied, I’m impressed you know who the Smiths are. So Sherlock had holed himself up with his laptop and John heard him poking through YouTube long after he’d gone to bed.

On the drive to the stadium on the day he was pitching, Sherlock fiddled with his phone to set it up with the stereo. They never listened to music when they drove, because they didn’t share each other’s musical tastes, but Sherlock said, “This song,” and pressed play.

John listened carefully, surprised, because it wasn’t classical or opera or anything like that. It was a normal song, although not one John had heard before. But bouncy, catchy, not a bad choice. John tried to understand as many of the words as he could to figure out why Sherlock had chosen this.

“What is it?” he asked, when it was over.

“It’s called ‘Shuffle.’”

“What does it mean?”

“Absolutely nothing.” Sherlock’s smile was grim out the windshield. “That should drive Moriarty absolutely mad.”

Moriarty was already at the stadium when they got there, and he smiled winningly at Sherlock. “Looking forward to your start. Looking forward to getting to relieve you.”

Sherlock smiled back, even and unconcerned. He grabbed his glove and walked out to the field with John and said, “He is not relieving me until my arm actually comes off my body, do you understand me?”

John shook his head but didn’t push it. They hadn’t had to use Moriarty last night, since they’d had a blowout of a loss. John was hoping for a blowout of a win tonight. With any luck, they game would be well in hand and Sherlock would be out by the seventh inning, and they’d bring a middle reliever in instead of Moriarty, and the point would be moot.
Sherlock’s very first pitch was so wildly in the dirt that it skidded past John all the way to the backstop, and John actually turned to the umpire and asked for a time-out for a conference.

Both the umpire and the batter looked at him in disbelief.

“Seriously?” the batter complained. “He’s thrown one pitch. If this is about some stupid gay thing —”

“Yeah, that’s what this is about,” said John, “just a quick little make-out session on the mound, do you mind?”

“Make it quick,” said the umpire, annoyed, waving him away.

Sherlock looked as annoyed as the umpire as John jogged out to him. “What do you want?” he snapped.

“Listen to me. Take a deep breath. You’re going to call this game.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows drew together. “I’m…?”

“You. You’re not going to get a single signal from me. You do what you want to do. It’s your game.” John picked up Sherlock’s arm and placed the baseball firmly in his glove. “Make it perfect,” he said.

Sherlock looked amazed, and John didn’t wait for a response, just turned and jogged back to home plate. But he figured Sherlock had enough going on in his head without analyzing John’s pitch choices and whether they were going to lead to a save for Moriarty or not. So John put his glove in a neutral position. Sherlock, after a moment, took a breath John could see from sixty feet and six inches away, and then he wound up and threw, and everything about the pitch was perfect, and it was strike one.

And from that moment on the game was Sherlock. It was all Sherlock. The rhythm of ball to glove and back again was intoxicating. There was nothing else in the world. It was like having tunnel vision. Sherlock threw, and threw, and threw, and the baseball found its way into John’s glove, and the batters flailed wildly or else froze up entirely. John sat in the dugout doing math, as the innings crawled forward, and wondered if Sherlock was doing the same thing, if Sherlock was aware. But of course he was. Nothing escaped Sherlock’s notice. He sequestered himself at one end of the dugout, a towel over his head, the way he usually did, but even John stopped talking to him, not even an exchange of words as they walked to and from the field between innings. By the fifth, nobody was talking to John, either. The dugout had that tense stillness of magic being worked somewhere around them, something barely understood, something that might dissipate if anyone moved the wrong way.

Make it perfect, John had told him.

By the eighth inning John felt like he was on the verge of hyperventilating, and he didn’t know how Sherlock still seemed so calm and collected. John sat in the dugout and resisted the urge to put his head between his knees. Instead, he forced himself to stare at the scoreboard, at the line of zeros racked up there. Remember this, he told himself, the way he had told himself at the All-Star Game. Do you know how few catchers have ever gotten to catch a game like this? Remember every single moment of this. He knew what the commentators must be saying. He knew that their game would be breaking into every single other game being broadcast that night, that someone would say, Sherlock Holmes is pitching a very special game right now, not putting it into true words for fear of jinxing it, just showing the scoreboard of zeros to get the point across.
John walked to home plate at the top of the ninth and listened to the crowd and thought that he’d never heard a crowd so loud, not even at the All-Star Game. They were on their feet, every single one of them, and the PA system was blaring “Shuffle,” and John wondered if he should tell Sherlock to pay attention, to remember this, the way Sherlock had done for him at the All-Star Game, but John was terrified of shaking Sherlock out of it. The other team had tried already, stepping out of the box frequently in an effort to break Sherlock’s rhythm. John didn’t want to challenge him any more than he already was.

But he stood behind home plate and looked out at Sherlock, and Sherlock stood on the pitcher’s mound and looked back at him, and Sherlock nodded, just once, and John knew that he knew and he was paying attention. John crouched behind home plate and held up his glove and kept it steady, a beautiful target for Sherlock, because he needed three more outs, that was it.

The first batter struck out, and the crowd roared deafening approval and stamped their feet and John felt like the field was trembling underneath him as he threw the ball back. The second batter hit sharply to the hole between second and first. Their first baseman dove for the ball and made a gorgeous play and tossed it to Sherlock, covering first in the nick of time. And that was the second out, and John felt the stadium swallow the same dizzying panic he’d experienced at the crack of the bat.

Sherlock went back to the pitcher’s mound and took a little more time than was usual for him, shaking himself a bit. John hoped he wasn’t going to start overthinking himself.

Sherlock wound up, and the motion was as beautiful as it usually was, as beautiful as it had been all night, and John waited for the baseball, except that the batter swung, connecting, into a pop-up, a foul, over by the stands, and John, pushing his mask off, dashed after it and lunged for it and caught it, soundly, in his glove, which he held triumphantly over his head while he tried to keep himself from toppling directly into the stands, which he managed only barely.

By the time he’d recovered his balance, Sherlock had been engulfed by the rest of the team on the pitcher’s mound, and John could just imagine how he was dealing with that, and was sorry he was missing watching Sherlock deal with it. He jogged toward the pitcher’s mound, and as he got close to the mass of his teammates, a few of them clapped him on the back and pulled him into the crowd, close to where Sherlock was at the center of it, trying to squirm out of some enthusiastic celebrating. His cap had fallen off, and his hair was askew, and when he looked at John he looked…delighted. John had thought there might be something else there—annoyance at being the center of so much physical attention, or triumph over not having to give the ball to Moriarty—but it was just delight, young and little-boy-ish, his eyes bluer than John had ever seen them, and John smiled at him and loved him so much it actually hurt.

John held up the baseball. “This belongs to you.”

Sherlock took the baseball and tucked it in his glove and then suddenly hooked his arm around John’s neck and pulled him in for a kiss. John made a noise of muffled surprise, and Sherlock let him go almost immediately, looking almost sheepish, and John realized he hadn’t really intended to do that, he had just done it, without thinking.

There was a wolf whistle from someone, John wasn’t sure who, and their center fielder said, “Now, now, save that sort of celebrating for later,” and the crowd moved then, nudging them toward the dugout. John got separated from Sherlock, although he didn’t try very hard not to be. Sherlock was in the middle of a crowd of people who all, at that moment, liked him very much, and John wanted to give him the opportunity to enjoy it. So John fell back, standing on the infield and watching Sherlock in the middle of their team staggering toward the dugout. Sherlock actually waved to the
crowd cheering in the stadium, and Sherlock almost never acknowledged the crowd, and John smiled and listened to “Shuffle” flooding through the PA system and thought it had turned out to be a bloody lucky song.

“It’s going to start very soon,” Moriarty said beside John, who hadn’t even realized he was there, he’d been so caught up in watching Sherlock. John looked at him, and he didn’t mean to look questioning because he didn’t want to get caught up in a conversation with Moriarty, but Moriarty answered anyway. “The fall,” he explained. “But don’t be scared. Falling’s just like flying, except there’s a more permanent destination. I owe him a fall, John,” said Moriarty, and his voice was as flat and cold as his eyes, and John stood there in the middle of a stadium that was chanting Sherlock’s name, and Sherlock was signing autographs along the edge of the stands now, and Moriarty said, “I owe him.”

***

Sherlock did the post-game press conference. Lestrade had said, “Please tell me you’re going to do a press conference tonight,” and Sherlock, his eyes guileless, still that bright shade of blue that made John’s heart ache, had agreed. John went to a lot of effort to make sure Moriarty didn’t go anywhere near Sherlock before the press conference, but Moriarty didn’t seem inclined to. He smirked at John from across the clubhouse, and John hoped he’d be gone by the time the press conference was over.

The press corps was in paroxysms of pleasure. First a perfect game and then Sherlock Holmes at an actual press conference. The very first question was a shouted, “Walk us through the game!” and that provoked Sherlock to go into great detail about the algorithms and equations and predictive statistics that he had employed, and John thought the press corps wasn’t understanding a word of it. Eventually, when Sherlock paused for breath, someone jumped in with, “John, what did you think about his perfect game?” and John thought that the press’s delight at having Sherlock to question hadn’t seemed to last very long.

John said, “I knew he was going to pitch a perfect game this season from the moment I met him. In fact, I promised him that he would. I was mostly surprised that he managed to cover first properly, honestly.”

There was scattered laughter.

Someone else asked, “Sherlock, mathematics aside, what was the key to this game, would you say?”

John thought Sherlock would answer with, How can you put mathematics aside? But instead Sherlock said, “When John came out to the mound after the first pitch and gave the baseball back to me, he said, ‘Make it perfect.’ So I did.”

John didn’t actually trust himself to look over at Sherlock. He thought his heart would be completely in his eyes and he might end up just throwing himself at him. So he blinked at the microphone in front of him and when the reporter asked, “What do you think about that, John?” he tried to think of what he thought about it. What he thought about it was that he loved Sherlock Holmes, but he didn’t know if that’s what he should say. It wasn’t like it was a secret anymore, but it was never permitted to be discussed at press conferences.

John managed to make himself look at Sherlock, who was looking back at him, smiling, eyes so blue and he was smiling, and John did not think he’d ever seen Sherlock smile at him that way in public, ever. “I…” said John, and had to look away, toward the sea of reporters waiting patiently for an answer from him. “I, uh, wish that worked when I tell him to wash the dishes,” he heard
himself say, and there was laughter, including from Sherlock, and John resisted a mad impulse to find Sherlock’s hand under the table.

The press conference was really a bit interminable, and he could tell when Sherlock started losing interest in it. So could Lestrade, who broke it up at that point.

John, thinking of Moriarty lurking in the clubhouse, said, “We’re going to be mobbed. Can you get us to his car now, quickly?”

Lestrade nodded and gestured someone over, and John assumed he was getting security. John turned to Sherlock. “Lestrade is going to get us out of here.”

Sherlock nodded and rubbed at the back of his neck. “That was tedious. I can’t believe you do that every night. They ask the most ridiculous questions. If I got asked one more question about the song, I was going to go mad.”

“It turned out to be a lucky song.” John looked at Sherlock’s motion on the back of his neck. “Are you sore?”

“No.”

“Liar. You’re not the only one who can deduce.”

“I’ll be fine. Ah, look, here’s our security escort.” Sherlock stood up. “Let’s just go home.”

“With pleasure.”

The security detail wasn’t really necessary to protect them from press, because there weren’t any lurking, but John was relieved that it served its purpose and protected them from Moriarty. Sherlock slid behind the wheel and started the car and revved it out of the parking lot so enthusiastically that John actually slid down on the seat with the force of it.

“Okay, then,” he said.

“John, do you think there’s any police officer in this town who’s going to pull me over tonight?” asked Sherlock, logically, and gunned the car down the street.

“Fair point,” said John, and pushed Moriarty out of his mind and hooked up Sherlock’s phone and blasted “Shuffle.” “Oh, look,” he shouted over it to Sherlock. “It’s your song.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes at him and shook his head, but his mouth was curved into a smile.

John leaned back and watched Austin zip by them. Strange how Sherlock’s driving no longer made him nervous. Instead, it was just, well, hot.

Sherlock skidded them into a stop in their driveway, and that was definitely hot, and then Sherlock met him as he opened the door and pressed him back against the car and kissed the life out of him, and that was very hot. John kissed him back, grabbing at anything he could reach.

“Yoo-hoo!” called Mrs. Hudson. “Boys! Is that you? I wanted to—”

Sherlock pulled back, his eyes silver in the ambient lighting of the yard. They glittered down at John, fierce and single-minded. “We are very busy, Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock called back, and then pulled John over to the door to their apartment, unlocking it more quickly than John would have thought possible in their current states.
They staggered up the stairs unevenly, distracted by kissing, and at one point stumbling enough that John ended up sprawled uncomfortably on the staircase half-underneath Sherlock, and it didn’t matter how fabulous Sherlock’s kisses were, the stairs were digging painfully into him and he shoved at him. “Not on the stairs,” he commanded.

Sherlock grumbled but regained his footing and pulled John up the rest of the stairs and into their living room and then shoved him against the wall, pulling his T-shirt up over his head as he did so.

Winded, John said, “Feeling predatory, are we?”

“Oh my God, yes,” growled Sherlock, full of promise, and undid John’s jeans and slid to his knees and then said, conversationally, “Oh, I almost forgot.”

“What?” John croaked, as Sherlock regained his feet and went bouncing away from him. Seriously? What the hell was he doing?

Sherlock pulled his perfect baseball out of his pocket and put it carefully on their mantelpiece. “There,” he said, pleased, taking a step back and regarding it, and John was up against a wall by himself with his jeans partly off of him but he smiled anyway.

Sherlock turned back to him. “Now, I was in the middle of something, wasn’t I?” he said, and stalked over to John, and John licked his lips in anticipation. Sherlock stood over him, hovering then pressing.

“Oh, bloody kiss me already,” said John, putting a hand on the back of Sherlock’s neck to pull him in.

There was a knock on the door.

“Really, seriously, very busy, Mrs. Hudson,” shouted Sherlock, around John’s tongue, so it wasn’t as much of a shout as it could have been, it was really very muffled.

Still, John thought that was no excuse for the door to swing open and for Mycroft Holmes to say, blandly, “Oh, dear. Am I interrupting something?”

***

Sherlock sat in his chair in the sitting room and looked at the baseball he’d set on the mantelpiece and listened to John in the kitchen.

Mycroft said, “He’s really making tea.”

“Of course he is. He thinks he ‘owes’ you or some such ridiculous thing for getting him into my hospital room, so well done.”

“Well done?” echoed Mycroft.

Sherlock glared at him. “Well, that was what you wanted, wasn’t it? Get John to like you?”

“Maybe I was just being nice,” suggested Mycroft.

Sherlock barked unamused laughter. “I didn’t even know you knew that word. Careful, I’ll tell Mother and then whatever will she think of you? Now.” Sherlock crossed his legs, leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers together, and gathered all the nonchalance he could summon. “I don’t suppose you’re here to congratulate me.”
Mycroft paused. He glanced toward the kitchen. Then he looked back at Sherlock. “Are you…” He hesitated. “Getting married?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. Mycroft never did bother his head to be clever enough to truly follow Sherlock’s career in baseball. “No,” answered Sherlock, shortly. “Why are you here?”

“What game are you playing with Irene Adler?”

Sherlock listened to John rattling teacups around in the kitchen. “What makes you think I’m playing a game with Irene Adler?”

“The fact that I’m not stupid makes me think you’re playing a game with Irene Adler. She’s in bed with Moriarty.”

“You don’t say,” replied Sherlock, blandly.

Mycroft’s eyes narrowed. “You’re in over your head.”

“I’m really not.”

“Then why do you need my surveillance on you?”

“Has your surveillance found anything interesting?”

“Moriarty’s planning something.”

“Obviously,” snapped Sherlock, as John appeared in the doorway to the sitting room with two cups of tea.

“Here we go,” he said, jovially, handing one to Mycroft and the other to Sherlock.

“I thought biscuits, too, perhaps,” said Sherlock, with his best hopeful expression.

“We, uh…” John glanced toward the kitchen, looking a bit confused. “I don’t think we have any. You put them all outside to study something about ants, remember?”

“Mrs. Hudson will have some, surely.” Sherlock blew on his tea.

“You want me to go to Mrs. Hudson’s for biscuits?”

Sherlock gave John the look that he had noticed John seldom said no to.

John rolled his eyes and breathed a curse and walked out of the sitting room. Sherlock waited until he heard the door downstairs close before turning back to Mycroft. “Moriarty’s obviously planning something. He manipulated his way onto my team. After the trade deadline. That takes some doing. And shut up about telling me you don’t know what that means, you claim to be clever, go and learn.”

“Your manager could be in league with him.”

“He’s not.”

“It’s true that I haven’t found anything concrete—”

“Lestrade has nothing to do with Moriarty. Lestrade’s just being an idiot.”
“This entire thing is idiotic, Sherlock.” Mycroft put his teacup down. “Forget about all of it. Forget about Moriarty and all of this silly intrigue. Come home.”

“And do what? Be normal, I suppose.”

“Sherlock, there’s never been anything wrong with fitting in—”

“Except that I don’t.”

“No,” disagreed Mycroft, slowly. “You just don’t let yourself fit in.”

Sherlock changed the subject because he didn’t want another word on that topic. “I thought your visit here indicated that you had concrete information to give me about Moriarty, but you know nothing more than what I knew ages ago about him and Irene Adler.”

“What do you care about him? What can he possibly take from you? This career? Really? Is that what this is all about?”

Sherlock stared at him in disbelief. “You think I would consent to your surveillance for the purpose of protecting my career?”

“What else then?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“John?” Mycroft looked around the sitting room incredulously, as if something about it would reveal the secret allure of John Watson. “Really?”

“I don’t expect you to understand,” said Sherlock, shortly.

“No, I never understand your cycling obsessions. I didn’t understand the crimes, or the drugs, or the baseball. Or John Watson.”

“John is different.”

“Well, you’ve certainly never asked me for my help when it came to any of your other obsessions,” Mycroft remarked.

“Yes, well, I learned at an early age not to waste oxygen. I don’t know what made me forget that lesson recently.” Sherlock stood, still holding his teacup, and walked over to the window, looking out it. John was standing on Mrs. Hudson’s front porch, clearly trying to leave, biscuits in hand, but Mrs. Hudson was chattering on about something, and John was too polite to cut her off and was nodding and smiling vaguely in distracted response. Sherlock, watching something so simple, so unremarkable, as John standing on a porch holding biscuits and having a conversation he didn’t want to have, felt short of breath in his adoration. He didn’t care what it took, if it took forming an alliance with Mycroft. He was getting John his World Series. “Moriarty’s after John,” Sherlock said, keeping his eyes on him.

“Moriarty’s after you,” Mycroft corrected. “John’s just caught in the middle of it.”

“He offered me Tchaikovsky,” said Sherlock.

“Moriarty did? Other than being insulting, I don’t see what—”

“It’s John’s favorite,” Sherlock interrupted, turning from the window. “Tchaikovsky is John’s favorite. It wasn’t an insult. It was a threat. An extremely specific threat.”
Mycroft was silent for a moment. “He may have just been guessing that your catcher has terrible taste.”

“Do you think that’s the likely explanation?”

“How would he know John’s favorite composer?”

“How indeed, Mycroft?” asked Sherlock, dryly, and took a sip of his tea, leaning back against the windowsill.

“So you think Moriarty’s doing all this to get to John?”

“Yes.”

“But why, Sherlock? What does John matter? I have done my research. You and Moriarty, when people talk about you, the two of you are twin comets in baseball. John Watson is a comparable non-entity.”

Sherlock shook his head and looked over his shoulder. John was walking across the gravel drive, back to the flat. “That’s what everyone gets wrong,” said Sherlock, “including John. He is the most important thing.”

***

Sherlock was waiting for Moriarty to corner him. The best way to be cornered was to engineer it yourself. It was actually hard for him to engineer it. John almost never left his side when he knew Moriarty was around, and Sherlock loved this protectiveness while simultaneously finding it laughable, since the protectiveness needed to be the other way around. But Sherlock had managed to shake John, finally, tagging along to the field remarkably early and then ducking out of a meeting John was having with Dimmock about West’s neverending mechanical issues (unsolvable, but convenient suddenly that they kept having discussions about them).

“You’ve been exceedingly well-behaved,” said Moriarty, behind him, and Sherlock settled his baseball cap on his head before turning around.

“Have I?” he inquired, mildly.

“Oh, you know you have.” Moriarty was slowly sauntering toward him. Sherlock leaned over and picked up his glove. “So difficult to get you to come out and play. You used to be so much more fun, Sherlock.”

“That’s always depended on one’s definition of the word,” remarked Sherlock.

Moriarty’s lips twitched in something that was as far away from a smile as it could be. “Do you think it’s going to save him? Do you think it’s going to save you?” Moriarty drew to a stop in front of him, much closer than polite society would have dictated. “I promised you I would burn the heart out of you, and you’ve rather shown your hand with Doctor Watson.”

“It would be a bad idea,” said Sherlock, evenly, “to do anything to John.”

“Oh, I think that depends on your definition of ‘bad,’” replied Moriarty. “What would you do to protect him? Oh, I think you would do anything. It’s delicious.” Moriarty looked gleeful. “You’d jump off a building if it would save him, wouldn’t you?”

Sherlock smiled. He leaned down and spoke in Moriarty’s ear. “I’d find a way to cheat death if it
would save him. That’s what you should be concerned about.” Sherlock pushed past him, walking toward the clubhouse door and calling back, without looking behind him, “Lovely chatting.”
They weren’t going to win the division, but the wild card was well in hand, and on the morning of the last game of the regular season, John Watson was lying in the bed he shared with Sherlock Holmes and staring up at the sun-splashed ceiling. Sherlock was not in the bed. He usually wasn’t in bed when John woke up. Sherlock almost never slept, as far as John could tell. He was making the world’s most enormous racket in the kitchen, and John was calculating the odds that he was going to start a fire or was merely making a huge, potentially toxic mess.

The bedroom door swung open, and John turned his head as Sherlock walked in, holding two mugs.

“What’s that?” he asked, in surprise, struggling to sit up.

“Oh, you’re awake.” Sherlock looked disappointed as he handed John one of the mugs. “I was going to kiss you awake.”

“Oh, well, don’t let the technicality stop you,” said John, and Sherlock leaned over and kissed him. John said, in approval, “Mmm,” and then, when Sherlock drew back, “What’s with the tea? You don’t pitch today.”

“It’s congratulatory tea,” said Sherlock, straightening and sipping from his own mug.

“We haven’t won yet.”

“We could lose today; we’d still be playing baseball in October.”

“Right, but I mean that wasn’t my goal.”

“I didn’t think you were going to make October at all with this team. You pulled that off. This is you-were-right tea. I thought you’d appreciate it.”

“Frankly, I find you admitting I was right to be terrifying. Almost as terrifying as the amount of chaos you seemed to cause in the kitchen while making two cups of tea.”

“It might be a slightly experimental tea.”

“Oh my God, have you drugged me?”

“That was a joke, John,” said Sherlock, his lips curving into a smile.

“The thing is that I wouldn’t put you drugging my tea past you.”

“If anything I’d drug your coffee. I think it would mask the flavor better.”

“See? You’ve thought about this.”

Sherlock put his mug down on the bedside table and crawled onto the bed next to John, propping up on his elbow on his side. “I was thinking about the postseason rotation.”

“Stop it,” said John. “You’re jinxing it.”
“I can’t jinx it. It’s mathematically impossible to jinx it.”

“You’re jinxing something.”

“Put your tea down,” said Sherlock, nudging John’s hand over to the bedside table.

“Why?” asked John, suspicious, even as he complied.

Sherlock rolled on top of him and leaned his forehead against his. He didn’t kiss him, which John had been expecting, he just laid there and breathed, holding his weight carefully so as not to crush John.

“Sherlock,” said John, eventually, questioningly.

“I just want one morning where we’re not waiting for the other shoe to drop. We’ll go back to worrying tomorrow. All right?”

John combed his fingers through Sherlock’s tangled curls and said, tenderly, “Yes. All right. We’ll fix your jinx with the old superstition.”

“What’s the old superstition?” asked Sherlock, sounding resigned.

“You owe me 307 seconds of sex.”

“Oh, that superstition,” said Sherlock, pleased now. “I love that superstition.”

***

John was thinking of the 307 seconds of sex as he sat in Lestrade’s office later that day, staring in silent shock at the piece of paper Lestrade had handed him. The office was completely silent, and all John could think of was Sherlock jinxing things that morning, of Sherlock asking for one morning without the shadow of the other shoe hanging over their heads, and Sherlock had gotten his wish, John supposed, since the other shoe had solidly dropped. Directly on him.

“John,” Lestrade said, finally, gently.

“It can’t…” John stared at the piece of paper and tried to make it make sense. “It can’t… It can’t be right. Greg. I haven’t… I’ve never… It can’t be… How did it…” John stopped talking, because it wasn’t like he was making sense anyway. He stared uncomprehendingly at the piece of paper on his lap.

“Can I get Sherlock?” asked Lestrade.

“What?”

“This is confidential, John. I can’t get him without—”

“This is confidential?” John asked, and was finally able to look up at Lestrade, waving the paper around violently. “This is confidential? No, it’s not! It’s going to be splashed all over the Internet in twenty minutes’ time! If it hasn’t been already! And it’s not even true.”

Lestrade’s gaze was even and sympathetic and John hated everything about it. He wanted to rewind the clock so he could wake up before Sherlock and stop him from making the jinx-inducing tea that had caused the domino effect that had ended in this.

“I can’t get Sherlock,” repeated Lestrade, carefully, “without your—”
“Oh my God, get him, don’t get him, what difference does it make?” snapped John.

Lestrade picked up his phone and pressed a button and murmured something into it. John heard Sherlock’s name. John was reading the piece of paper again, although he felt like he was reading it for the first time. Silence stretched in Lestrade’s office until the door flew open and Sherlock stalked in with his characteristic forcefulness.

“What have you done to John?” he demanded.

“I haven’t done anything,” Lestrade defended himself, offended.

“Then why does he look like that? John, what’s Lestrade done this time? What’s that?” He had clearly caught sight of the piece of paper John was holding.

“It’s the result of my drug test,” John said, and he was surprised how simple that sounded, said out loud like that, so straightforward.

“What’s it say?” Sherlock asked, although he asked it with dread, and John didn’t have to look at him to know that he already knew what it said.

“It’s positive,” answered John. “For steroids.”


John finally looked at him, watching as his eyes sped over the piece of paper before he dropped it to Lestrade’s desk imperiously.

“Well, this is preposterous,” said Sherlock. “Surely you can see that.”

“It’s an automatic fifty-game suspension—” Lestrade began.

“Of course it’s not, because we’re appealing it.”

“On what ground?” asked Lestrade.

“On the ground that it isn’t true.” Sherlock whirled to look down at John. “John, have you ever taken steroids?”

“Of course I’ve never taken steroids,” said John, dully. “But how are we going to prove that?”

“Appeal it,” Sherlock snapped at Lestrade. “We at least need the delay so he can play in the postseason.”

“They’re going to rule quickly, Sherlock. They’re not going to want the scandal of a tainted October if he loses the appeal.”

“He’s not going to lose the appeal,” said Sherlock.

John looked at him, feeling much sharper suddenly. “Sherlock,” he said. “What are you going to do?”

Sherlock affected an innocence that filled John’s belly with cold dread. “Nothing.”

“Then how do you know I’m not going to lose the appeal?”

“Because I have faith in the truth and justice of the Major League Baseball disciplinary system,”
replied Sherlock, loftily. He turned to Lestrade. “Lodge the appeal. Do it now. John is playing tonight.” Sherlock swept out of the room.

Lestrade looked at John, eyebrows raised, and John knew he was seeking John’s agreement. John hesitated, and then nodded. “Do it.” He didn’t have any other options, and he needed to buy a bit of time to figure out what Sherlock had planned. He left Lestrade’s office and sprinted after Sherlock, who hadn’t yet reached the elevator. “Sherlock. What are you planning?”

“This is Moriarty,” said Sherlock, not breaking stride.

“Moriarty tampered with my drug test?”

“Well, you haven’t taken steroids ever, so what’s your explanation?” Sherlock punched the button for the elevator and looked at John demandingly for an answer.

“Tell me what you’re going to do, Sherlock,” John said, firmly.

“It doesn’t matter—”

“Of course it matters.”

“This is my mess. Let me clean it up.” The elevator doors slid open, and Sherlock stepped onto it.

John followed. “It is not your fault that years ago Moriarty—”

“That’s not why it’s my fault. It’s my fault because I jinxed us this morning.”

“You don’t even believe in things like jinxes,” complained John.

“What can I say? You’ve convinced me.” The elevator door opened again, and Sherlock strode quickly off it.

“Sherlock,” John pleaded, desperately, following him.

Sherlock turned to face him, leaned close to speak softly to him, his eyes hard on his. “You have a game to catch. Do it. I’ll be back in time for the champagne in the clubhouse.”

“Where are you going?” asked John, between his teeth.

“See you soon,” said Sherlock, pointedly not answering the question and walking quickly away.

John watched him, furious but not knowing what he could do. He had a positive drug test hanging over his head, one last regular season game to catch before a chaotic postseason with a closer who hated the ace of his pitching staff, and a boyfriend who had just run off to wreak some sort of ill-advised and doubtless addle-minded revenge.

When Sherlock rounded the corner of the hallway and John could no longer see him, John pushed his hands through his hair, sighed in frustration, and turned away, catching Moriarty standing in the doorway of the clubhouse, watching him.

“What’s up, Doc?” asked Moriarty, casually.

John smiled tightly in response.

***
Photographers would snap him with Irene Adler, because they always did. They seemed to think he spent so much time with the head of Sherlock’s Sweeties because he was trying to improve his image or some such nonsense. Sherlock didn’t divest them of the notion because he didn’t want to tell them that he spent so much time with the head of Sherlock’s Sweeties because he was using her to double-cross his closer.

Irene sat opposite him at the table, all legs and blood-red lipstick as usual. She looked pointedly at the coffee in front of Sherlock. “And you didn’t order me one? Rude.”

“John’s drug test came back positive today,” said Sherlock, who was not in the mood.

“Ah,” said Irene, and smiled at him. “Good.”

“No,” retorted Sherlock, sharply. “Not good. You were supposed to warn me what Moriarty’s plan was.”

Irene’s smile turned into a scowl. “I couldn’t, could I? He would have suspected something if I told you, if you thwarted him. Don’t you want to take him down? Isn’t that what you want?”

“No, what I want is for John not to be hurt,” bit out Sherlock, “but it’s too late for that now.”

Irene leaned over the table, hissing at him. “This is the only way to guarantee John’s not hurt. Don’t you see? You’d be playing this game with Moriarty forever, always trying to keep one step ahead of him. Now you’ve let yourself fall one step behind so that you can win it all. Because there’s going to be a phone on your mantelpiece when you get home tonight that’s going to have all the evidence against Moriarty that you could ever wish for.”

Sherlock regarded her. “Evidence that he tampered with John’s drug test?”

“Exactly. Foolproof.” Irene leaned back in her seat. “Impressed?”

“Not especially,” responded Sherlock. “I would have been more impressed if you’d managed to do it without John getting caught in the crossfire. The way we agreed.” Sherlock stood.

“You’re welcome,” said Irene, pointedly.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t get exactly what you wanted out of all of this,” Sherlock told her, and handed her the rest of his coffee. “Enjoy,” he said, grimly, as he walked out of the coffee shop.

He didn’t even take two steps to his Aston Martin before the dark car drew up next to him, the back door swinging open and Mycroft snapping from inside, “Get in.”

Sherlock sighed and looked at his watch. Still time to have another delightful talk with his brother before getting to the field for the celebration. He ducked into the car. “This had better be worthwhile.”

“Irene got you the evidence on Moriarty tampering with John’s drug test, I assume?”

Sherlock frowned. “Did you know Moriarty was going to tamper with John’s drug test?”

“No. I thought he was going to tamper with your drug test.”

“Idiot. I told you he’s going after John, not me.”

Mycroft didn’t acknowledge the fact that Sherlock had been right and Mycroft had been wrong. Not that Sherlock had expected him to. “If you use the evidence, Moriarty will retaliate with the
evidence against you about the gambling.”

“I don’t care.”

“But you should care.”

“Why? All of a sudden you’re worried about my baseball career?”

“I’ve spent most of my life protecting your reputation from the things you’ve done to sully it. I’m not about to let all my hard work go to waste because of something you didn’t do.”

“Well, it isn’t your decision. I’m not letting this ruling stand against John.”

“You don’t have to,” said Mycroft. “You can use your evidence. I’m just saying that you ought to have something in your pocket for when Moriarty retaliates.”

Sherlock stared at Mycroft. “What do you have on him?”


***

The clubhouse was covered in plastic to protect everything from the champagne, and the champagne was chilling, and Moriarty was closing the game out, even though there was no need to have their closer out there. More evidence that Moriarty was wrapping people around his fingers left and right. Or effectively threatening them.

Sherlock stood in the clubhouse and watched the final out on the television screen in there. They’d clinched the wild card days before, but it had happened on a road trip, and they had decided to celebrate the end of the season since they were ending at home, and Sherlock watched his teammates flood Moriarty on the mound. John didn’t. John walked pointedly off the field, and Sherlock wished he’d stayed to celebrate a little, because the cameras would read a guilty conscience into the action.

At least it meant John walked into the clubhouse before anybody else did. He drew to a halt when he saw Sherlock.

“Told you I’d be back for the champagne,” said Sherlock, and picked up a bottle, shook it, and fired the cork out of it, spraying John with the champagne that came flying out. John scrunched up his face against the attack.

“Have you started already?” shrieked Caleb Broughton, as he bounced in at the head of the rest of the team, and then there was champagne everywhere.

Sherlock tried to duck out of the melee, looking both for John and Moriarty. He had expected Moriarty to come and gloat, but he was being occupied by the rest of the bullpen, who were dousing him in champagne. Sherlock wasn’t sure if this was a sign of affection or a sign of resentment. Either way, in keeping Moriarty away from him, the bullpen had just become his favorite members of the team.

John was standing in the middle of the fracas, yet entirely by himself at the same time. He was holding a champagne flute that he wasn’t drinking and had his head tipped back, watching the post-game press conference Lestrade was holding that the television was showing. Normally, John would have been at that press conference. There must have been a decision made to keep John away from the press for a bit.
Sherlock walked over to stand next to him. John didn’t look at him, kept his gaze on the press conference.

“So the team is standing by John Watson?” Sally Donovan shouted at Lestrade.

“Yes,” said Lestrade, grimly.

“Mrs. Hudson’s doing,” guessed Sherlock, who would have expected a no-comment on ongoing investigations.

“Lestrade’s, actually,” corrected John, and Sherlock gave Lestrade a few reluctant points in his favor.

“Even though he uses steroids?” demanded Sally Donovan on the screen.

There was a sudden commotion at the press conference, what sounded like a crescendo of vibrations and ringtones all going off at once. Lestrade looked confused on the screen. “What was that?”

“We all just got a text,” answered one of the reporters, off-screen.

“The same text,” said another one.

“Just says ‘wrong.’”

John looked at Sherlock. “Did you have anything to do with that?”

Sherlock looked at the television screen but let his lips twitch. “Not at all,” he lied, blandly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sherlock caught John smiling for the first time since he’d walked into Lestrade’s office and found him with the drug test results in his hand. John was a smiler. Sherlock couldn’t remember seeing him go so long without smiling ever before. He didn’t care for it at all.

“Sherlock, what did you do today?” John asked, sounding fearful. “I mean, other than program a mass text to go to the entire press corps.”

Sherlock looked at him, met his eyes. “Nothing to fret over. I didn’t sell my soul or anything like that.”

“But what did you do?” John persisted.

“My job,” Sherlock replied, and wanted to touch him. John looked exhausted, actually. Sherlock really wanted to gather him up and press his head into his chest and tell him to sleep and not to worry about any of it. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

John nodded weary agreement and put his glass down. No one tried to stop them as they trailed out. The celebration was in full-swing, and the rest of the team knew that John was not really in any mood to celebrate at the moment.

John was silent as Sherlock drove them home. Not sleeping, just thinking, and Sherlock left him to it because he didn’t know what he could do to help with those thoughts, and he didn’t really want John to ask more about what Sherlock had spent the day doing. So Sherlock drove them without a word and walked into their flat in the same silence and then turned to John and said, “Shower.”

John nodded, not arguing, and trailed into the bathroom. Sherlock listened to the shower turn on and knew John would make it very hot and would stay in it for a while.
John’s mobile rang where he’d dropped it on the coffee table on his way through the door, and Sherlock looked at it for a second before pulling himself off the sofa to answer it. It was blinking Mum, so Sherlock answered with, “Fiona.”

“Sherlock?” she said. “What is going on? They’ve been talking about—”

“I’m handling it,” Sherlock interrupted her. “I’m handling all of it.”

Fiona paused. “Is he okay?”

Sherlock considered. Not terribly, he thought. “I’m handling it,” he repeated. Which was true.

There was another pause. Then she said, “Tell us if you need any help.”

He wasn’t going to need any help. He had it all covered. “I will.”

“And give him a kiss and a hug from us.”

“Er,” said Sherlock. “Yes,” he agreed, with no intention of really doing that. But he understood the sentiment.

And he hung up John’s mobile, tossed it back on the coffee table, and, after a moment’s contemplation, reached for his violin.
Sherlock had not been planning a dramatic confrontation with Moriarty. In all honesty, he had not had enough of a position of strength to think of doing anything like that. Moriarty had everything he needed to destroy Sherlock, and the knowledge of that had kept Sherlock thinking of only modest victories. But then Mycroft had presented him with the most glorious mountain of information on the Commissioner of Baseball, and Sherlock’s plan coalesced into diamond brilliance. He couldn’t have wished for anything better than this. Well, he supposed he could have wished for the salvation not to have come from Mycroft, but, barring that, Sherlock would take what he could get.

Because the baseball gods had been kind enough to allow their team to face Moran’s in the first round of the playoffs. And Sherlock, starting the game, stood on the mound in the second inning and looked at the fourth batter the other team had sent to the plate, Sebastian Moran. He thought of Moriarty in the bullpen watching, and he thought of John, playing this first game of the playoffs under the taint of the ongoing investigation, and he thought of the way John had been grim and drawn on their way to the field, not at all the way he usually behaved on a day when they got to play baseball.

John flashed a sign at him, and Sherlock gave a nod that would have been imperceptible to anyone but John, who knew him so well. Sherlock aimed, and wound up, and threw exactly where he’d intended to: straight at Moran.

Moran tried to twist out of the way, but the ball had been a hyperenergetic fastball, and he didn’t have a chance to react fully. The ball collided solidly with his thigh, and the crowd—Moran’s team’s crowd—let out a collective gasp. Moran dropped his bat and stalked toward the mound, and John, pushing his mask off his face, scurried out quickly from behind the plate, getting in front of Moran, between Moran and Sherlock, giving Moran a gentle little shove to try to switch his trajectory away from Sherlock. Sherlock stood on the mound, watching and feeling a little bit smug, because he fancied he could sense Moriarty’s powerless fury radiating from the bullpen.

The umpire came out to tell Moran to move along. The crowd was shouting invectives now, booing loudly, so Sherlock wasn’t able to hear what it was that Moran said in Sherlock’s direction. Whatever it was, John moved so quickly in reaction that no one knew what he intended until he’d already delivered a solid punch to Moran’s jaw, least of all Moran himself, who reeled backward in shock. Sherlock blinked in surprise. He’d expected Moran to make a bit of a fuss, but he had not expected a fight.

And that was what it was, because after a moment of stunned reaction, Moran ran at John and then the dugouts emptied, and Sherlock found his entire team rushing from the playing field behind him toward the tangle of John and Moran.

“Sodding hell,” muttered Sherlock, because he really hadn’t meant to cause that. He went to head into the melee, because he needed to get John out of it, but found himself cut off by Moriarty. “Ah,” he said. “Have the bullpens joined in, too?”

Moriarty was breathing hard, and he looked more furious than Sherlock had ever seen him. He stepped close to Sherlock, exhaling sharp, jagged breaths through his teeth. “That was a mistake,” he said, quietly.
“Was it?” asked Sherlock.

“That was a mistake!” Moriarty shouted, loudly enough that a few of the players nearest them looked at them in surprise.

“Hurts, doesn’t it?” Sherlock responded, unflinchingly. “That sort of attack. Tends to burn the heart out of you. You don’t necessarily play fair after that. And isn’t that what you and I are doing? Playing a game? Just an extension of the game we play for a living?”

“Do you think I’m just going to let you get away with that?” Moriarty demanded.

“I think you should be grateful I didn’t throw at his head,” Sherlock replied, icily, and stepped away from Moriarty, walking away from him confidently. Moriarty wouldn’t come after him in the open. Moriarty didn’t like to get his hands dirty.

The fight had mostly broken up. The umpiring team was in the middle of it, pulling players off each other. John and Moran were being physically held apart from each other. John was breathing hard and looked a mess, blood trickling from his lip, and he and Moran were still glowering hatefully at each other.

The umpire in between John and Moran looked at Sherlock as he stepped through the crowd and made the universal motion for tossing him out of the game, which Sherlock had expected. “You two, too,” he said to John and Moran.

John shook off the players who’d been holding him back, snapped out, “Fine,” and stalked to the dugout.

Lestrade was standing on the edge staring at the two of them in angry disbelief. “Are you guys serious? Like we don’t need you? It’s October baseball, and you get into a fight?”

“Sod off, Lestrade,” said John, and knocked over a few bats on his way through the dugout to the clubhouse.

Lestrade looked at Sherlock in surprise that turned to disapproval. “And you threw right at him. What got into you? Could you have made it any more obvious?”

“I was sending a message,” Sherlock replied, shortly.

“A stupid message?”

“Like John said, sod off, Lestrade,” said Sherlock, and followed John into the clubhouse.

“What the hell, Sherlock,” John demanded as soon as Sherlock entered. He was standing in the middle of the clubhouse, hands on his hips. “What was that?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be a fight like that. I was just going to throw at him.”

“Throw at Moran? Get us thrown out of the game? We’re going to be suspended. And it’s October. And I’m already on thin ice.”

“You weren’t supposed to punch him.” Sherlock peered down at John’s face, where a bruise was blooming on his cheek. “Look at you. You’re a mess. What were you doing?”

John scowled at him. “My job,” he answered, and Sherlock winced a little at having his words thrown back in his face like that. “You know it’s the catcher’s job to keep irate batters away from
the pitcher.”

“Yes, I know that, and you were doing quite a good job of that without punching him.”

John dropped his eyes, looking somewhere in the vicinity of Sherlock’s Adam’s apple. “I had to punch him.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “What did he say about me?”

John shook his head. “Doesn’t matter.”

Sherlock sighed and dropped it. “Don’t worry about the suspensions.”

“Don’t worry about the suspensions.” John lifted his gaze again, glaring at Sherlock. “It’s October. How is this team supposed to win anything without either of us?”

“I’ve got the suspensions covered. Do you think I would have done that, and purposely jeopardized the postseason, if I didn’t have the suspensions covered?”

John stared. “How do you have the suspensions covered?”

“I’ve got everything covered, not just the suspensions. Come on, let’s go home. There’s nothing more we can do here, and you should get some ice on that cheek.” Sherlock turned and walked out of the clubhouse, confident that John would follow him.

He did. “What do you mean, you’ve got everything covered?”

“John, please don’t make me repeat myself; you know I find it tedious.”

“Sherlock.” John reached out and grabbed Sherlock’s arm and forced him to stop walking. “Tell me. Tell me now or, I swear to God, I won’t go back to that hotel with you.”

Sherlock sighed and looked around them. “Not here. Come back to the hotel with me, and I’ll tell you there.”

“If you don’t tell me when we get there, I’ll leave.”

“Agreed,” said Sherlock.

John narrowed his eyes in suspicion but nodded once, and when Sherlock resumed walking and got into the car waiting to take them to the hotel, John followed and slid in behind him.

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John sat on the room’s couch and Sherlock knelt on the floor between his legs and pressed ice to his cheek, and if anything made John suspicious, it was Sherlock’s solicitousness. He winced at the cold and the pressure, and Sherlock said, “How much does it hurt?” and John said, instead of replying, “Tell me.”

Sherlock sighed. “I’m going to have to start at the beginning.”

“How convenient for you, then, that we got thrown out of our baseball game early and have a lot of unexpected free time this evening.”

“Irene Adler was working with Moriarty.”
“She was?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why not? People like Irene Adler generally don’t need anything other than some vague ideas about their best interest. Now, are you going to keep interrupting with unnecessary questions?”

“I should have punched you instead of Moran,” muttered John, darkly.

Sherlock ignored that. “I convinced Irene to work with me instead.”

“How?” John had no intention of stopping with the questions.

“Again, just a push about her best interest. In reality, she played both of us and got paid by both of us in the end, so it really was in her best interest.”

“Did you know about the drug test?” John demanded.

“No. Irene was supposed to tell me about Moriarty’s plan. She didn’t.”

“What a fabulous ally she turned out to be,” drawled John, sarcastically.

“But she did give me all the evidence I need to prove Moriarty tampered with your drug test. We’ll clear your name, first thing tomorrow.”

John stilled and watched Sherlock concentrate on the application of the ice, peering much more closely than necessary at John’s cheek. “Sherlock,” said John, slowly.

“I do hope you got in a few good shots at Moran,” commented Sherlock.

“If you use the evidence, Moriarty will go to the Commissioner with the gambling evidence.”

“Of course he will,” Sherlock rejoined, lightly.

“Sherlock, look at me,” John demanded.

Sherlock did, meeting his eyes. “John, it doesn’t matter.”

“No. It does matter,” John insisted, and he pushed Sherlock’s hand away from his cheek, the better to have this argument.

“It doesn’t,” Sherlock replied, firmly, pushing John’s arm away and putting the ice back on his cheek, “because of Mycroft.”

“Because of Mycroft?”

“Yes.” Sherlock was paying close attention to the ice again. “We are very much in Mycroft’s debt. And you know I hate to say that.”

“Why? What has Mycroft done?”

“Mycroft knows a lot about the Commissioner. A lot about the Commissioner.” Sherlock gave John a meaningful look.

“Enough to make the Commissioner look the other way when it comes to the gambling,” John
realized. Sherlock said nothing, just adjusted the ice on John’s cheek, but John knew he was right. “Enough to make him look the other way when it comes to the fight tonight. We won’t be suspended, that’s why you threw at Moran.”

Sherlock said nothing again, removing the ice and readjusting the facecloth it was wrapped in.

“You’re going to blackmail the Commissioner of Baseball,” John concluded.

Sherlock replaced the ice. “Yes,” he confirmed, simply.

“I think you’ve gone mad.”

“I think it gets Moriarty out of baseball forever and it gets you and me nothing but a lack of punishment for things we don’t deserve to be punished for.”

“I did punch Moran tonight.”

“But I trust your judgment that he deserved it,” responded Sherlock, mildly.

“I’m not going to tell you what he said.”

“And I’m not going to pry about it. I will say thank you, though.”

“For what?”

“Doing your job. Above and beyond.”

John was silent for a moment. “Will it work? The blackmail.”

“Mycroth thinks so. And I’m letting Mycroft handle it. Mycroft knows all about blackmail.”

“You’re letting Mycroft handle it?”

“I’m learning delegation. Mycroft knows more about blackmail than I do, and you’re too important not to have the starting lineup behind you.”

John considered. He lifted his hand and loosely circled Sherlock’s wrist next to his face, near the ice on his throbbing cheek. He looked at Sherlock, who looked back at him, his moonbeam eyes hard and glittering with determination. Sherlock, who had been ready to get thrown out of baseball in order to clear John’s name. Sherlock, who didn’t have to because he was instead going to resort to blackmail to do it. Going to resort to asking his brother for help to do it. And John Watson had been in baseball long enough to understand that sometimes you played by the rules and sometimes war was declared. Which was what Moriarty had done long ago. Which was what Moran had confirmed that night.

“Thank you,” he said, finally.

“For what?”

“Doing your job. Above and beyond.”

Sherlock flickered a smile at him. “It was much easier having a drug addiction, you know.”

“Shut up,” said John, and pulled him in for a kiss. Yes, his lips were a bit tender and swollen from one of Moran’s more successful punches, and his cheekbone hurt like hell, but the kiss was still worth it.
Sherlock woke to John curled up next to him, head cushioned on his shoulder and arm thrown possessively over his chest, feet and ankles intertwined, and he spent a little while watching the sunlight creep progressively further into the room and listening to the flutter of John’s breaths against him. This was how he started most mornings. He wondered if John knew how much time he spent simply laying against him, marveling at how deeply he slept, at how much trust was involved in that action on John’s part. Eventually, when he deemed that it was late enough that his day should get started, he slid out of the bed without waking John, a maneuver he’d perfected, and went into the bathroom to get dressed.

When he was done getting himself ready to face the day, he walked into the hotel suite’s living room, sprawled on the sofa, looked at the ceiling, and commenced waiting until John woke up and got them tea or coffee.

Then there was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Hudson’s voice floated in, “Yoo-hoo! Are you up yet, boys?”

Sherlock scowled and rolled himself off the sofa and went and opened the door. “Shh,” he scolded. “John is still sleeping.”

“Oh. Sorry,” said Mrs. Hudson, looking unconcerned about how dire an issue that was for Sherlock. “Have you seen this? I know you’re not the best at looking over the news, and I know John’s a late sleeper sometimes—”

Sherlock took the newspaper section Mrs. Hudson was holding out at him and read the headline. And then read it again. And then he read the whole story. “Wait,” he said. “But...” Which was very unlike him, to start a thought and not finish it. “Mycroft,” he decided, grimly, and said, “Thank you, Mrs. Hudson,” and went back into the hotel room and closed the door.

And then he rang Mycroft, who answered with a bland, “Something wrong?”

“What is this?” Sherlock hissed, trying to keep his voice down for John’s benefit. “John’s been cleared of all accusations? The Commissioner’s suspended Moriarty indefinitely, pending further investigation? Given the circumstances, the Commissioner has declined to issue any further suspensions, including for the fight last night?”

“I thought that was your Christmas wish list,” remarked Mycroft, dryly.

“You did all this last night?” Sherlock demanded. “Without consulting me?”

“What was there to consult about? I thought we were both settled on the plan.”

“The plan wasn’t to—” Sherlock cut himself off as John came out of the bedroom, sleep-mussed and yawning, and Sherlock sent him a tight smile that he hoped look like good morning as John wandered into the kitchen area of the suite. Sherlock turned his back to the kitchen and spoke in low tones into the mobile. “The plan wasn’t yours to run off pell-mell and do as you wished.”

“You left me no choice. Your little stunt last night tipped our hand to Moriarty. You’d never have done something like that if you weren’t feeling confident. I had to hit him before he’d had a chance to regroup.”

“But,” sputtered Sherlock, and John called from the kitchen, “Sherlock! Tea or coffee?” “I don’t care!” Sherlock called back to him.
“Sherlock,” inserted Mycroft’s infuriatingly calm tones. “This is everything you wanted. I am handing it to you on a silver platter. No strings attached. You’re feeling uneasy because you’re not used to that, I’m aware. But consider it my penance for not being as quick about John as I should have been. Now. Enjoy the rest of your day. Enjoy the rest of your season.”

Mycroft hung up. Sherlock sat with a mobile pressed to his ear with no one on the other end, staring unseeingly out the window and trying to comprehend what had just happened. Maybe his brother had been kidnapped and replaced with a robot. A nice robot.

“That must have been Mycroft,” said John, from behind him.

Sherlock put the mobile down and turned. John was leaning against the kitchen doorway, arms crossed. “What makes you say that?”

“Only Mycroft could put you in such a terrible mood so early in the morning,” John commented. “You’re not the only one who can deduce.”

Sherlock allowed John’s point and leaned over to hand John the newspaper Mrs. Hudson had brought. He watched John read it through once quickly and then again more slowly, his eyebrows furrowing together.

“I…” John looked up at him. “When did you do this?”

“I didn’t.”

“Mycroft did,” John realized.

“As I somewhat requested,” Sherlock agreed. “I was supposed to be a bit more involved, but… yes.”

John glanced at the newspaper again, then back up at Sherlock. “Wait. Does that mean it’s over?”

Sherlock hesitated, and then said something he hated to say. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“Well, doesn’t it seem too easy to you?”

John looked over his shoulder into the kitchen, checking on the progress of whatever morning beverage he’d chosen to make, and then he walked over to Sherlock and said, “It was an elaborate blackmail scheme that involved a months-long game of double-cross. You think that was easy?”

Sherlock was mainly thinking that, if he’d asked Mycroft for help years ago then Moriarty would have been neutralized years ago, would never have done anything at all to John, but Sherlock hadn’t asked Mycroft for help, and instead he’d made a huge mess and then he’d dragged John right into the middle of it. He licked his lips and opened his mouth and wondered what he was going to say.

John shook his head and said, “No,” before Sherlock could say anything at all. “It is October 3,” he said. “It is the first day of the rest of our lives. No more what-ifs. Because we got the best what-if we could have hoped for.”

Sherlock hesitated for another second before nodding, and John looked satisfied and kissed the tip of his nose before disappearing back into the kitchen.
Sherlock pushed aside the nagging suspicion that Moriarty would not fade so easily into the background. “What did you make?” he asked, striving for normality. “Coffee or tea?”

“Green tea. We’re going to have green tea every morning of the postseason.”

Sherlock made his *ugh* noise. “I think I hate October,” he said.

***

They ran into Lestrade on their way into the field, and he said, without preamble, “This is a mess. I’m calling a team meeting.”

“The good news is Sherlock and I aren’t suspended,” said John, brightly.

“The bad news is that you look like a boxer, not a baseball player, so there’s no way you’re playing at a hundred percent.” John privately admitted that was true; he hurt all over from the fight. “And oh, yeah, there’s that little detail of we no longer have a closer.”

“He was always a stupid closer,” said Sherlock. “I told you not to trade for him.”

“Not helping right now, Sherlock,” Lestrade told him between gritted teeth.

“I find it always helps to acknowledge that I’m usually right. We could have saved ourselves all this boring drama.”

Lestrade looked as if he might murder Sherlock, and then his team would be down a closer and their ace, so John put a hand on Sherlock’s arm and said, “Maybe not the best time to gloat. Maybe we should wait until after we win the World Series.”

“Then the two of you can write some sort of bestselling memoir,” complained Lestrade, throwing his arms about in frustration. “How We Were Gay and Always Right.”

“Good title,” said Sherlock, blandly.

“Oh, and why am I now getting reports from your brother about Moriarty’s whereabouts? Why is he tracking Moriarty?”

“He’s tracking Moriarty because he is a bit clever,” said Sherlock. “Although I don’t know why he’s giving the reports to you and not me. Where is Moriarty?”

“New York City, apparently. Meeting with counsel about what to do about everything. It’s bad. Drug test tampering and gambling and—”

“I want to make a note that this would be another perfect opportunity to say I told you so,” inserted Sherlock.

“Team meeting time,” announced Lestrade, and turned on his heel to march into the clubhouse.

“Maybe a bit less smugness, love,” John commented, under his breath, with no hope that Sherlock was going to listen to him.

The clubhouse was buzzing with gossip, and John guessed that all of it was pertaining to the Commissioner’s overnight rulings, especially since the room went deathly quiet as soon as he and Sherlock walked in.

Lestrade didn’t really acknowledge the fight the night before or John’s overturned drug test. He
just launched into, “It’s the beginning of October, we’ve got a postseason to win, and we don’t have a closer.” He lifted his hands, palms up, as if pushing ideas toward his team. “I am open to suggestions.”

John felt everyone in the room look at him. He blinked, startled, and looked at Sherlock instead. Why was everyone looking at him? Sherlock was the one who had ideas.

Sherlock looked as if he were reading John’s thoughts. And he still looked incredibly smug. He turned away from John and said, “I can close.”

“We need you to start,” Lestrade said, dismissively.

“I can do both.”

“You can’t do both.”

“For a few weeks in October? Yes. I can do both.” Sherlock was sounding annoyed now.

“Stop it,” said John. “You’d just be showing off, and you’d ruin your arm in the process. The human arm isn’t supposed to throw overhand at all, you know, it’s not made that way. Halfway through you’d end up throwing the last pitch you’d ever throw in your life.”

“So?” retorted Sherlock. “You know it doesn’t matter to me—”

“First of all, it matters to me. And second of all, you wouldn’t make it far enough to get to the World Series, not unless every game was a blow-out and we never needed a closer.” Sherlock opened his mouth to say more but John lifted a hand to shut him up. “Next idea,” he said, firmly, and Sherlock radiated sulky displeasure but he did shut up. “We don’t necessarily need a closer.”

“You’re anticipating that the games won’t be close for the next month?” asked Lestrade.

“I say that we can hope for that, but that, even if they are, we can rotate through pitchers. We’ve got enough of them.” John looked at his knot of relief pitchers and didn’t feel overly confident about any of them, but thought they could piece things together. “We can all help out. We won’t have a designated closer. We’ll just have the pitcher who feels the best on the day.”

“The starters can help, too,” contributed Cadogan West, and John looked at him in surprise because West wasn’t usually the best team player. West looked sheepish enough that John knew he was aware of that reputation, but West also looked firm. The fact of postseason baseball often changed motivations. West seemed to be aware that they were actually not out of reach of a World Series and was willing to step up in reaction. “I mean, we can’t pitch every day,” West continued, “that would be a terrible idea, but we can join in every so often.”

“Yes,” Mike Ryan agreed, firmly. “We can piece it together.”


Lestrade looked at the team. There was a pregnant pause because, actually, a lot had happened to this team and there was a lot to discuss, but, again, it was October, and the moment passed and no one said anything, not even Anderson, and Lestrade said, “Okay, then that’s it.”

The buzz of conversation started up in the clubhouse again, a bit more subdued than it had been before the meeting, and Lestrade looked over at John. “You think we can win the World Series without a closer?”
John thought they didn’t have a choice. But what John said was much more positive. He said, confidently, “Yes.” He was going to will it to be so. He’d gotten them this far on what felt like sheer force of will; he wasn’t going to give up at this point.
There was a lot of debate about what to do about Sherlock’s aborted start in the Game 1 loss. He hadn’t thrown many pitches, so he could be ready to go again quickly, but that would have gotten the pitchers out of rotation order. In the end, when Ryan’s start in Game 2 turned out to be a romp of a victory for them, the decision was made to hold Sherlock in reserve for either a must-win start or a must-win close. Sherlock was so tickled pink about getting to be out in the bullpen for a possible close that John actually asked him if he’d wanted to be a closer instead of a starting pitcher. “Of course not,” Sherlock had replied, “starters have much more control.” “You just want to play every position,” John guessed, and Sherlock had beamed, “Exactly.” John decided he hadn’t been very successful in getting Sherlock to understand the point of being a team player.

To Sherlock’s disappointment, they never needed him to come in and close. They won the next three games of the NLDS and advanced to the NLCS and penciled in Sherlock for a Game 1 start.

On the day before the start, John was on the phone with his parents, explaining that he was trying to finalize tickets for the whole family to the next game, when Sherlock came barreling out of the kitchen, where he’d been doing something that John had decided against asking too many questions about, and said, “No. Absolutely not,” shaking his head violently.

“What? Why not?” John asked, bewildered, because it seemed unlike Sherlock to get performance anxiety over having acquaintances in the stadium.

“You’re inviting them to the NLCS because you think it might be their last chance to see you play in the postseason. But it won’t be, because you’ll be playing in the World Series, so don’t you dare invite them to tomorrow’s game.”

Sherlock had been speaking loudly enough that John’s mother heard him and said, “Oh, Sherlock’s absolutely right.”

“No, he’s not,” John denied. “Don’t be silly. Come to the game.”

“No, he’s right, you’re doing this because you don’t want us to miss you playing in October.”

“I don’t want you to miss me playing in October.”

“We won’t. We’ll catch you on the next round. Tell Sherlock we’ll see him soon, won’t you?”

John, his conversation with his mother having reached an unsatisfactory conclusion, followed Sherlock into the kitchen, where he was measuring something carefully and looking pleased with himself.

“I suppose you’re happy, then,” said John, annoyed.

“Yes. I am. It’s going to be fine, John.”

“You are jinxing things madly right now. You are jinxing things left and right,” complained John.

“You ought to make us some green tea,” rejoined Sherlock, absently.

John decided the suggestion was a good one, filling their kettle. “And another thing,” he continued.
“My mother does everything you say. She thinks everything that comes out of your mouth is brilliant.”

“Clever woman,” said Sherlock.

“You’d think she was in love with you,” grumbled John, being stubborn and insisting on watching the kettle try to boil, despite what he knew about such things. “She ought to come here and live with you and your smugness for a few days.”

Sherlock slid his arms around John from behind, pressed a kiss into the back of John’s neck, and said, “Your mother would be appalled by the amount of sex I require.”

“That is the opposite of something that you should say to someone you want to have sex with,” John pointed out, turning in Sherlock’s arms to face him.

Sherlock shrugged and then proved that it didn’t matter, and John didn’t make the green tea until much later. He did still make it, though. Sherlock needed to be taught lessons every so often.

In his more practical and less terrified moments, John understood why Sherlock felt confident. The team was coming together with a sense of destiny that felt frighteningly undeniable. John had seen other teams develop this aura during October, this fated unstopability. He had watched from couches in his living rooms or from bar stools in exotic locations, depending on how he had decided to spend October. He had never watched from a dugout before, from a clubhouse, from behind home plate, and he thought maybe he was getting it wrong, misreading things. He stayed away from any press coverage at all once he became aware that he was not the only one saying such things about the team, because he couldn’t bear to hope that much.

They were playing, all of them, with an easy inevitability. Sherlock set the tone with a flawlessly pitched Game 1—not technically perfect, but easy, relaxed, as if it were a pick-up game in a backyard instead of Game 1 of the NLCS. John envied him his laidback composure. John thought it must be much easier to play in October when baseball was just a job and not the milestone by which time itself was measured in your head. It was October, and the air was crisp and cool, and he, John Watson, was playing in front of a television audience of millions.

They were standing on the edge of a sweep, and it had been decided that Sherlock would take the Game 4 start, and he woke John up with the traditional cup of Sherlock-fetched tea followed by the traditional 307 seconds of sex, and John tried to enjoy all of it but felt vaguely sick to his stomach and enjoyed the sex very little and the tea even less. Which Sherlock noticed because anyone would have noticed, never mind Sherlock Holmes.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Sherlock was sitting on the couch in their hotel suite, his legs crossed, and he said, bitingly, “How’s your leg?”

Twinging, but there was no way John was telling Sherlock that. “Stop it,” he said, instead, and focused on not limping on his way to the dresser in the bedroom.

“You are thinking too much,” continued Sherlock from the living room. “You know it’s bad for you to do that. You are thinking yourself out of it.”

John, irritated, stalked over to the bedroom doorway, ignoring the protesting ache from his leg. “This is too easy,” he snapped.

“Oh,” drawled Sherlock. “Moriarty fading away the way he has, that’s not too easy in your view, but this is?”
“Yes. Do you know how many teams have gone on to win the World Series after sweeping the LCS? None, Sherlock. None. And that’s one of your beloved statistics, so, you know.” John thought he could have finished that sentence a bit stronger, so he compensated for it by waving his hand in Sherlock’s general direction.

“That’s a meaningless statistic. Baseball’s full of them. That’s a statistic about superstition, not about maths. We are a good team, and there is no reason we can’t win the World Series.”

“Yes, there is a reason, the reason I just gave you!” shouted John.

Sherlock rose from the couch, making his way over to where John was, and shouted back, “What do you want? Do you want me to throw the game tonight so that we don’t sweep so that you’ll feel better about the World Series?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” John retorted.

“Then what is this row about?” Sherlock demanded, close enough now to loom over John. John opened his mouth to answer, and then realized he didn’t know. He scrubbed a hand over his face, suddenly exhausted, and mumbled, “Christ,” then dropped his hand and looked at Sherlock. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry. I just…” Sherlock’s eyes were wide and periwinkle and inviting of confidences. “I’ve never made it so far into the postseason before, Sherlock. I’ve never played this long, never played this late, and I never will again, and I know it’s not the most important thing, I know it’s not, but it’s something that I’ve wanted for so long, and it’s greedy of me to ask for more, it’s greedy and all I can think of is everything that can go wrong.”

“John.” Sherlock took a step closer to him, and his voice had dropped to be low and soothing, a bedtime story sort of tone. “It’s not greedy. You deserve it.”

John made a small sound of protest, shaking his head. “Not the way the baseball gods work.”

“Don’t talk to me about gods. Talk to me about maths. We have played, you and I, 168 games now. We only need to play five more. Just five more.”

“Exactly,” said John, dully, looking at the top straining button of Sherlock’s too-well-fitted shirt. “We’re so close I can taste it.”

“You have gotten us here,” said Sherlock. “It’s been all you. But I know you don’t believe that, so I’ll tell you what you need to hear to get us the rest of the way there.” Sherlock reached out and rubbed his hands down John’s arms, and John looked up at him, wanting to hear it, whatever it was. “I will get us there. I will not let you not get there, John Watson. Take a deep breath and trust me. Because at this point I will get us there if I have to pitch every single bloody inning myself, I don’t care what you say.”

John nodded, hearing Sherlock’s words and telling himself, firmly, to believe them.

“Take a deep breath,” Sherlock ordered, again, and John obeyed. Sherlock nudged him forward, until John’s face was against his chest. “And another,” he murmured, and John breathed again, and Sherlock lifted his arms up to tuck him in as close as he could get, and the warmth of him pressed against John, and Sherlock said, at his ear, “And another,” and the warm velvet words uncurled into his blood like smoke, and John lifted his hands to close them into Sherlock’s shirt.

“I love you,” John mumbled, into the soothing silence that Sherlock was wrapping them in, into the expensive fabric of his shirt. “I love you more than the World Series.”
“But the World Series would still be nice,” added Sherlock, his voice laced with amusement.

“Yes,” said John.

Sherlock put his lips into John’s hair and said, “Ring your family. Tell them they’ve got front row seats to Game 1. I’m finishing this for you tonight.”

***

John wasn’t sure how he’d expected Game 1 of the World Series to be. He’d spent so much time imagining it, from his boyhood on, and yet every preconceived notion he’d had about it vanished from his head the minute he stepped onto the field for it. The PA system was blaring “Shuffle,” which Sherlock had kept as his song, even though he could have reclaimed the Wagner. John thought it was a good choice. “Shuffle” had been a good song for Sherlock, and the Wagner was now tainted by the whole Moriarty debacle, in John’s view.

John stood on the dirt by the dugout for a full minute, looking around the stadium and drinking it in, and then Sherlock walked past him and said, blithely, “Work to do,” as if it were any other game.

Which was helpful, because John swallowed all the butterflying nerves and thought of it as any other game, Sherlock on the mound, calm and cool and collected and throwing achingly beautiful pitches his way. And, when they won the game, John went to do the post-game press conference with Sherlock’s command ringing in his ear. *Just like any other game.*

When the press conference was done, he found Sherlock waiting for him by the Aston Martin, and he said, “Where’s my family?”

“I sent them home. Just like any other game, John. They’ll be here tomorrow.”

“This sounds suspiciously like superstition,” John couldn’t help teasing him.

“No, just trying to keep you out of your own head as much as possible,” Sherlock replied. John acknowledged that was a useful thing, and Sherlock had lovely ways of doing it, too, as he proved that night and then again the following morning, and John said, panting, “You’re going to steal all of my energy,” and Sherlock said, “You only have to play three more games this season,” and John said, “Oh my God, you are the biggest jinxer I have ever met,” and threw a pillow at his head.

John was waiting for them to lose. He thought Sherlock probably was, too, because statistically they should have lost a game by now, but they kept winning, and John, on the night they won Game 2, sat on the plane flying to the AL city and looked out the window and let himself think about the near future. Sherlock would pitch Game 4 again. And if they won Game 3, then Game 4 would be the deciding game. Sherlock would pitch the deciding game of the World Series, and Sherlock would win, because Sherlock had been pitching beautiful baseball that postseason, there was no question that he would win.

John made up his mind, and he waited until Sherlock was showering the following day, and then he phoned Mycroft. Mycroft’s number had appeared in the contacts list of John’s phone early on in his relationship with Sherlock, but he’d never thought he’d use it.

Mycroft answered with a curious “John?”

“Sherlock is about to pitch in the biggest game of his life,” John informed him.

“I have been following your progress,” said Mycroft, as if being up two games to none in the
World Series were the same as remodeling a bedroom or something.

“Your family should be there,” John said. “You should all be there.”

Mycroft was silent for a second. “He wouldn’t appreciate that—”

“Yes, he would. That is the thing he would most appreciate from all of you, just an acknowledgment that he’s good at this and that it’s worth being good at. I can’t tell if all of you genuinely don’t realize how much you matter to him, or if you’re all so cruel that you’re withholding your approval to purposely hurt him. Whichever it is, I don’t care right now. You should be at his Game 4, and you should smile and cheer for him, and you should be supportive, because it is literally the biggest game he will ever pitch, ever, and you should be there.” The shower was off, so John hung up without waiting for Mycroft to reply, because he didn’t want Sherlock to discover that he’d spoken to Mycroft or said anything like what he’d said; Sherlock would not take kindly to it.

Sherlock emerged from the bathroom and looked at John inquisitively, as if he knew something had happened, but John played it off as nerves and Sherlock was willing to believe constant nerves of John these days, so John thought he got away with it.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

This morning in the shower, it suddenly occurred to me: John and Sherlock won the All-Star Game. Which would give them home-field advantage for the World Series. Which means they should have been *away* for this chapter instead of home. Oops. I can only apologize and beg authorial prerogative or something.

Oh, also this John Watson shares a hiding place with N&N John Watson. What can I say? They are both John Watson. And both written by me. Just so you know, this John Watson had the hiding place first.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Sherlock knew they were going to win Game 4 from the very first pitch he threw. He could just tell. He could tell that he was on and that there was no way the pitcher for the other team could out-pitch him on such a night. But, for John’s peace of mind, he said nothing about it. He tried to treat the game as he would any other game, shuttering himself under a towel at the edge of the dugout during the offensive half-innings. Until he was approached by a reporter for a dugout interview, and under any other circumstances he would never have agreed, but it was Game 4, and the last game, and he said, “Yes.” The reporter blinked and fell all over herself getting him set up, clearly worried he was going to change his mind. John, noticing the commotion, frowned at him and mouthed, *Jinx*, across the dugout, and Sherlock shook his head at him.

The first question was, “And how are you feeling about this game so far, Sherlock?”

“If I told you, John would kill me,” Sherlock answered, and she laughed.

“Is he superstitious?”

“Yes.”

“And are you?”

Sherlock hesitated. “I think it’s possible there’s something about the World Series that makes everyone a little bit superstitious.”

“What do you think the key to this game has been for you?”

That was an easy question, and Sherlock’s eyes sought out John, leaning against the dugout fence watching the game. “John,” said Sherlock. “The key to the entire season has been John. And not just for me, because I’m love-addled or whatever you might be thinking. Ask anyone on this team. This has been John’s season; we would not be here without John Watson. ‘Doctor’ is an inadequate nickname for him. A better one would be ‘Captain.’ Actually, both are necessary. He’s basically an army doctor.”

John seemed to sense that Sherlock was talking about him, or at least sensed Sherlock’s gaze, because he looked over his shoulder at Sherlock queryingly.
The reporter didn’t seem to know quite what to make of Sherlock’s answer to the question. “He
certainly has had a career season,” she agreed, a bit awkwardly. “Is he still planning on retiring
after the season?”

“As far as I know,” said Sherlock.

“Well, continued good luck in this game, Sherlock, thanks for speaking to us,” said the reporter,
and Sherlock thought that had been relatively painless as things went.

“Just like any other game?” said John to him, wryly, as they walked out to the field together.

Sherlock shrugged.

By the eighth inning his pitch count was getting up there, and there was a consultation with
Lestrade and Dimmock about what to do.

“This is ridiculous,” Sherlock told them. “I feel absolutely fine, and this is the last game of the
year. What are we saving pitches for?”

“Jinxing, jinxing, jinxing,” John accused, and covered his ears with his hands dramatically.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, and Lestrade nodded at him, and he headed out to pitch the ninth.

John met him on the pitcher’s mound before going to home plate, and Sherlock said, “If this is
about how I’m jinxing this by pitching this inning—”

“No,” said John, solemnly. “This is about the fact that...I know why I never made it to a World
Series before now. And it’s because it wouldn’t have meant anything, I wouldn’t have enjoyed it
half so much, without you. So the baseball gods got that right, making me wait this long, making
me wait for you. I wouldn’t have ever wanted to do this without you. And I just wanted to say…
thank you.” John held out his hand.

Sherlock stared at him, wanting nothing more than to kiss him and kiss him and kiss him and to
forget about the rest of the game, and then looked down at the hand he was extending. “Are you
serious?” he said.

“Shake my hand now; you can kiss me later when we’re alone.”

“Ridiculous,” Sherlock muttered, but he shook John’s hand and John walked to home plate and
later the third out was a strikeout, and in the midst of all the raucous celebrating, John stood off to
the side and just watched, drinking it all in, until Sherlock could resist him no longer and split off
from the celebrations to suddenly tackle him into a breathless kiss against the backstop.

“You were supposed to wait until we weren’t being filmed anymore for that,” John told him,
gasping for breath.

“Oh, who cares? It’s all over now, and you told me I could tell everyone to go to hell once the
season was over.”

John shook his head, looking fondly exasperated and not really very disgruntled, and Sherlock
straightened and let him go and said, looking out over the crowd, “Come on, let’s go find your...”
He trailed off, staring at Mycroft in the stands, looking very out of place. Standing next to their
mother, who looked even more out of place. Standing next to their father, who looked the most out
of place. He stood and stared and remembered only eventually to blink. And then he said to John,
dazedly, “I’ll be right back,” and walked over to the side of the stands, where his family was
standing. His family. He looked at them in amazement. “What are you doing here?”

It was his father who answered, gruffly, and Sherlock tried to remember the last time his father had actually spoken to him. “Mycroft claimed it was important,” he said, sounding dubious about it.

In baseball terms, there was nothing more important, but to Holmeses it was nothing at all. Sherlock looked at Mycroft in astonishment.

“Oh, it was John, of course,” inserted his mother, impatiently. “He rang Mycroft and managed to convince him that you would actually care whether or not we came. And so here we are.” She looked annoyed at the effort it had taken.

But she had also come. To his baseball game. And she had stood there and watched it even though she didn’t understand and didn’t care about it. She had come and Sherlock had no idea what to say or how to feel and he was luckily saved by Matt and Sophie running over to him and shouting, “You won, you won!” and throwing water at him from their water bottles, and Sherlock wrinkled his nose in displeasure and tried to dodge every insane thing that was going on around him and took the opportunity to avoid thinking too much about the unfamiliar press of warmth in his chest because his family had come to see his baseball game.

And later, much later, after John had been named MVP to his great surprise and the surprise of absolutely no one else, after John had managed somehow to convince the Holmeses that they ought to join the Watsons for celebratory drinks, after the celebratory drinks managed to be just as awkward as Sherlock had thought they would be but not quite as painful as Sherlock had feared, when he stopped the Aston Martin in Mrs. Hudson’s drive and turned it off, he looked over at John and said, “That was quite enough for me. I am never winning the World Series for you again.”

John grinned at him and said, “That’s okay. You did it once. And now we are done. I have a surprise for you.”

“The surprise wasn’t ringing my family?”

“Well, no, that was a surprise, too. Are you angry about that?”

Sherlock considered then shook his head. “No. I’m not. But I can’t imagine what you said to convince them to come.”

“What can I say? I’m impossible to say no to.”

“I’ve experienced that myself,” Sherlock agreed, dryly.

“Come on,” said John, opening his door. “The surprise is inside.”

“How do you manage to surprise me?” Sherlock asked, following John into the flat. “It’s normally very difficult to do.”

“You just don’t seem to acknowledge how very brilliant I am,” John replied.

“Oh, no,” Sherlock responded, gravely, “I am well aware of how brilliant you are.”

John grinned and opened the cupboard and pulled out the tin of green tea and pulled out an envelope, handing it across to Sherlock. “I knew that was the last place you would look.”

Sherlock’s mobile was vibrating distractedly in his pocket, next to the Game 4 baseball that he’d also kept for John’s sake. He pulled the mobile out, leaving the baseball in place until he got it out
to the mantelpiece next to the perfect game baseball, and glanced at the name blinking at him.

Mycroft. Not interesting. Not as interesting as John’s gift. So he opened the envelope.


“Exactly.” John looked pleased with himself.

“The flight leaves tomorrow,” said Sherlock, looking up at him.

John nodded.

“How long ago did you buy these?” asked Sherlock, incredulously.

“October 3,” said John. “The first day of the rest of our lives.”

“You bought these tickets for us to fly to London on the day after Game 4 of the World Series on October 3?” Sherlock repeated. “And then you spent the entirety of the month quarrelling with me over how I was jinxing things?”

“I really was worried about jinxing things. And at the same time I thought… I thought to myself… Every day this season, or almost every day, I woke up and you were there, in our bed, or in our flat, or somewhere near. Every day. And you never got bored, you never stopped looking at me like I amazed you, you never… You were just there, always, gorgeous and clever and incredible and you loved me, and I thought to myself…I thought, John Watson, you have already won life’s lottery. How can anything go wrong for you this year? How can you lose?”

Sherlock’s mobile vibrated again. He frowned at it and turned his attention back to John. “You have that so very backward,” he said. “How can you doubt that I would be here every day? Where else would I be but with you?”

John reached for him and pulled him in and kissed him, not hard, not passionately, but relentlessly, desperate little sips of kisses, and in between he whispered, “Thank you thank you thank you thank you,” an endless stream, Sherlock was uncertain what he was being thanked for, when the gratitude should have been running in the other direction, but he tried to kiss back as well as he could, until John seemed to run out of the desperation and tucked his head into Sherlock’s neck and breathed.

Sherlock swept his hand down John’s back and closed his eyes and listened to the mobile vibrating again on the table.

“Someone wants to get in touch with you very badly,” John mumbled.

“It’s Mycroft,” said Sherlock, testily. “Being an annoying prat as usual.”

“You should talk to him. And while you do that, I’ll go wait for you in bed.”

“Or we could just go to bed together,” suggested Sherlock.

“Talk to your brother,” said John, and gave him a small shove away from him. “I went to all the effort of orchestrating a family reconciliation.”

“John, we are never going to be inviting Mycroft over for coffee, I hope you understand that.”

“Somehow, I will cope,” said John, and was halfway out of the kitchen before he turned back. Sherlock, who had been reaching for the mobile, looked up at him expectantly, and John grinned at
him. “Sherlock Holmes. We just won the World Series.”

Sherlock smiled back at him. “Yes, we did. Just tell me one thing: Did you have fun doing it?”

“I had a blast,” said John, indeed looking giddy.

“Good,” said Sherlock, pleased.

“Did you?”

“Baseball isn’t fun, you know. Baseball is equations and algorithms.”

“You had the time of your life this season,” said John, confidently.

“Go get naked,” said Sherlock, waving him away and picking up his phone with a smile on his face.

One of the vibrations had been a text, and he read that first before ringing Mycroft back, and the text read, *M fallen off surveillance; in Austin area*, and the smile faded off Sherlock’s face, and he looked up toward the silent bedroom with dread, already knowing. He didn’t even need to read the next test. *Get out now.*

Sherlock texted back, quickly, blindly, two words. *Send help.* And then, swallowing thickly, he walked slowly over to the bedroom and through the door.

John was standing still as a statue in the middle of the room, his hands slightly raised, and Moriarty was standing against the opposite wall, with a gun very casually trained on John. John looked at Sherlock, and he didn’t really look terrified, he looked furious. Sherlock looked at Moriarty, who smiled at him in welcome.

“Sherlock. Darling. *Hi.* I was wondering when you’d join the party. Took forever for the two of you to get here, and then I had to listen to all that tedious flirtation in the kitchen, which I really could have done without, I have to say. But, ah well, here we all are now, am I right?” Moriarty smiled brightly at them both.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock asked.

Moriarty looked surprised. “My, my, the great Sherlock Holmes asking such a simple question. How much does it hurt you to admit that you don’t know?”

Sherlock considered. “But I do know.”

“Oh, do you?”

“Yes. You’ve conspired to burn the heart out of me, hence the gun trained on John. And you’re doing it in the stupidest manner possible, because there’s no way you’re going to get away with it.”

Moriarty’s smile never wavered. “Why would I want to get away with it? What would that matter? I have no career left, you saw to that. So I’ll take the thing that’s most important to you, the way you took the thing that’s most important to me, and our game will be a draw. What do you say, Sherlock?” Moriarty corrected his aim a bit.

Sherlock looked at the gun. The safety was already off. Moriarty only had to pull the trigger. Sherlock thought of his gun, the one he used for target practice, in the drawer of the bedside table where it was *useless.*
“I destroyed your career,” Sherlock said, “it’s true. But that also means I could give it back to you. Take the blame for the gambling scandal.” Sherlock was inching closer to John, hoping he’d be able to push John out of the way.

“That blame should be yours anyway,” Moriarty snapped at him.

“Well, that’s a matter of opinion, but I suppose I’m willing to concede that under these circumstances,” said Sherlock and stuck his hands in his pockets.

The gun swept away from John, in Sherlock’s direction, and Sherlock breathed a small sigh of relief.

“Hands up,” said Moriarty, icily. “Now.”

And Sherlock closed his hand around the baseball in his pocket and pulled it out and threw.

His aim was as true as it ever was and it would have hit Moriarty full-on in the face except that Moriarty ducked, the gun going off as he did so, but Sherlock had also ducked and John had dove dramatically to the side, behind the bed, which was a good place for him, there was cover for him there. It left Sherlock out in the open, but Sherlock was okay with that trade-off.

“What a stupid, stupid thing for you to do,” Moriarty shouted at him, gun trained firmly on him.

Sherlock said, “I’ll admit it wasn’t the best fastball I’ve ever thrown, but—”

The gunshot made Sherlock flinch, and for a second he thought he must have been hit, that he wasn’t feeling anything because of the shock. And then blood trickled from the perfect round hole in Moriarty’s forehead and Moriarty staggered backward against the wall and down to the floor, his gun dropping uselessly to the side, his eyes staring unseeingly. Sherlock, breathing hard with shock, looked wide-eyed at John, who was lowering the gun he’d pulled from their bedside table.

“Good shot,” he gasped.

“People always underestimate catchers’ aims,” John replied, shakily, and then abruptly sat down with his back against the bed and closed his eyes and mumbled, “Bloody hell.”
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks to arctacuda, for helping with the writing and for uncomplainingly beta-ing when I whine. Including beta-ing while traveling around the world and having much more interesting things to worry about.

...How is this fic over? I don't understand. It seems like just the other day I was brainstorming what I could do with it, and now all of a sudden it's all done and out there in the world and it all belongs to you now. Which is actually my favorite place for a fic to be, because I love it when I'm writing it but I love most when I get to share it all with you and see it through your eyes and live it all over again, and again, and again. Because here's a little secret I'll let you in on about how I feel about being a writer: I love the act of writing, I love it more than anything else that I do, and I am happiest when I am in the middle of it. And then, when it's over and done, I'm like, "...Oh. But...But I loved them all, and now I'm done with them, and what am I going to do now?" And do you know what I get to do? I get to share it with you, and then my characters never stop living. That's the best part. You guys are the best readers in the world. Your passion and enthusiasm for words, for dialogue, for characters is so contagious. I love to see everything new through your comments, and you teach me so much about everything, and I am so incredibly grateful for each and every single one of you, more than I think a lot of you might realize. Writers talk about their characters being their kids a lot, and it is kind of, I think, like when you have a kid, and you think your kid is brilliant, and then you send him off to school, and someone says to you, "Hey, you know that kid of yours? He's brilliant!" And you know that's only partly because of you, but it doesn't matter, you're just so chuffed that someone else looked at something you love desperately and loved it just a bit, too. So thank you, to all of you who loved my baby after I sent it off into the world, especially those of you who don't at all care about baseball. It's yours now, really, and I leave it in good hands.

By design, I am wrapping up this fic just as the baseball season is ending. Today, in fact, the Boston Red Sox clinched a playoff berth and will be playing in October. There are lots of players just like John Watson full of emotion tonight over getting to live their childhood dreams, and there's a way in which this fic was for all of them. If you think of John Watson and Sherlock Holmes every time you see a baseball game now, well, enjoy that image, then. :-)

Chapter Thirty-Six

They went to London, as planned. The police were convinced that John had acted in self-defense, with a little help from Mycroft and his recordings of the goings-on in the bedroom. (“I'm sorry, I know it was wrong, but I was worried about Moriarty and your safety and see it came in handy after all,” Sherlock explained in one huge rush of breath when John learned about the surveillance in the apartment.) When Sherlock asked John, in the early morning after the longest night John had ever experienced, what John wanted to do, John begged him to get on the plane with him and just go.
So Sherlock did.

John had always intended to skip the World Series parade for Sherlock’s benefit, sensing he would hate it, but it turned out that Austin decided to delay the parade indefinitely due to the scandal, so Sherlock didn’t need to convince John that they should at least go to the parade (which Sherlock had intended to do for John’s benefit, because he knew he would love the parade) and they went to London to escape all of it.

The scandal followed them to London, of course, and they spent the first few days there holed up in a hotel room with the curtains drawn against the paparazzi outside, until Sherlock said he was sick of hotel rooms and managed to get them away to an enormous manor house somewhere outside London that Sherlock called a “hunting lodge,” even though it was nothing like any hunting lodge John had ever seen. The grounds were expansive, and they were safe from paparazzi, and John uncoiled and relaxed, and if Sherlock treated him like he was a little more fragile than he normally was, John let him because he felt a little more fragile than he normally was.

They stayed at the “hunting lodge” for a week, and at the end of it, as they were lying in front of the fire one night, John sitting up and Sherlock sprawled with his head in his lap, Sherlock finally asked the question John had been waiting for, which was, “Are you all right?”

John stroked his hand through Sherlock’s thick curls, growing even more unruly now, and looked into the fire and said, “I think so.”

“You did just kill a man,” said Sherlock.

“He wasn’t a very nice man,” John pointed out.

“True.” There was a moment of silence before Sherlock ventured, “What do you want to do next year?”

“No commit murder at any point would be nice,” said John, dryly.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” replied Sherlock, but twisted on John’s lap to look up at him. “But I’m serious. Are you still going to retire?”

John looked down at him and pushed the tumbled curls off of his forehead. “Yes. I can’t imagine playing baseball again after the season I just had. I can’t imagine ever having a better season. I want that to be my last memory of baseball.”

“You could coach. You’d be good at it.”

John shook his head. “I don’t want us separated, and we would be, if we were on different teams, which we would probably be.”

Sherlock hesitated, and then said, “I don’t think I’m going to play next year.”

John had been looking back into the fire, but he looked down at Sherlock in surprise at that. “But you’re under contract.”

“I know, but I… I have the money to buy the contract out, and I don’t want to play anymore. I’ve done everything I meant to do with baseball, and more. I was only ever playing because I couldn’t think of anything better to do. But now I have something better to do.”

John lifted a wry eyebrow. “Me?”
“In the crude sense and the not-crude sense,” answered Sherlock. “I have you now, and I think I was only ever playing baseball in order to find you, so there’s no point to it for me now. I’ll find another hobby and follow you around next season, if you want.”

It was John’s turn to hesitate. He looked back into the fire. “I don’t know. You’d mentioned medical school, and I was thinking… Maybe it’s time for both of us to say good-bye to baseball. Maybe we can never top anything that happened this season, so maybe we shouldn’t try. Maybe we should just relegate it to games of catch when one of us is agitated. Maybe we should find a life for ourselves here.”

“At the hunting lodge?”

“For the last time, Sherlock, this is a bloody palace, not a hunting lodge. But no, not here, we’d both go mad here eventually. In London.”

“You would miss it,” said Sherlock. “It’s a part of you. You love it.”

“I love you more. I’ve always loved you more. And if I miss it, if I’m wrong, then we’ll revisit this topic at this time next year. We’ll come back here to this palace-slash-hunting-lodge and we’ll talk about all of this again. Deal?”

Sherlock considered. “Deal,” he said, and turned back into the fire and settled more comfortably. He was silent for a moment, but John could practically hear the thoughts flying through that busy head of his. “There’s a flat…” he said, finally.

Trust Sherlock to have never been entirely hypothetical in his talk about the London flat they could get. It turned out that he’d had one in mind for a while, that he’d staked it out years ago, when he’d first imagined living in London by himself, but that it was well-suited to two people, and John stood in the middle of 221B Baker Street and had to agree. It looked exactly the way he had pictured their flat to look, the way Sherlock had described it, with the busy wallpaper and the cozy fireplace and the bedroom big enough for a nice-sized bed.

“I never got you anything for your birthday,” said Sherlock, as they stood in the living room together, and he sounded almost shy.

“I told you not to worry about that,” said John.

“I know. But I could buy us this flat.”

John looked at him. “You’re going to buy us a flat as a birthday gift for me?”

“If you like it.” And then Sherlock seemed to backpedal. “Is that not right? I thought it would be… Maybe it wouldn’t… I don’t normally buy presents,” Sherlock admitted.

John felt his heart clench, the way it often did around Sherlock, the way it often did when love surged through him at too severe a rate for his system to process it. Sherlock didn’t normally buy presents, because Sherlock had never had anyone to buy presents for, and, of course, Sherlock was going to start gift-buying at the very top of the heap, with a flat. And who was John to turn him down, when all he was trying to say was I so-much-more-than-love you.

John looked around him and then turned back to Sherlock. “You know,” he smiled, “I think you’re right. I think the wallpaper’s going to grow on me.”

THE END.
Works inspired by this one:

- Cover for The Bang and the Clatter by avawatson (avawtsn)
- The Bang and the Clatter - Book Cover by ficklewordsmith
- The Case of the Baseball Detectives by elephantfootprints
- Holmes and Watson Steal the Show by moonblossom graphics (moonblossom)
- Cover -- The Bang and the Clatter by thewaysinwhich
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