This Doesn't Feel Like Falling

by Dark3Star

Summary

When he fell from St. Barts, Sherlock knew he loved John Watson. John couldn't love him back (or so he thinks). Now that he's back from the dead things are back to normal... sort of. When a serial killer targets increasingly high profile gay couples Sherlock is on the case. With a, possibly ill-advised, plan Sherlock and John go undercover as a couple to uncover the truth.

Notes

Okay, I know this starts short, but I promise it gets longer a better. Just bear with me.

This is my first fanfiction in...let's just say a while. I normally do straight romance and, while this story will most certainly have that, it also has a fair amount of drama. I welcome all kinds of feedback; I want to tell a good story. Suggestions for things you would like to see are also welcome. I can't make any promises, but you may find suggestions appearing in the story, so don't hold back. I'm really excited about this story; hopefully it's the first of many. Enjoy!
Smitten?

Chapter Summary

It begins...

Chapter Notes

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I offer my heartfelt thanks to my Beta Helena Chauby for her help in editing chapters, Lady of Clunn for BritPicking this story, and to my flatmate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff, for his help with plot development.

I hope you enjoy the story!

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Prologue: Smitten?

_Bored - SH_

"Well _somebody_ looks smitten."

John looked up from his phone and blinked at Tara, his health care assistant. "Excuse me?"

Tara's lips were quirked upwards in a knowing smirk. "I saw the way you were looking at your phone just now. You're smitten. Who's the lucky girl?"

John flushed and shoved his phone in his pocket. "No one. It's nothing."

Tara raised an eyebrow. "If you say so doctor, but it doesn't look like nothing from here."

"Tara, will you just room the next patient please?" John muttered, running his hand over his face.

"Yes doctor," Tara nodded, and then she was gone.
John leaned back in his chair with a sigh. This had happened more than once. Things had been different with Sherlock since he had returned from the dead, a little over a year ago. John was so very glad that Sherlock was back, but that didn't have to mean anything. Considering all the things they had been through together, it was only natural to feel such a strong connection with Sherlock. Yup. Everything was completely normal...

Was he smitten? No. Impossible. He wasn't gay. Sherlock was married to his work. Impossible. They were just good flat mates and partners. Working partners of course. Not any other type of partner. John pressed the heels of his hands lightly against his eyes and groaned.

Maybe it was time to start dating again? It had been a while since he'd even tried to get a date. Too many of his previous girlfriends had expressed ire about John's frequent absences. On top of that, the rare occasions when they were able to get a moment alone with John would invariably be cut short by John's impossible flat mate. The truth of the matter was that, despite being more than a bit 'not good', John would drop everything at a moment's notice, and run reckless around London on some wild case with Sherlock. And why shouldn't he? It was too damn fun to pass up.

John speculated that what he really needed was a partner (of the romantic variety of course) who would accept him just the way he was. That seemed fair enough. After all, John accepted Sherlock with all his eccentricities, and they'd gotten on brilliantly for years.

Right. This was not helping. John slowly dragged his hands away from his face and shook his head in frustration. What he needed right now was a distraction, any distraction.

He'd just stood up when Tara popped her head back around the door and informed him that, "Your next patient is ready in exam room two."

John nodded and replied, "Thank you, Tara." Patients, he decided, were as good a distraction as anything else.
Chapter Summary

John comes home from work and gets more than a bit flustered. Sherlock eats (gasp!) and reflects.

Chapter Notes

Alright, now I feel as though we've gotten properly started. ^_^

Special thanks goes to my Beta, Helena Chauby as well as to Lady of Clunn, for BritPicking this story.

In addition I would like the thank my flatmate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff. Feedback and reviews are much appreciated!

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Chapter 1: Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps

John threw himself back against the door of his flat and groaned softly. He was glad to be home. As much as he loved his work it could be exhausting, especially when he was wreaking havoc on his energy supplies and sleep schedule by running amok with Sherlock half the time. John pushed himself off the door and trudged further into his flat, scanning for Sherlock. He found his consulting detective in the kitchen, bent over some beakers and Petri dishes. He didn't want to know. Still, he couldn't help but smile at the look of intense concentration on Sherlock's face.

"Evening Sherlock," John murmured, leaning against the door frame to the kitchen, "How was your day?"

Sherlock immediately looked up from his experiment, his eyes softened, and his mouth curled up in a welcoming smile. "Good evening John," he replied setting his things down. He stepped away from his experiment and towards his blogger. "After your abysmal lack of response to my text I began experimenting with mold colonies and their growth on decayed flesh."

John paled a bit and craned his head trying to see around Sherlock's shoulder. Sherlock chuckled and John jumped a bit when warm breath ghosted over his ear.

"Relax," Sherlock said, his eyes sparkling with amusement, "I've requested small strips of dead flesh, enough to contain in the dishes on the table. They need to be under heat lamps so they won't be molesting your food."

John jumped a bit when warm breath ghosted over his ear. Sherlock chuckled and John paled a bit and craned his head trying to see around Sherlock's shoulder. Sherlock chuckled and John jumped a bit when warm breath ghosted over his ear. "Relax," Sherlock said, his eyes sparkling with amusement, "I've requested small strips of dead flesh, enough to contain in the dishes on the table. They need to be under heat lamps so they won't be molesting your food."

John felt heat flush his face and looked down for a moment. It was just stupid to think of thin strips of dead flesh as a touching gesture. They wouldn't be in the fridge, as Sherlock had said, and
because they were only strips they wouldn't be quite so unsettling to come across unexpectedly. Sherlock had thought of him. Specifically. Yup, hypothesis confirmed, he was stupid.

"How was your day, John?" The question was soft and warm.

A tingling, happy feeling curled up in John's chest at the question. Sherlock didn't bother with pleasantries for anyone, so when he took an interest, you knew it was genuine. It made John feel special. John inhaled and looked up into Sherlock's brilliant eyes.

"Good," John began, a smile creeping back onto his face, "Busy. I lanced another abscess, messy business. Oh, when I got to work I was a bit late, we had someone screaming in the waiting room, and two possible overdoses. I'm surprised I manage to get through everyone in one day there were so many."

The consulting detective took another step toward John and smirked warmly. "You really have a thing for danger, don't you?"

Sherlock was standing very close to him now. So close that John leaned his head back against the wall as he looked up at Sherlock, suddenly warm and dizzy. "I guess so," John murmured, willing his heart to beat normally. It wasn't listening. His chest felt tight. No. This wasn't good. Or maybe it was, but John did not want to look at this too closely right now. He had to pull some brain cells together here. Think of something. Sherlock was just a boundary-ignoring genius; this didn't mean anything. Right. Right?

"D-dinner?"

Sherlock's smile widened. "Starving," And with a quick 'swoosh' of clothing Sherlock had turned and started walking towards the door. "Angelo's alright?"

John took a few measured breaths before replying, "Yes, fine." One more breath and then he was jogging after Sherlock, who was almost out on the street already.

~*~*~*~

John grinned as Angelo seated them in what was rapidly becoming "their" booth. "You remember the first time we were here?" John asked, glancing at Sherlock over his menu.

Sherlock chuckled and nodded. "Obviously. The beginning of our work together."

John shook his head and looked back at the menu. "I never would've guessed where we'd end up."

Sherlock "hmmed" thoughtfully and assumed his thinking pose, hands pressed together against his lips. After a moment he said, "There has been a shortage of good cases lately. Forget murder, I'd love to sink my teeth into a halfway intelligent serial killer." After a pregnant pause Sherlock glanced over at John who was glaring at him with narrowed eyes. "Not good?"

"A bit not good, yeah." John giggled despite himself. "You really are something else Sherlock."

"My friends!" Angelo gushed as he approached their table. With a candle. John pointedly ignored the candle. "How are you both this evening?"

"Fine Angelo," John replied, setting his menu down. "I'll have the lobster ravioli please."

"The stuffed mushrooms for me," Sherlock added, handing the restaurant owner their menus.
John stared at Sherlock incredulously until the consulting detective met his confused gaze and said, "What?"

"You're eating," John replied slowly.

"I eat," Sherlock huffed, a bit indignant.

"Not often, and not recently."

Sherlock leaned towards John, his chin resting on his interlocked fingers. "Maybe I became tired of your nagging."

John smiled, "You could do with a bit more nagging."

Sherlock shrugged and sipped at his water.

John leaned back into his seat and took a moment to just relax. As brilliant as work (especially his cases with Sherlock) could be it had been a really long time since he'd just relaxed. A thought occurred to him.

"Sherlock," he began, "Do you ever think about going on holiday?"

Sherlock glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. "With you?"

John flushed unexpectedly. He took a drink of water to collect himself before continuing. "With or without anyone. Do you ever think of going on holiday at all?"

"What for? Do you think there are more interesting cases abroad?"

"Lord Sherlock, don't you think of anything but cases? Didn't you stop for just a moment during a case to appreciate the stars?"

Sherlock's eyes crinkled as he smiled. "I'm surprised you remember that." Then he thought for a moment. "Sometimes, especially recently."

John tipped his head to this side in confusion. "Sometimes what?"

Sherlock stared at him pointedly. "You asked if I ever think of things besides a case. I said sometimes, do try to keep up with your own conversation John."

John huffed in mock annoyance and smiled. "Eat your mushrooms," he mumbled as their dinners had just arrived.

Sherlock smiled and did just that. "So where would you go?" he asked after a few moments of chewing.

John looked down into his ravioli and thought a moment. Again, specific attention from Sherlock about him and his interests. It was nice... John shook his head and looked up. "America maybe. I hear there's lovely scenery in Oregon. I've also heard the Appalachian mountains are nice. There are supposed to be some good sights to see on the east coast near New York. Good museums."

Sherlock shrugged, unimpressed. "I find that London keeps my mind adequately engaged."

John rolled his eyes even as an affectionate smile formed on his lips. "I know you know London like the back of your hand, Sherlock, but the whole point of a holiday is to go somewhere that you wouldn't normally go, relax, and see some interesting things."
"I wasn't aware there were rules," Sherlock mused.

"I'm curious now," John began, leaning closer conspiratorially over his ravioli, "Where would you go Sherlock?"

Sherlock thought for a moment before replying, "Probably some of the ruins throughout Europe, good place to practice deducing." John chuckled, and after a brief glare Sherlock continued. "Japan is also of interest. Their culture is full of intricacies most others can't keep up with." Sherlock thought again, the tines of his fork pressing against his pale lips. Which was not distracting for John in the slightest. Not at all.

"Though if you're going to America I suppose I could convince you to go to Hawaii."

"You would go on holiday with me?" John asked surprised, his fork suspended over his plate.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow, then smiled. "I don't see why not. I have heard it said that traveling is more enjoyable with good company."

John looked down and flushed, again. This was becoming a bad habit. It was just a compliment on his company; no need to blow it out of proportion. Still...it was coming from Sherlock; he did not compliment lightly.

John forced himself to look up at Sherlock again. His pale face glowed in the candlelight. "Why would you want to go to Hawaii? I've heard it's supposed to be a laid-back place."

Sherlock grinned at him over his fork. "Better stargazing. Away from most city lights, high altitudes on the volcanoes to give you a better view."

John nodded. This made sense. The idea of Sherlock staring at the stars just to appreciate the view made him smile. Earlier John had mentioned the one time he had seen Sherlock stargazing, if only for a moment. It would be nice to see more of it.

"That was a good case," Sherlock stated, his eyes getting a faraway look as he recounted those fast paced days.

John huffed a laugh. "You have a funny idea of 'good' you know. We both almost died. A few times."

Sherlock shrugged and brought his attention back to John's face. "Wouldn't be the first time. Comes with the territory I suppose."

John's face took on a slightly pinched expression and Sherlock knew he was thinking of his fall from St. Barts. A distant and unpleasant memory for them both. He still couldn't believe John had accepted him back as easily as he had.

Wanting to stop John's discomfort, Sherlock began speaking again. "Do you remember the time I came to the flat covered in blood, with that spear?"

John laughed into his water glass. "How could I forget? God, Sherlock you were quite a sight."

Sherlock grinned back at him. "It was a most amusing walk home."

"I'll bet it was," John replied between mouthfuls. "You got a kick out of the stares didn't you?"

Sherlock shrugged as he chewed. When he had swallowed he said, "I enjoy making lesser minds
think for once."

"Humble aren't you?" John quipped.

"We all have our flaws," Sherlock said, unconcerned.

They ate in silence for a few minutes before John started chuckling to himself.

"What is it?" Sherlock queried.

"Just remembering. Buckingham Palace. Do we still have that ashtray?"

Sherlock nodded, "And the sheet. The ashtray is by the skull on the mantle.

John shook his head. "God, the sheet. Can you imagine if the Queen had been around?"

Sherlock lifted his hand slightly in surrender. "Mycroft was the one who almost took off my sheet, and he calls us immature."

"We were mature enough to survive being handcuffed together," John mused, taking another mouthful of ravioli.

"I thought we handled that rather well," Sherlock noted.

John sputtered. "Well?! You were trying to ignore physics jumping over that fence with me attached to your arm."

Sherlock shrugged. "We worked it out didn't we?"

"Yeah, once you started listening to me," John replied.

"Yes I may need to work on that."

"May? Possibly? Perhaps? You do remember getting jumped by a Chinese assassin because you left me in the lurch outside that woman's apartment, don't you?"

Sherlock took a moment to study the mushroom at the end of his fork. "I do seem to recall something of the sort."

"Please, Sherlock, everyone knows you have an eidetic memory when you don't delete things. That was a good case so don't try to convince me you deleted it."

Sherlock grinned and pulled his last mushroom off of his fork with his teeth. At length, after chewing and swallowing, Sherlock said, "I do believe we have improved our cooperative abilities over the years."

John nodded. "It helps that you act like you trust me now."

"Of course I trust you," Sherlock replied, "You have been..." he paused, as though the words stuck in his throat a little, "very loyal and trusting yourself. Perhaps to the point of foolishness, mind you, but still..." Sherlock let the words hang there a moment.

John rolled his eyes and smiled. "It's hard not to trust someone who would throw themselves off a building to keep you safe," he said softly. Their eyes met, shimmering in the candlelight, and they held each other's gazes, smiling.
"Can I interest either of you in dessert this evening," Angelo asked, coming up to take away their empty plates.

John had an idea which formed an evil smile on his lips. "Yes," he replied. Molten chocolate lava cake please, two spoons."

Angelo smiled and winked. "Right away."

Sherlock was looking at him incredulously and John had to struggle not to giggle.

"You're still too thin. I'm just trying to take advantage of you while you're in the mood to eat." There was a pause, then John groaned and rested his forehead in the palm of his right hand. "That did not come out right."

It was Sherlock's turn to laugh. He placed his right hand lightly over John's left, which was still resting on the table. "Thank you for looking out for me."

John looked up at Sherlock, turned his hand so that their palms were pressed together and squeezed. "You're welcome. I've always got your back Sherlock, whether you like it or not." He withdrew his hand after a moment and scanned the restaurant. He wasn't looking for anything in particular, more just something to do other than look at Sherlock. He was feeling odd again and resolutely not exploring those feelings. He needed a brief distraction.

While the consulting detective was as annoying as ever, since his return from the dead he had been more open with John. It was a small change that spoke volumes.

Angelo arrived shortly with their dessert and the check.

"Now," John began as he picked up his spoon and Sherlock picked up his, "You will be eating half of this, no arguments."

"If you insist," Sherlock conceded with a put-upon sigh.

An easy silence followed where each man just focused on the dish in front of them. John smiled. This was one of the things he liked most about Sherlock; the silences between them were as fulfilling as running around with him on a case. They'd become comfortable with each other, without any pressure to speak just to fill the void. After this long being partners (professional, of course) they could communicate without speaking at times.

"What are you so happy about?" Sherlock murmured, amusement clear in his voice.

John looked up and chuckled. "Sherlock you've got a bit of chocolate here," John tapped the right side of his chin, close to his mouth.

Sherlock stuck his tongue out and swiped it along the corner of his mouth, clearing away the chocolate. John swallowed and the room suddenly felt a bit warm. He looked down at the plate and tried to concentrate on the taste of chocolate in his mouth instead of the erratic beat of his heart.

Some long minutes later their plate was cleared and their check was paid. John was slightly calmer, but still flustered.

"Ready to go?" Sherlock asked. His breath ghosting over John's ear. His voice sounded soft and warm.

John blinked and realized he must have been staring at the tabletop again, lost in thought. He nodded
dumbly, hoping Sherlock felt better now that he had actually eaten something.

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One brief cab ride later found them back in their flat again. Neither made a move to turn the lights off as they could see fine with ambient light from the street below.

John turned to Sherlock as he closed the door and placed a hand on his wrist. "Thank you for tonight."

Sherlock looked down at him in the soft light, looking happy and slightly confused. "You're welcome," he murmured. They stood there for several moments, smiling at each other.

Acting on impulse John reached up and hugged Sherlock for a moment, feeling the other man close to him. Hugging had become somewhat more common (that is to say it happened occasionally) since Sherlock's return. John wondered for a moment why that was and if the reasons for it were all as innocent as they appeared. Then he decided that it had been a good evening, and he was too tired to muck it up by over thinking anything else today. "Goodnight, Sherlock." He whispered. "Try to get some sleep tonight."

"Goodnight John," Sherlock breathed into his ear. John smiled, pulled back, and made his way up to his bedroom. He was happy, and looking forward to a good sleep.

Sherlock watched John as he retreated into the shadows. He stayed by the door for some long minutes before walking towards his violin and picking it up off the coffee table. He brought the familiar instrument under his chin, and began to play. After many long talks about the necessities of sleep, John and Sherlock had come to an agreement about late night violin playing. Sherlock was allowed to as long as it was quiet and not too jarring.

The strings sang under Sherlock's careful ministrations; the song was soft, haunting, and thoughtful. Sherlock's music usually reflected his mood, and this was no exception.

The moment Sherlock had stepped off of the roof of St. Barts, he knew he loved John Watson. Never had he been so willing to risk everything for someone else. As much as he avoided attachments and protested love to be a chemical defect, sentiment for John had crept in silently and completely. By the time he realized it was there, it was deeply wound around his heart and he could find no way to remove it. More surprising still... he didn't want to. He would step off that building again if it would keep John safe.

The music hummed with a new longing, undercurrent.

He knew John wasn't gay. He'd had his doubts as first, especially after John had asked after his romantic interest their first time together at Angelo's. However, as case followed case Sherlock observed that John was irresistibly drawn to the chase. John was almost as thrilled with cases as Sherlock was. Granted it was tempered with more empathy and practicality. Still, it was the cases, not Sherlock, that John was so enamoured with. John obviously cared for Sherlock as well, but just as a friend.

The music developed a steady, sweeping rhythm like that of breath or a heartbeat.

Sherlock threw his mind back to the day he had returned from the dead. It had been three years. Three long years. Without his blogger...without John. Sherlock swallowed hard and remembered.

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He had been careful. He had hunted every last member of Moriarty's loyal underlings until no danger remained. There could be no risk; he couldn't allow it. When, at last, his path was clear, he faltered. Should he return? It would be hard on John and the other people he cared about (few though they were).

In the end his sentiment, his love for John had won out. John deserved the truth, and Sherlock hoped they could at least resume as they had been.

As much as Sherlock wanted to go back, he didn't want to simply appear either. He knew that might be a bit of a shock for his blogger. First he had Mycroft explain to John the truth of what had happened the day Sherlock fell. As loathe as he was to use his brother, he was also afraid John would dismiss him out of hand without giving him a chance to explain. John had to know the whole truth before he decided where to go from there.

John had a rough time of it the night he learned the truth. It was everything Sherlock could do not to break into their flat to try to comfort him. But Sherlock cared about his impact on others this time, and he wanted to do this as gently as he could.

In the end, Sherlock had designed a case for John; a careful series of clues and puzzles slowly revealing the truth, or at least putting suspicions of the truth in John's head. He'd used Mycroft, again. Mycroft had presented this 'case' to John as a training exercise, in case John wanted to work for him. Sherlock still didn't know exactly why, but John had taken the bait. He'd run all over London, just as they'd used to, tracking down Sherlock.

John found him, at last, in St. James park, standing by the pond. John had paused when he saw Sherlock standing there, like he just couldn't believe it, despite the previous clues and the evidence staring him in the face. For a moment John had braced himself on his knees, and Sherlock was afraid he would faint. Before Sherlock could start towards him, however, John picked himself up and ran for the consulting detective. Sherlock braced himself for an impact, mostly likely a beating. Surprisingly, John hadn't hit him. He'd just crashed into Sherlock, wrapping his arms tightly around the lithe frame as they both tumbled into the mud. Sherlock had wound his arms just as tightly around John. He held his blogger close as the anger and sadness came out. "You jerk!" John had hissed. "You sodding prick! You absolute bastard!"

"I'm sorry John. I'm so sorry," he'd murmured in between John's outbursts. After a few moments, John stopped yelling and sobbed quietly into Sherlock's shoulder. Sherlock carded his fingers through John's short hair, trying to calm him, ready to stay there all night if that's what John needed. John calmed, slowly. After a while Sherlock wondered if he had fallen asleep. That was when he spoke.

"You're back for good?" The sound was muffled by Sherlock's coat, and John seemed to have no intention of letting Sherlock go any time soon.

"Yes John," he said softly in the other man's ear, "I'm back for good."

John squeezed him tightly for a long moment, then began to get off him. John offered him a hand up and Sherlock took it. They stood together in the cool night air for a moment, just looking at each other. A cautious smile crept onto John's face, one which Sherlock returned.

"Dinner?" Sherlock inquired.

John let out a strangled laugh. "Starved, but I don't think I could keep anything down just now. I'm too hopped up on adrenaline."
Sherlock nodded; he could see John shaking. "You are having breakfast tomorrow; no arguments."

John laughed again. "That's rich, coming from you."

"Then I will join you, to set a good example," Sherlock concluded.

John beamed up at him and nodded. "Sounds like a plan. For now, though, let's go home." John held out his arm and Sherlock took it. They stayed arm in arm through the cab ride, all the way into 221 B Baker Street.

Sherlock kept his arm linked with John's as they entered the flat, steering him towards the couch.

"Sherlock?" Confusion knitted John's brows as he looked sideways at the consulting detective. Sherlock tightened his grip on John's arm for a moment.

"You've been shaking since the park. I would be remiss if I let you go into shock. We're going to sit on the couch and watch crap telly until you are calmer."

John chuckled and leaned into Sherlock's shoulder as they came up to the couch. "I'm the doctor here," he murmured, "I think I would know if I was about to go into shock."

Sherlock just 'hmmmed' at John before separating their arms and settling himself on the sofa, his back against one arm. John joined him, sitting with his back against the back of the couch.

Sherlock reached forward and urged John to lie with his back against Sherlock's chest, nestled between his legs. As he did so he said, "Haven't you told me, more than once, that human contact can be helpful in most cases of shock? Isn't that why they hand out those orange blankets, to simulate someone being close?"

It was John's turn to 'hmm' as he settled himself back against Sherlock's chest. Sherlock was right, as usual, and he was too tired and strung out to protest. Besides, it was reassuring to feel the consulting detectives steady heartbeat behind him.

Sherlock swiped the remote and turned on the telly to some crap late night talk show. John and he talked as the show progressed. They commented on the dullness of the topic and (mostly Sherlock) the intelligence of the guest. It was quiet, easy conversation interspersed with soft chuckles. Sherlock's arm had snaked it's way around John's waist and John had laid his own hand over top, interlacing their fingers.

Eventually he felt John's heartbeat and breathing slow into a more normal, sleepy rhythm. Sherlock looked down at his best friend, the man he loved, and smiled. He could see John's eyes slowly drooping as his breathing evened out. If he was honest with himself, Sherlock was dead tired as well. Living off the grid for three years will do that to a person. When John's eyes had remained closed for five minutes Sherlock, with his free arm, quietly turned off the telly and pulled a blanket that had been resting over the back of the couch, over them. With a contented sigh Sherlock rested his cheek against the top of John's head and closed his eyes.

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Sherlock's music reached out softly into the night, seeking, much like he was. The last, haunting notes hung in the air and he let his bow arm drop to his side. Things had slowly returned to normal after that night, over a year ago now. They were both the slightest bit more physically affectionate with each other, that is to say they hugged occasionally, and there were more casual touches. It was so much less than he wanted.
With a sigh Sherlock lowered his violin to his side. He placed both violin and bow on the coffee table before walking over to the large windows overlooking the street. The small changes in physical interactions and how they spoke to each other, with more trust and openness, felt natural to Sherlock. John was, in general, more affectionate than Sherlock. Given all they had been through, it was obvious he would be more affectionate with such a close friend. It was a struggle not to do more. Sherlock found himself pestering John more often...and missing him when he went to work. Most days he keenly felt the fine line he was walking with John; he didn't want his blogger to become suspicious.

What could he offer John in the way of a normal relationship, even if he did want it? Sherlock still loved his work. Even if he was no longer 'married' to it, his work was most certainly a mistress. One that would not be ignored or short-changed. That may work for their friendship, but he could never expect John to accept a relationship on those terms.

Sherlock raised a hand and rested it lightly against the cold glass, scanning the street below. His eyes tracked a couple walking with their arms around each other, braced against the cold wind. His heart ached. Sherlock blinked and shook his head. It was pointless to continue this train of thought. John wasn't gay. John did not love him back in the same way. They were friends and they were partners (working partners obviously). That would have to be enough.

Jerking his mind into a more productive train of thought, Sherlock considered his options for the night. His experiment would need more time to incubate. There were other experiments he could turn to, or cases he could review... hadn't John asked him to get some sleep? In addition to the small measure of satisfaction this would give Sherlock's feelings for John, it was also practical. There had been no new cases for a bit. Whether it was a new case tomorrow, or more experimenting he would be in better form if he got some rest.

Sherlock turned from the window, and started for his room. As he prepared to sleep he forcibly reviewed his experiments in his head. Practical. Stay practical. When his head hit the pillow, however, he was beyond fighting himself. Sherlock let his mind fill with the image of John asleep on his chest the night of his return. John was peaceful, reassuring, and he felt like home.
Chapter Summary

Sherlock gets a case; John is still a bit flustered. Warning: This chapter contains descriptions of the aftermath of a violent murder. If this could be triggering for you please do what you need to for your own safety.

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains descriptions of the aftermath of a violent murder. If this could be triggering for you please do what you need to for your own safety.

As I said previously, I normally write romances, so, the murder mystery part of this story is outside of my normal comfort zone. Feedback is always appreciated, as it will help me give you a better story.

Reviews, in general, are always motivating. So if you want to see more faster, review away!

Once again thanks to my Beta, Helena Chauby for her help in editing this story, as well as to Lady of Clunn for her helpful BritPicking. ^_^

Thanks also goes to my flatmate, sounding board, own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

Chapter 2: First Blood

The sound of feet pounding on the stairs were John's only warning before his bedroom door burst open.

"John! John, wake up, we have a case!"

John groaned and rolled over in bed as one very enthusiastic consulting detective whirled back out of his bedroom. He heaved himself into a sitting position, and glared at the early morning light sneaking in around his curtains. He hadn't got quite enough sleep, and he would really like to settle back into his warm covers.

"Hurry, John!" Sherlock called up the stairs. Despite himself, John found a smile tugging at his lips. Sherlock's excitement was infectious.

"Coming!" he called back. John stood, looked around his bedroom for a moment, and began scrambling into fresh clothes. Sherlock was notorious for the furious pace he kept while working a case, and it was unlikely that John would get the chance to change again for a while.
John clamored down the steps while still shoving his arms through his coat sleeves. It was late spring and, if the sound from the windows was anything to go by, a cold drizzle was falling outside. He paused at the bottom of the stairs to tug his shoes on. He was lacing up his shoes when he became aware of Sherlock hovering impatiently over him.

"I'm going as fast as I-," John cut himself off when he saw the travel mug Sherlock was holding out to him, even as he shifted from foot to foot with pent-up energy.

"I made you tea," Sherlock said quietly.

John smiled up at his flatmate, and reached forward to take the mug, standing as he did so. "Thank you," he replied.

Sherlock flashed him a grin before dashing off down the stairs. John chuckled to himself before running down the stairs himself, anticipatory adrenaline thrumming in his veins.

~*~*~*~

John closed his eyes as he felt the hot tea slide down his throat. It was good; much better than the coffee Sherlock had made for him by way of an apology, after calling John his only friend. Was that so long ago already?

A warmth seeped into John that had nothing to do with the tea. He remembered how anxious Sherlock had seemed for John's approval in that moment. The signs were subtle, but John could read his consulting detective. That flash of vulnerability had been oddly endearing. Smiling to himself, John brought the mug of tea to his lips and took another sip.

John sighed in exasperated affection as he felt Sherlock fidgeting unbearably in the seat next to him. "Sherlock," he began as he turned to face the taller man, "the cab can only go so fast. Relax, will you?"

"It's a double murder this time," Sherlock launched to the facts Lestrade must have related to him over the phone. "We have a fanatic on our hands."

John took another sip of his tea before asking, "How so?"

Sherlock's faze fixed on John with a startling intensity. John felt Sherlock's breath ghost over his face as he replied, "The victims were crucified."

~*~*~*~

For all his previous restless energy, Sherlock was deceptively calm and sharply focused as they exited the cab. There were criminals to hunt down. John paid the cab before chasing after his friend.

Yellow police tape surrounded the entrance to what appeared to be an old commercial building that had been converted into a small home. It was neat with small flower boxes affixed to the outside of the front windowsills. Sherlock strode with purpose, ducking under the tape while holding it up for John.

John grinned as he followed after Sherlock. That grin quickly faded when he saw Donovan glaring at them from further down the walk. "Sherlock. John." Her acknowledgements, one couldn't call
them greetings, were clipped. John returned her icy glare and felt gratified when she took a step back.

She and Anderson had stopped heckling Sherlock since his return from the dead. Part of this was because of the realisation of all that Sherlock had done to protect others. Another part, John suspected the bigger part, was out of fearful respect. John had never forgiven them for losing faith in Sherlock.

On Sherlock's first case after coming back, Anderson and Donovan had both started up with the usual insults. John had never come so close to beating a police officer. He would have decked the both of them if Sherlock hadn't stayed him with a hand on his shoulder. As it was, John had verbally berated the two officers for their incompetence, presumptuous judgment, lack of respect, and everything else he could think of. John hadn't been the least bit sorry about their abashed looks and downturned faces, especially after he caught Sherlock smiling at him. Apparently, the consulting detective approved of the insults and, for once, had nothing to add.

Breezing past Donovan, and ignoring Anderson completely, John clamored up the front steps. Over Sherlock's shoulder, he could see there were the usual scene of crime officers and other personnel milling about.

Sherlock had paused to examine the door frame and the surrounding entryway. John took a moment to get his own impressions of the house. The floors appeared to be mostly polished hardwood. The walls were a smooth white with scattered pictures and artwork. Two men, and sometimes a small black cat, looked out at John from varied photographs.

"It was a gay couple then?"

Sherlock "hmmed" in agreement before darting off through a doorway to the right into what appeared to be a living room. The ceilings arched high above them showing off decorative, but apparently strong, support beams. John surmised they were strong beams because there was a man hanging from one of them.

It was a completely naked man. John recognized him from the photos in the foyer. His arms were stretched taut above his head and bound together at the wrists by some sturdy rope. More rope was hooked around the bindings and secured to the support beam. John could see the tension in the man's shoulders from five feet away. It was caused, no doubt, by all of the, literally, dead weight.

John scanned the face of the body. The man had straight brown hair that fell in choppy pieces over his eyes and ears.

"The man hanging from the ceiling is Thomas," Lestrade began. John blinked and looked to his right, noticed Lestrade for the first time. Sherlock had already begun exploring the scene, circling the room from the outside in. John knew Sherlock was looking for what was there, not what he wanted to find. John had been endlessly lectured on the importance of observation as opposed to speculation. He smiled briefly. It was always a wonder to watch the consulting detective at work.

"His lover, Sean, is at his feet here," Lestrade continued.

John glanced away from Sherlock and back to the body. Oh right. Bodies. At Thomas's feet knelt another, equally naked and equally dead, man, who much have been Sean. Sean's arms were wrapped securely around Thomas's knees. His head hung limply in death, and John could see soft blond curls of hair decorating Sean's head.

John walked around the bodies, examining them. Closer to the bodies, and further into the room
now, he could see that Sean also had rope around his hands. These bindings had been used to secure
Sean's arms tightly around Thomas's knees and keep him there.

John felt his chest constrict a little at the scene; Sean kneeling at the feet of his crucified lover. It was
clear, to John at least, that these two had loved each other very much. Scanning their hands he was
able to find the gleam of two rings on each man's left ring finger.

Despite John's frequent protests that he was not gay he had, in fact, no problem with gay people.
People invading John's privacy, that was another matter altogether. But, especially after Harry had
come out, John had made a point of educating himself. He had certain qualms about Harry's drinking
problem, but not her sexuality. As John had informed Sherlock on their first case together, 'It's all
fine.' Perhaps the killer disagreed with him.

John felt Sherlock come up beside him, examining the bodies at last. "Well, John?" he asked.

John looked up at Sherlock with a brief, warm smile before returning his gaze to the bodies and
scanning them from the ceiling down.

"There are scratches on the forearms," John began, narrating as he noticed things. His eyes drifted
downward. "There is a nasty bruise along one temple, closer to the hairline than the forehead. He
may have been struck from behind."

"Good, John," Sherlock murmured, "What else?"

John took a breath and began again. Sherlock's voice wasn't distracting. It just wasn't. "There are
more bruises on the shoulders and chest. He didn't go down without a fight. There may be some
DNA under his fingernails."

"We can check at the morgue. Please continue."

John began circling the bodies again as he spoke, searching for new details. "He's been whipped.
Some of these marks look lighter than others. Maybe the killer used a flogger as well?"

"A flogger?" one of the SOCO's interjected. "Isn't that the same thing as a whip?"

John shook his head. "A flogger, more commonly known as a cat of nine tails, is less dangerous. It
can sting if the person wielding it knows what they're doing, but it doesn't have the mass of a whip.
A whip is usually made of braided leather, and its length enables the user to crack it with great force.
It's easy to scar if you're not careful. A flogger, on the other hand, is often made of many strips of
unbraided leather. If someone was using or trying to use a flogger as a real weapon it might have bits
of sharp metal or glass at the end of those strips. Most whips and floggers on the market today are
meant to be sex toys more than actual weapons."

The SOCO flushed slightly before asking, "How do you know that?"

John looked over his shoulder for a moment at Sherlock, who raised a solemn eyebrow. "Sherlock,
of course," he replied. He turned back to the SOCO and giggled at their expression. Sherlock was
still stone-faced but John saw the mirthful glitter in his eyes.

"What have I told you about giggling at crime scenes?" Lestrade broke in. "Honestly!"

John blushed as he realized the double meaning in what he had said... This was not helping the "I'm
not gay" argument. He took a breath to stop the blushing, and returned his attention to the bodies.
"Thomas is strung up tightly, his feet are a good three inches off the floor." John crouched to
examine Sean more closely without moving him. "Sean has similar injuries, however he's tied up to
Thomas. I'm guessing the killer tortured him elsewhere then tied him up here."

John swept his gaze along both bodies again, checking for anything he may have missed. "They both have bruises on their necks consistent with strangulation." John examined the faces of each victim. "There was, without a doubt, oxygen deprivation. They both have burst blood vessels around the eyes, as well as a bluish tint to their lips and nails. Sean received the worst of it; he died of asphyxiation." John lifted his gaze to Thomas again. He hadn't seen it the first time, through the whip marks and clotting blood, but there was a stab wound, right through the heart.

"There," he gestured, pointing, "Thomas was stabbed to death."

John turned to Sherlock with a cautious smile, hoping he hadn't missed too much. He knew Sherlock would see something he hadn't. He always did. "How did I do?"

Sherlock was still looking thoughtfully at the bodies. He nodded slightly. "You didn't miss everything of importance," he acknowledged. John huffed a laugh.

To the outside observer Sherlock might seem dismissive, but John recognised a compliment when he heard one. There was so much of Sherlock that other people completely missed. They thought him a cold, calculating machine. John, although he had his doubts at one point, knew better. Sherlock had a very human heart, he just expressed things differently.

It was similar to the way that John, as a doctor, had to set aside empathy for his patients when he had to hurt them (whether it was for a blood draw, a biopsy, a lanced abscess, or what have you). Sherlock was also forced to set aside the caring parts of himself and surrender to logic in order to work his brilliance, catch criminals, and save lives.

John suspected that Sherlock actually cared more than most people, in his own way. He saw, and he listened. The counterpoint to that was his distance. He refused to let others get personally close to him, unless he felt he could trust them. Once one was close to Sherlock, John surmised, it was all or nothing.

Sherlock had let Mrs. Hudson in, and proceeded to beat the hell out of the men who dared to threaten her. John smiled to himself as he remember the warmth Sherlock conveyed when he had wrapped an arm around Mrs. Hudson and proclaimed that England would fall if she ever left Baker Street.

It should also be noted that there was also more to Mrs. Hudson than most people suspected. She would laugh at Sherlock's excitement for murders in one breath, and nag them both in a motherly fashion for not cleaning up after themselves in the flat.

Sometimes John wondered why Sherlock had teamed up with him all those years ago. John knew he was just your average ex-army doctor, while Sherlock was much more interesting. His dangerous lifestyle, his genius deductions, and his fierce loyalty were rare and wonderful attributes. Also, from a completely aesthetic point of view, Sherlock was beautiful. Tall, graceful, pale skin, soft black curls of hair, and those eyes. They shimmered like opals or moonstones when Sherlock was on the case.

"John!"

John jumped and looked up at Sherlock, a little abashed for having zoned out. Sherlock must have called his name several times.

Lestrade groaned and ran a hand down his face. "Don't you start developing a mind palace too. I've already got him to deal with, " Lestrade threw his arm in Sherlock's general direction. "I don't need two."
Sherlock rolled his eyes and began speaking again, "As I was saying, there were slight scratches on the front door and the door frame. Our killer picked the lock. It was late, he probably expected to catch his victims sleeping. They were busy having sex in the living room so they didn't hear the click of the lock."

"And how, exactly do you know they were having sex," Lestrade cut in, frustrated but patient. "I didn't see any condoms or other things."

Sherlock scoffed. "Look at their wedding rings Lestrade. Flawless, sparkling white gold. They're at least five years old and they look new. They've been regularly cleaned and treated with rhodium. This was a very happy marriage."

"Okay," the detective inspector conceded, "So they were happy-,

"Not finished," Sherlock continued. "With a happy committed relationship that long standing, unless there was some risk of STD/STI infection, there would be no need for condoms. At least not for protection's sake. I suppose if they minded the mess there might be condoms. Although given the untidy state of the house I don't think-"

"Alright!" Lestrade cut him off again. "Anything else?"

"Plenty. Lube's between the couch cushions by the way. I'm sure forensics will find traces of said lube on Thomas's fingers and penis as well as in Sean's arse."

"How do you know our killer wasn't involved in that somehow?" Lestrade asked. John smirked to himself. At least Lestrade had stopped verbally dismissing Sherlock’s theories.

Sherlock huffed again. "The killer hates homosexuals and/or homosexuality. I was going to get to that but if you think your tiny brain can follow along I'm happy to jump around."

Lestrade sighed in surrender. "No no, please continue from the beginning."

"Thank you," Sherlock paused for a moment, surprised at himself. This was John's influence no doubt. Not important; this was the time to relate facts. "As I said, they were having sex at the time of the break-in, and so did not hear our killer enter. Our killer went to strike Thomas over the head. Sean must have seen or heard something in the darkness and tried to warn him. Our killer went to strike Thomas over the head. Sean must have been able to jump to warn him. This is why the blow landed more on the side of the head than on the back. There was a scuffle, which resulted in some of the bruising you see on both bodies."

Sherlock paused a moment, scanning the scene, then continued. "Yes our killer must have been very strong to subdue both Thomas and Sean. That and the strong handle of the whip, which was what he used to beat them both over the head. Once he had them disoriented and tied up, the rest was easy. He either knew this property well, or was using the tools at hand when he strung these men up to crucify them."

"It's not a proper crucifixion is it?" A SOCO broke in. "I mean this one bloke is on the floor and the other is just strung up by his hands." Sherlock turned and glared at the woman until she backed off with a small, "Sorry."

"We will be here all day with these constant interruptions!" Sherlock heaved, frustrated. He took a deep breath, and became calm and clinical once more. "The lady does raise a good point. The use of tools around him in addition to the hesitation whip marks, which you mistook for flogger marks, John, those lead me to conclude this was his first killing. He hadn't planned for everything, and he was a bit hesitant at first. Sherlock's eyes narrowed slightly as they swept over the bodies. "That
didn't last long, however."

Sherlock pointed up to support beams on the ceiling, across the room from where Thomas hung. "Sean was also hung. You can see traces of the rope on the beam, and slight traces of wear on Sean's ropes. This man whipped them. He clearly isn't experienced with whips, but he was passionate in his intent to cause harm. Sherlock's eyes swept the blood spatter beneath them, covered with clear plastic tarps to allow movement around the scene. There was a lot of blood splatter and smear.

"Our killer was a large man, you can tell from the impressions of his shoes, which are markedly larger than the smaller impressions left by Thomas and Sean's feet. Don't bother looking for tread marks, he covered them with something. So, while this was in part a crime of passion, he was likely thinking about it for some time. Our killer is a very religious man to have decided on crucifixion. This is further confirmed by the Bible passage torn out and left by the fireplace."

Sherlock strode towards the fireplace and pointed down, two feet away from the remnants of a fire. There, affixed to the floor in clear duct tape was, indeed, a passage from the St. James bible. It read:

**Leviticus 18:22** - *Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.*

"Such theatrics," Sherlock sighed with disdain, before gesturing to the fireplace proper. "You can see the remains of a rainbow flag in these ashes. No doubt it belongs in the window, as evidenced by the residue of the tape used to hold it there," Sherlock gestured and every face in the room turned.

"Just brilliant," John breathed in the following silence.

Sherlock turned to John and smiled warmly. "I'm not done yet." With a sweeping gesture, Sherlock brought everyone's attention back to the bodies. "Our killer probably lectured them as he whipped them, beat them, and strangled them. He must have been a bit more energetic with poor Sean given the extent of his injuries. He must have thought he had killed Sean, and didn't want to leave him in a semi-crucifixion. In his eyes this would be 'too good' for Sean." Sherlock rolled his eyes again in disdain. "Honestly the symbols some people venerate. It boggles my mind."

Sherlock rounded and approached Sean again. "Sean, however, wasn't quite dead. His windpipe was likely crushed or partially crushed, allowing just enough oxygen to keep his brain going for a few more minutes."

Lifting his gaze to Thomas, Sherlock continued. "Thomas wasn't quite done yet, but then our killer is interrupted."

Sherlock turned to look at Lestrade as he asked, "You said the housekeeper called this in?"

Lestrade nodded. "Isabel Bruckner. She was in hysterics, we could barely get the address out of her. She asked to be allowed some time at her church after I took her statement. Bit unusual that, but I figured it might calm her some, so I let a uniformed officer take her."

Sherlock nodded. "Yes, that may come to benefit us later." His silvery-blue gaze swept back to the bodies and he launched into narration once more. "Our killer hears the housekeeper beginning to enter. He is out of time. He takes a knife, probably a short, sturdy work knife given the wound, and stabs Thomas in the heart to ensure his death." Sherlock's arm swung up and towards Thomas as he spoke, miming the gesture. "Given the angle of the wound compared to my hand, I surmise that the killer is almost exactly two meters tall. Sherlock paused for a moment before sweeping his arm to the right, towards the window near the back of the house. "Then he flees out of the very window from which he ripped the rainbow flag."
There is another moment of silence before Lestrade speaks. "And Sean? Did the killer arrange him like this?"

Sherlock gave Lestrade a withering glare. "Don't be daft. As I said, he wasn't quite dead. The clatter of his killer's escape, and the hysterics of the housekeeper probably roused him from an oxygen deprived stupor. His dying thoughts were to be close to his lover. They must have hung separated for hours." Sherlock gestured at a long, wide smear of blood which trailed from where Sean would have hung to his current position at Thomas's knees. "In a final act of defiance Sean drags himself to Thomas's feet and binds himself there with the very rope his killer had strung him up by."

"That's almost poetic," Lestrade mused.

Sherlock scoffed again. "Useless sentiment. It would anger the killer to no end to know that, despite all his efforts, these two lovers still died together whilst embracing. Make sure a picture or a description ends up in the papers."

"What?!" Lestrade sputtered. "You just said this would make him angry! It might make him angry enough to kill again!"

Sherlock faced Lestrade squarely and smirked. "I'm counting on it." He took two quick steps forward and held out his hand to stay another outburst as he explained, "The clues tell us we are looking for a man passionately committed to his cause. He would strike again regardless. If we make him angry, we might make him sloppy. If he is sloppy, we are more likely to catch him." Sherlock emphasized his final point by poking Lestrade firmly in the shoulder.

Lestrade glared fire at Sherlock for some long moments before expelling a forceful breath through his nostrils. It wasn't verbal consent, but both men knew Sherlock had a point.

After a long moment Sherlock stepped away from Lestrade and began ticking off on his fingers as he reviewed the points of note. "To review," he began, "We are looking for a man passionately committed to his cause. He would strike again regardless. If we make him angry, we might make him sloppy. If he is sloppy, we are more likely to catch him." Sherlock emphasized his final point by poking Lestrade firmly in the shoulder.

Lestrade glared fire at Sherlock for some long moments before expelling a forceful breath through his nostrils. It wasn't verbal consent, but both men knew Sherlock had a point.

Sherlock rolled his eyes dramatically and pointed forcefully at the bible. "Don't you see?! Tucked between the pages there are some pamphlets for a Church." Sherlock whipped out said pamphlets and thrust them at Lestrade. "There are several, which indicates they may have spent time passing these out; something they wouldn't do if they were only casual members of this church. They were committed members."

Lestrade nodded slowly, turning the pamphlet over in his hands. The writing on the front declared it to be advertising for a church called "All God's Children United."

"This is the church Isabel asked to be taken to," Lestrade observed, gesturing at the printed address.

"Brilliant observation, Lestrade," Sherlock intoned sarcastically. "For once you are a mere four steps behind instead of ten."
"Sherlock!" John admonished, glaring at the lanky consulting detective from a few paces away.

Sherlock returned the glare for a moment before letting out a small sigh and refocusing his attention back on the bodies. "These were his first targets. If this is a vendetta against the community as a whole, these killings will get more dangerous and more high-profile. This killer will want his message out there."

Lestrade shook his head. "Just perfect. I don't suppose you deduced any witnesses that could give us a place to start."

"You have the housekeeper," Sherlock pointedly reminded him. "We've already established that she attends the same church as the victim. The killer could have attended service a few times in order to select his victims. Being religious, he probably felt comfortable starting from a church, and justified in selecting victims from a church that accepts homosexuality."

A soft cry from under the sofa brought everyone, but Sherlock, to a pause. He leaned down and, after some coaxing, held a small black cat in his arms. "And there was the cat. The cat probably saw the killer."

"You're impossible sometimes, Sherlock," Lestrade muttered, before stalking away.

Sherlock smirked to himself, gently stroking the cat in his arms. Warm fingers brushed his own and Sherlock turned his head to see John beside him, also stroking the cat. John was beaming up at him.

"You're amazing, Sherlock, you know that?" Sherlock felt a flush of warmth in his chest at John's comment. That was what had first set John apart from other people in Sherlock's mind; his amazement of, and pride in, Sherlock's abilities. As ordinary as he had first appeared, John was forever surprising the consulting detective.

"Try not to swell his ego," Anderson commented as he walked into the room, "He doesn't need it."

"Perfect timing Anderson," Sherlock stated, holding the cat out to him.

"What do you want me to do with that?" Anderson asked, making no move to take the cat at first.

"She was their cat," Sherlock stated, gesturing towards the bodies with his head as he did so.

"Do what you do. Call next of kin or something."

The cat let out a thin whine of protest as Anderson finally stepped forward to take it.

"I think she likes you," John chuckled to himself as Anderson walked away.

Sherlock arched an eyebrow at John. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm sure the protest originated from disquiet at being left in the hands of a lower life form such as Anderson." John chortled quietly while Sherlock started for the front door.

"Come, we've a long day ahead of us. Let's start with the housekeeper at the church."

John took off after Sherlock, and caught up to him on the pavement. They walked down the street in comfortable silence for a minute before John spoke again. "It wasn't useless."

Sherlock glanced sideways at John. "Pardon?"

"Sean's sentiment," John continued with a small smile, "It wasn't useless."
"It didn't help him stay alive, now did it?" Sherlock quipped

John shook his head. "No, but as you said, yourself, his actions created a situation which could help you catch his killer...by angering him."

Sherlock stopped short on the pavement and stared down at his blogger. John couldn't help the slow grin that spread over his lips. "I'm right," John murmured, "and you know it."

The pause only lasted a moment before Sherlock was striding rapidly down the street once more.

"Not admitting it won't make it any less true!" John called after him, still smiling, jogging to catch up.

~*~*~*~

John and Sherlock rounded a street corner together just as the church they were looking for came into view; the walk here had been brief, making a cab unnecessary. The building itself was made of rough-cut gray fieldstone. John assumed it had been sold to this congregation from the Church of England, given its age. It had a steepled bell tower and stained glass windows that shone even in the overcast light of midday.

That made John smile. He wasn't a particularly religious man, but he appreciated the architecture that went into these old buildings. That kind of history, for John, was part of what attracted him to London.

"Keep up, John," Sherlock called out over his shoulder as he pushed open the church's heavy wooden doors.

John shook his head and smiled affectionately at Sherlock before moving to catch up to him.

Sherlock strode down the centre aisle of the church towards a small group crying near the altar with John trailing after.

A short, robust woman broke away from the crowd and took a few steps to meet Sherlock. "Sherlock Holmes?" she choked between her tears. Her thick brown hair fell around her shoulders and back like a veil. The way it crinkled led John to believe she's had it up recently, probably for her housekeeping job.

"Obviously," Sherlock drawled, "Isabel Bruckner?"

She nodded, holding her arms close to her stomach as if she was in pain. "Yes, did detective Lestrade give you my name?"

Sherlock half nodded, "He did, but I stole his note pad anyway." Sherlock displayed the small book with a flourish of his hand, "In case he 'forgot' anything."

"Sherlock!" John admonished, swiping the notebook out of his hand. "Was that honestly necessary?"

Sherlock shrugged. "It was fun."

A strangled laugh from Isabel brought their attention back to her. "I'm sorry," she said, one hand coming up to cover her mouth. "You two are just...such a sweet couple. Thomas, Sean, and I were fans of your blog, Dr. Watson. They would have been honored to meet you." She took a few deep breaths. "We, uh, had a little betting pool between us, about when you'd finally tie the knot."
John stiffened beside Sherlock and Isabel reached her hand out to him, as if to comfort him. "We could tell that you weren't very public with your relationship," she pressed on, "We weren't trying to pry or anything. It's just that your partnership shone through so clearly in your writing."

Upon hearing Ms. Bruckner's commentary, a plan started to form in Sherlock's mind. There was only one problem; it would be wrong, wrong and selfish, to take advantage of a case to initiate physical intimacy with John.

Well, Sherlock had never been a saint. He wrapped his arm around John's waist and pulled him closer. John started a little at the unexpected contact, suddenly looking a bit flushed. Embarrassment, no doubt. Still, like the brilliant (work) partner that he was, he followed Sherlock's lead. That impulse had saved their lives on more than one occasion.

"We keep our personal life private, generally," Sherlock began, his baritone voice warm and inviting, "but we appreciate the support."

Isabel nodded with a watery smile. "Of course." She looked around for a moment at the church, then at her companions, who were hanging back respectfully. "That kind of support is what makes this church so special."

Sherlock tipped his head to one side, showing interest. "Please explain." John figured Sherlock had deduced everything Isabel might tell him, but Sherlock was thorough and wouldn't risk missing something important for such an interesting case.

"Well," Isabel began. "I first met Thomas and Sean when they joined this church." She paused and her gaze swept over the shining stained glass. "No one is discriminated against here. Not because of race, or gender-"

"Or sexual orientation," Sherlock finished for her.

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"Or sexual orientation," Sherlock finished for her.

She nodded. "Exactly." She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "I am doing my Master's, and Sean and Thomas offered to take me on as a housekeeper to help me pay for tuition. They were such a lovely couple. So much in love."

Sherlock nodded. This had been in line with his earlier deductions.

"I-," she choked up a bit, "I just don't know who would want to do this to them. Everyone loved them. They had one of the best attended weddings I've ever seen at this church-" she broke off into sobs.

Sherlock gave her a few moments to collect herself before asking, "Has anyone new joined the church recently? Someone a bit shy perhaps?"

"Mr. Holmes," Isabel said, "As much as this church can be like a family, sometimes a surrogate family, it is an open community. We have new people coming and going every week. Many of them are shy. We don't ask too many questions. It's up to the people to decide if they feel comfortable here."

Sherlock nodded with a small sigh. "I don't suppose you have any way to track newcomers either?"

Isabel shook her head no, looking a bit surprised. "You don't think someone from the church-"

"It is too early to assume anything Ms. Bruckner. I need more data. To jump to conclusions now could be disastrous. Please, leave the investigating to me."
She nodded again. "Of course, Mr. Holmes. If anyone can bring justice to Thomas and Sean, it's you."

"Very good," Sherlock replied. "If I need to talk to you again -"

"Oh please," she cut him off, "Take my card." She pressed a brown rectangular piece of paper into his hand.

Sherlock nodded. "Thank you for your help, Ms. Bruckner."

"Thank you, Mr. Holmes," She replied with a soft smile. Her eyes flicked to John once more and she leaned towards them, speaking softly. "Just so you know, if you ever decide to exchange vows, this church would be thrilled to hold the blessing ceremony."

Sherlock smiled and gave John a squeeze. "We'll think it over, I assure you."

Isabel looked pleased. "Well, if you'll excuse me Mr. Holmes, we were talking about...bout the services for Thomas and Sean."

"Yes, of course," Sherlock said. "Good day."

Isabel gave them one last, warm smile. "Good day," she murmured, before turning back to the small group of parishioners.

John leaned against Sherlock's shoulder as they walked away. He told himself it was to look convincing and to be able to whisper to the consulting detective, not because it felt so good.

"Trying to play off her sympathies?" John whispered after they exited the church. Sherlock didn't let him go... probably in case someone looked out the window.

"Naturally," Sherlock whispered back, his breath warm in John's hair. John shivered a bit at the sensation. "Thank you for playing along."

John looked up into Sherlock's eyes and smiled at the warmth he saw there. "I trust you, Sherlock, and I've got your back. Always."

They slowed to a stop then, at the edge of church property. Sherlock was looking at John intensely, and John found that he couldn't look away.

Sherlock leaned in, slowly, not breaking eye contact until the last moment, and pressed a soft kiss to John's cheek, close to his lips. John's eyes widened and his breath hitched as Sherlock lifted his lips closer to John's ear.

"I'd be lost without my blogger," he whispered.
John yawned slowly, stretching his limbs languidly beneath the covers. Being a highly productive person, a trait that had served him well in the army, he didn't often lay about in bed after waking up. Today, however, he needed to think. To think, properly, he needed to avoid Sherlock. He chuckled to himself at the irony.

Normally it was Sherlock ordering people out of a room, or to quiet down, so that he could think. Another irony.

Right now, John needed distance from the world's only consulting detective...to think about him. Thinking around Sherlock was difficult at best, because of Sherlock being...Sherlock. During a case, when Sherlock was thinking faster than most people could ever dream of...it would be impossible to have a thought that wouldn't be immediately deduced. This difficulty was now compounded because of certain...feelings John was having.

His mind went back to the clinic a week ago. Maybe he was smitten. He was certainly flustered by Sherlock's proximity these days. Or was he mistaking friendly feelings and the strong bond they had built between them for something more?

John ran a hand through his hair in frustration. Did it even matter? Even if he did have...feelings for
Sherlock, the famous consulting detective had informed him from the start that he was 'married' to his work.

Still...it would be good to know, because Sherlock would certainly observe the truth. He knew everything. Would he even care? Were these feelings even strong enough to merit recognition? It had been a while since John had been on a date. Maybe he was just transferring unfulfilled romantic feelings over to someone he knew was safe?

John threw an arm over his eyes and groaned. This was still not helping. Now he was just sounding like his former therapist. So there was...something there. So what? They had a close (impossibly close really) friendship, and he wouldn't do anything to risk that. And Sherlock was probably asexual anyway. 'Besides,' John thought to himself, 'I'm not gay!'

Still frustrated, and more confused than when he began to think about all this, John heaved himself up and off his bed. He wasn't getting anymore sleeping done anyway. He threw on a robe, and stumbled down the stairs to make breakfast. Sherlock was at the kitchen table just as John had left him the night before, on John's laptop, naturally.

'"Don't you ever sleep?"' John muttered irritably around a yawn.

'"Tea and toast are on the table,"' Sherlock said, gesturing with his head.

'"Thanks,"' John mumbled, his bad mood dissipating for the moment. They were a bit over a week into this case now. Thankfully, there had been more time for food and sleep than normal. Oddly enough, Sherlock had been making breakfast. John felt a bit dumb for being touched, but he was touched all the same.

'"It might be a bit cold...you took a long time before coming downstairs."'

John's gaze flickered over Sherlock as he munched on his toast. Perfect example. Sherlock knew everything. He'd probably dismissed John's confused feelings as insubstantial and moved on days ago. He scooped up said tea and took a sip. It was warm, not hot, but still good. After a few swallows he spoke.

'"What's on the docket for today?"' This case was taking a bit longer than usual, but John wasn't surprised. Sherlock had created a good profile for the police, but too many people fit the profile. As Sherlock would say, there was not enough data to narrow the field accurately. Actually, what Sherlock would probably say was, 'There are simply too many idiots to choose from.'

Lestrade had taken Sherlock's advice, and published information on how the victims were found. One paper was even daring enough to publish a photo of Sean's hands clasped around Thomas's knees. Lestrade had thrown a fit over that photo, but he couldn't find enough proof to pin its existence or publication on Sherlock.

Sherlock had taken the photo, of course, and ensured its publication. John had overheard Lestrade verbally berating Sherlock over the phone the day said photo appeared in the papers.

Sherlock hadn't tried to hide anything from John. He went so far as to hang up on Lestrade to show John the original copy of the photo on his phone, and explain how he had done it. It was a small feat for the great consulting detective, but John was impressed all the same.

The reaction, both to the story and the accompanying photograph, had been volatile. There was an uproar in the religious and gay communities with news coverage, debates, and some protests. Sherlock had deemed the atmosphere a bit too volatile for him to question people in said
communities just yet. It was the killer he wanted off-balance; not the general public. He needed accurate testimonies for accurate data. Sherlock had expected another murder soon. None had come...yet.

Sherlock had not been idle, however. He had spent days combing through newspapers and the internet for potentially relevant information. He searched everything from LGBT specific newspapers, to the national papers, to what may have been every magazine available in Great Britain. There was still not enough data to narrow the field, but it couldn't hurt to refresh his memory for when new data arose. While the relative quiet of Sherlock's research had been a nice change of pace for a case, John knew it couldn't last.

Sherlock finally tore his gaze away from the computer and fixed it seriously on John. "I need you to be my boyfriend, John."

John sputtered and choked on his tea. "P-pardon?"

Sherlock nearly winced. Nearly. He wasn't trying to take advantage of the case to express his feelings for John...mostly. Still, the reminder that John did not return Sherlock's romantic feelings stung. He knew John was far from homophobic; his discomfort around the assumptions of others stemmed from his preference for privacy more than anything else. This is why Sherlock's sentiment was useless. Sherlock would be on the losing side in this, even if John never discovered his true feelings.

Sherlock shook his head briefly to clear it, and explained. "Things have calmed somewhat in the last week, and I believe it is time to put out some feelers. We must try to see if the killer had a personal interest in the demise of Sean and Thomas, or if the crime was motivated by a hatred of their lifestyle. Problem is, the gay community is still a bit skittish. We would be less intimidating if we went out as a couple." He paused, uncertain, his desire to pursue the case warring with his desire not to upset John.

John stared down into his tea for a moment and gathered his thoughts. Given his recent state of mind, he wasn't sure if this request from Sherlock made him happy or uncomfortable. It was probably time to stop analyzing and just feel. Feelings may be messy and illogical, especially according to Sherlock, but John had found answers to many serious questions by following his heart. Still... John looked up meeting the surprisingly hesitant gaze of one Sherlock Holmes.

"You really think it will help the case?"

Sherlock waited a beat before answering, "Yes."

John nodded into his tea. "Alright." After a brief pause he continued, "You seem more cautious than normal. That's not like you."

Sherlock cleared his throat and sat up a bit straighter. "Yes, well, if you were not aware of, and in agreement with, my plans it would be a pointless exercise. We wouldn't be a very convincing couple if you jumped every time I touched you, now would we?"

"Ah," John murmured in understanding, "So you were planning on convincing me to go along with this plan of yours, one way or the other?"

Sherlock grinned. "I am dedicated to my disguises."

John snorted with laughter. "That's putting it mildly. Besides, you needn't have worried. Everyone seems to think we're a couple anyway."

Sherlock steepled his fingers under his chin in his 'thinking' pose and nodded. "Yes. We must do
something about your reluctance to 'come out' as it were."

John shook his head, the gesture belied by the sparkle of amusement in his eyes. "Is that how we're going to play it? That you won me over despite my shyness?"

Sherlock stood and crossed the distance between them with measured steps. He leaned over John, invading his personal space slightly. "Well," he murmured, his voice full of honey, "I have been known to be quite charming when I put my mind to it."

John swallowed and flushed at the intensity of Sherlock's gaze. The consulting detective was a formidable actor. He could almost believe... and then Sherlock was swooping away to tug on his coat and scarf. "Dress quickly, John. Our public awaits."

"Right, got it," John replied, rising from the table. This was an act. An act. He would have to keep that in mind.

~*~*~*~

For once, Sherlock didn't hail a cab. Instead they walked, arm in arm, down the streets of London.

"I fail to see how this is helping the case," John said, looking quizzically up at Sherlock.

Sherlock smiled in the rare spring sunshine and leaned down, his lips grazing John's ear, "Patience, John, patience," he whispered, "Even as a couple we will get better results if we come at this gently."

John nodded. That made sense. Sherlock had pointed out, before they left the flat, that this was supposed to be a disguise. He shouldn't have spoken so freely; he could've blown their cover before they'd gotten properly started. It would be better to just go with it.

He walked along deep in thought, letting Sherlock lead. It felt...good to have Sherlock on his arm. Surprisingly natural. He almost chuckled to himself when he thought of all the years he spent protesting that he wasn't Sherlock's date. This had only encouraged the rumors and, in fact, solidified this 'disguise' they were now using for the case.

Why had he protested so much? He wasn't homophobic, not at all. Because of the mess things had been at home when he was younger, he had always been private about his personal life. Well, some habits die hard.

They were soon in a part of London John didn't recognize. The streets were lined with small shops. These shops were overpriced and seemed to sell a bit of everything. Mostly knick knacks, decorations, and crafts.

John tipped his head up to look at Sherlock quizzically.

"I thought we could do some window shopping today." Sherlock's voice was warmer and more friendly than normal. Right. He was playing the adoring boyfriend.

John nodded. "Okay, but I'm not letting you bring something ridiculously expensive and useless back to the flat."

Sherlock smiled and nodded before steering John into a shop that sold bits of coloured and stained glass. They were pretty enough to look at and John enjoyed watching the patterns of multi-coloured light skipping over Sherlock's face. It reminded him, just a little, of the stained glass windows at the church.
Towards the back of the shop, away from the plethora of windows, John spied a hanging crystal in the shape of a heart. It struck John because it glowed with colours even in the darkest corner of the little shop. John didn't realise he had been staring until he heard a small cough from beside him, and looked up into the smiling blue eyes of a salesperson.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" the blonde salesperson asked. His name tag declared him to be "Eric" and his green apron, with the store logo emblazoned on the front, confirmed that he worked here.

John glanced back to the crystal and nodded. "How is it so colourful away from the light?" He asked turning back to Eric.

Eric flashed him a crisp white smile. "It's called an aurora crystal because of that feature. The cut of it captures light, even in dim places, and reflects it outwards."

"A light in the darkness," Sherlock mused and John looked up at him, surprised. It wasn't like Sherlock to be sentimental. About anything. Oh, right. Playing boyfriend, mustn't forget that.

Eric beamed up at Sherlock. "Exactly! Many of our customers say they find the light of such crystals to be reassuring, during difficult times and all that."

Sherlock nodded thoughtfully before turning back to Eric. "We'll take one please."

John started, surprised. "What did I say about-"

Sherlock cut him off, "It's not useless, it made you smile."

John flushed, embarrassed at the attention. Sherlock was certainly an observant fake boyfriend. Well, and this probably-no definitely-must have something to do with the case that John was currently unaware of.

"I'll wrap it up for you right away," Eric murmured with a knowing smile as he glanced between Sherlock and John.

Sherlock promptly paid and, a few minutes later, they were walking down the street once more. John knew Sherlock had wanted to question people indirectly, he just hadn't realised that would actually involve a real-ish date. Still, Sherlock was the expert on disguises, and John trusted him. It would be better if he played along.

John laid his head on Sherlock's shoulder as they walked along, smiling when he felt the small hitch in the consulting detective's steps. Sherlock wasn't the only one who could surprise people. "Thank you," John murmured. Sherlock gave his arm a little squeeze, and John knew he'd been heard.

They wandered the streets for a quarter of an hour more before John saw a familiar face locking up one of the craft shops.

Sherlock lifted a hand in greeting and called out, "Isabel!"

Isabel Bruckner turned towards them, and smiled. "Sherlock! John!" She waved as she ran to meet them. "What are you doing here?" she asked, stopping just in front of them.

"Window shopping," Sherlock replied, "And yourself?"

Isabel turned and gestured to the shop she had just closed. "I own that craft shop, there. It's been closed since... well." Her face fell. "The funerals were yesterday and, I'm not quite ready to open yet."
Sherlock nodded in understanding. "You were very close to Sean and Thomas," he surmised.

"Yes," Isabel enthused, "And not just from church. I helped them meet, sort of."

Sherlock tipped his head to the side, showing interest. "Oh?"

Isabel nodded. "I met Sean at university, and Thomas was a customer of mine. I didn't directly hook them up, but I did recommend the same artist to them both. Thomas was just looking for art. Sean was looking for work while he tried to get his novel published... he was a writer, you see."

"And you recommended this artist to Sean so that he could model for him," Sherlock concluded.

Isabel flushed and nodded. "He's a very respectable artist, and Sean has had such a nice body. Thomas happened to walk in when Sean was being sketched... I think he got quite an eye-full.

"Does this artist do portraits?"

Isabel looked up in surprise. "Yes, why? Are you thinking of having yours done?"

Sherlock pulled John a bit closer. "Ours actually."

A slow smile dawned on Isabel's face. "I see. Well, you do make a lovely couple."

Sherlock smiled back. "Thank you."

"His name is Nicholas," Isabel said as she started digging through her purse. "I'm sure I have a copy of his card here. Ah!"

Isabel stretched out her hand and passed Sherlock a bright blue business card.

Sherlock took it with a smile, "Thank you, again," he murmured as he scanned the card. "We're in luck," he said, more to John that to Isabel, "He's not far from here."

Isabel glanced at the bag attached to Sherlock's wrist as he gestured. "You said you were window shopping, but that's not entirely true is it?"

Sherlock flushed a bit. John was once again impressed with his acting. "You caught me," Sherlock replied, "I picked up a little something for John."

Another soft smile from Isabel. "You'll spoil him," she said in reference to John.

Sherlock shrugged. "I can't seem to help myself."

"Well," Isabel began briskly, "I will let you gentlemen get back to your day. It was lovely seeing you again." She paused, her expression turning serious. "You'll let me know if you-"

"Yes," Sherlock cut her off. "I'm sorry to say there's no news yet. I expect that to change shortly."

Isabel nodded. "Good. Sean and Thomas were decent people; they didn't deserve this."

Sherlock nodded as well. "Good day, Ms. Bruckner."

"Good day, Mr. Holmes," Isabel replied, continuing past them, down the street.

John turned his head to watch her go for a moment, before looking back to Sherlock.

"To this artist's place then?" he asked.
"To Nicholas's," Sherlock confirmed.

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Nicholas's studio looked like a Victorian salon with polished hardwood floors, plush rugs, elegant chairs, and impressively decorative coffee tables.

"Must be doing well for himself," John murmured, looking around.

Sherlock tapped the bell on the counter and it rang loudly in the otherwise empty space.

"In here!" came a soft, feminine voice from the room to the left.

Without hesitation Sherlock followed that voice and strode into the next room, John at his heels.

It had, apparently, been a woman that called them in. She was laying, naked, upon a large sleigh bed with lavish bedclothes. She was bent at an awkward angle, her hips resting against the curve of the bed while her feet dangled over it. Her arms were thrown over her head as though she had been tossed onto the bed.

John gaped for a moment until he saw the artist off to his right, sketching her.

"You'll have to excuse me," Nicholas said without looking up. "She's my receptionist," he gestured towards the model. "I'm afraid I've left my customers at a bit of a disadvantage today."

The receptionist chuckled, hair dark brown hair shaking around her shoulders. "You just want to attract more potential models by dragging people back here."

Nicholas smirked into his sketch pad. "Guilty." He finished a few more pencil strokes before looking up at Sherlock and John. "Well this is a surprise. Sherlock Holmes and John Watson."

Nicholas set his sketchpad down, and stood to shake Sherlock's hand. "Please tell me I can get you to model for me," Nicholas enthused, "I will never find another model with your cheekbones!"

Sherlock shook his head with a wry smile. "You may get me to pose with John, but not alone."

Nicholas glanced at John and grinned. "Of course, a portrait with your partner, how sweet."

John glanced sideways at Sherlock. "Does anyone not know about us?"

Nicholas chuckled. "It's hard to keep a love like yours quiet."

Jon flushed and looked down.

"What are you working on now?" Sherlock inquired

Nicholas glanced back to his receptionist. "Oh Sheryl is helping me with a series of nudes I've been working on. She's great with poses."

Sherlock nodded, studying Sheryl for a moment. "May I?" He gestured to Sheryl.

John didn't know what Sherlock was asking, but Nicholas must have, because he held his hand out to Sheryl. "As long as she doesn't mind."

Sherlock looked at Sheryl who shrugged. "Go ahead."
Sherlock stepped over to her and considered her position again for a moment before reaching forward and grasping her ankles. Sherlock gently tugged on her legs until they were draped over the side of the bed. His hands wrapped around her hips then, shifting her more to the side of the bed, in line with her legs. His hands then slipped under her ribcage and tugged until she arched her back. Next Sherlock grasped her wrist and draped one hand over her breasts, leaving her other arm bent at the elbow with her hand close to her face. Then Sherlock hooked a finger under her chin and tilted her head to lengthen her neck. He stepped back for a moment before leaning down and grasping her right ankle, bending her leg at the knee, and placing her foot over her entrance.

'It does make a more interesting picture,' John thought as he glanced sideways at Sherlock, and then glared resolutely at the floor. What was it with Sherlock and naked women being completely comfortable around him? First Irene, now...what was her name? Sheryl?

John heard Nicholas chuckle quietly before saying, "Careful now, I think you've made your boyfriend jealous."

John glared harder at the floor. He was not jealous. He wasn't.

The edges of Sherlock's shoes came into his vision, and John felt one of Sherlock's cool, thin fingers pull his chin upwards so that their eyes could meet. Damn Sherlock and that soft expression in his bloody magnificent eyes.

John closed his own eyes when Sherlock leaned in and, despite his ire, gave the smallest smile when he felt Sherlock's lips against his hairline.

Sherlock shifted, after a moment, and wrapped his arm around John's shoulders. "He has nothing to be jealous about," the consulting detective stated, "I was just trying to apologise for interrupting your sketching."

Nicholas grinned. "I should hope you have cause to apologise to me more often if this is how you do it." Nicholas scanned his model and looked back to Sherlock. "This is a fantastic pose."

"I'm glad you approve," Sherlock replied.

"Before I get back to sketching," Nicholas began, "Should we schedule a portrait for the two of you?"

Sherlock glanced at John and asked, "What do you think about Thursday, two weeks from now?"

John shrugged, "It's fine." He was really starting to wonder how this was relevant to the case.

"That works for me as well," Nicholas gushed, enthusiastic, and picked up a planner that had been on the floor next to him. "Say, around, ten a.m.?" Sherlock and John nodded, and Nicholas began to scribble in his planner. "How did you hear about me anyway? I do get walk-ins, but my business operates largely on word of mouth."

Sherlock's mouth set in a grim line before he replied. "Isabel Bruckner."

Nicholas stopped writing and looked up. "Ah, I read you were working the case with Thomas and Sean. Is this visit about that then?"

Sherlock looked down at John again and gave him a squeeze. "One could say this case hits close to home," he looked back up at Nicholas, "and that this trip is mixing business with pleasure."

Nicholas nodded and set his planner back down. He seemed more at ease "I knew them well. Isabel
might have informed you that Sean used to pose for me?"

Sherlock nodded.

Nicholas shook his head. "They were such a beautiful couple. I have no idea why anyone would hurt them."

"Did they have any family tensions?"

"No," Nicholas shook his head again. "Both families were incredibly supportive."

John felt Sherlock nod above him. In addition to his research, Sherlock had reviewed police statements given by the family, they all said the same thing-No one would want to hurt these men. It must have been a stranger then, someone who took their love life personally. John figured Sherlock was having the same thoughts. After all, he was always a step ahead.

"Thank you for fitting us into your schedule, Nicholas," Sherlock began, pulling everyone out of their thoughts. "And thank you for answering our questions."

Nicholas nodded to himself, then made eye contact with Sherlock. "John raves about you in his blog. I think we're in good hands."

Sherlock smiled and opened his mouth to speak when his phone rang.

"That's probably Lestrade," John said.

"Agreed," Sherlock replied, reaching for his own damn phone for once.

"Go ahead," Nicholas made a 'shooing' motion with his hand, "I'll see you when you come around for your portrait."

Sherlock lifted the phone to his ear with one hand, and tugged John towards the exit with his other. By the time they were on the street again Sherlock had slipped his phone back inside his jacket pocket.

"Another couple," Sherlock muttered.

John winced. He had hoped they might get to the bottom of this before now, but even Sherlock was only human. Then John remembered something, and looked back up at Sherlock. "Did you tell Lestrade we're coming? Did you even say anything to him?"

A slow smirk formed at the side of Sherlock's mouth. "I must keep the good inspector on his toes somehow. Besides, he knows we're coming. Why would we do anything else?"

John shook his head and smiling despite himself. "What am I going to do with you Sherlock?"

Sherlock just chuckled in John's ear.
Deductions and Chocolate Sauce

Chapter Summary

Chapter title says it all.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Once again, this chapter contains the aftermath of a murder, please keep yourself safe if this could be triggering for you.

I offer much thanks to my Beta, Helena Chauby for her editing skills. In addition, I would like to thank Lady of Clunn for her work as BritPicker for this story.

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Chapter 4: Deductions and Chocolate Sauce

A short cab ride later, Sherlock and John were striding up the walk to another house. John noted that this house was slightly larger than the converted flat Thomas and Sean had lived in. This couple must have had more funds between them.

Lestrade met them just outside the front door with an impatient frown. "About time Sherlock-oh, did I...interrupt something when I called?"

John followed the inspectors gaze until he realised that Sherlock and he were still holding hands. He jumped a bit and pulled away. "Don't be daft," he muttered, staring at the pavement.

"Come, Lestrade," Sherlock stated, taking charge, "show us the bodies." The three men entered the house, walked down a short corridor and turned right into another living room.

It was an eerily familiar scene, with some key differences.

John took a breath and scanned the scene in front of him. There were two men hanging from the ceiling this time. There were no arched ceilings or visible support beams, however, hooks had been fixed into the elevated ceiling which appeared to hold both men securely in place. John doubted that plaster alone would be able to hold two grown men. Therefore, the hooks must have been driven through support beams just behind the plaster. Secured to the hooks were ropes that supported the bodies via the victims' wrists.
John did a brief scan of the bodies. Similar injuries as before. Bruising on the temple (both men this time), whip marks, strangulation. The man closest to him had long brown hair that reached his shoulders. The other man, also strung up, had a short, red buzz cut.

The red-headed man hung at what would have been a very uncomfortable angle, were he alive, because he was secured by only one arm. His other arm hung limply at his side with a broken wrist and thumb so badly dislocated, that John could see it from across the room.

"Their names are Bryan," Lestrade said, indicating the one with the red hair, "and Marcus," Lestrade stayed at the edge of the room so that the consulting detective and his blogger had room to work.

Sherlock examined the bodies, and the room, alongside John. After a few minutes of doing this in silence he turned to face John. "Your impressions doctor?"

"This time neither man had died of asphyxiation," John glanced at Sherlock for a moment before continuing, "They're both incredibly pale and given the amount of," John paused to look through the clear plastic they were walking over, "dried blood on the floor cause of death was likely exsanguination." He paused for a moment looking at the floor, then the bodies. "This wouldn't be so dry if it had happened recently. The killer tortured them for a long time."

Sherlock rolled his eyes, "Could you be any more vague John? How long is a 'long time'?"

John spared him a glare before returning his gaze to the bodies. Jesus, Thomas and Sean had been whipped, but Marcus and Bryan had been tortured. Their bodies were riddled with bruises, cuts, whip marks, all crisscrossed on top of each other so it was hard to tell them apart. "Given the healing I'm able to make out... at least three days. I have a hard time believing, even as bad as they look, that a whip did all this..."

Sherlock muttered something about tiny little brains before speaking up. "They were tortured for four days John, and the whip marks didn't do 'all this' as you say. Don't you see the stab wounds?!"

John leaned closer to Marcus and squinted at his body for a few moments before Sherlock huffed a breath and walked over to him. John turned his head, in time to see Sherlock step directly behind him.

"Focus on the bodies," Sherlock breathed in his ear and he grasped John's hand and lifted it, index finger pointed outwards.

John followed the line their fingers made, and finally saw it. There, amidst the dried blood, welts, and other marks was a small puncture wound, right through the heart. He glanced over to Bryan to see he had the same wound. "Jeez, those are small puncture wounds, compared to last time."

John felt Sherlock nod and the consulting detective's breath tickled his ear as he spoke, "Poker from the fireplace."

John turned his head along with Lestrade and the few others in the room. All the fire pokers appeared to be in place, but now that he was looking, John saw a reddish tint to one.

"Bag it," Lestrade instructed a SOCO, who moved to do so.

"Make sure you get the flag and the bible quote," Sherlock instructed.

John scanned the rest of the fireplace and saw the charred remains of a rainbow flag and a strip of paper underneath clear tape. Stepping closer he was able to read it. It said:
Revelation 2:2 - I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars.

"These men were much more active in the gay community than Thomas and Sean. They were meant to be at a rally today." Sherlock surmised.

"How-" Lestrade began, sounding only half surprised.

"Look at the evidence," Sherlock stated, cutting off the detective inspector. "The pictures on their walls show more rallies, parades, and events, less personal photos. Also there are pamphlets for said event on the coffee table. Given that no one missed them for a few days I take it they were meant to be away, perhaps on holiday?"

"Yes," Lestrade sighed, resigned. "Sally, a community partner of theirs, came to check on them when they hadn't shown. We got the call at 11am. Will you be wanting to question her as well?"

Sherlock shook his head. "Unnecessary. The killer is targeting gay men he doesn't know, but he does have a type."

"Care to share with the class?" Lestrade prompted, impatiently.

Sherlock spun back to face the bodies as he spoke. "Gay, married, heavily involved in the community." Sherlock glanced over his shoulder as he continued, "I told you he would target higher profile couples." Sherlock shook his head. "He's getting more careful, too, more thoughtful. He isn't squeamish about his work either. Probably ex-military, or," Sherlock looked back to Lestrade as he spoke. "Possibly a former constable. Someone who knows what he's doing."

Sherlock paused and smirked to himself when he noticed Lestrade flushing in displeasure at the insinuation, then continued: "Look below the victims. By the fine traces of sawdust in the plush crème carpeting, the hooks in the ceiling have been fixed there recently, by a person of some strength. Notice that there are no nails or bolts; he affixed the hooks directly into the support beams, behind the plaster. There are no hesitation marks, and no additional holes. Because of this we can deduce that the killer found the support beams on his first attempt. The killer was either familiar with this property or, more likely, has some knowledge of architecture. He was strong enough to hammer the hooks into place, while not fearing retaliation from his victims, who must have been already beaten and bound, but not yet hung..."

Sherlock would likely have continued without pause, but even he needed to breathe every now and again.

"...The sawdust on the carpet is present, showing that the killer was not bothering to hide his tracks, nevertheless, there is less than there should be, suggesting that the killer got some of it on his clothing."

"So, we're looking for someone with trace amounts of sawdust on their clothing?" Greg asked.

Sherlock gave Lestrade a withering look. "Really Lestrade, have you learned nothing of observation in all the years we've been working together?" Sherlock motioned toward a wastebasket in the corner. "You will note the remaining sawdust is there. There is still visible sawdust in the carpet, so we know this wasn't an attempt to clean the house. It was an attempt to clean himself. Interesting that he doesn't shy away from bloody work but he stops to brush sawdust off his clothing. This indicates a long time habit. He must have been used to keeping himself presentable at all times, which is yet
another indication of a uniformed employ."

"They don't have wedding rings, like the last two," Lestrade pointed out.

"Honestly, Lestrade, must I do everything for you? Look at their fingers," Sherlock gestured excitedly, "He ripped the rings off this time. I'd check the fireplace for that as well."

"Do you want to examine them when we find them?" Lestrade offered.

"Unnecessary. It was a happy marriage." Sherlock gestured to Bryan, "He did some damage to himself trying to get out of his bonds, probably to reach for Marcus."

"And this homophobic killer just let him do that?" Lestrade questioned.

Sherlock shrugged. "It put his victim in more pain, and he didn't get away so it wasn't a problem."

Sherlock cut him off. "No! Absolutely not. No details and no photos are getting out to the press. They had a field day with that image you snapped of Sean and Thomas. How did you get it anyway? Probably your damn phone."

Sherlock scoffed, "I admit nothing, and you have no proof."

"This case is pulling a great deal of attention towards our department, Sherlock," Lestrade pressed on, "don't make it more difficult for us than it has to be."

Sherlock raised an accusing eyebrow. "I wouldn't' dream of it. Come, John."

John sputtered a bit in surprise as he followed Sherlock out of the room. "Where are we going?"

"The morgue." Sherlock replied.

"Why the morgue" John questioned, "These bodies won't get there for hours yet."

Sherlock grinned over his shoulder at John before racing down the front steps of the house. "We won't need those bodies," Sherlock called as he went.

'This is going to be interesting,' John thought to himself as he chased after his friend.

~*~*~*~

Sherlock and John strode into the morgue as if they owned the place. While they weren't exactly official personnel, they were here often enough that no one stopped them.

"Hello Sherlock, John," Molly greeted them in the lab with a smile.

John returned the smile. Sherlock and he still worked closely with Molly on some cases. After his 'return' Sherlock, partially at John's insistence, had a sit down talk with Molly.

John didn't know the details, but he suspected, based on the talk he and Sherlock had just prior, that Sherlock had apologised for some of his past behavior towards Molly while making it clear to her (hopefully gently) that he didn't return her affections.

Whatever the details, Sherlock and Molly appeared to get on better now. Molly still ogled Sherlock.
from time to time, but it was more appreciative, less school girl crush.

"How's the case Sherlock?" Molly continued, removing gloves from her hands, and then washing them.

Sherlock launched into his explanation without preamble, as usual. "This is personal for the killer. The two bodies you have coming are in awful shape."

Molly nodded, thankful for the warning. "What do you mean, personal?" She asked, turning towards Sherlock.

"He tortured his last victims for four days before killing them. The blood was dried by the time we got there, so they were dead a few days more before we found them. Still no footprints. I couldn't even get an impression to calculate his shoe size. He could've found them shortly after his last victims."

Molly frowned. "That's terrible." She paused and worried her lip between her teeth for a moment before speaking again. "Were they... well...were they killed while they were..." Molly trailed off, her cheeks turning red.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "They may have had sex earlier that day, but no, I'm fairly certain they were sleeping when he picked their lock. Probably spooning so that when he hit the first one on the side of the head, the other turned just in time to get hit as well. Matching bruises."

"You didn't think it was important to inform Lestrade of all this?" John asked, incredulous.

Sherlock shrugged. "I told him our killer was detailed, planning things out. The rest is just details."

It was John's turn to roll his eyes. "Any other important details you've left out?"

Sherlock thought for a moment before nodding. "I've said this is personal. Someone close to the killer, probably a son, was hurt or killed in or by the gay community. At least in the killer's eyes. It fits. It makes things personal, makes him violent. That's also why he's targeting individuals in the community instead of large groups. He wants the revenge to be personal too."

Molly shook her head sadly.

"It's still brilliant how you do that," John murmured, impressed.

Sherlock grinned in an evil fashion. "You won't think I'm so brilliant in a moment John."

John raised a cautious eyebrow. "Why?"

Sherlock shifted his gaze to Molly without explanation. "Did you get my text?"

"When did you text her?" John asked, slightly worried now.

"When you weren't looking," Sherlock said dismissively, keeping his eyes fixed on Molly. "Did you get what I asked for?"

Molly glanced quizzically at John before looking at Sherlock and nodding. "I nicked some from the cafeteria, but why?"

"Bring it here, will you? " Sherlock asked. "Oh, and bring a camera as well."

"Okay..." Molly hesitantly walked to the supply room, while Sherlock turned his attention to John.
"Now John," Sherlock drawled, stepping closer, "take off your shirt."

John swallowed and took a step back. "Excuse me?"

Sherlock continued advancing, slowly, and John continued retreating. "I need a picture to turn over to the press."

"What?!"

John's back hit a wall.

"It's important to keep the killer off-balance." Sherlock sobered for a moment before he said, "The killer may already have his next victims..."

John frowned and looked at the floor, concerned. Sherlock was right. Bryan and Marcus had been tortured for days... It hurt to think another loving couple may already be suffering.

A pair of black shoes came into John's vision and he looked up to meet Sherlock's serious grey-blue eyes.

"He'll know it's not real," Sherlock began, "hell, everyone will, because Marcus and Bryan were dead when we found them."

Sherlock was right in front of John now, reaching his hands towards the hem of John's jumper. "The reminder, however, will drive him mad. He doesn't want the public to feel sympathy for his victims, and keeping him off-balance may give us a chance to stop him and prevent further deaths."

"Soften," John accused with a smile.

Sherlock returned the smile. When he felt John relax under his hands he quickly lifted off the jumper and the shirt underneath.

John yelped in surprise, his arms covering his chest. "I take it back! You are cold and calculating!"

"Flattery will get you nowhere, John" Sherlock replied.

Molly returned to the room at this moment and flushed when she saw John. "Sherlock?" She asked.

Sherlock snatched the chocolate sauce from her hands and advanced on John. "Stay still or this will get on your trousers too."

"Sherlock!" John protested in vain. He was quickly squirted with long strips of chocolate sauce across his upper chest. "What is the point of this?!"

Satisfied with his handiwork, Sherlock put the chocolate sauce down. "I plan on editing the picture so it's black and white. The chocolate sauce just adds the proper color and texture. They used it to replicate blood in that American movie, Psycho, after they found that ketchup and other red pigments become a washed out medium-grey when seen in black and white. Now, stay still." Sherlock turned to Molly, "Please pull the frame in so you only see my hand and a bit of John's chest."

"Sherlock I am not-" John stopped short when he caught the look in Sherlock's eyes. Sherlock was a brilliant actor, and he acted with his whole body. He must have been trying to put John in Marcus's place and himself in Bryan's, because he reached out his hand towards John with a look of longing that stopped the doctor cold. Sherlock wasn't even touching him, but John couldn't pull himself away from that look. Sherlock looked like he loved him, but just couldn't reach him...It was so earnest,
John almost believed it himself.

"I think I've got some good shots," Molly piped up, looking bit flustered.

John looked at her confused. He hadn't even seen the flash go off. Was he that out of it?

"Thank you, Molly," Sherlock stated, snatching the camera from her grasp. "Please help the good doctor clean up will you?"

And just like that, Sherlock tore out of the room with his prize.

John blinked, and Molly giggled. "Come here," She said, pulling out a wet wipe.

John shook his head and obeyed. "I am going to kill him," John muttered as Molly and he began wiping the chocolate sauce off his chest.

Molly smirked. "It's cute how he can get under your skin, even after all this time."

"It is not cute," John groused, "He's a terror of a flatmate."

Molly looked up at him through her lashes. "You're not going to convince me that's all you are."

John looked at her, shocked. "Molly, not you, too. We are not a couple!"

Molly raised an eyebrow as she continued to clean up the chocolate sauce. "All I'm saying is I've seen the way you look at him. And the way he looks at you."

John let out an aggravated sigh as he pulled his jumper back over his (mostly) clean chest. "I'm not gay."

Molly shrugged, tossing her gloves and the wet wipes in the garbage. "Sometimes, Dr. Watson, the heart just wants, what the heart wants."

John shook his head and strode out of the morgue. He was not in love with his best friend. He wasn't...honestly.
Moments of Clarity

Chapter Summary

Investigations into the case continue, hilarity ensues.

Chapter Notes

I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Helena Chauby for being Beta reading this story, and to the Lady Clunn for her diligent work BritPicking this story.

Thanks also go to my flat mate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff, is also to be thanked for his assistance with plot development.

Many thanks to all who have commented on this story, given kudos, and bookmarked this story. Your support is much appreciated and always very motivating to continue on.

I hope you all enjoyed this latest chapter. I just wanted to remind readers that if there is something you would like to see in the story, or if you feel like throwing out suggestions those are always welcome. I do have the major plot points sketched out all the way to the end, but nothing is set in stone.

Thanks again for reading, and I'll see you all next week! ^_^

Chapter 5: Moments of Clarity

John stumbled downstairs the morning after the chocolate sauce incident, yawning behind his hand. He hadn't slept well, again. Damn Sherlock, and damn this case. It was messing with his head.

"Morning," Sherlock murmured from behind one of the local papers. It seemed like every local or national paper was spread out on the kitchen table.

John glared resolutely at the paper between Sherlock's fingers. "I'm still cross with you," he muttered.

Sherlock lowered the paper enough to arch an eyebrow at John. "The chocolate sauce still?"

"Sherlock, that was completely childish!" John gave an exasperated sigh. "And you could've stained my clothes."

Sherlock gave a little shrug. "It would have been an improvement on the jumper."

John huffed irritably as he grabbed a seat. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. Nope, what he saw on the table was still there. "What kind of experiment is this?" John pointed to a covered plate and cup of tea which sat by his seat.
"I believe it's called eggs and toast, John," Sherlock drawled as he turned a page.

John cautiously lifted the plate that Sherlock had used as a make-shift lid to keep the food warm, and sniffed. It smelled good. Still eyeing Sherlock, John warily asked, "Is this safe to eat?"

Sherlock folded his newspaper down so he could glare at John properly. "I'm not that bad at cooking."

John shrugged and took a bite. It was good; very good. He took a few more bites and a sip of tea before he said, "Your apologising skills need work, but the food and tea are good. Thank you."

Sherlock smirked to himself and started reading again.

"Do you have every paper known to England on this table?" John asked, peering around in-between bites.

"I'm missing twenty or so more localised and lesser publications," Sherlock mused as he turned a page, "but this will do for now."

John chuckled to himself. "Only twenty?"

"Our picture is in most of them," Sherlock added.

"Oh for the love of-" John sputtered, "You actually sent that picture to the papers?! You really think it will make that much of an impact?"

"Well, that one was published too," Sherlock began, folding his paper in half, "but I meant this one." He placed his paper alongside John's plate before picking up another one.

John glanced at the photo, then did a double take. It was him and Sherlock alright, but not the close up of hand and chest which Molly had captured. It was the two of them walking, arm in arm, down the street yesterday morning. They'd caught the brief moment when John had laid his head on Sherlock's shoulder. The headline declared:

**FAMOUS DETECTIVE AND "PARTNER"**

John scanned the article. It, along with every other bloody person in England apparently, insinuated that Sherlock and he were romantic partners. "This is in most of the papers?" John asked, taken aback.

Sherlock nodded and slid another paper over to John. "This photo is in a few less, but it still appears to be well-circulated."

John glanced down to see a close up, black and white image of Sherlock's hand reaching for his chocolate sauce smeared chest. John, blinked, surprised. Black and white, close in like that, it really looked like that moment the article below was describing; the moment Bryan reached out to Marcus. Except, of course, Marcus and Bryan hadn't been that close.

John looked up at Sherlock who was still rifling through papers and shrugged. Whatever. This was the crazy, upside-down life he had chosen. He had no regrets; mostly.

"So," he began after a sip of tea, "What are we going to do today, Sherlock? So help me, if you say, 'Take over the world,' I will throw my toast at you."

Sherlock looked at him quizzically for a moment. "Are you referencing pop culture again? No, never
mind; it's irrelevant. Also, that would be a waste of food. We both know how much you like toast and jam." Sherlock paused to turn another page. "I intend to examine articles for couples gone missing, or any hint of what may have triggered our killer."

"You've been at that all week Sherlock," John protested, "Even before we saw the aftermath of the second murdered couple."

Sherlock just shrugged.

"Fine," John let out a small sigh. "Let me finish eating, change, and I will help you go through articles."

Sherlock's paper rustled slightly and, for just a moment, John thought he heard a quiet, "Thank you."

A few minutes, and a quick change, later found John sitting beside Sherlock at the table, riffling through papers and magazines.

"Look for any mention of homosexuality, the LGBT community, or religion," Sherlock instructed. "The data we need may be mentioned only in passing."

"Will do," John murmured, his eyes scanning a page. "I assume I can skip the articles about our 'relationship'?"

Sherlock glanced at John out of the corner of his eye. It was harder than he thought to just keep 'reading' and to act unaffected. After a moment he murmured, "There may be useful information even there; don't skip it." Another, pregnant, pause and then, "Does that bother you?"

John put his paper down for a moment and thought about it. Hell, it was all he'd been thinking about this past week and a half, even before yesterday's 'Let's be a couple' ruse. "No, honestly it doesn't," he began. "I really can't tell you how I feel about it...but it doesn't bother me."

Sherlock tried not to sulk into his paper. That wasn't exactly a rousing approval. Then again, what had he been hoping for? Focus, stay practical.

"John, it is entirely possible this 'ruse' of being a couple could become more important as this case goes on." Sherlock had made a concentrated effort to examine the facts removed from his feelings for John, and was certain this was the truth. The fact that it was, in some ways, a pleasant truth was besides the point. "But if you are not comfortable with it, we shouldn't go any further."

John closed his eyes, his hands folded and resting against his mouth. Sherlock smirked at the close approximation to his own 'thinking' pose.

John tried to push the confusion aside and focus on just how he felt. Sherlock deserved an honest answer and, by God, he wanted one for himself. He pictured Sherlock's arm around him and remembered the warm butterflies he'd felt at the action. He visualised the moment Sherlock had bought him the crystal, and the smile they had shared. Their hands so comfortably intertwined at a crime scene that he hadn't even noticed... Eating a good meal together at Angelo's...wait. That hadn't been a date. Why was that coming up? Irrelevant-God now he even sounded like Sherlock. Still, he focused on the feeling. Sherlock's warmth next to him, good conversation, and the image of Sherlock's face in the candle light. It felt good. Really good.

John didn't notice the warm smile that had formed on his lips, but Sherlock did. He refused, resolutely refused to read anything into it other than hope for the ruse they were currently discussing. Anything else would have been the height of foolishness, just like the giddy feeling swimming in his chest; foolish.
John opened his eyes and looked into Sherlock's waiting gaze. Hell, maybe the only way for John to get his own answers was to surrender to this ruse, and see where it led him. Once he had those answers...well he could decide what to do then. "I'm in, Sherlock, wherever this leads us."

Sherlock cursed his answering smile to John, but he could no more have stopped it than he could have eliminated his occasional need for food and sleep. "Alright then," he murmured, and both men returned to their search of the papers.

~*~*~*~

"John, wake up."

Someone was shaking him. John opened his eyes to see Sherlock leaning over the table to nudge his shoulder. John looked blearily up at him for a moment, before removing his face from the newspaper it had been plastered to. He ran a hand over his face, and hoped none of the ink had transferred. "Hey," he murmured, "How long was I out?"

Sherlock shrugged, returning his gaze to his papers. "No more than an hour."

John stretched, the action causing his jumper to ride up and reveal a strip of bare flesh. This fact was not lost on Sherlock. "Did Lestrade call?" John yawned.

Sherlock shook his head.

"What, did you wake me just so you wouldn't be alone?"

Sherlock shrugged. "You said you would help me."

John smiled to himself and looked down at the paper he'd fallen asleep on. The ink wasn't smudged so it likely wasn't on his face. Well, that was something. "Find anything interesting?"

Sherlock hmmed, "I was able to find wedding announcements for the two deceased couples in past papers."

John looked up, his interest piqued. "Show me."

Sherlock slid two separate papers his way. Each one was open to wedding announcements, mostly blokes with birds; a few were just blokes or just birds. Sean and Thomas were easy to spot. They were the only couple on the page looking at each other instead of the camera, like they couldn't be bothered to look away. John smiled. "They're a cute couple."

Sherlock 'hmmed' and continued to read.

John scanned the other paper and saw Marcus and Bryan with their arms around each other and a rainbow flag held in front of them. They also looked very happy.

"What about you?" Sherlock asked.

"Hmm?" John looked up from the papers.

"Find anything interesting?" Sherlock elaborated.

"Oh," John turned back to his own papers, "Just some opinion pieces."

Sherlock shrugged. "Dull."
John nodded, a resigned look on his face, before looking back over at Sherlock. "Say, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

Sherlock huffed and put his paper down. "If it will stop these interruptions, by all means."

John was not deterred by his flatmate's irritable moods. He'd seen them too often to be put off his question.

"Well, I was thinking-"

"Will wonders never cease," Sherlock shot out. John pointedly ignored the comment.

"And I noticed you've been unusually cautious around this case."

"What do you mean?" Sherlock asked.

"Well, you normally don't ask my permission for help with your disguises-"

"I told you we needed to look authentic," Sherlock interrupted.

"Will you let me finish?!" John snapped. Sherlock held up his hands in surrender. When John was fairly certain Sherlock would stay quiet, he continued.

"And you normally barge into people's lives regardless of what they're doing, deducing them and demanding answers."

"I did say discretion was required in this case," Sherlock replied.

John wasn't convinced. "Other cases would've benefited from discretion and that's never stopped you in the past. This is one of the most complex cases you've had in a while."

"So?" Sherlock cut in, unable to contain himself.

"So I wonder if you're being cautious because of what happened before, with Moriarty."

Sherlock froze. Damn John, damn him. No one else but Mycroft would have guessed that. "I'm not scared," Sherlock snapped, glaring at his flatmate.

"I didn't say that," John pressed, leaning towards him, "I just don't want that concern to limit you."

John could see Sherlock closing off from him, but he pressed on, reaching forward to lay his hand over the consulting detective's and squeeze. That got Sherlock to look up and meet John's gaze again. "There can only be so many geniuses in the world, and you've defeated every single one that's come up against you."

Sherlock kept his expression cool, but he did return the squeeze of John's hand. He certainly didn't want to repeat the events leading up to his fall... but he appreciated the support. He cleared his throat before saying, "I will take that into consideration."

John just smiled at him before turning back to his papers.

It was three papers later before John realised they were still holding hands. 'Screw it,' John thought, 'This feels good, and I am not going to defend or define the actions of my relationship with Sherlock anymore.'

With the calming awareness of Sherlock's hand in his, John turned the page.
John worried his bottom lip between his teeth as Sherlock sawed away on his violin. It was torturous, really. When Sherlock was calm, or at least not angry, he played beautifully, and John could listen to him for hours. Now, however, John was simply tolerating.

Sherlock was frustrated. Hell, John was frustrated. They'd spent three days poring over news articles looking for a clue. Well, Sherlock had anyway. John, being the sensible man that he was, stopped for, as Sherlock would say, 'useless' sleep, food, and a shift at the clinic.

John ran his calloused hand over his face and considered going down to the pub... even if it was only 10am. Sherlock was difficult to deal with under normal circumstances. When he was stuck on a case...well. There was certainly no arguing with him about manners, or the pressures an eardrum could take before it started bleeding...

John let out an audible sigh of relief when Sherlock paused in his 'playing' to flop irritably down on the couch.

"We must have missed something John," he complained.

"Clearly," John muttered, glaring at Sherlock over the edge of his laptop.

Sherlock glared back just as fiercely. "You're not helping."

"Well what would help, Sherlock?" John asked, exasperated. "Questioning the friends and family of the latest victims perhaps? Or at least reading the police reports of their statements?"

Sherlock waved his hand dismissively at John and turned his gaze away. "Useless, these men are not connected except for the 'community' they were all a part of. Marcus and Bryan were much more involved in activism and politics than Thomas and Sean. Also, Thomas and Sean were religious, where I saw no indications of Thomas and Sean being particularly religiously inclined. No, it is the killer that is the common link."

John rested his forehead in the flat of his palm. Now he'd got Sherlock started again.

"The killer wet his teeth on the first two; they were a link from where he's been, to where he's going. He started from a place of religion, and we have reasonably deduced he is religious himself. He targeted Thomas and Sean after finding their church. However, I have also deduced that this is personal for him, it's important for him to hurt the GLBT community as a whole in addition to individually. This is why he is seeking out people more involved in the community. His 'message' is starting to get out and he wants better vessels for that 'message.' We won't find him through similarities between the two couples he's murdered; I doubt they even knew each other."

Sherlock paused thoughtfully. "His next victims will likely be very high profile, maybe even political. It has been this killer's story that has fueled the killings. The details of his victim's day to day lives are only relevant in as much as they fit his evolving profile. The more we understand his 'story' the more we will be able to anticipate his movements. That is when the killings will stop, not before."

Although his head remained firmly in his hands, John smiled. He doubted Sherlock even noticed how his voice had softened when he talked about stopping the killings. He was thinking of the victims with empathy. That was just one of the hundreds of bits of evidence that showed Sherlock cared more than he let on. It warmed John's heart. Plus, it was good blackmail material for those days when Sherlock was truly insufferable.
"It will come together, Sherlock," John tried to soothe him, "It always does."

Sherlock huffed irritably and ripped a piece of paper off the table.

John shrugged and tried to go back to making notes for his blog. Irritable paper-reading was a lot easier to endure than irritable violin playing. He had got all of three sentences before Sherlock leapt off the couch with an excited, "Yes!"

"Sherlock?" John looked up cautiously at one, suddenly very energetic, consulting detective.

"Get ready John!" Sherlock declared, sweeping through their living room to grab his coat and scarf, "We're going on a date!"

"A-a date? Why?" John took a measured breath to calm his suddenly racing heart.

"Data!" Sherlock cried triumphantly looping his scarf around his neck. "There's no useful data in the police reports, the gay community is more skittish than ever, so we're going to let the data come to us."

"You lost me," John admitted as he stood up, confusion etched on his features.

Sherlock rolled his eyes and impatiently helped John into his coat. "I have never recived as much information on a case as when people thought I was not listening. People feel far more protected in a crowd than they should; their chins start to wag."

"So we're going to go on a 'date' so people will think we're too focused on each other to hear what they have to say? All on the hopes we'll stumble across some useful information?"

Sherlock beamed, "Exactly! And I know just the place to increase the odds of that."

John was being headed by his flatmate out the door and into a cab. "Where's that?" John asked hesitantly.

"There's some sort of LGBT community event/festival today; saw it in the paper."

John sighed and began to re-evaluate whether irritable paper reading was truly more tolerable than irritable violin playing, given the results.

~*~*~*~

It was, John discovered, a bustling little street fair. It stretched on along the river for ten streets or so, and, while it was cloudy, the skies were mercifully dry.

John nestled closer to Sherlock both to avoid being jostled by the crowds too much, and for the added heat. Summer may have been 'just around the corner' but it bloody didn't feel like it.

Sherlock and John were walking arm in arm again, just like they had earlier in the week. Sherlock adjusted his hold to slip his arm around John's waist. John smiled up at him. The git had probably felt him shivering. If they were trapped in this 'ruse' for the day, at least this was a warmer way to go about it.

They were just meandering through the booths, sometimes stopping to 'window shop' or enjoy a performance, depending on what the booth offered.

Couples of all sorts (men, women, and mixed) flowed around them as they went. Surprisingly, John began to notice flowing bits of conversation.
"He did what?!

"Honey... I'm just not ready to tell my parents about us. They just started talking to me again!"

"Oh my GOD you look fabulous!"

"I'll take two please."

"Are you sure the security is tight here?" "It's safe, love, I've got you..."

"Of course I'm not out at work, why do you think I've got all this face paint on?"

"Oh wow... this is a lot of people."

"I told you we weren't alone."

"I've been looking everywhere for this!"

In general, it sounded like normal public conversations. Although John did note undercurrents of fear along with the excitement of the fair. Excitement, boredom, bickering, all these themes were here in the amounts he’d expect them to be. But the fear... there was a bit more than one might pick up in your average crowd. For the first time it occurred to John how little of that fear may be related to their case. While the current serial killer was extreme, this population, and too many other marginalised groups, faced a certain amount of fear on a daily basis, whether it played a small, or a large role in their lives.

John felt Sherlock give him a squeeze, "You're thinking about it too hard," the consulting detective murmured in his ear, "You almost look like you're eavesdropping."

"I am eavesdropping," John whispered back.

Sherlock changed the subject suddenly probably to keep them looking inconspicuous. "Are you hungry, love? Let's grab something from one of those food carts."

John let out a small sigh, and tried to relax. "Fine," he said, "It's probably close to lunch time."

The line was mercifully short and they were soon strolling amongst the booths again. Sherlock was holding an enormous sausage on a stick. John had tried to order something for himself but Sherlock had insisted it would be enough for the both of them. He was probably right, given how much Sherlock normally ate, or, rather, didn't eat.

"You're pouting again, dear," Sherlock murmured.

John glared at the ground for a moment. Great. Sherlock was putting out pet names now. He looked up at his consulting detective, and whatever reply he'd had in mind died instantly on his lips to be replaced with only slightly controlled laughter.

"You know, Sherlock, it's really hard for me to take you seriously when you're stuffing your face with that giant sausage."

"Ha, bloody, ha," Sherlock muttered around his mouthful. "Your lack of commitment to disguise is appalling."

John shrugged, trying to get his breath back. "Boyfriend or not, you make quite a sight right now."

Sherlock retaliated by taking another large bite out of the sausage.
"Hey!" John protested, "You said half of that was mine!" He was getting hungry now.

Sherlock, his bite of meat still clenched between his teeth, looked down at John with a dangerous gleam of amusement in his eyes.

John's eyes widened as he understood and he tried to back away, bracing his hand flat on Sherlock's chest. Sherlock was having none of it. He pulled John closer, and leaned his head down suggestively.

'The quickest way out of this embarrassment,' John thought, 'Is to play along.' For surely it was embarrassment causing his cheeks to flush this way. Leaning forward, pushing onto his tip toes to reach, John grasped the offered bit of sausage in his teeth, and pulled back. Or at least he tried to. Sherlock wasn't letting go. Narrowing his eyes, John bit down, breaking off something more bite-sized from the larger chunk. His fingers clenched reflexively in Sherlock's shirt as he felt the juices of the meat run down his chin, all the while never breaking away from Sherlock's heated gaze.

Setting both feet firmly on the ground once more, John wiped his mouth and chewed, trying to figure out why Sherlock looked so smug.

"Excuse me!" Someone was calling out to them.

Sherlock on John turned as one to see a pale, thin woman with a mop of curly red hair making her way to them. Following her in tow was an average sized blonde male with warm brown eyes and eyelashes so long they would make a supermodel jealous.

"Are you Sherlock Holmes?" The red-headed woman asked as she got close to them.

"I am," Sherlock replied, "To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

A pale hand almost as long and thin as Sherlock's was stretched out in greeting. "My name is Lisa," the women introduced herself. "Stephan and I," she gestured to the man behind her, "work for The Rainbow Times. We're going to be writing an article on this festival. Would you mind if we interviewed you?"

Sherlock raised a skeptical eyebrow. "About what?"

"We saw your picture in the Strand," Lisa began.

Oh. That.

Lisa pressed on, "We just wanted to ask you if the rumours are true? Are you and Dr. Watson a couple?"

Sherlock took a moment to carefully word his answer. "John and I make a point of keeping our personal lives, personal." Lisa deflated slightly. "However," Sherlock continued, pulling John closer, "You can see the truth for yourselves."

Lisa brightened. Even John had to appreciate that bit of clever wording. Sherlock admitted nothing but left the door wide open for Lisa to interpret things to her liking.

"How long have you been together?" Lisa asked.

"More or less, six years."

John smiled at that, despite himself. Sherlock was including the time he had been 'dead'. Even then,
separated by God knows how many miles and criminal masterminds, they were still partners. Working partners, of course.

"Six years is a long time," Lisa arched a curious eyebrow, "Will there be wedding bells in your future?"

"That," Sherlock replied, "is a very personal question."

Lisa nodded, a bit put out. "Fair enough. I suppose it's too much to hope for a comment on the murders of gay couples you're working on professionally?"

John felt Sherlock stiffen and looked up at him worriedly. They both still remembered that nosy reporter from the days just before Sherlock fell.

"If that will be all," Sherlock said briskly and moved to turn away.

"Wait!" Lisa called out, extending a hand in their direction, "Could I at least get a photo of you two together? It would look so good for our article."

Sherlock paused for a moment, torn. He despised reporters. However, making a scene wouldn't help the case they were working on any. He considered prospects of their 'we're a couple' ruse. This was turning out to be one of his longer cases. "Then you will let us go." It wasn't a question.

"Absolutely," Lisa agreed, and gestured for Stephan to ready the small camera he was holding.

Sherlock looked down at John, who was looking up at him with adorable confusion. Sherlock was glad he didn't believe in God. Any sane and benevolent deity would punish him for enjoying this ruse so much.

John nervously ran his tongue over his lips when Sherlock began to lean down. He had just enough time to wonder if he was going to go along with this before Sherlock's lips were pressed gently to his. John closed his eyes and leaned into the kiss instinctively. It was a chaste kiss; just the soft press of lips against lips. Still, John felt the impact of it right down to his toes.
Chapter Summary

The plot thickens...

Chapter Notes

I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to all those who have commented on, given kudos to, and bookmarked this story. I am touched by and very thankful for the support this story has received. ^_^

Many thanks go to my Beta, Helena Chauby for her help with editing. I would also like to thank Lady of Clunn for her work BritPicking this story.

I would also like to thank my flatmate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff for his continued assistance with plot development. Not every flatmate will let you knock them up at 3am to discuss the finer points of foreshadowing. ^_^

Warning: Once again, this chapter depicts the aftermath of a violent murder. Please keep yourself safe if this could be triggering for you.

Chapter 6: Of Kings and Men

"What the hell do you think you two are doing?!"

John cringed; Lestrade was not happy.

Sherlock and John came to a stop at the bottom of the front steps. This latest house, this latest crime scene, was the largest home they had been to thus far. Lestrade had called them, just after breakfast, to report a third couple had been discovered.

Sherlock looked up at Lestrade and raised a cocky eyebrow.

Lestrade's glare narrowed as he brandished the front page of the Rainbow Times. Right there, on the cover, were Sherlock and John, in a full kiss.

John gasped when he saw it, his breath suddenly coming faster. They looked every bit the couple that they were pretending to be. John's eyes traced the picture, taking in the way he was leaning into Sherlock, and the way Sherlock was leaning into him; just like they'd been drawn together. John felt Sherlock slip an arm around his shoulders and pull him close.

"I know this isn't how you wanted the Yard to find out," he whispered, his hot breath ghosting over John's ear and neck, "I'm sorry."

John glanced up at Sherlock, confused for a moment, until he saw the pleading look in Sherlock's
eyes. Right, if he denied this picture here, now, it could hurt this 'ruse' they'd been going with. That was why Sherlock stayed as close to the truth as he could with all his disguises, less chance of someone contradicting him. John swallowed and looked down. He'd known the picture would be in a paper, but he never suspected the front page!

Still, it wasn't so much Sherlock and him being thought of as a couple that bothered him, it was that the public took such an interest in a private matter... It was bad enough that the Sun had published several pictures of his quasi-kiss with Sherlock when he'd taken a bite of that sausage... John fought against a blush at the memory of the pictures, and the headlines.

"John?" Sherlock murmured and the ex-army doctor looked up again, meeting Sherlock's still pleading eyes. "Are you okay?"

John took a breath and nodded. He trusted Sherlock, and if he said this couple ruse was important, then John would run with it. "I'm fine," John replied firmly, "I just wasn't expecting this to be on the front page Sherlock." John looked up at Sherlock through his lashes and tried to sound like he was lecturing Sherlock, as he'd done for so many out of control experiments in the past.

That, apparently, had been a good tactic, because Sherlock smiled at him, and leaned down to press a kiss to his forehead.

Sherlock turned then, his arm still around John, and faced a less intimidating and more confused-looking Lestrade. "My apologies, Lestrade, I really did not think an afternoon out with John would upset you so much."

Lestrade looked between Sherlock and John a few times, the anger fading from his face. "Are you trying to tell me this picture wasn't staged?" he asked, Sherlock raised a sardonic eyebrow. "What do you think?" he snapped.

Lestrade looked a bit flummoxed and then glared again. "And this had nothing to do with the case?" Lestrade asked, brandishing the paper once more.

Sherlock let a smug grin spread over his lips and gave John another squeeze. "I didn't say that. It may prove helpful."

Lestrade ran a hand down his face a groaned. After a moment, peeking out between his fingers, Lestrade smiled. "While I'm not happy about the media circus you're stirring up, I am happy for the both of you. It's about time. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Sherlock and John murmured together, glanced at each other, and chuckled.

"We actually had a betting pool going about when you would finally get together," Anderson muttered with a sour face. "I lost."

John sighed and leaned his head against Sherlock's for a moment, surrendering to the inevitable. "A betting pool," he murmured, "Of course you did."

"Don't forget to pay up Anderson," Sherlock smirked at him as John and he were finally allowed up the steps.

"You're not even part of the pool!" Anderson shot after him. Sherlock just chuckled.

Once they were properly inside the house, Sherlock gave John one last squeeze before extracting himself. They passed through an elegant foyer and into a great room. A staircase on their right swept
grandly up to the second floor. The ceiling was pitched two stories high so that the steps ended in a balcony/walkway one could easily see from the ground floor. If a dinner party were held here that balcony/staircase set up would make for quite a grand entrance.

Slightly behind them and to the left was a huge set of bay windows with a cushioned bench built into the wall. Expensive looking, multi coloured tile swept across the floor. There were several richly upholstered couches, chairs, divans etc. positioned around the room with thick oriental carpets underneath. Towards the far end of the room was a grand fireplace, bracketed by two heavy wooden doors.

John sucked in a small breath as he noticed the corpse. It was kneeling by the fire place with its arms stretched taught above the head, hands crossed. As they approached the dead man John noticed a nail stuck through his overlapping hands, fixing them to the fireplace mantle. His head hung limp in death and his hair, which John imagined looked quite dignified when swept back, was dirty blond, speckled with gray. Like all the others before him, this man was naked. His feet mirrored his hands, laying one atop the other with a nail driven through the middle to hold them there.

"His name is Nathan," Lestrade began, keeping back a bit to let John and Sherlock explore. "His partner is Evan."

John glanced around the great room, suddenly confused. "Where is Evan? Did he survive?"

Lestrade shook his head, sadly.

"He's here John," Sherlock murmured, tugging John to crouch down on one side of the body and peer into the fireplace. John understood immediately. The fireplace was a double fireplace, continuing on the other side of the wall, allowing one to see right through to the other room if you peered through the center, where the fire would be. John noticed the charred remains of a rainbow flag in the ashes and shook his head.

John imagined there was another mantle on the other side of the wall. Through the opening, and past the fire guards John could make out another body on the floor. John winced in sympathy for the victims. "They probably were able to see each other through the fire..." John moved towards one of the doors to the side of the great room fireplace when he felt Sherlock's hand on his arm. John looked at Sherlock, confused.

"One thing at a time," Sherlock insisted, "Examine this body first. If you go back and forth between them, you'll only get confused."

John huffed in annoyance and pulled his arm away. "Fine." John pulled himself to his feet, grumbling, careful to avoid the body.

Sherlock also stood, looking around the room with a sour expression. "Nathan and Evan were big political players and GLBT rights activists."

"He's right," Lestrade confirmed, gesturing to the framed news articles and rally photos that decorated the walls alongside other, more personal, pictures of the couple. "How did you-"

"Mycroft keeps tabs on me, I keep tabs on him and the people he works with," Sherlock said dismissively. "I told you he would go for high profile targets; I did a little digging on potential targets."

Lestrade blustered a bit at this. "And you never bothered to tell me that? I could have given them a protective detail!"
Sherlock's eyes narrowed as he approached Lestrade. "And would you have given a protective detail to the forty other couples I thought our killer may be interested in? Are you going to patrol every gay couple in England, because that, ultimately, is who he is after." Sherlock loomed slightly over Lestrade now. "It could never be organised enough to keep everyone safe. Someone would mess up somewhere, and there would be even more dead. We need the killer, not to go down false or useless trails."

Lestrade's mouth was set in a thin, unhappy line, but he nodded. Sherlock gave the barest of nods in return before turning his attention back to Nathan. He stared at the body for a long moment before gesturing to John. "What do you think?"

John looked a bit flustered. This made six deaths, and the pressure of the case was weighing on him. "Really, Sherlock, does it matter? You could out-deduce anyone."

"This helps me, John," Sherlock insisted, "It really does."

John looked dubiously at Sherlock. The consulting detective had said this before, but John couldn't see how. Still, Sherlock was looking at him, eager and open, and John couldn't deny him anything.

John shook his head before turning to examine the body. It was tortured, whipped, beaten, strangled. "He was tortured, not as long or as sloppily as Marcus and Bryan. This was more methodical and," John sucked in a long breath, "likely more painful. He used a whip or a flogger again, and a very sharp knife. I'd say Nathan was tortured for at least a day."

"Two days," Sherlock corrected.

John glared at Sherlock before continuing. "Some of these wounds are more healed than the other victims, and some aren't; some of these wounds had time to heal..." John scanned the body thoughtfully for a moment before pressing on, "I'm guessing the killer tortured one partner at a time, so that all the other man could do was listen to his husband's screams."

Sherlock nodded, "Yes, most likely. He is becoming more methodical when he tortures his victims, but he is still using whips and knives as his primary weapons."

"Let us see if we can find cause of death, shall we," John asked as he accepted the thin blue gloves Donovan was waving at him, and put them on. His hands hovered lightly over Nathan's back, searching. "Aha!" He cried, pressing his fingers gently to the puncture wound on the left side of Nathan's back. "Puncture wound, probably drove straight through his back to his heart."

John's fingers circled the wound a moment, curious, before comprehension dawned on his face. "This wound is cauterised!" John's head shot down to the flagstones of the fireplace and saw a straight poker flung there, slightly bloodied. His head jerked then to the fireplace noting the ashes of a somewhat recent fire. "Oh, god," he breathed, "the killer heated that poker in the fireplace before using it on Nathan!"

"Brilliant, John!" Sherlock cried, causing John to flush at the rare compliment. "Now if you can tell me why, I'll really be impressed."

John huffed a breath, feeling a bit pressured. He knew he could never compare with Sherlock. Still, no harm in trying. Sherlock would put to rights anything he missed. Taking a step back, John swept his gaze over the body, starting with the hands.

"He was bound, like the others," John began, pointing to the bruising around Nathan's wrists. John cast his eyes about the room, looking mostly at the ceiling. "I'm not sure where though."
"Above the window so that he would be suspended in the middle of it," Sherlock explained.

John squinted and saw bits of rope and a hook shoved into the crown moulding above the window.

"Right, the window," John said, dragging his gaze back to the body. "Our killer has a flare for the dramatic. He probably felt like he was putting Nathan on display, as an example to the world."

"Wouldn't he be worried about people seeing Nathan and interrupting his work?" Anderson asked, trying to break into the conversation.

"Not with the trees in the front garden," Sherlock drawled impatiently.

John nodded. "They would block people's view so that Nathan would be 'on display', without risk of the killer getting caught. The killer could have his little drama, while also removing the chance of being discovered. This way he can continue to up the ante with every couple he kills."

"Exactly," Sherlock nodded encouragingly.

John flushed a bit before looking back to the body. Evan was alive when he'd been nailed to the fireplace, John was pretty sure. He'd been trapped, only able to look at his lover through flames. "Our killer is getting more careful," John concluded, "He hung Nathan first to torture him, then nailed him in place so that there could be no touching last chance gesture. They would have only been able to see each other through the flames of the fireplace. That combined with all the religious quotes and imagery that have surrounded these killings... He's focusing on his 'statement' more... using imagery that implies a purifying fire, or the fact that he thinks these men would burn for their 'sins'."

"What else John?" Sherlock prompted. John scanned the body once more. He couldn't see any bible quote taped to the flagstones by the fireplace. Perhaps on the other side?

John scanned the nail holding Nathan's hands in place. The mantle piece was sturdy oak, so it easily supported his weight. His eyes trailed to the nail in Nathan's feet and his eyes narrowed. The tile around them was splintered. No surprise there, but... "How are his feet nailed to the floor? I would expect nails to shatter tile, you can see the cracks here," John gestured with his hand, "How are his feet held here?"

"That is the right question," Sherlock said with a triumphant gleam in his eyes. "Lestrade," Sherlock began, tugging on some blue exam gloves then holding out his hand expectantly, "Get me some clamps."

Lestrade's face wrinkled in confusion. "Clamps?"

"Yes, clamps, are you hard of hearing?"

Lestrade rolled his eyes and grumbled, but went to fetch the clamps as Sherlock had requested. When he returned, he slapped them into Sherlock's outstretched hand with a meaningful look.

"This had better be good," Lestrade muttered.

Sherlock flashed him a grin before moving to stand over Nathan's feet.

"Sherlock?" John asked, but he received no answer.

Sherlock grasped the nail head firmly with the clamps and began to pull. One inch, two inches, three... John swallowed, feeling unsettled. He was no stranger to dead bodies or gruesome sights, but
this was a bit unexpected. Sherlock gave a grunt as the nail finally came free...six inches long.

"Jesus," Lestrade breathed, taking in the length of the metal. Most people in the room jumped when the body slumped to the side, deprived of the support that had been holding it in place. Except for Sherlock and John, who had been expected it, obviously.

"What kind of nails are those?" asked a surprised SOCO.

Sherlock shrugged. "Roofing nails. Can be used for other big jobs as well."

"Here," Lestrade said, holding out an evidence bag, which Sherlock deposited the nail in.

"Mind if I get the other nail?" Sherlock asked.

Lestrade rolled his eyes. "As if I could stop you, just don't let the body crash into the floor, it's in rough enough shape as it is."

Sherlock nodded, "I'll put my best man on it. John, support the body."

"Yes Sherlock," John murmured with exasperated affection, holding the body up by grasping it under the arms.

Sherlock braced the dead man's arms with one hand and pulled the spike out with the clamp in his other hand. As the spike came away they heard a small, metallic clanging. Everyone looked down to see a gold band clattering to the floor.

"His wedding ring," Lestrade guessed, kneeling down to pick it up with gloved hands.

Sherlock nodded, "It must have been threaded onto the spike." Sherlock's brow furrowed in thought as he reviewed the different steps of this third double murder. "This was quite a job."

"Sherlock," John called, crouching in front of the body, "Come look at this."

Sherlock returned the clamps to Lestrade before bending down beside John. "That is interesting," he murmured, studying the ring of deep scratches that appeared to encircle Nathans head like a crown.

Sherlock and John looked at each other and, in the same moment breathed, "Crown of thorns."

As one they stood and walked towards the door on the right side of the fireplace.

"By all means, don't stop to explain yourselves," Lestrade muttered, following them.

Donovan and Anderson shared an unsettled look. "Did you see that?" Donovan asked quietly.

Anderson shook himself. "I wasn't kidding when I said we don't need two of them."

"It's like they were feeding off each other or something," Donovan agreed, remembering the energy that seemed to permeate the air between Sherlock and John.

"Anderson, Donovan, move your arses!" Lestrade called from the other room and they jumped to comply.

Sherlock and John were already crouched over either side of Evan when they entered the next room. Evan was laid on the floor, face up. His feet were overlapping, nailed to the floor, Just like Nathan. His arms, however were stretched out taught to either side of him, each one nailed to the floor individually. Evan looked every bit a victim of crucifixion, except on the floor as opposed to
mounted on a cross.

Evan was a bit shorter than his husband with more tawny blond hair.

"Similar injuries," Sherlock murmured, eyeing the 'crown of thorns' injury in particular.

John nodded grimly. "There's some partially healed injuries on Evan as well," John swept his hand over Evan's body, gesturing as he went. "Whip marks, knife wounds, and another cauterised wound through the heart," John finished, gesturing to Evan's chest.

Sherlock gestured to Evan's wrists, "He was hung as well, there are some rope burns and bits of hemp stuck in the wounds here."

John looked up, making a slow scan of the ceiling, before turning his gaze to Sherlock, perplexed. "Where?"

Sherlock removed a small torch from his coat, and shown it up above the fireplace where the walls met the ceiling. The light glanced off the shining metal of a recently affixed hook. Like it's counterpart above the window in the next room, it was securely fastened, with bits of hemp still clinging to it.

John slid his gaze down the wall, observing. If Evan were hung from that hook, his torso would press uncomfortable against the mantel and... John scanned the body once more finding characteristic bruises along the ribs, just as he'd expected. The good doctor allowed his gaze to trail further downwards and took in the slight burn marks on Evan's feet. John had suspected, and these marks appeared to confirm, that Evan's feet had dangled uncomfortably close to the fire while he was suspended.

John drew a measured breath and tried hard not to think of how much pain Evan and Nathan must have gone through. He only sort of managed it. They were dealing with a fanatic whose victims were no better to him than carrion. Refocusing, John perused the body and the area around the flagstone. He frowned. "There's no bible quote. Hasn't he always left one in the past?"

"It's here," Sherlock assured him, taking the clamps from Lestrade again. "Hold him down for me? That'll make this a bit quicker."

John nodded and pressed his gloved hands firmly into Evan's feet, then his right hand, then his left. When Evan's left hand came free they found his wedding band.

Sherlock barely glanced at it before declaring, "Happy marriage, obviously."

"Obviously," John mimicked with a grin before handing the ring to Lestrade.

With Evan's limbs free, John and Sherlock were easily able to roll him over, revealing a blood-smeared patch of tape. The edges of the tape were burned where the hot poker had touched as it was pressed through Evan's chest.

Sherlock wiped the blood away with a gloved hand and revealed the words on the paper beneath the tape:

**Proverbs 16:12 -** *It is* an abomination to kings to commit wickedness: for the throne is established by righteousness.

Sherlock's eyes flicked rapidly across the words, to the fireplace, then to Evan's face. John got a
queasy cold feeling in his stomach at the hardened expression that flittered over Sherlock's features. He had figured out something, and it wasn't good.

Sherlock stood abruptly, tearing off his gloves and tossing them out. John followed without question, tossing his gloves as well.

"Sherlock?" he asked, worried. Sherlock didn't often act like this.

"Sherlock!" Lestrade was also calling after the detective, demanding an explanation.

"I'll be in touch, Lestrade!" Sherlock called over his shoulder at the inspector, waving his hand dismissively.

"Sherlock," John panted a bit, catching up to the consulting detective, who was all but running now, "What's wrong? Tell me."

Sherlock paused at the great doors to the house, searching John's face. John saw worry there, and a million thoughts racing behind those flawless eyes. Sherlock lifted a hand and placed it on John's shoulder, squeezing gently. John leaned into the touch, waiting.

Sherlock opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it. "Later," he whispered, and John nodded.

"Okay." John couldn't help but return the small smile on Sherlock's face. He knew what it meant to Sherlock to have someone who trusted him.

Together they moved to the door, never expecting what was on the other side. Cameras flashed like blinding lightning as soon as Sherlock and John stepped over the threshold. The police tape was keeping people back, but barely.

John was completely taken aback and instinctively inched closer to Sherlock. Without thinking about it Sherlock looped an arm around John's waist, pulling him closer. The flashes got much worse after that, and the press started screaming questions.

"Sherlock, do you know who the killer is?!

"Sherlock, how many bodies is this?!

"Do you have any promising leads?!

And, of course, "As a gay couple in the community, how do you feel about this killer's rampage?"

Sherlock glared threateningly at the reporters, and started making his way past them with the help of a uniformed officer; he kept John close all the while. As they neared the end of the gauntlet of reporters, an overly enthusiastic female reporter leaned over the police barricade, and threw a desperate question at Sherlock.

"Are you afraid for your lover and yourself?!

Sherlock had positioned them so that he was on the outside, closer to the reporters, and that John was closer to the house, more sheltered. He paused then and glared at this women for all he was worth. She was, clearly, a seasoned reporter, but even she began to cower as Sherlock loomed over her. "My personal relationship with John Watson is not your, nor anyone else's concern," he hissed, pulling John impossibly closer to his side. "But I can assure you," he drawled menacingly, "I protect what is mine."
John flushed at Sherlock's protective gesture trying, desperately, not to be as thrilled as he was. He didn't want this to escalate into a fight, however, so he looped an arm around Sherlock's waist and gave him an gentle squeeze. This caused Sherlock to turn and look at John, still a bit flushed and obviously concerned.

"I'm okay," John assured, his smile growing as he looked up at Sherlock. It was difficult to tear his gaze away from Sherlock's penetrating stare, but John managed. The ex-army doctor scanned the area around the crowd, wondering how they would ever make it home. "Maybe we should've called a cab before we left," John murmured, trying to lighten the mood.

Sherlock's gaze softened a bit, and he lifted his free hand to caress the side of John's face. John smiled and leaned into the touch. An unexpected warmth seeped into his limbs, and John let his gaze fall away from his might-be-more-than-best-friend.

"No need," Sherlock replied softly, "We already have a ride."

John blinked at him in confusion until he heard the all too familiar, rhythmic tapping of an umbrella on the ground. He made a soured face and muttered, "Mycroft."

Sherlock chuckled and pulled John into a proper hug for a moment. "While it is amusing to see you sharing my unpleasant sentiments towards my older brother, going with him will be the fastest way to get out of this crowd."

John grumbled a bit and closed his eyes. He was enjoying being held by Sherlock too much. Way too much. They were in the middle of a bloody crowd of police and reporters for God's sake! And yet he could not bring himself to pull away. He was well, and truly, fucked.

"Besides," Sherlock's baritone voice breathed in John's ear, growing serious, "I need to talk to him."

John moved his head to look at Sherlock, stunned. He had never, ever heard of Sherlock willingly talking to his brother. John swallowed, searching his long time partner's serious face. This might be more than a bit dangerous.

"Come along you two," Mycroft drawled sardonically as he approached them. "You're making quite a scene."

Sherlock and John pulled apart then, a bit guiltily, and glared at the elder Holmes in unison.

Mycroft was dutifully unimpressed, and turned to seat himself in the waiting black Bentley.

John jumped a bit when he felt a hand encircle his, but relaxed when he realised it was Sherlock's. Sherlock gave him a small, reassuring smile before pulling John into the car with him. John was pressed close into Sherlock's side as the car sped away and, for once, he was beyond caring. Something was brewing here... something big.
Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John, mostly Sherlock, hatch a plan to ensnare the killer...

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has bookmarked, commented on, and given kudos to this story. Your support means a lot to me. It's helped me keep my head through, well, everything. Thank you.

Believe it or not, this chapter contains the very first words I ever wrote as far as this story is concerned. I'll give you a hint, the section I wrote starts with: "John leaned his head against the couch..." and ends with "...and so very Sherlock."

So, it goes without saying that I've been waiting for this chapter since day one. Don't worry, this story goes on for a while yet and, I hope, it improves with every chapter.

I would like to thank my lovely beta, Helena Chauby, for her assistance in editing this story.

I would also like to thank Lady of Clunn for her assistance with BritPicking.

Finally I also owe thanks to my flatmate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

Without further ado, onto the story...

Chapter Seven: The Leap

John sighed, uneasy, as he dragged his eyes across the walls of his room. He was trying, very hard, not to think about what was going on downstairs.

When they'd got back to 221 B Baker Street, Sherlock had actually asked to speak with Mycroft alone. John had looked at up at Sherlock hurt and a bit confused. Sherlock had looked back at him, pleading. In the end John had huffed an unhappy breath, and climbed the steps to his room.

John trusted Sherlock, of course, he always had. It was crazy, really, when John stopped to think about it. He had trusted Sherlock completely so soon after meeting him. Sherlock had turned his life upside down, and he hadn't been able to get enough of their mad rambles about London since he'd left his cane at Angelo's...

A sparkle of light caught his eye and John smiled. He'd hung the crystal Sherlock gave him in his bedroom window. He'd selected this location in part because he didn't want Sherlock to witness the goofy smile John got whenever he looked at it.
Standing, John made his way from his bed to the window. It was late afternoon now, and the crystal sparkled in the golden light. John cupped it in his hand, blocking out most of the light, but it still glowed, true to its name.

John carefully ran his thumb over the ornament, feeling its cut facets. Having the crystal in his bedroom window also meant that he would be able to see it glow with light when he started out of a nightmare and be reminded of the day Sherlock had given it to him. It was a foolish sentiment, really, but it made John feel better.

The sounds of a scuffle coming from downstairs caused John to look up sharply from his ornament. The crash that followed, moments later, resulted in John sprinting through his door and down the steps.

John clamored into the sitting room to find both Sherlock and Mycroft looking a bit roughed up. A small side table had tipped, or been flung over, and spilled its varied contents across the floor. Sherlock faced Mycroft with an open posture, knees and elbows bent, cheeks flushed. John knew Sherlock could box quite well when he chose to, so seeing Sherlock in a fighting pose was not nearly as surprising as seeing Mycroft pulling back from one.

Mycroft wasn't as skilled a fighter as Sherlock, but he showed the signs of having been in a scuffle. His knees and elbows, now straightening, had been slightly bent when John entered the room. John also noted that Mycroft's right eye was beginning to look puffy, as though he'd recently been struck, and the knuckles of his left hand were smeared with a small streak of blood.

Mycroft yanked on his lapels to straighten himself out and glared across the room at his brother.

"Just remember what I said, Sherlock. You are playing with fire."

Sherlock's eyes narrowed and he held his ground. "Get out Mycroft," he hissed.

Mycroft made a point of sweeping his gaze across the room to look at John, then back at Sherlock, before shaking his head judgmentally.

"Now!" Sherlock insisted, taking a step forward.

Mycroft took a step backwards, and held his hands up in surrender. "Just remember, when this game comes to an end, Sherlock, I warned you." With that cryptic and ominous statement, Mycroft retreated from the room.

John stared after the elder Holmes for a moment as the door closed behind him before bringing his gaze to Sherlock. The lanky consulting detective was just straightening himself, tugging on his own lapels.

"What happened?" John asked, flabbergasted. The Holmes brothers' contentious relationship was certainly no secret, but John hadn't seen them come to actual blows before.

"It's nothing," Sherlock waved a hand in front of him dismissively.

John set his hands crossly on his hips. "Sherlock, you promised me answers-" John stuttered to a stop as Sherlock turned to face him. There was a nasty cut dripping blood down Sherlock's cheek.

"Lord, Sherlock, can't I leave you alone for two minutes?" John strode forward and grasped an uncooperative Sherlock's chin in his hand as he examined the wound.

"Technically," Sherlock began, leaning away from John's touch slightly, if only because he feared
his natural inclination to lean into it, "Mycroft and I were speaking for over forty minutes."

John caught Sherlock's eyes for a moment and smiled, despite himself. "You're impossible sometimes, you know that."

Sherlock's breath hitched the slightest bit. John was close, too close for him to think properly, and lord did he need to think right now. He was, of course doing the right thing. He knew all the details of this case, and it was a smart plan, wasn't it? Suddenly, Sherlock felt a gentle push on his shoulders.

"Sit down, Sherlock," John murmured, continuing to push him in the direction of the couch, "I'll get some antibiotic cream and some antiseptic."

Right, sit, he could do that.

Sherlock slowly folded his legs and settled himself on their familiar green sofa. Sherlock took several deep, measured breaths as he listened to John rummage around in the medicine cabinet. He needed to be sure, absolutely sure, of his plan. Once he presented it to John, there would be no turning back. It, fit certainly. It just might put them in the killer's sights, but it also stood a good chance of preventing yet another double murder. If, that is, John agreed to it. John would need to be all in if this was going to work.

Sherlock swallowed and willed himself to be calm as John strode back into the room with cotton balls, a small tube of antibiotic cream, and antiseptic. 'It's a good plan,' Sherlock thought to himself, 'It is.'

John knelt between Sherlock's slightly parted legs, completely in doctor mode. John pressed the cotton to the tip of the antiseptic bottle, tipped it, righted it again, then set the bottle down. Sherlock traced John's every move with his eyes. John leaned forward slightly, grasped Sherlock's chin again, tilted the taller man's head to the side, and gently dabbed the wet cotton against the blood. "This might sting," John breathed, intently focused on his work, and Sherlock felt pinned.

Now was not the time to get caught up in foolish sentiment. He needed to focus, but all he could concentrate on for long minutes was the small movements John was making with his hand as he dabbed at Sherlock's cut.

At length John pulled the cotton back, studied Sherlock's cheek, and nodded to himself. "I think the bleeding's stopped," John murmured, leaning back on his heels and wrapping the bloody cotton in a tissue.

John moved to rise and throw out the used cotton, but paused when he felt Sherlock's hand on his wrist.

"Sherlock?" John asked, confused.

Sherlock gave John's wrist a little squeeze before tugging him down towards the couch. John followed the movement and sat beside Sherlock, placing the first aid supplies on the coffee table as he sat. They turned to face each other properly, John curling one leg under him and letting the other drape off the couch.

John looked at Sherlock expectantly, waiting for an explanation, for answers. Something had been eating away at Sherlock since they'd examined Evan's body, and John was not about to let Sherlock get away without a complete explanation... he just couldn't allow that, not since Sherlock's fall.

Sherlock looked at John, then looked away, then looked back. Sherlock's mouth worked, moved,
opened and closed, but still there was no explanation.

Finally, with a frustrated sigh, Sherlock heaved himself from the couch, and began pacing the sitting room. John turned to follow Sherlock's movements, still sitting, but with both feet on the floor now.

John watched Sherlock pace for a few moments before the consulting detective finally spoke. "Our killer is fanatical," Sherlock began, "This is a holy war for him; he's out to punish both the community and individual couples for some wrong he feels has been committed against him. Our biggest problem at the moment is that there are too many idiots that fit this description..."

Sherlock trailed off for a moment and John interjected, "Yes, I know this already, Sherlock."

Sherlock heaved a strangled sigh before rounding on John, "John, I am laying out an argument here, be so kind as to listen."

"Oh," John breathed, taken aback. Sherlock had never bothered to lay out his argument from beginning to end before. He just spouted incredible deductions and presented the conclusion. If most people weren't fast enough to keep up, that was their problem. John swallowed. This had to be big. "...I'm listening," John murmured at last, his eyes locked on Sherlock's.

Sherlock held John's gaze for a beat before resuming his pacing. "This killer has gone for wealthier and higher profile targets with each new killing."

John nodded to show he was following along.

"He started out almost slap dash, a long time fantasy played out in a moment of convenience," Sherlock continued, "Then he became more organised, but he was still acting from a place of intense emotion, anger, hatred, as evidenced by the state of the second two bodies."

Sherlock paused and John nodded again, he was still with him. Sherlock had adopted his 'thinking pose' as he strode back and forth across the room.

"With this latest double murder," Sherlock continued, gesturing with both his index fingers pointed at the ceiling, "The killer has created over the top gothic and religious imagery. This killer is no genius, unfortunately, and his motives have been too ordinary to pinpoint him by. However, I think we have managed to get his attention. He's building steam now, but he's also got sloppy; just as we wanted him to." Sherlock finished speaking while he was facing John, both hands fully extended, slightly in front of him and to the sides of his face as though he'd come to some grand point.

John stared at his flatmate for a moment, slightly open mouthed before shaking his head and admitting, "Yeah, you lost me somewhere."

Sherlock sighed irritably and sank to his knees in front of John, gesturing forcefully as if this would somehow help cram the message he was trying to get across into John's thick skull. "John, he's drawn us a map of where he's going next."

John licked his lips reflexively and opened his mouth to ask Sherlock to start making some sense, when the taller man drew a stack of papers and a bible off the coffee table. Sherlock quickly spread the papers over John's lap.

"Here," Sherlock began, gesturing to the papers, "these are photocopies of each bible quote we've found. This first one: Leviticus 18:22- Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination. He's laid all his cards on the table with this one, he's only focused on his anger towards homosexuals."
Sherlock shuffled the papers a moment before laying the second quote out before them. "This one reads: Revelation 2:2 - I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars. Here he's proclaiming himself to be the person who will 'rid the world of these evils' or some such nonsense."

Sherlock muttered to himself a moment, thumbing through a copy of the King James Bible before coming across the quote they'd found only today. "Ah, here it is; Proverbs 16:12 - [It is] an abomination to kings to commit wickedness: for the throne is established by righteousness." Sherlock rested his finger near the passage and looked up at John, "This quote, taken in combination with the patterns we've seen building, and the mock crown of thorns the killer placed on Nathan and Evan most likely leads to only one conclusion."

John stared at the photo copies, then at the bible, then at Sherlock. "He's, what," John fumbled, "He's going after the Royal Family? Last I heard, none of them were gay."

Sherlock rolled his eyes and blew a pursed breath through his lips, ruffling the dark curls over his forehead. "Don't be daft John. It's not the nuclear Royal Family he's going for..." Sherlock paused then, and John leaned towards him, hanging, as usual, on Sherlock's every word. "...but the Queen does have a cousin. His name is Albert, and he is set to marry his long time partner, Trevor, a month and a half from now."

John gaped at Sherlock, incredulous. "No," he breathed, disbelieving. "How does this tie in with the other murders?"

"Think of the victims," Sherlock insisted, ticking off each couple on his fingers, "Thomas and Sean were your average 'couple next door' types. Marcus and Bryan were heavily into GLBT activism, and fighting for gay rights. Nathan and Evan are not only activists, but had the money and the political backing to really make an impact. The one thing that ties these men together, besides homosexuality and a growing influence over politics, is their marriages. Each one was happily married, or as close to it as they could've got with the laws."

Sherlock paused meaningfully, scooping up a recent newspaper, the front page of which proclaimed the new legality of gay marriage in Great Britain. "Now, not only has the Queen and parliament recently given the legal seal of approval to gay marriage," Sherlock pressed on, "but one of the first people to make use of this-"

"Albert," John finished, a bit stunned.

Sherlock nodded, seeming to calm some, now that John was on the same page.

John sat back a bit, taking it all in. "So you think the killer means to hunt down Albert and Trevor just before their wedding?"

"No," Sherlock shook his head forcefully, startling John, "that would be too easy. You see, it's nearing early summer and the 'happy couple' is planning to have a low-key honeymoon in the Hamptons of New York, America. Killing them there will make his statement both shocking and international."

"That's diabolical," John murmured, leaning his head on one hand. John lifted his head then and made a sweeping gesture with his hand, "So you've got a plan, then?"

Sherlock looked away and rested back on his heels. Was he biting his lip? Couldn't be.
"Sherlock?" John pressed, leaning forward a bit, looking down, for once, at his best friend, "You do have a plan don't you? You've always got a plan, even a harebrained, last minute one."

Sherlock took a breath, looked up, and held John's gaze intently. "I have an idea for a plan," he conceded, "but it will only work if you're in agreement; I mean, all in."

John's eyebrows crept towards his hairline, "This must be some plan. You don't normally ask my permission."

Sherlock was silent for a moment, his gaze searching John's. "This one won't work without your permission," Sherlock breathed, his cheeks looking slightly flushed.

John leaned forward now, intrigued. Sherlock's dark curls were almost touching his forehead. "What is it?" he murmured.

Without breaking eye contact Sherlock reach forward and took John's hands in his. John sat back a little, surprised by the gesture. Sherlock had to be worried about something. John gave Sherlock's hands a little squeeze, "Look, you're asking me first," he began, "I appreciate that. If I can't do whatever it is, I'll let you know. No hard feelings. Especially considering all the times you've thrown me into some harebrained scheme, sink or swim."

Sherlock chuckled and looked down at their joined hands, running his thumbs over John's fingers as he did so. "Being close to Albert and Trevor, following them on their honeymoon would put us in the best position to catch the killer before he strikes this time."

John nodded, following along again. "We need to be close but not too close, or we'll spook the killer."

Sherlock gave a tight smile as he studied their joined hands. "It would be better if we could be both inconspicuous and potential targets at the same time."

John was still nodding. It made sense. It would hardly be the first time they'd put themselves in harm's way for a case. Sherlock and he did have an unhealthy attraction to danger. "We could draw him out that way, by staying close and being targets," John surmised.

Sherlock nodded but remained silent for the moment.

"So, what, we'd go on holiday as a couple or something? That's hardly shocking considering how many times we've made news as a couple recently. Hell, we'll probably be in the paper tomorrow. I told you I was game for this ruse, what's the problem?"

Sherlock began running his thumb over John's fingers again, eventually resting his right thumb over John's left ring finger and holding it there. Taking a breath Sherlock looked up again and held John's gaze with his. "The killer only targets married men, John."

John sat up a little straighter then, reeling.

Sherlock pressed on. "At least, for now, they represent the greatest insult to him."

"W-won't that look a little suspicious?" John asked trying desperately not to blush, and failing. "He must know we're on the case."

"It won't be suspicious if he thinks we've dropped the case." Sherlock allowed himself just the smallest bit of hope now. John hadn't said no, he was talking details.
John's brows knit together in confusion. "Why would we drop the case?"

"If we think it's solved," Sherlock replied. "One of the most frustrating things about this case has been how many prejudiced or bigoted people could have the right motive for committing these crimes. If we arranged for someone to take the fall, someone who the police could make a big show of arresting, we might be able to lull the killer into complacency. We've already made him mad. If we then make him lazy, and present ourselves as a possible target he would likely strike, for revenge if nothing else."

John's eyes traced Sherlock's face, trying to keep up; to make sense of the consulting detective's reasoning. "You're not the type to frame someone."

Sherlock shook his head. "Of course not, we, the Yard, and the person they arrest will be in on it. The Yard will just hold them for a short while, until we can pin the real killer."

"And you can get Lestrade to agree to this?" John asked, incredulous.

Sherlock levelled a look at John and arched his eyebrow as if to say, 'You doubt me?'

John chuckled. "True enough, you've got him wrapped around your finger."

Sherlock shrugged, "Making someone else look good by solving murders for them for years will earn you some favours."

John smiled affectionately, then looked away, thinking. His face softened before he looked down at Sherlock again, disbelieving. "You...you want to marry me?"

"Yes," Sherlock replied without hesitation, and John felt his breath catch in his throat.

Sherlock squeezed John's hands again, and pressed on. "It would only work if you were willing, John. Bringing the ruse to this level would likely result in more intimate moments, depending on what makes the most sense at the time. It wouldn't be believable if you looked like you were just tolerating being touched. It would have to be as real as possible."

John swallowed, hard. He'd just barely admitted to himself that he was attracted to Sherlock, and now he was supposed to marry him? That would not help his little crush, or whatever it was. Then again, Sherlock was asking him. Sherlock was asking because he valued their friendship as much as he was asking so that it would be believable, John was sure of it. He could see concern etched in Sherlock's features. He didn't want to damage their relationship. Sherlock had, in his own way, voiced his relief at John's warm welcome when he'd returned from the dead. Sherlock certainly didn't want to damage things now. That and he was being careful; more wary since Moriarty. Concern for them both, concern for their relationship, and concern for the case. That was what was motivating this.

"John," Sherlock murmured, "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

John couldn't help but smile. Sherlock was never this concerned about getting permission from someone if he needed their help on a case. John had lost count of the number of schemes he'd been unwittingly thrust into over the years. It was possible that Sherlock was being somewhat cautious about this case in general. After all, the last case that ran this long, and proved this complex, resulted in Sherlock's fall... Even so, John was sure that part, if not all, of Sherlock's concern stemmed from his desire to avoid damaging his relationship with John. That was proof positive that Sherlock cared as much about John as the case. It was even within the realm of possibility that Sherlock cared more about John than the case. That thought made John blush.
Would it really be so bad? It was just a stupid crush. This could be a way for him to get his Sherlock fixation out of his system without hurting anyone, and help Sherlock solve a case.

"Okay. I'm in."

Sherlock still looked wary. "Are you sure? While we won't need to consummate the marriage, we would be faking a honeymoon while surreptitiously trailing another couple on an actual honeymoon." Sherlock forced himself to sound calm as he pressed on. "We may find ourselves in a situation where chemistry and biology are at play. That's all they are, chemistry and biology. I don't want any hurt feelings or apologies."

John flushed and looked away. That was Sherlock's way of saying one or both of them might become aroused because of...stuff. Well... as long as they both understood ahead of time, and were being adult about it.

John had to fight back a laugh at that thought. Yeah, right. What could possibly be mature about this? John looked back down at Sherlock and found him still waiting for John's answer. Still nervous about inadvertently hurting or alienating John.

John lifted his left hand from Sherlock's grasp and caressed the side of the consulting detective's face, trying to convey that he would be comfortable with what had to happen. "It's fine, Sherlock," he murmured, "It's all fine."

Sherlock smiled up at him, cupping John's hand in his, keeping it against his face.

"People are going to ask how I proposed to you though," John speculated. "We'll have to think of a good story."

"I proposed to you," Sherlock insisted, pulling their joined hands down to John's lap once more.

"Who would believe Mr. 'I'm married to my work' would be the one to propose?" John asked, amused at the idea. "You said it had to be as close to the truth as possible."

"It can be," Sherlock assured, shifting his weight so that he was properly on one knee.

"Sherlock?" John asked, more than a little surprised.

Sherlock gathered John's hands up in his once more, and lifted his shining gaze to John's, pinning him there. "John Hamish Watson, I never thought I could fall in love. I had always regarded love as a chemical defect found on the losing side; a weakness. I never thought I would encounter sentiment I could not rationalise or ignore, and then I met you. Someone so simple, so grounded, and so full of surprises. I still couldn't say why you shot that cabbie for me, but there you were. You've been protecting me from myself ever since."

John stared at Sherlock, transfixed. Sherlock had to be mixing a description of the friendship they'd forged with romance. This was for the case, obviously, so John would have an actual memory to draw from when asked about the proposal. Even knowing that, John found himself swept away.

"Still, I couldn't say that I loved you, until it was almost too late." Sherlock swallowed and paused, adding weight to his next words. "But I knew I loved you when I stepped off the roof of St. Bart's."

John sucked in a breath, he hadn't expected this to come into play.

"That was why, more than anything, I had to fake my death. I could not let anything happen to you. If it would keep you safe, I'd do it again."
"Idiot," John breathed.

Sherlock smiled in response. "Most people are, especially for love."

John couldn't help but smile back.

Sherlock raised their joined hands to his lips, and kissed John's knuckles. "You've made me a fool of sentiment, John Watson," he murmured, looking up at John through his lashes, "and I can find no cure for it. Will you be my husband? Will you marry me?"

Sherlock looked so sincere, like he meant every single word.

"Yes, Sherlock," John murmured, "I will marry you."

Sherlock grinned up at him. "See? Easy. Now we have a story."

John blinked and shook himself as Sherlock stood and seated himself on the sofa beside John. This just might be more difficult than he'd first thought. He leaned back and glanced over at Sherlock. "So, what now?"

Sherlock leaned back on the sofa, adopting his 'thinking' pose again. "We should visit Ms. Bruckner tomorrow, I think she will be able to help us find a 'killer' for the Yard to arrest. About four days is long enough not to be suspicious, that's when we'll set up the arrest. We can announce our engagement shortly after."

John nodded. "That's poetic."

"We want to be in the Hamptons just before Albert and Trevor, so that gives you about three weeks to plan the wedding."

"Wait, hold on. Sherlock, I am not planning an entire wedding by myself!" John protested.

Sherlock glanced at John out of the corner of his eyes. "Why not?"

"Because!" John insisted, "Weddings should be planned by both people involved."

Sherlock waved his hand dismissively. "Details."

"Yes," John replied, "Details. Ones you will be planning right along with me."

Sherlock narrowed his eyes and leaned forward slightly. "And why would I do that?"

"You said you wanted this to be as real as possible, right?" John asked. "Well if I were really getting married-"

"We will really be getting married," Sherlock interjected.

"You know what I mean," John countered. "If this was real, I would find a way to get you to help. A marriage is a partnership, Sherlock, and a wedding is a celebration of that partnership. It's not right unless both people have a say."

Sherlock sighed dramatically, leaned back onto the sofa, and threw an arm over his eyes. "You're going to beat me to death with that 'We have to make it look real' excuse aren't you?"

John grinned. "Don't hand a man a gun, unless you know where he's going to point it."
Sherlock let his hand slide down into his lap and looked over at John again. "Duly noted."

John leaned his head against the sofa and smiled. It was always fun scheming with Sherlock. Sherlock scooted closer to John on the sofa, causing their legs to touch. John lifted his head off the couch and looked at his consulting detective.

Sherlock reached forward and placed his right hand on John's left shoulder, letting it rest there. "I am going to kiss you now, John," he murmured.

John felt a rush of heat and his breathing quickened slightly. Sherlock leaned into him, his brilliant blue/grey eyes captured John's gaze and held him, pinned. When John felt Sherlock's breath ghost over his face, he closed his eyes and shivered. Sherlock's lips pressed warm and soft against his. John groaned softly at the contact, opening his lips against Sherlock's. Sherlock opened his lips in turn, and their lips slid and moulded around each other.

Tingles crept from the back of John's neck down his arms leaving goosebumps in their wake. John had never had a kiss quite like this, unhurried, teasingly open-mouthed, almost aching. John slid his right hand over Sherlock's left shoulder, around his neck, and began threading his fingers through the black curls he found there.

John's tongue slipped between his lips to skim along Sherlock's mouth, soon after meeting Sherlock's tongue as well. This time it was Sherlock who moaned, or maybe they both did. Fingers tightened on shoulders and in hair as they pulled each other closer, hungry for more. Tongues curled together, lips moved against each other, and for a few, breathless minutes, the rest of the world faded away.

Sherlock slid his left arm around John's waist and stroked his back. Slowly, he began to pull back his tongue, and after a few moments more, his lips as well. Sherlock didn't pull back far; their foreheads were pressed together, and their breath still mingled.

John kept his eyes closed at first, his head still swimming. At length, Sherlock pulled back further and met John's gaze. "Well," he breathed, smirking, "We may be able to convince people we are a couple after all."

John shook his head and chuckled. This was crazy, and brilliant, and so very Sherlock.

"I think it's time for bed, John," Sherlock murmured, when John lifted a hand to cover his yawn.

"Yeah," John relented, "For those of us who actually sleep."

John stood then and, surprisingly, Sherlock stood with him. "Are you going to sleep, too?"

"We will be sharing a bed on the honeymoon," Sherlock observed, "It makes sense to get used to it."

"Oh." John was not blushing, he was not. "A-Alright then. Whose room?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "Mine, of course, I've got a bigger, better bed."

"Of course," John replied sarcastically as they made their way down the hall. "I'll just run up and change then."

John returned shortly in a soft, oversized, t-shirt and comfy pajama bottoms. He found Sherlock wearing a similar outfit, turning down the covers.

"Do you have a preferred side?" Sherlock asked
John shook his head.

Sherlock gestured to the bed, "Then get in."

John ducked his head and did just that. He couldn't help but notice, as he slid between the sheets, how soft Sherlock's bed was. You just sank right into it. John closed his eyes and sighed contentedly.

"Isn't this better than your hard mattress upstairs?" Sherlock asked smugly, as he turned out the light.

John just smiled and nodded. After a moment he rolled onto his side and got comfortable. "Goodnight, Sherlock," he murmured. John felt the bed dip as Sherlock moved, then he felt a long arm wrap around him, and pull his back flush with Sherlock's front. John's eyes flew open in surprise.

Sherlock surprised John again by throwing his leg over John's, pulling him closer. He was spooning him. Sherlock was spooning him. Beneath the shock John noted just how nice it felt, how warm.

"Goodnight, John," Sherlock whispered, his breath ghosting over John's ear.

John shivered. He felt tingly all over. It had been a long time since he'd been held like this, and, God, it felt nice... Most of the women he'd dated wanted John to do the holding. John didn't mind, but it was nice to be held now and again. Sherlock seemed perfectly suited to be the "big spoon", John felt comfortably surrounded, safe.

'Well,' he thought as he snuggled back into Sherlock, 'I did say I was all in, didn't I?' John closed his eyes, oblivious to the contented smile resting on his lips. This crazy case seemed like just the thing to blow off some steam and get himself over his silly crush. After all, it was just a crush...
Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John hatch their plan, with a bit of a hiccup.

Chapter Notes

As always, I would like the thank everyone who commented, gave kudos to, and bookmarked this story. You guys are awesome! I'm not sure I would have written as much as I have as regularly as I have without a captive audience. Thank you!

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And, naturally, thanks goes to my flat mate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

Chapter 8: Where angels fear to tread

John looked around the church a bit nervously. He wasn't in the nave of the church, he was in one of the side aisles with Sherlock and Isabel. Sherlock had thought it would 'fit' the case if they were married in the church where the case had started. Sherlock had added that, if the killer managed to get wind of it, they might be more appealing targets than Albert and Trevor.

That part made sense; John was fine with it. He'd lived most of his life in the firing line. John had also been fine with accompanying Sherlock to the Yard so that he could pitch his 'scheme' to Lestrade about staging an arrest. As much as John chastised Sherlock about 'being nice,' it was almost funny to see Lestrade about to blow a gasket.

"First you want to make him angry," Lestrade had roared, "Now you want him to get lazy?! What the hell kind of game are you playing at?!"

Sherlock had convinced Lestrade, naturally. Sometimes John wondered if there was anyone Sherlock couldn't charm, threaten, or otherwise manipulate. This time, Sherlock had focused on the logic of the case. Sherlock had been careful to omit the fact that he and John were not 'actually' a couple. Instead, he had spun the argument that he and John had been planning on getting married anyway, and this would allow them to do so, while benefitting the case. Their argument had got rather heated. Not surprisingly, especially given the media attention this case was getting, they were overheard.

About an hour into Sherlock and Lestrade's 'debate' a balding, middle aged man in a worn jacket knocked, and asked to come in. When Lestrade had denied his request, Sherlock let the man come in anyway. Lestrade had begun yelling again, and was really working himself up, when the balding
man cut in, "My son is gay!" He'd had to shout to be heard, but his statement brought Lestrade to a stop, for the moment.

The balding man, whom John knew was named 'George' continued, "Liam came out to the family while he was still at uni, about seven years ago..." There George's voice began to crack. "I said the most awful things to him... He...I haven't..." George took a breath then, and looked down. "I kicked him out of the house... I don't know where he is, or if I'll ever see him again..." George took a watery breath, before looking up again. "I'm not sure if Liam will ever forgive me, but if I can help put this bastard away; Liam and those like him deserve that much. They should be safe... If you're willing, detective inspector, I'd be happy to take the fall. I'd like to give Mr. Holmes anything he needs to close this case."

Things where quiet then. It felt like all of the Yard was holding its breath. With a long sigh, Lestrade sank into the chair behind his desk and stared at the wood. "If this goes south, Sherlock, so help me, I will have your head on a platter."

Sherlock had smirked in victory. "I assure you, Mycroft would help you season it."

John almost chuckled at the memory. While Isabel was helping them greatly on this case, she was largely ignorant of her role. Sherlock had spoken to her a few days before Lestrade, both to plan the engagement announcement, and to talk about the parishioners. With the information he'd gathered from Isabel, Sherlock had selected a target and approached him quietly. Just like Lestrade, George had only got part of the story. Sherlock had continued to tout the 'John and I are actually a couple' line and had used his not insubstantial charm to convince George to be 'arrested' so that John and Sherlock might actually catch the true killer. Given George's own back-story, Sherlock was easily able to convince him.

It had taken a bit of planning, but the 'sting' was all set up to go down later today. John and Sherlock weren't there. Nor were they planning to be part of it because, in Sherlock's words; 'We have something more important to do.' It was that 'something' that made John nervous. Today, with the help of Isabel, they were announcing their engagement to the church.

Sherlock had insisted that being here, instead of at the 'arrest' would send the message that his priority was now John, instead of 'the work.' John was somewhat dubious on that point. Even in a world where they would actually get together, John felt certain that Sherlock would always let a case interrupt 'date night' or whatever else they might have planned. It had certainly never stopped Sherlock from interrupting John's dates, when John was seeing other people.

John glanced over at Sherlock, who was still talking amicably with Isabel. John, admittedly, hadn't been paying much attention, but Isabel appeared to be intelligent and friendly. John hoped Sherlock was at least partially motivated to be charming and agreeable because he wanted to be, rather than being solely motivated by the needs of the case. It always bothered John to see Sherlock be so convincingly friendly to someone one moment, then turning cold and calculating after he'd got what he'd needed. People, at least some people, where worth Sherlock's while, and John hoped he would convince him of that, one of these days.

Sherlock looked over at John then and smiled. John couldn't help smiling back, despite his nerves.

"You've been a bit distracted," Sherlock murmured, reaching out to caress the side of John's face.

John blushed and instinctually leaned into the touch. "I was just wondering," John began focusing on Isabel as Sherlock' returned his hand to his side, "Are you sure it's okay that we announce our engagement to the congregation? I mean we aren't really regular members of the church."
Isabel smiled warmly, her brown eyes crinkling in amusement. "It's just fine, John. As I said, we have a very open congregation. We don't have any mandatory attendance policy, and we welcome people of all faiths."

"Well, if you're sure," John replied. He liked Isabel. He doubted she was much older than thirty, but she had the air of a comforting mother. To the members of the congregation, perhaps she almost was. Isabel nodded, "I'm sure, and congratulations, again, by the way."

John flushed anew and looked down for a moment. "Thank you." Sherlock and he hadn't done anything more 'couple' like than what they'd been doing already. That is to say small, affectionate touches, holding hands, and, when Sherlock chose to sleep, sharing a bed. Sherlock had insisted John sleep in Sherlock's bed, even if Sherlock didn't join him. John had to admit it was comfortable, and he'd got a secret thrill the few times he'd woken up to find Sherlock had joined him at some point in the night.

In general, John was having fun. Sherlock and he were on a case, which was always interesting. Also, John was relieved that he did not have to monitor his every word and action to prevent Sherlock from noticing his little crush. With a great deal of luck, Sherlock would just think John was embracing his 'role.' John sincerely hoped he would be able to get these feelings out of his system by the end of the case, because Sherlock Holmes didn't do relationships. It was not 'his area.'

"Are we nearly ready?" Sherlock asked.

Isabel leaned her head back to peer through the doorway into the centre of the church.

"Almost."

Sherlock smiled and took a breath, Mycroft's words from a week ago ringing in his head. "You know you're only doing this because of your own, unrequited feelings for the good doctor," Mycroft had said. Sherlock had sent Mycroft a heartfelt glare and replied, "It makes sense for the case!"

Mycroft had raised a sardonic eyebrow at him. "What was that you once said about sentiment? The chemistry is incredibly simple and very destructive. 'Shortly followed by, 'Love is a dangerous disadvantage.' You were right, Sherlock. Take your own advice. Don't let your heart rule your head."

Sherlock had adopted his thinking pose then and tried to ignore Mycroft. Mycroft wasn't having any of it.

"First you die on him, Sherlock, and now you're playing with him to satisfy your own...baser needs."

Mycroft never saw the punch coming, the idiot. Although he'd returned it with a decent backhand.

"I am not playing!" Sherlock had hissed at him, getting ready to strike again.

"Think what you will, Sherlock," Mycroft had replied in an angry whisper, "but I will not help you pick up the pieces after something so foolish explodes in your face."

Of course John had come tumbling down the stairs at that moment, and had seen the end of their little scuffle.
Sherlock took another breath. He was not using John, he was not. Yes, fine, he loved John. But he was aware of that fact, and could therefore compensate for it. He'd offered John an out, he'd asked for permission. They were being smart about this. And if Sherlock felt relief at being able to express himself more openly, what of it? The only person he wanted to be honest with most of the time was John, anyway. And now he could be...just in a slightly deceptive way. Right. Train of thought not helping. Focus on something else.

"Isabel!" a wavering, distressed voice cause all three of them to turn their heads and look down the hall.

A tanned man about John's height with thick black hair and bright blue eyes was jogging down the aisle towards them. "Isabel, you need to see this," The man said nervously, his lips set in a tight, unhappy line.

"Bobby?" Isabel turned to face the young man, extending her hands towards him, her face etched with concern. "What's wrong?"

Bobby took Isabel's hands in his, and tugged her gently in the direction he had come from. "Someone's defaced the church, you need to see."

They set out down the aisle together, walking quickly. Soon, they were rounding a corner and walking out into a small garden on the side of the church. Bobby turned around as they exited the church and gestured towards the outside wall, "Here, look."

They turned and looked. John's breath catching in his throat in surprise. Despite the fog drifting through the air, it was impossible to miss what Bobby had been gesturing at. There, smeared over the fieldstones in what John desperately hoped was red paint, was another bible quote. It read:

**Romans 1:32 - Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.**

Isabel let out a cry of distress as she read the quote, and covered her mouth. Sherlock had already begun moving towards the inscription to examine it, when parishioners began spilling out of the church, summoned by Isabel's cry of distress.

John stayed back, letting Sherlock work, and tried to keep the others back as well. That turned out to be no easy task, as the crowd was soon incensed at the bible quote emblazoned on the stones of their church.

John began scanning the crowd, using skills from his army days to keep an eye out for anyone who may become volatile. A crowd, even a relatively small one such as this, could easily become dangerous. Bob or 'Bobby' as Isabel had called him, had a few friends clustered around him that looked like they could deal some damage, but not like the type that would. One man was taller, almost as tall as Sherlock, with short dark hair, glasses and built like a rugby player. There was another, shorter man with a shaved head and some visible tattoos on his arm that John felt certain was ex-military. He had the right look about him. He too, was scanning the crowd, possible looking for trouble. He might work as a security guard or bouncer now, John knew many who did.

John shook his head at himself. He couldn't tell if his skills as an ex-soldier or his experience with Sherlock's 'deductions' lead to his conclusions about the crowd. John turned and looked towards Sherlock again. The lanky consulting detective was stretching and twisting around the writing, examining high and low. Sherlock stilled then, and strode backwards a few paces, scanning the whole of the wall.
There was some slight movement at the very edge of the crowd, towards the back, near the small graveyard. Sherlock seemed to have seen it as well; John could see a slight shift in his stance and the briefest glance of his eyes towards the edge of the crowd. John knew from experience, Sherlock was about to run for whatever it was. John turned slowly towards Isabel, gesturing for her to stay where she was, and began, very casually, to walk towards Sherlock.

John had managed to halve the distance between them before Sherlock sprinted off. John took off after Sherlock, only glimpsing the man they were chasing as Sherlock and he rounded the corner of the church. John followed, and found himself plunging headlong into the graveyard behind the church, which was currently mired in soup-thick fog. John cursed, and jerked violently to the side to avoid crashing into a headstone that seemed to spring up out of nowhere.

John turned and ran the sound of hurried footsteps. After a moment he was able to make out the faint shadow of a man through the fog. John kicked up to a sprint, keeping his eyes trained on the waver of silhouette, trying to ignore the looming gravestones that whipped past as he ran. Reaching out, John felt the faintest brush of fabric brush his fingertips. Another inch, and he would have him. Pushing sharply against the ground, John leapt for the man in front of him, gripping tightly to the fabric of his jacket; the momentum carried them both into the mud.

"John!"

Recognising the voice that called out to him, John groaned, and rolled off his flatmate. "Sorry Sherlock, I can't bloody see in this fog."

"Shhh!" Sherlock hissed as he scrambled to his feet. "Quiet! Quiet!"

John stilled as Sherlock craned his head about, listening. In the gloom, three others stumbled up to them. John recognised them as Bobby and the two men who had stood beside him earlier, just outside the church.

"We came to help," Bobby gasped as he approached them.

"Yeah, where is he?" the shorter man asked, scanning the mist.

"Shut up! Shut up, everyone!" Sherlock whispered insistently. Despite Sherlock's harsh words, everyone obeyed without protest. Sherlock inclined his head and they all followed suit, listening.

The soft chirp of birds and the rustle of leaves filled the air. John blinked the mist out of his eyes and tried to silence his breathing. The five of them stood for a long minute, statues in the graveyard mist.

The sharp cry of ravens to their left had them off and running again, tearing through the grass and leaping over low, crumbling gravestones. The fog thinned slightly as they neared the wall, and John glimpsed their man scrambling over it. Sherlock quickly followed suit, followed by John, Bobby, and Bobby's two friends.

The group of them streamed down a narrow ally which opened onto a dangerously busy street. People tumbled out of the way, and tires screeched as breaks were heavily applied. John and the three men scrabbled over the sidewalk, dashing through the street as the man they were chasing tried to evade them. Sherlock wound gracefully around several cars, which were required to stop suddenly, whilst John and the rest of them were forced to scrabble over the hoods in order to keep up.

The man they were chasing lurched up the street, making rapidly for the bridge just ahead of them.
He was losing ground now, because, despite his speed, his legs were not nearly as long as Sherlock's. John and the others were doing a fair job of keeping up, only twenty paces behind Sherlock.

The fog lay thickly over the river making the water to either side invisible. They raced across the bridge, the mist whipping at their faces. Sherlock was closing fast on their man; he was just one third the way over the bridge. John saw Sherlock lunge for him. Unfortunately, the man they were chasing saw it too. He ducked and twisted, sending Sherlock sprawling up against the side. As Sherlock tilted dangerously over the edge, the man continued to run.

Immediately John felt his heart ratchet into a higher gear; Sherlock was teetering on the edge of the rail. Visions of St. Bart's flashed before his eyes. Sherlock was right on the edge of the ledge, about to fall... The three other men ignored Sherlock and ran for the criminal, leaving Sherlock to his fate.

Time seemed to slow down around John. This fall was not something Sherlock had planned. He had nothing to break his fall... They were too high up, and the water was too cold. If Sherlock went over, he may never get back out of the Thames again. Sherlock undulated, he was fighting against gravity. But would it work? Or would the cold, dark water swallow him up? John could only hope he would not be too late.

Sherlock heaved forward... this was it. Either Sherlock would have the abdominal strength to get himself up, or he was going to go over... John was out of time... Sherlock arched his back, teetering on the rail... and forced himself back onto the solid surface of the bridge.

John rocketed forward, lunging for Sherlock to help keep him from going over. Sherlock quickly got his feet under him and scowled over his shoulder at John. "What are you doing?! He's getting away!" Sherlock gestured wildly down the bridge, shoving John along. A dull thud finally managed to pull John's attention away. He turned to see the man they had been chasing most thoroughly tackled to the ground.

"There you see," Sherlock groused, disappointed, "You've let the rugby players get him! Come on, let's stop them before they do any real damage."

John followed as best he could, finding himself suddenly, quite cold.

"Stop that!" Sherlock called after Bobby and his friends, who were roughing up the man they had just chased down. "This man is not the murderer we've been tracking! The worst you could accuse him of is bigotry and graffiti. STOP!"

Sherlock's volume and forcefulness of tone finally brought a stop to the scuffle at his feet. Bobby and his taller friend drew back. Bobby's shorter friend remained on top of the man they had chased, pinning him down. "How do you know?" the shorter man asked with the practiced restraint of a soldier awaiting orders..

Sherlock heaved an impatient sigh. "His hands are marred with the paint he used to inscribe that quote on the side of the church, but he is a poor copycat at best. This case has been well publicised. This idiot probably heard mention of it in the paper and decided to take advantage of it to do a little fear-mongering. Given the layering of stains upon his hands, he's made a habit of this sort of thing. By the state of his clothes it's obvious he lives cheaply. Perhaps he was even an orphan, taken in by the church. Poor, indebted, and ignorant. Our killer is certainly no genius but he's quite a bit smarter than this man. No, our killer had grander plans than this."

"What do you mean, had grander plans?" Bobby asked, coming to stand at Sherlock's side.
Sherlock scanned the horizon and noted the commotion they'd caused. Reporters would be on their way soon, in addition to the police. This case, John, and himself had been in the paper quite a lot lately. Sherlock would just as soon avoid this opportunity.

"Perhaps we'd best bring our man back to the church before we get into that," Sherlock replied. "There's going to be quite a spectacle here soon."

Bobby glanced around and nodded while his shorter friend hauled the man they had chased to his feet. Sherlock noticed the parishioners had rather a good grip on the delinquent. That was most useful.

Bobby and his friends began jostling the man they had chased back towards the church. Sherlock rolled his eyes and began to follow, when he noticed that John wasn't beside him. That was odd, because John was always beside him. Sherlock turned around to see John standing almost exactly where he had been when he'd pulled Sherlock back from the railing. He was shaking, which was also odd, because John was rarely so affected by the cold.

"John?" Sherlock began taking a step towards his friend.

John looked up at him with hard eyes. "Not here, Sherlock," he said before striding off to catch up with the others.

Sherlock’s brows knitted together in concern, but he managed to remain quiet until just after they’d cleared the graveyard. Once they were back on church grounds, Sherlock addressed the parishioners who had helped in the chase, "Please, go on inside. Tell Isabel to call Lestrade, she has his card. We'll be right in." Bobby nodded assuredly, and ushered the others into the church.

Sherlock turned then, in the mist by the side of the church, and faced John. "What's wrong?" he asked without preamble.

John crossed his arms and stared at the ground, still shaking. Sherlock seriously doubted it was the cold. John was in one of his familiar jumpers with redened cheeks and a bit of perspiration showing around his brow. "If this is going to become a habit of yours Sherlock, I need to know right now."

"If what becomes a habit?" Sherlock asked, lost.

John looked up, meeting Sherlock's gaze sharply. "Jumping off of things!" John hissed angrily, "Or nearly so. It's not alright! I-" John brought his hands up to cover his face, "I can't watch you jump off of something again," John finished with a shaky breath.

Sherlock's gaze softened in sympathy. "John... I'm sorry. I didn't realise." He took a step forward, and rested a hand on John's shoulder. "I'm alright John, I wasn't going to fall even if you hadn't tackled me."

John's lips were pressed into a thin, unhappy line, and he leaned his forehead into Sherlock's chest despite how upset he was. "Don't do it again," he insisted.

"I won't," Sherlock promised, bringing both arms around John's waist and holding him there for a few moments. "I am sorry, John. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"I'm fine," John insisted, drawing a deep breath.

"No," Sherlock replied, leaning down to press a kiss against the top of John's head, "You're not. But I'll make it up to you." Sherlock rubbed a hand up and down John's back, glancing over at the church when he noticed members of the Yard arriving at last. "For the moment, however, I think we
have some explaining to do. And then, if you're still up for it, we did plan to announce our
engagement."

John nodded and looked up at Sherlock. "Let's go then."

Sherlock smiled down at John for a moment before sliding his arm around his waist and guiding him inside.

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Some time, and much excitement later, the delinquent, who was named Lewis, and had a long
history of petty crime, was arrested. All proper statements were taken from those involved, and the
congregation was left to their own devices once more.

Before the congregation had a chance to settle down, one of the parishioners announced the 'arrest'
of the serial killer, and began streaming the news on their tablet. It was a good day. Not only was a
petty criminal in custody, but, as far as most people knew, the man who was the cause of many of
their recent fears, was finally behind bars.

George put up a good show, he looked every bit the raving, prejudiced fanatic. The church was
appalled that one of their own was to blame, and relieved to have the ordeal over with at last. Once
the news broadcast had finished, Isabel gathered everyone's attention for one last announcement.

Sherlock and John were now, once again, waiting in the side aisle just off the main part of the
church. They waited alone and in silence as Isabel began to introduce them. Sherlock's long, warm
hand was nestled securely against Johns'. They looked a sight, still smeared in mud from their earlier
adventure, but there was nothing to be done about it now. John was still a bit inwardly shaken, but
he was managing.

Sherlock squeezed John's hand then, getting his attention. "It's almost time," Sherlock whispered.

John looked at him and nodded, feeling a small measure of calm at last. Drawing a shaky breath, he
turned his attention to Isabel in the next room and listened.

"Well," Isabel began, "I know this has been a longer and more...energetic day than we were
planning, but I have an announcement to make that will add a pleasant note to the day." The
parishioners murmured in curiosity. "I hope you will join me in welcoming Mr. Sherlock Holmes,
and Dr. John Watson."

John heard the church erupt with applause as Sherlock and John moved to join Isabel at the altar.
The stone church was beautiful from the inside. Tall arches met overhead and detailed stained glass
adorned the windows along each side.

Isabel smiled at the two of them before holding her hands up, and calling for silence. "You all know
we have them to thank for the continued safety of our community. In addition, we will soon have the
privilege... of hosting their wedding!"

John had thought the church erupted before, but now it shook and thundered with clapping hands,
cheers, and shouts of congratulations. John grinned out at the crowd as he felt Sherlock tug him
closer. The possessive side of his flatmate was rather endearing. John was grateful for it. Even as
tired and strung out as he was, he doubted they would be leaving the church without first joining in
some celebration on their behalf.

~*~*~*~*~
It was indeed, late afternoon before they managed to get back to the flat. John was exhausted. As grimy as he felt and as restless as he knew his sleep would be without a meal, John wasn't sure he had it in him to do anything but collapse and try not to have a nightmare. He was, therefore, pleasantly surprised to find freshly delivered Chinese food waiting for them in 221 B. He looked up at Sherlock suspiciously.

Sherlock smiled down at him. "I remember your somewhat persistent need for food. I thought I might save you the trouble of procuring it by way of apology. I had Mrs. Hudson bring it up for us."

John chuckled and shook his head. "Thank you Sherlock, I'm better now."

Sherlock nodded. "Good. Go have a shower, I'll get you a plate."

Now that he knew hot food was waiting for him, John figured he could manage a shower.

A few short minutes later found John eating on the sofa as Sherlock took his turn in the shower. It was an uncommonly chilly day and it felt good to be freshly showered, wrapped in warm pajamas, with good food. All in the middle of a case, too. Perhaps Sherlock would even let him get a decent night's sleep.

As if summoned by thought alone, Sherlock strode into the room in cotton pajamas and his dressing gown. "Good food?" he asked, still towelling his hair.

John nodded. "Yes, you should join me, Sherlock."

Sherlock made a show of pouting, but willingly sat beside John and indulged in an egg roll. After John had cajoled him into eating three dumplings and a small container of lo-mein, they packed up the leftovers and nestled together on the couch.

John felt the ache of a trying day in his muscles as he settled against Sherlock's side, but he was reluctant to let himself drift into unconsciousness. Sherlock's not so near-tumble into the Thames had rattled him more than he expected. He was sure he'd put all that behind him until he saw Sherlock teeter on the edge...

John felt Sherlock's arm sliding around his waist, tugging him closer. "Come here, John," Sherlock whispered. John could not bring himself to argue. Sherlock brought his hand up and began threading it through John's short hair, while his other hand held John tightly about the waist. John snuggled deeper into Sherlock chest and sighed contentedly, starting to feel better almost instantly.

"Feels nice," John murmured into Sherlock's chest.

Sherlock smiled as he looked down at John "Of course it does. I'm playing to your instincts."

"Most people, baring trauma and/or some natural deviations of preference, enjoy being held, or in some way compressed, and having their heads stroked. This is because they learned to associate these things with safety from being tightly compressed in their mother's womb, then held and stroked often after birth. Assuming they had caring parents of course." Sherlock spoke calmly and, for once, his voice didn't seem to hold any distain in explaining something, that to him, must have been 'obvious.' "I gave you quite a fright earlier, it seems. Your heart rate has been elevated since then. Calming you down is the least I could do after, well..." Sherlock hesitated a moment, "after you've been so accommodating on this case."

What Sherlock was saying made sense, and now that he'd mentioned it, John recalled learning
something of that nature in his development classes at university. It made him smile, Sherlock doing something so nice, in such a... 'Sherlock' way. "Well, thank you," John murmured, snuggling back into Sherlock's chest and closing his eyes.

John doubted this was the biology or chemistry Sherlock had thought of when he'd first proposed to John, but John was very grateful for the comfort of his embrace. Despite Sherlock's protests of 'not caring,' John knew that he was one of the few people Sherlock actually did care about. Even without John's crush, John knew Sherlock was someone he could trust with this vulnerability. He was safe with Sherlock. With that thought in mind, John's heart rate finally calmed, and he drifted off to sleep.
All In

Chapter Summary

A bit of wedding planning. ^_^

Chapter Notes

I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to every person who has left a comment, given kudos, and/or bookmarked this story. Your support means a great deal. It is always encouraging to know people out there like this story.

I would also like to thank my beta, Helena Chauby for her help with editing.

In addition, much thanks is owed to Lady of Clunn for her help BritPicking.

Also, I am grateful for the help of my flat mate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff. You've helped make this story what it is.

Brief reminder: I can make no promises, but you are all welcome to make suggestions on things you'd like to see.

And now, without further ado, onto the story:

Chapter 9: All In

John woke slowly, to the feeling of fingertips being traced along his back. As consciousness returned he realised he was on his stomach, and that Sherlock had slid his hand under John's oversized cotton shirt to trace looping patterns across the skin of his back. John arched up into the touch, mumbling contentedly.

Behind him Sherlock chuckled. "You know, the small muscle movements you're making are telling me all sorts of useful things about your particular nervous system. This kind of information could be put to quite deadly uses in hand to hand combat," Sherlock drawled, thinking aloud.

John smiled into his pillow and mumbled, "If you really intended to kill me you would've poisoned the milk." After a brief mental review of all the experiments Sherlock had conducted John felt compelled to add, "And let me drink it."

Sherlock 'hmmmed' softly and, lifting John's shirt slightly, pressed a kiss to the small of John's back, before urging him to turn over. John did, and was mildly surprised when Sherlock moved on all fours to hover over him.

"I believe we decided we would pick out rings today," Sherlock mused, leaning back to rest some of his weight on John's thighs.
John stretched, yawned, and blinked sleepily up at Sherlock. "The wedding rings, right?"

"You don't want an engagement ring?" Sherlock asked, tipping his head to the side.

John smiled and shook his head. "No. I'd never thought I would be the one proposed to."

"Still, it's important this be realistic," Sherlock murmured, resting his hands gently on John's hips.

"I am being realistic," John yawned, "It's somewhat superfluous when you think of it. Once you're married it becomes just this extra piece of jewellery that symbolises a period of time from your past."

Sherlock's eyebrows raised slightly. "I didn't expect you to be so practical. You struck me as more the romantic type."

"I am romantic," John protested. "You've certainly interrupted enough dates to know that." John ran a hand over his face and thought for a moment. "Why?" he asked, "Do you want engagement rings? I wouldn't expect that of Mr. 'I don't do sentiment.'"

Sherlock offered a small smile. "I admit I agree with you on the superfluous nature of an engagement ring once one is married," Sherlock's leaned forward then, pressing his hands into John's, which were resting above the doctor's head. In this position Sherlock was still technically hovering over John on all fours, but this move brought his face much closer. "But I am a very possessive person. If I were moved to marriage I would want to make it known that my fiancé is taken."

John smiled. "I could see that." John interlaced his fingers with Sherlock's, securing him in place. "What about if we bought rings we could add something to before the wedding, like an engraving or small stones? That way, the engagement ring could become the wedding ring."

Sherlock nodded. "That sounds like a plausible compromise, especially because of our short engagement."

"Well?" John asked, trying, and failing to get up as Sherlock continued to pin him to the mattress. "Are you going to let me up or not?"

A wicked smile curved on Sherlock's lips, and he leaned down to whisper in John's ear, "Now, what kind of fiancé would I be if I let you come ring shopping without looking... pleasantly rumpled."

John swallowed, feeling a sudden rush of heat in his face. Sherlock had been insistent on acting as a couple at all times so that they wouldn't 'forget' to do it. It made perfect sense to John, and the part of him that had a crush on his flatmate was quite grateful. After all, the more he did 'couple' things with Sherlock, the more it would get the whole notion out of his system, right?

Sherlock moved backwards slowly, his lightly stubbled cheek brushing against John's. John turned his face slightly to meet Sherlock as the younger man brought their lips together. John's hands pushed against Sherlock's, eager to bury his fingers in Sherlock's dark curls. Sherlock pressed his hands down against John's, keeping him pinned. Their lips were open against each other, sliding, wet, and hot. John captured Sherlock's bottom lip for a moment, worrying it between his teeth. Sherlock made a small sound, and pressed his tongue against John's lips, asking for entrance. John opened to him, morning breath be damned. Their tongues twined around each other, exploring. John lost himself in that moment, arching up to be closer to Sherlock.

Sherlock's head swam with chemicals and emotions that made him dizzy. He hadn't thought John would agree to his plan, much less so willingly. Mycroft was wrong. This wasn't playing with fire, this was a way to ease some of the tension he'd held inside him for so long... and move the case
along. Sherlock let out a small gasp when John arched against him, brushing their chests together. Lord, he might give every power of deduction he'd ever had for John to love him back, to want him the way he was acting.

Sherlock pulled back when he felt the heat of arousal curl low in his abdomen. Neither of them were hard yet, but Sherlock doubted it would take much. John and he were both panting lightly, their breath mingled as Sherlock continued to hover over him. Opening his eyes, Sherlock saw that John's lips were slightly swollen, as his own must be. Sherlock leaned back slightly, and lifted one hand to run his thumb over John's lower lip. He smirked, and nodded in satisfaction.

"We should get dressed," Sherlock murmured, his voice an octave or so deeper than normal, before he rolled back to his side of the bed and stood.

John nodded, thankful he'd managed not to buck into Sherlock when he'd dragged his thumb over John's lip.

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A short cab ride later, with a stop to get tea and biscuits for John, found them in front of the jewellers. "Wait," John murmured, tugging on Sherlock's sleeve to stop him from going in just yet.

Sherlock turned towards him, his brows knit in confusion. "Why?"

John smiled and leaned up on his tip toes to run his fingers through Sherlock's hair just as he'd wanted to do since morning. "If I have to look 'pleasantly rumpled,' so do you," John insisted.

Sherlock's eyes slid part way closed as he felt John's fingernails brush his scalp. It felt surprisingly good, but it was distracting. "Are you finished?" he asked a minute or so later.

John locked eyes with Sherlock and murmured, "Almost." John slid his arms around Sherlock's neck and used his leverage to draw the consulting detective into another kiss. It was a brief slide of lips over lips, and a hint of tongue. John grinned into the kiss when he felt Sherlock press his hands into John's waist. Now that Sherlock had permission, of sorts, to touch John, he found it rather hard to stop.

A passerby gave a small whistle, which caused them to finally break apart. John ducked his head, pressing his forehead against Sherlock's chest. Sherlock smiled, and pressed a small kiss to the top of John's head. "Are you ready now?" Sherlock whispered into John's hair.

John nodded against Sherlock's chest, and they turned to make their way into the jeweller's shop, arms around each other's waists.

The attendant that greeted them had warm honey-coloured hair, and soft green eyes. 'Natural blonde,' Sherlock mused to himself. Much to the delight of hair product companies, natural blondes were quite rare. Sherlock glanced down at his sandy haired doctor and smiled.

"Hello," the attendant began with an easy smile, "my name is Mary. How can I help you gentlemen this morning?"

Sherlock briefly scanned the women. She was wearing make-up, as her job dictated, but only lightly. She wasn't the type to wear make-up outside of work, but she had applied it with practiced ease. Sherlock could tell from the way she held herself that she was good at her job, and genuinely friendly. That had caused her some pain in her life, because genuinely friendly people were also rare. She was married, her plain gleaming ring proclaimed her to be both practical and very much in love. She'd been trying to get pregnant for a year or more if the books barely peeking out of her purse in
the back corner were anything to go by.

Sherlock felt John nudge his side, and returned Mary's smile. John didn't like it when he deduced people outside of crime scenes. Something about invading their privacy. The thought almost made him laugh. "We're here to look at some wedding rings please."

Mary's smile brightened. "Wonderful, just this way." She ushered them over to a line of cases that held all the usual suspects. There were bands of every variety and metal from the plain to the ornate, ones with bevelled edges, bands with two metals fitted together seamlessly, and a fair amount of men's bands with jewels. Sherlock leaned down and tapped the glass just above one heavily-jewelled band grinning at John, "Could I convince you to try that one?"

John leveled a withering glare at him that said, "I thought we were supposed to be taking this seriously."

Sherlock rolled his eyes, and continued scanning, until he heard John say, "Could I see this one, please?"

Mary glanced up at John with a questioning look upon her face. "We carry many of these rings in a variety of sizes... Do you happen to know your ring sizes?"

Sherlock glanced at John's face, and seeing that the doctor clearly did not know his own size, let alone Sherlock's, proceeded to tell Mary both of their ring sizes.

John was not surprised, this was the kind of esoteric trivia and attention to detail that made Sherlock so successful. At the same time, John was honoured that Sherlock made the effort to both notice, and remember, John's fingers in such detail.

Mary obligingly scooped out a silver band lined with black on either side. The black edges were, in fact, more silver that had been treated to change the colour. "Come here," John murmured, slipping the ring onto Sherlock's finger so that he might see how the ring looked on the consulting detective. "It suites you," John murmured thoughtfully. It did too. The silver shone against Sherlock's pale skin, and the black edges of the metal accented the ring as perfectly as Sherlock's dark curls accented himself.

Sherlock looked at his hand, then at John's which was still wrapped around Sherlock's wrist. "I don't think it suits you though, and they should match." John looked up then, slightly surprised. Sherlock smiled and turned his hands so that his fingers could caress John's wrist. "I told you I was possessive."

John couldn't help but smile again, surprised at how much he liked the idea of one Sherlock Holmes being possessive of him. Taking a breath to steady himself, John removed the ring from Sherlock's finger, handed it back to Mary, and scanned the display.

"What about this one," Sherlock asked, untangling his hands to tap at the glass again. John could tell it was a serious suggestion this time, because Sherlock was pointing to a small gold band. Simple, traditional, and far more suited to John than Sherlock.

"Again, I don't think it will suit us both," John replied, saving Mary the trouble of fetching it.

Sherlock didn't bother to argue because, of course, John was right. The plain yellow band, as good as it might look on John, would feel awkward to him. They turned and scanned the rows of jewels again. Sherlock was grateful that Mary stood quietly by and let them. He couldn't stand pushy sales people.
Sherlock and John side-stepped in tandem, inching their way along the display case. Mary followed silently, waiting. Occasionally John would pause and open his mouth, only to close it again. Sherlock was also struck by a few rings, but reconsidered when he imagined them on his own hand as well as John's.

Finally, at the very end of the display case, they found something that looked like it might work. "That one!" they said in tandem, their hands brushing as they pointed.

Mary chuckled softly before pulling out two copies of the ring they had pointed at. Gold and platinum twined tightly around each other in one band; cold and warm at the same time. The coils were tight enough that neither Sherlock nor John thought they would need to worry about catching their rings on anything. That was always something to consider in their line of work.

"Let me see it on you, John murmured, taking up the smaller of the identical bands in one hand, and holding out his other expectantly. Sherlock gently placed his hands in John's and smiled despite himself as he felt John slipping the ring on. It was a perfect fit. The silver-coloured platinum still shone against Sherlock's skin, and now the gold added some warmth to it, just as John had added much-needed warmth to his life.

Sherlock turned his hand, and grasped John's. "My turn," he said quietly, taking the slightly larger ring from Mary, and slipping it onto John's waiting finger. The gold looked as good on John as Sherlock thought it would. The silver brought in a certain sharpness that looked better than it should have on someone as steady as John.

John and Sherlock's hands were tangled together, admiring the fit of the rings. Sherlock felt a simmering sense of satisfaction at seeing that ring on John's finger; it marked John as taken. John kept running his thumb over Sherlock's ring as it rested against his finger, feeling a strong pull that he refused to give any other name than 'crush.' The rings had a certain symmetry to them that mirrored the men who wore them. It was a perfect fit all around.

"Are you gentlemen sold, then?" Mary asked quietly.

John and Sherlock looked up a bit guiltily. Neither one realising they'd taken quite so long looking over the rings, and each other. "Yes, thank you," Sherlock replied, recovering first. "Also, I have some questions to ask you about modifications."

Mary smiled and nodded. "What kind of questions, sir?"

Sherlock looked at John over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. John looked back at him curiously. "What?" John finally asked.

"A little privacy?" Sherlock returned.

"You mean the modifications for the wedding, right? You want to surprise me?" John asked, taken aback.

"Yes," Sherlock insisted, making a 'shooing' motion with his hand. "Go look at some watches or something."

John hesitated. "When I told you to take an active part in the wedding planning, I didn't expect you to be this enthusiastic."

Sherlock turned to face John properly. "Do you trust me?" he asked softly.

"Yes," John answered without hesitation, "always." John didn't know why he felt compelled to add
that last part, but when he saw Sherlock smile he was glad he had.

"Then go on," Sherlock insisted, gesturing with his chin towards the watch displays.

John smiled, shook his head, and went. He studied Sherlock’s reflection in the glass as he spoke to Mary about whatever he wanted done to the rings before the wedding. John was surprised to find he really did trust Sherlock to make a decision he would like, as though they were really getting married. He almost laughed at himself then because, of course, they were really getting married. Sherlock had made it quite plain when he’d proposed that it would be an honest, legally binding union...one that would be promptly annulled once the case was finished.

John told himself he was not disappointed at that thought. He was just getting his crush out of his system. That's all there was to it. Focusing on Sherlock's reflection again, John noticed him lean closer to Mary. John closed his eyes, tilted his head, and strained his ears to listen. There weren't that many people in the shop, and they were all relatively quiet. John strained harder, tilting his body slightly towards Sherlock and Mary. He was just, barely able to make out the words...

"The due date should be in November, congratulations." Mary made a small noise and John turned, opening his eyes, to see her covering her mouth with her hands, tears glistening in her eyes. John saw her mouth the words, "Are you sure?" and Sherlock nod before he turned back to the watches to hide his smile. A few moments later, John felt Sherlock's hand settle on his shoulder. John smiled when he saw the gleam of Sherlock's ring. They'd not even taken them off before paying for them.

"Ready to go?" Sherlock asked in his ear. John nodded, and let himself be led out of the store, Sherlock's arm still around him.

John managed to get all of two hundred yards down the street, before he began giggling uncontrollably. They stopped walking.

"What's got into you?" Sherlock asked, ducking his head, to try to look John in the eye.

John saved him the trouble, and grinned up at him. "I heard you, Sherlock Holmes!" John said between chuckles.

Sherlock looked at him, confusion etched over his face. "What do you mean?"

"You told that women she was expecting, didn't you!" John spoke quietly, so as not to be overheard, his words rushed with his excitement. "She'd probably been trying for a while, and didn't even know she was finally pregnant."

Sherlock blinked. He was still confused. "So?"

John brought his hand up to cover his mouth as he giggled into it. "There was no benefit to you to do that. You just did it because you care."

Sherlock stiffened at John's words, slightly affronted. "I'm not sure I understand your amusement."

John lowered his hand now, grinning for all the world to see. "You care, Sherlock. You try so hard to make people think you don't, but you do."

"We should take care of some other wedding errands while we're out," Sherlock said, as he started walking again. Sometimes he wished John hadn't improved his observation skills as much as he had over the years.

John, still laughing, jogged to catch up with Sherlock's quick stride, and fell into step beside him.
Smiling up at Sherlock as the younger man looked resolutely in front of him, John reached out and took his hand. This action gave Sherlock pause, and he slowed to a more normal walking speed.

"I like that you care," John murmured, squeezing his hand, and offering another of his damnable smiles.

Sherlock grumbled and, after an exaggerated pause, squeezed back.

John grinned, but managed to refrain from further comment. Instead, he asked, "What other wedding chores did you want to take care of today?"

~*~*~*~

They were seated at a small table for two, with a variety of cake samples spread out before them. Everything from light angel cake, to buttery yellow cake, to chocolate, to red velvet.

John poked at one sample with his fork, while watching a bit of red velvet disappear between Sherlock's lips. He waited until the consulting detective had swallowed before asking. "What do you think?"

"Sweet," Sherlock replied with a shrug.

John snorted and rolled his eyes. "That's helpful."

Another shrug. "I'm not one of those people who's been planning my wedding since I could toddle."

"Neither am I," John mused, sliding his fork lightly over his plate, to prevent squeaking. "Although this is kind of fun."

Sherlock looked up in surprise. "Really?"

It was John's turn to shrug, smiling as he met Sherlock's gaze. "Scheming with you always is."

A small smile quirked up on Sherlock's lips, and John badly wished he had a photo of that smile. He wondered, sometimes, if he was the only one who ever saw it.

"I have something else for you to try, if you'd like."

Sherlock and John turned to face the baker and owner of the little shop they were currently in. His name was Mark. He was in his early twenties with thick brown hair and dark brown eyes; just a little taller than John. In his hands he held what looked to be a tart. He shrugged under their combined gaze, embarrassed.

"It's just," he pressed on, "you didn't look like you were enjoying the cake so much, and there's really no rules to weddings when you think about it. So I thought you might like this," he gestured with the plate the tart rested on. "It's a blackberry and raspberry crumble tart."

John looked down at the tart, then back up at Mark, and smiled. "Sure, we'll give it a try. Thanks."

Mark smiled and left the tart between Sherlock and John with two spoons.

Sherlock lifted his spoon and examined the tart. It looked like a well made base with pastry crust crumbles over the top of a blackberry and raspberry filling. He and John dipped their spoons in, pulling away twin mouthfuls. They smiled as they chewed, nodded to each other. This was much better than boring cake, in Sherlock's opinion. There was a good balance between pastry and filling; the acid/sweet combination of the blackberry and raspberry was pleasing. Also, these particular
flavors were not a common choice for weddings. That seemed to be a theme in his relationship with John; uncommon things.

"Good?" Sherlock confirmed, once his mouth was clear.

John nodded, "Yes, this is good."

Sherlock nodded back and stood. "I'll take care of the details."

While Sherlock spoke with the baker, John trailed his gaze over the bag from the jewellery shop. Reaching inside, he pulled out the black velvet box that was big enough to hold both their rings. He opened it, closed it, and sighed. Fake wedding or no, it bothered him that Sherlock was paying for everything.

Arms encircled him from behind, and John leaned gratefully back into the embrace, tilting his head to look up at Sherlock. Sherlock leaned down, and pressed a soft, warm, chaste kiss to John's lips. As Sherlock pulled back, he whispered, "If it bothers you that much, you can pay for the flowers, the tarts, and the modification to the rings."

John smiled, leaning his head back against Sherlock's chest for a moment. His flatmate really did know everything.

Sherlock pulled his chair out for him as John moved to stand. "Come on," Sherlock said, gesturing towards the door, "We can get flowers out of the way while we're at it."

"Don't I need to put a down payment on the tarts?"

"Already done," Sherlock insisted, brandishing a card as he moved towards the door.

"But you said I-" John cut himself off when he realized that Sherlock was holding his card. John's hands fell to his pocket. His wallet was still there but years of being pickpocketed by Sherlock Holmes had made John more than able to detect his wallet was thinner than it should be.

"Sherlock!" John called after the infuriating, loveable man, chasing after him as he tore off down the street.

~*~*~*~

John leaned his head against the glass door of the cooler, which sheltered many bouquets. As much as John was enjoying spending time with Sherlock, and getting his crush satisfied at the same time-he'd always found long shopping trips to be draining. "Can we make this the last stop, Sherlock?" he asked. "I'd like to go home and make tea."

"Already, John?" Sherlock was standing by a flower display, tilting his head disbelievingly. "Our cases usually take much longer than this, and involve at least one chase."

John rolled his eyes. "There was a chase, unless you've forgotten. You made me chase you all through Regents Park to get my card back."

Sherlock shrugged, and smiled mischievously. "You're the one who wanted to help pay."

John couldn't help it. He smiled back. "Next time, I'm pushing you into the duck pond."

John heard a small chuckle that wasn't Sherlock's, and turned his head to see two men snickering behind a bouquet of red and white roses. One man had choppy auburn hair and grey eyes, while the
"I'm sorry," said the man with dark brown hair, stepping away from his partner for a moment, and towards John. He had a flat, American accent. "It's just, you're such a cute couple." The man stuck out his hand to shake John's. "My name's Dylan and this is my husband, Kyle."

John shook his hand. "Nice to meet you. "What brings you to Britan?"

Dylan look back at Kyle, ushering him over, and slipping an arm around his waist. "We're on our honeymoon," Dylan explained, his amber eyes never leaving Kyle's grey ones.

John smiled as he took in their matching silver bands. They looked very much in love. When Kyle lowered the bouquet to his chest, John fought to keep his expression neutral. Kyle had a vicious bite scar on his left cheek. Probably the remnants of a dog attack. John had seen plenty of those as a doctor, and knew, having his own scar, how little people wanted attention drawn to their scars.

"Where are you from," John asked, shifting his weight from foot to foot, trying to be conversational. "You sound American."

"New York City," Dylan, Kyle, and Sherlock said all at once.

John's eyes widened and he rounded on his flat mate. "Sherlock!" he hissed "Behave!"

It was Dylan and Kyle's turn to look shocked. "The Sherlock Holmes?" They asked together.

"No wonder you knew where we're from," Kyle said with a shy smile. "It's nice to meet you."

John's eyes narrowed, and Sherlock reached forward to shake Kyle's hand. "Nice to meet you too," he said, glancing at John when he was finished, as if to say, 'See? I can be polite.' And he could be, when people weren't too intolerable. This couple both seemed genuinely interested in meeting him, even if Kyle was a bit shy. He kept staring at Sherlock's ring, the question so loud in his eyes, he may as well have shouted it.

"I'm not married yet," Sherlock explained, reaching out to squeeze John's hand, "Just engaged."


"Are you picking out flowers for the wedding?" Dylan asked.

"Trying to," John replied, "Only Sherlock's been lecturing me on the different meanings of flowers instead."

"It's important," Sherlock insisted, gesturing to the display of roses in front of him. "Yellow is for friendship, red is for love, pink is appreciation, orange is desire, red and white together are-"

"Unity," Kyle cut in, smiling down at his own bouquet.

Sherlock paused, then nodded. "Exactly right." Turning to John, Sherlock raised an accusing eyebrow and pointed to Kyle. "See? Even he knows."

John rolled his eyes, and laughed. "The roses are fine, Sherlock, but I like the unique theme we've been going with so far. Why not throw in something a bit exotic?"

"Such as?" Sherlock asked, hands held in front of him, waiting.

That was the problem; John wasn't sure.
"Orchids are nice," Kyle spoke up again, his voice still quiet. He blushed a bit when John and Sherlock turned to look at him.

Dylan slipped a reassuring arm around his husband and said, "Kyle owns a flower shop back home."

John smiled again. The two men in front of him really looked like a sweet couple. "What kind would you recommend?" John asked.

Kyle hesitated, his gaze sweeping over both John and Sherlock. "Purple maybe? It matches your shirt," he began, indicating Sherlock's shirt (one of John's favorites), "I mean, I know you probably won't wear that to the wedding, but I think it would look good, especially as a boutonniere." Kyle blushed a bit more, and pointed to the left, "There's some over there."

John turned to take in the delicate flower. It was pretty. It wasn't a solid purple, but mixed with white swirls, which complimented the purple well. John was reminded of Sherlock's pale skin peeking out at his collar. Turning to face his consulting detective, John asked, "What do you think about purple orchids and white roses?"

Sherlock gave him that small smile again, and John cursed the warm, tingly feeling that curled up in his chest.

"If that would make you happy," Sherlock conceded, reaching an arm around John and hugging him tightly. His hand was pressed tightly against John's hip, near his front pocket... John nodded to Sherlock, enjoying the embrace.

"We should get going," Dylan said, checking his watch, "We're about to be late for our reservations." Turning back to John and Sherlock, Dylan shook each of their hands in turn. "It was nice to meet you."

"Same here," John agreed, then reached to shake Kyle's hand as well. "Thank you for lending a hand."

"You're welcome," Kyle murmured with a shy smile. A smile that widened when Sherlock also reached to shake his hand.

"Have a good night," Sherlock said, "And enjoy your honeymoon."

Dylan and Kyle smiled in unison. "We will," Dylan replied, "You have a good night too."

Kyle waved with his free hand as they left. "Bye, good luck with your wedding."

John smiled and turned to face Sherlock, only he wasn't there. Scanning the store John noticed Sherlock speaking with the owner...brandishing a card. John felt his wallet, and groaned.

"Sherlock!"

The younger man smiled at John over his shoulder, and John let out a frustrated sigh as he made his way over to Sherlock. As much as he was annoyed, John also found it endearing. Sherlock liked having John's attention, and John was happy to give it.
The Rabbit Hole

Chapter Summary

Just your typical Friday night at 221 B Baker street.

Chapter Notes

My deepest thanks go out to everyone who has commented on, given Kudos to, and bookmarked this story; your support is much appreciated.

Thank you very much to my beta, Helena Chauby for her help with editing.

Thank you also to Lady of Clunn for her careful BritPicking.

And, naturally, thanks go to my flatmate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff, for all your input and guidance.

FYI, if anyone is interested, this is the "Lama Song" it's easily located on YouTube.

Okay, on to the story:

Chapter 10: The Rabbit Hole

John strolled down the steps towards the sitting room, his eyes blurry from looking at invitation samples. It was mind-boggling how complicated a simple task could become. He carried a stack of samples under his arm with his top five preferred choices on top, awaiting Sherlock's vote.

As mind numbing as the task of reviewing invitations had been, it hadn't been as bad as picking out the song for their first dance. That had been two hours of internet hell, ending with John proclaiming that he would have said yes to the "lama song" if it got Sherlock off of YouTube. It was at that point that Sherlock had ushered John out of the room to get some rest. John had been more than happy to leave the search to Sherlock. There was enough wedding planning to go around, that was certain. They still had to pick out their formal wear.

As he rounded the corner into the sitting room, John to an abrupt halt. "Pease tell me that's not for the wedding," John groaned, taking in the sight of Sherlock on John's laptop engrossed in a flagrant BDSM website.

Sherlock didn't even glance up. "Afternoon John, any progress on the invitation front?"

John stepped slowly towards the consulting detective. "Sherlock," he began again, "What is that?"
Sherlock glanced at him with one eyebrow raised in amusement. "Really, John, I didn't think I'd have to explain this particular sexual interest to you."

John glared and crossed his arms. "Sherlock." It was a warning.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, and pouted. "You're no fun." A few clicks later and he'd brought up his e-mail. "Mycroft informs me that Albert and Trevor are having a joint stag party at 'Club Wickedness' tomorrow. I thought we might crash the party."

John opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "Why?" he sputtered.

Sherlock adopted his 'thinking' pose as he stared at the computer. "I want to make sure we're not overlooking the BDSM factor in the recent string of murders, and I especially want to know that we're not overestimating our killer." A shrug. "It makes sense to be there just in case."

John sat down in his chair, across from the sofa where Sherlock had planted himself. "What, exactly, are you going to make me wear?"

"Oh, your old military fatigues should do just fine," Sherlock replied, typing away as though he was composing the guest list. Knowing Sherlock, he might have been composing the guest list while perusing BDSM websites.

"You said we were going to crash the party?" John asked, still a bit uneasy, "How are we going to manage that? Security will be a nightmare."

Sherlock pointed at John's laptop, barely pausing in his typing. "Writing to Mycroft right now to make sure he arranges it. He's going to meet us at the Yard in an hour to coordinate with Lestrade."

It was John's turn to raise an eyebrow. "You're willing coordinating with your brother and Greg? Not running headlong into danger, and explaining yourself later?"

Sherlock paused, pressed 'send' with a flourish, then grinned at John over the laptop. "I think I've given you enough scares for the foreseeable future."

"Plus," Sherlock finally capitulated, "I want to see if I can arrange Mycroft and Lestrade becoming lovers."

John blinked. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I want to see," Sherlock explained more slowly, "If I can influence Mycroft and Lestrade into becoming lovers."

John blinked again. "Why?"

Sherlock let out a long suffering sigh, and gestured dramatically with one hand, "To get one over on my brother, to see if this will get him out of my hair. They both seem equally lonely, and, despite what my brother will tell you, susceptible to sentiment."

"What, exactly, are you going to do?" John asked, running his hand over his face in exasperation.

"Nothing you would've been able to notice if I hadn't told you. Mycroft actually observes where most others merely see. No, I'm simply going to bring certain things to Mycroft's attention, and see if he acts on them."
John peeked out from between his fingers. "Such as?"

Sherlock continued smiling. "Greg hasn't been doing well since his divorce. Lives alone, in a bare bones flat, keeps to himself, besides an occasional drink with friends—you yourself included—, throws himself into his work, skipping meals, not eating enough. Worst case scenario is that Mycroft ignores what I've told him, and no one's the wiser."

John sighed, and shook his head. As Sherlock 'experiments' went, this one seemed mostly harmless.

"Just don't handcuff them together," John muttered, grimacing when Sherlock's smile widened. "No, Sherlock, no. Behave."

Sherlock rolled his eyes and closed the laptop. "You are no fun."

"Right," John began sarcastically, "I'm no fun, because I'm game to pretend to be your boyfriend, to marry you, to crash the BDSM stag party of the cousin of the Queen because you say so, but I won't let you handcuff your brother to a detective inspector of Scotland Yard."

"Exactly," Sherlock replied, rising and moving for the door. "Come along John."

John rolled his eyes, but followed.

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"It is quite unusual for you to call me, dear brother," Mycroft drawled as he approached them outside the yard. "Care to inform me of the occasion?"

Sherlock looked gravely up at Lestrade's window. "Lestrade's been worked a bit thin lately." He paused, squinted, and frowned. "Slept in his office again." Sherlock sighed and looked back to his brother. "I thought it would be better to present a united front."

If John didn't know Sherlock so well, he would've missed the small quirk to his lips when Mycroft looked up to Lestrade's window and frowned.

"I can see the wisdom in that," Mycroft conceded, turning to look back at Sherlock and John. "This does have the potential to become...complicated."

They moved together into the building.

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"God, you've brought Mycroft," Lestrade groaned, leaning his forehead against the palm of his hand, "This is bound to be interesting."

Mycroft looked slightly miffed. "I am hardly the harbinger of bad news, Gregory."

Lestrade chuckled, and shook his head, "No, but you're always up to something, usually something big."

Mycroft wasn't sure if this mollified him, or irritated him further, and he opted to remain silent while Sherlock explained his plans to the detective inspector.

For his part, Lestrade listened quietly, and only frowned a few times. "It sounds like you'll only need a car or two of officers in the area as backup."

Sherlock nodded. "That seems about right. It's a slim chance that something will turn up, but I don't
want to take any chances."

Lestrade's expression grew dark. "Neither do I; this bastard's ruined enough families." He thought for
a moment before adding, "Do you want a wire?"

Sherlock waved his hand dismissively. "It will hardly be necessary. If anything happens I'll have
enough time to text you."

"And you will text me either way, right?" Lestrade asked seriously, "Instead of leaving my people
out there all bloody night?"

"Yes, Lestrade," Sherlock sighed dramatically. "Lord knows your blood pressure is high enough
already."

Lestrade's eye twitched. "My blood pressure is fine," he hissed.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. "If you say so." He twirled around and began making for the exit. "I'll
be in touch," he called over his shoulder. He even managed not to giggle until John and he were
safely in a cab. If all went well, Mycroft would be eating his words about being removed from
sentiment before long.

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"Shouldn't you be getting along too?" Lestrade asked, looking up at Mycroft from his position
behind his desk. "Don't you have some foreign country to terrorise?"

Mycroft glanced up from his phone, where he was texting. "Not at the moment," he mumbled.

"Then, what are you doing here?" Lestrade asked, "And why are you texting? Sherlock says you
never text."

Amusement glittered in Mycroft's eyes for a moment. "I do, when the situation calls for it." Mycroft
finally looked up from his phone. "You are an extremely stubborn man, Gregory, but you are now
working in collaboration with my team. That means your liabilities, become our liabilities."

Greg straightened in his chair. "What do you mean your team? This is my case, Mycroft. And what
liabilities?"

"It was, until the killer decided to go international, and after a member of the Royal Family besides."

Mycroft's lovely assistant entered the room then, dropped off a smallish white paper bag on Greg's
desk, and, after Mycroft gave her a brief nod, left. Turning back to Lestrade, Mycroft continued,
"Not eating, and sleeping in your office are liabilities. I push my people hard, but not to the point they
need concealer to cover the dark circles under their eyes."

Lestrade's hand lifted to his cheek, and he glowered at Mycroft.

Mycroft leaned towards Greg with a meaningful expression. "My brother has enough bad habits,
without other people picking them up." Mycroft gestured towards the bag with his chin. "Eat, and
get some rest tonight."

Greg looked suspiciously towards the white paper bag. "Is that your lunch?"

Mycroft shrugged. "Inconsequential."

Greg narrowed his gaze. "No it's not, Mycroft. Sit down."
Mycroft raised a surprised eyebrow at Greg. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," said Greg defiantly, "If you really want me to eat, sit down."

Mycroft glared, but lowered himself to the chair in front of Greg's desk. "I am not accustomed to receiving orders," he grumbled ominously.

"And yet, you're taking them," Greg quipped, riffling through the bag, and pulling out some kind of sandwich. Thankfully, it was already cut in half.

"You are surprisingly insubordinate," Mycroft observed stiffly, as Greg pulled away the plastic packing surrounding the sandwich.

"But I'm still here," Greg noted, offering half the wrap to Mycroft. "You eat too."

Another raised eyebrow. "Pardon?"

Greg rolled his eyes. "Your hearing is not deficient, Mycroft. Take the bloody sandwich." Mycroft did, but slowly. "See? Was that so hard?" Greg offered a quick grin, before biting into his portion of the wrap.

Mycroft finished chewing, and swallowing before he answered. "I believe in picking my battles."

Greg snorted. "Please. Sherlock's got it in your head somehow that you need to lose weight, and I bet your schedule doesn't afford you the best eating habits either. If you're going to lecture me about mine, be prepared to follow through with your own actions."

Greg meant it too, Mycroft didn't need to lose weight. He might have at one point, and he certainly could if he so chose, but at the moment Mycroft was pleasantly overweight. Greg didn't like it when people unnecessarily maligned their own bodies.

Mycroft looked a bit surprised at his comment, and Greg smiled. If he was going to be 'forced' into lunch, he was damn well going to try to enjoy himself.

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John finished buttoning up his uniform, and looked himself over in the mirror. Running all over London with Sherlock had helped keep him in good shape; his fatigues still fit him perfectly. He gave himself a nod, and went down the steps to find Sherlock.

John's breath caught in his throat. Sherlock was leaning against the windows of 221 B Baker Street in tight leather trousers, with his god damn purple shirt sinfully untucked. Sherlock turned towards him, and John could see that Sherlock had unbuttoned the first few buttons of his shirt, showing a bit of his chest.

A smirk curled at the edges of Sherlock's lips as their eyes met. "You look nice,"

John swallowed, and nodded. "So do you."

Sherlock pushed off the wall, and strode slowly towards John. "You have your dog tags?" Sherlock drawled.

John nodded, pulling them out. Sherlock hooked a finger underneath the chain, and tugged, forcing John to lean closer; keeping him off balance. John's eyes widened. His face was millimeters from Sherlock's, their breath mingling. Sherlock's eyes bore into John, searching, pinning him there.
"This will probably be a light party on the BDSM aspect," Sherlock began, his baritone voice making John shiver, "However, should we find ourselves in an unexpected situation, can I count on you to follow my lead?"

It was unnerving to have Sherlock repeatedly actually asking for permission to rope John into his schemes. John wanted to put Sherlock more at ease. He had said he was all in, and he meant it. "I've always trusted you, Sherlock," John murmured, "and I always will." Following his instincts, John knelt in front of Sherlock. The consulting detective lowered his hand, but did not let go of John's dog tags. The chain pulled at his neck a bit, forcing John to look up. He met Sherlock's surprised blue gaze with his own. "I'll go where this goes; just lead the way."

Sherlock was very rarely stunned, and yet, somehow, cute, cuddly, stable, normal John Hamish Watson never ceased to amaze him. John really was always, always there for him. Sherlock was no longer surprised that he had fallen for such a man, just that it took him so long. Sherlock fist his hands in John's shirt, yanked him to his feet, and crashed their lips together.

John moaned softly, and leaned into the kiss, swiping his tongue lightly over Sherlock's full bottom lip. Sherlock's tongue pushed back against his, insistent, forceful. John ran his hands along Sherlock's sides, pulling him closer into the bruising kiss. When Sherlock pulled back slightly, John chased him, crushing their lips together again; running his tongue along Sherlock's lips and teeth, into the hot cavern of his mouth.

Sherlock pushed John backwards until they collided with the desk, the impact forcing their mouths apart, panting into each other. Sherlock leaned back slowly, reluctant to let go of his blogger, but more terrified of what he might do if he didn't stop now. "Well then," Sherlock began, raising his eyebrow slightly, "I do believe we have a party to crash." Sherlock whirled about, and strode for the door. "Come, John."

A small smile quirked on John's lips as he replied, "Yes, Sherlock."

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The party was loud. John could feel the music thumping in his breastbone as Sherlock tugged him through the crowd by his dog tags. John tried to scan the crowd, but, if he was being honest, watching Sherlock slither through the crowd in front of him was more than a little distracting. Every time he saw the fabric of Sherlock's shirt slide over his skin John's hands itched to slide his hands under that purple cloth, and touch the skin underneath.

Sherlock steered them through the mass of people, towards an abandoned booth in the corner of the club. Sherlock seated himself on the edge of the booth, facing out, towards the crowd. He reached up and grasped John's shoulders, turning him to face the crowd as well, before pushing down on John's shoulders and forcing him to kneel. John knelt at Sherlock's feet, wrapped one arm around Sherlock's calves, and leaned his head into Sherlock's lap. Sherlock 'hmmed' in contentment as he began to rub John's scalp through his short hair.

They must have made quite the picture of dominance and submission, because they garnered a few stares, but no one approached. This was good, it left them time to scan the crowd, and speak to each other.

The lighting was dim, but still bright enough that they could make out most of the club. People were dancing and chatting. Some were in poses similar to Sherlock and John, and most people wore some sort of suggestive and/or revealing outfit. Still, all in all, it felt like a BDSM 'light' party. There were no 'scenes' set up, and, while some sported whips or floggers, no one was actually using them. There was a somewhat more relaxed, and festive air than John had expected. Probably because it was, at its
heart, still a stag party.

The couple of honour was easily spotted on the dance floor. They were about the same height. Albert had short blond hair and Trevor had light brown hair, slightly longer than his fiancés. John recognized them from pictures that Sherlock had him review, but they were also easy to pick out because Albert was dressed entirely in white leather, while Trevor was dressed entirely in red. Both colors of the Tudor rose, if you were a student of history. And when one lived with Sherlock Holmes, one became a student on a myriad of subjects, whether one wanted to, or not.

"I did not expect to see so many happily married couples here tonight," Sherlock murmured, leaning over John, so that only he could hear.

John shifted his head so that he could gaze up at Sherlock. "Is it the number of couples, or the 'happy marriage' part that surprises you the most?"

Sherlock's lips quirked briefly with amusement. "You know me well." Sherlock looked out over the crowd again, fingers moving over the crown of John's head. "Couples never surprise me. People seem driven towards each other, latching on with unwarranted desperation to strangers they barely know. And still they are shocked and hurt when they fail to build something meaningful."

"All hearts are broken," John murmured sadly.

Sherlock nodded. "All hearts are broken, John, but not all hearts dare to love. For all the married people walking around, love, as people claim to think of it, is quite rare."

John arched to look up at Sherlock again, forgetting the crowd for a moment. "What do you mean?"

Sherlock glanced down at John for a moment before continuing. "What most people find themselves in is chemically, and behaviorally, no different from lust. Those 'butterflies' people are so obsessed with do not last perpetually. It hardly takes a scientist to tell you that the longest lasting fires have a slow burn."

John smiled, resting his head on Sherlock's lap again, listening to his rumbling, baritone voice.

"To love someone, the way most people talk about, requires a shift in perspective from those first 'butterflies,' and more faith than most people have. It also requires work. People have this ridiculous notion about 'happily ever after' as though once they arrive at a certain point in their relationship, it will be maintained without further effort." Sherlock snorted derisively. "That's as absurd as expecting a human to develop gills if they stay in the water long enough."

John turned his face into Sherlock's leg and chuckled. How he could sound so romantic and so analytical at the same time, John would never know.

"Mummy even has this ridiculous saying about love," Sherlock continued. "She says that if you marry someone, it should be someone who makes you laugh."

"And what do you say about love, Sherlock," John asked, looking up and leaning his head into the consulting detectives long fingers as he caressed the side of John's face.

Sherlock blinked slowly before lowering his gaze to look into John's eyes. His voice was deep and comforting as he spoke. "I maintain my stance that the chemistry to love is incredibly simple and very destructive." Sherlock's fingers were caressing John's face again—he couldn't stop himself. Perfect example to his point. He was here, trying to make a break in the case, and he could barely concentrate.
Sherlock forced himself to look up at the crowd before he spoke again, sliding his fingers over John's neck. "And you John?" he asked before he could quash the impulse to speak. "What is your stance on the matter?"

John stifled the urge to giggle again. Trust Sherlock to call love 'the matter.' John wondered for a moment if Sherlock's insistence on love being destructive was out of his own observations...or of fear.

John leaned his temple against Sherlock's thigh and thought about the question. "It's not about finding a perfect person," John agreed with Sherlock's earlier statements, "It's about seeing, really seeing a person for who they are."

Another derisive snort. "By your estimation, I am in love with everyone," Sherlock drawled.

Laughter burst forth before John could stop himself. He knew Sherlock cared about others a hell of a lot more than he would ever admit to, but elevating it to love was ridiculous. "Well, it's more than that. There would need to be those 'butterflies' you speak of, and then the person has to choose that's what they want. They may not be able to help the butterflies, but they don't have to stay, or work at it. As you said, not working at it will often bring things to an end quickly. But, if two people really saw each other, felt that affection, chose to stay, and chose to work at it, I think they could build something really beautiful."

Sherlock brought his whole hand down to caress the back of John's neck. It was a primal, possessive gesture that said more than he felt was safe to put into words.

John pushed back into the touch and closed his eyes, just feeling. And then he felt Sherlock stiffen. Opening his eyes, John tracked Sherlock's eyes to a couple, swaying together on the dance floor. One man was tall with short black hair and green eyes. He was built like a rugby player. The other man was more than a head shorter with choppy brown hair falling over his grey eyes. The shorter man was wiry, like Sherlock, but John could see compact muscles rippling under his skin.

John pursed his lips in thought, scanning their hands. He squinted and caught a brief gleam in the dim lighting. "They're married?" he asked.

"Happily, for three years. Look to the far wall."

John scanned slowly in the dim light, and saw a cloaked figure who appeared to be studying the couple on the dance floor. John and Sherlock were silent now, discreetly watching the couple, and the cloaked figure as Sherlock's fingers danced across the skin of John's neck.

The couple danced for a while, some fast songs, and some slow ones. For a moment John wondered if this would all lead to nothing. Then a thumping, sexual beat pulsed through the speakers, and the couple's dancing whet from sweet to explicit. The dark-haired man pulled the shorter man flush against his body, and gyrated against him. The shorter brunet writhed against his partner, tossing his head back. The taller man smirked, and dipped his head to suck and nibble at his husband's neck. The shorter brunet's mouth opened, but neither John nor Sherlock could hear anything over the music.

The taller man pulled back, and seemed to whisper something in the shorter man's ear. The shorter brunet nodded, and was promptly lead through the crowd, by his hand. The cloaked figure watched the couple go, waiting until they were nearly at the door to follow them. Sherlock stood, yanking John to his feet by his dog tags. John followed the rough gesture, stumbling along after the consulting detective as they made their way through the crowd.
Once they were outside, Sherlock released his dog tags and scanned the street, just in time to see a cab pull away. Sherlock immediately hailed a cab, and they clamored into it. "We're following our friends to another party," Sherlock explained, pulling John into his lap, before continuing in a slow, sensual drawl, "Please don't lose them."

Whether Sherlock had charmed or intimidated the cabbie, John wasn't sure, but the cabbie took off after the other two cabs, staying close. With any luck, this cab would appear just like any other, and they wouldn't arouse suspicion. Even if they did, it was no matter, Sherlock wasn't one to give up a chase.

John followed the press of Sherlock's insistent fingers as they guided his head to Sherlock's shoulder. One of Sherlock's arms slithered over John's lap and around his hip, holding him in place. John shivered when he felt the fingers of Sherlock's other hand slip underneath his shirt to caress the bare skin of his back. He really liked that; Sherlock must have noticed.

John assumed they were maintaining the guise of a BDSM couple touring the clubs. It made sense. Their cabbie might have seen the couple and the cloaked figure they were following get into their cabs.

The drive was short, but as they arrived Sherlock pressed a sucking kiss to John's neck to delay their exit from the cab. This allowed him to watch the couple scramble up the steps, and into the unmarked building; the cloaked figure followed shortly afterwards.

"Oi, you two, getting out or what?" The cabbie asked, his eyes looking everywhere but Sherlock and John.

Sherlock pulled away from John's neck with a wet, sucking sound. "Come along, John," he murmured in a deep, gravely tone that made John shiver. John slid off Sherlock's lap to allow him to get out. For once, Sherlock paid. It must have been part of this dominant disguise he was putting on.

John turned to scan the building, and felt his chest clench painfully. Was this another club? It wasn't marked... could this be the couple's home? John raced up the stairs as the cab sped away, ignoring Sherlock's voice calling after him. If this was supposed to be some sort of side-kill or warning, John didn't want to be too late to stop it. John threw himself against the doors to the building forcing them open...

The lighting was dim and muddled because of the intermittent strobes of bright light and coloured lasers mingling in the smoky air. John didn't think anyone was smoking tobacco...or anything else, it smelled more like a smoke machine. The bright strobe flashes revealed images of the house like bursts of lightning. Here John saw people dancing in tight leather. There was a table where half the people were sitting and the other half were kneeling by the chairs. A bit further back, dancers in cages wriggled enticingly against their bars, with outfits that left little to the imagination.

John's sudden entrance had caused a few people look up at him in surprise, and he felt his mouth go dry. So much for subtle.

"John!"

John turned towards the sound of Sherlock's voice, and felt a vicious blow land across his cheek. John staggered backwards, clutching the side of his face, wincing against the sudden sting.

"Remember your place!" Sherlock hissed, and John's eyes widened in understanding even as he sank to his knees and bowed his head. This could work as a cover; they might be able to find the couple and the cloaked figure they were after.
"I'm sorry, Master," John murmurred demurely. He was glad he was facing the floor, because he couldn't quite hide the sour look that crossed his face. Sherlock may blow him away in so many ways, but John had still always felt like they were equal partners in their adventures. Still, the truth of their dynamic didn't matter right now, they were in the middle of a chase.

Sherlock's black boots came into view, and John felt a finger hook under his chin, pulling his gaze up to Sherlock's. Sherlock really was an amazing actor. John saw no apology in his face, just a hard stare.

"You will pay for your...little display," Sherlock drawled.

John swallowed, but otherwise remained perfectly still. "Yes, Master," he repeated.

Sherlock caressed the side of his face, but John felt the bite of nails over his bruising cheek. He winced. "One more outburst," Sherlock murmured in a tone that was part drawl, part hiss, "and we will leave!"

Sherlock's fingers left his face, and John let his chin fall back to his chest. He couldn't see, because he didn't dare look up, but Sherlock's quick thinking seemed to have restored order. John felt the minutes tick by as he knelt, and he hoped that Sherlock was scanning the crowd. They hadn't been far behind the couple and the cloaked figure...

John heard Sherlock snap his fingers and order, "Your hands, John."

John lifted his hands together as though he were bound at the wrist, and kept his head down. He felt Sherlock grasp both wrists in one hand, and tug John to his feet. "Follow me," Sherlock commanded, and John did.

John thought it best to keep his eyes down for now, so he couldn't tell where they were going. That was probably for the best anyway; this club was much darker than the last one. The flashing lasers and strobe lights made it hard to see, and John knew Sherlock could see better than he could in dim light.

John felt them go through a doorway, and it instantly seemed darker, quieter. John looked up through his lashes and, when they seemed to be mostly alone, he dared to raise his head.

"Did you see something?" he asked quietly.

Sherlock nodded, released John's wrists, and held his hand up for silence. John complied, straining his own ears as well. The music was muffled in this hallway, but John wasn't sure that Sherlock, even with his keen hearing, would be able to pick up anything important. Still, they waited, and listened while the minutes ticked by.

A disappointed sigh was rising in John's lungs when he heard it. SMACK! Both their heads jerked in the direction of the sound, then they heard it again. SMACK! followed by a strained, "No..please, no."

And now they were running, down the hall, around a corner, and through a strong set of double doors. This room was well-lit compared to the club. Towards the front of the room they could clearly see the short brunet from earlier. He was shirtless, tied to a spanking horse, and his husband was looming over him with a whip. There were other people, in chairs, watching the scene. Horrified embarrassment began to sink in as John realised that this is exactly what they were seeing, a BDSM scene. The married couple probably had safewords and everything.

John briefly scanned the crowd, and spotted the cloaked figure they had been tracking in the
audience. His hood was thrown back now, revealing him to be a red-haired man. He, and the rest of the audience, was glaring at the unknown intruders. John opened his mouth to apologise when a strong hand on his shoulder spun him around. John turned and looked up at a man in a tight black t-shirt, with the word 'SECURITY' written across it in white letters. A quick glance showed John that there was a second security guard in front of Sherlock.

"Um," John mumbled, running his tongue nervously over his lips, and looking back up at the security guard in front of him, "We can explain."

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Sherlock and John sat in complete silence for the first three minutes of their cab ride back to Baker Street. Finally, John dared to glance sideways at Sherlock, and found his consulting detective peering hesitantly back at him. A shared, relieved smile turned into a chuckle, then a giggle fit. Before thirty seconds had passed they were howling with a deep, raucous laughter that made their stomachs hurt from the strain, and had them leaning hard against each other, gasping for air.

"Oh god," John wheezed, leaning his forehead against Sherlock's shoulder. "I can't believe our life sometimes.

Sherlock turned towards him, and snickered into his hair. "It certainly makes for an unusual Friday night."

"Ha! I can just picture talking to Lestrade about this," John forced out between chuckles, his voice high pitched in merriment.

Sherlock snorted in laughter before gathering enough air to mimic the detective inspector, "Have you two found anything useful?"

"Not much," John giggled, playing along with the fake conversation, "Just a bunch of leather and ball gags." Sherlock's mimed expression of horror had them laughing all the way home.

When they got out and paid, the cabbie couldn't pull away fast enough. "You really should text Lestrade," John murmured, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

"Doing it now," Sherlock replied as his fingers danced over his phone. Sherlock was sucking in great lungfuls of air as he did so; he was still winded from laughing.

Instead of opening the door to their building, John leaned against it, breathing in the cool night air, and watching Sherlock. It was amazing and beautiful to him, the strange situations he found himself in when on a case with the world's only consulting detective. John remembered thinking not long ago that, if he were actually involved with Sherlock, the consulting detective would have no qualms about interrupting a night out to drag John out on a case. Now, John wondered if Sherlock would try to make cases into a night out. John's eyes crinkled in amusement as he realised that would probably be exactly what Sherlock would do, if they were really involved.

Sherlock glanced up as he finished his text, and placed his phone in his pocket. He approached John slowly, smiling down at him. John grinned back and, when Sherlock was close enough, he reached up to pull Sherlock down for an adrenaline laced kiss. Sherlock met John's lips willingly, pushing the shorter man back against the door, and invading John's mouth with his tongue. John arched into the contact, anchoring his fingers in Sherlock's wild hair. John knew he was playing with fire, but at that moment, as they moved against each other under the night sky, it felt like one hell of a goodnight kiss.
Arrivals and Connections

Chapter Summary

Greg is kidnapped and we meet the family.

Chapter Notes

To each person who has commented, left kudos on, and bookmarked this story: Thank You. Writing this story has been a joyous return to fanfiction for me, and it has been so much fun to write. That said my favorite moments are hearing your reactions in comments and getting notifications of kudos. I break out into fits of giggles when my inbox explodes with comments/kudos. Often times, after I post a new chapter, I joke with my beta that we 'broke the internet.' That is all thanks to you and your feedback, so, thank you very, very much. ^_^

I also owe heartfelt thanks to my beta, Helena Chauby, for her help in editing this story.

Many heartfelt thanks go to Lady of Clunn for her careful and educational BritPicking.

And, of course, I offer thanks to my flatmate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff. I've grown as a writer during this story, and it's because of you.

For anyone who may not know 'mad' is another way of saying 'crazy'.

FYI Suggestions about plot points are always welcome. You never know where a good suggestion might show up.

Personal observation: My word count, for both chapters and authors notes, seems to be swelling exponentially. I hope that's a good thing.

Please enjoy!

Chapter 11: Arrivals and Connections

Greg sighed, and ran a hand over his aching face, rubbing at his tired eyes. His whole body hurt. But, that's what happened when you didn't get enough sleep for weeks on end. This case wasn't helping matters; it had everyone on edge. He'd talked to a lot of grieving families recently...

Daring to peek between his fingers, Greg caught sight of his desk clock, and groaned. Bloody two in the morning. He thought things had gone quiet outside, but he hadn't known it was this late. No sense in going home, except he needed to shower and shave. Greg groaned quietly to himself as he rested his forehead in his palms. At least there was no one around to hear him. He should start planning the best time to nip home to change. Right now, the Yard needed a detective inspector who looked calm and in control, not like someone who'd been here all night without any more answers.
Greg looked up and immediately jumped, his hand coming to rest on his folding knife, releasing the safety. It wasn't a regulation weapon, it was part of his own, larger collection. Greg, for the most part, played by the rules. However, it never hurt to have a little added security, especially when consulting detectives made a habit of turning your life on its ear.

"No need for that, detective inspector," came the dulcet tones of a brunet woman who looked entirely too familiar. She barely glanced at him as her fingers flew over the surface of her phone, doing God knows what.

"Can I help you?" Greg asked in an even tone that demanded an answer.

The tall brunet looked up at him for a brief moment, and smiled. "Mycroft sent me to collect you. Your bags are in the car."

Greg relaxed slightly. "That's right, you're Mycroft's assistant, Anthea-wait. What do you mean bags?"

The comely assistant glanced his way again. "Mycroft said you would be spending the week before the wedding at the Holmes estate, in order to better combine your efforts on a case. We've picked up some things from your flat."

"You've been to my flat?!" Greg sputtered incredulously, voice raising in pitch. "How did you get in? And what has Mycroft told you about the case."

The assistant dipped her hand into her pocket, and suddenly a set of his house keys were hanging from her right index finger.

Greg's hands fell to his pockets, but his own keys were firmly in place. How? He glared at Anthea as she placidly typed away on her phone. God help him, the next time he saw Sherlock, he might help him plot evil for his brother. Did Mycroft have no sense of privacy? No, of course not. How could anyone keep anything from big brother Holmes.

"Mycroft only informed me that you were working together on a case," Anthea murmured, her hands and eyes back on her phone. "I don't ask for what I don't need to know."

Greg scoffed. "I bet you don't. I bet no one around Mycroft, except maybe Sherlock and John, dare ask for details his royal highness doesn't deign to give out."

Anthea looked up at Greg for another moment, one eyebrow raised nearly to her hairline. Apparently one did not snap at, or make pithy comments about, the British government personified. Too bad. Greg was not Mycroft's lap dog.

"Listen Anthea," Greg began, "That is your name right?"

"That's what everyone calls me," the woman confirmed with a cryptic smile.

"That's what everyone calls me," the woman confirmed with a cryptic smile.

Right. Probably not her real name. Greg fought the urge to roll his eyes. "Well, Anthea, I am not coming with you. Mycroft mentioned something about me visiting the estate, but we never solidified plans." Greg blinked at the clock again. "And we certainly didn't set anything up for two in the morning."

"Mycroft probably didn't have the time to send word until now," Anthea droned, unphased.

Greg's face reddened slightly in anger. "Robbing my flat is not sending word!" Greg managed to moderate his volume but his words were harshly clipped. "Bring my things up here, and give me that
set of keys before I report you."

Another raised eyebrow. "Do you really want to go through all that trouble?" Translation: Mycroft would just cover it up. Of course. Anthea interrupted Greg's train of thought again by saying, "You have an impressive collection of weapons by the way. Lovely swords."

"Thank you," Greg bit out, glaring daggers at the unruffled woman. He spoke in his hardest detective inspector voice, making it known just how serious he was, "Now, you are going to return my things to me, and tell your boss I am NOT coming."

Those must have been the magic words because Anthea finally looked up from her phone. She was a steady woman, you had to be steady to work for Mycroft; she just looked at him. It was in what she didn't say, or do, that Greg read the hell she might catch for coming back empty handed. Mycroft hadn't sent muscle with her because he'd either deemed it unnecessary and/or he'd known Greg would make use of the incapacitation spray in his desk drawer.

Greg wasn't someone to bend needlessly to the will of others, but he didn't relish the idea of this young woman catching grief because Mycroft was mad at him. Greg was nothing if not a gentleman. With a pained sigh Greg shuffled to his feet and pulled on his jacket. He paused by Anthea before offering her his arm. "Shall we go, then?"

Anthea blinked at him a few times as if he'd suddenly grown two heads, before she smiled, and slipped her arm through his, her phone disappearing into her pocket. "Let's," She agreed, and walked him down to the car.

Anthea was back on her phone the minute the car door closed, but Greg didn't mind. Given how hard the poor girl must work, taking the time to walk him down the stairs must have been an impromptu vacation for her. And she could multitask. Greg engaged her in easy conversation without asking anything even remotely personal. With everything that Mycroft got up to, he may have gone as far as to have Anthea's fingerprints removed. Greg didn't want to ask anything that she couldn't tell him, he was just determined to make the best of the situation. That is what Greg had always done; made the best of things. Still, by the time they pulled up to the entrance of the Holmes estate, Greg knew Anthea's birthday was the 8th of December (God knows what year), that her favourite flowers were Dahlias, and that she had a particular fondness for impressionist paintings. Greg flattered himself that she favoured him with another smile as he stepped out of the car.

"Get some sleep!" He called after her with an answering smile as the door closed. His cell phone buzzed with a text as Mycroft's staff escorted him and his luggage inside. Greg pulled his phone out and immediately smiled at the text:

_You as well, detective inspector. -A_

"I brought you here so that you could get some proper rest, Gregory."

Greg was glaring before he even made eye contact. "I only came so that I could have the satisfaction of yelling at you in person," he hissed. "Two in the fucking morning, Mycroft? Do you ever let that poor girl get any sleep?!"

Mycroft studied his nails for a moment, unimpressed. "Remember our discussion from the other day, Gregory. I push my people hard, but not as hard as you have pushed yourself. People are always sloppy once they reach the point of exhaustion." Mycroft returned his hands to his pockets, and finally deigned to look at Greg. "As I said, persons in my employ do not need concealer to cover the dark circles under their eyes. Had you actually been sleeping, I would have sent an invitation when you woke."
"That was not an invitation Mycroft!" Greg snapped, taking a few steps towards the elder Holmes. "That is called kidnapping, and it's against the law!"

Mycroft shrugged, a humourless smile settling over his lips. "Lest you forget, Gregory, we are chasing a serial killer." Mycroft began walking as he talked, circling Greg. "I understand the pressure your department is under, and surely you bear a great deal of that burden, being the detective inspector on the case..." Mycroft was partway behind him now, and Greg had turned slightly to keep the elder Holmes in sight. "It would be a pity," Mycroft began in a hushed tone as he leaned closer, "For your superiors to see those dark circles under your eyes; for them to see you...cracking under the pressure."

Greg whirled around to face Mycroft directly. "What?!" They were nose to nose now, and Greg was fuming. "People are dead Mycroft, and I'm sure as hell not to apologise for working extra hours!"

"You are not at your best this way," Mycroft replied, his voice annoyingly calm. "I was merely expressing my concern."

Greg's jaw hung open a moment in shock. He was well and truly at a loss for words.

Mycroft's phone trilled softly from his pocket, and Mycroft pulled it out. "If you will excuse me for a moment, Gregory..."

Greg snatched the phone from Mycroft's grasp, and hurled it towards the floor, where it shattered and went silent. Greg's escalated breathing filled the small space between them. Mycroft stood completely still, his hand outstretched as though he were still holding his phone. It was as close as Mycroft ever got to dumbfounded.

"Kidnapping someone is not how you show concern!" Greg yelled, his voice echoing in the grand entranceway of the estate. "Neither is threatening them, or questioning their competency! If John wasn't my friend, and if I didn't have great respect for your brother, I would tell you to take this case and stick it up your arse!" Unfortunately, John was his friend, he did respect Sherlock; and both of them were putting themselves in danger in order to catch the killer. Right now, that was the only thing keeping him at the Holmes estate. Spinning on the balls of his feet, Greg strode away from Mycroft, and towards one of the first doors he saw.

"Your room is upstairs," Mycroft informed him. That bastard still sounded calm.

"Fuck my room!" Greg yelled over his shoulder as he wrenched open the door, then slammed it behind him so forcefully that it rattled in its frame. Greg leaned back against the door then, and tried to calm his breathing. It was a lovely room, the one he'd just sequestered himself in. There was cream carpeting so thick he felt his feet sinking into it. The walls were covered in muted wallpaper which appeared to depict delicate green vines. Many bookshelves and paintings lined said walls, giving the room a cozy feeling. Just ahead of him, and to the right, was a marble fireplace. It was bracketed by two floor-to-ceiling windows, which had heavy drapes pulled over them. There was a dying fire in the fireplace. No flames, but the coals glowed warmly, and provided enough dim light to see by. Just before the fireplace was a plush brown sofa that looked infinitely inviting.

Greg sighed, and leaned his head back against the door for a moment. What the hell. It was late, and he wasn't doing anyone any favors by needlessly exhausting himself. He was just considering putting a chair against the door to make it harder for Mycroft to get in, when he noticed this study, possibly all the studies in this estate, had a door that locked. Mycroft had to have been in this room just before Greg had arrived, because the key was still resting in the lock. Greg smirked to himself as he jerked the key to the side, locking the door, then walked away with the key still in the lock. Mycroft probably had the equipment and the knowledge he needed to pick the lock, even with the key still
inside, but Greg didn't care. Right now, he wanted some privacy, and, at the very least, the locked door would convey that message.

Greg toed off his shoes, loosened his tie, and undid the first few buttons on his shirt before collapsing face first into the plush fabric of the sofa. Greg groaned softly in satisfaction. Damn. Even Mycroft's sofas where better than the bed at his flat. Tugging one of the extra cushions close to serve as a pillow, Greg closed his eyes, and was instantly asleep.

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It was an hour before the door to the study clicked open. Greg had been right, Mycroft could, and did, pick the lock. Mycroft scanned the room briefly, and nodded in satisfaction when he found Greg well and truly unconscious. A glance informed him that the fire had gone completely out, and he sighed in exasperation at the detective's stubbornness.

Mycroft stole across the carpet to a wooden chest in the corner. Mummy had made it when she was young, and had allowed Mycroft to take it to the estate after he'd finished renovating it. Despite appearances, the Holmes did not come from a long line of money. Mycroft's parents had done very well for themselves, and Mycroft had done better. Mummy could afford an estate of her own if she chose, but she preferred a smaller house in the country with Father and the dogs.

Mycroft lifted a fuzzy afghan that his grandmother had made as a 'wedding present' to him, before she died. She'd felt age coming on, and had wanted to give Mycroft this gift as a way of saying goodbye, and so that, in case he married, he could have something from her. Mycroft paused a moment to run his fingers over the material. Even at 87 years old, stricken with macular degeneration, his grandmother had done excellent work. She'd spent her life as a tailor, seamstress, and housewife. This blanket portrayed her skills beautifully...but it was only sentiment.

Shutting the trunk quietly, Mycroft loomed over the back of the couch, and spread the blanket over Gregory, tucking it around his body to keep in the warmth. Despite his distaste for fieldwork, Mycroft did know how to manipulate the environment of a sleeping man without waking him. Mycroft was just pulling back to make his way to the door he heard a muffled, "Thank you..." and saw Gregory snuggle further into the blanket. Mycroft watched Gregory carefully, but there was no other movement, aside from deep, steady breaths. It appeared that Gregory had spoken in his sleep...Well, at least he had good manners some of the time. Mycroft turned, and crept out of the study as silently as he had come.

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John closed his eyes, and concentrated on the sunlight warming his face. Sherlock and he had come to the Holmes estate for this last week before the wedding. Since the reception would be hosted at the estate, it would be easier to handle last minute plans from here.

It was quiet in this second floor hallway, and, right now, he needed a bit of quiet. He was having fun working this case with Sherlock...indulging in his little crush... but now that the wedding was only a week away, everything felt like it was moving so fast.

He wasn't sure how he felt about involving his family either. They were all so overjoyed... Still, hadn't John thought, back at the very beginning of this case, that maybe he wouldn't get married at all? Maybe it wasn't for him. He had more fun with Sherlock anyways... 'Yeah,' John thought to himself, 'not exploring that train of thought right now.' He had to keep his head in the game. This was a dangerous case, and he'd promised Sherlock he would be there for him; John meant to keep his promise.
Letting out a slow breath, John opened his eyes, and focused on the trees through the window. It was a nice, sunny day and it was calming to watch the sun play through the leaves.

"John!"

John turned, and smiled when he saw Greg making his way down the hall towards him. Greg was dressed in kakis and a white button up shirt that wasn't done up all the way. "Where'd you come from?" John asked.

Greg grimaced. "Mycroft kidnapped me."

John expelled a short, sharp laugh. "Yeah, he does that. I did warn you."

Greg glared harder. "I should arrest the stupid sod."

"Got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?" John asked, "Sherlock tells me the estate is supposed to have comfortable guest rooms."

"Wrong side of the sofa actually," Greg corrected. "I was so angry with Mycroft that I smashed his phone, and stormed into some kind of study. I crashed on the sofa inside."

John's eyebrows shot to his hairline in surprise. "You smashed his phone? And you lived to tell about it?"

Greg pressed his lips into a thin, unhappy line and stared out the window for a moment. "I may have overreacted, but Jesus it was two in the morning."

John held up his hands in surrender. "You'll get no arguments here. Did you sleep alright?"

Greg's lips finally quirked into a smile. "Yeah. Even the sofa was damn comfortable. I could use some more sleep, but I figured I could catch up while I'm being held hostage."

John smiled and shook his head. "Well, enjoy the bed tonight, at least."

Greg ran a hand over his face, and nodded. He'd slept in rather late, and even he had to admit he had a clearer head after a decent night's sleep. He wondered which of Mycroft's staff had left the blanket.

"I still can't believe that Mycroft lives here all alone," John murmured, craning his head to take in the arched ceilings, the long carpeted hallway, and what he could see of the lush grounds below. "Sherlock told me that Mycroft bought this old estate, and renovated it as soon as he could afford it."

Greg's brows drew together as he considered this. "I always had the impression that Sherlock and Mycroft grew up rich."

"Oh their family is very well off," John began, looking back out the window, "but Mycroft and Sherlock got rich on their own. Mycroft by being, well, Mycroft, and Sherlock by being brilliant."

Greg nodded, "Except Sherlock had his money placed in a trust fund for him, by Mycroft, for the first few years you knew him, just to make sure that he would...use it appropriately."

"I know," John said, "That's why he was looking for a flat share in the first place. It's all under his control now, since he...came back."

Greg saw John swallow hard, and had to refrain from putting a hand on his shoulder. John hated talking about the two years Sherlock spent 'dead,' and Greg didn't blame him. It was depressing for everyone. Instead, Greg decided to change the subject. "I saw that, you know," Greg began with a
sly smile.

John looked up, surprised. "Saw what?"

"They way your eyes crinkled and your lips curled when you called Sherlock brilliant," Greg chuckled, gesturing at John's face. "You're completely mad in love with him."

John blushed furiously and ducked his head. "Well, I am marrying him aren't I?"

Greg frowned then, looking concerned. "Is this really the way you want to marry him? In the middle of a case?"

John wouldn't look at Greg; he couldn't. He had to focus. Make this as real as possible, without disturbing his own feelings too deeply. In a world where Sherlock and he were actually together, would he mind being married this way? Being married in the midst of, and partially for, a case?

"Well you're smiling, so you must like something about this arrangement," Greg murmured.

Was he smiling? Oh. Crap. He was grinning like an idiot. Well, that was his answer, wasn't it? John turned to Greg, and forced himself to make eye contact. "Sherlock and I have had our own way of being since day one, Greg. Getting married like this...it fits."

Greg was smiling at him now. "Well," Greg began, "Just make sure you take a proper honeymoon when the case is over." John was a good actor, better since he began living with Sherlock, but Greg still saw his face and shoulders fall slightly. He must not think Sherlock would take the time to give him a proper honeymoon.

Greg already knew Mycroft and he would follow John and Sherlock to the United States-on a different plane, of course, to avoid suspicion. They already had plans to set up camp in New York City, so that they could be relatively close at hand when it was time to arrest the actual killer. Greg would just have to make sure that Sherlock took a proper holiday with John, for their honeymoon, once things were safe. John was a good mate, and he deserved to be happy.

"Dinner is ready," Sherlock's baritone voice interrupted them, "or, rather, tea is ready, considering we're well past dinner time, and it's not close to supper time yet."

John looked up at Sherlock, and was grinning again before he could stop himself. "Since when do you care about food?"

Sherlock shrugged. "I don't usually, but I do eat occasionally."

John put his hands on his hips, and tried to look cross, but he really just looked smitten. "You could do with eating a bit more."

"Come along, John," Sherlock said, holding his hand out to his blogger, "My parents should be arriving presently."

John bit his lip nervously, and took Sherlock's hand. John's own parents weren't coming into the area until the night before the wedding. They were on a fixed income now, and needed to be frugal. They had also insisted on staying at a hotel; they were an independent sort. In contrast, much of the Holmes family would be staying at the Holmes estate, arriving at various times up until the wedding, and John was a bit nervous about meeting everyone.

Sherlock smiled down at John and gave his hand a squeeze. "You'll be fine. Mycroft and I are the scary ones in the family."
John leaned against Sherlock's shoulder and chuckled. "In that case you're all a veritable group of teddy bears."

Sherlock chuckled softly. "Mycroft would detest that image. We must make a point of telling him about it over tea."

Greg fell into step beside John and Sherlock, following them down stairs wide enough to accommodate five people walking side by side. He gave John's shoulder a playful nudge as they made their way downstairs.

John blinked up at Greg. "What?"

"Completely mad," Greg murmured with a grin, referencing their early conversation about John's feelings for Sherlock.

John blushed and ducked his head. "Shut it!" he hissed, nudging Greg back. Greg continued chuckling to himself, and Sherlock was silent. John noticed that Sherlock didn't ask, and John knew he didn't need to. There was no way that someone as brilliant as Sherlock would miss what was going on… It was obvious that Greg was teasing John about his feelings. John's 'fictitious' feelings, which he was trying to portray as real. Only, what Sherlock couldn't know is that John's feelings weren't actually as fictitious as they should be... John was getting a headache just trying to sort out his own feelings, never mind what Sherlock knew.

Greg, Sherlock, and John descended into the entranceway, where Mycroft was waiting near the front door. John heard a small commotion outside, and figured Mr. and Mrs. Holmes were about to walk in, just as Sherlock has said. The front door opened, and, much to John's surprise, the first thing to come barreling into the house was an energetic black lab. John turned to look at Sherlock, but his flatmate/fiancé was already leaning down towards the dog, and talking excitedly. This, in turn, excited the dog even more until he was a whirlwind of fur and paws.

"Hello, Rocko! Who's a good boy?" Sherlock cooed, embodying the energetic silliness he normally distained in others.

"Stop that, Sherlock!" Mycroft insisted, "He's going to tear up the furniture, and drool on everyone if you get him that excited!"

'Ah,' John thought as he watched Sherlock rile the dog up even further, 'Now it makes sense.'

"Sherlock!" an elderly women, possibly Mrs. Holmes, was now peeking her way around the front door, "Stop that, you know how bad it is for his training!"

Sherlock stopped almost immediately. "Yes, mummy." John saw Sherlock was grinning, and knew why. The damage had already been done. Greg knelt to pet the dog, and the quivering mass of fur launched itself at him, knocking him soundly to the floor.

"I'm sorry!" The elderly women called, trotting over to Rocko. "He can get so excitable."

"No worries, Ma'am." Greg said, standing as she pulled the dog off of him. Once he had his feet again, Greg loomed calmly over the dog and ordered, "Sit!" Much to everyone's surprise, the dog did just that, although his tail continued to wag excitedly.

The elderly woman beamed. "Well," she said, pushing some hair back behind her ear, "You're very good at that."
Greg smiled and nodded at her. "I'm used to giving orders." He extended his hand, "Greg Lestrade, detective inspector for the New Scotland Yard."

The woman smiled up at him. "Evelyn Holmes. I've heard so much about you from Sherlock and Mycroft; it's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Evelyn was about 5'6", slightly plump build, white hair streaked with brown (which must have been its true colour in her youth), and the sharpest green/blue eyes John had ever seen. John supposed that Mycroft took after her because his eyes were close in colour and his hair was a similar shade of brown/auburn. Sherlock had taken a few things from his mother as well. Although it was harder to see in her fuller figure, she had the same prominent, high cheekbones. Now those sharp blue/green eyes were focused on him.

"You must be John," She said as she approached him.

"Please to meet you Mrs. Holmes," John said, extending his hand.

Mrs. Holmes bypassed this, and pulled him in for a hug, which John was happy to return. "Please, call me Mummy or Evie," she murmured in his ear. "I'm not one for too many formalities."

John smiled and nodded. "Alright, Evie."

Evelyn nodded and patted his arm. "There's a good boy. When I first met my future mother-in-law, she insisted I call her Mum or Janet, and I was so nervous I ended up getting in her line of sight every time I wanted to talk to her for six months."

John chuckled. He couldn't help it. This woman was nothing like he had expected. She was definitely intelligent, but she was also very warm and welcoming. Not only that but she stood before him in simple boots, jeans, and a light jumper. Summer did seem to be toying with the weatherman's emotions this year. John had to admit she had better taste in jumpers than he did. Evelyn's jumper was solid hunter green, and accented her quite well, while still looking comfortable.

"Hello, Mummy," Mycroft said beside them, and she turned to hug him. "Hello, Mycroft. How are you?"

Mycroft actually smiled, and Greg and John shared a knowing look. Emotion did not come easily from Mycroft Holmes; it was refreshing to have a reminder that he was, in fact, human. "Yes, mummy. Everything's going splendidly."

Evelyn pulled back, and kissed his cheek. "I'm glad to hear it," she murmured, before turning to pull Sherlock into an embrace. Sherlock went willingly, but the hug was still quite forceful, as if she were afraid to let him go. "Sherlock," she murmured, rocking slowly back and forth, "I am so happy for you."

And then Sherlock did something very rare, he blushed. "Thank you, Mummy," he murmured.

John had to smile. It reminded him of when Sherlock had hugged Mrs. Hudson.

"Thanks for waiting for me," came a dry sarcasm from the doorway. They all turned, and Evelyn hurried back to the open doorway to help in an elderly man, most likely Mr. Holmes. He was leaning in the doorway while he waited for her assistance.

"I'm sorry, darling," she cooed, pulling him into a hug, "Rocko got away from me, and I didn't want him knocking over any more of Mycroft's things."
Mr. Holmes smiled, and kissed his wife's hair. She smiled up at him and leaned up for a proper, if chaste, kiss on the lips.

Greg and John shared another smile. It was always sweet to see a couple in love after so long.

Mr. Holmes, who introduced himself to John as 'Elijah, please call me Eli', made his way over to the group to say hello. Like his wife, there were plenty of hugs to go around. Eli was also not what John had expected. He was 5'11", in black trousers with a black polo shirt. His hair was grey, what little he still had due to male pattern baldness—which Mycroft appeared to have inherited if the thinning on the back of his head was anything to go by.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Holmes wore glasses with no lenses. John came to this deduction when he observed there were no light reflections visible where the lenses should be as the senior Holmes moved around the room. Sherlock must have noticed because he leaned down to whisper, "My parents like being underestimated."

John turned his head towards Sherlock, and smiled both at this insight into the Holmes family, and his proximity to Sherlock.

"I'm sorry if we've kept you waiting," Evelyn began, "You all must be starving. Shall we go to lunch?"

Mycroft smiled and nodded, leading the way into the dining room. "I'm glad you've finally allowed the staff to take your bags to your rooms, Mummy," Mycroft said in a soft voice as he walked beside his mother, "instead of insisting on doing it yourself."

Evelyn glanced at her husband briefly, who, John noticed, was leaning on her arm as he walked. "Yes, well," she said, giving Mycroft a bright smile, "I'm not as young as I used to be."

~*~*~*~

Lunch, passed rather pleasantly as they got to know each other better. John figured they ate in one of Mycroft's less formal dining rooms—for surely a house this large had several—because the table comfortably seated the six of them. Mr. and Mrs. Holmes sat together, John and Sherlock next, which left Mycroft and Greg to sit together in the last two seats.

Mr. and Mrs. Holmes were pleasant company, with many intriguing stories about their children, and themselves. Apparently Mr. Holmes had once smuggled two katanas through customs because of how he had answered the attendant's questions. When asked if he had any weapons, such as explosives or handguns, he'd replied simply, "None of those, no."

John had to laugh. Sherlock did the exact same thing, telling the truth and still making it deceptive. It's what made his disguises so convincing.

This had launched into Greg describing his own affinity for sword collecting, something John had been unaware of until today.

Greg had later engaged Mycroft in some good natured ribbing about his food. "You need to eat more than a salad, Mycroft," he'd said, "After all it's important to keep in top condition."

John chuckled softly into his napkin at Mycroft's glare, which deepened when his mother seconded Greg's opinion. John suspected that Greg was looking to payback Mycroft some frustrations, because of Greg's recent kidnapping.

When Evelyn commented that Mycroft and Greg made "a cute pair" the two flushed and stared
down at their plates. John had shot a look at Sherlock, but the consulting detective had discreetly shaken his head as if to say, 'This wasn't me.'

"Oh, not that I was trying to imply you were a couple," Evelyn had pressed on, "but you needn't feel embarrassed if you were. Our family accepts all types, always has." She'd turned to wink at John and Sherlock then. In that moment, she reminded John of Mrs. Hudson, and he understood why Sherlock had taken such a liking to their landlady.

Once they had finished their meal, and were comfortably enjoying tea, Evelyn turned her attention to their wedding plans. "So, John, Sherlock tells me you aren't yet aware of the song he has selected for your first dance?"

John nodded. "That's correct ma'am, I mean Evie."

Evelyn smiled at him good-naturedly. "Well, I think it's high time to correct that, don't you Sherlock? The wedding is barely a week away for goodness sake! You should practice dancing to it."

Sherlock glanced at John, who nodded. "Very well, Mummy, why not adjourn to the banquet hall? It's the room we will be using for the reception; it makes sense to rehearse in it."

"As you wish," Mycroft said, dabbing his mouth with his napkin, "I can have the song ready to go over the speakers in a few minutes."

"Good," Sherlock said as he stood, and extended his hand to John, "That will give me time to teach John some basic dance steps."

~*~*~*~

John knew next to nothing about dancing, at least, not the kind that required choreographed movements. Dancing, as an art, had fallen out of use in modern day. Even when he had taken a girl out dancing, little had been required of John, but to sway/move to the music with his partner. What Sherlock taught him was not so different, there was just more coordination involved.

Sherlock had been kind in his choice of steps, because they were simple, easy to learn, and allowed them to sweep dramatically around the floor as if they both knew a proper waltz. Maybe when the pressure was off, John would ask Sherlock to teach him how to dance properly; he was rather enjoying himself.

Sherlock chuckled as he lifted their joined hands to spin John, then pull him back in.

"What's so funny?" John asked.

"You're natural at following," Sherlock murmured, amusement twinkling in his eyes.

John flushed a bit and glanced down at their feet.

"Eyes up John," Sherlock reminded him, as they practiced without music. Mycroft was all ready to go, but Sherlock had wanted to make sure John was comfortable with this dance step first. He'd started by asking if John wanted to lead or follow. John had chosen to follow, because, with Sherlock's height, it felt more natural. Sherlock had gone on to explain how following was as active as leading, because it required paying attention to your partner, and listening/watching for the subtle cues they would give you about where to go next. John guessed it made sense that he was good at following Sherlock; he'd been following him for years...

"Alright," Sherlock said, bringing them to a gentle halt, "I think we're ready to practice with music."
"Okay, but, aren't you going to tell me what you picked?" John asked.

Sherlock smiled as they assumed a waiting position. "Just listen."

The music started and John immediately noticed the upbeat tone of the music. Not anything super sugary, just happy. As they began to move, John noticed the piano that led into percussion and guitar. He had to smile. So many of the songs they'd combed through had been overly serious, overly romantic, and/or contained so many synthesised sounds that no one would believe a musician of Sherlock's calibre would tolerate it as his wedding song.

As they swayed and spun, John listened to the lyrics, and considered Sherlock's choice.

You're a falling star, You're the getaway car.
You're the line in the sand when I go too far.
You're the swimming pool, on an August day.
And you're the perfect thing to say.

And you play it coy, But it's kinda cute.
Ah, When you smile at me you know exactly what you do.
Baby don't pretend, that you don't know it's true.
Cause you can see it when I look at you.

When the chorus swelled Sherlock spun John around, and John had to laugh, even as he became dizzy. He knew he was in a room with four other people, but the awareness of their presence faded away somehow. All he could focus on was Sherlock and their dance. It was much like when they were on case...except they were on a case already, weren't they?

And in this crazy life, and through these crazy times
It's you, it's you, You make me sing.
You're every line, you're every word, you're everything.

You're a carousel, you're a wishing well,
And you light me up, when you ring my bell.
You're a mystery, you're from outer space,
You're every minute of my every day.

Sherlock's mind felt quiet, which was a particular high he often chased without much satisfaction. Except, that is, where John was concerned. John was so simple and so complicated at the same time, that he had been an intriguing enigma early in their acquaintance. Later, John became the one person Sherlock could trust with anything. Sherlock never could have been tempted to love a lesser man.

As they spun about his brother's banquet hall, Sherlock couldn't keep Mycroft's words, or even his own words about love, out of his mind...

Caring is not an advantage.

Love is a dangerous disadvantage.

The chemistry is incredibly simple, and very destructive.

All lives end.

All Hearts are Broken...

And none of that logic could dissuade Sherlock from his affections for John in the slightest. Holding
John like this felt so good...too good. How was he ever going to go back to the way things used to be when this case was...over? It felt so natural to express these feelings that John made him have, could he truly hold himself back for the rest of their lives? What would happen when they were in danger during a case? They led dangerous lives. Fun, crazy, dangerous lives.

What if this broke their friendship? No case was worth that. Was it too late to pull back? Was there a way to break this case that didn't leave his stubbornly human heart so exposed? It felt like they were living on borrowed time, and Sherlock didn't want it to end. What if John found someone else? ...There were too many questions...too much data without an answer...

And I can't believe, uh that I'm your man,
And I get to kiss you baby just because I can.
Whatever comes our way, ah we'll see it through,
And you know that's what our love can do.

And in this crazy life, and through these crazy times
It's you, it's you, You make me sing
You're every line, you're every word, you're everything.

So, La, La, La, La, La, La
So, La, La, La, La, La, La

And in this crazy life, and through these crazy times
It's you, it's you, You make me sing.
You're every line, you're every word, you're everything.

You're every song, and I sing along.
'Cause you're my everything.
Yeah, yeah

So, La, La, La, La, La, La
So, La, La, La, La, La, La

As the last notes faded away, Sherlock pulled John impossibly close, held him tight, and tilted into a low dip. Sherlock held eye contact, even as John's eyes widened, and his knuckles turned white from holding onto Sherlock. Sherlock was very strong, but John had not been warned about the dip, and his squirming put Sherlock off balance, causing them to tumble to the floor in a fit of giggles.

"Warn me next time, will you?" John chuckled in Sherlock's ear.

Sherlock laughed, and pulled back to look into John's eyes. "Next time," he murmured, "You will see it coming."

"Arrogant git," John replied affectionately, before tugging Sherlock down into a heated kiss by the lapels of his jacket.

Evelyn clapped enthusiastically. "Yes, do it just like that!"

John chuckled, breaking away, and they pulled each other to their feet. "I'm not sure if we can make it quite that dramatic Evie," John said with a grin, "but we'll do our best."

John continued talking to Evie, but Sherlock wasn't listening. His fingers were pressed against his lips in his classic 'thinking' pose. This was both because he needed to think, and because his lips were still tingling from John's kiss. For the first time in a very long time, Sherlock wasn't sure he could get answers to his questions, but he would still try. That was what he did. Later, when it would
be more convenient for John, at night, he would slip into his mind palace and try to sort things out.
"Your cousins are fast," John breathed, slightly winded. Sherlock and he had just finished an impromptu football match with Sherlock's plethora of cousins, and they were making their way back to their own suite of rooms. This past week had seen a great number of wedding guests slowly trickling into the estate. John couldn't decide if he was more intimidated by the number of Holmes's, or the impossible task of trying to remember all their names.

It was hard to believe that they had been at the estate for an entire week; it felt longer and shorter at the same time. John's mind swam at the thought of all the last minute wedding activities they had managed to cram into only seven days. Were they really getting married tomorrow? John glanced up at Sherlock, and willed himself not to blush when Sherlock winked back at him.

"Yes, well, you weren't the only one playing football with them," Sherlock mused, "Lestrade was out there exhausting himself as well. Let's hope he put on a good show for my brother."

"Sherlock!" John scolded as they entered their set of rooms. There was a simple sitting room with a fireplace, a bedroom, and an attached bath. "Is that why you suggested the game?"
Sherlock shrugged. "The game involves a great deal of kicking, and I suspect my brother is, as they say, a 'leg' man."

John shuddered. "Stop that. Just stop deducing sexual things about your brother; it's creepy."

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow as he settled on the couch, across from the armchair John was currently occupying. "Would you rather I deduce sexual things about you?"

John shivered at Sherlock's deep baritone voice. He was suddenly desperate for a change of topic. "You could have informed me that you have twenty-eight first cousins, you know."

Sherlock's mouth quirked in a wry smile. "You never asked."

John rolled his eyes. "And that's only first cousins. How many relatives do you actually have?"

Sherlock shrugged again. "I deleted the number."

"Of course you did," John said, exasperated.

"It's not as if the church will be lopsided," Sherlock began, "we've made it clear in the invitations, and to the ushers, that there's no need to 'pick a side'. It's a ridiculous, outdated sentiment anyways."

"I don't care about seating arrangements, Sherlock." John was sulking now.

Sherlock stood, approached John's chair, knelt before it, and took John's hands in his. "Something has you upset," he stated.

John leaned forward until his forehead was pressed against Sherlock's, and took a deep breath. "Your family had been so welcoming," John began. "Not only that, they're loyal. It's easy to see where Mycroft and you get your possessive streaks from, you're whole family is like a pack of wolves."

Sherlock leaned back slightly and looked at John with a raised eyebrow. "And this a problem why?"

John shook his head, "...I don't like lying to them Sherlock. They let me into their lives, because you said I was trustworthy. What's going to happen when this is all over?"

Sherlock lips tightened slightly. "John, you, yourself, said that this family is massive. I generally avoid family functions, because I have other things to do. I doubt many of them will even notice. It would hardly be the first divorce or annulment that took place in the family." Sherlock lowered his head slightly to be able to look into John's downcast eyes. "My family has all types of people in it John. You remember my cousin Matthew? He's not related to any of us. My Aunt Patricia adopted him from his biological father, Brandon, because he was an unfit father. None of us had ever treated Matthew as anything but a relative. And you and I will still be as we were. There won't be...any hard feelings, so there won't be a reason for anyone to be upset."

John leaned back in his chair with a deep sigh. "That's just what I mean Sherlock, they're good people, just like you. When I agreed to marry you, I'm not sure I was thinking of how many lives this would affect. It just...feels wrong somehow..."

That gave Sherlock pause. He swallowed, and stared up at John. "Do you want to call off the wedding?" John looked down at him in surprise. "We can find other ways to close this case," Sherlock pressed on, giving John's hands a squeeze. "I won't risk our partnership over any case."

John closed his eyes for a moment, and smiled. Opening his eyes, he leaned down, and pressed a
small kiss to Sherlock's forehead. "No. I promised you we were in this together. It's a good plan Sherlock, I just don't want to see any more people getting hurt. You say your family will be fine, they'll be fine. You're right, I have only just met most of them."

Sherlock searched John's eyes for a moment, before reaching up, and pulling him down for a kiss. John really was too good. Even now, Sherlock was using him, using their arrangement to satisfy his own secret feelings. Sherlock pulled away gently, pressing another kiss to John's cheek as he did so. "We will catch this killer John," he promised. It was about the one good thing he could promise.

John nodded and gave Sherlock's hand a squeeze. "I know."

Sherlock forced himself to let John's hands go, stand up, and return to the couch. "I will be in my mind palace tonight," Sherlock informed John, assuming his usual 'thinking' pose.

John's brow creased. "You've been doing that every night this week. Is everything okay?"

"Of course," Sherlock said, "Just reviewing clues, and making plans for the honeymoon."

"Make sure you get some sleep tonight, okay?" John said, standing over Sherlock for a moment. "The wedding's tomorrow."

Sherlock smiled despite himself, and nodded. "I remember. You should get some sleep as well."

John nodded, his hand hesitating over Sherlock's nest of curls. It was strange to think how quickly he'd gotten used to having Sherlock in his bed...and how much he missed the lanky consulting detective when he was gone. John rested his hand lightly on the top of Sherlock's head for a moment and said, "Goodnight," before making his way into their darkened bedroom.

Sherlock's pale eyes watched John's retreating form and he sighed, closing his eyes against the uncomfortable truth of their situation. While this current 'plan' was a very good way to help them close the case it was far from the only way. Sherlock may, or may not be playing with fire when it came to his heart and his blogger...but there was no doubt that he was hurting John... Sweet, simple, perfect John who probably had intended to only marry once in his life.

John wanted stability in his life; he exuded it. Beyond all sense and reason John had even managed to bring a sense of stability to Sherlock's particular brand of chaos. And here Sherlock was, wrecking that sense of stability for John, drastically changing the dynamics of their relationship, and pushing the good doctor well outside his comfort zone. John didn't love him...not like that. And while most humans were statistically at least somewhat flexible in their gender preference for a mate, John preferred women. This was hurting John; Sherlock was hurting John.

And still, every time Sherlock considered another way of solving the case his traitorous heart would present many useless but infinitely persuasive reasons why he should stay the course. It would be exceedingly difficult, and complicated, to pull back from this plan now, the night before the wedding...

Guilt was not an emotion Sherlock indulged in often. What was the point? You did what you had to and if, along the way, someone's feelings were a bit hurt, they were still likely better off than they were when you started...but not John. Sherlock wasn't just doing what he had to...

Sherlock's hands slipped out of position, up his face, and his palms pressed firmly into his eyes. He may just have to retire after this case, because Mycroft was actually right about something. Sherlock had been using John... Not that he didn't normally use John. Sherlock knew he'd been using John
since the first day they met. For entertainment, for backup, to have someone pick up after him...for friendship...and now...

Sherlock pulled in a slow, uneven breath, pulled his hands back and blinked at the ceiling. His hands were shaking as he pressed them together, and he knew his current position was a poor imitation of his usual thinking pose; he was losing control mentally and physically. He was on uncertain ground... For once in his life he had no idea, absolutely none, about what to do.

What possible futures were there? As much as he wanted to consider the possibility of John staying with him, the possibility of John actually choosing Sherlock as his partner... Sherlock couldn't think that way. John had not chosen him...Sherlock had manipulated him...The probability of John choosing to be with him... was zero. It would not happen.

Sherlock’s eyes burned, so he squeezed them shut. His breathing was barely regulated, but he had to stay quiet... John was sleeping just a room away. Sherlock was very, very good at controlling his transport, at bending it to his will... but his current... feelings surged violently, fighting for command of his body. Sherlock was never one to take orders. He forced his transport to comply, to fall into place... but just barely. He was certain he looked the picture of quiet contemplation, despite the swirl of his thoughts, the racing of his heart, and the slight uneven pace of his breathing. For once, he was completely unable to reign in the direction of his mind. There were too many viable options, and none of them were good...

If John stayed as just his flat mate? The pain that spread in Sherlock's chest felt so real, his fingers clenched in response. No. This was surely his best option, and yet, everything in him rebelled against it. It felt like going backwards over broken glass.

Slipping into a disguise for an hour, a day, even weeks on end; that was easy. But for the rest of his life? Sherlock's hands would clench every time he wanted to reach out and touch John, Sherlock would never be able to keep the worry out of his voice if John was hurt, and if John found someone else...

Sherlock was instantly torn, part of him wanting to rip this imaginary rival from the face of the earth, and the other part unable to keep John from anything that would make him happy. ... God, he'd spend the quiet times between cases tying himself up in knots. The cases might not be any better, because now it would feel like something was missing...

John was smart too. He'd figure Sherlock out one day, and then... Then it would get impossibly worse. They'd lose all of the ease with which they'd worked together for so long. John would be double thinking Sherlock's every word and gesture, wondering when Sherlock's unwanted affections would make themselves known again... And then he would leave. John would leave, if he wasn't driven out the first time he saw and understood the hunger in Sherlock's eyes.

Sherlock forced his breathing to remain even, but if felt like he was breathing fire, and it stung in his nose and throat like the coldest winter air. The thought of John leaving, however he left...it was a dark, terrible freedom.

Most people only thought of the upsides of freedom. The freedom to chose ones profession, the freedom to live where one wanted, the freedom to chose one's mate...although Sherlock was still dubious on how much choice one had in falling in love in the first place...But there were twisted, painful forms of freedom as well.

Sherlock could almost see it, breathing in 221B, knowing John's scent would soon fade, pacing the flat with no one to complain about the odd hours Sherlock kept, no one to force him to eat...In some ways it would make him more dangerous because he would truly have nothing to lose. What would
it matter, then, if his next tumble off a roof was real? Oh, he would've jumped off Bart's for Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade alone; they were Sherlock's true friends. John was the real reason that Sherlock had began to slowly claw his way back home; John was worth coming back for. John would always be worth coming back for...

And here Sherlock was, taking the one person he would always care about, and dragging him through a dangerous case that had to be making John uncomfortable in every aspect. John would keep his word, yes, but was it worth it? Nothing was worth hurting John. There had to be a way to back out of this wedding; there was always a way. If only Sherlock could bend his unwilling mind in that direction, he might be able to find the way out...

~*~*~*~

John turned over in the bed that Sherlock and he were supposed to share, and sighed. He wasn't getting any sleep tonight. Or, if he did, it wasn't coming anytime soon. The drapes were drawn over the windows to their bedroom, but John could see the moonlight framing the edges of the fabric. It was a full moon tonight, and the light was bright.

With another sigh John heaved himself up, out of the bed, and he tugged on a robe. He knew it was late, but Sherlock must still be in the sitting room, thinking.

John wrung his hands in front of him as he paced the room, his fingers absently running over the space where his wedding ring should be. He'd worn it for what? A month? He'd only given it to the jeweller for final alterations a week ago. Still... it felt...wrong to be without it. Probably he'd just gotten used to it. That had to be it.

Sherlock had been focused and attentive during the days, but this last week he'd spent almost every night in his mind palace, thinking. John was sure it was something to do with the case, but Sherlock wouldn't give him the details. That worried John. And the pressure of their current situation worried John. And, if John was being completely honest, his own feelings worried him as well.

Turning, John opened to door to the sitting room and strode inside. Sherlock was laying on the couch in his 'thinking' pose as John had suspected. "I'm going for a walk," John said, not sure if Sherlock could even hear him. "I need some air." Then John leaned down and pressed a kiss to Sherlock's forehead, before making his way out of their rooms altogether.

John was on the stairs before he realised he'd kissed Sherlock at all. With all the 'couple' stuff they had been doing it had become instinctual, natural. John bit his lip to keep himself from making a noise of frustration. He suddenly understood Sherlock's contempt for 'feelings'. John felt awash in strong emotions that darted out of his grasp when he tried to put a name to them... he was so confused.

John had intended to go for a stroll in the gardens, the night was certainly warm enough, but a soft glow from the kitchen caused him to veer off course. John rounded the corner just as Greg closed the refrigerator door. "Feeling a bit peckish?" John asked. The ex-army doctor held back a snort of amusement as Greg started, bumped his head on the side of the fridge, cursed, and turned around.

"Oi, John, give me some warning the next time you sneak up on me, mate," Greg said, setting down a carton of ice cream with one hand while rubbing the top of his head with the other. "What are you doing up then? Pre wedding nerves?"

John flushed and ducked his head. "I was going to go for a walk when I saw the light from the fridge."
Greg had begun scooping the ice cream into a bowl. "Yeah I spent so much time playing with the younger kids today, I didn't eat much."

John looked up and smiled, making his way over to the island where Greg stood. "They sure have taken a liking to you." John had enjoyed watching Greg play with the youngest of the Holmes; he knew Greg had always wanted a large family...maybe the divorce would've been easier on Greg if he'd had children.

Greg's smile widened and he nodded. "I figured I would need a lot of energy to keep them entertained during your reception tomorrow. Care to join me?"

"Please," John said, sitting beside Greg on the high stools. The Detective Inspector reached for another bowl and continued scooping ice cream. They sat together in silence for a few moments, eating. John closed his eyes and focused on the heat he could feel radiating off of Greg's body. He didn't want Greg in any other way then as a mate, a good friend. Still, it was nice to enjoy the company of someone he didn't feel so confused about.

It wasn't that John felt bad about what he was doing with Sherlock, it was that he felt good. It was all too easy, too natural, and it felt too right. John had to wonder, if he ever had the chance to marry for love, would he take it? Could it measure up to the giddy joy that was danger and Sherlock and these cases? John didn't think so.

It felt as though he was on a precipice, staring down an impossible distance, and whirling with vertigo. But Sherlock was his best mate. He'd asked John's permission for this ruse, and John had promised he'd be there. He would never, could never leave Sherlock out in the cold like that. John was a soldier, he knew he could quiet his mind and focus on the task at hand...but what happened when the dust settled?

Earlier in this case John had endlessly picked his feelings apart and now...now he was scared to look at them too closely. What if it meant the end of everything?

John could not, absolutely could not, bear that.

A snort of laughter from Greg finally broke John out of his existential internal monologue. "Sherlock is right," Greg chuckled, "You do think too loud."

John glared at him over his ice cream. In that moment, he was more than a little tempted to help Sherlock in his grand escapade to bring Greg and Mycroft together; let Greg feel a little of what John's inner turmoil was like.

Greg chuckled in the chair and swivel to face John more directly. "Relax, you've got a lot going for you. Sherlock adores you, and you clearly adore him."

John 'hmmed' and took another bite of his ice cream.

"You do," Greg insisted. "Remember earlier in the week, when I was teasing you about being madly in love with Sherlock?"

John rolled his eyes. "I seem to recall something of that nature."

"Well those signs of affection are good things!" Greg insisted. Then he swiveled back to face the island counter and stared morosely into his bowl of ice cream. "I knew I was in trouble with Rebecca, when I stopped seeing little signs like that from her.

John glanced over at his friend and sobered a bit. He was hardly the only one in the room with
emotional turmoil to deal with.

Greg stabbed at his ice cream. He lifted a spoonful and stared at it, thoughtfully. "It was when she stopped talking to me altogether that I knew it was over..."

John grimaced in sympathy for his friend. The divorce had been final for three years now, but John could tell Greg was lonely.

Greg glanced at John with a watered down smile and said, "So there's a bit of pre-wedding advice for you, always tell Sherlock what you're thinking. As long as you're honest, I think you two could work out anything."

John nodded. It was good advice...Advice he was already ignoring. Outside of what Sherlock may have already deduced, John had told him nothing of his...crush...or any of the other confusing/conflicting emotions. Without any answers for himself or for Greg, John did the only thing he could think of; he reached over and gave his best friend's hand a squeeze.

~*~*~*~

John took in a slow, deep breath that turned into a yawn. His body felt heavy, and his mind felt fuzzy; still, his internal clock insisted it was time to be awake. John blinked up at the ceiling and wished he could roll over, go back to sleep. He wished he'd been able to get to sleep sooner...

John drew in another breath, squirming, tensing, and lengthening his body until he could feel the stretch everywhere. He held the stretch for a long moment, until his muscles began to shake with the strain, then he rolled over, snuffling into the bedding once more. John smiled when he smelled Sherlock on their sheets. The consulting detective had still been 'thinking' when John trudged up from his midnight snack; it was nice to know he'd got some sleep.

John lifted his hand, running it along Sherlock's pillow, wishing he was still in bed. John's eyes flickered to a fading bruise on the inner part of his elbow and smiled. In addition to everything else they'd needed to do to make their wedding official with the government, Sherlock had insisted they test each other for STD's and other blood-borne pathogens.

"We're going for realism right?" Sherlock had insisted, "Do you honestly think I would marry someone without getting and providing proof that we are both clean?"

"I have a hard time believing you'd trust anyone enough to have sex, knowing the limitations of protection." John knew the importance of protection, and he'd used it diligently in every sexual encounter he'd had. Going through med school and seeing the affects of the STD's that could be cured, never mind the one's that couldn't, he'd never trusted anyone enough to risk going bareback. One of the assuredly many reasons for John's failed relationships; trust is not optional.

Still, as many lives as it saved, and as many pregnancies as it prevented, protection wasn't foolproof. Knowing how hard it was for Sherlock to make friends, John had a hard time picturing Sherlock trusting anything that wasn't 100% effective.

"I haven't," Sherlock confessed, wrapping a tourniquet around John's arm to prep him for a blood draw.

Even with his earlier assumptions about Sherlock's lack of trust, John stilled in disbelief. "Never?" he had asked before he could stop himself.

"No," Sherlock drawled in that same slow drawl as when John had asked him, so long ago, if he had any pants. John jumped when the needle pierced his arm, overwhelmed. "Watch it," Sherlock
insisted, grabbing John's arm to steady him. "You'll get a bruise now."

"My fault," John said trying to gather his thoughts. He knew it was his fault if he got a bruise, Sherlock was better with a needle than some doctors...which lead to another uncomfortable thought. Fortunately, or unfortunately, Sherlock deduced John's thoughts before he could decide if he even wanted to ask.

"I manipulated people, John, I've always been good at it." Sherlock's lips were pressed into a thin, unhappy line and John rested a hand on Sherlock's shoulder to offer comfort. Memories of the drug days were never easy for Sherlock, despite whatever casual mask he'd tried to put on.

John had winced when Sherlock drew the needle out, and stilled again when Sherlock pressed a bit of cotton to his arm. In retrospect, John really wished he could've blamed the loss of blood on his next question. "So you've never...not anything?"

Sherlock had rolled his eyes before sitting down and smirking up at John. Sherlock rolled up his shirt sleeve, and waited for John to draw his blood continuing his explanation in his slow, posh drawl, "Going without protection is trusting someone with your life unnecessarily. While risks are vastly diminished, if not mostly eliminated, with protection, one is still vulnerable to one's partner. Being alone made more sense." And there was another bloody smirk. "I am, however, familiar with a plethora of masturbatory options, and have tried all of them at least once."

John had forced a breath out through his teeth then, and tried desperately to focus on keeping the needle steady. Thank God Sherlock had waited until blood was collecting in the tiny vial before speaking again. "Well, not all of them..."

John glanced up at him, wondering exactly what he meant... He couldn't help thinking about their first night at Angelo's when John had asked Sherlock if he'd had a girlfriend... 'Not my area...' John swallowed, pulling a full vial off of the needle and pressing an empty one in. These tests always needed a handful of vials. John knew there were...toys out there meant to simulate a woman, and he couldn't stop himself from wondering if that was one 'masturbatory option' that Sherlock was unfamiliar with...did that meant he'd tried dildos and vibrators? Did he prefer them? John swallowed again, the image of Sherlock laying back, impaling himself with toys dancing, unbidden, through John's brain.

"Vial is nearly full," Sherlock's baritone voice broke in, and John jumped.

"Right, sorry," John had said, pulling the vial free, then carefully removing the needle from Sherlock's arm. John pressed a cotton to Sherlock's arm and held it there a moment, counting his breaths as he tried to calm himself.

"You jerked the needle a bit," Sherlock observed.

John frowned and murmured, "I'm sorry," running his thumb lightly over Sherlock's skin in apology before he moved the cotton away.

An odd smile had quirked at Sherlock's lips as he'd looked down. "We might have matching bruises."

John found himself smiling at the memory. They'd both come back squeaky clean, no surprise there.

With a short sigh, John pulled himself up, tugged on his usual jeans and jumper combo, and made his way downstairs. There was still a bit of time before they had to leave.

All God's Children Unity Church had long ago annexed some surrounding buildings to add a bit of
office space and additional rooms to the original church. This meant there was plenty of room for the wedding party to get changed after they arrived at the church.

John trailed his fingertips lightly over the railing of the steps and tried to imagine what Sherlock would look like in his tuxedo. John's stomach flipped with nervous energy.

During this past week Mycroft had ensured that all the paperwork at the Register Office was taken care of. So, technically, John and Sherlock were already married... Still, it wouldn't feel right until they'd completed the ceremony.

John wiped his suddenly damp palms over the legs of his jeans and tried to focus on brief pleasantries with the various Holmes's roaming the halls. Most of them were in casual clothes, and a few were still in their pyjamas. ...At least no one was in a sheet. John wasn't quite sure he could handle that kind of spectacle today.

One thing John had come to realise, and appreciate, about the Holmes family is that they were as relaxed and informal around each other as they were loyal to each other. For such a posh, intelligent family, they were surprisingly relaxed.

The family forwent scheduled meal times, except for dinner, when they would all gather for conversation if for nothing else. This relaxed atmosphere helped John feel at ease, and meant he never knew who he'd bump into in the dining room. This morning it was just Evie at the table. John doubted she was the first to breakfast, because the table had a small spread of fruit, a tray of toast/croissants, tea, jam, and butter.

"Morning!" Evie called, waving John over.

"Good morning Evie," John said with a smile, leaning in to kiss her on the cheek. "How are you?"

She smiled back at him. "Oh, fine. I didn't sleep much, but I'm not sure anyone does the night before a wedding. I'm in good spirits though."

John nodded as he poured himself some tea. "I know what you mean. Greg and I were raiding the ice cream last night."

Evie finished chewing a grape before she said, "Greg is such a nice young man. He gets along so well with the younger children of the family." Evie paused to glance at John suspiciously. "Are you sure he's not seeing my eldest son?"

John chuckled to himself as he spread butter and jam on his toast. "I'm sure. I don't think Mycroft could keep something like that from Sherlock for long." John glanced around before adding, "Do you know where Sherlock is?"

"Riding one of Mycroft's horses," Evie replied, gesturing to the windows that overlooked the estates grounds. "I was watching him earlier."

John smiled and peered out the windows, but, wherever Sherlock was, he wasn't visible through the delicately cut glass at that moment.

"At least he's not experimenting," Evie added, "Because then Eli would want to join him, and we'd all be doomed."

"You're husband experiments too?" John asked, taking a bit of his toast.

Evie chuckled. "He never stops. Even if we're just going out to eat he'd build these constructs with
whatever is handy at the table. Cups, cutlery, menus, condiments. He's always trying to make something impossibly high at angles that look more precarious than they are. He's caused a few spills that way." Evie paused a moment, a fond smile creeping over her features. "But he's kept me on my toes."

John was smiling despite himself. "I can only imagine the trouble Sherlock and his dad got into together. Did you have to put out many fires over the years?"

"A few," Evie mused, "but I also caused my fair share."

John's eyebrows rose towards his hairline. "You experiment too?!"

Evie chuckled. "No dear, I cook... badly. I would always forget which burner I turned on, or ignore the directions." Evie gestured energetically with her butter knife, "Once I melted an oven, because I'd accidently left something quite flammable inside before trying to pre-heat it." Evie chuckled ruefully. "Eli took care of most of the cooking until recently. We're both getting on in years so we've hired some help." Another rueful smile. "I'm largely banned from the kitchen outside of baking, the one culinary exercise where I have yet to set a fire."

John smiled and shook his head. "I'm glad I only have the one Holmes to deal with at home. I'm not sure I could keep up with two fire hazards."

Evie smiled warmly. "I'm sure you could manage. Love is a powerful motivator."

John made a slightly sour face then. "Yes, I've heard Sherlock go on endlessly about the crimes it motivates, how destructive and dangerous it can be." John poured milk into his tea and stirred it, watching the light and dark swirl inside his cup. "We had quite a row once just about making friends and trusting people."

Evie's faced darkened with sadness and she nodded. "For a long time, I worried that Sherlock wouldn't be able to open himself up to someone else. Being smart isn't always an advantage."

John nodded thoughtfully. "He's not an easy man to get close to."

Evie reached forward and patted John on the arm. "That's why I was so glad to hear he'd met you, John. Even before you became a couple I could tell, from what Mycroft said, and from your blog, that you two are good for each other."

John flushed slightly and placed his hand gently over Evie's. "Thank you."

Evie smiled back. "You're welcome." She paused to take a long sip of tea. Mrs. Holmes was the picture of calm English serenity when she murmured, "I suppose this is the point where I should warn you that, if you ever break my son's heart, they will never even find your body."

John chuckled for a moment, but sobered when Evie did not join him. "I would never hurt Sherlock," John said earnestly.

"You can't help hurting him," Evie said with an intense look. "To love someone is to be vulnerable. And, as wonderful as it can be, love isn't always pretty. Too many people get caught up in this 'happily ever after' notion. What makes love special isn't that it's easy; it's honoring the commitment you made to each other, especially when times are difficult."

John nodded slowly. "That's good advice." It was crazy, how Sherlock and he had met; all the things they'd done for each other when they barely knew each other. They'd come together so fast, and so completely that John should've been shocked. Any normal person would be, but normal went right
out the window when Sherlock was around. Everything Sherlock and John did together felt too natural, too right to be surprising. To John, it felt like finding something he hadn't known he was missing. Now that he had it, John couldn't imagine being without it again...

That was exactly why this case troubled him. It felt too reckless. He had a crush on the impossible bastard for God's sake, and now he was marrying him! They'd been playing the devoted couple for roughly a month, and John's feelings... hadn't diminished. He felt terrible for lying to Sherlock like this... Sherlock valued the truth above all things and John was lying to him, manipulating the case to suit his own purposes. Sherlock had been hurt and betrayed too many times already... John didn't want to add himself to the list...

John felt a strong pressure in his throat at the thought of confessing his, admittedly more than friendly, feelings to Sherlock... Things would never be the same. It did not matter that he was not, could not, be in love with his best friend, because then it really would be all over. Having even slightly romantic feelings towards Sherlock could be enough to end everything! Relationships had never been Sherlock's concern... Jesus, he was still a bloody virgin!... kind of?

If Sherlock deduced John's feelings, it would change everything. He would look at John differently... They got along so easily now that it hurt, physically hurt, to picture being awkward and stilted around Sherlock. John didn't want to lose that spark between them... Sherlock would consider John compromised or something. He probably wouldn't let him help on cases anymore, if he didn't kick him out altogether...

John had to close his eyes for a moment against the sudden sting. He hadn't moved out of 221 B, even after Sherlock's 'fall'. He couldn't imagine moving out now... He would go if he was asked to leave... but John doubted he could make any other flat feel the same; it just wouldn't be home.

Even if John could stomach being dishonest with his best friend, and if, by some miracle, Sherlock overlooked John's true affections, where did that leave them when this case was done? What would happen if his crush didn't go away? What if...

John worried his bottom lip between his teeth, wishing he'd considered the far-reaching consequences before he'd said 'yes' to Sherlock... But, even if he had, John knew he wouldn't have said no. Outside of insisting that Sherlock take care of his basic needs for sleep and food, and preventing the temperamental consulting detective from shooting the wall again, John could never say 'no' to Sherlock. The good doctor was stuck in this awful mess, with no idea how to protect his most valued friendship.

John took a long sip of tea, trying to quiet his growing sense of dread. Losing Sherlock now, over this, would be so much worse than watching him fall... This time, it would be all John's fault...

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"And this one," said Eli, stepping a bit further down the hall, with Greg in tow, "This one is a Naginata."

Greg's eyes swept over the weapon mounted on the wall. It began with a sturdy wooden shaft that was approximately 240 centimeters long. At the top was a 60 centimeter curved blade, reminiscent of a katana.

Greg had met Eli on his way down to breakfast, and they'd become somewhat sidetracked. Currently Eli was giving Greg an impromptu tour of the estate. The parts of the estate that lay between them and breakfast, that is. Greg was presently surprised to find Eli made very good company. When he'd pictured the man who'd helped raise Mycroft Holmes, he'd always pictured someone as intimidating.
as an ancient Greek god. To instead be confronted by this unassuming, bespectacled elderly man of fairly average height and plump build... well, it was the last thing he'd expected.

"It was largely used by single women, maids, and young mothers who might be the last line of defense during an attack. However, it could also be a particularly effective weapon from horseback. The long blade allows the wielder to cover a wide area while also fighting from a distance, hence minimizing injuries, especially injuries to the face. This would allow a woman to fight if she needed to, while still, hopefully, preserving her beauty."

Greg sighed and rolled his eyes. "That seems exceptionally shallow, worrying about your looks when your life is a stake."

Eli gave a shrug of his shoulder. "Pointing out the silliness in the actions of others rarely stops them from being silly."

"That certainly doesn't discourage your sons from pointing out the idiocy of those around them," Greg chuckled.

Eli nodded. "My sons are both very opinionated. They were raised to give respect only when it was earned, regardless of the status of who they were with."

"I guess that makes sense," Greg agreed. While Sherlock still gave him a dressing down every now and again for missing simple things, Sherlock was not as harsh or as rude as he had been in the early years of their acquaintance. Likewise, Greg was more trusting of the consulting detective than in years past... That didn't mean he was surprised in the slightest when Sherlock brought all manner of hell down on the Yard. You took the good with the bad.

Mycroft on the other hand...Greg had never seen Mycroft be anything other than coolly civil... Well, that wasn't entirely true. Greg had seen Mycroft's deep concern for his brother when Sherlock had struggled with addiction. Greg cringed inwardly at the memory of those days. They had been a special kind of nightmare for him too, because, against all common sense, he liked Sherlock. They'd become friends. One could argue that Mycroft and he had become friends, of a sort, during that time. It had been hell, waiting for one of their sources to call with Sherlock's location, fretting in some private hospital, waiting for Sherlock to detox...wondering if he'd come out of things safely this time...

Mycroft and he hadn't spoken of anything besides Sherlock during those long, sleepless nights, but they'd developed a comradery of sorts. When at last, Sherlock appeared to have achieved sobriety, Greg had made a point of checking up on Sherlock and reporting his findings to Mycroft. Sherlock had resented it, of course, and was badly behaved...but still clean. Shortly after John came into the picture, Greg had stopped. His own marriage was on the rocks then and Sherlock was doing brilliantly.

In retrospect, Greg had to admit that sharing a flat wasn't that much to start a friendship on, but no one could deny what Sherlock and John did for each other. Their connection was electric and instantaneous. It was more than a bit unusual too, the lengths they had been willing to go through for each other so shortly after their first meeting. Greg suspected (and thankfully couldn't prove) that John had killed Sherlock's wayward cabbie...Greg smiled at the thought. Despite his own position as Detective Inspector, he had to admire John's protective streak. One did not fuck with Sherlock Holmes when one John Watson was around. ...Greg had to wonder what a connection like that would feel like.

Greg tried to strike up friendships where he could, in part because a contact was always helpful, and in part because he liked people. Why, after years of checking in on Sherlock, had he and Mycroft
lost touch so easily? He supposed the stress of his marriage, and the beginning of John and
Sherlock's partnership may have accounted for some of the reasons...but it was more than just that.
Mycroft was generally aloof, off-putting, and unapproachable. Sherlock was definitely wary of other
people, but Mycroft...Greg had to wonder how alone Mycroft really was.

"Gregory!"

His name wasn't being shouted, but it had been called out in a rather clipped, very posh accent. Greg
whipped his head around and looked at Eli, abashed. "Sorry, zoned out for a moment." Greg glanced
up at the Naginata once more. "Do you only collect Asian weapons? I remember your wife talking
about the time you snuck two katanas through customs."

Eli chuckled. "No, no. I'm most interested in the more delicate Spanish fencing swords, the ones with
elaborate wrist guards," Eli gestured with his arm as he spoke, like he was thrusting a sword forward.
"The rivalry between Toledo and Damascus as to where the better sword makers are located
fascinates me. And the fusion of function and art within the masterpieces they make...well, it's not to
be missed if one is a serious sword collector. I just happened to be lucky enough to be gifted those
two katanas, and I wanted to get them home." Eli looked up at the Naginata once more, studying it.
"Besides, this weapon is one of Mycroft's varied collections."

Greg turned and studied the Naginata once more. A weapon long enough to keep your enemies at
bay, while allowing you to defend a large amount of ground... it suited Mycroft, and the thought
saddened Greg a bit.

At that moment Eli leaned forwards a bit, and nudged Greg in the side. When Greg turned to look at
him Eli said, "So, should I be asking about your intentions towards my son?"

Greg sputtered and took a step back, reeling. "We're not like that," Greg sputtered, "We work
together sometimes, I'm John's best man at the wedding and, it's just...not like that."

Eli gave him a sly smile and shrugged. "If you're sure," he murmured, and began walking towards
the stairs.

"Yes," Greg stated emphatically. His voice sounded strangled, and that realisation irritated him
further. "Positive," he grumbled, "It's not like that."

Eli shrugged. "Can't blame an old man for trying to look after his eldest son now that his youngest is
happily settled."

Greg snorted in laughter. "I have a hard time picturing Sherlock being settled...but happy, yes. John's
always made him happy. They push each other's buttons a lot and live in their special brand of chaos,
but it works."

Eli nodded, resting his hand on the top of the banister. "Good. That's how it should be." Eli hefted
the cane he had been walking with in one hand and lifted it towards Greg. "Would you mind
carrying that down the stairs for me?"

"Of course not," Greg said, taking the cane from the elder Holmes. It was made of sturdy, beautiful
black wood, with a silver tip, and an ornate silver handle depicting a dragon that had emeralds for
eyes. It was surprisingly heavy. Greg hefted the weight for a moment, paused, then checked the
balance. "How do you get it out?" he asked, half exasperated, half impressed.

Eli chuckled from a few steps down, having begun his descent of the steps while Greg studied his
cane. "Twist the handle to the right and pull."
Greg did just that, freeing the slim sword from the confines of its wooden sheath. He turned it, this way and that, admiring its shine in the bright morning light. Cane swords were hardly practical, and almost never durable, but they'd be good enough for one kill in a pinch. Also, Greg had to admire the artistry both in placing the sword inside the cane, and in concealing it so well. Greg had his own collection of swords and daggers, but a dozen or so, and they were purely functional. He liked actual, durable weapons. Still, it wouldn't hurt to add one or two decorative pieces at some point, purely for the artwork.

"I do hope that is not some poorly conceived assassination attempt, Gregory, you would live to regret it."

Greg glanced over his shoulder and grinned at Mycroft. He really should not find threats of bodily harm endearing... Still, after working at Scotland Yard for so many years, he greatly respected the loyalty that the Holmes family had for one another.

"Morning sunshine," Greg cooed, sliding the cane sword back into place and trying, very hard, not to laugh at the sour expression on Mycroft's face. He'd overheard Mrs. Holmes referring to Mycroft this way once, and, upon discovering that it annoyed him, Greg had used the expression relentlessly. "Are you actually planning on eating today?"

"There is nothing wrong with my diet!" The hiss and strain in Mycroft's voice was barely detectable; this man lived for control. Greg's grin only widened at further evidence that Mycroft Holmes had feelings.

Greg tucked the cane under his arm, and Mycroft stepped past him, joining his father on the stairs. One of Eli's hands held the railing firmly for balance. Without a word Mycroft gently took his father's other hand in his own.

Greg smiled softly; it was a touching scene. That is, until Eli turned slightly and, with a raised eyebrow said, "If you're sure." A quick wink accompanied the statement, and Greg let out another small choking sound.

Mycroft glanced quickly between Greg and his father. "What is going on?" he asked.

"Nothing," Mr. Holmes and Greg said at once. It was far from convincing, but while Greg writhed in discomfort, Mr. Holmes only laughed.

Mycroft spent a few more moments glancing between Greg and his father, but ultimately said no more on whatever private conversation had been referenced. Instead, Mycroft turned back to his father and asked, "How did you sleep?"

Eli smiled up at his son. "Very well Mycroft, and yourself? I hope you got at least some sleep."

Mycroft nodded. "Of course. I am not in the habit of pushing myself too far."

Greg noticed the pointed glance Mycroft sent his way, but chose to ignore it.

"How is your herb garden coming in this year, father?" Mycroft asked when it became apparent that Gregory would not rise to his bait.

"The poisonous one?" Eli asked casually. Mycroft nodded. "Very well. It's still very far from the house so it takes a bit longer to get there, but it's off to a wonderful start this year."

"That is good to hear. May I send Anthea to collect some samples once the crop has fully grown in?"
'Just your average morning before a wedding,' Greg thought, 'talking about concealed weapons and poisonous plants.' The surrealness of the conversation was making him a bit giddy, and it took substantial effort not to laugh.

"As long as you don't use any on your cousin Andreas," Eli replied, "No matter how annoying he is at the wedding."

And with that comment, detective inspector Lestrade lost his inner battle, and let loose a flood of giggles that left his stomach aching. The looks Mycroft kept shooting him only made it worse.

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Several hours later a great deal of people were swarming around the estate, getting ready to leave. The immediate wedding party, that is to say, Sherlock, John, Mycroft, Greg, Evelyn, and Elijah, were making their final preparations to leave much earlier than the rest of the family. This was, of course, because they had preparations and final dressing of the grooms waiting for them at the church.

"Have we got everything?" Evie asked, casting her gaze around the entrance way as though any forgotten items or tasks would present themselves for her review.

John smiled as he watched this. Dread still lingered at the edges of his mind, but what could he do about it? He'd made a promise; he would pull himself together and deal. He had to trust Sherlock, trust their mission. In his entire career he'd only left one mission unfulfilled, and being shot was one hell of a good excuse. For now he would focus only on what was directly in front of him. One step at a time.

In the week that he'd known Evie, and the rest of the Holmes family, he'd become quite fond of them... There was a warmth and a fierce affection that wasn't always present in his own family. John's own parents, and Harry, had elected to meet them at the church. He was looking forward to seeing them... but also a bit nervous. John had long experience of Harry's addiction making itself known at the worst moments. She'd been doing well for a while, but it was still in the back of his mind. And his parents... well they still surprised him with unintentional stings and slights. John was sure they didn't mean any of them, but his nerves were on end as was.

"Nearly everything, Mummy," Sherlock replied, grasping her by the shoulders from behind and planting a quick kiss to the top of her head. "Mycroft just needs to unpack his weapons."

Mycroft glared. "Sherlock!" he hissed in a low voice. Sherlock was not intimidated.

"This is a wedding, Mycroft. My wedding, and I won't have you showing up armed to the teeth. It's bad enough I know your agents will be swarming nearby and in the crowd all day. They should be more than enough."

There was a brief, intense, stare off, which ended abruptly when Evie broke in, "Leave your weapons behind, Mycroft."

Mycroft huffed, before calling over Anthea. She would not be attending the wedding, but had shown up this morning to help oversee the preparations for the reception. "Please return a few things to the safe for me," Mycroft said. Anthea nodded and, putting away her phone, held out her hands. Mycroft produced two derringers, one from each wrist, a pistol that had been hidden in his jacket, an ankle knife, a can of mace from his pocket, three large razor blades from his other pocket, and a pair of handcuffs from God knows were.
Sherlock raised a calculated eyebrow. "Kinky," he murmured.

"Behave!" Mycroft ordered with a glare.

"And the garrote Mycroft," Sherlock insisted, undeterred. Mycroft let out a long suffering sigh before undoing a cufflink that came away with two feet of wire attached to it. Mycroft reached inside his sleeve with his free hand, undid something, and the wire/cufflink combo came away from his sleeve without further comment. Unphased, Anthea handed Mycroft a non-armed cufflink to replace the one he had just removed.

"Better?" Mycroft asked in a huff.

Sherlock looked smug. "Much better."

Greg stood close by with his mouth slightly agape. "Did you have that many weapons on you when I smashed your phone?" he asked.

Sherlock gave a quick snort of laughter. "Goodness, no, he was dressed for work, not a wedding. He would have had at least twice that."

Greg looked, and felt, positively gob-smacked.

It was Mycroft's turn to look smug. "Anything to say for yourself Gregory?" he asked, arching an eyebrow at the detective inspector.

Greg narrowed his eyes and glowered at the elder Holmes brother. "You're still an arse," he insisted.

This set off a round of good natured chuckling before Eli stepped forward and handed Anthea his cane. "Should probably put this away too, I don't need it that much yet, and I've always got Evie."

Evie smiled as she stepped up beside her husband, taking his arm.

John's brow crinkled a bit. "A cane's not that much of a weapon."

"This one is," Anthea corrected, demonstrating how to open it and showing John the steel hidden inside, despite her armful of weapons.

"Somehow, I wasn't expecting that," John admitted, "And I think I should've been."

More good-natured chuckling. Sherlock looped his arm around John's shoulders. "Yes, do try to keep up.

"You too dear," Eli said, looking at Evie and sounding a bit stern.

Evie managed to look convincingly innocent. "Me what?"

Eli fixed his wife with an intent look for a long moment before she relented. "You are no fun," she said with a small pout. She raised her hand to her not insubstantial bosom, slipped her hand inside her clothing, and removed a small but sturdy folding knife. She handed the knife to Anthea, who took it without complaint.

"If that will be all?" Anthea asked.

Mycroft nodded grumpily. "Yes Anthea, thank you."

Anthea nodded back before making her way down the hall to store the weapons.
Now John was the one who looked speechless. Sherlock had not forgotten his earlier concerns about John's welfare and presence in his life. Frowning slightly, he gave John a squeeze with the arm still wrapped around his shoulder and asked, "Are you alright?"

John blinked and looked up at Sherlock, slightly dazed. "Your family is awesome," John spoke slowly as if there were a period between every word.

Sherlock broke into quiet laughter, shortly joined by the rest of the wedding party.

"Well, Evie said, taking a firm hold of her husband's arm, "If that is everything, we really should be going. We're on a tight schedule."

There was a chorus of, "Yes mummy," and the wedding party allowed themselves to be herded towards the door.

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John was just settling his things in the dressing room that had been provided for him, when he heard a knock on the door frame (he'd left the door open). John turned and smiled.

"Hello Harry," he said holding out his arms, which Harry practically leapt into.

"Johnny," she breathed, hugging him tightly. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," John murmured into her neck, holding her close for a few more moments.

Harry eased back, just enough to look John in the eyes. "You look tired, brother."

John rolled his eyes at his sister. "If I remember correctly, you didn't look too peppy on your wedding day either. There's a lot to do, and I was too wound up to get much sleep."

Harry nodded. "I remember." She ran her hand through John's hair, smirking when it came away wet. "At least you showered though."

"Of course," John said, "The estate is so big I didn't even have to fight Sherlock to get my turn."

Harry raised an eyebrow at this and John flushed when he realised what he sounded like. "That's not… I didn't mean," he floundered.

Harry chuckled. "Relax, you're about to marry the man right? Just sit with a warm wash cloth over your eyes for five minutes, and that should help freshen you up."

John nodded. "Right, thanks for the advice."

"Hello there," came a familiar voice. John looked up and beamed at his parents.

"Dad, Mum, I'm glad you could make it," John said as he pulled them in for a group hug.

"Wouldn't miss your wedding for the world, baby," his mom said, giving John a kiss on the cheek as she pulled back.

John, to the amusement of many, was the shortest one in his family. His mother, Anne, was a thin women who stood 5'10". Her brunette hair was shoulder length and constantly in a perm. Today she wore a light grey dress that matched her eyes perfectly. John's father, Edward, was a slightly pudgy, bald man who stood at 6' even, with eyes that matched his only Son's. Even Harry had an inch on him, standing at 5'9".
John gave Harry's hand a quick squeeze as a show of support. He remembered his parents hadn't been too keen on the idea of homosexuality when Harry'd gotten married. They'd come around since then...mostly.

"Where is your husband to be?" John's father asked.

John cringed at the way his father hesitated over the word husband, as though it didn't taste right.

"He's in his own dressing room at the moment," John replied, "We're going to meet just outside the main hall, and walk down the aisle together."

John's father clapped him on the shoulder. "Right then, good luck." John nodded.

"We want you to know dear," his mum said softly, "Even though this isn't quite normal, as long as it makes you happy, we're happy for you."

John gave her a tight-lipped smile. He knew his parents were trying, and that change wasn't easy, but he still felt put off by some of the things they said. "Thanks, Mum," he said shortly. She nodded and, with one more group hug, his parents made their way back towards the nave of the church.

John looked at Harry, who was giving him a sympathetic look. He gave her hands a squeeze, and she smiled. "Clara's here with me," she said quietly.

John smiled more genuinely. "That's great Harry, I'll make sure to say hello at the reception."

Harry smiled back. "You'd better, or I'll have to ambush you." She gave John a quick peck on the cheek and one more "Good luck," before she too was making her way to the pews. John shut the door to his dressing room and started to get ready.

Harry'd been right. The warm washcloth did wonders, and before long he was straightening his tie in the mirror. It was the first stretch of time he'd had to himself since his musings over breakfast...

John was just reaching out for his boutonniere, when everything hit him. His hands started shaking so badly, he had to put the boutonniere back down. Oh, god what was he doing?

John suddenly felt cold and sick. He leaned heavily against a desk in the corner of the room, his breath coming quickly. This was really happening, and it had the very real potential to ruin the best thing that had ever happened to him.

John fought to slow his breathing, and calm his rising panic. It was one thing to think about this wedding and its repercussions abstractly...but when he'd seen the boutonniere, he couldn't help but remembered Dylan and Kyle on their honeymoon—they had given them the idea to use orchids. They'd looked so happy...Did Sherlock and he ever look like that? John sucked in a ragged breath. This was too much. The doubt, the fear, everything he had thought about at breakfast, and managed to put aside for a time, came back to him—all at once.

It felt like he was losing control, like the whole situation was slipping out of his grasp. Suddenly the pain of Sherlock's fall seemed fresh again. John couldn't, he couldn't lose Sherlock again. Not over something like this...This case was dangerous enough as it was. Now, with John's mixed up feelings, and this wedding, it felt like they were throwing gasoline into an inferno.

John hear the door click open then shut again. Suddenly, Sherlock was sitting on a chair in front of him, holding John's face in his hands. "John," Sherlock murmured slowly, trying to break through the haze of adrenaline, "John, what's wrong?"
Sherlock had just finished his own dressing, and had come in to check on John. After turning his thoughts in circles for most of the night, Sherlock did manage to catch a few hours of sleep. He'd barely had enough sleep to take the edge off before he was awake again and itching with unanswered questions. He'd ended up at the stables, revisiting his concerns during a morning ride.

While he was riding, Sherlock had come to the conclusion that it was too late to pull out of the wedding; that he'd have to just push through and be clever enough to make it out with his relationship intact... but all those resolutions had fled from his mind when he'd seen John leaning against the desk, distressed.

Damn this case, damn Lestrade, damn Mycroft and, God help him, damn the victims too. John was more important to Sherlock than every one of them. Sherlock would throw his careful planning to the wind, likely ruining his chances of solving this case, instantly if that's what John needed to feel calm and comfortable again.

Sherlock stood then, pulling John closer to him, his hands still bracketing John's face. "John," Sherlock repeated, with much more calm than he felt. "John, what's wrong?" Sherlock swallowed hard, his eyes darting over John's face. "What do you need?" Sherlock asked. "Do you want to call off the wedding?"

John started and looked up into Sherlock's concerned face. John's hands grabbed at the fabric around Sherlock's waist, his fingers tightening in the cloth. He saw caring and warmth in Sherlock's eyes, and John had to come out with the truth, at least, part of it.

"Sherlock," John breathed, his voice shaking, "I...I can't do this..."
Chapter Summary

Chapter title says it all.

Chapter Notes

I knew the swelling word count couldn't last forever. Don't worry, this chapter is just as long a 'normal' before the two extra long chapters, and there may be more 'long' chapters. I don't know; we'll just have to find out together. ^_^

Thank you very much to all those who have commented, given kudos, and bookmarked this story.

I would also like to offer heartfelt thanks to my Beta, Helena Chauby, and to Lady of Clunn for her Britpicking.

And, naturally, I owe thanks to my flatmate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

Man, last chapter got one heck of a response, and it makes me really happy to know you are all following along and enjoying the story. I know I left you on a bit of a cliffhanger last time so I won't keep you anymore; enjoy:

Chapter 13: A Promise

"Sherlock," John breathed, his voice shaking, "I...I can't do this..."

Sherlock closed his eyes, and leaned his forehead gently against John's; a bitter cold feeling spread through his chest. This was exactly what he'd been afraid of. He'd pushed, and pushed, and made John so uncomfortable, that he was just this side of a panic attack. Sherlock had never made a habit of apologising to people before John, but then again, John was an exception for Sherlock on so many things...

"I'm sorry, John," he whispered, his breath ghosting over John's face, "I knew this would make you uncomfortable I...I never should have asked you to be a part of this ruse." Sherlock leaned back a bit and opened his eyes, still holding John's head in his hands. The ruse was still the best way to crack this case, and John had been an easy choice because of the feelings Sherlock already had for him...too easy. It would've been more logical to choose someone he wasn't actually in love with, someone from the homeless network who could get free showers, food and clothing for a bit-anyone but the one person he never wanted to do without. Then John wouldn't have been in danger from the
killer, wouldn't be having a meltdown in his arms, wouldn't be so uncomfortable that he'd be in
danger of leaving 221B...

Sherlock swallowed, caressing the side of John's face before he could stop himself. "You've always
taken offense when other people thought you might be gay. I know that was more about valuing
your privacy than anything else...but you're still straight. I might not pay attention to social mores
most of the time, but I know this would be a difficult ruse for someone who was gay or bisexual to
begin with... The last thing I wanted was for this to...to damage our relationship. That's why I asked
for your cooperation first, but I shouldn't have even done that. You're too good a person to say
no...no matter how uncomfortable you might be..." He really shouldn't be caressing John's face like
this, but Sherlock couldn't seem to stop himself. "I'm sorry, John."

John's eyes were wide with shock. Sherlock thought he was uncomfortable? Sherlock had missed
John's attraction to him? Much to the younger man's chagrin, Sherlock had missed things from time
to time, like Harry being John's sister. Had...had Sherlock mistaken John's signs of attraction as
simple reactions to the things they did together? Reactions he thought made John uncomfortable...
Well, John was uncomfortable, but only because he didn't want to lose his friendship with Sherlock.
Had Sherlock been worried about the same thing all along?

"Sherlock," John began, tightening his grip on Sherlock's waist so that he couldn't easily pull away,
"that's not it." Sherlock started, and his eyes went wide, but he made no move to interrupt his
blogger. "I..." John looked down for a moment before Sherlock's hands on his face forced him to
meet Sherlock's eyes again. John took a breath. If there was a way to fix this...he had to do it. "You
told me very early on that relationships weren't 'your area', that you were married to your work... I
didn't want you to misinterpret what was happening, my reactions, I didn't want that to damage our
relationship or your trust in me." What John had actually been worried about was Sherlock getting
the right impression about John's feelings for him. But, if Sherlock thought John's reactions were just
biology, it offered John a viable explanation that Sherlock would be comfortable with. John hated
lying to Sherlock but, if there was any way, no matter how painful, to keep Sherlock in his life...
John would do it. He hadn't needed Sherlock's fall to teach him that a life with Sherlock in it was
better than any life without him.

Sherlock studied John's face for a long moment, watching his eyes dilate, feeling his pulse return to a
more normal rhythm, and his breathing start to slow. He'd seen John react physically to his presence
before, but that was expected. That was biology. They'd been living together as a couple for over a
month. John had been worried that Sherlock would confuse these physical indicators as signs of
emotional attraction as well? John was worried about Sherlock's reaction? ...John really was a better
person than Sherlock ever deserved. John had pushed his own discomfort aside because of the case.
It really shouldn't have surprised Sherlock. John was a soldier, and a doctor; he always did what
needed doing.

"John," Sherlock began, fighting a groan when John licked his lips unconsciously. That nervous
habit was going to be the end of him one day, but, right now, he had to focus. "I told you from the
beginning that biology would factor into this." Sherlock's moved his hand downward and ran his
thumb over John's lips causing them to part. John's breath hitched and his pupils dilated even further,
almost resembling eclipsed moons. "If you didn't have a reaction, I'd be concerned. It's just biology,
John, it's how you're meant to react. It doesn't have to mean anything other than that. This is exactly
why I asked your permission," and it was...mostly, "I didn't want you to read too much into your
own reactions...or mine."

Sherlock knew he was shutting the door on something important; the possibility of John interpreting
his reactions correctly. At the same time, he was preserving something more important; his
relationship with John. Three years without John, taking down Moriarty's network...that had come
closer to killing him than the drugs ever had. He wasn't really losing anything anyway; nothing good could have come from John correctly interpreting his feelings... The pain and the doubt involved were of no consequence; he needed John by his side, and that could only be as friends...

John closed his eyes for a moment and nodded, concentrating on the feel of Sherlock's fingers on his face. This...this was for the best. He was reconciled to his strong attraction to Sherlock, but it couldn't be anything more than that. There was no point, no chance...it wasn't even worth exploring. He would get to keep his friend, and indulge in his feelings for a short while. Nothing to complain about. If anything, he was lucky. It was a taste of both worlds, friend and lover, and it was as much as he could ever expect.

Opening his eyes, John stared into Sherlock concerned blue-grey gaze. "You're okay with this then?"

Sherlock's lips quirked in a small smile. "More than okay," Sherlock moved his hand to rest lightly on John's shoulder, his other still caressing John's face, "Are you okay with this? I don't want you to become upset again. If you have any doubts, I'll put an end to this wedding, no problem."

John flushed. Sherlock was so concerned about John's feelings, that he hadn't even mentioned the case. John knew pulling out of the wedding at this point could ruin their chances of stopping the killer before he struck again... He didn't want anyone else to die, he didn't want to ruin Sherlock's efforts on the case, and...John wasn't quite ready to give up this new way of interacting with Sherlock. "I am. As long as it doesn't risk our friendship, I'm with you."

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at John. "Risking our lives is fine, but risking our friendship is unacceptable?"

John chuckled, leaning his forehead against Sherlock's once more. "I think risking our lives is in the job description." John hesitated for a moment, before stepping back to look at Sherlock intently, their arms still around each other. "Are you sure it won't bother you to see my...reactions to you?" He was not blushing; he was a doctor for God's sake.

Sherlock smirked at John and murmured, "No," in that same sultry tone from long ago when he'd 'forgotten' his pants. John felt his heart jump slightly. 'No' shouldn't sound so...pornographic.

Sherlock did not believe in hell, or any higher power for that matter. However, if any version of 'hell' did exist, he was certainly going to burn in it for his reaction to John's squirming... Not to mention his manipulation of this case for his own personal gain... and so many other things besides. Instead of doing the upstanding thing and cancelling the wedding, instead of backing off from his straight flat mate, Sherlock had seized an opportunity to double down. As short as it may be, and as wrong as it may be, Sherlock could not turn down the opportunity to be with John, as an almost lover. It was the closest thing he would ever get to what he really wanted, and Sherlock was too selfish to turn it down.

"As long as we keep communicating with each other, John, I do not believe there will be a problem... Even after this case is over, there may be residual reactions to each other; we have lived together as a couple for over a month, almost two. It may be close to three by the time everything is said and done. The human body is built to fall into patterns, it's normal and it still does not have to mean anything..." Sherlock drew John's hands into his and gave them a squeeze, "I don't want you reading too much into a casual gesture you or I may make out of habit after...after everything is back to normal."

There. Sherlock had well and truly sealed his fate. After this case was solved, any lapse in concentration Sherlock might have would be sufficiently explained away... As much as Sherlock
didn't want to think about that, didn't want to remember that he was on borrowed time with John, it would be foolish not to plan for the future. He didn't want to lose John, ever, not if he could avoid it.

John nodded, then brought their joined hands to his mouth and kissed Sherlock's knuckles. "You're right. I think we've been more than a bit lacking on the communication front, to have come so far without hashing this out." John looked around them and gave a small sigh.

Sherlock disentangled one hand from John's, and used it to lift John's chin so that they might make eye contact once more. "No plan is without its flaws."

John smiled up at Sherlock and, without any more thought on the matter, leaned up to kiss him. Sherlock's hand slipped to the side of John's face once more, holding him there. John's lips opened against Sherlock's instantly, sliding, pressing together. Sherlock let out a small groan, his tongue moving to caress John's, drawing them closer together Sherlock felt the briefest scrape of teeth when the door to the dressing room cracked open.

"Oi!" Lestrade sounded both fond, and frustrated. "We're waiting on you two out here; you'll have plenty of time to kiss later!"

John flushed, ducking his head into the crook of Sherlock's neck. Sherlock smirked and ran his hand over John's back. "We'll be along in a moment, Greg," Sherlock murmured.

Greg glanced over the two once more and nodded, a content smile gracing his lips. "Alright, you have five minutes. If I have to come back, I'm bringing a hose."

John and Sherlock chuckled quietly as Greg closed the door, giving them privacy once more. "Now then," Sherlock began, reaching to pick up John's forgotten boutonniere, "I do believe you'll be needing this."

"Yes," John said a bit wistfully, "I suppose I will." He watched as Sherlock deftly pinned the purple orchid to his jacket with his long, graceful fingers. John looked up as Sherlock smoothed out the fabric, and their eyes locked. John wrapped his arms more tightly around Sherlock, feeling off-balance. Sherlock had just begun to tilt his head downward when the door clicked open.

"Let's go," Lestrade insisted, stepping into the room to herd out the grooms. "It would be a shame to ruin your suits by getting them wet."

Sherlock arched a sharp eyebrow, undeterred. "In my research I found some ridiculous notions that certain individuals consider it good luck if it rains on your wedding day. Given the blatant pseudoscience behind such traditions, one could presume it is also good luck if one is doused with water in general." Sherlock smirked down at John and curled a possessive hand over his hip. "If there is any truth behind the colloquialism, it was likely derived from couples who, as you imply, could only be separated with a large spray of cold water."

Lestrade heaved an affectionately put-upon sigh and muttered," Whatever," before giving the happy couple a friendly shove towards the door.

John and Sherlock chuckled again. They made their way into the foyer of the church, standing together behind Greg and Mycroft who, as their best men, would be making their way down the aisle before the grooms. As they stood there John took a moment to admire Sherlock's suite. It had black trousers and coat with a stark white jacket underneath. The stark contrast mirrored Sherlock's hair and skin. It looked good on him. Well, everything looked good on Sherlock.

They'd toyed with the idea of one of them wearing a white coat, but Sherlock's pale skin made him
look a bit washed out with *that* much white, and John didn't look much better. As is, he wasn't sure he looked that good in his own, grey morning suit. The coat and trousers were a darker gray then the light silvery color of the inner vest. It was a nice enough combination that complimented John well, but it was hard for anyone to measure up to the dramatic visage of the world's only consulting detective, in John's opinion.

As if sensing John's thoughts, Sherlock leaned down and nuzzled his temple before murmuring, "You look fine John, very handsome."

John blushed, and turned his head slightly to nuzzle Sherlock back. "Thank you," he whispered, "So do you."

Greg was glancing over his shoulder, grinning at the pair of them. As he turned to face front again, Greg noticed that Mycroft was also looking back; and he was scowling. Greg studied Mycroft quietly, until the elder Holmes seemed to sense the scrutiny, and turned to look at him. Greg locked eyes with Mycroft, and the air fizzled with a quiet tension, brown irises meeting blue. "You really think they're making a mistake, don't you?" Greg said murmured.

Mycroft arched a condescending eyebrow. "Obviously."

"Then I feel sorry for you," Greg said earnestly. Gently, Greg reached out to take Mycroft's arm in his. Mycroft jumped at the contact, surprised, but didn't pull away. They were, after all, about to walk down the aisle together. Mycroft turned to face forward so he wouldn't have to look at the sympathetic expression Gregory was still directing at him. It was misdirected anyway.

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A violin song Sherlock had composed himself, performed by several cousins of his, was their cue to move. Mycroft and Greg made their way down the aisle first; there was a brief pause, then a subtle shift in the music that indicated the groom's entrance.

The room seemed to swim lightly as they passed pews decorated with purple orchids, white roses, and candles. All God's Children United church had been mostly constructed from rough gray fieldstones, with beautiful wooden arches high in the ceiling. Multicoloured light from the massive stained glass windows flickered and dappled the hall. It was, if he was honest with himself, just the kind of place John thought he would be married in. He wasn't strictly religious, but he did believe in a God, or a force for good; whatever you wanted to call it. Sherlock, of course, having deduced this during the wedding planning had called him 'sentimental'. John had just smiled, because it was true. Sherlock might not believe in any God but he was a righteous force for good in his own way.

They stood in front of the pastor, a trim man with short black hair, a beard, and brown eyes (he was, apparently, Isabel's brother). John and Sherlock faced each other. John knew the room must be crowded, but it didn't feel that way when he looked into Sherlock's eyes.

With a nod from the pastor, Greg stepped forward to perform a reading from George Eliot, which John had given to him before the ceremony. He spoke clearly, his voice echoing throughout the church, heavy with emotion for his two friends. "What greater thing is there for human souls than to feel that they are joined for life, to strengthen each other in all labour, to rest on each other in sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting?"

Sherlock was smirking quietly as Greg teared up near the end. John gave him a gentle nudge and whispered, "This is a wedding Sherlock, no smirking." Even though he was whispering, the acoustics of the church ensured John was heard throughout.
Sherlock's smirk widened into a smile and he whispered back, "Just like there's no giggling at crime scenes?" John had to make a very concentrated effort not to laugh, and then he did anyway, because everyone else was.

Greg returned to his place at John's side, and the pastor stepped forwards once more. "Friends, we have been invited here today to share with Sherlock and John, a most important moment in their lives. In the time they have been together, their love and understanding of each other has grown and matured. Now, they have decided to live their lives together as husbands.

We have been invited to hear Sherlock and John as they promise to face the future together, accepting whatever may lie ahead. For the world that God has created for them, with its beauty and grace that is all around, with the strength that it offers, and the peace that it brings, makes them truly grateful."

The pastor paused then taking a moment to make eye contact with each groom, saying their names as he did so. "Sherlock and John, nothing is easier than saying words, and nothing harder than living them day after day. What you promise today must be renewed and re-decided tomorrow. At the end of this ceremony you will be married, but you still must decide each day that stretches out before you, that you want to be married.

"Real love is something beyond the warmth and glow, the excitement and romance, of being deeply in love. It is caring as much about the welfare and happiness of your marriage partner as about your own. But real love is not total absorption in each other; it is looking outward in the same direction... together. Love makes burdens lighter, because you divide them. It makes joys more intense, because you share them. It makes you stronger, so you can reach out and become involved with life in ways you dared not risk alone."

The time had come for their vows. Instead of blithely repeating after the pastor, Sherlock and John had chosen to memorise the vows they would make to each other. They had worked together to alter a generally traditional set of vows so that they would be both slightly unique, timeless.

John took a deep breath and locked eyes with Sherlock as he began to speak, "I, John Watson, take you, Sherlock Holmes, to be my husband, to have and to hold you from this day forward. I promise to love you, comfort you, honour you, and keep you. Wherever you walk, I will walk; whatever you face, I will face. I join myself to you for better or for worse, for richer, or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until the end of my days."

As he said his vows, John reflected on how much he really meant them. Leaving aside the romantic aspect for the moment, John had already made and kept those vows to Sherlock, from the first moment he'd fired his gun in Sherlock's defence. He meant every word, and would continue to honour his vows regardless of what happened after the case. The more he thought about it, the more he realised how married, more or less, Sherlock and he had already been for years.

Sherlock gave John's hand a squeeze as he finished. John was pleased to note that, while no one could say Sherlock was 'tearing up' like John most certainly was, the consulting detective's eyes were a bit more 'moist' than normal.

Sherlock drew in a deep breath, and recited his vows to John. Unaware that John felt the same way, Sherlock was also resolved to keep his vows as he had been for the majority of his strange and fortunate partnership with Dr. Watson. John was the only person Sherlock could ever trust this much. Considering that he hadn't set out to trust anyone to begin with, that was saying something. John forced things out of Sherlock that he hadn't even known were in him.

"I, Sherlock Holmes, take you, John Watson, to be my husband, to have and to hold you from this
day forward. I promise to love you, comfort you, honour you, and keep you. Wherever you walk, I will walk; whatever you face, I will face. I join myself to you for better or for worse, for richer, or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until the end of my days."

A moment of silence passed before the pastor spoke again. "Sherlock and John, we have heard you promise to share your lives in marriage. We recognise and respect the covenant you have made. It is not a minister standing before you that makes your marriage real, but the honesty and sincerity of what you have said and done here, before your friends and relatives, in the sight of God."

The pastor extended his hand then to Rocko, who had been sitting silently at Evie's feet thus far. "May I have the rings?" Right on cue, Rocko padded to the altar and sat down. The pastor retrieved the rings from a small pouch attached to Rocko's collar. Rocko gave a happy bark, wagging his tail furiously, and made his way back to Evie's side. There was another round of chuckles, Sherlock and John being especially amused. Using Rocko as the ring bearer had been Evie's suggestion. John had found it cute, and Sherlock had known it would annoy Mycroft, so their decision had been a unanimous 'yes'.

The pastor held the rings out in the palm of one hand while his other hand hovered over them, and spoke again in a calm, clear voice, "The wedding ring is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual bond which unites these loyal hearts in endless love. It is a seal of the vows Sherlock and John have made to one another. Bless O God these rings, that John and Sherlock, who give them, and who wear them, may ever abide in thy peace. Living together in unity, love and happiness until the end of their days."

"Sherlock," the pastor began, "Do you take John to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Sherlock nodded. "I do." The pastor held out his hand and Sherlock reached forward to take John's ring.

John had been particularly anxious to see the rings, because Sherlock had not told him what changes would be made for the wedding. As Sherlock lifted John's left hand, and held the ring at the tip of his ring finger, John noticed the slight sparkle; diamond chips had been fitted into the small crevasses created by the gold and silver wrapping around each other. It was subtle, and it was perfect.

As Sherlock slid John's ring onto his finger he said, "John, I give you this ring as a symbol of our vows. With all that I am, and all that I have, I honour you. With this ring, I thee wed."

Sherlock looked up at John then, and John had to force himself to look away from Sherlock when the pastor spoke again. "John, do you take Sherlock to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do," John replied earnestly, reaching forward to take Sherlock's ring. John lifted Sherlock's left hand, placed his ring at the edge of his ring finger, swallowed, and willed his voice not to shake as he said, "Sherlock, I give you this ring as a symbol of our vows. With all that I am, and all that I have, I honour you." John glanced up and met Sherlock's eyes as he slid the ring home. "With this ring, I thee wed."

John heard the pastor speaking once more, but he couldn't look away from Sherlock. "May these people be a blessing and comfort to each other, sharers of each their dreams, consoler to each other's sorrows, helpers to each other in all life's vicissitudes. May they encourage each other in whatever they set out to achieve. May they trust each other, trust life and be unafraid. May they love each other and offer love and support to those around them."

Mycroft just barely managed not to look as though he'd eaten curdled milk when he stepped up to
perform the reading Sherlock had given him from 'The Prophet'. His voice resounded in the church delivering, without hesitation, a reading he was sure Sherlock had chosen just to make him uncomfortable. "Love one another, but make not a bond of that love. Let it rather be like a moving sea between the shores of your souls. And stand together, and yet not too near together, For even the pillars of the temple must stand apart; and the oak tree and the cypress will not grow in each other's shadow. Remember that love gives nothing but from itself. Love possesses not, nor would it be possessed, for love is sufficient unto love. And think not that you can direct the course of love. For love, if it finds you worthy, will direct your course."

Mycroft stepped silently back into place, allowing the pastor to step forward once more. The pastor raised both of his arms into the air and declared, "By the power invested in me by the people of this church, and by God above, I now declare you married! You may kiss your husband."

Sherlock and John leaned forward together, the soft brush of lips quickly giving way to the gentle slide of one tongue against another. John slid his hands up Sherlock's arms, and looped them around his neck, even as he felt Sherlock's arms tighten around his waist. John swore, he swore, he could feel Sherlock's heart beating wildly against his own, and the room seemed to spin out of control.

The applause was so loud that Sherlock could feel it in his chest, but he didn't hear it, because all his focus was on the feel and taste of John's mouth against his. Sherlock had kissed a plethora of people in the name of 'the game,' but no one else could silence his mind like this, and certainly no one else had ever made him tingle.

An indecent amount of time later, Sherlock began to pull back, first his tongue, then slowly, reluctantly, he moved his lips away from John's. Sherlock opened his eyes to find John's still closed. When John blinked up owlishly at him, looking slightly confused, Sherlock couldn't help smirking again. "You didn't even know I'd dipped you?" Sherlock asked, but it was more of a statement.

John blinked again before answering, "No, I didn't." But Sherlock must have, because now John could see the ceiling past Sherlock's head, and that would certainly explain the spinning sensation. John dragged his eyes back to Sherlock's and smiled up at him; a smile his new husband readily returned.

"Are you going to let me go?" John asked when Sherlock showed no signs of letting him up.

Sherlock leaned down just enough to whisper in John's ear, "Not if I can help it."
Revelry

Chapter Summary

One wedding reception with a twist.

Chapter Notes

And the long word count is back, for now. We're not quite at the honeymoon yet, but we'll be there soon!

I would like to take a moment to thank everyone who had commented on, given kudos to, and/or bookmarked this story for your support and encouragement. You guys are awesome!

As always I would like to offer additional thanks to my beta, Helena Chauby.

Much thanks also goes to Lady of Clunn for her thorough and most helpful Britpicking.

And, of course, I am grateful to my flat-mate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

A few of you have asked how I can update so regularly or thanked me for it. Part of it is that I said I would, and I keep my promises. Part of it is that, at the moment, it's easier to concentrate on this than other things going on in my real life, because those other things hurt too much. I hope you enjoy the chapter. (Beta's note: And part of it is the fact that I'll only edit one chapter per week, so she is often at least one chapter ahead of what I'm editing.)

Chapter 14: Revelry

"It is my pleasure to introduce my son and his husband, as a married couple, for the first time," Evie spoke into a hand-held microphone addressing a large ballroom in the Holmes estate that was crowded with wedding guests. "I present to you Sherlock and John Holmes!" She started to applaud then and so did everyone else, as Sherlock and John made their way into the reception; it was deafening.

John was grinning on Sherlock's arm, and Sherlock was looking affectionately down at John. John glanced up and then leaned forward for another short kiss. Sherlock smiled as they pulled back and reached up to pluck more birdseeds from John's hair. They'd chosen to be pelted with birdseed as they exited the church instead of the traditional rice—a practice largely forbidden because of fear of harm to local birds. On the limo ride back to the estate John and Sherlock removed seeds from each other's hair, each giggling slightly from excitement. When they had removed most of the kernels, John cuddled into Sherlock's shoulder while the consulting detective declared that, despite common
misconceptions, rice, cooked or uncooked, does not, in fact, harm birds.

Sherlock pulled out John's chair for him when they reached their table; they'd forgone the option of a head table in favour of a ten person round like their other guests. It felt more relaxed that way.

Once he was properly settled John tipped his head back and smiled at Sherlock to thank him. Sherlock bent down to steal another brief kiss. He still could not believe that John had taken his last name. It was official, Mycroft had begrudgingly seen to that. Everything from John's passport, to his driver's licence, to his medical licence now bore the name 'Holmes.'

Sherlock had never expected to bother with name changes; John had been the one to bring it up, taking Sherlock off guard.

"That seems like an awful lot of trouble for such a short marriage," Sherlock had said even as he inwardly thrilled at the idea of sharing a name with John. Sherlock had never expected to be that possessive, but sentiment did surprising, destructive things.

"Aren't you always the one talking about how the best disguises get the little details right?" John had asked and then began to mimic a lecture Sherlock had given him on pretending to be someone you weren't. "It's not so much what you say, John, but the way you stand, how you pick up objects, the entire way you relate to the people around you."

Sherlock had smiled then, despite himself, flattered. "You have a good memory," Sherlock had said.

John had just laughed and replied, "If only I could get you to have the same good memory when it comes to cleaning up your experiments."

After rolling his eyes in exasperation Sherlock turned back to John. "So how would you have us combine our names then? Watson-Holmes or Holmes-Watson."

John made a face. "Everyone does that whether it's one partner or both. If other people like it that's fine, but it just seems like a cop-out to me."

Sherlock had arched his eyebrow in response. "Who should take whose name then?"

John ran a hand over his face, thinking. "We're going for realism right? I guess it would depend on who I was with. I've never been attached to the stereotype of the wife taking the husband's name."

"That makes it easier to be original," Sherlock drawled, "neither of us would be 'wives'."

John had flushed at that and refused to meet Sherlock's eyes for a minute. "Yeah, sorry. I never gave much thought to weddings before now. It's silly how many things you need to work around to make it fit if the wedding is anything but 'normal.'" John made air quotes and Sherlock had to smile when he heard the level of distain in John's voice at the word 'normal'.

"Yes, well, we wouldn't want to be 'normal' now would we?" Sherlock drawled, folding his hands in his lap.

John grinned, "Hardly."

"You still haven't answered my question," Sherlock had reminded him. "Which one of us is taking the other's name?"

John leaned back on the couch looking thoughtful. "Well I did say it would depend on who I was with so," John turned his head to look at Sherlock and gave a special little smile that Sherlock wished
he could frame, "I would like to take your name, if you'll let me."

If Sherlock let him? The instant the thought was in his head he was fighting the urge to have John's towels monogrammed. Yes, he was definitely overly possessive when he was sentimental. All the more reason he was right to try to avoid sentiment in the first place. Feeling entirely too pleased with the prospect Sherlock said, "I suppose that would be tolerable," and John had laughed as if he could see right through him... and maybe he could.

At that moment Sherlock felt an incessant nudge against his ribs. Sherlock turned and observed John digging his elbow into Sherlock's side. "Welcome back," John said, sounding slightly amused, "I know your mind palace is an infinitely interesting place, Sherlock, but do try to eat your scallops before they get cold."

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The speeches came before the entrees. First Mr. and Mrs. Holmes, who welcomed John to the family and wished them both the best in marriage. They were followed by Mycroft who gave a short speech that felt both irritated and calculating without being overly negative. Mr. Watson spoke next for both himself and his wife, offering congratulations and advice that were well meant, but it was clear he was slightly uncomfortable; like he couldn't quite wrap his head around whom his son had chosen to marry. Harry offered an exuberant speech about how her brother was so stable, so supportive, and how Sherlock was lucky to have him. Harry also added that she was lucky to have John as a brother and speculated that both she and Sherlock had kept John busy over the years.

Greg spoke last but in many ways, it was more heartfelt, because he'd been with them since the very beginning of their relationship. He stood, accepted the microphone from Harry, and just smiled at Sherlock and John for a moment before he spoke. "When I first met Sherlock Holmes I thought he was lost. Brilliant, but lost. He is a pain in the arse to deal with and he's smarter than half the Yard combined."

"Only half?" Sherlock broke in with a wry smile.

Greg glare at Sherlock Half-heartedly and said, "Learn how to take a compliment."

"Don't encourage him," Mycroft broke in, and Greg turned his Half-hearted glare on Mycroft.

"You've had your turn," Greg said, giving Mycroft's shoulder a nudge, which was easy to do because they were sitting beside one another.

Mycroft looked affronted that someone would dare to touch him and a few people chuckled.

"As I was saying," Greg began again, turning back to Sherlock and John, "Sherlock was a lost, brilliant, pain in the arse, and when John came along, something just clicked. I'd watched Sherlock work for years, and even after he was sober it didn't compare to what he was like with John. I didn't know John before he met Sherlock, but from what I could see it was like they gave each other new life. While their antics have caused a fair bit of trouble and complications over the years, their energy is infectious, and they have done a better job of keeping London safe than anyone else I know." Greg raised his glass towards the happy couple. "I can't imagine two people more suited for each other. You two are meant to be; congratulations."

Murmured congratulations filled the room as the other guests clinked glasses and joined in the toast.

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Sherlock and John spun gracefully around the floor to their first dance. They'd practiced a few times
in this last week, and were able to glide along perfectly in step. When John had offered to follow he remembered smiling and thinking to himself how he was always following Sherlock anyways. As they moved together on the dance floor, John was surprised how right that analogy felt. He was dizzy from spinning, his breathing elevated (more from Sherlock's nearness than exertion), and Sherlock barely had to indicate which direction they were heading next, because John felt pulled to him anyway. Running about on cases wasn't exactly dancing, but somehow, it felt as if they'd been doing this for years.

As the song faded out Sherlock tugged John close by his grip around John's waist and leaned in for a kiss. John happily reciprocated, tightening his arms around Sherlock's neck, the wet heat making all the thoughts in his head go foggy. God, it felt so good to kiss Sherlock, John swore to himself he would make the most of it while he still had the privilege. His fingers tangled in Sherlock's curls as Sherlock's fingers tightened to the point of bruising on John's hips. John had just scraped his teeth lightly over Sherlock's bottom lip when the hoots and other cacophony of their guests finally registered. John pulled back, reluctantly, and ducked his head into Sherlock's neck, embarrassed. How was it he kept forgetting exactly how many other people were in the room?

Sherlock's deep chuckle and long, elegant fingers caressing the back of his neck finally convinced John to straighten up and meet Sherlock's eyes. John had been struck by those eyes the first time he'd met Sherlock. They were a brilliant blue-grey that popped in combination with Sherlock's pale skin and dark hair. John leaned his forehead against Sherlock's and closed his eyes because he was tempted to kiss him again, and then they might never get off the dance floor.

Sherlock gave John a little squeeze before gently escorting him back to their table. Sherlock planted a brief kiss on the top of John's head before extending his hand to his mother. Evie smiled and placed her hand in Sherlock's, allowing him to lead her to the dance floor. Eli used the microphone to announce the mother/son dance, and the music began to play.

Evie was the first person Sherlock had observed to learn about multitasking. Even now she was probably as good as he was, so it was no surprise when she began to speak as they danced. "I'm very happy for you Sherlock," Evie murmured, "You've chosen a good man."

As they spun Sherlock caught John's eye for a moment and a small smile tugged at his lips. "Yes," he agreed, "I have."

"For a while I was worried that you wouldn't." Sherlock noticed that she sounded relived.

"What? Choose well?" Sherlock was slightly affronted.

"Choose at all," Evie corrected. "I was afraid you were too smart for your own good." She glanced briefly at their table and sighed. "I'm still not sure about Mycroft."

Sherlock snorted derisively and he spun her. "No one is quite sure about Mycroft."

"I'm serious, Sherlock," Evie scolded. "You have a brilliant mind, you use it for good things, but you're always focusing on the worst aspects of people. Their weaknesses, their lies, what it will take to manipulate the truth out of them." Evie paused looking slightly pained. "I was afraid you'd lost faith in people as a whole."

Sherlock sobered then. "People, most definitely," he began, "but never in John," he gave his mother's hand a squeeze, "and never in you or father either."

Evie smiled somewhat wryly, "I wish you included your brother in that." Sherlock rolled his eyes but Evie persisted, "He's a good man too, Sherlock."
"You know he kidnaps people, and I haven't bothered to count the number of people he's killed," Sherlock muttered childishly.

Evie raised an eyebrow briefly as if to say, 'And you haven't?' but what she actually said was, "I know, and he's still a good man."

The song had come to an end now and they were making their way back to their table, arm in arm. "I hope this marriage means we can expect you at more family functions?" Evie asked hopefully. She knew Sherlock avoided them because he thought other things were simply more interesting, but family meant a great deal to Evie, and she wanted to see more of her both her sons.

Sherlock opened his mouth to answer, but before he could John cut him off. "I'll make sure of it," John assured Evie with a smile.

Evie smile back and said, "Thank you, John."

John nodded, then stood to collect his own mother, Anne, for their mother/son dance. Neither John nor his mother were as skilled at dancing as Sherlock and his family, so they had chosen an simple waltz. This, of course made it easier to talk. "What do you think of Sherlock and his family?" John asked as they moved across the dance floor.

Anne's face was pinched for a moment as she counted her steps. "They're alright," she spared a brief glance around the room, "There's so many of them though..."

John nodded. "And Sherlock himself can be a lot to take sometimes."

Anne nodded. "Yes," she glanced around the room. "It's lovely, but it's all a bit much..."

John bit his lip for a moment thinking of all the hell they'd put Harry through when she'd come out. They were his parents, and he would always love them, but at that moment he was more than a little annoyed about how long they were taking to change. John's eyes narrowed and he said, a bit shortly, "It's not going away mother." ...except it was, he and Sherlock that is. John wasn't quite sure what to think about that; he only knew that it pained him.

Anne glanced down for a moment. "I know that," she murmured. She waited a long moment before meeting his eyes again. "I am happy for you, John."

John thought again about Harry, what she'd been through, and what she might go through again when Sherlock and he parted... He wasn't in the mood to be gracious, even if he would regret it later. "The same way you were happy for Harry?" John had spoken quietly and evenly, still, Anne looked stricken. The song was fading now and John pulled his mother close to plant a kiss on her forehead. "I love you mum, that will never change," he whispered, "I'd just like you to be close to Harry again. I'd like us all to be close."

Anne glanced down for a moment. "I know that," she murmured. She waited a long moment before meeting his eyes again. "I am happy for you, John."

When John sat beside Sherlock again, after returning his mother to her seat, Sherlock squeezed his hand briefly under the table. He probably either knew, or had deduced what had upset John. As much as relying solely on deductions could, and had, given them both the wrong impressions in the past, John was glad not to have to explain right now. It just figured he'd fall in love with the
closeness the Holmes family shared. He would like that closeness for his own family, and that only came when the lines of communication were open.

Sherlock leaned close to John, resting his forehead on John's temple. "Dinner is next, then the bouquet and garter toss," Sherlock whispered, as if reminding John of the schedule. John saw right through his husband, he almost always did. Are you okay?

John nodded. "I remember, thanks." Yes, thank you.

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Their entrees turned out to be a bit more exciting than John had expected. While excellent, he was not surprised at the filet mignon with green beans and mashed potatoes that adorned his plate; he'd helped Sherlock pick out the menu. What surprised him was the unexpected entertainment.

It started with a glass and a fork. Eli balanced an extra fork across his water glass. Then he reached for another glass, then a plate, another glass, a spoon... John realized, a bit belatedly, that Eli was building a tower. Sherlock soon joined his father, building an adjoining tower. John watched half fascinated, half concerned as the towers grew in size and both men deliberately placed cups and other table paraphernalia at angles that had to be off balance before resting more weight on top of them. They must have known what they were doing because, despite appearances, each structure seemed sound. It wasn't long before everyone's cutlery and, by then empty, plates were pulled into the mix. Greg and Harry were amused. John's parents, and Mycroft looked slightly put out.

Evie chuckled and leaned towards John. "They always do this," she murmured with an amused glint in her eyes. "I've stopped trying to fight the madness."

John chuckled and shook his head. "Have they ever broken anything."

Evie's eyes widened and she nodded her head enthusiastically. "Oh yes. Thank God, never each other, but there have been many causalities to our crockery. There's no stopping them, dear, just duck and shield your face if it looks like things will come tumbling down."

John pressed a hand over his mouth to try to stem his laughter. "Duly noted."

Still, John had to protest when Sherlock looked as though he was about to build a bridge between the two structure. "Sherlock!" He admonished, but he broke out into a grin when Sherlock turned and beamed at him. "I think that's enough, don't you?"

Sherlock's smiled shifted to a smirk and he murmured, "No."

John threw up his hands in surrender, laughing, as Sherlock returned to building.

Evie patted him on the shoulder. "Loving someone isn't always easy," she said glancing at her husband with a smile, "but I've found it to be more than worth it."

John looked over at Evie, suddenly curious, "How long have you and Eli been married?"

Evie thought for a moment before replying, "Fifty years next fall."

John's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "That long?"

"Well we weren't able to marry until I was 28," Evie explained, "We didn't have the money, but I'm counting from when we first became a couple because we were 'married' in every way that mattered shortly after."
John nodded feeling a slight tingle at the reminder of his own thoughts during his wedding, not three hours ago.

"We almost didn't make it to the altar," Evie continued. John turned to look at her, surprise written clearly over his features. Evie nodded, "Oh yes," another glance to her husband, "I know it doesn't look like that now, but we had an unbelievable row oh, three years before the wedding. Money was tight, we were just starting out, and Elijah was struggling with depression."

John made a sour face before he could stop himself. He'd been there for his sister throughout her addiction and he wondered if Evie had felt just as powerless as he had.

Evie seemed to understand his expression because she nodded and pressed on, "It's amazing how alone you can feel when people who claim to trust you all but come out an berate your choice of partner. We didn't have bill collectors calling us, but I was still afraid to answer my door and hear one more well-meant lecture."

This time, John grimaced. He was reminded of Harry again, and of himself while Sherlock was...away dealing with Moriarty's men. That was the kind of alone people never saw coming. You don't expect to be left in the cold by the one group of people that claims to 'always' be there for you...

Evie nodded and patted John's hand like she could hear his thoughts. Then again...she was a Holmes, maybe she could. "Once I had moved through the fear both of financial ruin and the worries of others, I was able to reach this quiet place in my mind and, for the first time in over a year, I was able to think about what I wanted without any distractions." Evie grinned ruefully. "It was so simple, I'm surprised I didn't see it before. All of your decisions in life really come down to what you can do, and what you can't do. It's really as simple as that."

John tilted his head in a silent urge for Evie to go on. "At that moment in my life I knew I wasn't about to have children with Eli, or marry him, but I also knew I couldn't leave him." Evie shrugged. "Maybe I would have eventually if things had kept on that way, I don't know. All I knew was I had a choice to make, that day, and every day after it, about where I wanted to be." She smiled then, looking at her husband, "and my answer was always 'with Eli'. The rest was just details."

John reached forward and gave Evie's hand a squeeze. "You have an amazing story, Evie."

Evie smiled and left a short kiss on the top of John's hand. "We all do, dear, in one way or another."

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"No," Sherlock," John whispered, "the answer is no."

They were standing together at the edge of the dance floor, getting ready for the bouquet and garter toss. Regardless of the fact that neither had held a bouquet down the aisle, it was a tradition they had decided to keep. Only now, Sherlock was trying to corrupt it be ensuring that Mycroft and Greg ended up with the bouquet and garter, so that they would have to dance together.

"Come on, John," Sherlock was whining now. "Please, it will be fun."

John fought the urge to giggle.

"Manipulating your brother and one of our closest friends is wrong, Sherlock," John insisted.

Sherlock leaned into John, nudging him with his shoulder. "But it's fun too," he pleaded.

John looked at Greg, then at Mycroft. Then he thought about the last week, the last month, and all
the various stresses this case had put him through and decided, 'What the hell?'

Sherlock must have seen John's moment of surrender, because he was already discussing tactics. "Mycroft will see this coming, he's going to try to circumvent us by not coming up for the bouquet toss. However, if I land the bouquet right in his lap, he won't be able to voice any protest."

John nodded, feeling a bit giddy. "I think Greg would stand up for the garter toss."

"Exactly," Sherlock exclaimed, resting a hand on John's shoulder, "You just have to shoot straight."

John rolled his eyes. "Like I haven't done that before."

And then Eli was announcing all single persons to gather at the edge of the dance floor for the bouquet and garter toss. Sherlock scooped up a bouquet of white roses and purple orchids before planting a short, sharp kiss on John's mouth. "Wish me luck," he murmured before striding onto the dance floor.

John just smiled, leaning back against the wall and he watched. Sherlock's eyes swept the room as he approached the dance floor and, sure enough, Mycroft was still sulking at their table. Still there was a thick swath of people the bouquet would need to bypass to make it to him. Sherlock stood in the center of the floor, back straight, and bouquet tight to his chest. John saw Sherlock turn his head slightly to wink at him before tossing the bouquet in a high arch that almost brushed the ceiling. John could see the audience tense and the crowd of potential bouquet catchers crouch as they got ready to jump. The bouquet sailed high, well over the fingertips of an enthusiastic young girl (a Holmes by the look of her) who did leap for it, and soundly onto Mycroft's lap.

John had to turn away so Mycroft wouldn't see his grin. The elder Holmes couldn't have looked more surprised or more angry if he'd tried. There. Let this be payback for one kidnapping too many.

Eli was energetically calling Mycroft up to the dance floor to await the individual who caught the garter. Mycroft did as he was told, looking all the while like he'd just sucked on a lemon.

Sherlock didn't bother to turn and look at his brother. John could see from the smirk on his lips, however, that he knew his bouquet had hit home.

John stepped forward as Sherlock settled himself into a chair, readying for the garter toss. A brief glance told him where Greg was, milling amongst the crowd looking slightly less than enthusiastic...

A wash of guilt took him by surprise. This had to remind Greg of his own wedding. However things had ended, John knew Greg had wanted and tried to make it work.

John knelt before Sherlock, resting his hands on Sherlock's knees for a moment as he spoke to him. "I'm not sure we should be doing this," John whispered.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. "It's a bit late to be backing out now."

Sherlock did have a point there. It would be over quickly and he wasn't entirely sure there was anyone else he would inflict Mycroft upon. At least he knew Greg could handle the elder Holmes brother. Glancing up at Sherlock again John asked, "So where's the garter?"

John was concerned when he saw Sherlock's smirk. "Where a garter is traditionally kept," Sherlock murmured in reply.

John glanced down at Sherlock's thigh, then back at Sherlock. "You're in trousers?!" John hissed, "I can't get my hand all the way up there!"
Sherlock's smirk only widened. "I'm sure you'll manage," he said confidently, straightening his right leg towards John, to give him more room to work with.

John sent Sherlock a pointed look before slipping his fingers under the hem of Sherlock's right trousers leg. It was easy going, more or less, until his fingers crested Sherlock's knee. Then his fingers began scrabbling for purchase against the skin of Sherlock's thigh. John squirmed and wriggled his hands inch by inch up Sherlock's thigh until he felt lace. With a triumphant smile he tugged the garter down and off Sherlock's foot. John hadn't seen it before but he wasn't surprised that Sherlock had chosen a small circle of black lace with the necessary elastic at its center.

John turned it over in his fingers for a moment before giving Sherlock another pointed look. Sherlock gazed right back, looking completely unphased.

John stood, tested the elastic between his hand for a moment, and, with one glance over his shoulder, he shot the garter almost directly around Greg's wrist. John had to smile as the detective inspector blinked at the black lace as if trying to make sense of it.

"You always were an ace shot," Sherlock murmured in John's ear, causing the older man to jump.

"Yeah, well, with you around I have to be," John replied, turning to face his new husband.

Sherlock simply held his arm out to John. "Shall we take our seats? I believe the real show is about to begin."

~*~*~*~

Mycroft stared resolutely at a spot on the floor as Gregory knelt before him with the garter. Damn Sherlock and his childish schemes! He could feel Greg's fingers brushing his calf and only his years of experience prevented any blush from showing. How his brother's garter was going any further up his leg than his calf, he had no idea.

Greg felt like he was in an odd spot as well. While John had never shared his thoughts with Greg, he had been right. This did remind Greg of his own wedding. It was hard to ignore voices of self-doubt and regret that teased at the edges of his mind, but he pushed them aside.

One glance told Greg that Mycroft wasn't having the best of times either. Greg softened a bit when he realised the elder Holmes was probably thinking, among other things, about his weight and how high the garter would be able to get up his leg. Not that he'd ever expect someone as proud as Mycroft to admit it.

Greg spread the garter over his fingertips and set to work. It didn't take long to realize he probably wouldn't be able to get the garter higher than Mycroft's knee. So instead, Greg stopped just below the knee, lightly placed the garter, then inched his fingertips as far up Mycroft's pant leg as they could comfortably go. Glancing up Greg saw Mycroft still looking miserable, and lost in thought. Did he really not know that, at this moment, Greg was more or less groping his thigh for show? Greg stilled his fingers then, and eased back until his hands rested lightly on Mycroft's ankle.

"You know," Gregory began, breaking Mycroft's train of thought, "I think even my ex wife looked happier than this at our wedding."

Mycroft's lips tightened in an unhappy line. "This is a plan of my brother's to embarrass me," he muttered.

"Then disappoint him," Gregory replied as if the solution were simple.
"I beg your pardon?" Mycroft asked, turning to face Gregory, his eyebrows raised.

Gregory stood and offered Mycroft his hand. "Enjoy it."

Mycroft glared dubiously at Gregory's hand for a moment, before reaching forward to take it. "I lead," he insisted quietly so that no one else could hear.

Greg just smiled. "Whatever you want."

The song was slow, soft, and easy to dance to. Mycroft resolutely did not look at his brother as the lyrics registered, knowing this song had been chosen to insinuate a relationship with the detective inspector in his arms.

There I was again tonight forcing laughter, faking smiles
Same old tired, lonely place
Walls of insincerity
Shifting eyes and vacancy vanished when I saw your face
All I can say is it was enchanting to meet you

Obviously his brother meant to insinuate that Mycroft found his life of espionage unfulfilling. ridiculous.

"Mycroft," Gregory said quietly, and the elder Holmes looked down at him as they danced.

Gregory broke out into a small smile. "That's better. You look a bit less like you're plotting to kill your brother."

Mycroft let out a small huff of air. "Who say's I'm not."

Gregory just continued to smile. "I know you." Mycroft felt Gregory give his hand a squeeze. "You love your brother."

Mycroft fought the urge to glower at Gregory. There was no point in that, after all, the Detective Inspector was quite correct. Gregory had been there for him and his brother when Sherlock's addiction was at its worst, he must have known more than most how Mycroft cared for his brother… even if he was a giant pain in the arse...

Mycroft remembered Gregory sitting next to him, waiting for Sherlock to wake up after a particularly bad overdose. There was no one else he could think of who would have sat with him like that except his parents. Mycroft managed to shield both of their parents from Sherlock's addiction. Not that they didn't know, but he hoped they were not aware of how bad things had gotten before they got better.

Even now Mycroft noticed that Gregory wasn't pushing for answers or any further conversation. He had an ability to just be with someone without feeling pressured to speak or try to fix what was beyond his control to do anything about. It was...refreshing. If Gregory hadn't become such a romantic (the word rang with disdain in Mycroft's head) after his divorce, he may have made a passable employee at one point...if he ever learned how to take orders that is.

The song slowly drew to a close and they came to a stop with no unsightly flourishes such as dips or kisses. Mycroft shifted his right foot back and forth as the last notes of the song hung in the air, his face the picture of concentration. Then his eyes widened very slightly and his gaze snapped to Gregory who had a barely contained smile on his face. "Are you just now noticing?" Gregory asked, and Mycroft's face looked a bit pinched.

The garter was just below his knee. But Gregory's fingers had been...why? To save Mycroft a bit of
face? There was hardly a situation Sherlock could throw at him that he couldn't handle on his own. Mycroft didn't quite know what to say, so he simply nodded and said, "Gregory," before turning and walking at a measured pace towards the bathroom, fooling no one about his intent to take off the bloody garter as soon as humanly possible.

Greg returned to the grooms table, shaking his head lightly in amusement, while Sherlock and John had a small giggle fit.

~*~*~*~

Sherlock glanced around the room over the rim of glass. There'd been some dancing and mingling while they waited for the time John and he would 'cut the cake' so to speak. Sherlock did not enjoy mingling, but he was happy to let John do so while he scanned the room, deducing their guests. His family, when he did attend family gatherings, seemed content to let him do this, so that was one thing in their favour.

Sherlock's gaze swept over the ornate French doors leading out onto the veranda. They weren't open, but if Harry's body language was anything to go by, they were about to be. She looked tired and was sweating. Not from withdrawal, she had actually been clean for some time. This looked more like general fatigue. She'd had to pick up double shifts at her job to make time for her brother's wedding and, like Sherlock she preferred her own company to that of strangers. Generally not a bad thing, unless you're an addict staring a possible relapse in the face. Sherlock had begrudgingly learned that, for his own safety, it was sometimes a good thing to stay in supportive company. In Sherlock's case this had largely been corpses mulled over at the beginning of a case, but still.

Gently setting his glass down, Sherlock made his way over to her. She had just placed her hand on the doorknob when he spoke, "You and I both know that is not a good idea."

She turned and glared at him, angry at having been caught, and Sherlock couldn't blame her. He'd been less than accommodating for Mycroft and Lestrade. Then again, he wasn't particularly good at consoling people either. He tried to avoid all this 'caring' business as much as he could; it was messy.

Sherlock extended his hand slightly to her and said, "Dance with me."

It hadn't been a question and, with a moment of hesitation, she placed her hand in his. The dance floor was a bit crowded and, knowing their mutual dislike of crowds, he held her close. "When do you meet her?" he asked.

She bit her lip but didn't deny that she had planned a meeting with Clara, her ex. "Next weekend," she whispered, looking at the floor. "I shouldn't...Clara, I put her through so much...I've done nothing but hurt her for years..."

"You probably, shouldn't," Sherlock agreed, causing Harry to look up at him, "but you will anyway." And didn't that feel familiar? Especially lately.

Harry bit her lip, studying him, and he saw the question in her eyes. When does it get better? 'It' meaning the addiction, the cravings, and making it up to the people that you love. Sherlock hadn't bothered with the last part, but he knew his answer anyway. "It doesn't. You'll be faced with choices every day for the rest of your life, and you will have to make them."

Harry's lips pinched into an unhappy line and she nodded. It made sense. "Like your marriage?" She asked after a long silence. "It was all over your vows, making the choice to be together, or not, each day."
Sherlock glanced at John to hide the very slight tension that might be showing the slightest bit before he answered. "Yes."

They danced the rest of the song in silence and, as Harry was about to move away Sherlock stopped her by tightening his grip on her hand. "Have you been properly introduced to my mother? I think John and I might have overlooked that in our planning. We didn't have an engagement dinner."

Harry flushed a bit and stammered, "N-no but I've been at the table with everyone all this time. I mean, we have spoken-"

But Sherlock was already tugging her along and Harry, not able to think of anything else to say, was silent.

"Mummy," Sherlock began by laying a hand gently on his mother's shoulder.

Evie turned to face him. "Yes Sherlock?"

Sherlock swept his arm around Harry's waist, pulling her closer to his mother. "I don't believe I've properly introduced you to Harry, John's sister, Harriet."

"Oh, Sherlock, I've met her, we've been sitting at the same table all evening." Evie turned to look at Harry, "But I don't think I've had the chance to properly talk with you dear, it is a large table." Evie patted the currently empty seat beside her. "Have a seat."

Harry did so slightly reluctantly, looking confused.

"Don't be shy, we're family now," Evie encouraged, and Sherlock had to fight not to roll his eyes. His mother was big on making families not only from blood relations, but from people one cared about. She did all the 'caring' Mycroft and he often couldn't bring themselves to. "We have other eligible Holmes relatives, if you're looking."

Harry flushed and bit her lip. "I'm not really interested in Mycroft," she mumbled.

Evie chuckled. "No, not Mycroft, he's all wrong for you. But what about her?" Evie pointed to a tall, thin women with long black hair and light grey eyes. "Her name is Catherine, one of Sherlock's first cousins."

Harry smiled and shook her head. "She's cute but I'm trying to reconcile with my ex." Then Harry paused as if she'd just realised a woman had been pointed out to her instead of a man, maybe for the first time in her life.

Evie nodded, unaffected. "Oh, right, Clara was it? John mentioned her when he was talking about you."

Harry flushed both at being mentioned by her brother and being remembered by someone she barely knew.

Evie leaned forward a bit. "Do you mind telling me what she's like?"

Harry looked up, surprised. "Clara?"

Evie nodded. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

"That's okay," Harry said, brushing some hair back from her face. "She's lovely."

Sherlock backed away from the table as Harry began speaking with his mum. He'd barely made it
five yards before he was accosted by John in a fierce hug. "I don't think anyone has done something like that for Harry in a long time," John whispered as Sherlock wound his arms around the good doctor, returning the hug. "I love you," John breathed, almost before he could stop himself, and immediately turned bright red. "I mean, thank you and-"

Sherlock cut John off by pressing his fingers lightly to John's lips. "I understand," Sherlock murmured. And he did. John had honestly meant it when he said he'd loved him, in every way but the one way Sherlock wanted most...

John seemed to calm slightly, and, brushing Sherlock's fingers away, he leaned up to press a passionate kiss to Sherlock's lips.

~*~*~*~

Soft music played in the background as the last party guests made their way back to their rooms and, as much as he had enjoyed his wedding reception, John was glad to see them go, because he was also exhausted. It had been a long day on top of almost no sleep the night before.

John smiled to himself as he remembered 'cutting the cake' with Sherlock. They'd selected a single blackberry and raspberry tart, cutting off bite sized portions for each other. As they turned to feed each other, there was no impromptu food fight, and neither tried to smash the tart into the other's face. One might call it uneventful except for the spark John felt when Sherlock's lips brushed his fingers. John ran his tongue over one of Sherlock's elegant fingertips as his hand retreated from John's mouth, prompting the younger man to pull John forward for a kiss. It was a chaste kiss considering they had blackberry and raspberry tarts in their mouths, but their audience applauded enthusiastically all the same.

Long arms slipped over his shoulder and along his chest. John smiled and leaned back into Sherlock, closing his eyes. "I was wondering where you'd got to," John murmured, turning his head to press his face into Sherlock's chest.

"Just saying goodbye to a few guests with Mummy," Sherlock replied, his breath ghosting over John's ear. "Don't nod off just yet," Sherlock continued in his deep, rumbling baritone, "I have plans for you later."

John's eyes snapped open and he cheeks flushed red. "Plans?" He whispered.

"It is our wedding night, John," Sherlock murmured, and John nodded in understanding. Right.

They'd have to put on a good show.

John tipped his head back to receive a quick kiss from his husband. "Alright," he said as they parted. "Just let me help Evie put the wedding gifts away."

"John, that's what Mycroft's staff is for," Sherlock insisted, inching his fingers too close to the buttons of John's shirt for John's liking. It was probably only a bluff, but just in case, John caught Sherlock's hand in his and pressed a kiss to the younger man's fingertips.

"Yes," John pressed on, "and they'll be cleaning up this entire room tomorrow. The least I can do is move the presents out of the way." When Sherlock pouted John continued, "It's how I was raised Sherlock, I clean up after myself."

"If you insist," Sherlock huffed, surrendering.

"I do," John replied, standing and pressing a quick kiss to Sherlock's cheek before joining Evie by a table heavily laden with wedding presents. To his surprise, Sherlock followed. "Are you actually
going to help?" John asked, glancing over his shoulder.

Sherlock nodded, "If by help you mean carry things up to our sitting room and deducing their contents at the same time, then yes."

John smiled and shook his head. "You'll never change."

"Nonsense, dear," Evie broke in, "Everyone changes." She gestured to her son's left hand. "The very fact that he's got a wedding ring on his finger is proof of that."

John glanced down at Sherlock's hand and nodded. "I suppose so." Although he doubted it was their wedding, because it was fake, but more the deep friendship they had forged which helped change Sherlock for the better. John would rather have Sherlock trust people, even if 'people' was only John, than not.

"Don't forget," Evie spoke again, "Mycroft will be shipping the presents to 221B after you leave for your honeymoon tomorrow, so it will be a bit crowded in your flat when you get back."

John nodded. "I'll keep Sherlock from tripping and hurting himself," he assured Evie.

Sherlock huffed an irritated breath, "I am not in the habit of tripping and falling."

John smiled over at his husband. "No but you are in the habit of deleting what most people might consider useful or interesting information, hence I could completely see you forgetting the presents will even be there."

"I suppose remembering that would be tedious," Sherlock replied causing both John and Evie to chuckle.

They set to work, stacking and arranging the presents, while Sherlock deduced them without so much as unwrapping them. "A crock pot? What are we supposed to do with that?"


Sherlock gave a small snort in reply, and moved on to the next present. "A quilt? Dull."

"Sherlock!" John admonished, "It is completely practical. You know how cold the flat can get. Or maybe you don't because it's too 'dull' to remember things like that."

"Precisely, John," Sherlock said, causing John to groan slightly in frustration. Evie just smiled to herself and continued stacking presents.

Sherlock, meanwhile continued to deduce. "Oh, a new microscope! Now that will come in handy."

"Sherlock, could you deduce in your head or something?" John asked. "Some of us rather enjoy the element of surprise."

Sherlock let out a long suffering sigh, and fell silent.

Together they made short work of the gift table. They were down to the last pile of gift boxes when John he noticed a large bunch of black roses resting in a crystal vase, half hidden behind the last group of presents. The arrangement was so large John was surprised he hadn't seen it before. Then again, the black of the roses did fade into the shadows somewhat. A quick scan revealed a distinct lack of a card, which was odd. How were they going to send thanks if they didn't know who this was from?
"Hey Sherlock," John called ushering his husband over to the end of the table. "Here's something for you to deduce. Can you tell who left these for us? A bit gothic, but they're lovely roses." There was a brief pause, and the silent stillness that followed had ice running through John's veins. Carefully, quietly, John asked, "What does black mean again?"

Sherlock stepped towards him and wrapped an arm around John's waist, tugging him close. Sherlock tore his too-calm gaze away from the roses to look into John's eyes and murmur, "Death."
Chapter Summary

The honeymoon begins and the plot thickens.

Chapter Notes

I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to all those who have commented on, left kudos for, and bookmarked this story. Your support and encouragement is much appreciated.

Once again, I must warn you once more that there is a brief description of a violent murder within this chapter. If this could be triggering for you please do what you need to for your own safety.

Many thanks to my beta, Helena Chauby for her editing eye.

Thank you also to Lady of Clunn for her careful brit picking.

And, as always, I offer thanks to my flat-mate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

Finally, special thanks go out to the reviewer who originally gave me the idea you will see at the very end of this chapter. It fits with the story, and, I feel, makes it all the more compelling. I hope you enjoy.

Chapter 15: Like Honey

"Lie down," Sherlock whispered, and John sank gratefully into the plush warmth of the sofa. They’d been up for God knows how long; his head was starting to pound from exhaustion and eye-strain. John settled his head on Sherlock's lap—damn their audience—and sighed in relief when Sherlock's fingers started to work their way through his short hair. Sherlock was very good with his hands...

Sherlock had only massaged John's scalp a handful of times before, and only when John was in pain. John had thought of it as Sherlock's way of showing support or caring when his 'sociopathic' tendencies didn't allow for much else. Still, he'd always enjoyed, and accepted it.

Now that they were pretending to be a couple and, in fact, newly married John noticed Sherlock's hand would occasionally stray down his neck, over his shoulder, and along his arm. Not surprisingly, John found he enjoyed this too. It was much less annoying than the two hours that had passed since they had found the roses.

Evie had alerted the others about their ominous wedding gift, and Greg had wanted to call the Yard. It was the right thing to do, of course, but they could hardly admit to the fact that they knew the flowers had been sent by the killer. As far as the world at large was concerned, save for a trusted
few, the killer was already behind bars. Instead, Mycroft had convinced Greg to let him call some of his own 'staff'.

In the brief time Sherlock and John had before Mycroft’s agents arrived, Sherlock mused that the killer sent the roses because he knew Sherlock and John were still on the case. Or to let them know they’d ‘caught’ the wrong man. Either way, their target knew they were coming.

It felt like a stone had settled in John’s stomach and, despite all he’d seen Sherlock go through as a consulting detective, John couldn’t help but be worried for his husband. *Husband.* John glanced down at his wedding ring and wondered if their wedding would not be as helpful to the case as they had planned.

Sherlock must have seen the unhappy look on John's face because he had covered John's hand with his own and said, "*This will still help us with the case. Whether he believes it to be true or not, we still present a good target.*"

John had nodded in thought, giving Sherlock's hand a squeeze. "*If it's not true then we've still gone through a lot of trouble to embarrass him, and the fact that we were comfortable enough to go through with it might be enough in itself to set him off.*"

Sherlock had nodded then. "*Exactly.*" And then he had looked, just the tiniest bit unsure and said, "*I think it would be best, either way, to proceed as planned. Agreed?*"

It bothered John that Sherlock had needed to ask him so many times if he was okay with things. John would always have Sherlock’s back, no matter what. Then again, John’s little ‘episode’ earlier today, before the wedding, probably hadn't helped cement that fact.

"*Agreed,*" John had said and, to reassure both Sherlock and himself, he'd leaned up to kiss his husband. It was a gentle, closed-mouth kiss, which Sherlock returned. John had felt Sherlock’s free hand come up to caress the side of his face, and had just begun to open his mouth when they had been interrupted by a discrete cough of the first arriving agent.

John was thankful the wedding guests that were staying at the estate hadn't been disturbed, Mycroft's agents were silent and discrete. Still, it had been a grueling two hours of Sherlock, himself, Greg, Mycroft, Evie, Eli, and a few of Mycroft’s agents discussing the roses, and the implied threat to the newlyweds. After years of Sherlock's 'run into danger headlong and ask for support after the fact approach,' two hours discussing plans for his own safety seemed unbearably tedious to John. Still, there was Sherlock to think of, and John would do anything to keep him safe.

John had already given his statement and general input to Mycroft's agents, so he was free to lay on Sherlock's lap and drift off. He must have drifted too, because the world suddenly began to shift and rock. Reaching out, John wrapped his arms around Sherlock's shoulders and blearily realised that he was being carried.

"*I can walk,*" he insisted, even as he nuzzled his sleep-warm face into Sherlock's neck.

Sherlock chuckled quietly, and John could feel the vibrations in his chest. "*It's not much further to our rooms,*" Sherlock insisted. He went on to explain, "*Greg and Mycroft are still talking with the agents; everyone else has gone to bed.*"

John thought he really ought to put up more of a fight about being carried, if only Sherlock wasn't so damn comfortable...

John sighed when he felt the cool sheets of their bed against his cheek. He lay still while he felt
Sherlock's fingers working to undress him. "I can undress myself," John murmured, although it came out a bit slurred in his half-awake state.

Another baritone chuckle. "Just relax John." And so he did.

It took some maneuvering, but Sherlock got him stripped down to his boxers, and resting comfortably in bed. There were a few more minutes of rustling fabric before John felt the bed dip, and Sherlock's arms came around him. John snuggled into the embrace.

When they first began sharing a bed, Sherlock had been quite amused to find out how much John enjoyed cuddling. He'd gone as far as to call John a 'sleep octopus,' which John did nothing to deny. All John had said was, "You're the one who proposed," and Sherlock had smiled.

Now, John was dimly aware of Sherlock looming over him on all fours, and adjusting John's chin so that his neck was bared to the ceiling. John squirmed and giggled when Sherlock's mouth brushed his neck. Sherlock gently, but firmly repositioned John, and tried again. This resulted only in more giggles.

Sherlock huffed an agitated breath and whispered, "John, stay still!"

"Why?" John murmured between yawns, "Going to cause nerve damage if I move?"

Sherlock smiled, despite himself, at the reminder of his comments to John the morning they had bought their rings. "No," Sherlock drawled, "but you will end up covered in lovebites instead of just one."

That caused John to surface a bit more into the world of the waking. "Huh?" he asked, blinking his eyes open and staring up at Sherlock in the dim light.

"I did mention I had plans for you, did I not?" Sherlock asked trying to keep John's attention. "I know you're tired, so I think one visible lovebite will be all we need to make things look convincing."

John blinked slowly as he processed this. "Okay," he murmured, "but I can't just stop being ticklish."

Sherlock pursed his lips in thought for a moment before he said, "Perhaps I was too direct; the more natural way then."

John was about to ask Sherlock what that meant, when Sherlock's lips were pressed to his. John enjoyed kissing Sherlock, much more than he should, so he surrendered to it. He closed his half-lidded eyes and pressed up into the warm slide of soft lips against his own. John's mouth was already slightly open, and Sherlock's tongue slid easily inside, caressing. John 'hmmed' happily as heat swept through his abdomen. Sherlock's arms were braced on either side of John's head, steadying the younger man. John wound his arms around Sherlock's shoulders, and stroked his back, feeling the sinewy muscles drawn taught over the scapula. In the haze of John's exhaustion this felt like a dream; his inhibitions were lowered.

John slid one hand down Sherlock's side, and clutched at his hip as their tongues wound around each other. Sherlock made a soft noise before pulling back from the kiss to pepper John's cheek with gentle kisses and nips. John tried to follow Sherlock's mouth, but his husband was insistent. When Sherlock reached John's jaw and moved lower, John pressed his face into the cool pillow, giving way.

It was Sherlock's turn to 'hmmm' happily as he began nipping and sucking at the juncture of John's neck and shoulder. John let out a breathy moan, arching into the contact. Teeth and tongue swept
over his artery, making him dizzy. John must have been squirming more than he thought, because Sherlock's mouth opened wider to take a possessive bite. John's hips jerked forward and he moaned, "Sherlock..."

Sherlock held his grip on John for a few moments, sucking, probing with his tongue, before he finally released his husband. They were both panting slightly, both more than a little aroused.

Sherlock leaned his weight on his elbows once more, pressing his forehead against John's and closing his eyes. He wanted to go back for another kiss so badly it burned, but he knew that it wouldn't be wise. Leaving John and himself more sexually frustrated than the situation required would only complicate things further.

Long minutes later, when Sherlock felt he could trust himself, he pulled back. John's eyes were bleary with impending sleep, and he smiled fondly at his husband. Feeling drawn in again, Sherlock leaned down for a brief, open mouthed kiss. Pulling back while he still had the will, Sherlock murmured, "Sleep well John," against his husbands' lips.

"I will," John breathed, tugging Sherlock down towards him, "You too..." Sherlock willingly sprawled himself across John's chest, careful to maneuver so that their hips were side by side, instead of pressed together.

"Goodnight John," Sherlock murmured, twining his arms with his husband's.

John leaned forward a bit and pressed a kiss into Sherlock's dark curls. "Night."

~*~*~*~

The first thing John became aware of was the soft warmth that wrapped around the room, the kind that invited lazing under fuzzy covers long into the afternoon. The second thing was the light. Someone must have pulled back the curtains, or left them open, because, even with his eyes closed, John could tell the room was glowing with sunlight. John had admired how the light reflected off the pale yellow walls of their rooms earlier that week. Now he was both admiring it, and wishing someone would turn down the lights; he was too comfortable and happy to get up just yet. Finally, the sweeping brush of fingers along his back, a hand, and an arm registered in John's brain.

John's muscles bunched and he arched into the touch, snuffling a yawn against Sherlock's bare shoulder. Hadn't they fallen asleep with Sherlock across John's chest? How had their positions reversed? hmmm... Not important. John arched up into the touch again, mumbling contentedly as Sherlock rubbed circles along his back.

"Really, John, you're almost purring." Sherlock sounded entirely too amused so early in the morning... okay, it probably wasn't that early anymore, but still...

"mhph quiet," John muttered into his husband's shoulder. Sherlock's hand swept up John's neck, and his fingers raced through John's hair. John groaned in appreciation, then flushed. It really did sound like he was purring. Fuck.

Sherlock only chuckled. "Have you always been this...cuddly? It's a wonder any of your other partners ever let you go."

John still refused to open his eyes, but his speech was a bit clearer. "They followed social convention Sherlock," John paused to yawn, "They expected to be cuddled, not the other way around."

Sherlock made a small, thoughtful noise before he said, "Normal is dull."
At this particular moment, John couldn't agree more.

"John, we're going to have to get up sometime."

John made a sound of disagreement and twined his legs more closely with Sherlock's. "Stay," he breathed.

"Really John," Sherlock insisted, trying to jostle John into proper consciousness, "I'm sure there is a wedding brunch laid out for us at this very moment. We have guests to thank."

John latched on harder and murmured "...warm."

Sherlock rolled his eyes even as an affectionate smile tugged at the edges of his lips. "Of course you're warm, John. Our combined body heat in combination with the insulation of the bedclothes and the sound construction of the manner walls could only result in-" Sherlock released a sharp puff of air as John nipped softly at his neck in retaliation.

Satisfied that Sherlock's lecture had been cut off, John snuggled in again.

Sherlock, tried a different tactic. "Trying to give me a matching lovebite? You'll have to try harder than that." Sherlock's fingers grazed lightly over John's neck as he spoke. "Your skin, just here, is almost purple. Whereas I doubt you've even left a proper mark."

John's eyes finally opened. He tilted his head back, feeling the skin of his cheek slide across Sherlock's chest, until he met amused blue/grey eyes. "What did you say?"

Sherlock managed, just barely, not to grin. "I said your lovebite has gone dark purple, and if you were intending to-"

John's hand flew up to his neck, and he was no longer listening. He blinked in the bright light of morning and tried to make himself focus. "Last night...?"

Sherlock spoke slowly, as if trying to explain something to a child. "Last night was our wedding night, John. I marked you." And then, with just the smallest hint of reluctance, because he couldn't quite get the concerns of the other day out of his head, Sherlock asked, "That is okay, right?"

No one knew Sherlock better than his blogger; John caught the hint of insecurity instantly. His eyes locked with Sherlock and, spurred on by a sudden flash of possessiveness, John launched himself at his husband, pinning him to the bed.

Sherlock's eyes went wide with surprise as John's face hovered inches from his own. "I do believe," John began, his voice deep and gravely with sleep, "I heard you say I could mark you as well." Sherlock swallowed, turning his head instinctively as John lowered his mouth to Sherlock's neck.

Sherlock sucked in a breath and gritted his teeth when he felt John's mouth open on his neck. There was a graze of teeth and tongue; Sherlock closed his eyes and focused on the onslaught. John's hand gripped his wrists firmly, his legs bracketing Sherlock's hips, pushing him down into the mattress. John's warm, wet tongue was probing at his jugular vein while John's lips provided suction, pulling the skin taunt. Just like last night, when their positions were reversed, it was more than a little arousing. Sherlock had just begun to pant when John pulled away with a wet sucking noise.

The skin John had just detached himself from burned and throbbed. Sherlock realised his bruise might be even darker than John's, especially with his pale complexion. Slowly, Sherlock turned his head upwards to meet John's dilated pupils. They were both aroused and it was lost on neither of them. It was biology. Just, biology. After the tumult of the last few days, Sherlock was not about to
let biology come between them again.

Sherlock rested his hand lightly against John's hip, and gave a gentle squeeze. "We'll make quite a scene when we come down to brunch," he surmised.

John chuckled, and Sherlock returned his smile, relived. John reached forward and caressed Sherlock's face for a moment, not trusting himself to kiss his husband and leave it only at that.

"Then we should get downstairs," John murmured, "I think we've kept them waiting long enough."

Sherlock and John stumbled into the small dining room giggling and talking quietly to one another. They were greeted with a small round of applause from Greg, Eli, and Evie. Mycroft stared murderously into his porridge.

John blushed and leaned into Sherlock as they made their way to the table. He was glad there weren't any extended family around at the moment. Then again, it was a bit late for brunch, and the Holmes family seemed to be full of early risers. John thought he glimpsed a few cousins strolling along the grounds before he took his seat.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Sherlock said brightly as he pulled out John's chair for him.

"No worries," Eli said with a grin and a brief glance at his wife. "You got a late start on the wedding night after all."

Evie and Greg chuckled over their tea while Mycroft continued to look put out.

"Greg and Mycroft must have got to bed even later," Evie said with an amused glint in her eye. "They were still discussing everyone's safety on the case when we went to bed."

John sipped gratefully at his tea as he tried to remember who knew what. Last he checked, only Sherlock himself, and probably Mycroft knew his 'marriage' with Sherlock wasn't quite real, and everyone at the table knew how the wedding tied in to the case.

John still felt guilty for lying to everyone, but, considering recent developments, it was probably keeping them safe. Sherlock and John would have to have a long talk after this was over about how to end their ruse appropriately. Sherlock might breeze through most social mores without much forethought, but this was different. This affected a lot of people, and John didn't want there to be any more pain involved than there had to be. ...Still, the thought of this, ruse...crush...whatever it was, coming to a finite end made John sad. John closed his eyes for a moment, concentrating on the heat radiating from his tea cup. Thinking so far ahead wouldn't be helpful. He needed to focus on the conversation at hand, and go from there.

"For the love of all that is holy, I am not shagging Mycroft!"

John was immensely grateful at that moment, that he hadn't just taken a mouthful of tea. "I'm sorry, what?"

"My brother and my parents have been sophomorically insinuating a mutual attraction between myself and Gregory," Mycroft groused, looking all the more as though his porridge disagreed with him.

"It's not so farfetched," Greg muttered over his eggs, exhausted and not above ruffling a few feathers to share the misery. "I argue with you like I argued with my ex-wife."
Mycroft flushed red and turned to glare at Greg. "You are correct Gregory that does fit. I am as
attracted to you, in general, as she is now."

Greg's eye twitched in frustration, but he forced himself to smile warmly and lean towards Mycroft. That git wasn't the only one who could make people feel uncomfortable. "She did say she wouldn't mind getting together for a one off or two," Greg murmured invitingly. It wasn't true; the divorce had gone so badly Rebecca, his ex, probably hated him. Greg had his regrets over that, but the truth wasn't the point right now. Right now, he wanted to see Mycroft squirm a little. "Would you be as," Greg paused for effect, "accommodating, Mycroft?"

Mycroft's face looked a bit pinched for a moment before forcibly rearranging itself into an indifferent mask. "Do not embarrass yourself, Gregory. My sources have informed me that Rebecca is far too involved with a doctor from Cambridge to make time for a tryst with her ex."

"Fuck off, Mycroft," Greg ground out, hunching over his eggs once more.

"Please, Mycroft," Sherlock broke in, "I know for a fact you aren't wasting resources having a
detective inspector's ex-wife tailed."

"Boys, boys," Evie interrupted calmly, trying to derail the impending row, "We were only teasing. I'm sorry if I upset you Greg."

"No, I apologise," Greg murmured, looking abashed, "I shouldn't be picking fights over brunch."

Evie patted Greg's arm lightly. "It's quite alright, dear, I've been very unpleasant company in the past when I haven't got enough sleep.

"You are quite right brother," Mycroft interjected, still cross with Sherlock, "Gregory's ex-wife is hardly my concern, the doctor however, has been-"

"Mycroft!" Even John jumped. It was the only time he'd heard Evie raise her voice. "Are you quite finished?" Evie asked, her tone clipped.

"Yes, Mummy," Mycroft replied, slightly subdued for once.

Greg barely managed to contain a snort of amusement, which Mycroft must have heard anyway, because the elder Holmes brother promptly kicked him in the shin under the table. Evie, thankfully, didn't seem to notice.

"So, what have you managed to find out about the flowers?" Eli asked, trying to help his wife change the subject.

"Now that we've been able to question all the staff, we've confirmed that the flowers were delivered by post while the wedding was taking place," Mycroft explained. "Several other wedding gifts from family members unable to attend had already arrived, and all those staying at the estate had already left their gifts on the appropriate table. Unfortunately, no one thought otherwise about adding the roses to the gift table with everything else."

"Who would dear?" Evie asked, "This is a wedding."

"It is also serving to further a case, Evie," Greg reminded her, but she still looked upset at the case intruding onto her son's wedding. Greg couldn't blame her; Sherlock had just been threatened, more or less. "Very early this morning, I had some officers at the Yard trace the delivery to a flower shop not three streets from All God's Children United Church."
Everyone's expressions turned dark.

"What else?" Sherlock insisted, leaning forward slightly. After working with Greg for all these years, he knew Greg wouldn't leave it at that. He did have some common sense.

"Well, there aren't any cameras in the store," Greg continued, "and he paid with cash, so we have no hope of tracing a credit card-

"Of course it's a 'he!'" Sherlock interrupted, "We've established that ages ago."

"It wasn't confirmed yet, Sherlock," Greg insisted, glaring for a moment. "But, yes the shop owner remembers selling to a man who fits the description you originally gave."

Sherlock waved his hand dismissively. "It's too common a description to be of much use."

"As I was saying," Greg continued. His voice sounded clipped and irritated because, of course, Sherlock was right. "The shop keeper remembered the man because he gave the name 'Holmes.'"

"Clearly a fake name," Evie surmised, "We are a well known family. And who would think twice about receiving a delivery from 'Holmes' at the Holmes wedding?"

Greg nodded, "Just so."

"Unfortunately," Mycroft broke in, "My operatives were unable to get a possible sketch after interviewing the witnesses. Even the side street cameras were unable to get a clear picture of our culprit."

Sherlock made a frustrated noise and Greg looked put out. "I told my officers to interview witnesses and pull any extra footage they could find, Mycroft" Greg explained, "Our people are just going to get in each other's way."

Mycroft gave a small, satisfied smile. "No they aren't, my people are much faster and have access to more cameras."

Greg let out an irritated huff and turned back to his eggs. Was it some law of physics that the Holmes brothers always had to be right?

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"Right," John paused to look around their room, searching for anything out of place. "Have we got everything?"

"Of course," Sherlock drawled from his position, dramatically sprawled, on the sofa in the sitting room.

John quirked an eyebrow at him. "How would you know? I'm the one that's done all the packing."

Sherlock waved his hand lazily in the air. "Details."

That flippant comment really shouldn't make John want to kiss him, but it did. John loomed over the arm of the sofa until Sherlock tipped his head back to make eye contact with him. John leaned down and pressed his lips warmly to Sherlock's.

John had meant it to be a brief kiss anyway, but he was still embarrassed when there was a knock at their door.
"We've come to collect your bags, sirs," a clear voice rang through the doorway. Ah, it must be some of Mycroft's staff. The estate must need a number of staff to help with the upkeep, but John had seen very few staff outside of his wedding reception. He was glad for that. It felt a bit silly to him to let other people do things he was perfectly capable of doing for himself.

"Be right there," John called out as he went to get the door. While said servants were hefting their luggage out of the room, he turned to Sherlock. "Are you getting up or what?"

Sherlock turned his head to look at John. "If I must," he conceded, starting to rise, "Although Mycroft does have a private jet we could take if we missed our flight."

John gave snort of amusement. "Right. That won't look suspicious at all."

Sherlock stood beside John for a moment before taking his hand. "Our double purpose is already known to the killer, at least in part," he reminded John. John looked away for a moment, feeling suddenly cold. Sherlock gave John's hand a squeeze and continued, "However, it would be best to keep up appearances as planned." John nodded and allowed himself to be lead out of the room.

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The Holmes family had flooded the entranceway to the estate in order to see them off. Sherlock and John paused at the doorway to say their goodbyes to Evie, Eli, Mycroft, Greg, and all the others. Despite the fact that Mycroft and Greg would be following them to New York the next day, it was unlikely Sherlock and John would see much of them until the killer was caught. Greg and Mycroft were going to stay in New York City with a team of Mycroft's agents, and a pair of Yanks who were assigned to work with Mycroft's team. They were F.B.I. agents, and, from what Sherlock could deduce from the files Mycroft had on them, they would likely be of no greater help then the detectives from the Yard. Greg was officially there as a 'consultant' with information about the killer, while Mycroft's team officially did not exist. Together, they would do what research/fact checking they could, while waiting for more information from Sherlock and John.

There were hugs all around, if a bit unwilling on Mycroft's part, before the grooms made their way down the front steps and into the waiting Bentley. John leaned out the window slightly as they pulled away, to wave goodbye along with Sherlock. Returning to his seat, John glanced out the rear window, smiling slightly as the window beside him slid shut once more.

"You enjoy my family's company," Sherlock stated, sounding slightly amused.

John turned to him and nodded. "Well, yeah, especially your Mum."

"She does have that effect on people," Sherlock agreed, "Did you know her ability to read people exceeds Mycroft and myself?"

"That doesn't surprise me," John replied, leaning back into his seat. Even sleeping as well as he had, it hadn't been long enough, and it was starting to catch up to him.

"It may surprise you to know there is nothing scientific in her methods," Sherlock continued. That was interesting, and John turned in his seat to face Sherlock, anxious to hear more.

"She has an innate ability to read people," Sherlock explained, "So does father, but he relies less on intuition and more on facts. Because it's intuition, Mummy is, occasionally, wrong. However, she is still correct more often than not, and could likely tell you more than Mycroft or myself at a first glance." Sherlock was certain that, although she had not been informed, that his mother knew the important details about this case, including his love for John. Likely she had been trying to encourage
him to act on it with her little speech on the dance floor. He couldn't blame her; he could hardly deny that John made him happy. However, to keep John in his life, Sherlock would do what he had to, despite his preferences.

"Huh," John murmured as he turned this new information over in his mind. "Was it watching her that got you interested in deductions in the first place?"

Sherlock gave him a wry smile. "For once, Dr. Watson, you see and observe."

"It's Dr. Holmes, now," John corrected him, and they both looked away. Neither one was keen on considering just how long that name change would last...

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"Really, John, you are going to get yourself tackled by the air marshal," Sherlock scolded as John fidgeted in his seat, looking for all the world as though he was five seconds away from springing into the aisle and bolting towards the front of the plane, just to get a bit of exercise.

"It is not my fault they put these seats so close together," John hissed. "I have no room to move my legs, this is inhumane. You know this increases risk of blood clots and."

"Yes, John," Sherlock cut his husband off with an enamored smile.

"Don't look so smug," John insisted, "You're the one reading a book, fiddling on your phone, and listening to, I don't even know what, on your headphones." John leaned as far forwards as he could, hoping the change of position would ease his discomfort somewhat. It was only marginally better.

"Yes, well, it just about keeps me occupied," Sherlock mused.

John chuckled darkly. He jumped slightly when he felt Sherlock's fingers in the back of his neck, but relaxed when he felt them massaging his tight muscles. "Thank you," he breathed, arching into the touch. It didn't help the cramped discomfort in his legs, but it was a nice distraction. Of course, it did not help that his next thought was about Sherlock's hands massaging his... legs.

"Why did we take economy?" John whined in a low voice, pressing his heels into the floor to try to restore circulation.

Sherlock "hm'd" in a distracted fashion. "I do remember someone pointing out that the mark up for business class is, oh, what did you say? 'Unethical, and a waste of money.'"

"I've changed my mind," John grumbled miserably.

"We can fly business class back to England," Sherlock soothed, his attention still fixed on his various projects.

"What are you doing anyway?" John asked, his voice slightly muffled from leaning forwards in his seat.

"On my phone I am reviewing previous crimes both in London and the New York area which could possibly be relevant to this case."

"I thought you said the killer hadn't killed before the first couple that started this case," John cut in, glancing at his husband.

Sherlock shrugged, his fingers continuing to work on John's neck and shoulder as his eyes reviewed
the contents of his phone. "Something started this long before that. You remember I said he may have been motivated by harm coming to someone close to him, probably a son, from the LGBTQ community."

John nodded, slowly, "I remember you mentioning something like that."

Sherlock gestured with his phone, "I don't expect a revelation, but as we discover more information these cases may help us put the pieces together."

"And the rest of it?" John asked, finally trusting himself to sit up, blush fading from his cheeks. Sherlock's fingers still lingered at his neck.

"I'm listening to old news broadcasts," Sherlock explained, gesturing to his headphones with his free hand, "And the book is a history of the Hamptons, in case there is something useful there."

John shook his head slightly, thinking. "He's been quiet for almost a month, it's unnerving."

Sherlock glanced over at John. "Not entirely quiet, you remember the roses."

"Yeah," John said, pulling his coat more tightly around himself. He let out a frustrated sigh. "What are we going to do in the Hamptons, Sherlock?" Despite being calm and collected around ill persons and homicide victims alike, John fervently wanted to catch this killer before he struck again.

Sherlock closed his book, and took his headphones from his ears for a moment. "What we have to."

He paused before adding, "We will do some expected things, and wait for an opening. His mundane qualities have made him hard to pick out thus far, but they also point to someone of only above average intelligence. He will make a mistake and reveal himself in some way. He nearly did with where he bought the roses."

John nodded. Sherlock was being somewhat cryptic given the one hundred plus other people on the plane, but John got the message loud and clear. They would do normal honeymoon things, probably stay close to his next intended victims, once they arrived, and wait for the killer to trip up. In the meantime they could also spend time exploring what information they did have, and anything new they happened to figure out. In short what would happen would likely happen fast, and they might be relying partially on luck to be in the right place at the right time. John gave a mental shrug. It wasn't like they hadn't done similar before.

"You're tired," Sherlock observed, lifting armrest between them and pulling John close to him with an arm around his waist. "We're still hours away from landing, try to get some sleep."

John leaned into Sherlock's shoulder with a sigh and decided that sleeping sounded like a very good idea. He was tired, sleeping would help the time go by, and, in this freezing airplane, Sherlock was still, somehow, quite warm.

~*~*~*~

"It is petulant to persist in sleeping on my sofas when I've given you perfectly respectable accommodations with a proper bed."

Greg groaned softly and opened his eyes slightly to see Mycroft leaning against the fireplace just in front of him. After John and Sherlock had left, Greg had intended to get some work done. Instead he'd ended up sprawled, face down, on another of Mycroft's sofas, very much asleep. "It's your fault for keeping me up so late," Greg mumbled, his voice muffled by the cushions he was laying on, "and for having such comfortable furniture."
"My brother and John should be landing across the pond shortly," Mycroft observed.

Greg nodded and sat up, running his hands over his face to help himself wake up. "Right. When do we leave?"

"Shortly after breakfast. We have the estate largely to ourselves at the moment. Mummy and Father will stay a few more days before returning home."

Greg scooped up his discarded paperwork and began organising it. "I'm still surprised that John let this case take over his honeymoon."

Mycroft snorted derisively.

"Well I know you aren't happy for them," Greg said, sharply. "But I haven't seen two people so in love in a long time."

Mycroft scowled and advanced towards him until he was looming over the detective inspector. "Their marriage is a sham, Gregory!" Mycroft hissed, "A device to lure the killer out, which it seems may be working. I assure you, it is nothing more than that."

Mycroft stood straight again, looking confident, and waited for evidence of Greg's disappointment and embarrassment at having been so deceived.

Laughter was the last thing he expected.

Still, there it was. Gregory laughed loudly and deeply, clutching at his sides when they started to ache from the strain. Mycroft looked at Gregory as though he'd gone mad.

At last Gregory spoke again, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes, "That is too perfect for words." He snickered and threatened to break out into laughter again. "They still haven't," another chuckle, "After all this time-" Greg seemed unable to get the words out around his laughter.

Mycroft crossed his arms in front of him, angry again. "What are you going on about?" he drawled.

There was a long minute filled with Greg sniggering to himself before he'd calmed enough to give a reply. "You really don't know? Mycroft Holmes, I never expected something so obvious to escape your notice."

Mycroft continued to glare down at the detective inspector, waiting for an explanation.

"Case or no case, your brother and John love each other," Gregory insisted. "That's been obvious for years. Why do you think they make such a convincing couple in the first place? Why do you think we had a pool at the office to see when they'd get together? They are good together Mycroft, and I am just as sure now, as I was a moment ago, that they will be very happy together."

"Their union would be ill-advised," Mycroft said evenly, his eye starting to twitch lightly.

Greg refused to be angered. Instead he smiled ruefully up at Mycroft. "I'm glad I don't live in your world, Mycroft," Greg mused quietly. "It's true you wield a great deal of power. You are well suited to intrigues and exerting your influence. I'm even sure, despite your protests, that you largely operate for the greater good. Still, a world where love is 'ill-advised' seems like a very lonely place to be."

They stared at each other in silence for a moment before Mycroft turned on his heel, and walked out the door. Greg sighed as he watched him go, wondering how they were going to get through the next few weeks without strangling each other. He hadn't always been such a romantic, but his
divorce had made him take a hard look at his priorities, and what he wanted in his life. Greg was still just as committed to the job as he ever was, but he was also committed to building a family with someone, if he was ever lucky enough to have a second chance at doing so.

Pulling his eyes away from the door, Greg studied the fireplace embers and thought of Sherlock and John. They still didn't know? He shook his head. If this 'honeymoon' didn't knock some sense into them, Greg would seriously have to do something when they returned to London.

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Crisp night air whipped at John's cheeks as he waited for Sherlock to collect their luggage. He'd managed to sleep most of the flight, but he was still tired and eager to stretch his legs. Sherlock had, obviously, noted this, and volunteered to get their luggage while John went outside for a bit of fresh air. It was late at night, and it would take them a while to get to their hotel. Once they did, John was looking forward to a hot shower and a long sleep.

Despite his better judgment, he hoped Sherlock would join him. He didn't think Sherlock had got much sleep in the last few days either and...he quite liked having the consulting detective in his bed.

John took a breath, willed himself not to blush like a teenager, and began to skim the newspaper he'd purchased at a kiosk inside. It was true you could find most of what you needed online these days, but Sherlock's research on the plane had made him curious. John skimmed the pages, only half paying attention, until a photograph on page 6 made his blood run cold.

There was the sound of small rubber wheels on concrete. "There you are. Mind these while I hail a cab." John felt Sherlock's heat as the taller man lingered beside him. "John?" John swallowed and looked up into Sherlock's gray-blue eyes. "What is it?" Sherlock asked, stepping closer and resting his hand on John's arm.

John silently handed over the paper. Sherlock accepted it, his eyes almost immediately falling upon the picture which had darkened John's mood. It was grainy, black and white, the type of picture you would expect in a wedding announcement. A taller man stood with his arms wrapped around a smaller one. The taller man's head was resting on the shorter man's shoulders, and the shorter man had turned to look adoringly at the taller man. It was hard to make out, given the picture quality, but Sherlock could still see the bite scar on the shorter man's cheek. Probably, as John had surmised over a month ago, leftover from a dog attack. It was the headline above the picture that made it so chilling.

GAY COUPLE FOUND MURDERED BY THE HUDSON

A brief scan of the article revealed that the couple, *Dylan and Kyle*, who had recently returned from their honeymoon in London, were found dead on the riverbank a few days ago. The search had started when Kyle's flower shop remained closed, worrying friends and family. Sherlock read:

*The couple was pinned to the riverbank by an old railroad spike, driven through their chests, piercing both hearts. The hands of both men were bound together with a single set of prayer beads. Authorities reported that the following bible verse was found clasped between their hands, held there by the prayer beads:*

*If by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly. - 2 Peter 2:6-9*
Chapter Summary

Everyone is just...waiting. Tensions mount.

Chapter Notes

Thank you very much to all those who have left comments, given kudos, and/or bookmarked this story. Your support and encouragement means a lot. You guys are awesome and I hope this story continues to live up to your praise. ^_^

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And, naturally, I offer thanks to my flatmate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

To all of those who have helped me; this story started as an idea, you helped give it life and depth

Chapter 16: Waiting

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Sherlock folded the paper under one arm, using his other to pull John close. John leaned into the embrace, his face grim. Not only had the killer struck again, unexpectedly, but he'd chosen a couple they hadn't met. Had he been following them? For how long? What did he know?

...Were they really a step ahead of him?
Slowly, John pushed his arms against the plush mattress in their hotel room, angling his head to look at the clock on the nightstand. With a groan John fell forward onto his pillow, he'd slept on his stomach again, and he cursed jet lag. It was 11:15am. Almost noon. Given his old army discipline, this was becoming a disturbing pattern. He hadn’t got up much earlier the morning after his wedding either. He was going soft, sleeping in so often... Then again, with the odd hours Sherlock and he usually kept, John wondered if it counted as 'sleeping in' when you'd still only got eight hours.

John ran his fingers over the sheets underneath him, trying to pull together his memories of last night. His fingers clenched reflexively when he remember the paper...Dylan and Kyle...that hit close to home. He forced himself to take a deep breath, and keep his breathing even. Grieving for people he’d only met once, no matter how nice they seemed, couldn't help them now.

John rolled onto his back and pulled the blankets up to his chin, blinking in the dim light which snuck around the drapes. The cab ride to their hotel last night had been tense and silent for a long time. Then...Sherlock had said something oddly comforting.

"They died together, John. Most couples don’t get that luxury." It seemed cold...but it was romantic too, in a gothic way. John didn’t want to agree with Sherlock, especially because Dylan and Kyle had been so young; but then he only had to think of Sherlock's famous fall to know that the consulting detective had a point.

Sherlock must have deduced John's thoughts, or John had given himself away when he'd pressed further into Sherlock's side, because the arm that was still around John had tightened, holding him in place. John had been tired when they left the plane, now he felt drained as well. John had leaned his head on Sherlock's shoulder then, closed his eyes, and concentrated on the other man's scent. After a long while, John murmured, "You have an unusual way of looking at love."

Sherlock grasped John's hand with his free one and interlaced their fingers. "I have a realistic way of looking at love. Unless they are the victims of some accident or tragedy, all couples face the reality that one of them will have to watch the other die."

John gave Sherlock's hand a squeeze.

"People also seem to be stuck on this ridiculous notion of firsts," Sherlock continued, distain creeping into his voice. John let him talk because he knew, at least in part, Sherlock was shaken and upset by their discovery, just like John. "Anything can happen once. It's commitment over time that makes something truly special."

John's lips twitched with the hint of a smile. "In that case, may I congratulate you on your long and fruitful relationship with science."

Sherlock had smiled into John's hair then, and pressed a small kiss to the top of his head.

When they'd gotten back to the hotel, Sherlock had announced that he would wait until morning to contact Greg and Mycroft, since they wouldn't be able to do much until they settled into their own accommodations in the city. John had agreed and, after only a cursory unpacking, pulled Sherlock into bed with him to ensure he got at least some sleep.

John had settled on his stomach and Sherlock had draped himself partially across John's back. It was surprisingly comfortable, being pressed down into the mattress, having Sherlock's weight on him. Sherlock had woken John only briefly this morning to let John know that he was going for a walk around town to familiarise himself with the layout. John had needed more sleep, but he'd missed the weight on his back.
What he needed now, was a shower. John glanced down. God, and definitely a wank too. It had been a while since he'd touched himself. Between wedding planning, impromptu chases, and being thrown out of BDSM clubs; he'd just been too busy. That, and sharing a bed with Sherlock hadn't helped. Or having Sherlock's hands on him for that matter... John's hand trailed up his neck and pressed into the still visible lovebite. He let out a small groan. Yes, definitely time to release some sexual tension.

A quick glance around the room confirmed that Sherlock was still out. John knew that Sherlock could spend days turning a problem over in his head, or searching for something he knew he could find. Given that Sherlock was out exploring new territory, John doubted his husband would be back any time soon. John leaned back against the bathroom door and sighed. His husband...

Right, focus. If John didn't take the edge off, he was sure to embarrass himself the next time Sherlock touched him. John locked to door, just in case. Kneeling by the tub, John put the plug in place, ran the hot tap, and poured in one of the hotel's mini shampoo bottles to make the water sudsy. John kept one hand in the water as the bath filled to help him adjust the temperature. When the water in the tub was just a few inches deep, John shut the tap off and shed his pajamas.

John let out a slow groan as he sank his back into the warm, lathered water. For just a moment he allowed his mind to drift, thinking of nothing but the heat caressing him. John reached up, digging his fingers into his right neck and shoulder, massaging the tension away. It felt good. John remembered Sherlock's fingers doing the same just last night, on the plane, and felt a familiar warmth form in his abdomen. Slowly, his hand began to trail down the planes of his body.

He let his left hand rest on his stomach while his right hand slid further up his chest. John gasped when his fingers brushed over his nipple. In most people one nipple was more sensitive than the other. For John, this difference was pronounced, leaving his right nipple particularly reactive to touch. John rolled the small hardening nub under his fingers and pinched it. He sucked his lip between his teeth and wondered if Sherlock would notice the difference. Maybe he already had?

God.. That was...That was not helping...it wasn't. John slid his palm over his the muscles of his stomach, arching into the touch as he reached his pelvis, and went further. John licked his lips and moaned as he grasped his cock, spreading pre-cum around the tip. He swept his thumb over the glands under the head and bucked into his hand. "God," he breathed, stroking himself.

He felt strange. Good, but...very muted. True, not every time was the same, some were better than others, but this felt like his body's arousal was deflating, even as his desire increased. The itch he wanted to scratch seemed to dance just out of reach. John paused to squirt some liquid soap into his hand as a lubricant. He let out a breathy moan when he felt the slick slide of skin on skin. That helped. ...but still, it felt muted after a few strokes.

No problem, perhaps he was trying to get the point too quickly. Nothing wrong with a more leisurely wank. Gingerly, John lifted one leg out of the water and draped it over the edge, and ran his hand along the space between his legs, enjoying the sensual buzz. He trailed his fingers over his entrance and the tight ring of muscle quivered. Moving higher, John cupped his testicles, rolling them gently in his hand. He was eager to move on, but he forced himself to linger, slowly building tension.

Again, it felt good, tingly, but nowhere near as powerful as he expected, or was used to. With a
gentle tug, John released his scrotum and moved higher, trailing his fingers along his shaft. John’s cock gave a small twitch as he grasped it again and he gave an aggravated sigh; he was barely even half hard. Fine. He was nothing if not persistent. John gripped his shaft more firmly and pumped aggressively. He felt a spark, a flash of a familiar heat…and then a sharp decline in pleasure. John continued to pump his hand, ineffectually, till soreness in his wrist caused him to surrender in frustration.

Aggravated, numb from rubbing, and still as horny as hell, John let his hand fall into the water, defeated. He lay there for a brief moment, enjoying the lingering warmth of the water. He would just have to try again later. John, being well educated, and a doctor, was well aware that, sometimes, orgasm just didn’t happen, and there was nothing wrong with that.

Still, he needed to do something with this...energy. A run. He’d go for a run on a trail near the beach; this would help relax his body, and give him some much needed endorphins. John turned on the tap and finished filling the tub. Scooting forwards, John dunked his head under the water and made quick work of washing his body.

~*~*~*~

Sherlock stood on a rock which jutted up between several trees, scanning the ocean. After informing Mycroft and Lestrade of the latest developments of the case, it hadn’t taken long to secure a map of the area in his mind palace. Albert and Trevor didn't arrive in the Hamptons until tomorrow, and Mycroft's team would compile any important details about the murder of Dylan and Kyle. Now all there was for Sherlock to do, was think. Think about the case, and all the tedious dead ends they’d run into. Think about John...John...

That was another reason Sherlock had decided to get up early. It was bad enough, what he'd done already. He'd pushed past what was strictly necessary for the case to satisfy his own feelings for John. Now that they were on a honeymoon, he would have even more opportunity to push. He wasn't, he refused to be, it was useless to be a very sentimental person but... He ran his thumb over the twining metal of his ring, and closed his eyes for a moment. Being married to John, even if it wasn't technically real, the idea that John was his, held a certain appeal.

Feet crunched the sand on the trail at a quick, even pace. An experienced runner was coming up fast on the trail just behind the rock Sherlock was perched on. They had a solid breathing pattern, they were in good health. There was a dedication and routine in their steps, and Sherlock doubted they would even notice him as they passed.

"Sherlock?! What are you doing up there?!"

Sherlock turned, lost his footing, and fell. John reached up to catch him, and they both tumbled to the ground, rolling once, with John ending up on top of his husband.

"Are you okay?" John asked, trying to pull himself up to his knees so that he could look Sherlock over.

Sherlock placed his hands on John's shoulders, stilling him. "I'm fine, John, no injuries. Well, maybe my pride."

John pressed his face into Sherlock's chest, chuckling. "This is becoming a really nasty habit of yours, Sherlock," John muttered into the fabric of Sherlock's button up shirt. It was long-sleeved, but rolled up to the elbows and, in deference to the heat of the day, Sherlock had left his jacket in their rooms.
"What is?" Sherlock asked, arms looping themselves around John's waist, holding him there.

John lifted his head, halfheartedly glaring at Sherlock. "Falling off of stuff."

"I barely fell four feet John, and you broke my fall. Are you hurt?"

John shook his head, "No, just startled."

Sherlock nodded. "Good. You know the human body can fall tremendous distances as long as the impact is handled correctly."

John's look darkened. "I know, Sherlock."

Sherlock quickly shut his mouth, you could hear his teeth click. Right. Not John's favorite subject, falling. "Sorry."

John clenched his jaw for a moment before muttering, "It's okay." Knowing Sherlock he'd probably been trying to make John feel better, discussing the relative unlikelihood of him being hurt by such a short distance...but... the topics of Sherlock and falling in conjunction would never be something John was keen on discussing.

John let out a slow breath before pulling Sherlock to his feet, then stayed close to help him brush off the sand. "What were you doing on that rock anyway?"

"Thinking," Sherlock murmured, reaching out his own hands to help brush sand off of John's shirt.

John smiled. "Just don't make that your new thinking pose, okay?"

The corners of Sherlock's mouth tipped upwards slightly. "That is an easy promise to keep. Now, what about yourself? You're not in the habit of running since you were sent home."

"Yes I am," John insisted, the skin around his eyes crinkling in amusement, "Just, normally it's running after you and some mad criminal. I had some energy to work off, so I decided to get out and do a little exploring myself.

Sherlock stepped close to John's side, and wrapped his arm around the older man's shoulders. "I think you've seen all this jogging trail has to offer. Why don't I show you around town?"

They began walking together, back up the trail, to a place that would lead out onto one of the town's main streets. "Sure," John agreed. "Are there places that could be important for the case?"

Sherlock decided that, if there ever was a world with a hell, he would be going there. Good thing he didn't believe in hell then. Albert and Trevor arrived tomorrow, and the next leg of their casework would begin. This would be his one and only chance to pretend this 'marriage' was real. Was it wrong? Yes. Was it selfish? Yes. But if he had to fly back to England afterwards and content himself with John being forever out of reach, he would take this day for himself, to remember.

Sherlock gave John a little squeeze and leaned down to whisper in his ear, "Not as such, but it is our honeymoon." It wasn't as though John and he would do anything more physical than a kiss or two. Sherlock might be a sociopath, but even he knew some things were very not good.

Besides, if he ever could be with John physically, which he knew he could not, Sherlock would want John's consent. Sherlock had done a fair amount of seducing in the name of his career (not that it ever got as far as exchanging fluids or letting himself be touched intimately), but with John, even though they'd done nothing more than kissed, it was different. With John, it mattered. With John,
Sherlock actually felt something.

John flushed, and allowed a small smile to tug at his lips. Right. Sherlock still wanted to put on a good show then? Okay. John could do that. The run had helped calm him, somewhat. John still felt something akin to arousal simmering beneath the surface, but for now, he was in control. And it did feel good to have Sherlock's hands on him...A relaxing day with Sherlock might be just the thing to put John in a better state of mind the next time he tried to...relive some tension. John turned to look up at Sherlock. They were walking so close together John's mouth nearly brushed the corner of Sherlock's lips. "Okay," he breathed, "Where do you want to take me?"

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Sherlock and John were strolling down the sidewalk arm in arm, seemingly oblivious to the other people around them. They looked every bit the 'honeymooning' couple as they wandered in and out of little shops. Mycroft squinted and kept his hands poised over the keyboard, ready to adjust his camera feed at a moment's notice. His brother and John had started out at a little cafe for lunch, which had enabled Mycroft some time to practice maneuvering this new system. But now he needed to concentrate on keeping them in frame as they moved. The Hamptons had frustratingly fewer cameras than his own London.

Gregory, himself, and everyone they had brought with them had arrived early that morning. They had barely set foot into the spacious, multi floor office/suite accommodations Mycroft had procured when Sherlock had called to report another, unexpected murder.

Mycroft had ordered his agents to investigate while Anthea and the rest of his staff unpacked/set up most of the equipment. Mycroft had focused on setting up his surveillance suite in his temporary new office. After two hours of listening to on and off complaints from Gregory that he "could help if only you'd let me," Mycroft had snapped at the Detective Inspector. He'd informed Gregory that he was only a consultant, and should expect a reduced role in the proceedings. Gregory had left the room after that.

Gregory was likely on the first floor with most of the others at this moment. Mycroft was gratified to have found a space that met their needs so well. They were renting three floors high up in a corporate skyscraper that were usually reserved for important international collaborative projects. Because of this, the three floors Mycroft and the others currently occupied where a mix of relaxed/luxurious living quarters and equally luxurious spaces to work in.

The first floor held many bedrooms with a common sitting room and kitchen. This was where most of the team would sleep. The second floor was filled with meeting rooms and enough computer/technology equipment that Mycroft could orchestrate a small war. This is where most of the behind the scenes work that may become necessary would take place. Mycroft was certain, because he trained his people well, that all the equipment they had brought with them was properly installed by now. Then there was the top floor. This contained bedrooms for himself, Anthea, and Gregory, a large sitting area with plush furniture, and a study lined with wood paneling and books. There weren't any windows in the study, but that suited Mycroft's needs perfectly. If there were no windows there were no shades for him to draw. He didn't need to worry about counter operatives spying on his observation setup, because they could certainly never hack it.

At the moment Mycroft was in the study with his computer and a few other instruments laid out on the impressive wooden desk. It wasn't the system he was used to, but it would do. He doubted anything of true importance would happen today, which made it a good time to familiarise himself with any differences in systems/difficulties he may encounter as he tracked Sherlock and John's progress through the Hamptons. If it ever became necessary to track them during a chase, there
would be no margin for error between camera switches. Some of the camera feed was a bit too grainy for Mycroft's taste and he fought back a sigh. He missed London.

Gregory's footsteps were muffled by the thick carpeting. Mycroft heard him approaching anyway. He ignored it, focused on keeping an image of John and Sherlock centered on his computer screens, changing camera feeds as needed.

Gregory watched him silently for a few minutes and, because there was nothing confidential that needed to be kept from Gregory on screen, or out in the open, Mycroft was almost able to forget that the Detective Inspector was there. Almost.

"They sure look cozy for two people who aren't really married," Gregory observed with some amount of smugness.

"My brother is a superior actor," Mycroft stated flatly. He knew what Sherlock felt, or thought he felt, for the ex-army doctor. If Mycroft could only convince Sherlock of the foolishness of those emotions...

"And what? That skill just happened to rub off on John?" Gregory scoffed, disbelieving. Mycroft's eyebrow twitched. John's affection for Mycroft's brother had been obvious from his first kidnapping. All the more reason to squelch it. They were both fools. Caring made you lazy, unable to see a waiting trap. It clouded your judgment, that was a highly recognised fact. It was the very reason that doctors were not allowed to treat family. The whole concept was altogether too...messy.

"Fine, don't answer me," Gregory continued, "But I know what I'm looking at," Gregory paused then and leaned over Mycroft's shoulder until the elder Holmes brother could feel the detective inspector's breath on his ear, "and I know you do, too."

Mycroft forced himself to draw an even, calm breath before replying. "Why have you come to irriate me Gregory? Run out of useful things to do?"

Gregory, however, did not take the bait. Instead he held his position until Mycroft was sorely tempted to turn and try to glare him away. Finally Gregory said, with no small hint of a smile in his voice, "Why do you always rise to the occasion?" And then Gregory was gone from the room as quickly as he had come.

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Brilliant surf crashed over John's head as Sherlock pulled him underneath the surface of the ocean. John struggled and squirmed before managing to break free and lift his head out of the water. He gasped for breath while jerking his head back and forth, scanning for Sherlock's next attack.

They had spent a good portion of the day exploring the town, seeing the sights, and just being themselves...with a little more touching involved than usual given the circumstances. John had thoroughly enjoyed himself. He'd surrendered himself to the day. Instead of over thinking every look and touch he'd simply done what felt natural and left it at that. Grasping Sherlock's hand as they walked along the street, brushing an errant curl away from Sherlock's face after a brief kiss, listening to an outdoor concert they'd stumbled across with his head on Sherlock's shoulder.

Now they had returned to their hotel, changed into their swim trunks, and were playing around into the surf. John wasn't quite sure how this game had materialised, but Sherlock was currently trying to dunk him under the water as often as possible, and John was trying to retaliate in kind. Sherlock, naturally, was winning.
John jumped when he felt a light touch at his back, ready to squirm away, but Sherlock's arm tightened around his waist, pulling John's back against Sherlock's chest. "Truce, truce, I'm not trying to pull you under this time." John glanced at Sherlock disbelieving, until Sherlock's fingers came up to run over John's lips. "Your lips are blue," Sherlock observed, "We should get out for a while."

John leaned back against Sherlock's chest for a moment, feeling the cold now that his own chest was no longer beneath the water. "I think you're right," John murmured, starting to shiver lightly in the late afternoon breeze. They separated, and scrambled towards the shore.

By the time they stepped up onto the beach, John was really beginning to shiver, and he could see a light blue tinge the edges of Sherlock's lips as well. "I think we stayed in too long," John mused, handing Sherlock one of the towels from the small pack they'd stashed on the beach earlier.

They quickly dried themselves, leaving their towels around their shoulders for warmth. John glanced at their hotel thinking of a warm shower and, possibly, a cup of tea. He had just turned to suggest said plan to Sherlock when he spotted what appeared to be a uniformed local police officer heading for them.

Naturally, the authorities in New York City and in the Hamptons had been notified, at least in part, of the efforts currently taking place to capture and subdue the serial killer they had been chasing. Although John was a little sketchy about the details, he knew the American police force in both districts were cooperating with the New Scotland Yard and, whatever Mycroft's team was called. Perhaps this lone officer meant there was news from Mycroft? Although Mycroft usually called or sent a car to 'collect' then if there was any kind of news about a case. John suspected this practice was largely to annoy Sherlock.

"Can we help you, officer?" John asked politely, still not sure if this particular officer was aware of or working on their current case.

The officer, who's badge proclaimed him to be 'Andy' stood with his hands on his hips and looked genuinely displeased. "I'm going to have to ask you two to move along," Andy said sternly.

John glanced around for a moment, confused, then looked back to the officer. "Why?" John asked. "Is the beach closing?"

'Andy' took a menacing step closer. "Don't play dumb. We have families come to this beach. The last thing they want is for their kids to see that," Andy gestured to Sherlock and John's joined hands.

John looked down and was slightly surprised; he hadn't even realised he'd taken Sherlock's hand in his. John glanced up at the cop, and then the anger started to set in. Never one to be intimidated, John took his own step forward, invading the officer's personal space. "Holding hands is not against the law," John said evenly, his eyes narrowed. He'd defended Harry before against close minded people like this. It was a bit of a shock to feel that hatred directed at Sherlock and himself. John's jaw clenched. Especially since Sherlock's fall, he'd be damned if anyone tried to slander his best friend's name.

"I'm asking you nicely," Andy said in a low voice, sounding anything but nice, "Take a walk."

"That's what we were about to do, before you came over and started handing out orders," John replied. "This beach is open to the public."

Andy sneered, laying a hand on his nightstick. "Yeah, decent folks, not-"

John leaned forward slightly, when he saw Andy's hand land on his weapon. At the same moment
he felt Sherlock tug him backwards slightly. The consulting detective stepped forward, in front of John, and cut Andy off. "You have been impotent for six months now, something you'd like to blame on biology or illness when it is, in fact, a matter of psychology. However, you ego is so childish and mired in stereotypical delusions that you feel to admit this would make you, somehow, less of a man. Not that beating your wife is helping either-

"I never touched Laura!" Andy broke in, his face turning red.

Sherlock took another step forward as he spoke, in full deduction mode. Andy, took a step back, but Sherlock pressed on, inching forwards as he spoke, "No, not beaten her to the point of unconsciousness, you learned not to do that from your father. *Those* types of injuries might lead to an arrest one day. A little slap here, a bruise there, pushing her down into the mattress until she can hardly breathe just to recapture some of your own misbegotten beliefs about what it is to be a *man*, well that's all fine then, in your eyes."

"Shut up!" Andy shouted, but Sherlock wasn't near done.

Sherlock spoke in a low, almost hissing tone and Andy flinched at though his words physically stung. "Because you refuse to admit the obvious, that your impotence is psychological and thus, entirely your own fault, your body has taken to asserting it's built up sexual impulses when you are most relaxed and least likely to get in its way. This has lead to several state of arousal around your partner, probably on stake outs or while filling out paperwork. All leading to this, a misguided attempt to reassert your perceived heterosexuality; foolish really, most humans are at least somewhat bisexual, even if only in passing, and that is normal. Is suggest you return to your car and patrol elsewhere before I reveal any more of your secrets. Threaten my *husband* again and I will personally see to it that you are not only removed from the force, but driven out of town by the people you once thought were your friends."

Sherlock loomed over Andy once he'd finished, the officer was red with embarrassment and slightly hunched against Sherlock's penetrating stare. Andy clenched his jaw, then his fists before spitting out, "Fuck you!" and walking, somewhat shakily, up towards the road. Sherlock held his position, watching intently until the prejudiced officer was no longer in sight. Only then did he turn back to face John, surprised to find him smiling.

"That was a bit not good in the best way, Sherlock," John murmured. Then he added, "Thank you."

Sherlock stepped over to John and laid his hands gently on his husband's shoulders. "It seemed like the quickest way to dissolve the situation without risk to you."

John's mouth quirked up then in an almost smirk. "I could've taken him, but yeah, it's better to keep a low profile. That and I think your blows left more scars than mine ever could."

Sherlock smiled, leaned down, and kissed John, almost chastely, for a long minute, keeping his arms tight around his blogger. When he pulled back he ran a hand lightly through John's hair he said, "Let's get back to the hotel. You can take that shower you were thinking of and I'll order room service for us."

John arched a distrustful eyebrow. "You'll eat?"

Sherlock shrugged. "I may be persuaded to finish an appetiser."

John nudged him good-naturedly and said, "You'll eat a full meal and like it. I saw you picking at your brunch the morning after the wedding. And your lunch today is not enough food for the entire day."
All Sherlock would admit to, even if he knew he'd let John win this argument for John's own peace of mind, was, "We'll see." John smiled as though he saw right through Sherlock, and Sherlock wasn't surprised. John was one of the few people who usually could.

~*~*~*~

Greg's bare feet swept over the sitting room on the third floor of their 'accommodations' as Mycroft had called them. It was late and he should be sleeping, not milling around in his pajamas, but this case was unsettling. He wanted it wrapped up. He wanted it over with.

Greg ran a hand over his face and let out a long breath. He loved his job, he loved helping people, but it also brought him to some very dark places sometimes...

He stilled when he heard the jerky clack of fingers typing on keys. Greg narrowed his eyes and turned his head, listening. He thought everyone had gone to bed hours ago. He closed his eyes and listened again...yes, it was still there.

Given that the typing was coming from the study Mycroft had secured as a temporary personal office, and the fact that Greg knew enough about Mycroft that he had absolute faith in Mycroft's security, it had to be the great annoyance himself, working late. Greg rolled his eyes. And the git had the gall to lecture him on working too hard.

Moving again, Gregory quickly rounded the door into Mycroft's study. "You should be sleeping," Mycroft murmured, without breaking stride in his typing.

"I could say the same for you," Greg replied, leaning against the door frame in his pajamas and robe. Of course, Mycroft was still fully dressed in that damn suit of his. "Are you still spying on your brother?"

Mycroft glanced up briefly, looking anything but amused, "I am familiarizing myself with the camera systems in the Hamptons," Mycroft said flatly.

Greg pushed off the door and began walking towards Mycroft's desk. "So, you're practising for when you will actually be spying on your brother."

Mycroft didn't bother to glance up this time, he just continued typing. "Go to bed, Gregory," Mycroft muttered.

Greg, ignored Mycroft's command, leaning on the edge of his large desk instead. "Did our agents find out anything more about the murders of Dylan and Kyle?"

Mycroft arched his eyebrows as he typed. His face still did not leave the screen, but he let out a long-suffering sigh. "My agents were unable to find anything that would be particularly helpful in this case, yet."

Greg frowned. "What did they find? When? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Don't be difficult, Gregory," Mycroft muttered, "I didn't give you a report on their findings, because it was unnecessary. We are not near an arrest yet. When we are, you will be notified."

Greg felt himself flushing red with anger. "Excuse me?" Greg asked in a low, dark tone. "Is that the only reason you brought me here, Mycroft? To swoop in and arrest whoever you point at, no questions asked?"

"Don't be ridiculous Gregory," again Mycroft refused to look up, "You'll receive a briefing at least
thirty minutes beforehand, time permitting."

Greg sucked in an angry breath through his nose, jerked his arm forward and slammed Mycroft's laptop shut so quickly that the elder Holmes brother barely had time to get his fingers out of the way. Mycroft's face was carefully impassive, but his eyes betrayed his surprise.

"I did not fly across an ocean to twiddle my thumbs while other people do the dirty work of bringing down this killer!" Gregory hissed. Gregory leaned forward, his palm pressing down on the laptop. He might have broken it, and he didn't care. "I might not be a genius like you and your brother, but damnit, Mycroft I am more than useless!"

Mycroft rested his hands lightly on the edge of his desk, and studied Gregory for a moment. "I did not mean to imply that you were. It is simply the most constructive use of resources to keep people where they can be most effective."

Greg gave the laptop a shove and it crashed forwards into Mycroft's knuckles; Mycroft didn't even blink. "And we're back to me being your overgrown lapdog!"

"Yourself, the New Scotland Yard, and the local police will receive the credit for the arrest," Mycroft said, slowly, evenly.

Greg slammed a fist down onto Mycroft's fancy wooden desk. "It's not about the damn credit, Mycroft!" He was truly shouting now.

Mycroft stood now, but made no move to close the distance between them. "Gregory, I need you to calm down."

Gregory chuckled mirthlessly, running a hand over his mouth. "That's rich. You want me to calm down when you get off ruling the bloody world!"

"Gregory..."

"Oh, right, not the whole world, just whatever part of it you've set your sights on. Are people just pawns to you? Do you care at all? Or are any means justified to get the famous Mycroft Holmes whatever he bleeding wants?!" Greg shook his head in disgust. "You're a real piece of work!"

Greg took a step forward and sucked in a breath to continue when another voice cut him off. "Stop it!" Greg whipped around to find Anthea standing in the doorway. She too, was still dressed. As she walked closer, Greg could see that she was shaking. It wasn't until she spoke that he realized she was shaking with anger. "You don't know anything!" She hissed.

"Anthea," Mycroft said, more softly than he had said Gregory's name. It may have been meant to silence his personal assistant, but it didn't work.

"You think you've seen the dark side of people? The depths of depravity with your precious New Scotland Yard? You. have. seen. nothing." Anthea stood face to face with Greg now, staring up at him. Her anger was so unexpected, Greg was left speechless. "When you've seen what he does," she said pointing to Mycroft, "Who he helps, make your useless judgments then!" She was speaking in a strangled whisper and Greg was no longer sure if it was discretion, or because of the tears brimming over her eyes.

"I've got some news for you detective inspector. You're precious New Scotland Yard is every bit as useless as Sherlock has always said it was. It hasn't stopped people from being wrongly accused, from their lives being ruined by those false accusations. New Scotland Yard did nothing to help Luke fight charges of abuse that were not true. Do you even care about the truth, or are you just after
a certain amount of arrests so you can look good?"

She was advancing on Gregory now, and Greg gave ground, backing into the books which lined the walls. "We could barely afford to keep each other alive, and his undeserved record didn't make it any easier." Anthea's eyes were shining with rage and, perhaps, a touch of madness in the dim light, "When I became pregnant, we thought it could be a new start, even though it was hard." She pulled for air and swallowed hard. "But my family wouldn't give up. They were convinced I was trapped in a violent relationship, and I nothing I said could change their minds."

Anthea's head jerked to the side slightly, as if tilting under the weight of her memories. "When I got sick," her voice was low and dark, "I went to the hospital." A humorless chuckle. She shook her head. "I actually thought that losing the baby was the worst thing that could've happened." Her hand pressed to her lower abdomen and her eyes shifted slightly, no longer looking at Greg. "When I woke up I was told three things that ruined everything. The baby was gone. It was unlikely I could ever have another. And Luke," her voice caught and her hands clenched into fists, "because of his reputation, and his desperate attempts to reach me, and whatever else they wouldn't tell me..." Her face grew pinched and her mouth drew into a grim line. Her eyes shifted again, fixing Greg in his place as the bore into him. "The New Scotland Yard had 'taken care of him' for me."

Greg sucked in a breath, ashamed and appalled. Anthea pressed on, her voice grim. "You may think you bring people to justice, but he (she was pointing at Mycroft again) is someone who actually tries to make things right!"

They stood silently for a moment, each frozen by the unexpected weight of the argument. Mycroft was the first to move. He stepped quietly behind Anthea and placed a hand gently against her back. "Anthea," he murmured, his voice soft and reassuring.

Anthea turned and brought her hand up to cover her mouth. "Mycroft...I'm-I'm sorry." She sounded so small... Mycroft gave her arm a squeeze and gently but firmly began to guide her out of the room.

"Shhhh, Come with me," Mycroft murmured, one hand beginning to rub small circles against Anthea's back. Anthea went, leaning against him slightly.

Greg could hear Mycroft continuing to murmur to his assistant in a calm, reassuring way, but he couldn't bring himself to listen anymore. He felt too sick with himself. Yes, Mycroft could be an arse sometimes, but Greg had over reacted. Greg thought he must have really sounded out of control for Anthea to spit her tragic story out at him... Mycroft and he were probably the only ones who knew, and Greg felt guilty that he'd upset her that much.

Greg clenched his fists for a moment and stared down at the carpet. Hadn't he just been thinking how difficult it could be to face the dark sides of people? He shook his head at himself. Maybe he really did have no idea...but he definitely owed Anthea and Mycroft an apology. With a small, tired sigh, Gregory trod off to his room.
Trust

Chapter Summary

Relationships are founded on trust. John and Sherlock have a great deal of trust in each other, if not themselves. Mycroft and Greg are exploring the possibility of trusting each other.

Chapter Notes

I would like to offer my thanks to all those who have commented, given kudos to, and/or bookmarked/subscribed this story. Seeing your enthusiasm for it really makes me happy. ^_^

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And, naturally, thanks goes to my flat mate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

Chapter 17: Trust

John sipped at the dregs of his Thai iced tea while he waited for Sherlock on the corner. Sherlock had nipped into a local grocer for a cheap loaf of bread. John hadn't been quite done with his tea yet, and had stayed on the corner to get some air. He knew that Sherlock would be back quickly, but it gave him a little time to think.

For the past few days, in the quiet moments when they weren't subtly tailing Albert and Trevor, John found himself fighting a growing sense of dread-like he was at the edge of a deep precipice with a maelstrom of gales at his back. Of course, the metaphor didn't help; it just brought his mind to entirely separate, and equally unpleasant memories.

John swallowed, shook his cup, and listened to the ice rattle as he tried to pin point the cause of his distress. He was frustrated, sure. Even with opportunities which John was beginning to suspect were planned (by Sherlock), he still hadn't been able to achieve satisfaction. Sexual frustrations aside, there was something else nagging at him, some larger concern he couldn't seem to pin down.

John's feelings for Sherlock were...well, they were his own feelings, and he would deal with them appropriately. Sherlock and he had already (kind of) talked about that (not really) before the wedding. So what was it?

John summoned the memory of a conversation long past. It was, in fact, not long after Sherlock's 'return'. Sherlock had given all appearances of focusing on an experiment when he straightened, suddenly, and turned to face John. "When did you decide you trusted me?"

John had lifted his head from the book he'd been reading, his face the picture of confusion. "I'm
"When did you decide you trusted me?" Sherlock repeated. "Things have, for all intents and purposes, returned to normal. This indicates that you trust me, that you **forgive** me. Why?"

John's eyes had softened then, and a slow smile formed on his lips. "I've always trusted you."

Sherlock raised a suspicious eyebrow. "**Always**?"

John smirked and replied, "I *don't* shoot serial murderer cabbies for just anyone, you know."

Sherlock had smiled at that and seemed reassured. He had just begun to return to his experiment when John added, "Also, telling me that Irene Adler was still alive helped a bit. Are you going to try to track her down again, now that Moriarty's web is destroyed?"

Sherlock made a face. "Why would I want to do **that**?"

"I dunno," John had replied with a shrug, "I always figured you had a thing for her or something."

Sherlock rolled his eyes then, and gave a derisive snort. "**Please. She was a worthy opponent for the game, I grant you. But...romantically? I believe the saying is 'We would kill each other.'""

John had raised an eyebrow at this. "**Oh? You wouldn't choose someone as smart as yourself for a romantic partner?**" Sherlock had given him such an intense, and such an odd look then that John was forcibly reminded of Sherlock's first comments on love. "**Right, sorry, not your area.**" John had lowered his head, resolved to return to his reading when, just barely, he heard Sherlock speak again.

"**If I ever did...I would want to do it properly.**" John had slowly raised his head from his book, and glanced carefully at Sherlock, half suspecting his flat-mate to run when he realized he was under observation. He'd only ever heard Sherlock talk about love derisively, never seriously. "**I would have to trust them completely.**"

And there it was. The one reason the great Sherlock Holmes would never be moved to love. There was only a handful of people he trusted at all, and even that was somewhat begrudgingly. Perhaps he and Mycroft both saw too much of the dark underbelly of the world to make themselves that vulnerable. Absolute trust would be necessary if the notion were to even be considered. How could one trust when they saw the truth behind so many lies? John suspected Sherlock and Mycroft may be taking the safest course by eschewing all romantic love; which didn't say much for the state of humanity. Even so, John had, and did feel honored to have what trust Sherlock felt he could still give.

John had allowed a small, contented smile to form on his lips. "**Well, you'll always have me,**" he had murmured. Sherlock had turned away then, but not fast enough for John to miss the answering smile on his lips.

Pulling himself back to the present moment, John resolved to rely on the trust Sherlock and he had formed. Sherlock had known how difficult this case would be, that was why he had asked John for his participation in the first place. 'I really need to focus on feeling, going along for the ride, and unpacking things later when...**this**...is over...' John mused to himself, leaning forward to deposit his empty plastic cup in the public bin close to him. When he straightened again John leaned right into a solid, warm wall of Sherlock.

Sherlock's arms tightened around his middle. John closed his eyes and leaned his head back onto Sherlock's shoulder. Sherlock used the opportunity to place small kisses and nips along John's neck.
and up his jaw. John turned towards his husband as Sherlock's lips found his, drawing him into a
slow, heated kiss. Feeling breathless, John slid his hands up his husband's arms before stopping to
play lazily with the ends of Sherlock's curls. John leaned into Sherlock, suddenly dizzy as their
mouths slid together. He could feel Sherlock's fingers fisting in his shirt (it was a bit too hot for
jumpers) and felt a thrill run down his spine. John shouldn't find Sherlock's possessive side
so...compelling, but he did. When Sherlock finally pulled away, John bit his lip to stifle a wholly
embarrassing whine that threatened to rise in his throat.

"Time to get to the lake," Sherlock murmured against his lips.

Lake? John's brain felt a bit fuzzy, a side effect from being so...frustrated, recently. Oh, right, the
lake. Albert and Trevor were going to have a picnic by the lake, according to Mycroft, and Sherlock
had suggested feeding the ducks on the far side so that they could keep an eye on the newlyweds
without raising suspicion. John took a step back and cleared his throat. "Right, which way?"
Sherlock's gaze lingered on John for a moment, accompanied with a smirk that made John sure
Sherlock was aware of his affect on John and was taking some smug satisfaction in his...influence.
John looked pointedly at the ground, feeling himself blush. He really had to get some relief soon or
he would embarrass himself, with or without the excuse of biology. For all that, he felt an easy smile
tug at his lips when Sherlock's hand brushed against his, interlocking their fingers.
Sherlock gave John's hand a gentle tug and murmured, "This way." John did what he always did; he
followed Sherlock.

~*~*~*~

A childlike giddiness swelled in John's chest as they approached the lake. Most of the ducks were
paddling in the water of the near shore. John tore open the bread and started tossing breadcrumbs
before they were properly close enough, but it did attract the ducks' attention, causing them to cluster
towards Sherlock and John.

John knew Sherlock and Mycroft both were tracking the Royal newlyweds so, he decided to
concentrate on feeding the ducks. As Sherlock had often reminded him on a stake-out, they couldn't
both look. After a brief glance at the newlyweds' picnic site, John handed the loaf to Sherlock so that
he could grab a piece and resumed his own process of tearing off pieces of bread to toss to the ducks.

By the time he reached for his third piece, John was feeling more than a bit surrounded. Most of the
ducks were waiting patiently, but they were also crowding kind of close.

"Sherlock," John began, pressing his side into his husband's, "Think we should move?"

"There's a bridge over the water to the left," Sherlock said indicating the direction with a shrug of his
head, "As long as they keep to the water that should put a little friendly distance between us."

John gave a brief nod and leaned forward with the intent of jogging to the bridge, a bit eager to put
some distance between himself and the pushy waterfowl, when Sherlock's hand on his arm stopped
him. "They'll only chase you if you run," Sherlock explained, walking at a measured pace beside
John. John gave a quick glance over his shoulder and cringed at the creepy image of three dozen
small birds walking in step behind them.

The path curved out and away from the water before circling back towards the bridge and, much to
John's relief, most of the ducks took to the water again, heading for the bridge as well. A few
stubborn ducks followed them onto the bridge, but Sherlock quickly coaxed them back into the
water.
They stood close together, the loaf balanced between them as they drew off slices and distributed them in tiny pieces. The ducks were causing a small ruckus, drawing out stragglers from further along the lake. John drew back his arm and hurled the bread as far as he could, which admittedly, wasn't far, but it kept the ducks and a few stray geese from clamoring on top of one another to be in 'the best spot'.

John glanced over at Sherlock just as Sherlock turned to grin at him. In order to rest his elbows on the railing of the bridge, Sherlock had leaned down, leaving their heads approximately level. Taking advantage of this, John side-stepped closer and leaned his forehead against his husband's. Sherlock let John rest there a moment, before swooping in for a quick kiss.

John smiled and leaned his side into Sherlock's, refocusing on the task at hand. He wondered if this was how Sherlock and he would act if they really were a couple. John decided they were a bit more affectionate now than they would be if this was the norm. John mused that their overly affectionate actions were, in part, because of John's own frustrations and, likely, in part to annoy Mycroft/play to their audience. It was the gentle leaning into each other, while more or less on a stake out, that John could see happening with regularity. Then again, Sherlock's possessiveness seemed natural for him, which might motivate the consulting detective to act on his 'sentiment.' But, of course, there wasn't any real sentiment of that nature between them. It was all (mostly) an act.

A careful nudge to his shoulder brought John out of his reflections. Glancing up, John locked onto Sherlock's pale blue-green gaze. "Something interesting about the bread?" Sherlock asked.

John flushed as he realised he had been studying the same small piece of bread in his hands for a few minutes now. He shrugged, and let it drop into the water where it was quickly eaten. "Just thinking," he murmured, and God was he sick of it. He would talk himself into just going with things, barely glimpsing 'comfortable,' before his muddled feelings and doubts would start creeping back in. Was it any wonder Sherlock tried to distance himself from his own feelings when feelings themselves could cause so much trouble? Still, he didn't want to upset Sherlock and make him doubt their ruse again; this case would likely turn out to be dangerous enough. That was a good thought to put voice to, considering Sherlock's appalling lack of concern for his own safety. "Don't do anything stupid on this case, alright?"

Sherlock seemed to understand, because a small smirk began to play on his lips. "Given my relative intelligence, I doubt that is possible."

John smiled and gave Sherlock a small nudge. "You know what I meant."

Sherlock's arm drew around John's waist, and squeezed the shorter man's hip. Sherlock opened his mouth to speak, when his gaze suddenly flitted to the side, focused on something over John's shoulder. John turned to see yet another police officer looking sternly at them. Remembering their last interaction with a police officer, John bristled. That is, until the officer in question pointed upwards and to the right, at a sign that clearly prohibited feeding the ducks. John flushed, embarrassed that he'd missed it, then turned an accusatory glance at Sherlock. "Did you see that sign?" he whispered.

Sherlock gave an irritated sigh and rolled his eyes. "Of course I saw the sign. Irrelevant. Everyone feeds the ducks."

"Sherlock!" John hissed, but Sherlock had already straightened and begun to address the police officer.

"My apologies," Sherlock murmured, but John did not miss the subtle turn of Sherlock's heel. He
was going to run, and damned if John wasn't going to run with him. He'd had enough trouble after that graffiti incident.

"You'll need to pay a fine," the officer began, taking out his notebook.

John saw another smirk settle itself on Sherlock's lips, and cringed internally. If Sherlock wasn't so smart, and so fast, he'd never be able to get away with being such an arse sometimes.

"Only if you catch us first," Sherlock drawled in his deep baritone. The officer had just begun to look up from writing them a ticket, when Sherlock tossed the remaining bread at his feet and took off running, John following close on his heels. Most of the birds dove for the bread, but enough took to the air around Sherlock and John, creating such confusion as made it impossible for the officer to chase them.

Sherlock and John tore through the park, into the main part of town and ducked sharply into an alley before they stopped.

"That was a bit ... not good, Sherlock," John gasped out, trying to regain his breath.

Sherlock scowled in irritation. "Oh dear me, officer assaulted by water fowl and baked goods. I'm sure he can expect much worse throughout the course of his career."

John giggled between puffs of air and shook his head. "Yeah, worse certainly has happened to New Scotland Yard officers on your account." Sherlock just rolled his eyes. "Won't we lose Albert and Trevor now?" John continued, peeking out into the street as though the Royal couple would come strolling by any moment.

Sherlock shook his head. "Not likely." He tapped a discreet earpiece he wore which even John had trouble seeing. "Mycroft has alerted me of their next destination."

"Oh?" John tipped his head to the side and stared up at Sherlock, his breath nearly back, "And where is that?"

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Greg breathed out a short huff of air as he pulled the large steel bowl closer and mixed the ingredients. He'd just added the last bit of the flour, leaving the batter at its thickest and, considering he'd already made two batches before this, his arm was getting a bit tired.

Greg had spent the first day or so after his row with Mycroft and Anthea going over the case file, looking for new leads. He might have been able to ask Mycroft for new information, if there was any, but, in truth, he hadn't wanted to face him. Greg was still angry at Mycroft for being, well, Mycroft, but he also felt guilty for letting his temper get the better of him.

This case must have been wearing on everyone, because he doubted Anthea would have snapped at him and revealed such a tragic, personal story otherwise. She probably had never shared that story with anyone but Mycroft and those involved. Greg felt guilty for knowing it. There were many brave men and women working for the Yard, but they couldn't always get it right. There were, as Sherlock would say, too many variables. Greg liked to think Anthea's case would have gone differently if he'd been on the job, certainly if Sherlock had been.

That was what made being a police officer difficult; Greg never forgot the cases he couldn't solve, or when things went badly. He tried to use those lessons to be a better officer, but he still couldn't forget. A supervisor had told him once that remembering his own mistakes and always scrutinized his own work, was what made Greg such a good officer. That supervisor had also advised Greg not
to take his work home with him. Greg hadn't listened, and it had been a strong factor in the ending of his first marriage. Now, when he was 'living' this case as a consultant in the states, waiting for news, and stressed about recent developments, Greg did the only things he could think of to distract himself; he made biscuits.

Like Sherlock, Greg also came from a large family. Greg was one of five children and, in addition to working as a teacher, his mother had become an excellent cook. Being one of the older children, Greg had also learned to cook. Granted, he could have chosen a healthier option than biscuits, but he was upset, and this was comfort food.

The smell of peanut butter biscuits with chocolate chunks wafted through the shared kitchen and, Greg was sure, the common living area as well. When he'd crept downstairs to the first floor of their accommodations just after lunch, he hadn't seen anyone. He could only assume they were busy on whatever task Mycroft had set them to. Greg sighed as he stirred. He would have to apologise to Mycroft, and Anthea next time he saw them. In the meantime though, he would finish what he had started.

Greg set the bowl down and tossed in large handfuls of chocolate chunks he'd cut from whole chocolate bars earlier. He had most of a batch cooling on the counter, one in the oven, and, shortly, this third would be ready to go. It was really too many biscuits, even for the team they had, but it was soothing work and easy to do in the well-stocked kitchen. Greg was using a family recipe he'd had memorised for years that called for 20 large spoonfuls of peanut butter to a batch. It still seemed like a ludicrous amount of peanut butter, but it made for soft, chewy biscuits, so he wasn't about to complain.

The recipe hadn't been in his family long, one eight years. It began when his sister Laura had moved to the states and began exploring biscuit, or cookie, recipes. Peanut butter was too highly priced in the UK for Greg to make it often, but when he'd found several jars in the well stocked kitchen, it felt like a sign. If nothing else, once all the flour was added, it was a work-out for his frustrations.

Greg had almost made them without chocolate chunks (those weren't strictly necessary) when he hadn't found any. He wasn't sure who had ordered the chocolate bars, but he was grateful when he found them. Chopping them up had taken a while and left his hands coated in a thin chocolate film, which required a thorough hand-washing to remove. Much of this recipe resulted in sticky hands, and Greg had just stooped to wash his own hands again, when Anthea pushed open the door, head buried in her phone as usual.

Greg winced when he saw her, but as it took her a moment to look up, she missed it. "Hi," Greg said softly, reaching for a towel to dry his hands.

"Hello," she murmured in reply, before looking back down at her phone.

Yes, this was definitely awkward. But, Greg had never walked away from a situation just because it was difficult, and he wasn't about to start now. He dried his hands, then stepped around the counter to face Anthea. "I'm sorry," Greg said softly. She must have regained much of her composure because, while her fingers did hesitate a moment, she continued typing away. Greg was not deterred. "I lost my temper, and I should not have spoken to Mycroft like that. Also, I'm sorry I upset you so much." This time her fingers did still, but she still refused to look up. "I'm sorry Anthea, I won't tell anyone...I shouldn't even know."

Her eyes shifted then, a slow, sideways glance to the counter. "You've been busy," She observed, "Are the biscuits any good?"

"You tell me," Greg said, offering a small smile and gesturing with his hand.
Keeping the phone in one hand Anthea stepped forward and lifted a biscuit from the rack it had been cooling on. When she finished chewing she returned Greg's smile and said, "We may have found a use for you after all."

"Have as many as you like," Greg said, pulling on an oven mitt to take the newest batch out of the oven. It had hardly been a heart to heart, but Greg understood all the same. Anthea was willing to forget what had happened. When he talked to Mycroft, Greg would be a bit more insistent on being treated respectfully, but that was between him and Mycroft.

"I take it you all have been busy as well?" Greg asked, carefully placing the hot biscuits on the rack with the aid of a spatula.

Anthea nodded, already reaching for another biscuit. "It's a good thing you made so much, the others should be in shortly." As if on cue, a handful of Mycroft's agents slid into the kitchen. Greg assumed they must have broken for a snack or something, since they had all made their way to the kitchen.

It was gratifying to see evidence that Mycroft did not push his agents to exhaustion, as Mycroft had once told him. Greg imagined there were missions, days when they were pushed because they had to be, but while there was a lull in a case, like now, it was important to keep your team in top condition. Greg admitted he needed to take that advice for himself as well, and wondered if Mycroft might also need a reminder about pushing oneself.

"These are good mate!" One of the agents spoke up. He was a tall man with light red hair and pale skin.

Greg nodded and smiled. "Thank you. Please, help yourselves; I may have gone a bit overboard."

There was a chorus of chuckles as the team dug in. "Have you found anything new?" Greg asked as he rinsed the biscuit sheets to prepare them for the next batch.

A slender woman with short black hair and pale brown irises rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I wish. I've been staring at a computer screen for hours."

"What have you been doing?" Greg asked, wiping the biscuit sheets dry.

"Following every lead we have so far," The red headed man replied. He nodded his head towards the dark haired women and continued "Susan has been profiling every member of All God's Children United Church, just in case we could find the killer there, and I've been pouring over newspaper articles about hate crimes or the death of someone in the GLBT community."

Greg let out a low whistle. "That sounds exhausting, and tedious."

Every nodded. "It is," said Susan (probably not her real name), "but there is little active work to do until we get more information from Sherlock. It's looking to a needle in a haystack, but we might get lucky."

Greg nodded. "I could help," he offered.

The red headed man looked confused. "I thought you were. Mycroft said you were looking over the known victims. Not that I can blame you for taking a break, especially when it means biscuits for everyone."

Greg smiled a bit as he spooned the dough of the next batch onto the biscuit sheets. He guessed this could be considered helping in the context of things... Hearing how Mycroft had 'covered' for him, telling the others that Greg had been researching the known victims for any possible leads, it made
him feel like even more of an arse for his outburst.

The door creaked again, and Mycroft joined them. Greg was both glad, and upset to see him. Glad, because he did have to apologise, and upset because he wasn't about to do that in front of everyone. Not that Greg was embarrassed at having to apologise, but he knew Mycroft was a discreet person, and he did not want the other's asking questions, for Anthea's sake. He would have to wait until the other's filed out.

"Greetings," Mycroft murmured to the room in general, and received a round of 'hi' and 'hello in return.

"Greg made biscuits," Anthea announced, having set the phone in her pocket for the moment.

Mycroft raised an eyebrow as he took in the scene. "I see," he replied, then turned to face Greg "Ingratiating yourself with my agents?"

Greg gave a sheepish grin. "Trying to, this is a difficult case." Mycroft's eyebrow remained raised for a moment as though he heard Gregory's intent to apologise in what he had said. And why wouldn't he? Mycroft seemed to know everything else.

Mycroft turned and addressed the agents. "Any progress?"

Susan and the red headed man shook their head ruefully. "Some interesting leads, but nothing that sticks out in particular," Susan explained.

Mycroft's lips pressed firmly together in a look of frustration and disappointment. Not that Mycroft was overly expressive, but Greg was used to reading the Holmes brothers.

As Greg worked, pressing his fork into the dough he had just spooned out, creating the traditional cross hatch style for peanut butter biscuits as well as the chocolate chunks in the batter would allow, he listened to the others review things they all already knew. He remembered Mycroft working in his 'office' on the night he had argued with him. It had been very late. He remembered Mycroft's lecture on taking care of oneself. Greg had seen enough of Mycroft over the years to appreciate the work he did, but now, getting a closer look, he had to wonder if this was all Mycroft did. No matter how well Mycroft might take care of himself, doing nothing but work was not healthy. Greg should know, he was practically the poster child for that particular short-coming.

And after hearing Anthea's story, Greg had to wonder what kind of stories the other agents might have... Greg had, quite recently, called Mycroft's position lonely; maybe more lonely than Greg had realised at the time.

There was a lull in conversation just then, so Greg took the opportunity to speak up. "You can help yourself to the biscuits too, Mycroft, if you want. I made plenty and they're still warm."

Mycroft turned towards Greg, his face carefully neutral. "No, thank you Gregory, I had best be returning to my own work."

Greg snorted derisively and said, "Yes, lord knows your brother won't spy on himself." As soon as the words were out, Greg pressed the palm of his right hand against his mouth as if to shut himself up. "I'm sorry," Greg mumbled pulling his hand away from his mouth, "God, I'm sorry, that came out before I even had the chance to think about it."

Mycroft arched an eyebrow in Greg's general direction before sauntering out of the room and, most likely, making his way back to his 'office' upstairs.
"You just love antagonizing Mycroft don't you?"

Greg turned to face Susan who looked as though she were suppressing a laugh.

"You're right," the red headed man added. "I overheard the two of them bickering about something early on our first day here, when we were all setting up."

Anthea, who had resumed her typing on her phone at this point, quirked an eyebrow at the group and said, "Neither of you had to go out and buy Mycroft a new phone."

Two confused faces turned to Anthea while an embarrassed Greg put the last batch of biscuits in the oven and tried to think of a socially graceful way to follow Mycroft and apologise, properly.

"Greg did not take kindly to being invited over," Anthea continued in a low voice, "and Mycroft's phone fell casualty."

"Kidnapping is not inviting!" Greg snapped before bringing his palm to his forehead and muttering, "I have really got to stop that."

Susan and the red-headed man's eyes went wide. "You smashed his phone?!" The red-headed man whispered. "Susan's right, you do like getting under Mycroft's skin."

Greg let out a short sigh, and was suddenly seized by an idea. "You know what, you're right," Greg began, scooping up a small plate and laying out three biscuits on it, "And I'm going to go do it again by persistently offering him sweets." There was a round of barely suppressed chuckles as Greg made his way to the door. Just before leaving he paused and turned back to the group. "If I'm not back in ten minutes, take the biscuits out before they burn."

Anthea, who did not look up, nodded. "On it," she murmured.~*~*~*~

Greg knocked on Mycroft's door frame, because the door to his office was open, and waited. After a few minutes of listening to Mycroft typing away on his apparently undamaged computer, Mycroft, who did not look up, said, "I declined your offer of sweets in the kitchen. Did you think the slight altitude difference would change my mind?"

Greg shook his head and smiled despite himself. "Is there anything you don't know?"
Mycroft quirked a small smile back at Greg. "Only a few things."

"Yes, well, I'm here to help you with those things, if you'll let me," Greg replied in a low voice. After a long pause he belatedly added, "On this case, anyway."

"I am used to working alone in most cases, Gregory," Mycroft admitted.

"It's probably been safer for you to do so in the past," Greg agreed, and leaned forward in his chair to continue speaking before Mycroft could interrupt him. "I'm not saying I even understand a fraction of what you do, Mycroft, but I know enough to have a lot of respect for the work you do. You look after your brother, in your own way, and try to put things right. John couldn't write about the 'Coventry Solution' case on his blog, but he did mention it to me once, over drinks. That was brilliant."

Mycroft was looking at him again in a way that suggested he didn't know quite what to do with him. "I assure you, Gregory, I am not as susceptible to flattery as my brother can be."

Greg shook his head, but continued to smile. "I wasn't trying to imitate John, that really was a brilliant way out of it. But, my point is you do good work, and, at this particular juncture, you happen to be collaborating with Sherlock, with the police here, and with myself. I'd like to make this easier on everyone, if I could, not harder."

Mycroft 'studied' him again for a long moment, before pushing his chair back and slightly to the side. "If you wish, you may join me in my observations for the moment." There was a brief glance at the screen before Mycroft continued, "You might find Sherlock and John's current location amusing."

Greg's brown wrinkled in confusion as he stood to round the desk. "Where are they?"

"A sex shop," Mycroft answered without hesitation.

Greg sputtered as he approached Mycroft. "What?! Why?"

"They are still, mostly, trailing Albert and Trevor," Mycroft explained as Greg leaned towards the computer screen.

Sure enough, there were Sherlock and John, in a store that clearly contained a variety of dildos, vibrators, handcuffs, whips, floggers, ball gags, some other things Greg couldn't quite make out, and a rack of videos which were undoubtedly pornographic. "I'll be damned," Greg muttered, eyes scanning the scene. "Could I have a screen shot of this for blackmail?"

A soft chuckle cause Greg to turn his head to look at Mycroft, "As much as I admire your line of thinking, that video of a drugged Sherlock you have on your phone is a much more powerful 'bargaining chip' when it comes to my brother."

Greg gave a small laugh and nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"I am usually right, Gregory," Mycroft replied.

Greg smiled, and bit his tongue to stay silent. If Mycroft wanted the last word on this so badly, let him have it.

~*~*~*~*~

John fought the illogical urge to press closer to Sherlock. He was mostly successful. It wasn't as though he'd never been in a sex shop. When he was younger he knew several he would frequent. 
However, it had been many years since then, and John had, in general, become rather private about his sex life. While John had, fairly flawlessly, stood beside Sherlock during their little escapade through two different BDSM clubs earlier in this case, this shop felt a little more personal somehow. Especially because Sherlock had insisted that they buy something so they didn't look too suspicious. John didn't want to waste money, but he had very strong and very mixed feelings about perusing what the store had to offer with Sherlock watching.

Still, John felt he did an admirable job of keeping his expression neutral, a task that was harder than it should be, because of Sherlock's arm draped so casually over his shoulder.

"Well," Sherlock began conversationally, "We already have a riding crop at home. What do you think about looking over the dildo and vibrator selections?"

John felt his eyes widen slightly at Sherlock's casual tone. Not that there was any hiding what they'd supposedly come for in a store like this, but still. "Fine," John said, slightly clipped. He cleared his throat and tried again. "That would be fine." Damn Sherlock and his damn smirk. 'And damn me,' John thought, 'for finding both so damn endearing.' John didn't know why the universe seemed to be conspiring to torture him, but its timing sucked.

Sherlock steered them over to a large display with dildos and vibrators of varying shapes and sizes, some almost comically impossible. "If I remember correctly," Sherlock drawled, tapping his fingers against his chin thoughtfully, "We both prefer vibrators, correct?"

John's throat seemed to slam shut on him for a moment, and he coughed to clear it. How the hell had Sherlock known? Stupid question. Better one: Why was he bringing it up now? It was true that, while in uni, John had a bisexual girlfriend who, after some discussion, he had allowed to use a vibrator on him. John had never been afraid of exploring his own body to discover what he liked, and had quickly agreed to his girlfriend's suggestion. She had been much more experienced than him at the time, and had made it as comfortable as possible. At first there had been pain, and a whole lot of stretching. Once that was out of the way, it had been...nice. Certainly not mind-blowing, as other people had described, but nice. John hadn't felt that the movement did much for him, but the vibrations had created strong sensual stimulation. Since the end of that relationship John had used a vibrator occasionally, when the mood struck, or he was curious to see if he could make the experience more enjoyable. He was even fairly certain he still owned one, somewhere in the recesses of his closet.

Being somewhat physically intimate with Sherlock during this-case/thing/whatever- was one thing, but he hadn't expected to have a kind-of discussion about sexual preferences. Still, while adamant about his own privacy, John had, especially as a doctor, espoused the idea that sex was nothing to be ashamed of, or squeamish about. John straightened and soldiered on. "Yes, I prefer the silicone models that have some give to them." It was the truth, and he was not blushing. He was, seriously, almost not blushing.

Sherlock arched an eyebrow, his eyes glittering with amusement, but he kept his tone and expression calm. "I agree, those feel more natural."

Aside from the fact that John had never had an actual cock inside him to compare, he had to agree. Then again, Sherlock had never had an actual cock inside him either...right. Train of thought... not helping. Feeling like he needed a little distance, John said, "I'm going to go grab some lube, take a look, tell me what you like."

Sherlock, barely, managed to contain his smirk. "You know what I like, John."

John's steps faltered slightly when he heard that, but he pressed on. He quickly found what he was
looking for, and was debating browsing on his own verses finding Sherlock again, when Sherlock found him.

"What do you think about this?" Sherlock asked, handing John a white rectangular box with a picture of a vibrator on it. The vibrator was clear with a purple base, which gave the appearance of the purple leaching up onto the silicone of the shaft. There was both vibration (with several speed options) and a set of fixed 'pearls' in the upper half of the shaft that spun when some... 'thrusting' motion of the vibrator was engaged. From what John could tell, while the vibrator was made of a flexible plastic, there was more flexible plastic between the 'pearls' and the head that allowed the vibrator to flex and 'thrust' if that feature was engaged.

John's interest was certainly piqued but, given what he knew of Sherlock's history, the detective had likely chosen this particular vibrator for himself. John wondered, briefly, if Sherlock could be as frustrated as he was, then quickly shut that thought down. Looking up with a carefully neutral face, John asked, "Did you grab the appropriate batteries?"

Sherlock smirked and brandished a package in his right hand. John had to admit to himself then that he had completely lost track of where Albert and Trevor might be. He couldn't ask about that so instead he asked, "Did you want to look at anything else?"

Sherlock shook his head and slipped his arm around John's shoulder once more. "I think we can be on our way," Sherlock murmured.

John fought not to shudder at Sherlock's touch. He glanced at the box in his hands and swallowed, hard. John knew needed to get some relief soon or his body would take it for him in his sleep. What he hadn't suspected, was his sudden impulse to take the vibrator for a joy ride. That wouldn't be necessary, of course. With how on edge he was, when they got back to the hotel, John would take a hot shower and take care of things. Everything would be fine. Just, fine...
Chapter Summary

Sherlock takes a walk, John gets some *ahem* release, and Greg and Mycroft have a talk.

Chapter Notes

Thank you very much to all those who left comments, gave kudos, and/or bookmarked/subscribed this story. Your support and comments are very appreciated and encouraging.

I would also like to thank my dedicated Beta, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

Note: This version of the story will not be the explicit version, that will be posted on my Archive of Our Own account. On this posting there will be censored content. If you want the complete, explicit version, just visit the link to my Archive of Our Own account in my profile. This warning/notification will appear in every chapter with explicit content from now on, as a reminder.

Chapter: 18 What if...

John walked into their hotel room holding a chai latte in one hand and a coffee in the other. Sherlock, who was being prodigiously impossible today, had ordered him out for coffee. Although wary of loading Sherlock up on caffeine, especially Starbucks caffeine (they had an exceptionally high level of caffeine because they only lightly roasted their beans then added a handful of heavily roasted beans to 'enrich' the flavor -Thank you Sherlock-) John had returned with the coffee rather than risk Sherlock's wrath by returning empty handed.

It had been almost a week since Albert and Trevor began their honeymoon and there had been no new facts in the case. Sherlock would rather die than admit it, but John knew him well enough to recognise when Sherlock was doubting himself, wondering if he'd gone wrong somewhere.

John had listened all morning as Sherlock had argued back and forth with himself about how the killer should have made a move by now, but Albert and Trevor were highly, if discreetly, guarded by Mycroft's agents as well as their own, and if the killer had been watching Sherlock and John as closely as they suspected he had, he may know the danger in attacking now and be biding his time. Three hours of those kinds of back and forth arguments had been enough for John to think he might start bleeding from his ears, so the coffee run had been a welcome relief.

As he strolled into their room John rolled his eyes when he found Sherlock hunched over the bible
that had been in the drawer of their nightstand, muttering to himself.

"One peppermint mocha, as requested," John muttered, thrusting his hand towards Sherlock, who blindly accepted the drink. "Sherlock," John continued, "Do you really think this is helping?"

"'Course it is," Sherlock insisted, "Mycroft has the same information about the case that we do. Trust me John, if he found something new, he'd be only too gleeful to point it out." Sherlock tapped the pages of the bible rapidly and repeatedly while muttering, "If we're going to get a break in the case outside of the killer making a move, it will be here."

John sipped his tea and studied Sherlock for a moment. His husband was all twitchy, nervous energy. If they hadn't been out and about trailing Trevor and Albert this past week, John would call it cabin fever... or boredom. John didn't know whether to be upset or happy that it had taken all of a week of Sherlock being in John's company to get bored.

"Sherlock, why don't you go for a walk?" John suggested, glancing outside at the rainy weather that had driven most of the inhabitants of the Hamptons inside. It wasn't any worse than a London rain, but still. "With your coat, of course."

Sherlock sat up straight as if something had just occurred to him. "Of course!" Sherlock muttered, "A walk, yes, in disguise. I may turn up some bit of local information that pertains to this case."

John bit back a sarcastic comment and nodded. "Yeah, and, you know, help you burn off some energy."

Sherlock didn't seem to hear John, instead rushing to their dresser and fishing through the clothing for whatever would make a good disguise. He chose John's Jacket instead of his coat and, although it did not exactly fit, Sherlock managed to make it look more comfortable than it probably was. He also chose, of all things, a pair of jeans John hadn't seen before, and a button up short sleeved shirt with a pineapple print (John's taste in all shirts seemed to be poor, aside from a few items such as his black and white striped jumper).

John was forced to turn around sharply when Sherlock began to change. They hadn't exactly been shy about changing in front of each other in general (especially during this case) but with everything that had been going on lately...better not to look.

Sherlock brushed past John, who nearly spilt his tea, and into the bathroom. Whatever Sherlock did in there, it didn't take long and resulted in his beautiful curls being smoothed almost flat against his head. The effect of the styling and the clothes was quite remarkable; John thought even he might not know Sherlock at a glance.

Before his energetic husband could get away, John snatched Sherlock by the arm and held him. Sherlock rounded on John, looking cross. "What?! You said I should go out and it's actually a good idea."

John's lips tightened with unhappiness before he spoke again. "I just wanted to ask you to be careful."

Sherlock's features softened slightly and he turned to face John properly. "Don't be ridiculous, John, I'm perfectly safe."

John raised an eyebrow and Sherlock lifted a hand to cup his face. "Honestly," Sherlock insisted. "Mycroft is paranoid of me getting to the killer before he can swoop in and finish it; he's got us both under tight surveillance."
John let out a bark of laughter and settled his hand on Sherlock's hips. "Yes, Sherlock, that's why he has you under surveillance, not your propensity to run recklessly into danger."

"There is that, too, I suppose," Sherlock admitted, looping his arms around John's neck. "Fine," he continued, looking somewhat more serious, "I promise only to observe for today. It's not like I'm expecting to run into anything interesting anyway."

John groaned as if in pain and rested his forehead against Sherlock's chest. "And if you do run into something interesting? Are you still going to just 'observe'? You are impossible sometimes; you know that, right?"

Sherlock shifted his hands through John's hair and smiled. "I believe you mean improbable. I will call you if I do come across something interesting. Alright?"

John lifted his head and nodded. "Alright."

On instinct Sherlock leaned down and pressed their lips together in a chaste kiss. It was almost frightening how easy that action was, how automatic. As he slipped out of their hotel room and down the hall, Sherlock decided he would really need to do something about that...after the case.

~*~*~*~

Greg sat in the small common area on the third floor of their accommodations. This common area had polished, smooth tile floors; or maybe they were marble-Mycroft did have expensive tastes. Spread over the smooth white floor were plush, richly coloured area rugs. Not all over the floor, but by the sofa, along the hallways, and there was one near the windows. One wall of the room was almost entirely windows. Currently, because it was night, and the only light in the room came from the fireplace on the other side of the room, and the windows displayed a brilliant picture of New York City all lit up. While Mycroft had only procured three floors of the building, it was still a skyscraper, and they were very high up.

This both enhanced the view, and increased Greg's sense of detachment from the case. While he had now taken a more active role, via doing some research of his own alongside Mycroft's agents, and speaking with the 'States officials they were working with, there wasn't much for all of them to do that ended up being truly helpful. Was all this really worth it, on the off chance that they stumbled across something useful? Absolutely. Greg had only to think of those couples who had lost their lives to this madman to remember that; but it was still tedious work.

It was getting late and he should be sleeping, but Greg's worries were keeping him awake, so he had decided to play a game of chess with himself instead. Pressed up near the windows was an ornate, round wooden table with a beautiful classic chess set, and two surprisingly comfortable leather armchairs. Greg currently sat in the chair facing the fireplace, his back to the door that led downstairs. Greg stared morosely at his chess game. He enjoyed chess, as long as his opponent wasn't so good as be impossible to beat, then it was just frustrating.

He'd hoped the game would distract him, and allow him to get some rest. Sadly, that did not seem to be the case. Greg would go back and forth, moving pieces on different sides of the board for a few turns, before his doubts dragged him back into a melancholy reverie. He was just about to get up and turn on the television instead, when movement caught his eye. Mycroft was padding silently along, over rug and tile alike, with a small plate of cookies and a mug of tea in his hand.

A smile curled on Greg's lips and his eyes crinkled with both amusement and satisfaction. After Mycroft and he had watched Sherlock and John purchase a vibrator and some lube, Mycroft had shown him the basics of navigating the surveillance system. Mycroft had explained that more than
one person could survey the system at once, given the use of multiple computers, and it would be convenient if Gregory knew how to operate the system in case it became necessary to search for, say, Mycroft's errant brother during this case. It had been a pleasant afternoon, but he hadn't seen Mycroft try his cookies.

Given Mycroft's current position with what must be some of the last of Greg's cookies-Greg still couldn't believe they'd lasted a week- Mycroft must have either tried them and liked them, or decided to try them before they were gone.

"Midnight snack, Mycroft?" Greg murmured.

The only indication that Mycroft had been startled was the stiffening of his posture and his abrupt halt of forward motion. Greg continued to smile at first but when Mycroft remained stiff for just a few moments too long he guiltily remembered Mycroft's sensitivity about his weight. Sherlock made a point of teasing Mycroft about it whenever Mycroft annoyed him, which was always. Actually most people annoyed Sherlock most of the time, that was the reason Greg needed to replace his ID as Detective Inspector so often.

It was so silly though, because Mycroft wasn't overweight. Okay, so he probably could stand to lose some weight by medical standards, but Greg had never put much stock in that. His ex-wife had been obsessed with her weight too; ridiculous. No matter how much he had tried Greg had never been able to convince her he found her more attractive with a little extra weight-despite whatever the going standard for beauty was. Greg knew Mycroft would never voice it if it was true, but he wondered if Mycroft struggled with self-doubt in the same way.

Still, Greg knew better than simply insisting that there was nothing wrong with a few cookies; lord knows that had never worked on his ex-wife. Instead he tried a different tactic.

"I'm flattered that you decided to give them a try; I know you don't have sweets very often. Will you tell me what you think of them?" And Greg meant it too.

Mycroft turned slowly and 'studied' Greg for a long moment before speaking. "They are well made Gregory; very moist. I tried the ones you ended up leaving on my desk earlier."

Greg broke out into a grin. There was something special about a compliment from a Holmes brother. If they weren't trying to manipulate you-and Greg could see no reason for Mycroft to be trying to manipulate him now-they were always honest. "I'm glad to hear it." Greg looked back to the chess game for a moment before asking. "Would you care to join me? If you're not otherwise engaged of course. It's boring just playing myself."

"You never answered my question," Greg continued, "Do you want to play a game?"

Mycroft eyed Greg for a long moment before giving the barest of nods. "Very well," he murmured, settling himself in the chair across from Gregory.

Greg beamed and rest the board. "Try not to kick my ass too badly, okay?"

Mycroft arched an eyebrow at Greg and took a bite of a cookie.
They played in amicable silence for a long while, and Greg basked in the quite companionship. One thing he'd always liked about his relationship with Mycroft, neither of them felt the need to fill silence unnecessarily, and they were, generally, comfortable around each other. Perhaps more than anyone else Greg knew, except for John and himself, Mycroft seemed to appreciate the stillness in moments like these. When you lived a hectic life, like Mycroft and he did, these moments could be healing. Space to gather your thoughts, space to ground yourself. It was very peaceful...

"Am I boring you that badly Gregory?"

Greg's head snapped up and he realized he most have dozed for a moment. He grinned sheepishly at Mycroft. "Sorry, though you should really take it as a compliment." When Mycroft made no other move, other than to raise an eyebrow, Greg elaborated. "I don't feel comfortable relaxing this much in front of just anyone."

It was subtle but, Greg saw Mycroft's mouth quirk up in a slight smile. "You mean when you're not living at your office?"

Greg chuckled and nodded. "Yeah that." He looked down and the board and whistled softly. "Wow, I am losing so badly right now."

It was Mycroft's turn to chuckle. "I do not have my heart set on thrashing you; you may retire to bed if you wish."

Greg stretched his arms over his head and studied the board. As he lowered his arms again he said, "No, that's okay. I think I can stay up to watch you win." Greg paused to glance up at Mycroft through his lashes before he added, "I'll make you fight for it though." It felt very gratifying to see Mycroft smile back at him.

In the end Greg had been right on both counts. Mycroft had won, and he'd made Mycroft fight for it. "Congratulations," Greg murmured as he tipped over his king.

Mycroft gave a small nod of his head, "Well fought."

Greg smiled up at Mycroft, then noticed a small smear of chocolate at the corner of Mycroft's mouth. It was undoubtedly leftover from the cookies he'd eaten over the course of their game. "You've got a bit of chocolate there," Greg murmured. Without thinking, Greg swiped his thumb over his tongue, leaned forward, and rubbed it back and forth at the corner of Mycroft's mouth until the chocolate had disappeared. Greg studied his work for a moment then nodded. "Got it."

When his eyes met Mycroft's surprised, wide ones Greg felt a definite blush creeping up his neck. "Sorry," Greg murmured, sliding back into his chair. "I must be more tired than I thought; I forgot myself there for a moment."

Mycroft blinked slowly, and his face resumed its usual, neutral expression. "It's fine Gregory. We should both be getting some sleep."

Greg nodded, stifling a yawn behind his hand. "Just make sure you get enough sleep. Your assistant is talking to me again, I'll know if you were up early."

Mycroft smirked as they stood. "That same goes for you, Gregory."

"Sounds like a deal," Greg replied and moved to walk past Mycroft towards his room. As he did so Greg paused and laid a hand on Mycroft's shoulder briefly. "Sleep well."

Greg was almost down the hall before he heard the soft reply, "You as well, Gregory."
John knew he really should be asleep by now, but he felt antsy. Sherlock wasn't back yet, but that wasn't much of a surprise. When out on disguise, Sherlock could be gone for days at a time. John expected Sherlock to be back by morning, but even still...he was worried. Worried and frustrated...

Greg would call if something went wrong with Sherlock, he'd promised John he would before they left. They were both well aware of Sherlock's penchant for running off. That thought, and the thought that Greg was with Mycroft, who undoubtedly had them both under surveillance, comforted John. Still, if he couldn't sleep, then John decided he would wait up for his errant husband.

John ran his hands back and forth over his arms and found himself eyeing the drawer of the nightstand on Sherlock's side of the bed. That was where Sherlock had placed the vibrator when they'd returned home from the sex shop. Since then, John had been keenly aware of its presence; especially when he was particularly...frustrated. Like now.

John trailed a hand over the fabric of his loose tank top, and down over his pajama pants, not surprised to find himself already half-hard. God...Now was as good a time as any to try to find some relief.

Standing, John dimmed the lights and walked towards the door to their hotel room. Sherlock might surprise him and come back early, so he threw the dead bolt just in case. That would give John enough time to hide the evidence. Sherlock would still know, of course, but John would be at least slightly less embarrassed.

As he turned back towards the bed, John felt a tingle of excitement brush across is skin. It had been a while since he'd found relief, and John felt more easily aroused because of it. This time, he felt sure he'd be able to satisfy himself.

John stripped off his clothes and turned down the covers of their large, plush bed. Scooting near the center, John made himself comfortable, propping pillows behind his head, and under his hips. Then, he just let his hands wander. He felt highly sensitised, his responses more exaggerated than they would normally be. John focused on just relaxing, and trying not to overthink anything. He drew his lower lip between his teeth, and his hips jerked involuntarily as his fingers circled his right nipple. Normally John would be tempted to linger there, but at the moment he just wanted release.

John's hand reached out, and pulled open the drawer of the nightstand. Once he'd retrieved the lube, John poured some into his hand and began stroking himself. He sighed and arched into the touch, fully hard now. Yes, that felt good. John lowered his other hand between his legs, gently tugging at his testicles. God... He let his hand slip lower and brush his entrance. Maybe it was his fevered arousal, maybe he was in an unusual mood, or maybe all the activities of this honeymoon had put the thought in his head; however it had happened, John wanted something inside him.

He ran his slicked thumb in circles over the sensitive head of his penis, while his fingers worked the shaft, and added another finger. John curled his fingers, searching, seeking to stimulate his prostate indirectly, since his fingers had never been long enough to reach it on his own. Thrumming with arousal, John spread his legs and canted his hips upwards to accommodate a third finger.
John lost himself in the rhythm of stroking himself and riding his fingers. When he surfaced from the sensual haze a few minutes later, it was to more frustration. What did his body want? John threw his head to this side with a frustrated sigh and his eyes fell on the open nightstand drawer. He shouldn't. He really shouldn't. Despite the ruse, he doubted Sherlock had bought the vibrator for John...and yet his slicked hands were already carefully removing the packaging and, after wiping one hand mostly dry on his thighs, inserting the batteries.

This was wrong. God, no matter how careful he was, Sherlock would know...John's cock gave an interested twitch at the thought and he sucked in a quick breath. Would Sherlock still use the vibrator, even knowing where it had been? They were both clean, so he probably would... ohgod

John leaned back on the bed, carefully lubricating the vibrator. His tongue peeked out to wet his lip as John concentrated on the feel of the slick shaft under his fingers. It was wrong, but he was beyond caring. If thinking about Sherlock, his husband, helped get him off he would worry about consequences later.

John trembled as he lined the vibrator up against the tight ring of muscle. He engaged the vibration function and tossed his head back with a moan. The roll of John's hips that followed impaled the vibrator inside several inches. God, it had been a long time since he'd felt a stretch like this..

What would Sherlock say if he caught John like this, spread open and wanting? If Sherlock really wanted him, and wasn't just pretending, he would probably watch for a moment, and observe how desperate John really was. Then he would approach, but not touch. John could almost hear that deep baritone as it purred, "Are you putting on a show, John? Or could you not wait another moment to feel something move inside you?"

John's breathing picked up and he could feel the vibrator slipping slowly inside of him as his other hand worked his shaft. Oh. This felt different. In his head Sherlock's voice spoke again, slipping over his lust filled imagination like silk. "You're eager, aching for it." This pretend Sherlock loomed over John in his mind, tantalizingly close, but still not touching. John let out a small whine and rocked his hips forward, arching into his hand and back against the vibrator.

"I wonder if I could get you this frantic while at a crime scene," imaginary Sherlock murmured. "Would you let me take you where someone might hear or see?" John was moving the vibrator back and forth inside himself now, slowly building speed.

"Yes, I do think you would let me take you anywhere if you were like this," Sherlock drawled in his head, hovering just out of reach once more. "Do you want me to touch you now, John?"

"Yes," John panted into the empty room.

"Where?" John could almost feel the breath of his smirking consulting detective on his neck.

"Fuck me..." John's words were quiet. He didn't usually talk when he masturbated, but he couldn't quite help himself. The Sherlock in his head, however, wasn't satisfied.

"What did you say, John?"
John groaned and pushed his heels into the mattress, lifting his hips up and into the assault of the vibrator. "Fuck me," John said, his voice breathy from panting but definitely louder.

"When you're enjoying this so much?" the imaginary voice whispered.

John imagined Sherlock taking the base of the vibrator in his hands and turning up the speed on both the vibration and the thrusting motion. John let out a strangled cry, rocking both into his hand and against the vibrator. John began stroking himself very quickly, and working the vibrator inside him furiously back and forth.

"I think I would rather watch you come undone like this," imaginary breath ghosted over his ear as the Sherlock in his mind leaned back on his heels, studying him with a smirk. "You're close."

And he was. John was curled slightly forward with tension, and riding high on sensation while his blood raced through his veins. A creeping tingle started at the back of John's knees and worked its way up his thighs. John moaned loudly now, unable to hold back as the tingle swept over his ass and his cock. "Aaah! Aaaah! Aaaaaah! Ooooooh," John cried, feeling his internal muscles twitch and spasm around the vibrator as his orgasm took him. His legs stiffened and stretched, his toes curling inwards from the power of his eruption as the breath left his lungs and his body convulsed with pleasure.

John lay there, panting, shaking, and dimly aware of his cum cooling on his chest and stomach.

Holy fuck...

That had to be the most powerful orgasm John had ever had. His limbs felt heavy and uncoordinated as he tried to move. His calves were sore from the sudden stretch; he felt dizzy and breathless. A flurry of unexpected, relived laughter burst from John's chest. He stretched out slowly, bathing in the tingles of the afterglow. Yes, this was exactly what he had needed. Now he could only hope that when Sherlock found out, because he would find out, that he could excuse the urgings of John's biology. At the moment John was too pleased and too relaxed to worry much about it.

Stumbling to his feet, John made his way to the shower to clean up. Once he was clean John meticulously washed the vibrator in hot water and painstakingly returned it to its' packaging, just as he had found it.

John was ready to collapse back into the bed, and he would have, except for the condition of the sheets. Several globs of sperm had missed his chest, landing to either side of where his body had lain. Add to that the sweat, and the lube, and the resulting mixture kept him from collapsing just yet.

He knew Sherlock would figure out what had happened, but John had no intention of leaving this much evidence around. He had to do something, and quickly.

Wondering what to do about the sheets, stained as they were by his fluids, John looked around for a bit, and found that there was an extra set of sheets and a couple of blankets in the top of the closet. Smiling at his good fortune, John quickly stripped the bed and remade it with the new sheets, carefully folding up the soiled ones, and sticking them on the shelf... He made a mental note to take them back down tomorrow, and hide them in the new sheets so that the cleaning staff would wash them all when they came to clean... and to tip the cleaning staff a little extra.

Finally, John pulled on his pants, soft pajama trousers, and loose tank top. Hiding a yawn behind his hand, he trudged to the door to their room and unlocked it. With one final look around, John assured himself that everything was, more or less, as it should be, and slipped beneath the warm covers of the bed. Snuggling into the fresh sheets, John gave a sigh of relief and contentment. For once, he would
sleep soundly.

~*~*~*~

Sherlock ambled slowly along the beach, making his way back to the hotel. He'd uncovered a great deal of local information on his excursion, but so far none of it seemed relevant. Still, best not to delete any of it until he was sure.

A trail opened up that lead to the hotel, and Sherlock made his way slowly along it as it skirted the back of the building. He could spot their room, which looked out onto the ocean. The light was still on, but dimly. John was probably waiting up for him. Foolish. Sentimental. And still Sherlock found a smile curled on his lips.

Sherlock stepped up, just beneath their balcony and listened. The windows were closed so he hadn't expected to hear anything. He certainly hadn't expected to hear a moan. That had been a moan, hadn't it? Yes, there was another one. Sherlock staggered back a step, eyes wide.

Of course it only made sense that John would masturbate to relieve tension and anything else their 'ruse' stirred up. It wasn't as though he hadn't dimly heard John masturbating before, they did share an apartment after all. But this felt different.

Sherlock knew John hadn't been unaffected by what they did, and hearing the proof of it made Sherlock want to return to their room and touch his blogger. ...A touch that wouldn't be welcomed...

Sherlock turned around and pressed his back to the wall of the hotel, facing the ocean as he listened. It was an interesting sensation, being in emotional pain while feeling a hesitant arousal. Even with his general lack of concern for manners, Sherlock knew it was not right to stand here and listen, and yet he couldn't make himself leave.

Sherlock closed his eyes and drew in a long breath. This, this was why falling in love was a dangerous, destructive idea. Sherlock had long ago given up the illusion that he could control his feelings as well as he could control his transport or his mind. He'd tried not to have feelings altogether, but apparently that wasn't possible...

Above him, Sherlock heard John finish. A few moment later Sherlock forced his hands to uncurl from the fists he'd squeezed them into. He focused on doing one of the things he did best: controlling his transport.

A half of an hour later, Sherlock was calm. As calm as one can be when one is pushing aside intense emotions; Sherlock had a wealth of experience with that so his presentation was nearly perfect.

Slowly, Sherlock made his way up to their room. He hesitated at the door, but all he heard was John's steady breathing. Sherlock slipped silently into their room and paused after shutting the door behind him to watch John sleep. He looked so relaxed, like he was about to melt into the mattress. Sherlock found himself smiling. Despite his inner struggles, seeing John happy had always been infectious.

John sucked in a deep breath then, rolling onto his back. He blinked blearily, barely awake, but he must have seen Sherlock because he held out his hand to him. There were many things, apparently, that Sherlock 'could not do' tonight. He couldn't make himself give John privacy earlier, and now he could not refuse John's silent invitation.

Mycroft had been right, he was using this case to satisfy himself. The fact that his marriage also worked so well for the case was a happy coincidence. It was selfish and it was wrong to take John's
hand and lean in for a sleep warmed kiss. Worse to strip down to his pants, slip beneath the covers, and pull John flush to him so that John's back rested firmly against his chest. Even so, if this was all of John that Sherlock was ever going to have, he would take it; he wasn't a good enough man to refuse.

Sherlock's lips quirked in a smile as John nestled back against him, and he tightened his arm around John's middle. John rested his hand over Sherlock's for a moment before intertwining the fingers of their left hands, their rings nestled as close together as Sherlock and John.
Close Enough to Burn

Chapter Summary

And now, what you've all been waiting for...

Chapter Notes

I would like to offer heartfelt thanks all those who have left comments, given kudos, and bookmarked this story. You guys are awesome. ^_^ Seriously, you always make me smile.

I would also like to introduce and thank my new Beta, Helena Chauby, and my tireless Brit-Picker, the Lady of Clunn

And, of course, thanks goes to my flatmate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

And now, what you've all been waiting for...

Chapter 19: Close Enough to Burn

John brought his mug close to his lips and took a long pull from the warm tea inside. He closed his eyes and smiled, enjoying the warmth. Long, lithe arms slid around him, boxing him in against the railing of their balcony. John felt the pressure of a head settling on his shoulder beside his own. He leaned his head against Sherlock and chuckled before opening his eyes. "I've watched you drape yourself over the couch at Baker Street so many times over the years, how did I not guess that you would use this marriage as an excuse to drape yourself all over me? A little short on body heat are we?" It was a cloudy, unusually cool morning for early summer.

John felt more than saw Sherlock smile beside him. "Once again John, you see, but do not observe."

Ah, right. Important to stay in character, to put on a good show for anyone important who might be watching. Of course. Still, there was no reason why John couldn't enjoy it. He leaned back into Sherlock, closed his eyes and 'hmmed' contentedly.

John took another long sip from his mug before turning his head slightly to address Sherlock. "When I'm done with my tea, want to go for a walk on the beach?"

Sherlock sighed and shrugged. "Why not. Mycroft's agents informed me via text-at least they can be trained, unlike my recalcitrant brother-that Albert and Trevor are likely to spend all of today getting to know each other."
John pulled his head back a little and tried to look at Sherlock properly. "What do you mean 'get to
know each other'? They're married, aren't they?"

Sherlock smirked and leaned forward to whisper in John's ear, "I meant, getting to know each other
carnally, John."

"Oh." John felt a hot blush creeping up his neck and over his cheeks. Given Sherlock's deep
chuckling, it had not gone unnoticed. John sipped his tea.

They stood in surprisingly comfortable silence for a few minutes, listening to the waves crash on the
beach below. Both wanted to freeze the moment, to avoid the 'end' they felt looming. John took the
last sip of his tea and closed his eyes, feeling the wind ruffle Sherlock's curls against his cheek.

Feeling movement, John opened his eyes and nearly started at how close Sherlock's blue-grey eyes
were to his. God there was some kind of gravity about Sherlock that was pulling him in...that had
always pulled him in.

"I do believe you said something about a walk, Dr...Holmes," Sherlock drawled in his deep baritone.

John, still flushed from Sherlock's proximity, smiled at the reminder of his new name...for however
long he held it. "Yes," John replied quietly, leaning his forehead against Sherlock's, "but we'll need
our coats first."

Sherlock pulled back a bit, looking petulant. "For a walk on the beach?!!"

John put on his no-nonsense doctor face. "Yes, Sherlock; it's chilly out, it's only common sense.
You've dragged your overcoat all over London, I don't imagine that it will be that much of a hardship
to pull it out for a short walk on the beach."

Sherlock gave a dramatic sigh and pushed himself off the railing to retrieve said coat. John smiled,
amused by the melodrama. While Sherlock petulantly pulled on his scarf, John collected his own
jacket and surreptitiously slipped the dirty sheets under the fresh sheets they'd slept on last night.
With any luck, the cleaning staff would enter for their daily room cleaning while Sherlock and John
were out on their walk.

John paused by the bedside cabinet and left a sizable tip. The tip, unfortunately, did not go
unremarked upon.

"You're being awfully generous," Sherlock remarked.

John, just barely, managed not to jump at the proximity of his husband. With a soldier's calm he
turned around and made light of it. "Well, clean sheets every day is a nice change of pace. The
cleaning staff works hard, it's only fair they be appreciated." Without waiting for further comment,
John slipped his hand into Sherlock's and gave a tug in the direction of the hallway. "Come on, it'll
be too hot for this later."

Their hotel was so close to the beach that Sherlock and John dared leave their room barefoot. They
received some strange looks in the lobby, but this was nothing out of the ordinary when one lived
with Sherlock Holmes, so John took it all in stride.

Sherlock slipped his hand in John's as they walked, intertwining their fingers. John smiled and closed
his eyes when they reached the beach, concentrating on the sand under his feet. Sherlock led them
down to the edge of the waves where the surging water occasionally rushed over their feet, wetting
their trousers to mid-calf. It was a surprisingly pleasant walk, just making their way down the beach.
John felt the heat of Sherlock's hand in his and the heat of the younger man's body next to him. John turned his head and studied Sherlock as they walked. As if feeling the scrutiny, Sherlock turned to look at John and arched a curious eyebrow.

"This is nice," John commented. "Normally you'd be deducing everyone in sight, or spouting off a lot of facts about the ocean or what you find on the beach. It's nice to just walk with you."

Sherlock nodded in understanding, glancing in front of them for a moment, before returning his gaze to John's. "My mind is sufficiently occupied with the case. Normally it is easy to focus on only the relevant information. However, with the killer being so unoriginal in motive, I'm forced to remember a great deal of possibly useless information until I find the key bit of information that links to something important."

John smiled knowingly and nodded. He inched closer to Sherlock as they walked—almost, but not quite leaning on him. "Do you think you'd ever be this quiet or content on a proper holiday?"

Sherlock 'hmmed' thoughtfully, looking forwards again. "Didn't we have this conversation already? Back just before we started this case."

John smiled at the memory, surprised Sherlock hadn't deleted it. That felt like an age ago now. "I remember, Sherlock. We were talking about where we might go. I don't think I asked outright if you would relax on a holiday. In fact, if memory serves, you were talking about places that would keep your mind occupied, places with complex culture and such."

Sherlock was silent for a long time as they walked. So long, in fact, that John was about to ask his question again when Sherlock's deep baritone broke in at last. "I am 'relaxed' when I have something to focus on John. It's just rare to find something interesting that doesn't require movement of some kind."

"Like a case," John supplied.

Sherlock nodded, turning to look out onto the ocean as he spoke. "Yes, John, like a case."

Now that he thought of it John did remember Sherlock spending somewhat quiet evenings pouring over experiments, when there was no case and there was an interesting experiment to do. John had occasionally taken the opportunity to watch Sherlock as he worked, when such an opportunity presented itself. It was made easier by the fact that Sherlock never seemed to mind being stared at and wasn't likely to notice being stared at in the first place when his mind was at work.

John's mind crept back to the day they'd purchased their wedding rings, when he'd woken up to Sherlock's clever fingers mapping his back... How long had he done that before John woke?.. It made sense that Sherlock would act that way in a relationship, studying his partner as much as he'd ever studied anything. Hadn't John briefly considered how Sherlock might 'play' with a partner last night?

John flushed at the memory and looked down, watching the waves swirl around their feet before pulling back again. It couldn't be too much longer until there was a break in the case, the killer had been silent for quite a while...

It hurt to think about going back to England, back to London. It seemed cold, somehow, in his memory. Something...something felt out of place when John thought of going back. It all came back to this case, somehow, and how it had managed to turn everything on its ear.

Sherlock pressed his side against John suddenly, nudging him. John looked up and caught Sherlock's
eyes with his own. "Any new thoughts about the case?" Sherlock asked quietly, studying John's face.

John looked down for a moment and shook his head. "No," he replied. "I was just thinking about it, turning it over in my head, but I haven't thought of anything new."

Sherlock looked away and let out an aggravated sigh, squeezing John's hand in his frustration.

John worried his bottom lip for a moment before giving Sherlock's hand a tug, bringing them both to a stop. "Sherlock?" John began.

Sherlock turned to face John, his face etched in confusion. "Yes?"

"When... when this case is finally over, what do you think about taking a proper holiday, like we were just talking about." John nearly grimaced at his own question. As though a trip would somehow delay the inevitable end of their marriage. A marriage that was set to end before it had even properly started. That really shouldn't feel as bad as it did.

Sherlock was silent for a beat, then took on an expression of amused exasperation. "We're not there yet, but sure. This had been an interesting case on all fronts, and you have been more than accommodating. Fine. When everything is settled, pick a place and we'll go. Just don't waste any brain power on it before hand. We're close to the end of this case, I can feel it. Everyone who can, needs to stay sharp."

John nodded, glancing down at their joined hands. John doubted, even if Sherlock was on his best behavior, that a holiday would give him what he really wanted. Hell, John was having trouble figuring out what was wrong or what he wanted in the privacy of his own head. It was probably a bad idea, agreeing to marry Sherlock, when John knew he had some sort of feelings for his persnickety flatmate. Even still, John doubted that would've stopped him from saying yes. Aside from body parts in the fridge and enforcing the bare minimum of basic manners, John had always had trouble saying 'no' to Sherlock about anything.

A cool, slim hand on his cheek lifted John's gaze back to Sherlock's. "That's not all you're worried about," Sherlock began, and John knew if he let Sherlock continue he'd be deduced. John's heart beat kicked up a notch. Sherlock probably knew, probably had known for a while, but John was not in the proper head space to talk about his mixed up feelings.

"It's fine," John cut in, talking over Sherlock. "It's all fine, really. This case just seems a bit different from most of the others."

"We've been abroad on a case before, " Sherlock commented.

John nodded, "Yes, but your cases don't usually last this long. This has to be a record for you."

Sherlock looked away for a moment and shrugged. "Yes, well, welcome to the power of the mundane mind, just common enough to blend into the proverbial scenery. I think I did say I envied other people and how relaxing it must be to have a common mind, yes? I take that all back. I can have no good will towards simple minds when this killer in particular is being so bloody irritating. Why are you smiling?"

"Just you. It's rather entertaining when you're going on a rant."

"I'm not trying to be entertaining, John, I'm exasperated," Sherlock muttered

John nodded, still smiling. "I can see that."
Sherlock began to open his mouth and say more, when John leaned up on his toes and stopped him with a kiss. John slipped his hands up Sherlock's arms and around his neck, pulling his husband closer. Sherlock leaned into him, wrapping his arms securely around John's waist. John's arms settled around Sherlock's shoulders while his hands and fingers sank deep into Sherlock's wild curls, slightly damp from the misty ocean air.

Sherlock's mouth was warm and pliant over his. John drew Sherlock's bottom lip between his teeth for a moment and nibbled, tasting the salt from the air. Sherlock pressed forward, covering a soft moan from John. John could feel Sherlock's coat brush against his side, shielding him slightly from the wind.

John continued to lean up, even as Sherlock leaned down, pressing himself as close to his consulting detective as he could possibly get. John had thought that, after last night, he'd feel more in control. He'd been wrong. Very wrong.

Their tongues slid and pushed together, mimicking their passionate embrace. John's hands slid, grasping for purchase in Sherlock's black coat as the world seemed to tip and spin out of rhythm. God he loved this man.

The kiss jerked to a stop. John and Sherlock were less than an inch apart, their breath brushing across each other's faces. John's eyes locked onto Sherlock's blue-grey ones. Oh God... He really loved Sherlock.

This went beyond a crush and, the more he thought about it, deeper than anything he'd ever felt for anyone else. How, how could he have been so blind? John remembered thinking that he'd truly meant his vows, and now it was dawning on him how much he meant them.

"Are you alright John?"

That question had been directed at him in Sherlock's deep baritone, but John found himself unable to answer. Dragging his eyes away from Sherlock's, John found himself gazing at his hand, still fisted in the lapel of Sherlock's overcoat. It was shaking...no, he was shaking. Holy, fuck. He was honest to God in love with Sherlock Holmes.

"John?"

John's head snapped up towards Sherlock's voice and he blinked rapidly a few times to try to clear his head. No good. "Fine," John squeezed out, "Fine, just cold."

Sherlock's arms pulled John close again, slim hands rubbing at his back to warm him, and the ex-army doctor went willingly. Cold, yes, cold was a good excuse. It was misty and windy... And they seemed to have gone further out into the surf than they intended. Either way, cold would give John the chance to get back to the hotel and think for a bit. And make some tea. Lots of tea.

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Greg sipped at his tea and moved on to the next page of the police report. He was sitting in Mycroft's office, using a corner on the side of Mycroft's desk, while Mycroft sat behind his desk and reviewed the security cameras. They hadn't really planned to work together today, or even discussed it. They'd woken up a bit late (both with good reason, considering their late-night chess game), and just sort of settled down to work in Mycroft's office.

Mycroft had a good excuse, it was his temporary office after all. But Greg? He'd just grabbed a copy of the police report on Dylan and Kyle's murder, and followed Mycroft upstairs after brunch.
Greg smiled at the memory. They'd both gone for tea first thing. Mycroft had sat and watched his tea brew while Greg had begun pulling out ingredients for a mushroom and cheese omelette. Greg had crouched down to pull the appropriate pans out of the cupboard beneath the range top island, when he'd paused to glance up at Mycroft, who was sitting on a stool in the other side of the island, still staring into his tea. Greg's gaze must have lingered too long because Mycroft's gaze flickered towards him, studying him.

"May I help you Gregory?" Mycroft had asked.

Greg had smiled then, a bit sheepishly, and stood. "Would you like an omelette Mycroft?" Greg asked, placing a pan on the burner and drizzling a bit of olive oil into the bottom.

Mycroft had eyed the pan suspiciously and, for a moment, Greg had sworn he'd heard an internal calorie count going on in Mycroft's head. Greg had managed to keep quiet, but only by biting the inside of his cheek. Just as he had last night, Greg reminded himself how often his ex-wife and he had fought when he'd tried to convince her to have dessert or eat a bit more if she was hungry. It could be such a sensitive issue, that it was better to choose your battles. He'd only make a point of complaining if Mycroft went as far as something that could hurt himself, like skipping meals.

Whatever internal battle Mycroft was fighting must have ended favorably, because he removed the teabag from his mug, took a long sip, then nodded. "Yes, thank you Gregory," Mycroft had murmured.

Greg smiled, and set about making them each a two egg omelette with mushrooms and cheese. In deference to Mycroft's concern about his weight, Greg kept his omelet light on the cheese and removed one egg yolk. Mycroft didn't comment, but Greg had thought he'd seen a hint of a smile when Greg had placed the omelette in front of him. They had shared a companionable, silent breakfast together while the bright morning sunlight filled the room.

"That page must be quite interesting, Gregory," Mycroft broke in, pulling Greg back to the present moment.

Greg looked up at Mycroft and blinked, confused. "What do you mean?"

Mycroft raised an accusing eyebrow. "You've been reading that page for the last ten minutes. Normally you read one page approximately every three minutes. Therefore I must assume you have found something of note and have been re-reading it to confirm a suspicion, or that you are not really concentrating."

Greg flushed slightly, feeling guilty. "I was just thinking," he murmured, trying to bring his attention back to said page.

Mycroft, however, was not content to let the subject go. Instead he laced his fingers together and leaned forward, resting his chin on the bridge of his hands. "About what?"

Greg glanced up at Mycroft through his lashes, and found him stubbornly immobile. Greg lifted his head then and took a few moments to 'study' Mycroft as Mycroft had so often 'studied' him. Greg was starting to think he'd been more than a little right when he'd accused Mycroft of living a lonely life. Greg wondered if it bothered Mycroft, or if Mycroft deigned to let it bother him...

"I was thinking it's been nice spending time with you. We haven't really spent much time together since Sherlock went clean." It was a painful subject, Greg knew, so he tried to be direct and to the point.
"We work in similar, yet entirely different, circles. Once doctor Watson was on scene, there seemed very little point in further communication. As you say, my brother has been clean," Mycroft replied smoothly.

Greg's mouth drew into a tight line, a small grimace. There it was. That distance he'd always seen from Mycroft, except in those brief moments when he let himself relax, or couldn't keep up the mask. Greg had seen those glimpses when Sherlock was ill, especially during one endless night when the great idiot had nearly killed himself with an overdose. However, after last night, Greg admitted to himself he much preferred to see Mycroft let his guard down in a relaxed manner.

Forcing his attention back to the present Greg said, "It's Dr. Holmes now."

Mycroft made a sour face and muttered, "Not for much longer."

Greg let out a frustrated sigh. "Love is nothing to be afraid of, Mycroft."

"Love does not alarm me," Mycroft sputtered.

It was Greg's turn to raise an accusing eyebrow. "How would you know?"

Mycroft tried for a change of subject. "You're being awfully candid today, Gregory."

Greg smiled softly and replied, "Sherlock might have the reputation for deduction, but you would have found out what I was thinking anyway, sooner or later." Greg rested his elbow on the desk in front of him and his head in his hand. "How does it feel to be given something, instead of taking it?"

Mycroft started, studied Greg for a moment as though he couldn't quite understand him, then pointedly returned his gaze to his laptop. "Back to work Gregory. This killer, while dormant, isn't finished yet. I intend to catch him."

Greg smiled to himself, even as he returned his own gaze to the police report in his hand. "Yes, Mycroft," he murmured, knowing he'd given Mycroft more to think about than the elder Holmes brother had expected.

They had returned to their hotel room and promptly changed into dry clothes. For lack of a new lead, Sherlock and John had begun pouring over the case information they already had. John had managed, just barely, to convince Sherlock to write things out on a note pad instead of the hotel wall.

That hadn't made any further progress, but mapping out his 'mind palace', or the parts of it dedicated to this case, was at least a new perspective. Perhaps he'd be able to draw a few more connecting lines, eke out a few steps forward...God this was tedious.

"See you in a bit, Sherlock."

Sherlock's head snapped up and he took in the confusing image of John in running shorts and a thin cotton t-shirt. "Going somewhere?"

John took a step away from the door and rolled his eyes. "I told you already, I'm going out for a run. I need to clear my head."

"You never told me that," Sherlock insisted, standing up a bit straighter. "What about the case?"

John blew out an exasperated breath. "The case hasn't gone anywhere since we first arrived,
Sherlock. We've been at this all day. Yes, I think we'll get a break in the case soon, it's been quiet for too long. However, until that happens, I need to work off some of this nervous energy. We can't all pace around the room spouting off deductions, or sit in meditative contemplation of our mind palaces."

"Naturally, John. You don't have a mind palace."

John chuckled. "Exactly. I'll keep my phone on me, just send me a text if something interesting happens. I won't be gone long."

It was irrational, but Sherlock didn't like the idea of John being out alone when, indeed, the case had fallen silent for a suspiciously long time. He was aware of the faint brush of lips on his forehead and a murmured farewell while he racked his mind for a reason John shouldn't go.

The weather? No, it was late afternoon by now and the weather had cleared up beautifully. That meant they would be back on the trail of Albert and Trevor tomorrow, as it was likely to be the perfect day for an outing. Not important, focus. Dimly, he was aware of the rushing sound of water, about an hour ago. It hadn't been raining, the weather had begun to clear up by that time. What, then? What had it been?

"Shower!" Sherlock called out a bit more loudly than was necessary.

John, who had been most of the way out the door paused with his hand on the door and leaned back towards Sherlock. "Pardon?"

"You just took a shower an hour ago, if you go out running you'll just have to take another one."

John shook his head and smiled in amusement. "So I'll take two showers then, it won't be bad for my health." Looking up, John caught Sherlock's gaze with his own and held it. "I'll be fine Sherlock. I've texted Mycroft, I'm sure I'll be followed by cameras and agents alike. I'll stick to public running paths. Alright?"

Sherlock made a sour face and waved John off. "Fine, it's a needless risk, but why would you listen to me? You've only been complimenting my powers of observation since we've met."

"Sherlock, you could write the book on unnecessary risk taking," John replied, his smile undeterred. "I'll be back soon. Try not to tear the hotel apart while I'm gone, hmm?" And then Sherlock was alone.

Alone, and pouting. Unexpected petulance was another thing he could add to his list of why falling in love was a bad idea. Maybe one day that list would be long enough to convince his treacherous heart to be logical...maybe.

Sherlock sighed and spun in his desk chair. What to do now? Half the entertainment of writing things out had been talking with John the about possibilities for the case. Either way, Sherlock was sick of the activity and, for the first time he could remember, sick of pouring over his mind palace for information.

Sherlock's eyes slid along the hotel walls wishing, not for the first time, that John had brought his gun with them. Even if there had been a gun at his disposal, John had asked Sherlock not to take out his frustrations on the hotel. Hadn't he?

What to do, what to do...John would be gone for at least an hour, based on his usual running habits. Sherlock began gearing up to consider and discard boring possibilities of how to fill the time, when a smear on the wooden drawer of the bedside cabinet caught his attention. It was clear, little more a
slight discoloration in the light. Sherlock had just risen to approach the drawer when he realised. Of course! John had used the vibrator last night. He'd noted that when he'd stood beneath their window and listened to John's soft cries escape into the night.

Deftly, Sherlock removed the box from the drawer and examined it. John had done a passable job of putting it away, everything was in its place... Except for the smear of lubricant on the outside of the drawer, the missing lubricant in the bottle (nothing to be done about that really, even if he added water it would change the texture of the lubricant slightly)...and the batteries. In his haste to clean up, John had left the batteries in the vibrator.

Sherlock considered this for a moment before his eyes slid to the freshly made bed to his right, then to the windows, then to the clock on the bedside cabinet. He'd need to close the drapes...but an hour should be more than enough time...

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John's muscles buzzed, pleasantly warmed up, and his breath was just beginning to come out in pants. Yes, nothing like a good run to clear his head. He could fix this. He could...

How do you fix being in love with your best friend and flatmate? It didn't need to be a big issue. He just needed to be calm enough to talk to Sherlock. Or not. Sherlock had accused John of flirting with him during their first night at Angelo's. It was possible Sherlock had seen it coming, and had long been aware of John's feelings. God, if John had been worried about this disrupting their friendship before the wedding...

But they'd gone over this already. Things would stay normal. Nothing needed to change after the case. They'd be the same as always. God, asking for a proper holiday this morning had been a mistake. The fact that this case was giving John's feelings so much leeway was bad enough. He'd just tell Sherlock he'd changed his mind. John doubted Sherlock would take much convincing; he did love London and the plethora of cases/experiments it could provide. There. He had a plan. Now all he had to do was concentrate, focus...

"Aaaah!" Adrenaline spiked when John felt his foot catch in an errant root, sending him toppling and rolling on the ground.

John groaned softly, spitting gravel out of his mouth and mentally checking in with his extremities...there didn't appear to be any injuries.

"Are you okay?" asked a soft voice above him.

John turned his head to see a women with chestnut brown hair and mossy green eyes leaning over him.

"You took quite a tumble," She said, kneeling down to help John sit up.

"Yeah, running's not the best time to get lost in thought," John admitted ruefully.

The women smiled and nodded. "Oh yeah, been there, have the scars to prove it." She extended her hand to him and he shook it. "My name's Laura. I'm trained in first aid. Mind if I look you over? Make sure you didn't break anything?"

"Go ahead," John replied, taking a few deep breaths to calm his agitated system, high on adrenaline.

Laura took his face in her hands, turning his head this way and that to check for abrasions and lacerations. "Any stiffness?" She asked, while lightly running her fingers over his arms, then down
his calves.

"No," John replied, "I don't even think there'll be any bruising."

"What's your name," Laura asked as she continued to look him over.

"John."

"Well, John, you might be sore tomorrow," Laura said, pausing to dig her keys out of her pocket and shine a small light in his eyes. John blinked and fought the urge to look away. "Your pupils are reacting normally," Laura observed. "I might call off the rest of your run and have a soak in some Epsom salt, but you seem to be fine."

John grinned as Laura, who appeared to be about his age, now that he got a good look at her, pulled him to his feet. "Thank you, doctor."

Laura flushed and smiled shyly. "I'm no doctor. Like I said, I'm trained in first aid. It comes in very handy on the running trails."

John nodded. He'd seen enough running injuries to know. Laura turned slightly to check for other runners either coming or going down the trail. It was a smart thing to do since they were right in the middle of the trail. The movement caused John's eyes to wander to her chest. Not her breasts, but her breast plate. She was also dressed for a run in a tracksuit and a sleeveless tank top that was cut low and did little to hide her sports bra. From the looseness of the fabric John surmised her choice was about comfort rather than fashion. However, it was not her clothing that had caught John's attention, it was thin almost spider web like silver discolorations near her shoulders.

"Can I help you?" Laura's slight amused voice broke in, and John realised he'd been staring.

"Sorry," John sputtered his face growing red.

Laura smiled "It's a refreshing change of pace from having someone stare at my breasts," she noted, glancing down at the fine lines herself. "Do you know what they are?"

It sounded like a serious question so John looked again with doctor's eyes. "Stretch marks?" he asked, glancing up. Laura nodded. John looked again and added. "I don't think these are from children, being so high up on your body."

Laura nodded again. "Correct. I've lost over a hundred pounds in the past three years."

John's eyebrows shot up in surprise. She looked rather fit, he never would've guessed. "That's really something, congratulations."

Laura beamed. "Thank you." She glanced down at her stretch marks again then added, "I could have them removed I suppose, but what's the point of buying into other people's insecurities?" Laura looked back up at John. "Besides, I like the reminder."

"Of all the work that you did?" John asked.

"Of the fact that it's never too late to go after what you want," Laura corrected.

John nodded, pleased. That made sense. And, as a doctor, he was always happy to see someone doing important things for their health.

"I'm sorry if I've kept you," Laura said, "I know I can be kind of chatty."
John shook his head. "No, it's alright. I was out to get a little air anyway. If I'm going to head back early, I didn't mind talking for a bit." John's mood darkened somewhat at the reminder of Sherlock, waiting for him back at their hotel room. That was one thing, one relationship he wanted that was too dangerous to go after.

"It was nice to meet you John," Laura said, shifting slightly away, getting ready to run again. "Have a nice day."

John nodded, "You as well, enjoy your run." And then she was off, leaving nothing but a small cloud of kicked up sand in her wake.

John looked back in the direction of the hotel and sighed. He hadn't been gone anywhere near as long as he intended, but Laura had been right, better to just walk back. Especially now that the sun was rapidly setting. John made it a brisk walk, being mindful of roots and uneven dips on the path, and he was shortly back in the hotel.

He lingered in the lobby, pretending to look over a pile of brochures for activities in the area, but John wasn't fooling himself. He had to go back to the room he shared with Sherlock, and he was avoiding it. Avoiding it wouldn't change the facts. Sherlock and he had gone over this at length; nothing was going to change. He had to keep his head in the game.

John snatched up several brochures at random to read after his bath. It was doubtful, at best, that he'd find something useful for the case, but, at this point, with so little to go on, a shot in the dark was better than nothing.

John glanced over his selection as he climbed the stairs and made his way down the hall. There wasn't much. Silly tourist attractions, a theater company performing the 12th Night, and an art exhibit being put on by a local college.

John absentmindedly swiped his key card and pushed open the door.

"John?! Wait a moment, please!" John paused at the door. That was Sherlock's voice, but it sounded tight and strained.

"Everything okay?" John asked, hesitating with the door slightly open. The small hallway that later opening up into the main area of their room, shielded John's view of the bed. John craned his neck a bit, but all he could see from here was the small wardrobe to his right, the bathroom door to his left, and the floor at the foot of the bed. He could hear some scrambling.

"Fine!" Sherlock insisted, his response still clipped.

John was becoming concerned now. Sherlock had never even wanted cigarettes while on a case, and he'd never cared much for modesty with the way he traipsed around the flat in a sheet during the hot months. Why exactly was Sherlock delaying him from entering their hotel room? Had he found something dangerous about the case and was trying to keep it from John?

"Sherlock, I'm coming in," John insisted, pushing the door open the rest of the way. More scrambling. John stepped into the room and crossed the few steps down the hall, the door to their room closing behind him. John sucked in a breath as he rounded the corner.

Sherlock sat on the edge of the bed with bare feet, a badly buttoned shirt that was open to mid chest, and his hair looked slightly more rumpled than usual. John followed the line of Sherlock's arm to his hand that was pressing the drawer of the nightstand closed, the faintest shine of lubricant evident on Sherlock's fingers. John's eyes locked with Sherlock's wide, vulnerable ones. Sherlock's pupils were
"John, I-" Sherlock began, but he never got any further.

John crossed the distance between them in a few short strides, setting his knee on the bed beside Sherlock's hip. John's hands cupped Sherlock's face and pulled him up into a wild, desperate kiss. Something about seeing Sherlock aroused, deducing his intention to use the same vibrator that John had used on himself—not even a day before, had caused something to snap inside John. Sherlock was his.

John's teeth grazed across Sherlock's lips, pulling them apart, thrusting his tongue inside. Sherlock's hands slid up, over John's hips and clutched tentatively at his sides. John made a noise low in his throat, like a growl and lowered his hands to slip inside Sherlock's wide open collar. Sherlock's skin was smooth and warm. The world's only consulting detective arched into John's touch.

The few buttons that were still, in fact, buttoned on Sherlock's shirt kept John from exploring as much as he would like. John pulled at the buttons, almost tearing the fabric as he nibbled his way across Sherlock's jaw to his neck.

Sherlock breathed a low moan when John sucked firmly at the curve of his neck, tugging Sherlock's flesh gently between his teeth. Sherlock turned his head away, baring more of his throat to John. John finally, finally, managed to part Sherlock's shirt and pull it down his arms. He'd meant to pull the shirt off completely, but he stopped when Sherlock's shirt was pushed down to his elbows in favor of pressing his palms flat against Sherlock's chest and arms, exploring the skin revealed to him.

Sherlock pressed up into John's hands, squirming in frustration to get out of his shirtsleeves, a small whine escaping his lips. John, who had kissed his way over to Sherlock's shoulder, smiled into the skin there, but made no move to help. Instead, John pulled back, nipped gently at Sherlock's parted lips, and used his leverage to push Sherlock back into the mattress.

John slid his knee off the mattress, kneeling in front of Sherlock as the lanky consulting detective continued to squirm against the confines of his shirtsleeves, which had trapped his hands at his sides. John leaned over Sherlock to press sucking, biting kisses just above his trousers. Sherlock gasped and bucked into the touch, emboldening John to reach forward and palm his husband, his fingers toying with the zipper of Sherlock's trousers. Sherlock's head fell back against the mattress as he rocked against John's hand.

John's fingers made quick work of the button and the zipper before he began tugging Sherlock's trousers off his hips, mouthing the newly revealed skin of Sherlock's upper thigh.

"John," Sherlock moaned, need straining his voice as he endeavored to scrabble out of his shirt and pants at once.

John had meant to divest Sherlock completely of his trousers, but just as with the shirt he became distracted. Sherlock's erection pushing up against the fabric of his pants was too tempting. John left Sherlock's trousers pooled at his ankles and insinuated himself between Sherlock's thighs.

John exhaled, slowly breathing heat and moisture across Sherlock's thighs. Sherlock rocked his hips forward and John inched back, teasingly out of reach. "John," Sherlock murmured, lifting his hips off the mattress. John reached forward and tugged Sherlock's pants down just enough to free his long, slender, uncircumcised cock.

John abandoned Sherlock's pants at his knees in favor of grasping Sherlock's penis. It was hot to the touch, and John could feel his husband's pulse thrumming under the skin. Leaning forward, John
pressed his tongue firmly to the ruddy head, tasting the salty pre-cum that had gathered at the tip.

John eased forward, taking more of Sherlock into his mouth while his tongue explored the sensitive glands beneath the head. Sherlock made a strangled noise, bucking up into John’s mouth and hand. John allowed the intrusion, pleased that he must be doing something right. He’d never been intimate with a man before; John was acting on instinct, doing what had felt good to him.

Sherlock groaned deep in his chest, writhing on the mattress. John knew he preferred encompassing touch, and he also knew Sherlock, outside of toys, was largely unaware of what he liked. How could he be when he’d never had a partner before? John hummed in the satisfied knowledge that he was the only one to touch his husband so intimately, causing Sherlock to jerk against him.

John eased back slightly, pressing the tip of his tongue firmly into the glands under the head of Sherlock’s penis. The precise, deliberate touches were rewarded with a needy moan. Sherlock desperately tried to roll his hips against John's mouth, but his movements were hampered by his half-off clothing.

John fought a satisfied smile that threatened to break when Sherlock keened and thrust forcefully into John’s mouth. John pressed on hand into Sherlock's bare hip, rubbing small circles into his skin. John's other hand trailed slowly up Sherlock's thigh.

Sherlock fought to widen his legs, but only tore a seam. John paused and lifted his hand from Sherlock's thigh to slick his fingers in the saliva trailing down Sherlock’s prick. Sherlock took in a gasp of air and let out a long high-pitched whine. John pulled back completely for a moment, pushing two fingers into his mouth to lubricate them further while his other hand returned to stroke Sherlock's damp, heated member.

"Easy, Sherlock," John murmured, bending to take him into his mouth again. Sherlock groaned in relief when he felt the wet heat of John's mouth. John's hand crept along Sherlock's inner thigh once more. John's sturdy digits circled the quivering ring of muscle. He pressed one finger forwards and sucked in a shocked breath through his nose when it slipped easily inside Sherlock. Sherlock was already slick inside. Sherlock had to have been slick and stretching himself when John had first walked in the room. John quickly inserted a second finger, causing Sherlock to buck against him. John pulled back from Sherlock's cock with a long moan and his third finger worked its way inside his husband.

"Sherlock," John breathed in wonder, working his fingers back and forth inside the younger man.

Sherlock lifted his head from the mattress and caught John's gaze with his own. John's tongue slipped out to wet his lips as he took in Sherlock's smoldering gaze, pupils blown wide open.

John sucked in a breath to speak, then let it out in a quiet, "Oof!" as Sherlock's hands, finally freed, lifted John and deposited him firmly on the mattress. John had only started to sit up when a very naked Sherlock Holmes crawled over him, tugging his shirt over his head.

Sherlock swooped in for a sloppy, possessive kiss. Their tongues twined together, teeth pressing into kiss-swollen lips. John arched up into Sherlock giving the consulting detective enough room to maneuver John's work-out trousers off his hips.

John's hands scrabbled for purchase along Sherlock's back, moaning in disappointment when Sherlock broke their kiss. Sherlock trailed lips and teeth over John's neck, pausing to mark him as he had on their wedding night. Meanwhile Sherlock's clever hands and feet divested John of both trousers and pants, leaving skin on skin.
John arched into Sherlock's stomach and chest as the consulting detective slid determinedly downwards, licking and biting indiscriminately as he went. Sherlock was not rushed, but frantic, as though he couldn't decide what to do first. In the end, need won out and he closed his mouth over John's throbbing erection. "Sherlock!" John gasped, feeling the consulting detectives often cutting tongue undulate against his sensitive skin. Although Sherlock hollowed his cheeks, there was little suction. John gasped when he realised the reason for that; Sherlock was going to mount him. "Oh, God."

Sherlock hummed around John's erection, lingering a moment as he watched realisation dawn on his husband's face. John was not quite as long as Sherlock, but he was definitely thicker. Sherlock pushed his tongue meaningfully against the sensitive glands at the head of John's penis before pulling back and crawling up his husband's body.

John gazed up at him blearily, pupils nearly eclipsing his irises in arousal. Sherlock settled himself on top of John, capturing his mouth in a searing, desperate kiss, equal parts tongue and teeth. Was it possible to cum from kissing alone? That was a question for another time. Leaning back, Sherlock grasped John's penis and lined it up with his slicked entrance. Sherlock looked down, holding John's gaze with his own, and impaled himself on John's cock.

"Jesus!" John gasped, pressing up into Sherlock as Sherlock pushed down. When John was fully sheathed Sherlock stilled, panting, feeling John throb inside him. Sherlock gave a small roll of his hips causing John to toss his head back and moan loudly, "Sherlock!"

Sherlock rose up again and held his position, John barely inside him, until his blogger lifted his hips, pushing into Sherlock once more. John's hands found Sherlock's hips and chest, urging him to ride John's cock even as they caressed and explored Sherlock's skin.

Sherlock closed his eyes, threw his head back, and slowly worked his body up and down along John's erection. John was inside him... Panting, Sherlock leaned forward, locking eyes with his blogger as he rode him.

John's slicked hand closed around Sherlock's member, alternating between pumping him and playing with the glands at the tip. "John," Sherlock moaned, rolling his hips, causing John's penis to graze his prostate.

"Sherlock," John whispered, his voice tight with arousal. John's free hand gripped Sherlock's hip tight enough to bruise. God, they would both be covered in marks tomorrow...

John rocked up into Sherlock as Sherlock pressed down, grinding into him, filling the room with the sounds of wet flesh slapping together. Deep, long moans were pulled helplessly from John's chest as Sherlock gasped and writhed on top of him.

John felt Sherlock stumble in his rhythm as tingles and a familiar tension pooled in his abdomen and along his member. Grasping at pale shoulders John tugged Sherlock down for a fierce, burning, open mouthed kiss. Sherlock's muscles spasmed around John's cock as he pulsed hot release into John's hand. Sherlock cried out against John's mouth and John let out a muffled, panting, "S...lock!" as Sherlock's twitching muscles milked his penis, triggering his own orgasm.

They rested against each other, shaking and panting in the aftermath. Their hands clutching at any area of skin within reach, lips pressing together for insistent, gasping kisses.

"Sherlock," John murmured, pulling his husband into a leisurely, sensual kiss. Sherlock 'hmmed'
contentedly into their kiss, relishing in the soft pressure of lips and tongues. Their kiss gradually slowed and, hesitantly, they parted, locking gazes once more.

Sherlock leaned forwards and nuzzled John's neck as John wiped up most of the mess with tissues from the bedside cabinet. Satisfied that they wouldn't wake up too sticky, John let the tissues drop into the bin by the bed and locked his arms around his lithe husband.

Sherlock rolled slightly so that he was lying on his side next to John. John allowed the movement, but only just. His arms tightened around Sherlock to prevent the tall brunet from moving too far way. Sherlock grinned into John's neck and insinuated one of his legs between John's, bringing them even closer together. Sherlock draped an arm across John's chest and closed his eyes, concentrating on the feeling of John's breath in his curls. He hadn't been trying to get away from John, he never wanted to be away from John again. John was *his* blogger.

Sherlock felt his own breathing lengthen and deepen, falling into pace with John's. Sleep made his limbs heavy and his concentration fuzzy. For the first time since they began sharing a bed, Sherlock couldn't later recall who had fallen asleep first.
Chapter Summary

This is why you should think things through and talk things out before taking potentially life-changing actions.

Chapter Notes

My thanks go out to all those who have commented, left kudos, and/or bookmarked this story. Your support and enthusiasm for this story are always inspiring.

I would also like to thank my Beta, Helena Chauby, and my tireless/informative Brit Picker, the Lady of Clunn for their help in editing/revising this story.

And, of course, thanks goes to my flatmate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

All of my assistants helped make this story what it is. Thank you, this story really is a labor of love.

Note: For those of you that may not know, Pride is a celebration of LGBTQ persons and the rights they are fighting for, that falls sometime in June. It falls in June because on June 28, 1969 the police raided a Gay bar, named Stonewall, and it was one of the first notable occasions where gay individuals stood up for themselves. Hence, the Stonewall riots. There's more to it than this, but this is just a brief explanation.

Chapter 20: Fallout

The first thing John was aware of, as he swam in the hazy world between awake and asleep, was his breathing. Slow, regular, relaxed. Then he noticed his hands, pressed flat to the mattress on either side of the pillow. He was on his stomach. He'd been asleep for a long time; deeply asleep if the slight stiffness in his limbs was anything to go by. It was a kind of sleep he didn't get often, especially since he started living with Sherlock, and John intended to savour it.

John drew a long, breath deep into his lungs stretching them in a way that didn't happen with the even breathing of sleep. Next he bunched and rolled his shoulders, a movement that turned into a full body stretch. John tensed himself down to his toes, held it for a long moment, then relaxed, melting back into the mattress. He was a bit sore at his neck and in his lower back.

John slid his hand over the crisp sheets and into the curve of his neck, wincing as his fingers traced the bruises there. John's eyes snapped open wide and he sucked in a sharp breath.
In the muted light of morning that had crept around the curtains of their hotel room, John saw Sherlock turn, reacting to the sound of John's gasp. Sherlock, unsurprisingly, was draped in a thin white sheet. He had been standing at the window staring out the crack between the curtain and the wall. As John's fingers bunched in the sheets, pushing the ex-army doctor into a slouched sitting position, Sherlock approached the bed and knelt by it, facing John.

"John, are you alright?" Sherlock's voice was soft but even, he'd been awake for a while.

"Fine, Sherlock," John muttered pulling himself into a proper sitting position. He wasn't sticky, exactly, but there was evidence of what they had done on his body, dried lube and such, in addition to the bruises. Fear pulsed through John at the reminder. *Oh God...* no. No. nononono. This was bad. Relationships...other people...had never been Sherlock's area. The man was in his mid thirties and he'd never had a sexual partner...until now... God, there was a reason Sherlock hadn't had or wanted a sexual partner, and John had just ignored them all, and taken advantage of Sherlock.

John had no doubts that Sherlock was strong enough to stop him, but Sherlock had already been aroused, had been about to masturbate, and he'd been acting like John's lover for several months now...

Damn. Whatever Sherlock's reasons for not protesting the night before had been (Did high-functioning sociopaths have lust-induced one night stands with their flat mates while pretending to be in love with them?) in the aftermath of an orgasm, when looking at the situation with a clearer head, there would surely be some backlash. He couldn't...he couldn't lose Sherlock again, not to this, not to anything.

Just great. He was starting to shake again.

Sherlock's eyes narrowed. "I thought we had agreed not to lie to each other, John," Sherlock drawled, fixing John in place with a sharp stare.

John worried his bottom lip for a moment, sucked in a breath, then looked down at the sheets. He felt ill just looking at his husband. His *husband!* Oh, God... John swallowed hard and forced himself to speak. "Sherlock...Sherlock I'm sorry. I shouldn't have... God I'm such an id-

John's voice fell silent when long, violinist fingers pressed coolly against his lips. John dared to glance up at Sherlock and winced to find him looking cross, his mouth in a thin, unhappy line.

And Sherlock was cross, but with himself. He had known this could happen, he *knew*, and still he let the demands of biology overflow his senses. He couldn't blame John. This entire scheme, long before the wedding, had become an endless cock tease, driving them both to frustration and back again. Sherlock should have shown more control. He should have pushed John away and gone for a walk until they both had cooler heads.

Foolish... Sherlock knew he had been foolish ever to think...that this would end differently. The way John had looked at him last night...was not the way John was looking at him now. John's wide, panicked eyes and trembling body told Sherlock all he needed to know...

Sherlock closed his eyes for a moment and took a slow breath. He didn't deserve John and, especially given the gross liberties he'd taken with his blogger's body, he never would. And still, even now, he couldn't let John go. He would fix this. He *had* to fix this.

Opening his eyes, Sherlock looked at John's frightened face and willed himself to be calm. "You
have no reason to apologise, John, I do." Disbelief crossed John's face, but Sherlock pressed on. "I thought this could happen. I did say that biology would be at play, I..." Sherlock swallowed hard. "I should have had more control. I'm sorry, John."

John's hands came up to hold Sherlock's face, his thumbs caressing Sherlock's cheeks. They were both shaking now, and John couldn't find any words. Was this a graceful way for John to back out? Did Sherlock really think that John had only given in to biological urgings? It might be possible. John, himself, hadn't known the depth of his feelings for the dark haired consulting detective until yesterday... Whatever it was, whatever Sherlock was offering him, if it ended up with them together, in each other's lives... that's all John wanted.

Slowly, slowly John leaned forward until their foreheads were resting gently against each other. One of Sherlock's hands rested on John's knee, the other had slipped to the side and caressed his cheek. John closed his eyes and just breathed for a moment. Then, he said the only thing he could think of. "I'll always be your blogger, Sherlock."

John felt Sherlock's hand tighten on his knee, squeezing. "Thank you, John." Sherlock's voice sounded a bit tight, but then again John wasn't sure he had sounded much better.

They stayed, leaning against each other, barely moving, hardly daring to breathe. Neither wanted to break something so precious, especially when it seemed to be balanced so precariously.

Raucous thunder exploded in the sky, shaking the building, sending John tumbling off the bed and into the lap of one, equally startled Sherlock Holmes.

They waited a beat, eyes locked, before dissolving into exhausted, strained giggles. It was more a release of tension, born of fear and uncertainty rather than humour, but it gave John and excuse to curl around Sherlock and Sherlock an excuse to wrap his arms around John. The moment still felt breathless and thin, but they were together. Together mattered, more than anything else.

One of Sherlock's hands caressed John's back, slipping into his short hair, while the other remained locked around his waist. "You should probably shower," Sherlock murmured, close to John's ear. "We're going out today." John pulled back slightly, confused, and Sherlock explained. "I browsed some of the brochures you brought in yesterday. We haven't been getting anywhere by tailing Albert and Trevor. It wouldn't hurt for the both of us to go out in the community, do some digging. It could be that the couple as well as this location, the Hamptons, is important. The art show at the college should attract a wide age range of people; we may be able to turn up some information there."

"You never stop working, do you?" John murmured, amused, though still shaken by the events of last night combined with the clarity of this morning.

Sherlock shrugged. "It's what I do."

John nodded, slowly struggling to his feet, pulling Sherlock along with him. "Yes, world's only consulting detective, the man who made being brilliant a career."

"It's not my fault most people are dull and tedious," Sherlock countered, pleased to see a small smile ease its way onto John's face.

"What about you?" John asked, "Don't you need to shower?"

Sherlock glanced down for a moment, then back up at John. "I already did. While you shower I will dress and fetch some food from the hotel's breakfast."

"You're actually going to eat without complaint?" John asked, taken aback.
Sherlock shrugged. "Well, technically the art show doesn't open until 10am, and we don't know for sure that anything useful will happen, so we have some time. Plus you become unbearably cranky when I don't remember to feed you regularly."

John sputtered and smiled, despite himself and the insinuation that Sherlock needed to 'remember' to feed him like one would need to feed a pet. "Sherlock," John began, intending to chastise the lanky consulting detective for his own lack of eating habits, like he always did. Their half joking/half serious rows had become a surprisingly welcome constant of their relationship...when Sherlock's blue/gray eyes met his. Suddenly John couldn't make light of things. Maybe they would be fine, he hoped they would, but he couldn't casually brush off sleeping with his best friend...the man he loved... "Please eat something too."

John swallowed hard when Sherlock's face softened slightly and he said, "Okay, John. I'll find a table and be waiting for you." John fought to stop himself from sucking in a painful breath and a lead weight settled in the chest. It was subtle, or it appeared to be, but he still felt it. They were still together, still very much a team...but things felt...slightly distant...awkward...and John hated it.

John's relationship with Sherlock, however crazy it may look under the rational light of day, had always felt more right than any other relationship, platonic or romantic, that John had ever been in. Who fights about body parts in the freezer or the ethical qualms of experimenting on friends and acquaintances? The work they did was dangerous beyond good reason, and they were probably closer than two flat mates had any right to be. Still, John loved every minute of it. He loved it too much to let it go.

John cupped the side of Sherlock's face in one hand, caressing the skin under his thumb, and leaned up to press a kiss a chaste kiss to his lips. "I'll join you in a bit," John murmured before turning to walk towards the bathroom.

So things felt little awkward. Fine. He would deal with that. They both still, more or less, wanted the same thing: to be together. John would work to make sure they stayed that way, no matter what.

Greg cupped his hands around his mouth and breathed slowly into them, trying to warm them up. It was summer. Early summer, granted, but still, he shouldn't be this cold. Damn air-conditioning system. It wasn't frigid, but it was still a bit chilly for Greg's taste. Was that why Mycroft was always in his suit? Probably. There was also the subtle power play of always being immaculately dressed.

Greg glanced over at Mycroft from his comfortable chair by the fireplace. (Thank God he'd had the materials to light it!) Mycroft and Anthea were close together, Anthea standing, Mycroft sitting, hunched over some sort of file. Everyone was well behaved, they were working for Mycroft after all, but there was an undeniable tension in the air. Why had the killer been silent for so long? Would they be in time to stop him before he struck again? Were they on the right track with their current plan? Or had the killer changed his plan? Did the killer know Sherlock and John were on the case? Probably. He'd meant to show that with the black roses at their wedding. Hadn't he? Who was the killer? Where were they?

Greg had seen unanswered questions like this bring the entire Yard to a standstill. That is, until he started barking orders. That was the difficult part of being in charge, making the tough decisions, keeping people focused.

Mycroft had been doing an excellent job of that here, and Greg had been helping out where he could. Admittedly, there wasn't much to do at the moment but search for an opening. The case, however, wasn't all Greg was focused on. During the past few days, Greg had found himself
Thinking about Mycroft...

The tensions of this case aside...it had been surprisingly pleasant to spend some time with Mycroft again. When Sherlock had been using, Greg's interactions with Mycroft had been more about power struggles and grief then getting to know each other, although that happened anyway. How could it not when they had spent so much time together?

This time around, Greg was surprised to find himself actively seeking out Mycroft's company more often than not. Something just seemed to...fit. Their verbal sparring matches, how seamlessly they did work together when long acquaintance. It felt right...

Greg drew in a deep breath before looking back to the fire. It hurt to think about how quickly it would all disappear once the case was over. Greg would like to pretend that it wouldn't, but he knew Mycroft. Mycroft was all about the work.

Greg would like to pursue a deeper friendship, but he wasn't about to spend all his time chasing after someone who would spend most of their time trying to be elsewhere; he'd done enough of that with his ex-wife. One of them had always been chasing the other, it had never been equal, and then it had become nothing but work...

Greg flushed at the unintended comparison between Mycroft and his ex-wife. He forced his attention back to the file in front of him. He had to focus, not day dream about something he couldn't have. If Sherlock was to be believed, and that was iffy at best in regards to Mycroft, Mycroft had always been this way, driven by the mission as much as Sherlock had ever been driven by 'the game'. There was no reason to suspect he would ever change... Did Mycroft even feel lonely, or had he forgotten what it was like to live differently? Or maybe this way of living made him happy...

Anthea passed by Greg's chair and they exchanged friendly nods. Greg had just about managed to refocus on the report in front of him when Mycroft let out an exasperated sigh. For the ever composed British Government, that was a sign of intense frustration.

Greg set is report down on a small end-table, walked forwards to close the doors to Mycroft's office, then stood, silently at the edge of Mycroft's desk. The heels of Mycroft's hands were digging into his eyes as he sat hunched over his desk. Greg waited a few beats before asking, "What's wrong?"

Mycroft raised his head just enough to glare at Gregory between the cage of his fingers. "Sherlock and John have been intimate. This complicates matters exceedingly."

Greg's eyes widened and he sat down hard on the edge of Mycroft's desk. "Seriously?" Greg craned his neck around to get a glimpse at the screen of Mycroft's lap top. "Do you have footage of that or something?"

"Gregory!" Mycroft snapped, lifting his head out of his hands to glare at the detective inspector. "This is serious!"

Greg looked to Mycroft. "I am being serious, as serious as I can be when I'm still wondering if you have them sleeping together on camera. That does a bit more than border on intrusive, Mycroft."

Mycroft pushed his hands against the edge of his desk, causing his chair to slide back a few inches from the wood. "Just perfect," Mycroft muttered, glaring at his keyboard.

"Well, I think it is," Greg replied, crossing his arms and leaning back slightly. "Like I've said, those two have been tiptoeing around each other for far too long."

Mycroft shifted his gaze to glare at Gregory for a moment, before glaring at his computer screen once
more. At a glance all Greg could see was John and Sherlock eating breakfast. The one oddity being that Sherlock was actually eating.

"I've told him time and time again," Mycroft muttered. Greg turned to look at the elder Holmes brother and found Mycroft holding his hands close to his mouth in a way very similar to Sherlock's 'thinking' pose, except Mycroft's fingers were interlocked, fingertips pressing into the back of the opposite hand.

"Told him what?" Greg asked.

Mycroft closed his eyes and let out a long suffering sigh. "Caring is not an advantage. All lives end. All hearts are broken."

The following silence stretched out just long enough that Mycroft opened his eyes to look at Gregory. Gregory was looking down at him, appearing slightly amused.

"You say that like any of those are good reasons not to fall in love anyway," Greg murmured.

Mycroft stared at Greg for a moment, mouth just slightly agape. "That is a foolishly over-romantic perspective, especially coming from an experienced detective inspector."

Greg shrugged. "It's better than the alternative." When Mycroft raised an eyebrow Greg elaborated, "Logical, and alone."

Mycroft gave a derisive snort and recited an old line of his brother's, one he found quite apt given his lifestyle. "Alone is what I have. Alone protects me"

"Not from yourself."

Mycroft looked up at Gregory and Gregory held his gaze. He wasn't speaking anymore...just looking.

Greg itched to move his hand forward and lay it over Mycroft's, but before he could Mycroft blinked and began readjusting his chair. "None of this will help us catch the killer," Mycroft said smoothly.

Greg's mouth thinned into a tight, unhappy line. "Yes, Mycroft." And there it was. The one thing that had and would keep them at arm's length. Mycroft was almost always behind that professional 'mask' of his, and, if they were going to have any form of relationship at all, Greg wanted it to be with Mycroft, not his mask.

Greg returned to his chair, and lifted up the report once more.

~*~*~*~

John wasn't so much paying attention to where they were going, as he was to the heat of Sherlock's hand in his. He was a little afraid to let go.

Breakfast had been...slightly strained. It was obvious that they each cared, Sherlock had tea waiting for him when he'd arrived, but the conversation seemed cautious.

It made John angry. They'd tumbled together flawlessly all those years together and he hated that something was standing between that now. They could move past this, they would, he just had to be patient.

They arrived at the building for the art show and Sherlock moved to hold the door for John with a
wry smirk. John had to smile in return because Sherlock's look said, 'Aren't I the doting husband?'. John didn't know if Sherlock had done that to make him smile, or if he was just being Sherlock, and getting into character. It didn't matter, because it helped confirm John's earlier opinion. Everything would be fine. They would be fine.

Inside they each accepted a pamphlet that depicted the theme of the art show, entitled, "Pieces." Each artist was a student at a nearby college; several colleges/universities had banded together for this particular program. Some artists had large displays, some had only a few pieces. Some works displayed were collaborations between students from different schools.

Each work used the theme "Pieces" in its own way. One display they passed was a patchwork quilt in a wide array of colors and textures. Sherlock was trying to take in as much data as he could while scanning for what could be helpful, which gave John time to read the descriptions beside the quilt. It read:

*Each swatch of fabric was cut from clothing/fabrics important to the three collaborating artists (Kari, Ted, and David). Some are from childhood clothes or blankets. Some are from beloved toys that broke down over time. What we found most interesting, however, was the amount of cloth that came from clothing of relatives who have passed away; it makes up more than half of this quilt. For us this is a statement of how much our past shapes our present and our futures. The loved ones represented in this quilt may be gone, but they are still very much affecting the world, through each of us.*

John smiled at the explanation and took a step back to look over the quilt again. It was beautiful.

Sherlock didn't appear fixated on one spot or exhibit, so John took the time to wander around, tugging his husband along beside him. Sherlock was not entirely passive, either. Occasionally he commented on a clever interpretation of the theme or, more often than not, how dull the artist's exhibit was. For the most part, thank god, Sherlock only muttered the criticisms loud enough for John to hear.

There was one piece that, up close was just many, many glass eyes fixed to a sturdy backing. However, when one stepped back, and viewed the picture from across the room, the shading and coloring of the glass eyes reviled the face of a child. There was no description, but there was a title: 'Through my eyes.' It had been one of the few exhibits Sherlock had been thoughtful about, as opposed to dismissing it outright. Anyway, that's how John had interpreted his husband's muttered comment of, "At least they are attempting to think."

One exhibit John rather liked, but Sherlock was less than impressed with was just a phone. Beside the phone rested the description:

*Watch Me...*

John examined the phone which, according to the signs posted, he was allowed to touch. He noticed there was a program or video on the main screen waiting to go. John tapped the play button and was immediately confronted with a thin young brunette and an equally young, athletic blond man. They were smiling at the camera with their arms around each other's shoulders.

"Hello, my name is Jennifer," the woman said, giving a little wave.

"And I'm Ted," the blond man added with a wink.

"And we're about to leave this phone on the park bench behind us," Jennifer continued. The pair separated to reveal a wooden bench set neatly into a patch of grass.
"If you have found it, we challenge you to add something to this phone," Ted chimed in.

"I could be a picture, a text, a video, whatever you like," Jennifer added.

"All we ask," Ted explained, "is that you pass the phone on to someone else when you're done. You can leave it somewhere or pass it along to someone you know."

"Our goal is to show the collection on this phone on June 28th at the 'Pieces' art show," Jennifer said.

"So, if it's getting close to June 20th we ask that you mail this phone to our P.O. Box, to make sure we have it ready in time." Ted stated, holding up a sign depicting the address.

"We're asking for your help because we believe that people are awesome and everyone has a story to share. Please help prove us right!" Jennifer cooed into the phone.

The picture faded to black for a moment before a montage started up. John thought he recognised the song as, "Walking in Memphis" by Marc Cohn. Pictures, texts, and snippets of video were played. They started silly, some kids playing with a dog, someone texting a friend, and a snapshot of a young couple hugging. After the first few bars John started to see a theme emerge, acts of kindness, and moments of joy. There were people being handed food and water, there where people helping others cross the street, people helping animals/pets, people praying in temples and churches all around the world, people getting married, and random messages of encouragement sent out to the world in general. As the music started to fade the screen shifted to black and these words appeared in white:

_We never expected to get such a huge or such a positive response. Thank you, to every last person who contributed something to this project. We always believed in the good in others, thank you for further proof!_

John was touched, but Sherlock just muttered something about 'the Woman'. John figured he was thinking about how she had used her phone for such destruction, and shook his head. Sherlock could be pessimistic all he wanted, but the truth of the matter was that he was a greater force for good and justice than John thought he was willing to admit.

At length they came across a large display of photos in the shape of a heart. As they got closer John was able to see they were all wedding photos. Upon further inspection he realised that they were all wedding photos of gay and lesbian couples. This piqued his interest, and Sherlock must have noticed as well because he beckoned the artist over. She was a short woman, shorter than John with soft gold curls framing her warm brown eyes. Her name badge declared her to be 'Traci'.

"Yes?" Traci said, "Can I help you?"

"Are you the artist?" Sherlock asked, gesturing to the collection of photos.

"I'm one of them," she explained gesturing over to a young Latino man with dark hair and eyes. "I collaborated with Carlos. He's one of the few artists in this show who isn't an art major. He's majoring in law!"

Carlos stepped up beside Traci and smiled warmly. "Hello," he said with a nod, "Welcome to our exhibit."

John nodded in return, recognising the spark of recognition in the young man's eyes. He wondered if Carlos read his blog and Sherlock and him them from that, or from their (Sherlock's) international media reputation. Either way he didn't gush or make a scene. Instead he asked, "Do you have any questions for us?"
"How is it that a student of law became involved in a massive, multi-college art project?" Sherlock asked. His body language was neutral, but John could read the subtle tension that demanded answers.

Answers that Carlos seemed only too happy to give. "Every couple pictured here," Carlos gestured to the display with a jerk of his head, "Has been a victim of hate crimes."

Sherlock tilted his head slightly to the side and said, "Explain."

Carlos walked John and Sherlock closer to the display while Traci excused herself and went to speak with a small group who appeared to be waiting for her next to the description of the exhibit. "These women," Carlos began, gesturing to a black and white photo of a light haired woman with her arms around a shorter, dark haired woman, "Had a child who was reclaimed by the sperm donour once he was twelve years old."

"A child who went on to study law after disowning his biological father," Sherlock said with a brief sideways glance at Carlos.

Carlos smiled. "You are as observant as they say, Mr. Holmes." Carlos stepped closer to the display and gestured to the top of the heart. "We added this one at the last minute."

Sherlock and John followed Carlos's gaze to a colour photo of Dylan and Kyle, the one they had seen rendered in newspaper black and white when they'd first arrived in the states.

Sherlock's hands pressed together under his chin in his 'thinking' pose as he studied the photograph. John took a deep breath as he looked. Being a doctor and a soldier had taught him to remove himself from a situation to do what needed to be done, but it was still hard to see that picture. They had been such a loving couple. John forced his attention to a different photograph of two young men in order to distract himself from the intense anger that threatened to bubble over in his chest.

"Tell me about them," Sherlock demanded.


"No," Sherlock cut him off, then gestured at the expanse of the display, "them."

Carlos's mouth fell open in disbelief. "All of them?" he asked, glancing at the display. There had to be over three hundred pictures.

Sherlock arched an eyebrow at the younger man. "Maybe."

John's eyes swept over the display and he winced in sympathy. They were going to be here for a while. Still, even if this was just another dead end, it made sense to investigate it thoroughly. John shifted his weight on his legs and tried to get comfortable.

Carlos started at the top of the heart and took them slowly around it. There were men and women, young and old. Some had lost houses, limbs, jobs, family or even their lives for trying to be with the person that they loved. Some acts of violence and hatred were random, some came from the people closest to those pictured in the display. At first Carlos's descriptions had been overly detailed, but as they made their way around the heart Carlos began to adjust the facts he focused on based on what Sherlock had asked about, and when the consulting detective cut him off.

By the time they had reached the bottom and begun working their way up the other side John felt sure they'd find what they were looking for soon. They had to, because this was getting just as maddening as the blind banker and those damned books.
John smiled gratefully at Traci when she walked over and handed him tea and a sandwich. She left food for Carlos and Sherlock as well, but it went untouched. He wasn't sure if Traci also knew who they were, or was just respecting her partner. Either way he was grateful for her quiet presence, even when she was answering questions from other attendees of the show.

After three quarters of the heart had been reviewed John gave up all pretense of listening and struck up a conversation with Traci. She was, apparently, Carlos's girlfriend. They had met through this art project and begun dating two months ago. She had no family of her own, having grown up in foster care, but had recently met Carlos's mothers, and was charmed by the love they had for their son.

Traci asked a few questions about Sherlock and himself. John found the subject more tender than he would have liked, and kept his answers brief. Traci, thankfully, didn't push, and seemed happy to talk about her project, Carlos, and her studies. At one point she got up and stretched, informing John that, in addition to art, she was studying yoga and hoped to teach it one day. John watched her work through several simple poses, explaining them as she went. It was certainly less depressing than listening Carlos detail a litany of unimaginable losses.

Traci left to powder her nose, and John found himself studying Sherlock again. Fatigue was showing on Carlos's face, but Sherlock remained as stoic and focused as ever. It was amazing to see Sherlock working a case, and John found himself smiling in admiration despite his inner malaise.

"You two are great together," Traci murmured, appearing suddenly at his shoulder. "You are," she insisted when he turned to her, at a loss for what to say. "You have this...energy even now when he's absorbed in what sounds like a case." She paused to smile, looking at Sherlock and Carlos before turning back to John. "You two have one of those love stories that make people jealous. I can tell."

John smiled and sipped his tea because he wasn't sure what else to do.

"Is this all of them?" Sherlock asked Carlos, his voice clipped, irritated. There was a restraint in that irritation that John was illogically proud of. Maybe he had finally managed to instill a modicum of manners in his errant flat mate.

"No," Carlos said with a tired sigh. "Some were too old to mount on the display. Some people volunteered pictures for us to have at this show but refused to let us mount them because they had no copies and wanted them back. We did a lot of research and found some great pictures, but we couldn't always get permission from the owners of every picture we found."

"Do you have a record of the pictures you did not include in the display?"

Carlos nodded, clearly exhausted, but committed to helping Sherlock, and passionate about his work.

"He's really something else, isn't he?" Traci asked, sipping a coffee.

John smiled and nodded. "He's like a force of nature." John checked his watch and sighed. "Listen, don't let us keep you. He has no respect for the human need to rest, eat, or sleep when he's like this."

Traci smiled back, settling into a chair beside the one John was sitting in. "That's alright. Carlos wants to help. He loves your blog, Dr. Watson, and he's committed to ending the pain behind those photos. If this case has anything with that, that is."

"Actually," John began with an internal grimace, "We're on our honeymoon." He had to stick to the story, but it rankled a bit more to say 'honeymoon' now than it had yesterday. It was his own damn fault.

Traci nodded in understanding, "And Sherlock saw this case in the papers."
It was John's turn to nod. Yes, good. That fit. Hadn't he thought some time about how Sherlock would always be Sherlock, even if they were actually dating?

"I'm not sure if I could put up with that," Traci mused as Carlos dragged out boxes of photos and started to go through them.

John shrugged. "It's not as hard as you'd think. It's just...how we are." Bloody hell, he was smiling again.

Traci shook her head and gave John a gentle nudge in the ribs. "See what I mean? I love Carlos to death, and I'm still jealous of you."

John let out a slow breath and tried to re-focus on Sherlock. Both Sherlock and Carlos were leaning over a rapidly growing pile of photos.

"What about these three?" Sherlock asked, gesturing to the photo in Carlos's hands.

"They were a triad, all dating each other. This one is named Linda," Carlos was pointing now, "She came from a very religious family and left her lovers. This other woman is named Emily, she's now a motivational speaker for coming out of the closet, any closet. She married Robert, the man in the photo, a few years after Linda left them.

"Where were you married?" Traci asked, drawing John's attention back to her for a moment.

"A lovely old church in London," John explained.

"I love old churches!" Traci gushed, then flushed at her over enthusiasm. "What I mean is, I'm doing a series of sketches on architecture for one of my classes and I chose to sketch old churches because I thought their architecture can be really interesting. What church where you married at?"

"I don't think it always had this name, because it looks like such an old building, but I think it was called 'All God's Children United,'" John stated. "It's run by a woman named Isabel. They accept parishioners of all faiths and sexual orientations."

Traci smiled again and her eyes sparkled with warmth. "Sounds like one hell of a church, doctor."

John nodded, smiling at the memory. God how, how had it not occurred to him that he was in love with Sherlock when they were married? He was an idiot. ...then again, he had it on good authority that most people were.

"What are you waiting for?" Sherlock snapped. "I told you this couple is irrelevant. What about this one?"

"Sherlock!" John admonished as the lanky consulting detective went to reach for another photograph. "We've been doing this for hours. Show some respect for all the work Carlos has done to help you."

Sherlock glared angrily at John, and John stared calmly right back, undeterred. He'd seen Sherlock in a snit more times than he could count and Sherlock hadn't been able to cow him yet. Just as Sherlock's face began to soften slightly, Carlos broke in.

"What church did you say you'd been married at, Dr. Watson?"

"'All God's Children United,'" John explained. "Why?"
Carlos held up a still hand, his eyes flickering back and forth slightly, thinking. Carlos then snapped his fingers and crouched to pull out a different box. This next box, far from the last box, was filled to the brim with newspaper clippings. Carlos rifled through them with confidence; he knew what he was looking for. Carlos's hands moved quickly, pushing bits of paper out of the way as he searched. Nearby Sherlock waited, impatiently.

"Here!" Carlos declared, lifting a clipping, it looked like an article with an attached picture. They all moved forward, crowding around Carlos to get a better look. "This is an article talking about the death of Matthew and Patrick Brennan," Carlos began, gesturing to the article. The picture showed a tall, broad, red headed, brown eyed man with his arm wrapped around a thin man with dirty blond hair and gray eyes. "Matthew is the shorter man, and this is his lover, Patrick Brennan. They met in London where Patrick was doing a study abroad. They were married at 'All God's Children United' Church and moved to New York City about ten years ago. As you know gay marriage wasn't 'legal' in the United Kingdom at that point, but that doesn't sound like it's ever mattered to that church. Matthew was still able to change his last name from Walker to Brennan.

"This article talks about how they were found dead, beaten not far from a well known BDSM club, just after Pride. The crime was never solved, but it was listed as a hate crime. They were buried together by Patrick's family because, according to this article, Matthew was 'out of touch' with his own family back in London."

Sherlock snatched the paper out of Carlos's hands and scanned it. John crouched beside him, reading over his shoulder. The victims had been found in a dumpster not far from the BDSM club. They had been strangled, suspended by their wrists, whipped, flogged, and pierced through the heart by some unknown implement. Cause of death, exsanguination. Both men suspected to have been subdued by blunt force trauma to the side of the head.

John and Sherlock's heads snapped up simultaneously, locking eyes. Sherlock's eyes glinted with an internal fire and his mouth quirked up in long sought satisfaction. The world's only consulting detective drew in a satisfied breath and said, "Call Lestrade."
The Chase

Chapter Summary

The game is afoot.

Chapter Notes

A heartfelt thank you goes out to all those who have commented on, followed, and/or subscribed to this story. Your support and enthusiasm has helped make this story what it is. ^_^

I would also like to thank my Beta, Helena Chauby, for her help and tolerance of my technology-inept self. Many thanks also goes to my faithful and tireless Brit-picker, the Lady of Clunn.

One more shout out to my flat-mate/sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff.

I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 21: The Chase

"This is important then?" Carlos asked them, gesturing to the picture. "We've found something?"

Sherlock and John's heads snapped around to look at Carlos. Sherlock probably hadn't cared that they'd had an audience; John had just forgotten. It was easy to do that when Sherlock was around.

Sherlock stood, straightening his long legs, and the others followed suit. "Yes," Sherlock said in a calm, quiet voice. "I believe we've found something very important to this case. You have been very helpful, but I must ask that you speak of this to no one. Do you understand? This information is very sensitive."

Carlos nodded, beaming. "Sure thing, Mr. Holmes. I am studying to be a lawyer, for one thing, so I know how to be discreet. Also, you never told me anything about a case to start with, just started giving orders. I'm familiar with your husband's blog, so I figured you must be working a case. I won't say a word, and neither will Traci." Carlos paused to grin at his girlfriend. "We'll just watch for the full explanation on the blog."

John flushed at the reminder of how well Sherlock and he were recognised. He'd nearly forgotten the wedding announcement he'd made in his blog just after detailing the 'arrest' of the very killer they were now trying to catch. He hadn't felt very good about lying on his blog, but, as usual, Sherlock had been very persuasive. It had strengthened their story that this was 'just a honeymoon', and, right now, John would take any advantage over the killer that they could get. A killer who may or may not be on to them, depending on how much he had known when he'd sent the black roses.
John was jarred back to the present moment when he heard Sherlock say, "Thank you for all of your help Carlos, and you Traci." There was a chorus of 'you're welcome's' as Sherlock shook both of their hands and started for the door. John stared after him a moment, surprised.

"You must be a good influence on him," Carlos murmured at John's side.

John allowed himself a small smile. "Yeah, he doesn't normally behave that well." Then again, there was still a chance he was being charming to ensure Carlos and Traci's silence. Still, John would take what he could get.

"John!" Sherlock called over his shoulder, not breaking stride.

"I've got to run," John said, turning to Traci and Carlos for a moment. "Thanks again for all your help." John broke seamlessly into a run to catch up with his husband.

Sherlock had already hailed a cab by the time John had made it outside.

"How do you do that?" John asked as they tumbled into the back. "This isn't even England and cabs still stop for you out of thin air."

Sherlock turned to face John, having just given the cabbie directions to their hotel, and fixed his husband with a sardonic look. "I have been told I can be charismatic when I want to be."

"Is that what that was about in there?" John asked, gesturing to the building of the art show, which was rapidly fading from sight as the cab picked up speed. Sherlock, however, was bent over his phone, tapping it furiously, ignoring him. John tried again. "Sherlock?"

"Irrelevant, John, we have a lead."

John leaned back into his seat and crossed his arms. He was annoyed, but in the greater scheme of things, Sherlock was right. He usually was.

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"What is it? What's happened?" Greg asked leaning over the desk towards Mycroft.

They had been working on the case as best they could from their usual positions. Mycroft had sat behind his desk reviewing security footage, and Greg had sat in front of it with a small pile of police reports. They were working in companionable silence until Mycroft's phone buzzed. That, in itself was not unusual. The slight stiffening Greg had noticed in Mycroft's body after he read the text, was.

"My brother's found a lead," Mycroft murmured, his eyes still scanning the screen in front of him.

Greg practically leapt out of his chair and around the desk. "What?! Really?"

He leaned over Mycroft's shoulder to look at the screen, and the elder Holmes did nothing to hide it from him, absorbed in reading Sherlock's rapid-fire texts.

_I have new information. - SH_

_There was another murder ten years ago. Patrick and Mathew Brennan. -SH_
They were married at All God's Children United Church. -SH

Matthew's single, or maiden name, was Walker. -SH

Their murder fits the modus operandi we are looking for. -SH

Greg and Mycroft were silent and still for the next minute before Mycroft put down his phone and began frantically typing into his computer.

"What? Is that it?" Greg asked, glaring down at the phone. "Not that I'm not pleased, it's a lot more than we had to go one a moment ago, but with that much to go on he must already know more. He's Sherlock Bloody Holmes!"

"Actually, his middle name is Alexander, and we're lucky he gave us this much," Mycroft replied, his finger's never slowing on the keyboard. "I guarantee you that, as we speak, he is combing the internet and his mind palace. In all likelihood, he's also hacking some high-clearance databases for the information he needs."

"Still, he did stop to tell you." Greg offered, "Perhaps John is having a good influence on him."

Mycroft snorted. "More likely he considers this a race to see how can follow the lead to its logical conclusion the fastest. Sherlock will be Sherlock. Dr. Watson does not hold that much sway over my brother."

"It's Dr. Holmes, now," Gregory corrected.

"Gregory, this is hardly the time," came Mycroft's clipped reply.

Gregory nodded. "Right. How can I help?"

"I've dropped the video feed of them to follow up on this lead," Mycroft said, never looking away from this screen. "Have Susan and Ryan maintain visual contact through the security cameras. Anthea can get us a copy of the police report."

"Done," Greg said picking up the phone on Mycroft's desk and dialing the lab—or whatever they called the technology center they'd set up a floor down.

"Hello? Ryan here," came a steady, alert voice on the other end.

"Ryan, this is Greg," the detective inspector began, turning away from Mycroft so that he might be less distracting. "Pull up a visual on Sherlock and John over surveillance."

"On it," Ryan said, follow by the sounds of furious typing. Greg waited, alert and silent until he heard, "Found them. They're pulling up to their hotel now."

Greg let out a small breath of relief. "Good. Keep eyes on them, Ryan. In about two minutes Sherlock's probably going to tear out of the hotel after someone. He's faster than you think. Do not lose visual. Have Susan track them as well. Confirmed?"

Greg could almost hear the nodding on the other end. "Confirmed." A small, muffled chuckle and then, "I do have some experience tracking Sherlock Holmes, sir."

The set of Greg's mouth grew hard and straight. "I do too; I'm not about to underestimate how quickly he can slip away. Keep eyes on him."

"Yes sir," Ryan replied, all serious now. Greg heard him call Susan over before the connection was
Anthea strode into the room just as Greg was setting the phone down. She carried two small paper bags that probably held the take-away that was meant to be their dinner. When Greg moved to meet her in the middle of the room, her gaze snapped up, focused, and ready.

"Anthea, I need you to track down the police report for the murder of Patrick and Mathew Brennan," Greg spoke softly because 1) he knew he had Anthea's undivided attention and 2) he was still being mindful of not interrupting Mycroft. "Mathew was known as Mathew Walker before he changed his name."

Anthea nodded once, already shifting her weight. "Will do." She pressed the paper bags into Greg's hand as she turned. She was nearly at the door when Greg spoke again.

"And Anthea," Greg began, waiting until she had turned to face him. "Thank you," Greg murmured, hoisting up the brown paper bags, gesturing with them.

Anthea smiled and replied, "You're welcome." And then she was gone.

It took Greg a moment to realise he was smiling. Mycroft really had a well-oiled team. Greg grimaced to himself when he thought they were almost better than his own team. In addition to their discipline and impressive skill set, they didn't grousse about Sherlock showing them up. He would really have to put an end to that when he got back to London. For the moment, however, they still had a case to work. Feeling every bit at home, Greg rounded the desk and leaned in close over Mycroft's shoulder to observe his computer screen. "What've you got?"

Mycroft paused, turning his head slowly to shoot Greg a look with a raised eyebrow for the question/order.

"What?" Greg sputtered. "This isn't a time for egos, and I know you're just as good as Sherlock, if not better, therefore, you have something."

Looking slightly mollified, Mycroft turned back to the screen and gestured at a file he had just pulled up.

"Sherlock has speculated the killer is a father motivated to revenge himself on the LGBT community for a harm to his son. He's also speculated this man has a military background. Patrick's parents are United States natives, so I focused on Matthew's parents. Matthew's father, Frank served in Her Majesty's forces for over a decade."

On the screen, Greg could see a stout, muscular man with dark hair in a close buzz cut with piercing grey eyes. His stat sheet showed excellent service until he was honourably discharged to care for his two sons, Luke and Matthew.

"After going to the register office, he was married in the Catholic Church to a woman named Martha, who died in childbirth with their second son, Luke," Mycroft continued, seeing that Greg was following along. "He's kept a fairly low profile since then."

Greg watched as bank statements, pictures, driving license, and other important information flashed across the screen. "He's been careful?" Greg asked, mindful not to be too excited about a lead just because he wanted the killer caught. It had to make sense; they had to be sure they had the right man.

"Insidiously so," Mycroft replied, bringing up more bank statements. "About ten years ago, two months after the death of his son, he began pulling regular amounts from his bank account. Not enough to look suspicious, but enough to help finance his current plan entirely in cash."
"So that he's untraceable," Greg murmured, understanding. "Christ, you think he's been planning this for ten years?!!"

Mycroft shrugged, still focused on the computer. "Not this exactly, but something. He took time to decide on his current course of action. He planned this in detail. Sherlock mentioned the first double murder was somewhat impulsive but also showed signs of a long ruminated fantasy lived out. He's known what he was going to do for years, just not exactly when. While he was figuring out what to do, and waiting for the right time to do it, he made sure he'd have the resources he needed, in a way that wouldn't draw suspicion. It's the kind of planning I'd expect from someone in the military. He's been trained to be prepared, no matter what."

"We know he's already here because of Dylan and Kyle. It might be worth it to check with hotels in the area," Greg offered. "Most require a credit card on record even if their guest pays in cash. Although not the seedier establishments."

Mycroft waved his hand dismissively. "Waste of time. Too much risk of someone remembering him. No, he's got a better option." A few more clicks and the image of a rustic looking cabin appeared including blueprints and real estate information. "Frank inherited this cabin from a cousin who immigrated here in the sixties."

Greg squinted as he read the details on the property. "It's a little out of the way from the Hamptons. I think he'd want to set up base camp closer to his intended targets."

Mycroft nodded before holding up a single index finger as he replied, "But he knows, at least in some capacity, that Sherlock and John are dangerous to him. I'm still not sure if he knows they are on the case, or if he's just angry at them for getting married, but he knows they are here. Dr. -Holmes's blog has made my brother's exploits, and his participation in them, well known. He has even mentioned myself once or twice. Frank has been careful and patient for a long time. Perhaps he is waiting for the right opening."

"Still worth a once over, with back up," Greg agreed, already pulling out his phone when it began to ring. Greg swiped to answer and heard Susan's voice come through.

"Sir, John and Sherlock are on the move again. They just stormed out of their hotel room and hailed a cab."

"Thanks for the update, Susan. Continue to follow them." Greg paused, thinking about the remote location of the cabin they were probably speeding to. "Let me know the instant you lose visual."

"Yes sir." There was a question in Susan's voice, but she still sounded determined. She might not be on the same page at the moment, but she trusted Mycroft and, by extension, Greg.

Greg hung up and turned to face Mycroft. He could explain to Susan later. Right now, he needed all eyes on the younger Holmes brother.

Mycroft was just reaching to shut his laptop when his own phone buzzed. Pulling his phone from his pocket, Mycroft tapped the buttons a few times, scanned the message, and let out a derisive snort. Greg was about to ask what Sherlock had sent, because Sherlock was excellent at getting just that reaction from his brother, when Mycroft lifted the phone to his ear.

"Hello? Dr. ...Holmes." This time Greg allowed himself a small smile at hearing John's new name. Mycroft was still stumbling over it a bit, but he would come around, just like Sherlock and John had. Or, Greg hoped they had. Didn't Mycroft imply they'd slept together? It would be pretty hard to misconstrue something like that, but if anyone could manage it, it would be those two.
"Yes, he just did. We're on our way. Do not go in the cabin alone."

Greg couldn't make out John's words, but he heard the incredulous tone of his voice before Mycroft pressed the 'end call' button. "What did Sherlock's text say?" Greg asked, curious what, specifically, had gotten under Mycroft's skin.

Mycroft rolled his eyes and turned his phone so that Greg could see the screen.

*John told me to text you. - SH*

Greg chuckled before he could stop himself. "God, he is incorrigible! You should send that text to John, he'll give Sherlock a lecture for you."

Mycroft tilted his head for a brief moment as if seeing potential usefulness on John's part for the first time. "Later," Mycroft said as he stood.

Greg nodded, following Mycroft at a swift pace out of the room. They had a team to mobilise.

~*~*~*~

"I swear to God, Sherlock I will put you in a sleeper hold if I have to." John's voice was terse and serious.

"You know I can remain conscious in that hold for over twenty minutes," Sherlock quipped, crouching low in the underbrush. John could see the cabin in the murky gloom of the early night. They couldn't be more than one hundred yards from it.

"I mean it!" John hissed, reaching forward to yank the curls at the back of Sherlock's neck, bringing the consulting detective's body lower and closer to Johns. "You are NOT going in there alone, Sherlock!" He might not be able to help being in love with his crazy flatmate, but John would be damned if he let the idiot run into reckless danger when John could stop him. Not this time, not with this much at stake.

Sherlock must have read something in John's tone that gave him pause, because he went limp under John's hand, unresisting. "Alright John. I'll stay," he murmured.

John relented his vicious grip on Sherlock's hair, allowing him to sit up. Sherlock met John's gaze and held it softly. The hard edges of John's expression relaxed as he looked into the calm face of his husband. Sherlock wasn't going to bolt, this time.

Sherlock looked down at his ex-army doctor, surprised by this rare show of force. John was usually polite, charming, and easy going. Simple minded people often forget how quickly and fiercely John could act when the situation called for it. Sherlock was briefly reminded of when John pulled rank during the Hound case. That duality made him a good doctor, and a good soldier. In that moment Sherlock wanted to tell him the truth, wanted to be honest with him.

Sherlock had never made a habit of feeling badly for being dishonest, manipulating others was required in every case he'd ever worked. Until John had begun to lecture him for manipulating people unnecessarily, Sherlock had considered it a perk of his career choice. But, as he was in most cases, John was different. Nothing felt right about manipulating John.
"John, I..." Sherlock reached out his hand as if to lay it over John's shoulder, when John's phone buzzed and his blogger glanced down, breaking eye contact.

John looked up again a moment later with a grin. "See? You didn't have to wait long. Greg says they're in position, we can go in. I'm going to leave my phone on so it transmits what we say to Greg and Mycroft, just in case there's any trouble."

Sherlock nodded mutely, not trusting himself to speak. Just as well they were interrupted. What would he have said anyway? ...Nothing that would have done any good.

John and Sherlock skirted closer to the cabin, keeping low and silent. They crept up to the corner of the cabin to the left of the front door. They paused here, Sherlock's eyes flitting back and forth as he took in God knows what data, and analysed it.

John closed his eyes and focused on what he could hear. Mostly it was the wind, the chirps of birds, and the rustle of leaves. John tilted his head towards the wall of the cabin and strained, but couldn't pick up any sounds from inside. Glancing up, all the windows John could see were dark.

Sherlock touched his arm then, to get his attention, and John nearly jumped... nearly. Sherlock pressed a slim finger to his lips and jerked his head to indicate that they were going to move towards the door. John nodded, and they began to move once more.

There must have been a lake or stream nearby, because a cool mist had crept in along with the growing dark; it crowded in around the edges of the cabin. The stayed low, inching towards the door, hardly daring to breathe. Sherlock pressed an ear to the door, slowly reached up, and loudly jigged the handle. John's heart rate ratcheted up a gear and he bit his tongue to keep himself from chastising Sherlock.

A moment later, when Sherlock stood, John understood his reasoning. If there was someone in the cabin, they would have heard that and moved to see what it was. John hadn't seen or heard anything. If he felt comfortable enough to stand up, it was likely Sherlock hadn't either. They were going in.

Never one for subtlety, Sherlock reared back and kicked the door open. It came away from the wall with minor wood chips flying from the latch by the handle. Sherlock loomed in the doorway, scanning, with one hand pressed to the door to keep it wide open.

John stayed close, peering at the cabin around Sherlock's outstretched arm. It appeared to be a simple, one story, open floor plan. It was difficult to make out in the murky light, but the cabin appeared to be a mishmash of boxes and bric a brac lying about.

Sherlock swept into the cabin, keeping close to the walls, with John right on his heels. Sherlock pulled a small torch from his coat pocket and held it above his head, sweeping the stream of light slowly back and forth.

Everything was covered with a thick layer of dust, dirt, and cobwebs. Objects leaned at awkward angles against each other, cardboard boxes wilted with age and moisture, and the wind moaned in the chimney, kicking up small swirls of dust and ash. It didn't look like much in the way of accommodations. It didn't look like anyone had been here in years. There would have to be marks in the dust on the floor if they had been, and it was undisturbed. Noting the tension slowly drain from Sherlock's shoulders, John let out his own long-held breath. Sherlock must have come to the same conclusion: Another dead end.

"Damn!" Sherlock muttered under his breath, still scanning the cabin, but this time looking for something, anything to give them another direction to go in, any data that might be useful.
John remained still by Sherlock's side, shifting his weight from foot to foot, looking for anything that might seem out of place. Unfortunately the entire cabin seemed as common and muddied with useless details as the killer they were trying to track down. Still, there had to be something...anything...

John's head snapped to the left before he'd even properly registered the sound...shuffling, movement, unhurried. Aware that they may have walked into an ambush John reached out and grabbed Sherlock's arm to get his attention. Quick on his feet, Sherlock moved to crouch beneath a heavily laden table, close to the door. John just crouched where he was, they'd be able to attack from two different angles that way.

Breathing stilled, heartbeats thrummed, and they waited. It was almost poetic, really, a killer using a 'hide out' as bait before closing off the way out. What was he planning? Would he set fire to the cabin? Try to smoke them out? Did he know he was surrounded by Mycroft's operatives?

Considering the roses they'd received at their wedding John wouldn't be surprised if the killer had been following them while they followed Albert and Trevor, waiting for an opening. He could have seen where they were heading and gone ahead to lay in wait..

The footsteps were steady, calm, unconcerned. Did he really feel that confident? John's eyes flickered to Sherlock, who was also glancing at him. John gave a brief nod, they were in this together. John hunched lower, coiling his muscles, putting himself on an all too familiar, hair trigger. Gravel shifted underfoot as the person outside grew closer, almost...almost at the doorway now.

Wood groaned as weight settled against it and the shadow of a hand pressed against the half open door.

John sprang with Sherlock, pile driving the stranger into the threshold of the cabin. John pressed down into the man's shoulder, jerking his head up to search for any accomplices he may have.

"Get OFF me you louts!"

John froze, then flinched, pulling away from Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade.

"Greg..." John started, "Why didn't you announce yourself?"

"I didn't know what you two were dealing with in here! I thought I might, I don't know, help! Mycroft said he thought you might be alone in there so, silly me, I figured it would be safe." Greg's head snapped around to glare at Sherlock, who was still somewhat pinning him to the ground. "Oi! I said, get off!"

Sherlock let out a cheeky grin as he stood, leaving John to help Lestrade to his feet. "I was just savouring the moment," Sherlock explained. "It turns out that tackling you to the ground is almost as satisfying as pick pocketing your identification. I shall have to keep this in mind for future reference."

Greg made a sour face and looked about to hurl some vicious diatribe at Sherlock, when Mycroft broke in, approaching the scene from the mist of the woods. "You are here to catch a serial killer, dear brother, not injure an officer of the law," Mycroft drawled.

Sherlock crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. "I barely touched him. Your boyfriend is fine Mycroft."

Greg sputtered while Mycroft and John let out twin exclamations of, "Sherlock!"

"Enough," Mycroft pressed, "I presume you surmise the killer is not here?"
"No," Sherlock scowled petulantly at the ground. "I doubt anyone has been here since its previous occupants died."

Mycroft nodded, tapped something into his phone, and the woods became alive with men and so many torches, it was almost easy to see their surroundings. Mycroft looked up, glanced around, and sniffed. "It'll be dark as pitch before long. We should move in some flood lights."

"Yes sir," Anthea's soft, steady voice came from slightly behind Mycroft. John could just make out her silhouette as she looked into her own phone, tapping furiously.

"Come along, Sherlock," Mycroft muttered as he swept towards the doorway of the cabin. "Even if it's all untouched, it is worth a going over."

Sherlock rolled his eyes and remained mute, unwilling to verbally acknowledge that his brother was correct. He followed him anyway.

John caught Greg's eyes with his as Sherlock brushed past, and they shared grim expressions as they braced themselves for the long night ahead.

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Greg leaned back into the leather seat of the car and pressed his hands to his face with a sigh. Sherlock and John had left moments before in one of the many cars on scene. It was high time they all got some rest.

"Tired, Gregory?" Mycroft asked beside him.

Greg nodded and groaned. "My head's spinning, even though that went faster than it had any right to."

Mycroft glanced out the window briefly, before returning to his phone. "It is nearly dawn; I'd be worried if you weren't tired." A brief pause and then, "Sherlock was more helpful than usual, when he wasn't glaring daggers at me."

Greg let his hands slide into his lap with a chuckle. "He just wants to blame someone for the fact that things aren't going as fast as he would like, and you're his favorite target. I have a great deal of respect for your brother, but sometimes, I think we all should be nominated for sainthood."

Greg's saw the curl of a smile on Mycroft's lips as he typed into his phone, and felt an answering smile of his own forming. "As difficult as this may be to believe, not harming my brother for being the arrogant man that he is, is not a miracle."

"More the pity that, I'm sure you have the necessary contacts in Rome to fast track the process if those were miracles."

Mycroft chuckled softly, and paused to look up from his phone. "Go to sleep, Gregory," he murmured, tapping the seat between them. "The car is more than wide enough to accommodate you lying down and me sitting up."

"What about you?" Greg asked, stifling a yawn.
Mycroft gestured with his phone. "Paperwork will keep me busy until we're back at headquarters."

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Greg asked, even as he began to lean down; he was really too tired to argue.

"Not at all," Mycroft replied, not bothering to keep the smile out of his voice.

Gregory's breathing pattern evened out almost immediately and Mycroft found himself staring down into Gregory's salt and pepper hair. At least once this past week Greg had fallen asleep with his head on Mycroft's desk as they worked late into the night. He would really need to convince Gregory of the benefits a traditional bed held in promoting a restful sleep. Mycroft smiled to himself and shook his head. Sofas, chairs, desks, was there anything this man wouldn't sleep on?

Mycroft glanced down at Gregory once more before forcibly turning his attention back to his phone. He was not, even for a second, tempted to run his fingers through Gregory's hair. That would be ill advised and, worst of all, sentimental.

~*~*~*~

Upon exiting the car that had dropped them off outside their hotel, John stretched, leaning up on his toes and reaching for the sky. John realised too late he'd stood up too quickly and stumbled back into Sherlock's waiting arms.

"I thought you might do that," Sherlock said, sounding amused. "You're almost asleep on your feet."

John grumbled and leaned back into Sherlock until the car Mycroft had sent with them pulled away. Standing straight once more John said, "Little wonder, considering how long I've been up. Listen, I'm going to grab a kip once we get back to the room. Wake me up if you pull something together while you're in your mind palace, okay?"

"I will John," Sherlock promised, slipping an arm around him as they walked towards the hotel entrance. It was late, or perhaps early enough that there almost wasn't anyone around to put on a show for, but then again Sherlock had stopped caring about the 'show' of their marriage a long time ago. Trying to fight off returning feelings of guilt, Sherlock gave John a little squeeze. "Besides, you'd never let me hear the end of it if you woke up to an empty room."

"Damn straight!" John agreed emphatically, before stifling a yawn behind his hand.

Sherlock smiled and pressed a kiss into John's temple. He nodded to the lone smoker huddled to the side of the entranceway. "Have a light?" the older man asked, gesturing with his unlit cigarette.

Ugh, how dull. This was why Sherlock didn't normally bother with niceties like nodding to a stranger. He should have remembered that Americans were pushy. "No I'm-" Sherlock snapped his head around as John jerked from his grasp in conjunction with the sound of an impact. There was barely time to register John crumple beneath the blows of a masked young man, before a sickening impact jolted against his own skull, sending his senses reeling. "John!" Sherlock slurred, scrambling to reach his husband when two rapid strikes to his temple brought darkness upon him.
Chapter Summary

In my defense, I did have foreshadowing for this.

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains depictions of graphic violence/torture which could be a trigger for some people. Please be safe. Also please remember that I believe in happy endings.

Thank you so much to all those who all of those who have left comments, given kudos, and bookmarked this story! You guys are awesome, and your support is very motivating! ^_^

Many thanks also go to my Beta, Helena Chauby, for all of your help with editing.

And, of course, I cannot forget to thank my flat mate, sounding board, and own person Sherlock, Geoff.

It sounds like many of you were excited, or at least compelled, by the cliff hanger last chapter ended on. I'm glad to have you at the edge of your seats. This chapter, I hope, will be equally dramatic. I hope you enjoy the ride; buckle up. >:)

Chapter 22: The Fall

His head hurt. A lot. In fact his head, shoulders, and arms ached with a burning, pounding ache that was insistently ripping him from the black oblivion he had been drifting in. John sucked in a quick breath and lifted his head from his chest as he jolted back into wakefulness.

He blinked, rolling his head on his shoulders, still foggy. Large, grime covered windows and support beams swam senseless before his eyes. A long expanse of pale color broke up the stained, aging wood of the walls. John's eyes traveled up the thin shape until they caught and held a familiar blue/gray gaze.

Sherlock!

John jolted trying to move towards his husband only to find that he was suspended from hands tied tightly above his head, just as Sherlock was. A deep baritone rolled over his ears and John knew Sherlock was speaking to him. The fog was starting to lift from John's mind, replaced by the icy sharp fingers of panic.
They were both suspended, naked, twenty yards apart in some sort of expansive warehouse. John jerked his head around, trying to make sense of things. He remembered the sudden pain in his head... but nothing afterwards... They were a good three feet off the floor. The floor was cement. Towers of boxes and crates filled the space around them, preventing John from getting any real sense of how big the building was. A quick glance out of one of the windows showed they were about five stories up.

"John!" Sherlock's voice was quiet, but insistent. As John turned his head back to face the consulting detective he realized Sherlock must have been talking to him since he woke, trying to get his attention. "How badly are you injured?"

John did a quick mental scan of his body. "Definitely a concussion." He winced, "and this position isn't doing my shoulder any good. What about you?"

Sherlock's muscles bunched at his neck as he tried to shrug, his current suspension making the gesture impossible. "I've had worse."

John let out a dark, strangled chuckle, and tugged at his restraints again.

"Don't strain yourself," Sherlock admonished, "I'll have you out in a minute."

John's brows knit together as he lifted his head to look at Sherlock. "How?"

"Haven't you learned by now that my family is adept at hiding weapons?" Sherlock asked, jerking his chin up towards the ceiling.

John trailed his eyes up Sherlock's arms to his hands, which squirmed furiously in their bindings. John squinted, tilted his head and caught a glint of light off of something in Sherlock's hands. John's eyes widened in realization. Sherlock had a blade or sharp edge of some sort and was using it to cut his bindings.

"Where did you get that from?" John asked, swiveling his head about the room again, then back at Sherlock.

Sherlock's lip quirked up in his trademark smirk. "I secured it in my hair before we left the hotel room."

"Brilliant!" John grinned, and watched Sherlock's smirk shift into a warm smile that few others were privy to. "Let's get out of here."

Sherlock nodded, his face tense with concentration as he worked the blade into the rope at his wrists. "Frank must feel secure in his capture of us. I haven't seen or heard from him, or his young accomplice, since I regained consciousness. However, I'm not about to push our luck."

John gave a small snort of amusement trying to concentrate on Sherlock instead of the growing pain in his shoulders. "That'd be a first."

There was something soft and strange in Sherlock's tone as he said, "Not when you're in danger, it wouldn't be."

"hmm. Simply wouldn't do to have your little husband in danger, now would it?" a new, cold voice broke in, the word 'husband' dripping with condescension.

John's head snapped to the left, following the sound as a well built man with a buzz cut strolled out from the shadows. Frigid gray eyes swept down Sherlock's form and up John's. He was older than
the picture Sherlock had found on that database, but John knew he was looking down on their captor, and the serial killer they’d hunted for so long. Frank Walker.

"I've come to rather enjoy these moments," Frank drawled, completely at ease. "These few minutes after consciousness returns, when sinners who have trespassed against God's Holy word believe they have escaped his fury yet again." Frank's expression hardened to stone. "Divine retribution came for my son, and now," Frank paused, pulling a long cord of leather, a whip from his belt, "I will bring it to you."

John heard the whip snap before he registered Frank's movement. A red line bloomed open across Sherlock's chest, trailing thin fingers of blood down towards his hip. John's hands clenched into vain fists as Sherlock grimaced, but did not cry out.

"Drop it!" Frank bellowed, striking Sherlock twice in rapid succession, crisscrossing the red on his lean chest.

Sherlock sucked in a slow, shaky breath through his nose before he murmured, "No."

"Drop it now!" Frank demanded, punctuating each word with a harsh lash across Sherlock's legs.

Sherlock jerked reflexively, but remained stubbornly silent.

John clenched his jaw tight to prevent himself from shouting useless protests. Those would only fuel Frank’s twisted hatred. Still, he couldn't stop himself from pulling futilely at his restraints, desperate to get to Sherlock.

Frank cocked his head to the side, studying Sherlock, and chuckled. "You're a real piece of work aren't you?" Frank jerked his head back to indicate John. "And your little boy toy's blog said you were smart." Frank shook his head face full of mock disappointment.

Sherlock arched a defiant eyebrow. "I take it you find something lacking?"

Frank snorted in sick amusement. "You could say that. Why the hell did you start trying to cut yourself down when you hadn't established my location?" Frank held up a single index finger and gestured to emphasize his point. "Always know where your enemy is."

"It seemed foolish to waste the opportunity," Sherlock explained, his hand's completing swift, small movements as he started to work on the rope again without being obvious about it. "Also, most people get cocky when they've had as much success as you've had."

Frank's mouth twisted into an evil smile. "Well, I'm not most people, now am I?"

"No," Sherlock drawled, looking bored. Only the slight tension by the corners of his eyes and mouth betrayed his pain. "You are just dull enough to make yourself difficult to pick out. Tedious."

Sherlock silently braced himself, anticipating Frank would lash out the whip in retaliation for Sherlock's rudeness. When Frank broke out in mad laughter, he still expected the whip, and remained braced, indifferent mask coolly in place. It was that mask, which conformed to his will, that had broken so many cases, and almost never slipped out of place.

The whip whistled in the air and cracked violently against John's left cheek, sending him reeling as far as his rope tether would allow.

Sherlock sucked in a violent breath, choking on a cry of protest he couldn't quite stop, his mask all but forgotten. Even when Moriarty had threatened John at the pool, or before Sherlock's fall,
Sherlock had never had to sit through John sustaining any kind of significant harm. That was why Sherlock had jumped off of St. Barts in the first place; anything that threatened John's life was not an option.

John held his head still, and grimaced as his body swayed. Blood slid down his neck from the open wound on his cheek, mixing with sweat and pooling slightly at his collar bone. His breathing was measured, short. He was riding out the pain.

Sherlock wrenched forcefully in his bonds, seething and silently swearing vengeance.

Frank held the whip casually in one hand, sneering at Sherlock over his shoulder. "And now? Does the world's only consulting detective still find me... tedious?"

The whip flung out again, snapping a tight loop around John's neck, strangling him. John made choked gurgling sounds while Sherlock's mind raced, looking for the way out. There was always a way out. There had to be.

"You are quite stubborn, Mr. Holmes," a new, younger voice rang out.

Sherlock stiffened as Franks young accomplice, his son, Luke walked into view. He had the same dark hair as his father; the same cold gray eyes. But he wasn't as hardened, Sherlock could see it in the set of his shoulders and the tilt of his head. He was putting on a good show for his father, it might have even been fueled by religiousness fanaticism, but he was not as pitiless as his father. Luke was a liability to Frank, one Frank was unaware of, one Sherlock could exploit.

Sherlock's gaze jumped from Frank, to Luke, and back again, with a few furtive glances aimed at John, as he tried to work out how to use this situation to his advantage. What would set Luke off kilter? What would grow the doubt and uncertainty? Should he question Luke's loyalty to his father? To the church? Which loose thread would unravel him the fastest?

"I do suggest you drop the blade, Mr. Holmes," Luke said coolly reaching into a nearby crate and pulling out a taser. A high powered taser. Luke deftly switched it on, his face illuminated in the bright electrical current that surged between the two prongs.

Luke sent Sherlock a sly sideways look through his lashes before turning and walking slowly towards John, who was still being strangled. God, the edges of his lips were blue now. "The choice," Luke continued serenely, "is, of course, yours to make." Luke fired up the taser once more, stretching it out towards John's chest.

No...

The blade fell from Sherlock's fingers, clattering uselessly on the floor.

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"Where are they?!" Mycroft hissed moving from screen to screen in the lab as his team typed furiously on their computers. Almost as soon as they had returned from the cabin they had been alerted about Sherlock and John's abduction by those who had stayed behind.

They had not been idle. Mycroft's team tracked the white van Sherlock and John had been tossed in, to New York City, where it had parked close to a nightclub that was swarming with people.

The killer and his accomplice had each thrown an arm of an unconscious victim around their shoulders, secured their other arm around their victims waist, and walked into the bar. To simple minds it would look like two friends helping two other, very drunk friends. They passed into the
masses without a single protest being raised.

*That* was where things had gotten tricky. Both the killer and his accomplice had done a good job of shielding their faces. The shorter, stockier man had worn a long trench with a popped collar, and broad brimmed hat. The other man, who was taller and thinner, had a gray hoodie, that was two sizes too large for him, pulled low over his eyes.

They tried every camera angle that existed on the systems they were using, but they could never get enough for facial recognition. The line of a chin, the curve of a cheek, just enough to be utterly useless.

The team had lost visual, and was still unable to re-establish it.

When Mycroft and Greg first entered the lab, Sherlock, John, the killer, and his accomplice had just vanished into the crowd. At first Mycroft had remained calm. Focused, driven, but still collected. Immediately he'd ordered a vanguard team into the club to help re-establish visual. They failed. Sherlock, John, the killer, and his accomplice were nowhere to be seen.

Camera footage was reviewed, people were questioned, the local authorities were called...still nothing. Anthea and several others were reviewing Frank's military history with a fine toothed comb to get a sense of his skills, how he might think, in case that gave them an idea or a clue about where Frank may take Sherlock and John... he'd never taken his victims to a second location before...It was well into the morning now, and they didn't know any more than they had five hours ago.

Mycroft wasn't what anyone would call hysterical, but Greg could see the familiar lines of stress in his face and the way he held himself. He needed a break. After all his years working cases at the Yard, Greg had learned, the hard way, that sometimes, the best thing you can do for a case was to take a step back, take a breather, and regroup. That was hard enough on a good day, almost impossible when you became emotionally involved. As much as Mycroft rallied against emotions, Greg knew he was emotionally compromised. This was his little brother he'd had to watch being beaten into unconsciousness and spirited away to almost certain torture, and very likely death, without being able to do anything to stop it.

Greg was affected too, John and Sherlock were dear friends, however annoying the former could sometimes be, but he retained enough detachment to know that Mycroft wasn't helping anyone like this. Greg didn't blame him; he knew he would be a wreck if this had been his sister, Sarah. Still, Mycroft needed a breather...they both did.

If this had been the Yard Greg could have pulled rank, or at least outright questioned someone he felt was compromised. But this wasn't the yard, and there were higher stakes. Moving slowly, Greg pulled out his phone and tapped a few buttons, casually opening and closing apps. After a moment Greg looked up and gestured with his phone as he said, "Mycroft? Could I have a word in private?"

Mycroft's head snapped up, his eyes quickly zeroing in on Greg's phone. He strode quickly, almost too quickly, towards Greg, taking the detective inspectors arm and steering them both into a nearby conference room. Greg was shoved into the room as Mycroft shut the door. Mycroft turned to face him, mouth open as if to ask a question, when he paused. Mycroft was distressed, but he was still one of the most observant people Greg had ever met. He must have read some of Greg's true motivation on his face because he stiffened and drew himself up. "Gregory?" Mycroft asked, part question, part accusation.

Greg let his face soften, and his sympathy show through. "I'm sorry, Mycroft," he murmured. Sorry that Sherlock had been captured, sorry that Mycroft was in pain, but, most of all, Greg was sorry that he was smart enough not to offer any meaningless platitudes like 'We'll find them.' or 'It will all be
okay.' Sherlock could die horribly today, John along with him, and Greg respected Mycroft too much to lie to him like that.

Mycroft thrust his hands forwards, snatching fistfuls of Greg's suit and pushing him backwards into the conference table. Greg went willingly. He wasn't hurt, and if this helped Mycroft get it out, so much the better. Mycroft glowered down at Greg, and gave him one more, violent, shove into the table before stalking off towards the floor to ceiling windows on the other side of the room.

Greg followed him with his eyes, reading the anger, the tension, and the worry for his brother in every feature. Pushing himself off the table Greg made his way to Mycroft. As Greg neared his left side Mycroft did not acknowledge him, staring resolutely out the window. Greg stood silently for a moment watching the small movements of Mycroft's eyes as they flickered over the cityscape. Greg doubted Mycroft was feeling it now, but he had to be exhausted. Greg had at least managed to kip for a few hours in the car; Mycroft had been awake for over thirty hours.

There really was nothing to say. The team was working every possible angle in the other room. If they were going to catch a lead it would have to be soon. Inching closer to Mycroft, Greg slid his hand over Mycroft's wrist and palm until their fingers interlocked. Greg half expected to be hit, and for a long moment Mycroft only passively allowed the gesture. "I'm sorry, Mycroft," Greg repeated softly, giving Mycroft's hand a squeeze.

I'm here.

Mycroft's eyes flittered briefly to Greg's before the detective inspector felt Mycroft's fingers clasp over his hand, returning his grip. Greg let out a slow breath and pressed his side into Mycroft's. In a few minutes they would return to the lab and try to brainstorm, but, for right now, it was more important for Greg to let Mycroft know he was not alone.

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"They were all like you, you know," Frank said, slowly circling Sherlock with the end of the whip trailing after him like a serpent's tail. "So proud, even when they appeared to surrender."

Sherlock was listening, but only to watch for an opening, one that would allow him to manipulate the situation to his advantage. Frank seemed to want him fully aware of torture for as long as possible, because there had not been many more injuries to John or himself, but there had been pain. When Sherlock had dropped the blade he'd been using to cut his rope, Frank had released John from the whips strangle hold, and Luke had turned off the taser. Sherlock had closed his eyes for a moment in relief when he heard John gasping for air, so, while he heard Luke approaching him, he had not realized Luke had picked up the blade until the young killer had driven it into his calf. Sherlock had winced and jerked in his restraints but he'd kept his eyes trained on John, beyond relieved to see color returning to his face.

The relief, however, was short lived; the whip had cracked up once more, marking John's chest as it had Sherlock's. Sherlock clenched his jaw, forcing him mind away from John and onto Luke. Luke was still a weak link, and Sherlock would have to utilize that advantage to the fullest to get John and himself out alive.

Sherlock looked down at Luke sardonically as the young man watched his father. "Your father has become skilled with that whip. After all these murders are you still only watching?"

"Luke had turned his head slowly and looked up at Sherlock with calm, dead eyes, before jerking the taser against Sherlock's thigh and turning it on at full power.
When Sherlock was sensible again, he was gratified to see John had only sustained two more lashes, none of the marks on his chest being as deep as the one on his face...that one would leave a permanent scar...

Luke, who was, perhaps, more vicious than Sherlock had originally speculated, tossed the taser onto the top of a box before bending down to retrieve two long, wooden bo staffs. He tossed one to his father, which Frank caught while setting down his whip, barely looking. The first jab Luke delivered into his ribs informed Sherlock that Frank and Luke had studied pressure points; they knew how to exploit them in combat. This allowed for a lengthy beating that would leave superficial bruises while inflicting a great deal of pain. Luke and Frank traded places every so often so that neither Sherlock nor John would get too 'comfortable' with their particular style of beating. Together father and son brought their victims to the edge of senselessness, before easing off. That was when Frank had begun his 'holier than thou' speech, and Sherlock had marshaled his wits to find an opening, any opening he could use to change the tide.

"You still think what you're doing is right, don't you?" Frank continued. "That your love is somehow sanctified because you were married in that pathetic excuse for a church?!"

"I don't love John," Sherlock stated calmly. It was a lie, but he'd made a career out of lying convincingly, and it came easier than he had expected. There had been strong religious undertones in the murders Frank had committed from the beginning. There was, roughly a seventy-two percent chance that if he was able to convince Frank he was heterosexual, or, at least, not gay, that Frank would falter, and give Sherlock the opening he needed. That was good. Anything that increased John's chances of survival was good.

"You don't honestly expect me to believe that you've had a sudden change of heart, do you?!" Frank asked, incredulous.

"No, you misunderstand me. I have never loved John," Sherlock continued, "At least, not in the way you are implying. John is my flat mate, my friend, my associate. Nothing more."

Frank blinked a few times, squinting up at Sherlock, who fought the urge to roll his eyes. Really, how much easier could he make it for the man? He was practically spelling it out. "You cooked this whole thing up then? What, for your little case?"

"Changing your focus?" Sherlock asked coolly, arching a defiant eyebrow. I thought you were only targeting married gay couples. My marriage to John is a sham. It doesn't fit. I thought you were a man of conviction."

A slow, assured smile slid onto Franks face as he said, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. Colossians book three, verses five through six."
Sherlock rolled his eyes at the idiocy of it all, and Frank lashed the whip sharply across his feet. While he'd been unskilled with a whip at the start of this case, Frank had clearly improved...or he was very lucky.

"You have sanctioned the desecration of the Church in your deceit, Mr. Holmes!" Frank spat, "Despite the truth of who you take to your bed, you have sinned, just like all the rest."

"I was trying to stop a murderer," Sherlock replied, irritation showing in his voice. "'Thou shalt not kill' is one of the ten commandments, is it not?"

Frank appeared unmoved. "I do exactly what my Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. John, chapter fourteen, verse thirty one."

Sherlock took an even breath, fighting the urge to scoff at the fanatical idiocy of Frank's argument. "You believe that God has commanded you to do this?"

"I know he has," Frank countered, striding confidently around the room. "My son betrayed me when he left England with Patrick. I disowned him, washed my hands of him, and was not surprised to find out he had died." Franks lip curled with disgust, while Luke shifted slowly from foot to foot. Perhaps he still felt some familial affection for his 'sinning' brother. Sherlock stored that observation away as Frank continued.

"I left the sinners Matthew had thrown his lot in with to bury him, while Luke and I remained devout. I prayed, sought guidance for a way to remove this stain from my family." Frank was pacing leisurely now, dragging the whip behind him once more. "I felt called to action, but what action, I did not know. So, I made preparations and waited for a sign."

"That was when you began hoarding cash," John said, speaking up for the first time in a long time. His voice was gravely and strained. The left side of his face was so swollen he couldn't open one eye, but Sherlock saw determination glittering in his right eye. He was trying to keep Frank talking. Sherlock shot him a quick, small smile, gratified by John's willingness to help, even now.

Frank nodded. "Exactly. I stored money, I read my bible, and I waited." Frank turned to pace the length of their little area again, still talking. "I was horrified beyond belief when I learned that the nation I had fought so hard to defend would now allow homosexuals to marry. It is an abomination!"

Frank's voice had raised to the point of yelling, and he paused to collect himself. When he spoke again it was with the cool calmness of a blind fanatic. "I turned to my bible immediately, and the first page I land upon is the story of Abraham and Isaac." Frank closed his eyes for a moment and lowered his head, as if in prayer. "I knew then my mission was to seek out those like my son and show them the righteous fury of God as Matthew had seen it."

Frank circled back on himself, looking up at Sherlock's prone form. "So you see, Mr. Holmes, you still fit the bill. You have still sinned against God with your mockery of a marriage. Even worse, you have tried to interfere with my mission. Let Albert and Trevor return to England, by the time they get there your body will have been discovered, and they will know that no one else stands in my way."

Frank took a step closer to Sherlock, boring into him with piercing gray eyes. "Yes, you are still proud; still defiant. However," a cruel smirk twisted Frank's lips as he reached into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out Sherlock and John's wedding rings, "I will see you fall Mr. Holmes." Frank dropped the rings and they rolled on the floor in the smears and trails of blood their injuries had created.

"You wouldn't be the first," Sherlock murmured calmly.
John winced at the reminder of his worst memory. He knew Sherlock would have to die someday, as he would, but John swore to himself that it would not be today, not if he could help it.

Frank circled Sherlock slowly, studying him with a self satisfied smirk, confident in his impending victory. As Frank approached his son, Luke, he thrust the handle of the whip in his face. Luke took it quickly and obediently.

"Work them over good," Frank ordered, "I want them both sufficiently warmed up when I get back." Luke nodded and Frank strode away, getting lost amongst the boxes and crates of the warehouse. As he went his gate telegraphed his need to relieve himself, at least it did to Sherlock, and he almost smiled. Can't stage a holy war on an empty stomach. This was likely the best chance Sherlock was going to get to work on Luke; he wasn't going to waste it.

Luke glanced at Sherlock before making his way towards John. "Matthew was your brother," Sherlock began, willing his voice to be steady as Luke raised the whip. "Did you love him?"

The whip flew out, but faltered landing a stinging blow on John's legs without breaking the skin. "He was my brother," Luke deadpanned without looking back to Sherlock.

That non-answer told Sherlock everything he needs to know. "You miss him," Sherlock pressed on as Luke raised the whip again.

"He sinned," Luke replied, cracking the whip more forcefully over John's legs, bringing blood to the surface this time.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Romans chapter three, verse twenty three," Sherlock said in a thoughtful voice.

Luke hesitated, stilling the whip, but still refused to turn. That hesitance was the key. Luke was young, and passionately committed to his faith. He'd probably heard the bible recited by his father every day. However, given that Luke was the older brother, he and Matthew must have spent nearly every day of their childhood together.

Sherlock knew from his own experience how deeply entrenched that bond could be, despite what one thought of one's brother. If Sherlock could use Luke's bond with Matthew, his faith, and his doubt about the rightness of his actions, John and he would be able to get away. At least, far enough away to call Mycroft and Lestrade, who must have lost their trail if they hadn't come by now. Sherlock knew he was still strong enough to run...barely. He would run naked through every street in New York if he had to, to keep tabs on Frank and Luke, to help bring them down.

"I can see that you are faithful, Luke," Sherlock pressed on, bringing warmth and compassion to his voice. "You know this isn't right. Proverbs chapter twenty, verse twenty two. 'Say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the Lord, and he shall save thee.'"

Luke turned his head slightly and Sherlock could see his profile. "You're father was right, you know. It was a sin for me to act as I did," Sherlock's voice waivered with fake guilt, "And it is a sin for you to act in God's stead with your father. God said 'Vengeance is mine.'" Luke turned a little more, almost looking Sherlock in the eyes. "We can still repent Luke. We can all still repent."

Luke's gaze fell to the whip in his hand, which had begun to shake "Let me down, Luke," Sherlock murmured in the same calm voice one might use to persuade someone else to 'hand me the gun'.

Luke's eyes glistened with unshed tears, despite his attempts to blink them away. He shot furtive glances at both Sherlock and John, teetering just on the edge of action. "I know you have mercy in
you, Luke...Perhaps if your brother had seen more mercy from your father he would have felt the need to repent, to come home. Show your mercy, Luke. It isn't too late."

Luke's eyes shot up to Sherlock's and held his gaze for tremulous moment, tears creeping down his cheeks, before he dashed to the ropes holding Sherlock up. Luke furiously tugged at the knots, bracing himself against the wall as he lowered Sherlock slowly to the ground.

Sherlock found himself unable to bear weight at first, and allowed himself to sink to his knees. This would allow his limbs time to restore proper blood flow and limit the chances that Luke would see him as a threat. Getting down wouldn't do him any good if Luke strung him right back up again. But Luke wasn't stringing him up again, he was kneeling in front of Sherlock, cutting through the ropes at his hands.

Sherlock was just able to separate his hands when the scrape of a boot on the floor announced Frank's return. Luke jerked back and frozen in fear. He probably had never betrayed his father's orders a day in his life, or was beaten for it if he had.

Sherlock jerked his gaze up to John and realized with a stab of pain that he was not strong enough or fast enough, in his current state, to let John down in time.

John swallowed and worked his lips to mouth the word, "Run."

Sherlock's eyes cast about as he pushed to his feet, still unsteady. Damn. He'd be easy prey for Frank if he tried to search for an exit while dashing over the warehouse floor. He had to get out. He had to save John.

Frank's footsteps were dangerously close when Sherlock's eyes landed on the window. It was his best option. With a speed he wasn't sure he'd had, Sherlock rushed to the window and pushed it open with his shoulder.

"No, Sherlock.." John's voice was low, but loud enough that Frank may have heard it. That, and the sound of the window opening caused Frank's steps to quicken. Sherlock glanced out the window confirming that they were, indeed, five stories up.

"No, Sherlock, No." John insisted, voice growing louder and higher pitched as panic set in.

Frank was running now, and he'd just broken out from behind the boxes when Sherlock turned to look at John. John looked twice as pale as he had moments ago, and he was shaking in his restraints, desperate in his pleas that Sherlock reconsider. Sherlock held his blogger's gaze for a moment knowing that nothing and no one came before John's safety in his eyes...even if it meant breaking his promise to John that he wouldn't fall again...

"I'm sorry, John," Sherlock murmured, pitching himself over the edge moments before Frank could pull him back.

John watched with wide, disbelieving eyes as Sherlock tumbled over the edge and fell. Again. An anguished cry that was hauntingly familiar rose up in his chest as tears blurred his vision. "SHERLOCK!"
Chapter Summary

Chapter title says it all. Enjoy. ^_^

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: This chapter contains depictions of violence, torture, and injuries. Please keep yourself safe.

Additional Warning: Just read until the end of the chapter before you yell at me, k? I promise, it'll be worth it.

I would like to offer heartfelt thanks to all those who have left comments, given kudos to, and/or bookmarked this story. Your support has been amazing, and you've survived a number of vicious cliffhangers.

I would also like to thank my Beta, Helena Chauby, for all of your help with editing.

And, lastly, I must thank my flat mate, sounding board, and own person Sherlock, Geoff.

I know we're getting near the end now, but we're not done yet! We have another long chapter after this one (it's up to seven thousand words and still not done) then another (probably also long) epilogue.

Now I know I left you all on the edge of your seats last time so, without further ado, onto the story...

Chapter 23: At Any Cost

"SHERLOCK!" John's hysterical cries echoed faintly in the expanse of the warehouse. No. This was not happening... No! Not again... Tears blinded him. Quick, sobbing breaths made him feel dizzy for want of air. John jerked violently in his restraints desperate to peer over the windows edge, just as Frank was doing... To see if Sherlock had survived. A warm trickle of blood slid down John's forearm from where the rope had bit into his wrist.

John felt out of his mind, and maybe he was. He might not have had PTSD when he'd returned from the war, at least not like his therapist thought... But he certainly did after watching Sherlock pitch himself off the roof of St. Barts. Now, watching him tip over the window ledge... it felt like he was...
watching Sherlock fall from Barts all over again, while John stood by, helpless. Except this time was different. This time, Sherlock had no way of setting up a break fall beforehand. What was Sherlock thinking?! He had to have a plan. He always did.

John willed himself to be quiet, to focus, to ignore the wounded, animal, part of his brain that had been woken when Sherlock had jumped. He couldn't assume... he needed data. Sherlock would not have jumped unless he thought that was the best available option. John had to trust that. He had to trust Sherlock...

John forced himself to lengthen his breathing, to stabilize it. He blinked rapidly, waiting for any information Frank could give him; he knew better than to ask, he would need to deduce. He could see Frank now, as the tears started to clear. He stood rigid, leaning out of the window, staring down with intense concentration.

John kept his gaze riveted to Frank waiting for a sign, an exclamation, something that would give him the information he so desperately needed. For a long moment, there was nothing. Then, a slow roll of Frank's shoulder as his right hand crept towards his hip, towards his gun. Sherlock must have survived the fall, there must have been something to break it, and now Frank was trying to shoot him.

"No! No! He's got a gun! Don't shoot!" John yelled as loudly as he could, trying to give Sherlock warning.

As soon as John's voice rang out Frank snapped into motion, drawing the gun quickly and firing off three rounds in rapid succession.

John kept himself in check, barely, as Frank leaned out the window and studied the ground once more. John held his breath, not daring to move, and waited. Had he been able to give Sherlock enough warning? The gun came out so quickly once John had started to yell, he was sure Frank had begun firing before he was finished. Was Sherlock still alive?

Frank waited a long moment and everything was still. Then Frank lowered his head and murmured, "He's gone."

A raw, primal cry was ripped from John's chest as the control he'd so tenuously held in place disintegrated. Beneath him Frank jerked to face his son, Luke, who was still crouched, frozen on the floor. Frank roared in fury and began beating Luke with sharp, cruel blows about the head and neck, kicking him viciously in the ribs as he collapsed.

John, however, was senseless to it all in his anguish. Sherlock was gone. Gone. He thrashed and screamed in his bonds, unable to cope with this loss for a second time. His shoulders rolled and snapped as he dislocated his 'good' arm, but none of it mattered. God... Sherlock... John's breath wracked in his chest, and a pained keening noise escaped his lips. The sound of Frank's blows, the warehouse, the slight, salty breeze, all of it seemed to be slipping further and further away...

~*~*~*~

Sherlock braced himself against the rough brick of the wall, shaking. He'd taken one hell of a risk when he'd leapt from the window into the dumpster below. He could have missed, and even if he didn't, he could have impaled himself on some sort of industrial refuse. In the end, his desire to keep John safe, to make sure John survived had won out, as it always would.

Sherlock's brief glance out the window had told him they were being held in a warehouse on a pier, right by the Hudson. There was a seventy eight percent chance of being injured in the fall or the
aftermath of it, but, as before when he'd leapt from St. Barts, he'd been lucky. The dumpster had contained mostly boxes and other sorts of packing material, which had cushioned his landing.

Immediately, Sherlock had retreated deeply into his mind palace, burying himself in the part that the thoughts and memories of John occupied. Frank had been very close to him, and very nearly grabbed him, and Sherlock had known he would be watching. Better to appear 'dead' then try to get away just yet. Frank would likely turn his aggressions on his son, and give Sherlock the chance he needed to run.

Dimly, John's warning reached him, and it was only Sherlock's extreme control of his transport that kept him still as a bullet grazed his thigh, the other two thudding uselessly into the boxes on either side of Sherlock's torso. A sickly warm/wet sensation grew over his leg, but Sherlock maintained his control It was still too quiet, Frank would be watching. There was the soft murmur of Frank's voice and then a cry from John so excruciating that it rocked Sherlock to his core. He could spend the rest of his life apologizing for this, and it would never be enough...

The muffled cacophony that emitted from the open window indicated that Frank was distracted, and Sherlock sprung into action. He was damned if he was going to leave John there for a second longer than absolutely necessary. Sherlock secured a zip tie and used it to jury rig a tourniquet around his thigh. Blood loss was only consequential insofar as it could lead to loss of consciousness. That was not going to happen, not as long as John remained captive.

Hurling himself over the side, Sherlock had begun a stumbling sort of run, looking for someone, anyone, he could get a phone from. He wasn't above ripping it from them if he had to. Then again, the way he must look, someone might just save him the trouble and call the local authorities for him...but that would waste precious time. A report of a naked, beaten man would get at most, one officer and an ambulance. That probably wouldn't be enough resources to get to John in time. No, he had to call Mycroft.

Everything felt dangerously numb which, at this point, Sherlock was grateful for. He couldn't tell if he'd broken or dislocated a limb in the fall, but at this point that data would only get in the way of his primary objective. Find a phone. Call Mycroft. Go back for John.

Sherlock scanned the alleyways and the shadows as he made his way, painstakingly slowly, away from the warehouse where he'd been held. This area of the docks appeared to be used mostly for storage, hence, not many people were around. If he was lucky, he might find a homeless person. They were such an underutilized resource. They were everywhere, but so few people actually saw them, or understood the intelligence and worth they could have. Sherlock wrote off a great number of people for being idiots, and a great number were, but at least he based his judgments on facts. More than a few of Sherlock's Baker Street Irregulars had gotten off the street via Sherlock's repeated patronage, and even then they remained fiercely loyal.

Individuals who were, or looked, homeless were often ignored, which made them excellent spies. Also, sleeping rough expunged any amount of squeamishness a person might have had, so you could count on them to get a difficult job done. Also, contrary to what one might think, many had phones, laptops, etc. That's what Sherlock was counting on now. A phone.

Sherlock paused at the corner of a building, just listening. Another important and intriguing fact he'd learned in his work with his homeless network, was that they were skilled at obfuscating their squats to avoid being moved along by the authorities. It was past noon, but dark, roiling clouds that threatened rain hung low, drastically dimming the natural light. His current position, huddled as he was against the wall, was shielded from the breeze off the river.

A discreet shuffling noise, barely louder than the wind, filtered into his left ear causing Sherlock to
turn his head in that direction. There was a set of stairs against the wall of yet another abandoned warehouse about twenty yards away. The area under the stairs was particularly dark, because the stairs themselves were in an alleyway between two warehouses, blocking out most of the sun.

Squinting, willing his eyes to adjust to the gloom, Sherlock peered into the sheltered area and held his breath. The shuffle came again, this time accompanied by a small movement. Sherlock saw the faint outline of a hand in the shadows and knew he had found someone.

"Hello?" Sherlock called, allowing distress and desperation to leech into his voice. He knew his had to be polite, had to be vulnerable. If he were perceived as a threat they'd likely run...or finish what Frank had started. The situation was risky, true, but Sherlock knew the adrenaline and endorphin high he was on would fade, leaving him even less able to search for help.

"Have you got a phone?" Sherlock asked, hobbling towards the staircase. "Please," he begged, "My friend, they still have him," Sherlock shot a look over his shoulder back the way he had come. "I need to call for help!" Sherlock avoided the word 'husband' in reference to John and the words 'the police' in reference to help so as to avoid any hot button issues that may put this person off.

He'd manipulated others countless times before to meet his needs, yet this felt different. The patterns, the calculations were all the same...but the emotions in his voice were real, and strong. He was letting down masks instead of putting them on. For once, he was not acting.

"Please, can I use your phone?" Sherlock persisted, hovering close enough to see who he was talking to.

It was a gaunt women in her early thirties, who appeared a decade older, clutching a small waif of a child with matching dirty blond hair to her waist. The women studied him with wide gray eyes. He must look a sight if she couldn't keep the shock off of her face; showing vulnerable emotions could be deadly for someone sleeping rough in the wrong circumstances.

"They will kill him if I can't get help in time," Sherlock pleaded, leaning against the wall of the building, showing her his profile and making himself look smaller.

The young girl, about seven years old, whispered something in her mother's ear. The women nodded and, without breaking eye contact with Sherlock, slid a simple phone across the ground to him.

"Thank you," Sherlock said, bowing his head slightly as he leaned forward to pick up the phone. As blunt as they were, which Sherlock appreciated, Sherlock had also learned from persons in his homeless network how much showing respect could get you. Another reason he respected those in his homeless network more than some of the riff raff he ran into in 'everyday' life.

Sherlock rapidly punched in Mycroft's number, then held the phone to his ear and waited. His words came out stilted at first because of Mycroft's frequent interruptions. "Mycroft- Yes it's me- Shut up! There isn't much time! I'm injured, badly. John's injured worse than I am. We are being held in a tan warehouse on the docks near the Hudson. It's five stories tall with a window open on the fifth floor and a trail of blood leading away from a dumpster under that same window. Yes, of course I jumped- Mycroft! Stop interrupting! The killer and his son, Luke are there. They have handguns, whips, taser, and staves. Nothing too substantial. Send at least two ambulances." Sherlock took a breath before he added. "Hurry, I'm going back for John."

Without another word Sherlock slid the phone back to the women. "Thank you," he said again as she picked up the phone. "You may give him additional directions if you like; either way he'll see that you're rewarded." The woman looked at him skeptically, and Sherlock could hardly blame her. She's probably heard more lies in her life than he'd told in his. Still, she brought the phone to her ear and started to speak, her voice rough from the years of abuse and drugs her body had been subjected
As Sherlock turned to go he could see worry for him in her eyes. She was right to worry; he wasn't in good shape, but he could care less. Right now his focus was on getting John out of there, about keeping him safe.

He lurched back around and made his way as quickly as he could to the warehouse he'd escaped from. As he went he scanned, assessing the entrances he could see. He chose a side entrance both because it was largely shielded from view by another dumpster, and because it would likely be close to the stairs.

It took a bit of rummaging in the dumpster, but once he'd found passable tools, picking the lock was child's play. Sherlock slipped inside and ascended the stairs immediately to his right. He wasn't sure if Frank had picked the lock (most likely) or had acquired a key. Either way his method of access was entirely irrelevant right now. He'd chosen a decent spot. Isolated, while being close to the city. If this was primarily a storage facility it would be mostly or entirely unmanned most of the time. Being an army man, Frank must have done his research.

Sherlock crept up to the fifth floor, taking care to be absolutely silent as he opened the door. As he suspected, the door into this level of the warehouse was shielded from view by numerous crates and boxes piled neatly around it. Sherlock's bare feet whispered over the cement floor as he maneuvered the isles between he boxes towards the sounds of Frank enthusiastically beating someone. Sherlock selfishly hoped that someone, was Frank's son, Luke.

No such luck. As he peered around the edge of a large crate Sherlock could see that Frank had already done that. Luke lay curled on his side facing away from Sherlock, unmoving, a dark red circle seeping out from his head and torso. Sherlock's eyes snapped to his right and he tensed when he saw Frank working John over with one of the bo staffs. There was no thought in his movements, just blind fury, black and purple bruises forming under his blows. John's head lolled in unconsciousness against his chest and for the first time since this case began Sherlock truly felt dread. He couldn't wait for Mycroft, he needed to act now.

Sherlock frantically scanned the area for something, anything, he could use as a weapon. He would go against Frank bare handed if he had to, but he doubted those odds would be in his favor. The other bo staff was propped against the wall close to the window he'd jumped from...no good. Frank could easily see him from his peripheral vision if he ran out from this position. He could sneak around and come in another way, but the length he'd have to run would give Frank too much time to notice him. Sherlock scanned the area around Luke once more, searching...

There!

Sherlock spotted the taser Luke had used on him resting on the edge of a crate. That would be a much more effective weapon than the staff, especially considering Sherlock's current condition. He'd still have to go back and creep around the outside of the boxes to diminish the risk of being seen.

Plan in place, Sherlock whirled about and hurried to get into position. The floor was smooth but his legs were shaky, and getting shakier. He nearly stumbled twice, and was saved only by the sturdiness of the boxes he leaned against. Frank likely wouldn't have heard with the way he was carrying on...but better safe than sorry.

Sherlock stretched himself out low across the floor as he neared Luke, reaching his lithe limbs and violinist fingers for the taser. Frank was still beating John and, though Sherlock was unarmed and injured, it took considerable self control not to attack him. Sherlock felt his digits close around the
implement triumphantly, and he pulled it close to his chest.

Sherlock crouched as low as he was able and scuttled along the wall, trying to position himself behind Frank and decrease the odds he would be seen before he struck. Sherlock continued his furtive movements as quickly as he dared, closing the gap between himself and Frank. Sherlock's fingers twitched over the switch of the taser impatiently until, less than a foot away, Sherlock lunged. He drove the taser deep into Frank's neck and the same moment that he turned it on. Frank, sure of his strategic positioning and planning, never saw it coming. He heaved and convulsed, falling to the floor. Sherlock followed him with the taser, maintaining contact a full minute after Frank's body hit the ground.

Without bothering to check if either Frank or his son were still alive Sherlock dragged Frank towards Luke and lashed them together with the remainders of the rope that had bound him not long ago. Once he was assured that, even should they regain consciousness, neither would pose any threat, Sherlock rushed to the knot securing John's ropes, pulling it free. Sherlock shook with the effort of lowering John to the ground slowly, but he managed it.

The moment his blogger was safely on the ground Sherlock hurried to his side, tugging at the bindings that still secured his wrists. The slow rise and fall of John's chest was reassuring, but only slightly. Once John's wrists were free Sherlock swept his hands over John's form, assessing his heart beat, (elevated within normal limits given the injuries sustained), and cataloged the injuries sustained in his absence (one dislocated shoulder-opposite John's old bullet wound, additional bruising, several other wounds, mostly open and bleeding).

"John...John, wake up!" Sherlock called insistently, desperate to see his husbands eyes on his own. Sherlock pressed his knuckles firmly into John's sternum to try to rouse him. Sherlock knew this would cause both more pain and bruising, but only mildly compared to what they had already suffered, and he needed to see John awake, to know that he would be alright... To know that they would be alright.

John groaned, shifting away from Sherlock's knuckles, and his eyes began to flutter.

Sherlock moved his hands to cradle John's face, caressing John's cheeks with his thumbs as he continued to call to him. "John! Wake up! John!"

John's eyes fluttered violently then, slowly, they opened. They were bloodshot from crying and the pressure of strangulation. John winced, then slowly blinked again, seeming to register Sherlock's hands on his face. "Sh'lock?" He slurred, wincing again as if the lights hurt his eyes.

"Yes, John, I'm here. I'm safe." Sherlock swallowed hard, "I'm alive."

"Sherlock!" John cried recognition dawning on his face as he tugged the lanky consulting detective fiercely to him with his non-dislocated arm. "God, Sherlock...idiot," John breathed into Sherlock's ear, followed by, "Bastard. Don't ever do that again... Sherlock, God...so stupid...please." John continued muttering half pleas, Sherlock's name, and insults while clutching onto Sherlock's abused skin as if he couldn't begin to let go.

Sherlock cradled John against his chest, rocking him gently, repeating, "John, it's okay. We're okay. Help is coming...I'm so sorry John." The one thing he didn't say, couldn't say, was a repetition of the promise he'd made John outside All God's Children United Church. He couldn't promise he wouldn't do it again. At the time of his original promise he hadn't foreseen a scenario where he might 'fall' again, so it had been an easy promise to make. Now, he stood corrected. If taking a fall meant saving John's life, he would always, always take it.
Greg cupped his hand in front of his face and breathed against his fingers to warm them. It was nearly July now, and while they'd had some nice weather on and off both in London and in New York during this hellish case, it felt unusually cold today. Maybe it was he breeze blowing in from the Hudson, maybe it was exhaustion, or maybe it was the state of Sherlock and John by the time paramedics and everyone else had arrived.

They would be fine, no life threatening injuries, but there would be scars, both physical and emotional. Both Sherlock and John had been conscious and alert. They had absolutely refused to be separated and, in this particular case, Greg had to agree. They would be more cooperative and heal better emotionally, together.

One EMT had complained that it might be against regulations to let two injured people ride together, but Mycroft had been able to smooth that other. No surprise there.

Frank and Luke were both alive, but in critical condition. Before the ambulance took Sherlock and John away Greg had been able to get just enough of the story to hope that Frank never woke up again. Luke... he was conflicted about Luke. It smacked too much of the many abuse cases he'd worked for Greg to feel pitiless. Perhaps with the right therapy, and a just sentence for the crimes he had committed, there might be hope for Luke... "And perhaps I'm going soft," Greg thought, staring down into the black looking water of the river.

Mycroft and Greg had both remained at the scene for hours to give orders, answer questions, and get the wheels turning. Frank and Luke had been escorted to a hospital under guard. Sherlock and John were at a separate, high end hospital by Mycroft's orders. Evidence collection was hard at work bagging, tagging, photographing, and collecting samples. The scene was secure now, and Greg had stepped to the side to get some air. It had been one hell of a case, and he was glad it was over.

Glancing over his shoulder Greg saw Mycroft speaking with the homeless woman, Jane, who had been more instrumental in saving Sherlock and John's lives through the use of her phone. What he saw made him smile. Mycroft was being polite. Not because of politics or power plays, but because he was grateful, and it was the right things to do. Mycroft Holmes had a heart, and he would never be able to hide it from Greg.

Anthea walked over to Mycroft, Jane, and the young girl, Summer. Anthea appeared to take control of the conversation as Mycroft said his goodbyes. Greg smiled again when he saw Anthea lay her hand gently on Jane's arm; he had no doubt, one way or another, things were about to get a bit easier in her life. Greg hoped they would get better too, but that was largely up her.

Mycroft appeared to be making his way back into the warehouse, and Greg strode forward to intercept him. Mycroft could play God or megalomaniacal overlord all he liked, but he was still human. Greg halted Mycroft's forward motion with a hand at his elbow, turning the elder Holmes to face him.

"Yes, Gregory?" Mycroft asked, arching a curious eyebrow.

"We're leaving," Greg informed him.

Mycroft tilted his head to the side and squinted slightly as if he found that notion ridiculous. "There is still work to be done."

"Yes, and someone else can do it," Greg insisted. "Everything here is running smoothly. Let your team work, Mycroft, we need to go see Sherlock and John."
Mycroft was silent for a moment, shifting his weight slightly from foot to foot, hesitating, torn.

Greg looped his arm through Mycroft's elbow and began firmly leading him towards the car they'd taken to get here. "Not too long ago, for my own good, you ordered me to eat and sleep," Greg explained, "Now I'm ordering you to see your brother."

A small, reluctant smile curled at the edges of Mycroft's mouth as he allowed himself to be lead to the car, and he murmured, "As you wish, Gregory."
Chapter Summary

And now for what you've all been waiting for...

Chapter Notes

Firstly I would like to apologize for the slightly late post, final review took a bit longer than normal. Sorry.

My heartfelt thanks goes to and all those who have commented on, subscribed to, left kudos for, and/or bookmarked this story. Your support has truly been phenomenal. ^_^

Much thanks also goes to my Beta, Helena Chauby, for her editing assistance.

And honorable mentions go to my flat mate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff. I'm really not kidding about the own personal Sherlock thing, here's an example:

"Geoff, where are my vitamins?"

"On the floor, next to the eyeball."

"How did the eyeball get over there?"

"The cat was playing with it."

Note: Said eyeball is actually a toy, not real, but still.

Chapter 24: The Heart of the Matter

Greg closed his eyes, his lips curling in a tiny smile as the warmth of the sun reached his skin through his thin, button up shirt. It was warm and sunny today, just bordering on hot, but Greg didn't mind. The weather had been oppressively sweltering and muggy for weeks now, this was a nice change of pace.

Summer had come on with a vengeance shortly after Sherlock and John had gotten out of the hospital. They'd only been there for three days, and even then Mycroft made sure they had a room to themselves. Sherlock was a notoriously awful patient, Greg had expected to have to bribe and/or threaten him to ensure he received the proper treatment. Sherlock, however, was surprisingly subdued. Well, perhaps not so surprisingly considering that John was with him.

Sherlock and John were intently focused on each other during their recovery and continued to share
the same bed. As much as Lestrade wanted to see them properly together (Mycroft, who was usually right, had informed him that they were still not a 'real' couple) he believed the reason their bed remained shared was more for comfort than anything else, reassurance that they were both still alive.

While both Sherlock and John remained subdued, refusing to be separated beyond what was necessary (such as various tests/procedures and personal hygiene) Greg could see healing taking place both physically and emotionally. They were still Sherlock and John. They still bickered, Sherlock still deduced people, John still scolded him for being rude, and life went on.

During the end of their short stay in the hospital, Sherlock had felt well enough to corner a nurse who was speaking to her emotionally abusive father, and deduce the man to tears so that the nurse would be available to re-dress John's wounds. Greg had actually witnessed this event and had been expecting vicious backlash from the nurse. Instead the thin young woman with short black hair and dark brown eyes had silently watched her father go before turning back to Sherlock and fixing him with a brilliant smile. "I think I love you," she murmured.

"Sadly, miss, I am taken," Sherlock had replied, already beginning to roll his wheelchair back towards his room. His and John's wedding rings were still being held in evidence at that time, but no one was changing their story just yet. Greg figured Sherlock and John were waiting for things to return to a sense of normalcy before they addressed their marriage, and he hoped they would finally bleed observe the truth before they did something foolish, like divorce.

"Aren't all the good ones?" The nurse asked with a wink, holding up her left hand as she followed beside Sherlock. On her ring finger was a thin platinum band housing a moderately sized blue topaz. Sherlock nodded, polite now that he was getting what he wanted. "She's a lucky woman," he had murmured as the pair passed Greg in the hall.

Greg opened his eyes and sighed as he took in the cityscape. That had been over a month ago. After three days in the hospital Sherlock and John were stable enough to leave, but not to travel. Also, there was still a great deal of follow up to be done on the case at that time. Most of the paperwork and administrative tasks fell to Mycroft, Greg, and the local police force, but the statements and testimony of Sherlock and John would be invaluable. The case had been closed, but no one was going home just yet.

To focus on healing, and completing their obligations to the case, Sherlock and John had moved back to their hotel in the Hamptons. Mycroft had not been pleased. He'd wanted his brother and John to join him in the three floors of a skyscraper he'd been renting, but Sherlock wouldn't hear of it. Greg knew this was because he wanted some alone time with John.

It was almost laughable. Sherlock could deduce a room full of strangers at half a glance, but three years into his 'partnership' with John he'd yet to deduce his blogger's true feelings. Greg had no doubt the truth would come out, he'd never doubted it. Hell, Greg would make good on his promise to spell it out for them if he had to...but first, he had to deal with his own problems.

Greg clenched his jaw tightly and looked down at the roof he was standing on. They were meant to be leaving tomorrow. Sherlock and John were all but healed, and the case was neatly wrapped up. Evidence had been collected, paperwork completed, and statements and testimonies given. One of the reason's they'd even stayed this long was the confusion over where the trial would be held and where the criminals would serve time. Frank was going away with five life sentences; no possibility of parole. Luke was facing thirty years with the possibility of parole and mandated counseling. For Greg, at least, there was only one loose end to tie up...Mycroft.

They were going back to London tomorrow, and Mycroft would disappear again. That's what he
always did. One minute you saw him, then you didn't. Greg's fists clenched and released at his sides in anger. He took a slow breath, and made himself relax.

This was why he'd come up to the roof in the first place. He needed to think. He needed to decide what he was going to do. This mattered. He couldn't articulate why, exactly, he only knew that it did.

When the door to the roof opened behind him, Greg closed his eyes for a moment and nodded. Sometimes, the fight came to you.

"Sulking Gregory?" Mycroft's voice rang out clearly as he approached. "That's most unbecoming of a detective inspector. Especially one who makes big speeches about 'wanting to be useful.'"

Greg scowled, and turned to face Mycroft as soon as the elder Holmes brother stood by his side. "Mycroft," Greg began, "for one of the most observant people I've ever met, you are an idiot."

Mycroft stood silently for a moment, studying Greg as he had so many times before on this case. Mycroft probably intended to appear aloof, but Greg knew better. Mycroft was confused. He didn't know what to make of Greg's statement, so Greg pressed on.

"The case is over now, and you're going to disappear again. Just like you did before, just like you always do. Greg pressed his lips together in a thin, unhappy line. "Just like you did when Sherlock finally got clean. You just can't stand people getting close to you."

Mycroft's expression darkened. "Do not be obtuse, Gregory. You know the risks involved in my position."

Greg could understand some of Mycroft's reluctance to let people get close to him. Opening up, being vulnerable wasn't exactly a picnic for Greg either, but sometimes, it was worth the risk Greg knew his first marriage had ended, at least in part, because he had closed himself off. After all the heartache his reticence had caused, Greg didn't want it to be a part of any of the important relationships in his life.

"Besides," Mycroft continued, the picture of calm condescension. "We have never been particularly close."

"Did it ever occur to you that I might want to be?" Greg asked, taking a small step forward, invading Mycroft's personal space. Mycroft's eyes widened slightly in surprise and Greg pressed his advantage, knowing he had Mycroft off-balance. "This case, as awful as it has been, I actually liked working with you. I liked spending time around you, and your family."

Greg began gesturing as he picked up momentum, pointing at Mycroft. "You play dangerous games, Mycroft, with dangerous people. God knows what you get up to half the time; I sure as hell don't... but I'd like to." Greg softened a bit then, returning his hands to his sides as he looked up into Mycroft's pricing blue eyes. "You pretend you don't have a heart, but we both know that isn't the truth. I've seen it when your staff is hurt, and every time your brother's been in danger."

Greg paused, swallowed, and got to the point. "I'd like to keep seeing you, Mycroft."

Mycroft took a slow breath, carefully re-arranging his features, and illuminating the slightest hint of surprise. You sound as though you want to court me, Gregory."

Greg was caught between an urge to roll his eyes at Mycroft's archaic language and a hot flush that swept up his neck, encroaching on the edges of his cheeks. Greg looked away for a moment and fought the urge to move away. He was asking for honesty from Mycroft, it would only be fair to give the same. "I don't know, maybe?" Greg murmured, forcing himself to make eye contact. Mycroft's
eyes widened noticeably, but Greg pressed on, determined. "I never really let myself think that far because I can't get past this idea that you're going to hold me at arm's length no matter what I want or what you agree to."

Emboldened, Greg took another step forward so that he and Mycroft were inches apart. "It can't work like that, Mycroft. I want to spend more time with you, and I hope you feel the same way, but if our..." Greg fumbled for words momentarily, "Whatever this is, if it's going to work at all there needs to be equal efforts on both sides." Greg's fingers twitched as he spoke. He wanted to rest his hand on Mycroft's shoulder, but he held himself back. "I'd like to see more of what you're hiding behind that mask you wear, Mycroft, but I won't chase you if you're determined to stay behind it."

Greg held Mycroft's pale gaze with his own, darker one. Greg stood still and vulnerable in front of Mycroft for a long moment...too long. As the seconds ticked by, and Mycroft's stoic face remained unchanged, Greg knew he had his answer. He let out a long, slow breath and let his eyes drop to the side. "Okay then," he murmured, nodding to himself. "Okay."

Greg shuffled his feet and moved to step around Mycroft, trying to swallow his disappointment. He'd barely managed three steps before he jerked to a stop, held back by Mycroft's fingers at his wrist. Greg followed the line of Mycroft's arm with his eyes, looking up towards his face. Mycroft was still turned away, his head tilted so that Greg could see his profile. "Stay, Gregory," Mycroft murmured, then he lifted his eyes to meet Greg's, and added, "please."

Greg paused, felt a smile tug at his lips, and shifted his hand so that their fingers interlocked. Greg leaned back towards Mycroft, squeezed his hand and said, "I'd like that." Mycroft turned towards Greg and returned his smile, making the detective inspector feel slightly giddy. He still wasn't sure quite what to call this 'thing' with Mycroft...but, whatever it was, this was a good beginning.

~*~*~*~

John stood on the balcony outside the rooms he shared with Sherlock, staring into the sea as it churned and roiled. It felt like a good metaphor for his emotions, unstable. He'd been drifting for a month, delaying the inevitable reality of his situation while he'd healed. He was still a bit sore and stiff, but that would fade with time. His cheek, however, would never be the same.

John lifted his left hand and traced the jagged, red lines the whip had left in the side of his face. With proper care it would fade over time, become less livid, but it was a permanent mark. It wasn't the only scar he'd take away from this case. Both Sherlock and he would bare whip scars on their torso, legs, and feet, but those were much smoother. Only John's cheek and Sherlock's thigh had required stitches, and those came out last week. They would fade into silvery discolorations within a year. Still, none of these was the most painful reminder of this case.

John's fingers fell away from his face, seeking out his pocket instead. They'd gotten their rings back today. The case was closed, the justice system in motion, and Sherlock and he were nearly healed. It was time to go home. They were supposed to leave tomorrow and John wasn't sure he could even make himself get on the plane.

He lifted his wedding ring into view and watched it sparkle in the fading twilight, holding it tightly. He didn't want to give it back...

This last month had felt like suspended time. Neither during the case, nor entirely after it. Sherlock and he had shared no more kisses or other intimate gestures. They hadn't spoken of their marriage at all.

John closed his eyes for a moment, picturing Sherlock's hands on him. They'd continued to share a
bed for comfort and convenience... John had been afraid to sleep that first night, unsure what devilish nightmare his brain might release on him. Sherlock had encouraged John to lean his head on Sherlock’s shoulder. The world’s only consulting detective had spent hours running his fingers through John’s hair and talking quietly to him until he felt safe enough to drift off.

This past month had been full of moments like that; Sherlock comforting John, and John comforting Sherlock. Sherlock, of course, had been more stoic and reserved, but John had read the extra stiffness in his muscles like a neon sign.

They’d spent a great deal of time lying down in the past month, and the first time John had seen Sherlock struggle had been their first night back at the hotel. They were in a suite this time, to make them more comfortable as they recovered. John had woken from a doze to see Sherlock’s back held in tense, rigid lines. John had slowly reached forwards, brushing his fingertips gently over Sherlock’s pale skin. Sherlock hadn’t reacted at first, but as John’s fingers danced in circles over the planes of his husband’s back, John saw the tension leech out of him. At length, John convinced Sherlock to lie on his back. They spent that night watching crap telly together and John laughed at Sherlock’s rants until he thought his bandages would come undone.

The next day, they had slept in, holding each other. John suspected they spent more time touching each other this past month than in all the years they’d been flat mates prior to this case, even counting all the intimate moments they’d shared during their engagement and marriage.

There was one striking difference, however, between the touches they’d shared this past month and the touches they’d shared earlier in the case: None of the touches in this past month had been about romance or putting on a good performance of romance. Every touch, every embrace had been about reassurance. Each needed to know the other was safe, and healing. Hands had wandered over wounds, assessing, and over smooth planes of skin, soothing.

John’s fingers shook as he held his ring and his eyes stung.

Sherlock was out at his final doctor’s appointment. John had completed his three days ago but, of course, as Sherlock felt better he had found other, more ‘interesting’ things to occupy his mind such as antagonizing Lestrade or making John laugh.

John had been alone with his thoughts for an hour, and he knew what he had to do. He couldn’t lie to Sherlock anymore. Sherlock had to know about John’s feelings. He had to. How could he miss it? But this silence, these assumptions that maybe, just maybe their partnership could be salvaged weighed heavily on John’s mind. He loved Sherlock, desperately, and if they were going to continue as they had been...if Sherlock would allow that, he needed to know how strongly John felt for him.

John closed his eyes and shoved the ring back inside his pocket. As much as he would like to wear it...he couldn’t. Now that he knew he wanted to stay married to Sherlock, for all the reasons most people get married in the first place, it didn’t feel right.

He didn’t flatter himself that Sherlock felt the same, that was a reality his heart was too fragile to contemplate. No, the best he could hope for would be that Sherlock would tolerate John’s affection without letting it change how they worked together...and even that sounded farfetched.

John hung his head and focused on his breathing. Earlier, when he'd first felt well enough to be up and about, to go for walks, he'd contemplated leaving. It was so painful to be around Sherlock, to be so close and not be able to touch him...at least, not like John wanted to. And it was only going to get harder when they flew home. John had even spent some time today, just after Sherlock had left, researching on his phone for jobs, apartments, countries that would take him away from Sherlock... In the end, after his phone was shaking too much to type properly, John decided, painful or not, he
would rather stay...if Sherlock would let him.

It was ironic in a cruel, twisted sort of way. When Sherlock had fallen the first time, John hadn't been able to return to 221B for three months...but even in the midst of his all consuming grief, he hadn't been able to stay away. If Sherlock would let him, John would stay forever... If he didn't...if he'd misjudged the depths of John's feelings and asked him to leave...John thought he might very well need to look into other countries. History had already shown him that his home, in London, would always be 221B Baker Street.

The door clicked as it opened and John lifted his head up, opened his eyes, and tried to keep control of his breathing. Sherlock was back. It was time for the truth.

"Well that was tedious," Sherlock sighed dramatically, leaning against the balcony doorway for a moment.

John's lips quirked up in a smile, but he couldn't bring himself to turn around. "It wouldn't have been if you'd just cooperated as opposed to deducing the doctor and his staff."

Sherlock rolled his eyes and moved to stand beside John, leaning on the edge of the balcony. "I didn't deduce all of his staff."

John turned towards Sherlock, placing his hands on his hips and arching an accusatory eyebrow.

"I didn't!" Sherlock insisted, turning to face John, and standing defiantly straight. "I didn't have time to share my deductions about his new secretary, he called me back to an exam room too fast."

"Ah huh. And I wonder why that was," John scolded, but his smile belied his tone.

Sherlock smiled back and raised his hand to cup John's cheek, his fingers tracing the scar. "That's healing well. Any pain?"

John sucked in a sudden breath at the contact and looked away. "No," he said softly, feeling himself go tense under Sherlock's hand.

Sherlock stilled and John could feel that penetrating gaze boring into him. "What's wrong?"

Sherlock's voice had an urgency behind it that forced John to look up and meet his eyes.

"Nothing Sherlock," John began, trying to soothe his husband, "I'm fine."

"You are not fine," Sherlock snapped, his eyes darting back and forth over John's face, searching for data. "What is it?"

John wanted to take a breath, to calm himself, but he couldn't seem to draw the air in, choking on the importance of what he had to say, and how it would change them. "Sherlock I...," John paused, his tongue peeking out to wet his lips, a nervous gesture. It felt like Sherlock's eyes, his hands on John's face, all of it was pulling John in. For the life of him he would never figure out why people called it 'falling' in love. This didn't feel like falling. Drowning, spinning wildly out of control yes, but not falling. "I love you," John murmured.

Sherlock nodded slowly, his eyes still searching. "I know that John-"

"No, you don't!" John cut him off, stepping closer so that Sherlock's breath ghosted over his face. John reached up, resting his hand over the front of Sherlock's shirt. He only just managed not to pull at it, the fabric was tight enough that Sherlock would have lost a button for sure. "I love you," John repeated, "Not like a flat mate, or a best friend, but like the husband I'm pretending to be."
Sherlock's eyes widened and his body grew stiff. John crossed his arms in front of himself, self-conscious, and took a step back. John glanced out at the beach, then forced himself to meet Sherlock's eyes once more. As hard as this was, he deserved the truth. The whole truth.

"I don't know for how long. Maybe since before this case even started. I tried to ignore it, write it off as a crush, but it never went away." John paused again, and swallowed hard. "It only got stronger." Glancing out at the beach again, John pressed on. "It finally hit me that day we walked on the beach...then afterwards..." John trailed off, looking down and feeling a guilty blush heat up his face. God...he'd taken advantage of Sherlock. When they'd slept together... it hadn't been entirely about biology, not for John. God, how could he expect Sherlock to keep him on as a flat mate and a partner for his work when John had abused his trust that way?

John startled when he felt hands on his shoulders, his head snapped up and his eyes widened in shock to find Sherlock touching him. Sherlock was looking down at him with a thoughtful, disbelieving expression. "There's always something," Sherlock murmured, shaking his head slowly.

"What?" John sputtered, two steps behind as usual.

Sherlock's lips quirked in a faint smile and he leaned closer to John; so close that John could feel Sherlock's breath on his ear. "I love you too, John," Sherlock whispered.

John's eyes widened even further and he drew in a quick, stuttering breath. Tingles broke out all along his back, and he almost shook his head in disbelief. Sherlock Holmes loved him?

John's mouth opened and closed a few times before he could manage, "But...you're work...?"

Sherlock pulled back enough to face John, his pale blue/gray eyes seeking out John's darker gaze. Sherlock's hands slipped up John's neck to cradle his face once more. "John, I meant every word I said when I proposed to you. Every single word."

John's mouth fell open as he remembered the words that began this odyssey:

"John Hamish Watson, I never thought I could fall in love. I had always regarded love as a chemical defect found on the losing side; a weakness. I never thought I would encounter sentiment I could not rationalize or ignore, and then I met you. Someone so simple, so grounded, and so full of surprises. I still couldn't say why you shot that cabbie for me, but there you were. You've been protecting me from myself ever since.

"...Still I couldn't say that I loved you, until it was almost too late." Sherlock swallowed and paused, adding weight to his next words. "But I knew I loved you when I stepped off the roof of St. Bart's.

"...That was why, more than anything, I had to fake my death. I could not let anything happen to you. If it would keep you safe, I'd do it again."

And he had done it again, hadn't he? Christ, they were both such idiots. John grinned and shook his head, still having trouble believing...

Well, there was only one thing to do now. Leaning up on his toes, John pulled Sherlock down into a fierce, passionate kiss. Sherlock responded enthusiastically, wrapping his arms tightly around John's waist. John's world dissolved into the slow slide of lips, tongues, and teeth as his fingers became hopelessly lost in Sherlock's dark curls.

John felt himself being pushed back into the wall, and groaned softly into Sherlock's mouth, arousal pooling low in his abdomen.
Sherlock began kissing and nibbling his way across John's cheek, down his neck. Long, violinist fingers slipped under the hem of John's shirt, caressing the skin of his torso.

John pressed into Sherlock's touch, feeling dizzy. After waiting, agonizing, for so long, John felt drunk on the sensation of Sherlock pressed against him. God, how had they ever had so many misunderstandings? How had they both missed this? They'd both spoken about the importance of being honest with each other during this case and yet, they'd both only offered half truths. Not anymore, John decided. This mattered too much to get it wrong. With effort, John managed to push back and say, "Sherlock, wait...stop."

"What?" Sherlock snapped, glaring a little as he pulled back.

"Sherlock, we need to talk first," John replied, trying to steady himself against the wall and gather his senses.

"Talking is boring," Sherlock murmured, leaning in and grazing his teeth against the pulse point on John's neck.

"Sherlock," John insisted, pushing against the taller man's shoulders lightly, "please, this is important."

Sherlock heaved a sigh of agitation, but eased himself back enough to look down into his husband's eyes. "Yes?"

"I love you," John began.

"Yes, we've established that, John," Sherlock said tersely. He softened, however, under John's glare. His hands settled firmly on John's hips and he murmured, "I love you too, John. What's the problem?"

John worried his bottom lip for a moment before he said, "I meant what I said earlier, Sherlock. I'd like to...to stay married to you."

Sherlock blinked, and then a slow smile formed on his lips. His agile fingers slipped into John's pocket and, before the good doctor could protest, Sherlock was holding up John's wedding ring. He must have deduced that John was keeping the ring on him, no surprise there.

"John Hamish Holmes," Sherlock began, a small smirk forming on his lips, "I have no intention of letting you give up that name." Sherlock took John's left hand in his and slid his wedding ring back where it belonged. At the same moment Sherlock leaned forward and pressed a chaste kiss to John's lips. "I did warn you that I was possessive," Sherlock murmured as he pulled back.

John grinned up at him. "I wouldn't have it any other way. I knew who you were when I agreed to room with you." John glanced down at their hands and asked, "Where's your ring?"

Sherlock produced his ring from his own trouser pocket and handed it to John. John took Sherlock's longer hand in his and slid the wedding ring home. "I love you," John said quietly, still reeling at the fact that, somehow, Sherlock loved him back. He smiled down at their joined hands for a moment, reminded of their wedding day. It was crazy, the way things had turned out...but it was also kind of perfect.

"I love you too, John," Sherlock murmured. Sherlock's thumb began to rub small circles against the back of John's hand, and he pressed a small kiss to John's forehead. "Do you want to have another wedding?"
John let out a small snort of laughter and shook his head. "No, that won't be necessary." John lifted his gaze, smiling brightly. "I like the wedding we had. I really wouldn't change a thing." Sherlock gave John's hands a squeeze and leaned forward until his forehead rested gently against John's. John closed his eyes and grinned, beyond happy. "Normally the people getting married declare their love for each other before the wedding," John observed quietly, glancing up at Sherlock, "but you don't really do normal."

"Normal is boring," Sherlock agreed swooping in for another kiss.

John leaned up, pressing himself into Sherlock, sliding his hands up Sherlock's chest. Sherlock's hands skimmed down to John's waist, and began tugging at his shirt. When John felt warm summer air against his sides he pulled back enough to whisper, "Sherlock, not out here."

"You can't tell me it's because you're worried people will see," Sherlock whispered, close to John's ear. Sherlock's fingers trailed over John's right nipple causing his blogger to gasp and clutch at his shoulders.

John wasn't about to deny the little thrill that risk of discovery gave him, but he insisted, "Please, Sherlock, there's a perfectly good bed inside, and I'm not as young as I used to be."

Sherlock arched an eyebrow and John and smirked. "You're young enough."

John began walking backwards into their room while he had the chance, pulling Sherlock after him and chuckling to himself. "You," John murmured, "are going to be the death of me."

Sherlock breathed an answering chuckle against John's lips. "Not if I have anything to say about it." Sherlock's hands anchored themselves at John's hips while John's fingers plucked at the buttons of Sherlock's shirt. John nipped and licked at Sherlock's plump lips, groaning softly when he was able to slip his hand inside Sherlock's shirt.

Sherlock's thumbs snuck under the hemline of John's trousers, caressing his hipbones. Sherlock smiled into their kiss when he felt John tug at his shirt, untucking it. Sherlock's slid his hands over John's lower abdomen, undoing the zip of his trousers. Long, pale fingers swept over the fabric of John's pants, dipping underneath John's trousers to grasp the curve of his ass.


John probed a tendon with his tongue before sucking at the delicate skin there, letting out a small hum of satisfaction when Sherlock's fingers skittered to a halt along his hip, the taller man no longer able to concentrate. John nipped and sucked, encouraged by the breathy moans escaping Sherlock's throat. It was reminiscent of their wedding night...except that this would be the wedding night they should have had.

John reached around Sherlock and tugged the unbuttoned shirt from his back, exposing his flesh to the warm night air. This action spurred Sherlock into movement again and he pushed John's trousers off of his hips. Sherlock pressed John backwards then, encouraging John to step out of the trousers now pooled at his feet.

The pair stumbled a few more steps into the bedroom before John pressed a hand to Sherlock's chest, stopping his forward motion. Sherlock stopped and looked quizzically at his husband. John smirked and leaned up to whisper into Sherlock's ear, "I want to taste you." To emphasize his point, John
drew Sherlock's earlobe between his teeth, sucking on it gently.

Sherlock swallowed hard before breathing "Yes," and pressing down on John's shoulders. John knelt, keeping eye contact with Sherlock as he opened his trousers. John pulled the fabric of Sherlock's trousers and pants down, running his hands over Sherlock's long legs as he stepped out of his clothing.

John leaned forward, grasping Sherlock's hips and pressing a kiss to his half hard member. John trailed his lips up the shaft, before pulling back the foreskin and pressing a warm, wet kiss at the tip. Sherlock groaned and braced his hands at John's shoulders. Glancing up at Sherlock, John drew the head between his lips, undulating his tongue against the sensitive glands. Sherlock bucked reflexively, sliding several inches into John's mouth at once.

John's eyes crinkled in amusement at witnessing Sherlock's ridged control waver. The good doctor relaxed his jaw, breathed out through his nose and took several more inches into his mouth. Sherlock made a strangled keening sound, shaking with the effort of remaining still.

Tears swelled in John's eyes as he fought the gag reflex, and he knew he couldn't take any more...yet. It would be worth the practice to see Sherlock coming undone like this more often. John could feel thigh muscles trembling under his hand as he slid it up the inside of Sherlock's thigh and cupped his testicles. Clever fingers pressed against Sherlock's perineum while John's lips and tongue moved slickly over Sherlock's cock.

John hollowed his cheeks and closed his eyes, losing himself in the sensation of Sherlock against him, inside him. Sherlock was bucking slightly, unable to restrain himself, moaning John's name into the night.

Sherlock stiffened suddenly, then pulled back with a strangled, "John!" Sherlock's hands pushed back against John's shoulders, keeping him at bay, and his whole body shuddered with denied orgasm.

John looked up and locked eyes with his husband. Sherlock's pupils were blown wide open with lust, making his gaze look dark. Hectic spots of color bloomed over Sherlock's impossible cheek bones, and breath heaved in his chest as though he'd just run a mile.

Sherlock hoisted John to his feet by his grip on his bloggers shoulders and crushed their mouths together in a violent kiss. John sat up a bit, allowing Sherlock to work the pants over his hips and down his legs.

Sherlock crouched there, rocking against John's hips, still clothed in pants. The lanky consulting detective let out a high, frustrated whine before tearing John's shirt over his head, heedless of ripped seams. John dug his fingers into Sherlock's back, pulling Sherlock over him, then rolling so that he was hovering over Sherlock's lithe frame.

"John, clothes, off now!" Sherlock hissed, pulling at the fabric of John's pants. John sat up a bit, allowing Sherlock to work the pants over his hips and down his legs.

Sherlock hummed contentedly, almost purring as he ran his hands over John's bare back, soaking in the warmth of his skin. "Come here," Sherlock whispered, urging John to slide up his body with urgent hands on John's hips.

John complied, eyes widening as he realized Sherlock intended to take him into his mouth while John leaned over him. Sherlock reached back to tuck a pillow under his head, then looked up at John
and licked his kiss-swollen lips.

John braced his hands on the headboard and canted his hips forward until his cock pushed against Sherlock's cupids-bow lips. Sherlock opened his mouth slightly, breathing hot, humid air over John's shaft. John closed his eyes for a moment and groaned. Then, because the image was so decadent, he forced himself to open his eyes again and look down at his husband. Sherlock's tongue peeked out between his lips, lightly tracing the head and rigid veins along the underside.

"Sherlock," John gasped fighting the urge to thrust. Not only did he want to avoid choking his husband, but he wanted to see what that *wicked* tongue would do when Sherlock had free reign to play.

Sherlock's eyes sparkled with amusement as his hands on John's hips encouraged his blogger to press closer. Sherlock arched his neck pressing hot open mouthed kisses along John's shaft, and lower, towards his testicles. Cool, slim fingers wrapped around John's penis, stroking the hot organ while Sherlock mouthed his balls.

"Sherlock!" John's voice was thready with need. Sherlock let out a long, low hum, content to play with John's body for a while. John craned his head to watch Sherlock's dexterous mouth and fingers and *damn* if that wasn't the hottest thing he'd ever seen...

Sherlock tugged John's hips back slightly, mouthing up the shaft until he could slide his lips over the head. Sherlock looked up, holding John's gaze as he encouraged John to push inside by pulling his hips forward.

John began the thrust, slow and shallow, fixated by the the sight of himself disappearing into Sherlock's mouth. Sherlock worked his lips and tongue over John's shaft, moving his head as much as his current angle would allow. The resulting sensations were delicate and intense.

Even in this position, pressing Sherlock into the mattress, John knew that the dark haired consulting detective was in complete control; he was playing John's body like his beloved Stradivarius.

John brought one hand down to caress the side of Sherlock's face, tugging lightly at his dark curls. Sherlock let out a low moan of approval which nearly brought John to his tipping point. "Sh- wait!" John stuttered pulling back from the wet, velvet heat that was Sherlock's mouth.

John knelt, breath stuttering in his throat, trying desperately to pull himself back from the edge. Sherlock, meanwhile, and wriggled into a sitting position so that John was now hovering over his lap. Lithe arms wound their way around John's neck, pulling him into a panting, biting kiss. John groaned at the sensual assault and moved his hands onto Sherlock's shoulders, pushing him back into the headboard.

Between kisses, Sherlock murmured, "I want to be inside you, John."

"Yes, please," John gasped against Sherlock's parted lips.

Sherlock trailed his lips over John's neck, while his arm flailed for the lube in the top drawer of the bedside table. The sensation of Sherlock's teeth at the juncture of his neck and shoulder was dizzying, and John rocked impatiently against Sherlock. Sherlock stayed John's movement with firm hands on his hips and chuckled softly, the vibrations shooting down John's neck and shoulder.

Sherlock trailed one hand down the small of John's back, over his ass, and between the round cheeks. John sucked in a quick breath at the unfamiliar sensation of a warm slippery finger that wasn't his own pressing against his entrance. Sherlock's fingers circled the tight ring of muscle
leisurely until John spread his legs further and pushed back against them.

John grunted at the somewhat familiar stretching sensation, rocking back as Sherlock pushed into him. Sherlock pressed slow kisses along John's neck and face as he worked his finger inside his husband. Some kisses were chaste, some nipped at John's skin, and some included the broad swipe of Sherlock's tongue. Sherlock's teeth scraped lightly over the sensitive hickey forming on John's neck as he pushed a second finger inside, causing the ex-army doctor to buck against Sherlock's torso.

"God, Sherlock," John panted rocking against Sherlock's long fingers and biting his lip when they brushed his prostate.

A contented rumble rose in Sherlock's chest as John's thrust impaled himself on Sherlock's fingers, desperate and wanton. His bloggers eyes were locked on his own, hazy with lust, pupils stretched wide. Sherlock was careful in his attentions to only just brush John's prostate, to keep his blogger on the edge.

John let out a high, needy whine. "Sherlock, please," he begged, leaning forward to press his lips sloppily against Sherlock.

"Easy," Sherlock murmured, sounding amused. He was not unaffected, however. The sounds they were making went straight to his cock, which felt heavy and thick between his legs. As John writhed on his fingers, Sherlock felt the occasional, tantalizing brush of John's thighs against the tip of his penis.

Sherlock gently mouthed John's Adam's apple while he wriggled a third finger in beside the others.

"Sherlock!" John keened, rolling his hips into the intrusion. "Please, I'm ready."

"Almost," Sherlock insisted, his breath hitching with excitement, "Almost."

John fumbled behind himself as he rocked into Sherlock's fingers, taking his husbands fully erect penis in hand and smearing pre-cum around the tip.

"hngh!" Sherlock exclaimed, arching into John's touch, jerking his fingers into John's prostate. "John!"

John snatched up the lube with shaky fingers and slicked his husbands throbbing cock. Sherlock's pulled his fingers slowly from inside John, placing both hands firmly on his hips instead.

John carefully positioned Sherlock against his opening. John lifted his head and held Sherlock's gray/blue gaze with his own as he began a slow downward slide that had them both moaning. Once Sherlock was balls deep inside him John paused to savor the sensation, panting with the effort of remaining still.

One of Sherlock's hands trailed up John's torso and cupped the side of his face. "I love you," he murmured, running his thumb over John's bottom lip. John turned his head to press a kiss into Sherlock's palm and whispered, "I love you too."

Sherlock pressed his hips up into John causing his blogger to roll his hips in response. John leaned forward and caught Sherlock's bottom lip in a messy, panting kiss as he began to rock against him in earnest.

"John," Sherlock breathed, pushing his heels into the mattress as he thrust up into his husband. John's fingers tangled in Sherlock's hair as he rode him, their lips brushing together and apart with their
movements. John pressed down hard, rolling his hips, and drawing a deep groan from Sherlock's chest.

Peeling Sherlock's hands from his waist with a breathless smirk, John rose up, off of Sherlock and held himself just out of reach. Sherlock pulled on John's wrists lightly, mindful of old, healing injuries, and pressed himself up, but to no avail.

John's breathy chuckle was cut short when Sherlock pushed him down onto the mattress with a predatory growl.

Sherlock maneuvered onto his knees, insinuated himself between John's thighs, and pushed inside him with a heady slide.

"Sherlock!" John cried, reaching for his husband. Sherlock slid his hands up John's arms until he could press their palms together and interlock their fingers. John arched his chest up into Sherlock as Sherlock pressed their hands into the mattress and drove into him.

"Fuck, John," Sherlock gasped into the doctor's neck, snapping his hips up to meet John's, assaulting his prostate. John let out a shaky moan, as arousal curled tight and low in his abdomen, bucking into his husband.

Sherlock leaned up and brushed his lips over John's before sliding one hand down John's torso, towards his cock. Sherlock pulled back to watch John's face as he took him in hand. "God, Sherlock, yes" John hissed, bucking into Sherlock's hand.

John lost his free hand in Sherlock's curls once more, seeking purchase as he spiraled out into white hot pleasure. "Sherlock! Aaaaah! Oooh, God! Aaah!"

Sherlock cried out his own pleasure as he saw John surrender, warm, wet semen coating his hand. "Joooohn!" Sherlock keened, trembling as he pulsed release deep inside his husband.

Long, breathless minutes later tight muscles and locked joints began to ease. Sherlock nuzzled into John's neck, buzzing with endorphins.

"God, I love you," John panted, stretching up to nibble at Sherlock's earlobe.

Sherlock chuckled in his ear. "I love you too, John." Sherlock pressed an open mouthed kiss across John's jaw and added, "I think I may develop the awful pattern of repeating myself.

It was John's turn to laugh. "I think, in this case, we can make some allowances for that, Sherlock." John turned his head and drew Sherlock into a deep, dizzying kiss as they reveled in the afterglow.

"I don't think I can move," John groaned, grin spreading across his lips.

Sherlock pressed a short, chaste kiss to John's lips before he replied, "I think I can manage." Gently, Sherlock eased himself out of John, kneading his husband's trembling thigh muscles for a moment before he staggered towards the bathroom for a flannel. He returned a minute later, damp flannel in hand and tenderly cleaned his blogger and himself.

Assured that they wouldn't wake up sticky, Sherlock tossed the soiled flannel in the laundry bin, and nestled into the bed, beside John. John gravitated towards his husband, twining their limbs together and resting his head on Sherlock's chest. Sherlock managed, though it took some maneuvering, to tuck the duvet around them both, and settled back into the pillows.

"I don't want to go to London tomorrow," John said quietly, his voice muffled against Sherlock's
"Hm?" Sherlock replied, glancing down into John's damp hair.

John shifted and looked up, his eyes finding Sherlock's blue/grey ones. "While I don't want to redo the wedding, this was definitely not a honeymoon."

Sherlock smiled softly and pressed a kiss into John's forehead. "Where would you like to go? I'll call Mycroft early and have our tickets changed."

John thought for a moment, trailing his fingers in looping patterns over Sherlock's chest. At last he said, "You choose. Surprise me." When Sherlock arched a suspicious eyebrow John chuckled and insisted, "I mean it. I trust you. I know you'll pick some place interesting; just make sure it's not also filled with bugs or something." John stretched languorously, then added, "I'm not having sex if I'm covered in mosquito bites."

Sherlock nodded solemnly. "No Palo Verde, got it."

"Where's Palo Verde?" John asked sleepily. Now that he was warm and sated, and things were finally, finally, resolved, he felt like he could sleep for days.

John felt Sherlock smile into his hair as he murmured, "It's a tropical swamp in Costa Rica."

"Hmm," John replied, feeling sleep tugging insistently at him. Dimly, he was aware of Sherlock shifting, rolling onto his side. John snuggled up to Sherlock's back, looping an arm around his waist, and hooking a leg over his thin hips. John pressed his forehead in-between Sherlock's shoulder blade, surprised at how well he fit there. He'd thought, because of their height difference, that he'd be awkward as the big spoon; he wasn't. He seemed to fit perfectly against his husband. "S'This comfy?" John asked, his voice stretched in a yawn.

"Yes," Sherlock replied, almost purring the word as he nestled back into John's warm embrace.

John closed his eyes and smiled as he felt Sherlock's steady heartbeat fluttering under his fingers.

They'd gone through a lot over the years, and especially during this case. Through torture, through judgment, through danger, and through webs of malevolence thick enough to bring a nation to its knees. But right now, wrapped around his infuriatingly brilliant husband like a blanket, John felt he would never want for anything else, ever again.

A deep, sleepy voice broke the drowsy reverie "John?"

"Yes, Sherlock?" John mumbled into the skin of the consulting detective's long back.

"You're thinking too loudly. Go to sleep."

Sherlock couldn't see it, pressed as John was against his back, but the good doctor grinned like a fool and replied, "Yes, Sherlock."
And They Loved

Chapter Summary

I TOLD you there would be a happy ending. :P

Chapter Notes

Okay, full disclosure, I have procrastinated in writing this chapter more than any other I think. Part of it is I don't relish the idea of this story ending, and part is because I haven't been in the best of spirits lately. I know, I know I've said that before. I'm not trying to complain, really I'm not, just being honest.

Still, I can't be entirely certain this story would have become what it was if things hadn't turned out the way they did. You see things started going bad in real life just as I began posting this chapter. While I'm not exactly thrilled that things are still as they have been (that is to say, less than optimal) for nearly half a year now, I am exceptionally thrilled at how this story turned out, and the support it has received. You guys are fantastic, seriously. I never expected this story to be so popular and I am tremendously thankful for all the support.

When I first started writing this, I hadn't written in a long time, and I'd certainly never written anything this long. But, as it grew and people took an interest it helped re-ignite my passion for writing as well as building my story telling skills. Now, as we come to the end of this story, I'm happy to say I intend to keep writing, no matter what. I will still write fanfiction, but now I've also begun research for a book I will actually try to have published (something I've always wanted to do). It's one of the only projects I've ever started that I can throw myself into without fear because, win lose or draw, I will still have a story I'm proud of at the end of it. ^_^

Special thanks goes to all those who have left comment, kudos, bookmarked, and/or subscribed to this story. Your encouragement has been heartening and inspiring.

I would also like to thank my beta, Helena Chauby, for her dedicated work in editing this story. Editing is hard work, as my utter inability to do so can attest.

And, of course, I must thank by flat mate, sounding board, and own personal Sherlock, Geoff. You helped this story be everything it could be.

One more note before you get to the actual final installment: Keep a look out for the Authors note at the end of the chapter for my future plans and a sneak peek at my next big project!

And now, after an insanely long authors note, I give you the epilogue:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
"...and you have a meeting with the French Ambassador tomorrow at two o'clock," Anthea said evenly. She'd been reviewing tomorrow's schedule as the car approached Mycroft's estate. "With any luck you'll have a few hours for paperwork by the end of the day."

Mycroft let out a s tilted chuckle. "With any luck," he repeated wryly, and they shared a small smile. Mycroft was getting home from work early today. Well, early for him anyway. Over the last year, as his relationship with Gregory had grown, that had become a more common occurrence. It had been a little unsettling at first, caring about someone else like that, but Gregory could be quite convincing.

Mycroft had asked Gregory to meet him at the estate tonight to spend the evening together, and to...resolve something that had been on his mind of late. It had never been difficult for Mycroft Holmes to control his emotions, he was even better at it than his little brother. However, at the moment he was pleased that it was only Anthea and himself in the car; there was no need to fight the upwards curl growing at the edge of his lips.

"I'll see you tomorrow, sir," Anthea said as the car pulled up to the door, a knowing smile on her lips. "Have a good evening."

Mycroft nodded and murmured, "You as well, Anthea."

In short order, Mycroft was striding through the foyer and up the stairs towards his bedroom. Mycroft paused in his sitting room to hang up his coat, and it was there that he caught sight of one detective inspector, Gregory Lestrade, fast asleep on the sofa in front of the fireplace.

Mycroft smiled to himself, and shook his head in amusement. Gregory and he had been intimate for the past five months and, especially over the past two months, Gregory often found himself spending the night. Judging by the small duffle bag resting just beside the foot of the sofa, Gregory was planning to spend tonight at the estate as well.

Mycroft settled himself at the end of the sofa, for there was more than enough room, even with Gregory's sprawled form, and reached forwards to run his fingers through Gregory's thick salt and pepper hair. Gregory sighed and nestled into the caress. The edges of Mycroft's eyes crinkled with amusement and warmth at the familiar gesture. Each time he'd found Gregory asleep in odd places, Mycroft threaded his fingers through his hair until he woke.

In all this time, over a year since the end of the infamous case that had begun their relationship, Mycroft had never once found Gregory asleep in his bed; even when sudden business obligations had kept Mycroft away all night. It was always a sofa, couch, daybed, or leaned against a desk or chair. Mycroft supposed he should feel gratified that, in these last two months, Gregory's odd sleeping arrangements had been restricted to the sofa in the sitting rooms which adjoined Mycroft's bedroom.

Mycroft watched the firelight playing in Gregory's hair, and remembered when their relationship had truly shifted from friends to something more. Once Mycroft and Greg had returned to London from New York they had quickly established a pattern of meeting once a week for dinner or, occasionally, some other excursion. By the time Sherlock and John had returned from their (real) honeymoon, over a month later, once a week had become twice or even three times, if their individual work schedules would allow it.
Mycroft had been quite surprised at how much he enjoyed Gregory's company. The conversation came easily and was markedly intelligent. They stayed until closing at dozens of restaurants, and strolled on the grounds of Mycroft's estate until it was far too dark to see. (Thankfully, Mycroft always had a torch). Once or twice in those early months Gregory had spent the night, but always in a guest room.

Although Gregory was naturally more social and 'friendly' than Mycroft, they were both extremely reserved about their private lives. This slow growth of their relationship seemed satisfying to each of them for their own reasons. Neither felt compelled to rush, despite the quiet frustrations of one, slightly meddling, younger Holmes.

One morning, after Gregory had spent the night in a guest room, Mycroft had made his way into the kitchen to find Gregory already there, cooking breakfast for the both of them. The light of the morning was warm and bright, bathing the kitchen in its glow. Mycroft had paused in the doorway and, quite contently, watched Gregory work. After several minutes Gregory half turned, caught sight of Mycroft, and broke out into a welcoming grin. Mycroft's answering smile was all he needed to recognize the romantic affections he held for the detective inspector, that had grown like the climbing tendrils of a plant seeking the light.

Shortly afterwards Gregory had invited Mycroft, as well as Sherlock and John, to a tree trimming party at his flat. Greg's flat was not large, and neither it, nor the furniture in it, were in particularly good condition. However, with decorations, food laid out, and a tree set to be decorated, it was unexpectedly cozy.

Gregory, of course, was a pleasure to talk to, and John was decent company as well. Sherlock was, as ever, his usual charming self. Although, Mycroft noted a discreet softness in his brother's manners that was beyond the usual. In addition, while he traded barbs with Mycroft, they were more good natured than vicious. Once, when Sherlock believed himself unobserved, Mycroft witnessed a warmth and light in his younger brother's eyes as he observed his blogger...his husband.

Intimacy on that level went against every survival instinct Mycroft had developed over the years...but he was hardly in a position to pass judgment anymore. ...and John did make his brother happy.

After dinner, Mycroft had settled into a threadbare wingback beside the heater with a single glass of wine, and admired the end result of their work. He remembered the lights of the tree starting to swim, an intense sensation of drowsiness, then...it was morning.

Mycroft had blinked irritably at the unfamiliar white ceiling which greeted him, and turned his head to the left. He started a bit when he observed Gregory was also lying, quite closely, in the bed beside him. Gregory was asleep, but close to waking, given his breathing pattern. Mycroft's eyes darted furiously about the room, gathering data.

He was missing only two articles of clothing. His shoes, which were on the floor at the foot of the bed, and his suit jacket, which hung from the back of the bedroom door. A quick scan of Gregory's body, both above and below the sheets, proved him to be dressed of soft pajama trousers and a loose cotton shirt. Mycroft them made a mental scan of his own body and found nothing amiss. What had happened?

"Sherlock drugged you," came a voice slurred with a yawn.

Mycroft turned his head to left and found Gregory's sleepy brown eyes blinking at him.

"I just wanted to tell you, so you didn't freak out." Gregory elaborated, bringing one hand up to rest beneath his chin. "John was livid. You can give Sherlock a dressing down later, if you want to, but
"I'm pretty sure John has it covered."

"What happened?" Mycroft had asked evenly.

"Well," Greg began, leaning up on his elbow and resting the palm of one hand against his cheek, "You started dozing off and, when I asked you if you were feeling okay... you were acting strange."

Mycroft's eyes narrowed both at Gregory's pause and the blush creeping over his features, "Strange, how?"

Greg looked away and worried his bottom lip for a moment before answering. "You were acting drugged." he elaborated at length. "Your speech was a bit slurred, and your posture was slumped." Greg had hesitated again before meeting Mycroft's eyes, "When you complimented Sherlock on his choice of husband, we were all pretty sure something was wrong. Sherlock's grin did nothing to deny it. It's like he wanted us to know."

Mycroft closed his eyes and pressed a hand against his forehead. "He probably did," Mycroft mumbled. The romantic meddling of his younger brother were not lost on him, he'd only hoped his brother would not resort to such drastic measures. "Anything else?" Mycroft asked, drawing his hand slowly away from his face.

The detective inspector was silent again and refused to meet Mycroft's eyes. "Gregory?" Mycroft asked, a pointed tone to his voice.

Gregory glanced at Mycroft, a blush creeping back onto his cheeks. "As I was putting you to bed... you kissed me."

Mycroft's eyebrows drew up towards his hairline. "Pardon?"

"You kissed me," Gregory had repeated softly, looking at Mycroft through his lashes. "I stopped you, made you lie down, and you went right to sleep... but I figured you'd want to know that you kissed me..."

Mycroft nodded slowly. He was not blushing. The British government did not blush.

"I'm sorry for taking the rest of the bed," Gregory pressed on, looking away, "It's just... well, my couch isn't fit to sleep on."

"It's fine, Gregory," Mycroft insisted, struggling to his feet. "Where is your bathroom?"

"Out the bedroom door, down the hall on your left, first door on your right," Greg had said softly. Mycroft was nearly in said hall before he heard a quiet, "You could do it again... if you want... now that your sober..." Mycroft paused, turned his head over his shoulder slightly, and nodded once to signal that he'd heard to detective inspector, before pressing onwards towards the bathroom.

While Mycroft resolved his morning absolutions and brushed his teeth, he heard Gregory dressing. Once Gregory had dressed and was in the kitchen making tea, Mycroft had returned to the bedroom to re-dress himself. While Mycroft was straightening his suit jacket Gregory took his turn in the bathroom. The end result was that, by the time Mycroft had emerged from the bedroom, Gregory was curled on the sofa with a cup of tea, staring rigidly out of the window.

Mycroft approached the couch and said, "I am sorry for an inconvenience I may have caused you, Gregory."

Greg's head had turned slightly, his eyes flicking to Mycroft's, then back to the window. "It's fine,"
Greg said softly. "You didn't exactly have a choice about it."

"Gregory," Mycroft began seriously, "Please look at me."

Greg had sighed then, put his cup down on the coffee table, stood, and turned to face Mycroft with a carefully neutral, if somewhat hurt expression. "Yes?" he'd asked, lifting his dark brown eyes to Mycroft's lighter gaze.

Mycroft took this opportunity to step forward and place his fingers gently under Gregory's chin, lifting it. Gregory's eyes widened, but only for a moment before Mycroft's soft lips connected with his own. Their lips met with a jolt that sent tingles down his spine. Greg had closed his eyes and leaned up into the kiss, bracing his hands lightly on Mycroft's shoulders.

Mycroft moved his lips gently against Gregory's, enjoying his warmth. Gregory made a little sound in the back of his throat, and clutched at the fabric of Mycroft's suit jacket.

Mycroft pulled back slowly, his breath still mingling with the detective inspector's when he said, "Thank you, Gregory."

Gregory had smiled up at him dreamily and whispered, "You're welcome."

... It was nearly Christmas before, during one of the dinners they shared at the estate, Gregory glanced across the table at Mycroft and asked, "So...we're officially dating now, right?"

Mycroft had smiled despite himself, and slid his hand across the table to cover Gregory's. "Yes," he replied quietly, "I do believe so."

Greg had beamed at Mycroft across the table and said, "Good. I figured, but I wanted to be sure."

Gregory had then given Mycroft's hand a squeeze and returned to his dinner. Mycroft had likewise returned to his dinner, all the while trying to convince himself that the faint blush staining Gregory's cheeks was not that becoming. By the time they had cleaned up the dishes, Mycroft was still trying.

"Hey," a sleepy voice broke in to Mycroft's recollections. "How long have you been here?"

Mycroft glanced down at Gregory as the detective inspector nuzzled into his hand. "Not long Gregory," he replied, a fond smile playing on his lips.

"S'Good to see you," Greg yawned, pulling himself into a sitting position and promptly leaning his head heavily onto Mycroft's shoulders. "Wasn't sure if you'd make it home tonight."

Mycroft secured an arm around Gregory's waist and replied, "Actually, I am home early today."

A warm smile pulled at the corners of Greg's mouth as he nuzzled into Mycroft's shoulder, completely relaxed. "You've been doing that more often lately, I thought you might have to catch up."

"I have everything well in hand," Mycroft quietly assured his lover, bringing his hand up to stroke the nape of Gregory's neck.

"You always do," Greg agreed, drawing in a deep breath, trying to wake himself up a bit.

Mycroft glanced down at his detective inspector, a wry smile playing on his lips for a moment before a more serious expression returned. "That brings me to an important point, Gregory," Mycroft began,
Greg straightened, stretched his arms up above his head, and turned to face Mycroft as well. "Yes?" he asked tipping his head to one side, watching the light from the fireplace dance over the skin on Mycroft's cheek.

Mycroft pressed his hands together in front of his chest as he often did when making a point. Greg fought a smile when he remembered the first time he'd commented to Mycroft on how this particular gesture resembled Sherlock's 'thinking' pose. Mycroft had completely lost his train of thought after that, and Greg had been absurdly pleased with the slight vacant expression on the elder Holmes's face.

"Gregory!" Mycroft snapped and Greg met his eyes, slightly abashed when he realized he had zoned out.

"Sorry, what?"

Mycroft's left eye twitched in annoyance. "As I was saying," he began again, his tone slightly irritated, "At present, you're overnight bag is present in my rooms more often than it is not. It is constantly underfoot, Gregory."

Greg glanced at the floor to his small duffle, pressed up against the couch. He looked back to Mycroft with a shrug and an amused smile, sure that Mycroft was playing with him, somehow. "Sorry about that. I didn't think it would be such an inconvenience."

"It is an inconvenience, Gregory. One I intend to put an end to."

Greg's face fell and paled considerably. Mycroft had never been an easy man to get close to, but Greg had thought he'd done an admiral job of it. Their communication wasn't always as forthcoming as Greg's initial confession that he wanted to be closer to Mycroft, largely because of Mycroft's natural reticence, but they were always honest with each other. He expected an explanation. "Excuse me?" he asked, his voice suddenly tight.

Mycroft stood and began walking smoothly towards his bedroom. "If you would follow me, please. Bring your bag with you."

Greg gaped after Mycroft for a moment, utterly bewildered. If Mycroft was about to turn him out, he wouldn't have walked into the bedroom. But, for the life of him Greg couldn't account for Mycroft's sudden cool demeanor.

"Gregory," Mycroft's voice summoned him, the form of the elder Holmes no longer visible from the doorway.

Greg opened and closed his mouth once, twice, before grabbing his bag from the foot of the couch and storming into Mycroft's bedroom.

"Mycroft what-" Greg stopped short, gaping again, only this time it was at partially empty drawers and shelves instead of the empty air where Mycroft had just been sitting.

Mycroft was standing beside his closet with an almost imperceptible, amused curve to his lips. "There's room to hang things as well," Mycroft said, jerking his head towards his walk in. "I doubt you can see that from the door."

Greg glanced at the closet, then back to Mycroft. He leaned around and saw there was, indeed, more than enough room for him to hang his shirts next to Mycroft's posh suites. Altogether, between the
shelves and the drawers, and room to hang things...it was double the room Greg would need to fit all his clothing.

Greg glanced back at Mycroft, who was pointedly examining his manicured nails. "If your busy work schedule won't allow you to move your things, I could send Anthea for them. She is familiar with the layout and content of your apartment, after all." At this last line Mycroft glanced up at Gregory through his lashes, and held his gaze.

Gregory waited a beat, then dropped his bag and began advancing on Mycroft. He grabbed the lapels of Mycroft's suit and pulled him in close, crushing their lips together. "Mycroft..." he exclaimed between kisses. "you," "are," "an," "idiot!"


Greg finally pulled back far enough to look into Mycroft's eyes. "I want to be clear, Mycroft" he began, "Is this just an offer for some of my clothes to be kept here, or is it more than that? Either is surprising and wonderful and unexpected, but I need to know which it is."

Mycroft cringed internally. Greg was always demanding a level of forthrightness Mycroft was uncomfortable with. And Mycroft, beyond all reason, allowed this, enjoyed it even. Some days he had no idea what he'd allowed Gregory to do to him...but then he'd smile softly to himself, well aware of the fact that the damage was already done.

Mycroft lifted his hands to caress the side of Gregory's face and said, "Stay Gregory, please."

Greg's face broke into a wide grin, and he pulled Mycroft closer in a violent hug. He should not find Mycroft's roundabout confessions as endearing as he did. He really shouldn't. More than the space for his clothing or the prospect of a new, extravagant, home, Greg was touched that Mycroft was letting him in. It was a slow process, but Greg didn't mind. He knew how hard it was for Mycroft to trust someone.

In fact, Gregory believed that he may just be falling in love with the enigmatic government official. They hadn't said that yet, either of them, but Greg thought maybe... maybe they were close.

~*~*~*~

John stood in the corner, just inside Angelo's little restaurant, waiting for his order of takeaway. Angelo still refused to be paid for his services, but John was finally able to get him to start accepting a tip. After all, Sherlock did call on him as an ally during cases. Usually it was for takeout at an ungodly hour. Once he'd had Angelo throw him out of the restaurant like a drunk just so he could be 'inconspicuous.'

John almost laughed at the thought. Sherlock was many things, but inconspicuous was not, normally, one of them. Unless he wanted it to be. And, of course, Sherlock had made himself 'inconspicuous' in the most conspicuous way possible. He had been right too, the insufferable git. He'd made quite the scene, being thrown out and stumbling his way down the street, yet no one paid him any mind at all. 'The things people choose to ignore, John.' Sherlock had ranted afterwards,'It's maddening. They're training themselves not to think!'

John had nonchalantly turned the page of his newspaper, barely glancing up at his fuming husband. "And yet you were able to take full advantage of that fact for your own purposes. Are you sure you want to be complaining about this?"

Sherlock's pacing had come to an abrupt halt, and John had been unable to keep the gleeful smile off
his face. That is, until Sherlock had decided to straddle him and kiss it off.

It had been slightly over a year since they began their marriage. Well, since they had been honest with each other about actually wanting to be married. John smiled at the memory.

The morning afterwards he'd been more than a little distressed to find their plane was heading to Costa Rica after all, but Sherlock had just smiled and asked John to trust him. And John did. Always had, really.

Monteverde, it turns out, was very different from Paulo Verde. It was home to a rainforest so high in the mountains you could climb above the clouds and watch them roll in underneath and around you. John spent many mornings marveling at the colorful Macaws that flitted in the trees while Sherlock tried to coax them near and teach them curse words. John had scolded him for that, but his heart wasn't in it. It was too funny. Also, Sherlock had quickly lost interest when John pointed out that countless of others, most likely teenage boys, had probably tried the same thing, and it wouldn't shock the locals.

Sherlock only pouted for a minute before sliding over next to John and employing a different tactic that was more likely shock the locals. John, ever the practical one, had not allowed Sherlock to seduce him on their balcony...at least not in broad daylight.

It had been such a wonderful trip. Despite frequent and enthusiastic coupling, the pair had managed to see a fair number of sights. They spent several afternoons walking the trails of the rainforests together, narrowly avoiding an international incident when Sherlock wanted to collect 'samples' to take back to 221 B.

Sherlock had shown John a brilliant place called the hummingbird garden, which housed delicate birds with dazzling colors John hadn't thought existed in nature. Sherlock had a bit of trouble getting John to leave once they saw the birds with metallic color in their wings.

They'd walked on a sky bridge in the canopy, flew down a zip-line, explored Arenal volcano, and even spent a few days lounging on the beach in Manuel Antonio.

John had been a bit hesitant about spending an entire additional month abroad on holiday, but Sherlock was, as usual, pretty convincing. It didn't hurt that they had, perhaps, years of repressed feelings to make up for. Now that John had permission to be intimate with Sherlock, it had been hard to resist stealing a bit of time for themselves.

Sherlock had even gotten a bit of color, which he lost almost instantly upon their return to London. John managed to hang onto his tan just a bit longer, making the other medical staff at the clinic jealous.

John had greatly reduced his hours at the clinic this past year. Sherlock had insisted that he quit altogether but, as much as John loved Sherlock (and the cases) it went against his hard working moral principles to stop working altogether. Plus he actually did like being a doctor.

There had been three or four bloody spectacular (and not in the good sense) rows between him and Sherlock before they'd settled on a compromise. John had moved to on-call hours. This worked because, if he were called while on a case with Sherlock, he could say 'no' guilt free, and, when there were no cases, he was available to work long stretches, thereby boosting his productive ego.

Sherlock would pout and, occasionally, have a strop if John pulled a lot of clinic shifts during the down time between cases, but he hadn't pressured John to quit entirely since their last true row about John's work, over eight months ago.
There were also times between cases, when the clinic didn't need him, where John reveled in Sherlock's quiet affection. It didn't matter if Sherlock was knee deep in an experiment or if they were fucking each other through the mattress, it was all fine. Sherlock had to know—though John would never admit it for fear of reopening the 'you should quit the clinic' argument—that those times when they had only each other, no cases or clinics, were some of John's favorite times.

"Here you are," Angelo said with a grin, handing John two neatly packed bags of takeaway. Neither John nor Sherlock cooked very often, so they made a habit of getting extra takeaway when they could. Assuming tonight's leftovers weren't apportioned for an experiment, there should be plenty left for tomorrow as well. "Tell your husband I said hello," Angelo added with a wink glancing at the perfectly clean ring on John's left hand.

John smiled, blushing a little, and nodded. As much as he liked the title he hadn't yet gotten used to it. Maybe because it was still new(ish), or because of all the time John wasted denying what they were to each other, or maybe part of him still couldn't quite believe it. Once, back in the beginning, it took him over a year to believe that even being Sherlock's flat mate and going on cases with him had become a normal part of his life.

As he made his way out onto the street and hailed a cab John reflected that he still referred to Sherlock as his flat mate when they're on cases together. John hadn't set out to make that distinction purposely—they were wearing match rings for God's sake, anyone with half a brain could notice—but there was something in that phrase that had come to mean so much more than "this is the person I share a domicile with." For John, and maybe for Sherlock too, (if his sly smiles were anything to go by), 'flat mate' had come to symbolize the absurd and wonderful way they had begun their life together. It had become a word completely interchangeable with husband, partner, and lover.

Hopping out of the cab, John paid the driver and bounded up the steps to 221B. They'd had one hell of an interesting case last week that had left them both more than a little sleep deprived. Even with John's medical degree he was always a bit amazed at how good it felt when he was caught up on his sleep. Of course, having one inscrutable consulting detective to share his bed might have something to do with the good sleep they were both getting when they weren't on cases. Sherlock still ate and slept far too little for John's liking, so he made a point of abusing Sherlock's affection for cuddling when he felt it might also result in Sherlock getting some much needed rest.

John slowly pushed back the door to their flat, edging his way to the kitchen, determined to set the food in the fridge. He was planning on locating Sherlock and immediately beginning dinner, but one never knew what 'just a minute' would turn into at Baker Street.

John set the bags quickly in the fridge, pleased to see it devoid of body parts. He had managed to convince Sherlock to lease 221C for the sole purpose of being a lab area for said consulting detective. Money wasn't the concern it had once been due to Sherlock's increasing fame and natural genius. That didn't stop Sherlock from setting up his microscope on the kitchen table from time to time, but John didn't mind. As long as Sherlock wasn't blowing anything up, he rather liked the silent company.

Backing out of the kitchen John turned and scanned the sitting room. He chuckled softly to himself when he spied one Sherlock Holmes sprawled over their sofa, fast asleep. John leaned against the wall and smiled fondly at his husband. Even in the dim lighting he could see a soft new scarf adorned Sherlock's neck. John had made it for him, with some assistance from Mrs. Hudson, to celebrate their anniversary. Knowing Sherlock as well as he did, John couldn't be cross that Sherlock had found it early. It was almost endearing that he'd waited until today to ferret it out.

Today was the eighth anniversary of the day they had met at St. Barts. For all that Sherlock wasn't
overly sentimental and John was, neither of them were big on normal. Once they'd returned to London, after a brief discussion about the future, they decided that the one anniversary they did want to celebrate, was the day they met. That day was the genesis of every other happy milestone, after all.

Neither had planned anything particularly fancy, just a quiet night in at 221B in each other's company. They hadn't even made a firm decision about gifts as neither was fond of picking something out just because occasion required it. They always just gave each other presents whenever they felt like it. Christmas being the only exception, because Sherlock knew how much John loved the holiday and they were both easy to shop for.

John's sock covered feet swept quietly over the floor as he brought himself closer to Sherlock, sitting lightly on the edge of the sofa so that his hip pressed gently against his husband's. Sherlock snuffled a bit in his sleep, but didn't wake yet. John took the opportunity to stare down at his handsome face and smiled.

Since their marriage John had stopped adamantly refusing that he wasn't gay. He toyed around with a few labels-bisexual, Sherlock is the exception, etc.- before giving up the idea of labeling his sexuality altogether. He was in love with Sherlock, they were married, and those were the only important facts anyway.

Unable to resist, John reached forwards and ran his hand down the front of Sherlock's shirt covered chest, smiling when Sherlock arched into the touch. It was tempting to pause and circle his nipples, or continue down and palm Sherlock through his trousers, lord knows he'd done that before on finding Sherlock sleeping. It was amazing, really, how well they got on, sexually. Then again, John supposed it shouldn't be surprising, considering how well they'd gotten on just being 'flat mates'.

That wasn't to say it all went smooth. There had been hiccups, failed attempts, and awkward moments as they'd gotten to know each other. But always, there had been humor and love too. Sherlock was never deterred when things didn't go perfectly; it was simply more data in his needlessly complex, never-ending experiment on what made John Watson excited. Sometimes it was quick, sometimes it was slow, sometimes sweet, sometimes rough, but it was always thrilling.

Once on a warm spring afternoon between cases Sherlock had made a show of being tired and invited John to lay with him on their bed. Being the besotted fool that he was, John almost never turned down the chance to hold Sherlock in his arms. Of course 'hold' had rapidly turned into caress and fondle, just as Sherlock had planned. They had the leisure to take things slowly that day, and they did. Clothing slipped off, mouths, tongues, and hands wandered aimlessly, and passion simmered. Love bites appeared on necks, backs, legs, and luscious backsides whenever the long delayed need swelled and demanded to be satisfied.

John had lain Sherlock down and made a project of exploring the skin between his legs, opening him slowly until his gasps sounded like desperate sobbing. He had protested when Sherlock pushed him away. He'd watched awed and amused as Sherlock clawed himself back from the edge, not wanting to cum yet.

And then it was John softly writhing on Sherlock's fingers, moaning loudly as Sherlock entered him. They had gone back and forth for hours that day taking, and being taken. It was the first and only time John had ever passed out from orgasm, too blissed out to even remember who had been inside whom at the end. Sherlock had retained consciousness, but only just, trembling and shaking on John's chest as his head swam in the aftermath.

When John came around some long minutes later he pulled Sherlock up his torso and kissed him languidly, sweetly, running his hands possessively along Sherlock's sides.
"Just so you know," Sherlock had murmured as he pulled back, a mischievous glint in his eyes, "I have every intention of doing that again."

John had grinned and nipped lightly at Sherlock's lips. If by 'that' Sherlock meant mind bending marathon sex, or sex where they took turns penetrating each other, or seeing John pass out from orgasm, or all of it together, John was in complete agreement.

Long, slender fingers sliding up his wrist pulled John back to the present and he smiled down into gray/blue eyes as he threaded their fingers together. "Hey," John murmured, leaning forward for a warm, chaste kiss. Sherlock 'hmmed' contently into their kiss before John pulled back and declared, "I brought takeaway from Angelos."

"Thank you, John," Sherlock replied, his voice a little breathy from sleep. John could tell from the way the fingers of Sherlock's free hand danced against the edge of his new scarf that he was thanking John for it as much as he was for the meal.

John smiled again, humor crinkling the corners of his eyes. "You are most welcome. Did the lock on the dresser upstairs give you any trouble?" John's old room had largely been relegated to storage, although it still contained a bed and small dresser.

Sherlock shook his head and stretched. "Child's play," he declared.

John shifted, pressing his face down into Sherlock's shoulder as long, thin arms circled his torso, pulling him down. If he wasn't afraid of falling off the sofa, John mused, he could easily fall asleep this way. Sherlock hands trailed lazily over John's back, tracing the curve of his spine. John sighed, and closed his eyes, inhaling the scent of his husband.

Despite his reservations, John may very well have fallen asleep if a small, high-pitched cry hadn't found its way to his ears. John stilled and listened. There it was again. He lifted his head and closed his eyes, tilting his head slightly to try to identify the source of the cry. When it came a third time John opened his eyes and looked up towards the stairs. "Sherlock," he said very evenly, "what was that?"

"You're present," Sherlock murmured and, even though John wasn't looking he could hear the self satisfied smirk in Sherlock's voice.

"My what?" John sputtered turning back to see the smirk he had expected.

"Your present, John," Sherlock said slowly, "For our anniversary."

John frowned and looked up at the stairs again. It had sounded like a cry, but maybe it was something else. John had heard Sherlock's experiments make all kinds of noises.

John waited a beat, before looking back at the all too amused face of his husband. "Is it safe?" he asked, half dreading the answer.

"Mostly," Sherlock replied, pulling himself into a sitting position. "It could shred your hand I suppose, but only if you aren't careful."

John stared at Sherlock, then glanced to the stairs, then back at Sherlock before rolling his eyes and heaving himself to his feet with a sigh. "What is it?"

Sherlock stood and pressed his hands gently against John's back, urging him towards the stairs. "Go and see."
John glanced dubiously at Sherlock and, hesitantly, allowed himself to be ushered up the stairs. Sherlock's excitement was infectious, despite the havoc John knew he could wreak.

Slowly John turned the handle on the door to his old bedroom, and pushed it open. A small cry drew his attention immediately to his feet where a pair of fiery green eyes peered cautiously up at him out of a small angular face covered in black fur. John blinked down at the cat and she meowed again, rubbing up against the doorframe with a gentle purr.

John sank carefully to his knees and offered her his hand, which she sniffed then butted up against. John's face melted into a smile as he scratched gently behind her ear. "Hello there," John murmured, stroking her hand on her back.

The cat gave a pleasant chirp before rolling onto her back, paws neatly folded against her chest. John chuckled while Sherlock's pale fingers swept over her belly, making her purr again.

"She's adorable. Where did you find her?" John asked, leaning into Sherlock's side as they crouched at the top of the stairs.

"Animal shelter three blocks from here," Sherlock said quietly, bringing his gaze up to meet John's. "You've talked about wanting a pet but not being sure anything would survive our crazy schedule. Cats are flexible and most can do fine on their own if we get a busy case."

"What made you choose her?" John asked, glancing down at the sleepy cat, then back to Sherlock.

Sherlock gave him a wry grin. "It seemed fitting."

John's brows drew together in confusion. "How so?"

Sherlock looked down at the cat again and John followed his gaze, watching her tip her head back so Sherlock could scratch under her chin. "Did you know that a cat's nose print is just as unique as a human fingerprint?" Sherlock drawled.

John blinked and looked over at his husband once more. "Okay, that's interesting, but I still don't see how it factors in to the topic at hand."

Sherlock looked up at John, holding his gaze with a warm smile. "Her name's Maggie, apparently. They never changed the name registered to her ID chip when Anderson dropped her off at the shelter." Merriment flickered in Sherlock's eyes and John realized he was waiting for something to dawn on him.

John pursed his lips and thought for a moment. His gaze fell back to the cat, who's eyes were closed in a contented purr as Sherlock's hands continued to work. Sherlock must have met this cat before if he'd been able to identify her from her nose print. Probably on a case if Anderson had dropped her off at a shelter. And if it was 'fitting' that this particular cat was an anniversary present, then John must have met her also at one point. A creeping tingle broke out across the back of John's neck as he finally recognized her. John turned to stare at Sherlock wide-eyed and whispered, "She's the cat...from that first double murder? Thomas and Sean?"

Sherlock smiled and nodded his eyes shining. "The very same," he agreed, leaning towards his husband, intent on closing the gap between them with a kiss.

An indignant trill rose up from the floor shortly before Sherlock grimaced and brought his hand to his mouth, glaring bitterly at the cat that had scratched him.

John rolled his eyes affectionately and reached forward to draw Sherlock's hand close to examine it.
"It's just a scratch," John proclaimed softly, smiling up at Sherlock's sour expression.

"Apparently, she doesn't like to be ignored," Sherlock observed dryly as Maggie rubbed up against John's hip, all sweetness again.

John chuckled and pulled her up to his chest for a hug. "Then she'll fit in rather well. You two can drive each other nuts." Sherlock continued to glower at the purring cat until John reached forward and took hold of his wrist, bringing the injured hand to his lips. "Thank you, Sherlock," John murmured against the back of his husband's hand, "This was very sweet." And it was. He had no idea why she hadn't been snatched up, but John was glad to welcome her into their home.

The hint of a smile tugged at Sherlock's lips and his eyes softened. "You're welcome, John."

Maggie jumped out of John's arms and back into John's old bedroom to lap at the water dish Sherlock had set up for her earlier that day. Sherlock took advantage of this fact to reach out and pull John into his arms. John came willingly, and they met in a soft, hot kiss.

Sherlock's long, agile fingers worked their way underneath John's jumper, running up his sides until he could sweep his thumbs over the edge of John's nipples. John's hips rocked forwards reflexively, and Sherlock smiled into their kiss.

"Not here," John murmured, meeting Sherlock's heated gaze with his own.

Sherlock let out a small sputter of disbelief and pulled back slightly. "You're not protesting because of the cat, surely?"

John bit his lips, glanced down, then back up again. "John, she is a cat, a neutered one at that. She's hardly going to be prudish, she doesn't even know what she's looking at."

"It still feels strange being stared at," John insisted, standing and pulling Sherlock to his feet beside him. John closed the door to his old bedroom and moved to walk back down the stairs, only to find his progress barred by Sherlock's arm across his chest. John turned his head to look at Sherlock when he found himself unceremoniously pressed back against the wall of the stairwell, his husband's piercing gaze boring into him.

"Being seen might not actually excite you," Sherlock murmured, leaning forward until John could feel his breath on his ear, "but the risk of getting caught certainly does."

John sucked in a sharp breath, willing his pulse not to quicken, trying to force the flush away from his cheeks; it was a losing battle. Sherlock was right. Sherlock was usually right.

Sherlock nipped playfully at John's earlobe and dragged his teeth slowly along the curve of John's neck before whispering, "You think I didn't notice how excited you were this morning when we heard Mrs. Hudson was wandered around, straightening up, with no idea we were still in bed, or what we were doing there?"

John groaned softly at the memory. With no case or clinic or experiments to worry about, they had lain in late into the morning. When they had begun to stir it had quickly turned sexual. Sherlock had worked three fingers into John before they heard the mutterings and shuffled steps of the landlady. There was no risk of her coming into Sherlock's bedroom, they'd made a habit of locking the door from the inside. All the same, John had held himself still, trying to remain silent under Sherlock's assault. Unwilling to make a sound or voice that they should probably stop, John had writhed and bucked on Sherlock's fingers, then cock, tumbling over into powerful orgasmic bliss. Mrs. Hudson probably hadn't been in their flat for more than a few minutes, but the added thrill had certainly made
an impact. And Sherlock had noticed.

"You might still be open from this morning," Sherlock purred as if reading his thoughts. Sherlock’s hands were tugging up at the fabric of John's jumper, pulling it off of his head. John wrapped his arms around Sherlock's neck, pulling him in for another heady kiss while Sherlock's hands slipped inside John's trousers and pants. "I might have to remember this next time we have a crime scene near a convenient alleyway."

John's cock twitched in Sherlock's hand even as he gasped, "Don't."

"Not unless you ask me?" Sherlock breathed, leaning down to slide John's pants and trousers from his legs. "I can play that game."

"Sherlock!" John wanted to sound reproachful, but his voice was strained with need instead. He could already imagine the situations Sherlock could contrive to make a quick shag at a crime scene seem appealing. Oh hell, who was John kidding? A sizable part of him already thought it was appealing...they were probably going to get arrested for public indecency. "Fuck!" John's head lolled on his shoulder's as Sherlock's cool fingers caressed his testicles, tugging lightly.

"That's exactly what I had planned," Sherlock grinned up at him, standing and producing a small tube of lube from his trouser pocket. Sherlock was now walking around with lube on his person. Yes, they would definitely be arrested for public indecency at some point...Good thing Sherlock's older brother was the British government.

A slicked finger breached him causing John's hips to roll up, his erection pressing against the pristine fabric of Sherlock's taught shirt. "Hmm, you are open," Sherlock murmured, pressing a second finger in alongside the first.

"God, Sherlock," John breathed, clutching his husbands shoulders. Long fingers were already skimming along his prostate. Jesus this was going to be hard and frantic. "Fuck me!" John growled, his nails scrapping along Sherlock's back, pulling him closer.

Sherlock inserted a third finger, twisting and stretching John's insides a moment longer before he pulled away and attended to his own clothing. John heard the whir of a zip being undone, then the snap of the cap on the lube bottle. He drew his hand down along Sherlock's front, moving for his bottoms. His husband, however, had different ideas. Sherlock pressed John back into the wall with his body, holding him there. "Don't move," Sherlock rumbled as he lifted one of John's legs up high and held it there.

John opened his mouth to protest when something hotter, harder, and thicker than fingers nudged at his entrance. "Sherlock!" John cried out in surprise and pleasure as his husband thrust up into him, still fully dressed. John held desperately to Sherlock's shoulders, half tempted to bring both legs around Sherlock's hips, and half terrified that they were about to go tumbling down the stairs. God Sherlock knew how to push his buttons. Fucking him on the stairs, fully dressed while John didn't have a stitch on. John knew he didn't need to voice his excitement in words, it would be written all over his body for Sherlock to deduce. It was dangerous to give Sherlock Holmes that kind of information, but John couldn't seem to stop himself from playing with fire.

Sherlock moaned softly as he thrust into John, pressing panting, bruising kisses against his husband's mouth. "I love you," he whispered tightly.

"I love—you too," John gasped, reaching down to take himself in hand. Sherlock surged forward then, latching onto John's shoulder and biting down as release ripped threw him. John threw his head back, heedless of its contact with the wall as he howled his completion.
"Fuck," John whispered, as they slid into a heap on the steps. "Mrs. Hudson must have heard that."

Sherlock chuckled languidly, his fingers sweeping over the trembling skin of John's thighs. "Mrs. Hudson," he declared, "has heard worse."

The fit of inappropriate giggles that followed left them both lightheaded.

"We should shower and eat dinner," John observed, pressing an open mouthed kiss into Sherlock's neck.

"If you insist," Sherlock muttered, heaving them both to their feet once more.

"I do," John confirmed, looking serious. "You said you'd eat, Sherlock."

Sherlock smiled affectionately at John's fussing. "I will," he assured his husband, feeling tingly and generous in the afterglow.

"You'd better," John replied, pressing another warm, chaste kiss to his husband's lips. "God, your shirt," John murmured as they broke apart, looking down at the evidence of their lovemaking.

Sherlock glanced down and chuckled. "It's nothing the cleaning service can't handle."

John flushed and gave Sherlock a gentle nudge in the direction of the shower. "You just want the whole world to know what we're up to, don't you?"

Sherlock shot him a wolfish grin as his fingers traced the outline of the love bite on John's neck. "I am possessive," Sherlock affirmed. "Are you going to let the cat out of your old bedroom?" he added, glancing behind them as they made their way down the stairs.

John blushed again. "After we're dressed, yeah? Besides, this is a new environment for her. I think we're supposed to let her get used to one room at a time before springing the entirety of the flat on her.

Sherlock rolled his eyes and let out an exasperated sigh. "Rules!" he explained, and John watched him pad into the bathroom with a smile. Lord knows Sherlock Holmes lived to break the rules. And John, for the most part, lived to indulge him and keep him safe.

Sherlock's head poked back around the bathroom door, the edge of his shoulder looking suspiciously bare. Sherlock arched his eyebrow. "Are you coming?"

John grinned. "My refractory period isn't that short."

Sherlock returned his husband's grin and sent him a salacious wink before disappearing back into the bathroom.

John could hear the water running as he approached the bathroom door, and had to laugh at the wonderful chaos that had become his life since the day he'd stepped into 221B. It might be wild, it was certainly crazy, and it was exactly where he wanted to be.

Chapter End Notes

OMG I can't believe it's over. Well, not really over, but I'll get to that in a minute. I
sincerely hope you enjoyed the story and that this extra bit of fluff helps smooth frayed nerves that may have resulted from the numerous cliff hangers. (FYI Geoff was encouraging me to put in more cliffhangers. And he was the seed of inspiration for some of the more shocking ones.)

So, yes, I'll spare you the gushing sentiment, I think I covered that in the beginning authors note. I'll leave it at one more thank you. Thank you for reading and for your support. It means a lot to me.

Now, onto future plans!

I will be taking a brief hiatus. Don't get too concerned because, as I wrote the entirety of "The Moment That I Knew" while I was supposed to be on vacation, it is readily apparent that I am unable to tear myself away from my computer for long. All this hiatus really means is that I will not make an ironclad commitment to update every single week.

There are two projects I will be working on during this hiatus and, depending on my inspiration/temperament you may end up with updates more than once a week. But, like I said, I make no promises. I might need a breather of a week or two before I post anything new.

Project One: I have left my reunion story "Always" languishing for months now. My apologies. Between the definitive deadlines I had for this story and my fluctuating good/bad days in terms of temperament (I could turn panicking over bad news into an Olympic event, I swear to God) I have not been able to complete it as of yet. That will change. Indeed that is my first commitment now that this story is completed: finish 'Always.'

Project Two: This has been such a lovely story to write that I'm not ready to let go of it quite yet. I will be doing a series of one shots to follow up on areas of the story I'd like to see more of. This will largely be Mystrade, with only one other Johnlock addition planned. However, I am open to suggestions. What do you want to see? Mycroft and Greg's first time together? Their first fight? Discussions of long term commitment? Any and all suggestions are welcomed. I do have some of these one shots planed out, so I can't make specific promises that all suggestions will appear, but they are most welcome nonetheless. Who knows, if you make a suggestion I like, but not for this universe, you might inspire a new story.

Side note: I'm sorry my authors notes are so lengthy. I'm a stickler for detail (if only that translated to grammatical and editing detail *sigh*) and I wanted to make sure I covered everything and expressed my thanks appropriately.

It is my, tentative, plan for this hiatus to last into February (although it may take a bit longer depending on how fast I write). Once the two projects above are complete, at a semi leisurely pace, I will begin work on my next pig project. It is another Johnlock, which I will title: "Something More." It's inspired by one of my all time favorite stories which, I believe, most people are at least somewhat familiar with. Still, familiar, or not, I hope you enjoy my Johnlock rendition of it. I will end this authors note with the summery that will appear beneath the title once I begin publishing 'Something More.' (Feel free to take a guess at which story you think Something More might be inspired by, if you choose to review).

Something More
Rating: Mature/Explicit

Summary:

John Watson knows the world to be a good place to live in, with decent people in it. Sherlock Holmes is a brooding, temperamental beast of a man, who sees the world for the cold, cruel place that it is. Desperate to help his alcoholic sister, John is willing to do anything, even begin a tumultuous partnership with Sherlock. Both find what neither expected while investigating the final problem of the human heart.

Works inspired by this one: [Cover Art] for Dark3Star's "This Doesn't Feel Like Falling" by Hamstermoon

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!