Thirst

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by bittergreens

Summary

When John realizes he has feelings for Sherlock and decides he must keep those feelings secret at all costs, the resulting tension might bring Baker Street to the ground.

Notes

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“The fundamental condition for desire is an absence or lack, but desire is never only an absence.” –Leo Bersani
Chapter One

It started in the aftermath of the Moriarty incident.

That’s what John was calling it in his head—it sounded better than “the incident with the bomb,” or even “the swimming pool incident,” which conjured up memories of the overpowering smell of chlorine, the blue glow of the lights underwater, the look of horror on Sherlock’s face; and produced a resulting sick feeling in his stomach.

If he was honest with himself, of course, he had to admit that it had started long before that, but it was Moriarty who had brought it to his attention. Moriarty, slithering around him in the locker room, fingers on John’s neck, whispering in his ear, “I know how you feel about him. He’ll never reciprocate you know. He doesn’t have the same… needs.” His hands ghosting down John’s sides as he tugged him into the vest, a mockery of intimacy, fingers skimming John’s hips, making him jerk. “Easy there, solider boy. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just trying to strap a bomb to your chest. Jesus. Trust issues is right.”

He was chewing gum. Spearmint. He was chewing loudly, like a parody of a teenage girl, his jaw splayed open to reveal the backs of his molars while he looked at John. His eyes were all pupil. “He’s like me. We don’t want what you little people want. We aren’t at the mercy of those coarse bodily urges.”

Moriarty flipped the gum to the end of his tongue, then moved his tongue against his cheek in an unmistakably lewd gesture. “So bestial. It doesn’t hold our interest. Mind over matter.”

John turned his head. The scent of the gum was choking him.

“What’s the matter, Johnny boy? Remind you of something?”

Moriarty grinned as his hand closed on the zipper of the vest and began dragging it slowly shut. “Sherlock should count himself lucky I don’t go in for anything more sordid than bombs… I could do all sorts of things to you, here in the shadows. It could be our little secret. Sherlock would be none the wiser.” He put his mouth to John’s ear again. John could smell expensive cologne underneath the overpowering scent of the gum. “I’m sure you’ve done all sorts of nasty things in boys’ locker rooms, haven’t you, Dr. Watson?”

He finished zipping and stepped back. “After all, there must be some reason why he keeps you around. What is it about you he finds so appealing?” His fingers moved to touch John’s cheek. The touch was strange. It was how John imagined someone would touch a corpse, inquisitive, disturbed. “I suppose there is something potentially delicious about you. All that soft, stupid flesh…. makes me wonder how ordinary people taste.” He scraped his thumbnail over John’s bottom lip. “Maybe I should cut you open and find out. I’d share with Sherlock, of course. You’d like that wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t you, Johnny boy?”

John didn’t sleep well in the weeks after. He was ashamed by how much it had affected him. He was a solider after all; the threat of death was nothing new. But there was something about Moriarty—he had gotten under John’s skin and he’d left a cold horror that John couldn’t seem to shake. He would wake from nightmares with the feeling of those creeping reptile hands still on his skin.

Worse than that though, worse than the memory of his lifeless hands, the blank inhuman quality in his gaze was the fact that Moriarty was right. He was right about John. He wanted Sherlock. He wanted Sherlock with an intensity that far surpassed any of his attractions in the past. How he had
remained ignorant of that fact up until now was impossible for him to understand. How had it taken the observations of a psychopath for John to notice what he himself had missed?

Looking back, it was impossible to say when the shift happened, impossible to pinpoint the exact moment when his affection for Sherlock transformed into something more significant, something… decidedly sexual.

It didn’t help to compare his relationship with Sherlock to previous relationships because everything about the way John interacted with Sherlock was absolutely unlike any relationship he’d ever had. It felt like it had happened gradually but if John really thought about it, it was obvious that that wasn’t the case.

It was as if Sherlock gave off a magnetic pull that tugged John closer ever so slightly, day by day, until John found himself instinctively doing things he never would have considered doing in his life pre-Sherlock—waking up in the middle of the night to chase murder suspects over London rooftops, digging through rubbish bins beside Sherlock to find discarded evidence, calmly picking burned fingers out of the toaster oven.

Of course, Sherlock had adapted to him too, in little ways, his own habits shifting to better incorporate John, things John never saw him do for other human beings—naturally slowing his pace when they walked together to accommodate John’s shorter gait, pausing to hold the door for him, getting out two mugs of tea whenever he wanted some.

As the boundaries between them had come down, the edges of their lives locking together as neatly as two pieces of a puzzle, the physical space between them had begun to evaporate. Their unspoken communication was almost seamless. John could anticipate when Sherlock would ask him for things, reading the question in Sherlock’s eyes when he was uncertain, reaching out to offer Sherlock his phone before Sherlock had even opened his mouth; every day drifting closer and closer to Sherlock, like a planet caught in his orbit.

It was only now that he realized how he felt, that he began to notice how close he had drifted. This realization would have been jarring enough on its own but because the knowledge had come to him from Moriarty, something about John’s desire felt perverse. Somehow, his arousal was all tangled up in the whole nightmarish experience.

Sherlock had been oddly quiet in the days afterward. Undoubtedly, the encounter had unnerved them both, but in his own way he seemed almost as affected as John. Something had shifted imperceptibly between them. They had new information about each other, about the way they related to each other, which was somehow even bigger than the near-death experience.

They had both shown their hand in terms of the way they felt about each other. It had been clear almost from the day they met that they were willing to risk their lives for one another, but when John grabbed Moriarty and told Sherlock to run, there was no mistaking the sacrifice he was prepared to make.

As much as John had wanted to believe that Sherlock was committed to him, in his day-to-day interactions with Sherlock, he’d had his doubts. However, the look on Sherlock’s face when he saw John by the pool, the sheer horror when he realized what had happened—there was no mistaking that look. John knew in that moment, Sherlock would do anything to save his life.

Add to that John’s sudden blazing awareness of his attraction to Sherlock, and he found himself suddenly ill equipped to know how to deal with any of it. John honestly didn’t know how he had remained so oblivious before. He’d never realized just how little physical space existed between them. Now, he experienced little jolts of desire like shocks of electricity, every time he and Sherlock
made physical contact; which as it turned out, was all the time.

In the days immediately following the Moriarty incident, John began to notice just how often it happened. It was as if John’s sensory awareness had been turned up to maximum capacity. No detail escaped him: Sherlock’s hand brushing his as they walked, his hips angled close to John when he stood behind him, Sherlock’s long torso bending over him on the couch as he reached for his laptop. They had the sort of physical intimacy John had only ever experienced in his longest relationships, which was surprising not only due to the fact that he and Sherlock were not sleeping together and had only known each for just under a year, but also that this was Sherlock, whose aversion to other human beings was deep and unmoving. Apparently John was the exception.

He thought at first it was maybe something he could ignore. John had experienced unrequited desire in the past and he’d always come out on the other side relatively unscathed. However, with Sherlock it was different. For one thing, he’d never been living with the object of his affections. And for another, Sherlock was Sherlock, who never followed any of the conventional rules about anything. John was rapidly realizing that Sherlock had absolutely no concept of personal space, as was evidenced by almost every interaction they shared. It was impossible to ignore the flare of heat in his stomach whenever Sherlock got close to him.

It became clear to him almost immediately after their encounter with Moriarty just how serious John’s problem was.

He had woken from a nightmare that vanished as soon as he opened his eyes—the colors receding into the darkness as he fought to get his pounding heart back under control. It had been something to do with Moriarty; he couldn’t remember the details, except that he had been taunting John about Sherlock. The things he’d been saying to John—they had made his cheeks flame with embarrassment, but they had also made warmth pool in his belly, and to his horror, upon waking, John discovered he was half-hard under the covers.

He rolled over onto his side, determined to ignore the beginnings of his erection. He would not fantasize about Sherlock; that would only make things worse. He would stop this thing in its tracks before it got out of hand. He fell back asleep with his fists clenched at his sides.

He dreamed of the pool again, but this time, Moriarty was nowhere in sight. Sherlock ripped the vest from his shoulders, but after tossing it aside, he pulled John into his arms and buried his face in John’s neck.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry.”

Horribly out of character, John realized later upon reflection. Sherlock had never apologized for anything in his life as far as John knew. But in the dream, the emotion in his voice was genuine. It tore at something in the center of John’s chest.

“I’m so, so sorry.”

His arms around John’s waist were tight—he was practically crushing John against his chest. John had to put his hands between them and pull back slightly from Sherlock’s grip so he could breathe.

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Everything’s alright.”

He felt Sherlock’s breath against his neck as he exhaled in relief, but he didn’t move back.

It felt strange, seeing Sherlock so vulnerable, but it made John instinctively want to protect him. He brought his arms up around Sherlock’s shoulders and squeezed.
“Everything’s all right now.”

He could feel Sherlock trembling and something softened imperceptibly within him at the realization that Sherlock had been terrified that John would be hurt. He moved his hands up into Sherlock’s hair and began stroking very lightly, the same way his mother used to do for him when he was little and he couldn’t calm down.

Sherlock was hunched over in his arms, and John could feel the unsteady ricochet of his panicked breathing against his neck. He bent his mouth to Sherlock’s head and made soothing noises, while continuing to stroke his hair.

“Shh, it’s alright.”

Gradually, he felt Sherlock’s breathing slow, although he was still shaking.

Sherlock pulled back and then pressed his forehead to John’s. “Thank god you’re alright. For a moment there…” Sherlock’s blue eyes burned into his with the intensity of his concern.

At the look in Sherlock’s eyes, John felt something in him give way.

Taking Sherlock’s chin gently in his hand, he pulled Sherlock’s mouth to his own.

He kept his eyes open as their lips met, registering the look of shock on Sherlock’s face that quickly transformed into desire. He shut his eyes when he saw Sherlock’s close, and heard a low sound in his throat that only could have been a moan.

He threaded his fingers into Sherlock’s hair as the kiss deepened, Sherlock opening his mouth beneath John’s. John accepted the unspoken invitation, running his tongue over Sherlock’s bottom lip, eliciting another louder moan from deep within Sherlock’s throat.

After several moments, John broke away gasping, attempting to regain a semblance of control. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me, I—”

Sherlock didn’t let him finish. He kissed John hungrily, open-mouthed, his teeth scraping John’s bottom lip, his hands fisting in the material of John’s shirt to pull John closer against him.

“Oh God…” John felt his knees go weak and he knew then that he couldn’t remain standing.

Keeping his mouth on Sherlock’s, he guided them both to their knees on the hard tile. Sherlock arched against him and it was John’s turn to moan as he felt the press of Sherlock’s erection against his hip.

He pulled his hands from Sherlock’s hair to push Sherlock’s blazer from his shoulders. There was altogether too much clothing between them for John’s liking. He ran his hands over the planes of Sherlock’s chest, and was rewarded with a gasp as his fingers brushed Sherlock’s nipples. Sherlock fell back on his heels, pulling John with him.

“I’m sorry. I can’t keep upright if you’re going to do things like that.” He was breathless. John watched the rapid rise and fall of his chest through the gap in his shirt.

John grinned at him and settled himself between Sherlock’s knees. “Oh no, this is much, much better.”

His mouth found Sherlock’s again as he lowered himself down over Sherlock’s torso. He could feel the heat coming off him and for a moment he was overwhelmed by how many things he wanted to
do to him; how many places he wanted to touch, and lick and suck.

Sherlock had his weight back on his elbows, and when John’s tongue began to stroke Sherlock’s, Sherlock instinctively rolled his hips against John’s. John felt a shudder course through him at the contact.

“Shit.” He broke away from Sherlock’s mouth, gasping. “Could you do that again?”

Equally breathless, Sherlock nodded and complied, this time thrusting up against John with more force so that his erection rubbed against John’s, which was straining against the fabric of his trousers.

“Sweet Jesus.” John arched his back at the sensation and Sherlock did it again, this time rising up to lick John’s neck as he did so.

John let out a strangled cry and ground down against Sherlock’s hips. “Fuck, Sherlock…”

They began moving against each other in something of a steady rhythm, both of them clearly too close to the edge for either of them to exert much control. John’s arms were trembling on either side of Sherlock as he struggled to support his own weight. Sherlock’s head was thrown back, lips parted, temples slick with sweat, his eyes dark as he gazed up at John.

“Wait…” It took all of John’s self control to still his hips. “I want…” John panted. “I want to touch you, before we come and I can’t…”

Sherlock nodded and dropped his hips, settling further back on his elbows. Just the sight of him like that, offering himself to John, was almost more than he could take.

With trembling fingers, John undid the buttons on Sherlock’s trousers and pushed the material down his hips. He groaned when he saw Sherlock’s straining cock; it was flushed deep red, the tip of it already shining with pre-come.

Reaching between them, John took it in his hand and began to stroke. He heard the sharp hiss of his breath as his fingers made contact and watched Sherlock’s eyes flutter shut as his hand started to move.

“Oh God, Sherlock…”

His hips began to move in time with the rhythm of his fist on Sherlock’s cock, grinding down against Sherlock’s thigh. He hoped Sherlock didn’t mind because at this point, he could not stop.

It was only a matter of seconds before Sherlock seized up against him, hips straining forward into John’s hand as he came with a shout, John stroking until he’d worked every ounce of liquid from Sherlock’s cock.

John followed not long after, coming in a hot burst in his own trousers against Sherlock’s leg. He supposed he should have been mildly ashamed at that but all he felt was sleepy contentment as he lowered his wet mouth to Sherlock’s and kissed him searchingly, his body sinking down to settle against Sherlock.

Sherlock kissed him back, his hands drifting down to John’s arse, tugging John tighter against him; the kisses were long and slow and deep. Despite the fact that they were lying on the cold hard tiled floor beside a swimming pool, John felt that he could have lain there kissing Sherlock for the rest of eternity.

He woke in the midst of that thought and felt the contented feeling drain out of him as he became
aware of his own dark bedroom and the raging erection between his legs. He was shocked by the intensity of the sorrow he felt, realizing that he was alone, in his own room; that Sherlock had not just nearly wept out of relief for his wellbeing and then come in his hand. The feeling was more than disappointment—it filled John like an ache.

He shifted uncomfortably, all too aware that this was the kind of erection it was impossible to ignore. He let his hand drift down his belly and slip beneath the waistband of his shorts. It was fine, he reasoned, as long as he kept his thoughts on anything but his dark-haired flat mate.

He began to stroke himself, slowly at first, fighting to keep his mind carefully blank.

Don’t think about Sherlock. Don’t think about Sherlock.

He shut his eyes and tried to think of the things that he usually did when he got off, and for a little while, it worked, but then, unbidden, into his mind came the memory of Sherlock’s mouth on his neck, the hot plume of his breath as he exhaled, and John moaned aloud at the thought.

No. He forced his eyes open and pushed the thought aside. Don’t think about it. It wasn’t real. His breath began to come faster as he established a rhythm, and he pushed the sheets off his legs so he could see the movement of his own fist as he stroked.

But as soon as he began to lose himself in the sensation, he imagined the feel of Sherlock’s cock in his hand, imagined that it was Sherlock’s cock he was stroking instead of his own, and the corresponding heat in his loins was enough to make him growl in response. It was too good—for a moment he let himself get lost in the fantasy. He imagined all the parts of Sherlock he hadn’t been able to taste in the dream—he pictured himself licking the curve of Sherlock’s ear, pulling his head back by the grip in his hair—those soft, dark curls—and burying his mouth in the curve of Sherlock’s neck, sucking marks into the sensitive flesh, marks that would be visible the next day, dark purple on the pale skin of Sherlock’s throat.

John rolled over onto his stomach, and moaned into the crook of his arm. He hadn’t been so turned on by a fantasy since he could remember. He began thrusting into his own fist, imagining it was Sherlock’s body beneath his own that he was pushing into, and he sped up his movements, imaging the sounds Sherlock would make beneath him, the way his body would arch back to meet John’s.

He moaned again, louder, and pushed his face into his elbow to muffle the sound. He began to fuck his own first in earnest, clenching his other hand in the tangle of bed sheets, his movements urgent, desperate, as he imagined Sherlock encouraging him to move faster, to fuck him harder, that he needed to feel John deeper inside him. It was that thought that pushed him over the edge, and he came in hot spurts into his own fist, biting the inside of his arm to keep from crying out.

It was several moments before he collapsed on his side, his stomach sticky with his own semen, his heart hammering in his ears. He rubbed his hands over his face, a feeling of horror descending to replace the hot intensity of what he had been imagining only moments before.

Whatever this was, it was clear that it was more than just a fantasy, and John didn’t know what he was going to do about it.
The next morning, John awoke to the sound of Sherlock playing his violin. That was a good sign. It meant he was thinking, and judging by the quality of the melody it wasn’t anything too dark. In fact, the music sounded sweet and light, nothing like what Sherlock usually played.

John was so curious as to the source of Sherlock’s good mood that he made it halfway down the stairs to the bathroom before he remembered his dream from the night before.

He froze with one hand on the railing, overcome at the memory. And then a panicked thought gripped him.

What if Sherlock saw him and could deduce what John had dreamed about? What if he could somehow intuit that John had gotten off thinking about him? He genuinely had no idea whether Sherlock would be able to tell. That was the unnerving thing about Sherlock’s abilities; John could never guess how he figured out the things he did. He’d never worried about it before, but then, he had never had reason to hide anything from Sherlock.

He briefly considered turning around and heading back upstairs, staying in his room until Sherlock left the flat.

Sherlock had stopped playing. “John?”

Never mind. Clearly that idea was out. If he went back upstairs now that would only make Sherlock curious. He wouldn’t leave John alone until he found out why he was acting strangely.

No, the only option was to pretend like everything was normal. After all, he couldn’t very well avoid Sherlock for the next however many weeks until this temporary madness left him. God knows he had gotten used to hiding things from Harry when they were growing up, her nosiness far surpassing any other older sisters he’d ever encountered. Then again, Harry didn’t have brilliant powers of deduction.

John took a deep breath and continued down the stairs to the bathroom.

“Morning!” he called out before closing the bathroom door.

This obviously satisfied Sherlock. His playing resumed.

When John emerged twenty minutes later, freshly showered and shaved, he felt more equipped to face Sherlock and his scrutiny. He’d tried to wash as many of the memories from the previous night as he could down the drain.

Sherlock looked John over approvingly as he entered the room.

“Good. You’re dressed. There’s tea for you there. Lestrade phoned. I told him we’d come as soon as you were up.”

John picked up the steaming mug of tea gratefully and sat at the table, feeling mildly stunned. Sherlock had found out about a case and waited until John had woken up? Not only that, he’d made him tea? John took a sip and realized that Sherlock had made it exactly as he liked it. No sugar and
the perfect amount of milk. He felt a warm feeling fill his chest that was more than just the warmth of the tea. He hid his smile behind the rim of his mug. Best not to get used to any of this—Sherlock’s good moods generally left as quickly as they came.

“So, what is it?”

Sherlock was tucking his violin back into its case. “There’s been a murder at a butcher shop in Hammersmith. Apparently something grisly. Lestrade didn’t have time to give me details.”

Ah, so that explained the merry tune. Sherlock straightened up and looked at John. He was practically beaming with excitement. He was wearing his customary dark blazer with a deep blue shirt underneath. The blue in his shirt made his eyes look brighter than usual. Or maybe it was a result of the morning light streaming in through the window.

Either way, John realized all of a sudden that he was staring and dropped his eyes. He licked his lips and took a long swallow of tea.

“Think you’ll be ready in five minutes?”

John nodded.

Sherlock rubbed his hands together. “Right then. I’ll go call a cab.”

John sipped his tea, contemplating. It hadn’t even been a week since the incident with Moriarty and he was embarrassed to admit that he felt slightly apprehensive about taking on another case. He knew that the odds of having another bomb strapped to his chest with a serial killer purring in his ear were slim to none, but he couldn’t shake the feeling of unease that hovered around him like a bad odor.

Really, he should be thanking his lucky stars that Sherlock had a case to distract him. He caught himself staring again as Sherlock shrugged his coat on, watching the lean lines of Sherlock’s body as he moved.

John stood up from the table, dragging his eyes away. At this rate, even a blind man would be able to read the longing in John’s gaze. Maybe this case was exactly what John needed too to keep his thoughts off Sherlock.

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The victim had been vivisected. The body was in the back of a butcher shop, lying in a pool of blood on the scrubbed tile floors. All around them hung the dangling carcasses of slaughtered animals.

“Do you think there’s a connection between this guy being slaughtered like this and the fact that he was a butcher?” Lestrade was hanging back a few steps, a look of disgust plain on his face. John didn’t blame him. As far as crime scenes went, this one was particularly gruesome.

“Obviously.” Sherlock didn’t look up. He was on his knees beside the body, examining the incisions in the chest. The man was still in his white butcher’s uniform; the clothing had been cut away as neatly as the flesh. “These incisions were made while he was still alive, seemingly with the intent to cause him the maximum possible pain. John, can you ascertain time of death?”

Normally, this sort of thing wouldn’t bother him. He’d seen his fair share of gruesome injuries and deaths, with Sherlock as well as in Afghanistan, but this time he found he couldn’t even look at the body. When he looked away, his eyes kept returning to the severed flanks of the hanging pigs, the white cross-sections of their exposed ribs. He felt nausea rising in him.
Sherlock looked up when he didn’t answer. “John?”

Lestrade took a step nearer to him. “You alright?”

Lestrade was chewing gum. Spearmint. As soon as John smelled it, he knew he was going to be sick. “Sorry,” he gasped and then bolted from the room.

He made it to the front of the shop and thankfully found a bin to be sick in. When his stomach was done heaving its contents, he went out the front door and sat on the stoop. He couldn’t bear the sight of the scrubbed tile walls. He put his face in his hands, shaking.

He wouldn’t have heard Sherlock approach but the tiny bell on the shop door gave him away. Sherlock didn’t sit; he walked down several steps and hovered nervously at John’s side. John didn’t look up but he could feel the concern emanating from Sherlock like a faint pulse.

“Are you alright?”

John let out a long breath and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The nausea was subsiding but his forehead was still prickling with cold sweat.

“Yeah. Sorry. I don’t know what happened to me back there. It’s… It wasn’t even—” The fingers of his left hand clenched compulsively. He let out another shaky breath.

Sherlock waited silently for him to continue.

“It was Lestrade’s gum.” He covered his eyes with his hands, embarrassed now. “It’s the same gum Moriarty was chewing that day. It was—” His voice tensed.

“It’s alright.” Sherlock’s abrupt response had an undertone of steel. His tone softened. “I mean it’s fine. You don’t have to explain.”

John nodded, grateful. Now that he no longer felt sick he was left with an overwhelming feeling of shame. He spoke through his fingers, his voice miserable. “I don’t think I can go back in there.”

“Do you want…?” Sherlock gestured awkwardly then dropped his hand. “That is, do you mind if I go back in?”

John shook his head. “No, go ahead. I think I’ll just… get a cab home, if that’s alright with you.”

“Of course.” Sherlock went up two steps and then stopped to look back at John. “See you later then?”

John lowered his hands and nodded, attempted to make his voice sound normal. “Yeah. Yeah, I’ll see you later.”

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John spent the rest of the day trying to forget what he’d seen that morning in the butcher shop. More than anything now he felt embarrassed that he’d been so affected but every time he considered going back he was filled with horror at the prospect. He felt guilty for abandoning Sherlock so completely on a new case, but it was clearly the right decision to stay away, at least for the time being. Besides, Sherlock was probably so immersed in figuring out the details he wouldn’t even notice John’s absence.

His nightmares that night were bad.
He often didn’t remember them when he woke, left only with a feeling of intense panic, but this one stayed with him. He was strapped to a butcher block, exactly like the one they’d seen today in the shop. Moriarty was standing over him with a long knife in his hand, whistling tunelessly. When John began to struggle Moriarty grinned at him.

“Oh no, don’t get up. I’m going to keep you awake for this. That’ll make it so much more exciting. I was thinking I’d start with your liver and make a nice pâté. Then take a few bones from your thigh, extract the marrow for a stew, ooh, which I could put your kidneys in! Yum, yum.”

John saw his tongue dart out and lick his lips. “I’ll even let you taste it, if you’re still alive at that point.” He bent down over John’s mouth, exhaling messily. John smelled spearmint and gagged. “Luckily, I know some tricks to make you laaast.”

He drawled the last word, filling it with sexual innuendo, and John felt the tip of the knife on his bare thigh. He twitched violently and Moriarty laughed.

“We’re going to have such a good time together. You wait and see. Maybe we can play a little game before we begin. Let’s pretend the knife is Sherlock. We can enact all of your darkest fantasies. Would you like that? Just close your eyes and imagine it’s him.”

John felt the knife creep up the inside of his leg. Moriarty’s breath was unsteady in his ear. The pressure from the blade was so light it was almost ticklish. To John’s horror, he felt himself responding to its touch.

“Like that, Johnny boy? Feels good, doesn’t it? Would you like to know how it feels inside you? I’ll bet you do. Open up now, just a little bit more, for Daddy… That’s it. Good.”

The touch of the knife vanished and he felt a hand slip between his legs, as Moriarty leaned down again. “I’m going to slice you from spinal cord to belly button, pull you inside out to show Sherlock. I know he’s dying to see it for himself. All those lovely colors… Let’s get started, shall we?”

John jerked his hands in the restraints, his body tensing. “No. NO!”

And then he was thrashing awake, gasping, clawing at the sheets tangled around his chest. He sat up, dragged his shaking hands over his face, and then nearly yelled in panic when he saw the figure sitting at the end of his bed.

It took only a split second for him to recognize Sherlock, but the adrenaline that surged through him at the sight was enough to make him start violently.

“Jesus Christ, Sherlock! What are you doing?”

Sherlock was sitting at the foot of John’s bed, his posture impeccable, yet relaxed. As if it was perfectly natural to be sitting at the end of John’s bed in the middle of the night.

“I heard you screaming. Naturally, I came in to make sure you weren’t being murdered in your bed.”

John could hear he was offended from the tone of his voice—just mildly offended; his voice was only slightly huffy. John’s heart was still pounding. He put his face in his hands. He felt sick.

“Was it…?” Sherlock stopped himself then tried again. “You were having a nightmare.”

John nodded into his hands. He supposed he should be touched by Sherlock’s concern, but at the moment he didn’t feel equipped to navigate the potential emotional landmine that was touchy Sherlock. He couldn’t shake the feeling of the dream—he could still see the hanging fluorescent
lights above him, could still feel Moriarty’s moist breath in his ear. He felt…dirty, ashamed.

He swallowed and lowered his hands with an effort. “It was just… a nightmare. I’m fine now.”

Sherlock did not seem convinced. “You were screaming.”

John felt annoyed. “Yeah, I often do that during nightmares.”

“No, you don’t. You have nightmares frequently and I’ve never heard you scream.”

John was silent at that. There was too much behind that statement that he needed to think about. Sherlock was aware that he had nightmares and had paid enough attention to note John’s reaction to different ones. Bloody hell.

“Sometimes you fall out of bed and you often knock things over, but you’ve never screamed. This time was different.”

John exhaled loudly. There was no point denying it. “It was about Moriarty. He was…” He shut his eyes. He’d never talked to Sherlock about what happened that night, what John had experienced in the time between leaving the flat and showing up beside the pool when Sherlock arrived. “We were in that butcher shop—the one from today. I was on the butcher block.”

“What did he do to you?” Sherlock’s tone was carefully blank. His expression was unreadable, his face lost in moonlight.

“There’s no point repeating it. Unpleasant things.” John ran a hand through his hair and was embarrassed to note that he was shaking, his body wracked with fine tremors. He didn’t want Sherlock to see him like this. He was ashamed by how much it was affecting him, by how much five minutes with a madman had made him come undone. John had always assumed he was made of stronger stuff. “I’m fine now. You don’t have to…” He stopped himself before he said ‘worry.’ Somehow, that didn’t seem like the right thing to say to Sherlock.

Sherlock didn’t say anything. He stayed right where he was, his body angled toward John.

John clenched his fists under the sheets. “I don’t think I can help you with this case.”

“The butcher? I solved it. Some anti-animal rights nut case. He wanted to make it look as if the animal rights people had done it but there were signs everywhere pointing to him. He had a case history. Obvious, really. Lestrade’s already got him in custody. I just came from the station.”

John let out a breath, this time in astonishment. “Amazing.” He didn’t even have to see Sherlock figure it out to be impressed. This time it had taken him less than twelve hours. It was incredible really.

“So shall I sleep in here tonight?”

John literally did a double take. He stared at Sherlock. “What?”

“Shall I sleep with you tonight, in here? The nightmares aren’t as bad when you’re sleeping beside someone.”

“How do you—?”

“Oh, John, please. I haven’t been your flat mate for this many months and not noticed the pattern. Every time you’ve had a woman stay the night you’ve slept peacefully. Therefore, I’m simply
offering—”

“No.” Even with his face hidden in shadow, John could clearly make out the affronted expression on Sherlock’s face. John backpedaled quickly. “Thank you for offering, I just… I prefer to sleep alone.”

“No, you don’t! I’ve just explained—”

“Sherlock! Please. Tonight I’d really like to be alone.”

“Fine.” He rose from the bed with a flounce. “But don’t complain to me in the morning about your bad night’s sleep.”

“Sherlock—”

But he’d already exited the bedroom, closing the door behind him with a bang.

John put his face in his hands. What was happening to the world? Sherlock offering to sleep beside him to keep his sleep free from nightmares? Maybe he was experiencing some rare brand of guilt over the fact that technically it was his fault that John had been nearly blown up by Moriarty. Or maybe in the world of Sherlock’s brain it was a perfectly normal thing to offer to do. John couldn’t figure it out.

At least his conversation with Sherlock had caused him to forget about his disturbed feelings of arousal upon waking. His arousal of course being the primary reason why he had refused to let Sherlock sleep in his bed. God only knows what kind of things he might moan out in his sleep, and with Sherlock being in such close proximity… John shivered at the thought. Even just imagining Sherlock an arm’s length away from him in the darkness was enough to make heat pool in his abdomen.

John lay back down, dragging the covers up over his shoulders, forcing himself to think cold, clear thoughts. He was determined not to think about the curve of Sherlock’s long body tucking in behind his own, the way his hipbones might feel under John’s hands. He would not consider how Sherlock’s mouth would taste, or whether John would be able to feel the slender muscles in his back tensing as John moved against him. Or how Sherlock’s hair would smell, how it would feel under his mouth… whether he was quiet when he came, or whether he made a lot of noise. John shivered again and was reaching down to take himself in hand when he had a sobering thought.

If Sherlock could hear when he had nightmares and when he slept peacefully, did that mean he could hear John wanking too? John’s hand froze at his hip. Best not to take the chance.

John sighed and shut his eyes. It was better this way anyway. He had promised himself this morning that he would not think about Sherlock while wanking again. Might as well take a break from wanking in general until he could get his thoughts back under control.

Or maybe he’d just do it when he knew Sherlock was out of the flat. Otherwise it was going to be a long couple of weeks.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter coming very soon! Please leave a comment if you feel so inclined. Comments are magical things :)
The next morning Sherlock still seemed miffed by John’s refusal of his offer the night before. He didn’t look up from his microscope when John entered the kitchen and his “Good Morning” to John was several degrees colder than usual. John searched the perimeter of the room hopefully for a mug of tea but no such luck. He sighed. He’d known the appearance of fresh, perfectly prepared mugs of tea would be fleeting but it was still disappointing to face reality.

They spent the rest of the morning ignoring one another, or at least, John had the impression Sherlock was ignoring him. John tried to take advantage of the relative peace and quiet to update his blog, but Sherlock’s moody silences were somehow almost as loud as his tantrums and he found he couldn’t concentrate.

So John was relieved when Sherlock’s phone buzzed just before noon.

“There’s been another one,” he said, rising from his chair and hurrying to get his coat. He was so distracted by his own excitement that it took him a moment to realize John hadn’t moved from the table.

He looked over at John as he was pulling on his scarf, his expression neutral. “Coming?”

“I think I need a break from cases honestly. At least for a few days.”

Sherlock’s expression didn’t change, but John could have sworn he saw a flash of something in his eyes that looked like disappointment. He nodded and then, without a word, swept out of the flat.

John turned his attention back to his computer and tried to tell himself he wasn’t just staying away from Sherlock because he couldn’t deal with his feelings. Updating the blog was important. They had followers now who wanted to know the details of what happened. He was also hopeful that writing about the encounter with Moriarty would help purge the experience from his mind. With Sherlock gone his account of the events went along fairly quickly. However, when he got to the part detailing his own involvement, John hesitated, his fingers frozen on the keys.

What could he say? “Then, I came to in a pool locker room with Moriarty’s hands all over me, informing me of my repressed desire for Sherlock while he made salacious implications that have given over to constant, obsessive sexual fantasies. To shag, or not to shag? Please comment below.”

He couldn’t even bring himself to type that out for fear that if he did Sherlock would somehow be able to read the deleted material via the fingerprints on his keyboard. The blinking cursor flashed at him, as if mocking his indecision.

It had never been a problem for him, deciding which details to include about a case. He’d never had to worry about it before because he had had no reason to censor himself. In the past, he’d simply described everything that had happened. He never thought much about what he wrote, he just wrote it. But all of a sudden it seemed unclear what was relevant to the case and what was simply too personal to disclose.

In the end, he decided to lie. He recounted truthfully that he’d been ushered by gunpoint into a taxi outside Baker Street but then he wrote that he must have been knocked out because the next thing he knew he awoke in the locker room of the sports club with a bomb strapped to his chest. There was
no reason anyone needed to know about his private interaction with Moriarty.

He felt no better after posting it. The sense of catharsis he had hoped for did not follow. If anything, the fact that he had lied about the encounter made him feel more ashamed, as if he himself were somehow complicit in the interaction and had a reason to feel guilty. He moped around the flat the rest of the afternoon and briefly considered texting Sherlock to see if he could meet him at the station but before he could make up his mind whether that was a good idea, he heard a door slam downstairs.

John braced himself. Front door slams of that magnitude usually meant angry Sherlock.

Sure enough, Sherlock’s entry into the living room was like a small hurricane. He planted himself in the middle of the room and stared at John with fire in his eyes. It never ceased to amaze him that Sherlock’s coat seemed to have a life energy of its own; it somehow had the ability to continue swirling around Sherlock long after he’d stopped moving, even when he was indoors.

“How did it go?”

His question was not so much because he believed he could distract Sherlock from whatever accusation he was about to make, but more to delude himself into believing that maybe Sherlock was actually mad about a case, and not at him.

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“Honestly, John, I never expected much from this blog of yours but this is a new low.”

“What?” For a panicked half-second, he wondered if he had somehow accidentally posted the line about his sexual fantasies, but then he remembered he hadn’t even written it. “What about my blog?”

“Once again, you’ve spent far too much time detailing your own mundane emotional reactions to things rather than describing the facts, and in this instance, your sentimentality borders on the obscene.” Sherlock’s tone was vicious.

John bristled. “The whole point of this blog is to give people a human account of what happened. People aren’t just interested in dry facts, Sherlock. They want to know how it feels to be in situations like that. In case you hadn’t noticed, the rest of us are human beings and we happen to have emotions.”

Sherlock ignored the jab. “I thought the point of the blog was to help us attract new clients. Who’s going to come to a consulting detective that you refer to as a lost child?”

“When did I—?” But John knew the answer to his own question before he’d even finished asking it. He’d just written the entry a few hours ago after all, and he knew exactly which part Sherlock was talking about.

“I could see the look in Sherlock’s eyes,” Sherlock began reciting, his voice dripping with disdain. “A flash of, not anger, but hurt. For a second, he looked like a little, lost child. You make me sound like an idiot, John!”

John was taken aback. He had never imagined Sherlock would take offense at John’s description of him. After all, he’d referred to Sherlock as being like a child in his blog before. Was Sherlock covering up the fact that he had taken offense at a different part of the description? Was it the fact that John had seen the doubt in his eyes, the brief flash of betrayal? Or was it that he had confessed his own doubts about Sherlock caring whether John was blown to bits?

John’s mind was racing. He had a strong suspicion that this was about something else he had written but he had no way of knowing what. Could it have been his admission that for one moment he had
wondered whether Sally Donovan was right? His own words came back to him like a slap in the face. *Maybe he is a freak.*

“In future, try and keep the overblown emotional details out of it. I don’t want to waste my time fending off readers of the sensationalized novel.” Sherlock turned angrily and headed for the door, but he stopped before going through it. “Oh, and don’t misinterpret that as evidence that you have any talent whatsoever as a writer. On the contrary, I would advise you very strongly against quitting your day job.”

“What happened with the case?” He called after Sherlock’s retreating back.

“I solved it!” He yelled, slamming his bedroom door behind him.

Sherlock had solved the afternoon’s case in less than five hours. It looked like another longed-for distraction had proved to be a dead end.

John fell onto the couch with his head in his hands. He had a bad feeling that there were going to be a lot more slammed doors in his future.

***

The next few days were something of a living nightmare.

No new cases surfaced and as a result, Sherlock apparently had no reason to leave the flat. Sherlock’s anger over John’s recent blog post did not diminish by the following day. If anything, he seemed more annoyed. John couldn’t be sure if Sherlock was still offended that John had refused his offer to sleep beside him, or whether he was disappointed that John hadn’t accompanied him on the last two cases, or whether he was simply irritated because they had both been so easy to solve. All he knew was that Sherlock was barely speaking to him but that didn’t stop him from being constantly in the way. Everywhere John wanted to be, Sherlock seemed to show up five minutes later and take over the space. He was like an especially territorial cat.

If John went into the kitchen to make tea, Sherlock would come in after him and start cooking toenails in the microwave or insist that he needed all four burners to make a tincture for removing human skin. If John tried to watch television, Sherlock would sit beside him and immediately change the channel, practically crawling into John’s lap in his efforts to steal the remote. If John went to sit by the fireplace Sherlock would begin sawing angrily on his violin.

He hadn’t seen Sarah since the morning all the business with Moriarty had started but John found himself hanging round her flat almost constantly in his desperate attempts to get away from Sherlock. What made all of Sherlock’s angry proximity worse was that even while being irritated with him, John was still incredibly turned on, and he had no outlet to relieve his frustration since Sherlock was always around. He considered locking himself in the bathroom to achieve some semblance of privacy but that was no good. Sherlock had disabled all the locks in the flat ages ago.

He reached a breaking point the day Sherlock strode calmly into the bathroom while he was in the shower.

“I’ve had an insight about the Haymarket Strangler.”

“Sherlock! Bloody hell! What are you doing in here?”

“I told you, I—”

“Sherlock, I’m in the shower!”
John could practically hear Sherlock rolling his eyes. “Yes, John, I had gathered that. I didn’t fancy yelling at you through the door.”

“I don’t want to talk to you about Crimewatch right now! Get. Out.”

Sherlock sniffed. “If you think I’m offended by seeing you without clothes on—”

“SHERLOCK!”

“Fine, fine, if you insist on being puritanical about such things I’ll wait until you’re done.”

“Unless you want this shampoo bottle lobbed at your head I THINK THAT’S A GOOD IDEA.”

Sherlock had left the bathroom before John could make good on his threat, which was a lucky thing for Sherlock, since John had settled on his discount family-sized bottle of shampoo as his projectile of choice. Let Sherlock lose a few brain cells, he could certainly spare them.

However, as soon as John exited the bathroom and started down the hall to his bedroom, Sherlock pounced on him like a giant, feral cat, leaning into John with such savage intensity that John fell back two hasty steps until his shoulders hit the wall.

“Jesus, Sherlock! What? What could be so important about the Haymarket Strangler that it can’t wait until I’m dressed?”

Adrenaline was coursing through him. He really ought to remind Sherlock that it wasn’t a good idea to apprehend ex-military men, especially not when they were on their way out of the bathroom, only half-clothed. He forced his body to relax.

Sherlock’s blue eyes were boring into him. John didn’t know if he’d ever been the target of such direct scrutiny from Sherlock.

“You’ve been acting strange recently. Something’s different. What’s the matter?”

John felt his body immediately tense up again. He was suddenly very aware of the fact that he was naked except for the towel slung low around his hips. He was running late to his shift at the hospital so he hadn’t bothered to properly dry himself before leaving the bathroom. In the cold air of the hallway, he could feel every drop of water on his skin. He forced himself to calmly meet Sherlock’s gaze.

“Nothing’s the matter.”

Leave it to Sherlock to get right to the heart of an issue with all his characteristic finesse. Why? Why did he have to do this now when John was half-naked? John was always aware of Sherlock’s height, but having him this close and looming down the way he was made him seem like a giant.

Sherlock leaned in closer, his gaze intensifying. “You’ve been avoiding me. Why?”

Sherlock was so close, John could feel the heat coming off his body. He felt himself leaning into it instinctively, like a plant tilting toward the sun, and realized that his towel was slipping. He reached down to keep it from sliding further down his hips and saw Sherlock’s eyes follow the movement.

“I have not been avoiding you. You’re the one who hasn’t been speaking to me! You’ve been following me around the flat like a tetchy cat!”

Sherlock’s eyes flashed. “I have not been following you—”
“You came into the bathroom when I was showering! People need privacy, Sherlock!”

Sherlock let out a huff of disbelief and the warm breath made goose bumps break out along John’s arms.

“I’m late for work. I don’t have time for this right now!”

“Don’t try and change the subject,” Sherlock snapped. “Something’s wrong. I can tell. What is it?”

A wave of fury moved through him. “What’s wrong is that I don’t like being attacked when I’m on my way out of the bathroom! Now stop acting like a fucking panther and let me by!”

“No.” Sherlock put his arms on either side of John’s head, effectively making a cage around him with his body. “Not until you tell me what’s wrong.”

John sucked in a sharp breath. The gesture was so erotic he wondered fleetingly if Sherlock wasn’t doing it deliberately to try and seduce him, but then he saw the determination in Sherlock’s eyes and realized this was simply about Sherlock getting his way.

John shut his eyes and let out a long-suffering sigh. He could feel himself starting to shake from the effort of holding in his desire. The combination of the freezing air and the intimate heat of Sherlock’s breath against his neck was too much for him to cope with. He had to escape before Sherlock picked up on every obvious sign of his arousal.

He opened his eyes and found Sherlock watching him. He felt a drop of water make its leisurely way down his jaw, saw Sherlock’s eyes follow it, and clenched his hand compulsively in the towel around his hips.

“Look, there’s nothing wrong. Seriously, nothing. I’m sorry if I’ve been a little jumpy these last few days, it’s just…” He let out a hard breath and dropped his eyes. Sherlock was watching him with absolute focus. It was unnerving, how still he got when his concentration was this heightened.

“It’s something that happened with Moriarty, isn’t it?” Sherlock’s voice was uncharacteristically soft.

John felt his shoulders tense at the name. He didn’t say anything. He stared at a spot on the wall above Sherlock’s shoulder.

“What happened, John?”

Suddenly, he couldn’t bear the gentleness in Sherlock’s voice. He felt the muscles in his throat constrict.

Sherlock must have read his desperation in the lines of his body because suddenly he dropped his arms and took a step back. The sudden removal of Sherlock’s body heat hit John like a slap in the face.

“I’ll let you get to work.” His voice was back to its regular tone, matter of fact, slightly cold. “I apologize if I made you late.”

And then he turned, and disappeared around the corner before John had even registered that he had taken a step back.

John fell back against the wall and let out a shaky breath.

This was the last straw.
Sarah had mentioned she was going to visit a friend in New Zealand for two weeks, and had half-jokingly suggested John come along. Initially, he had refused. Things with Sarah were shaky at best and going on a holiday with someone halfway around the world was usually the sort of trip reserved for couples in committed relationships. Under regular circumstances John would never go on a trip with someone who he’d only so recently started dating, but by the time John had finished getting dressed and was heading out the door to work, he’d made up his mind. After that business with Sherlock in the hallway, he didn’t care what the excuse was; he needed to get away.

Chapter End Notes

Some details from this chapter were inspired by John Watson's "actual" blog, which I only discovered very recently, much to my delight. Here's the link, just in case there are others out there who have yet to encounter it: http://www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk/ The comment sections are where the real magic happens.

Thanks for reading! And as always, comments are greatly appreciated! :)
The trip with Sarah was a disaster.

As John probably could have predicted had he taken the time to think about it and not been solely motivated by his desperation to get away from Sherlock, their fledgling (and frankly floundering) relationship had not survived the intensity of an international, two week holiday.

Thankfully, the relationship hadn’t progressed far enough to warrant any screaming rows. There were just several frustrated conversations and a lot of uncomfortable silences. It was perhaps fortunate that most of these conversations took place within the first few days of the trip, so by the second week they were able to go on some sight seeing ventures together. The situation was made all the more awkward by the fact that Sarah was paying for the entire trip.

Needless to say, John was more than a little relieved when the plane touched down in London. He bid an awkward farewell to Sarah in the taxi queue at Heathrow and concluded that if nothing else, the trip had at least made him grateful to return home to the madness of Baker Street.

As he let himself in through the front door, it occurred to him that perhaps he should be worried about what sort of state the flat would be in upon his return; he’d never been away for such a long stretch of time. John suddenly had a vision of the kitchen transformed into a smoking black ruin, the living room floor lost under a heap of murder weapons, and Sherlock sitting calmly in the midst of it all, typing furiously on his phone.

But when he pushed open the living room door, he was pleasantly surprised to see all the furniture still standing. There were a considerable amount of books and papers stacked on the desk between the windows and more than the usual number of abandoned teacups on every surface (including the floor) but other than that, nothing appeared too out of order.

“Hello!”

John heard a banging noise coming from the kitchen, and rounding the corner, he saw what looked like the aftermath of a small hurricane. Apparently Sherlock had spent the better part of two weeks entirely dismantling the kitchen. Everything that had once been in the cupboards was now turned out onto the kitchen table. The stove had been pushed out from its customary place against the wall to reveal a tangle of wires and tubes.

“What—?”

Sherlock was lying on his back under the sink, brandishing a blowtorch. John could see sparks flaring around Sherlock’s torso. At the sound of John’s voice, he shimmied out into the light. John was at least glad to see he was wearing safety goggles.

“Ah! You’re back. Excellent. I’d love some tea.”

“Yeah, me too, but it appears you’ve dismantled our stove. What are you doing?”

“An experiment.” Sherlock had vanished again from view under the sink. “The kitchen needed some adjustments in order for it to work properly.”
John ducked down to look at Sherlock. He looked thinner than when John had left. “Have you been eating at all since I’ve been away?”

“I don’t know. How long have you been away?”

John sighed and straightened up. “I’m going to have a shower. That is, if you haven’t dismantled the bathroom while you’re at it.”

John was halfway out the door when he heard Sherlock call after him. “How did it go?”

John paused in the doorway. “Disastrous.” He hesitated and then felt his face break into a smile. “I’m glad to be back.”

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To John’s relief the shower was in full working order. When he emerged from the bathroom, the sun was setting over the tops of the buildings across the street, staining the sky a deep, dusky pink. There was a strange, faintly worrying burning smell drifting up from the kitchen but John didn’t hear any sounds of distress so he continued into his room to get dressed.

Despite the fact that the flat was a disaster, the kitchen was in disarray, and Sherlock was clearly as mad and disaffected as ever, John found he was happy to be back. It wasn’t just the dysfunction of the last two weeks with Sarah; he realized his life felt off-kilter without Sherlock’s strange, disruptive presence. He hadn’t really felt like himself. Even when faced with the overwhelming prospect of being thrown back into the fire of his newfound attraction, he felt happier than he had in days.

John went down into the kitchen to investigate the burning smell and found Sherlock shoving the stove back into place.

“Finished the experiment, then?”

Sherlock grunted as he pushed the stove the remaining two inches, which John took as affirmation.

“I’m starving. Curry?”

Sherlock turned to look at him and grinned. “Sounds lovely.”

“Right, I’ll just—”

The lights in the kitchen went dead.

John blinked at Sherlock through the gloom.

“Sherlock?”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember that stack of bills I put on the mantelpiece before I left?”

“No.”

“Do you remember me telling you to pay the electric bill as soon as it came because we never paid the last two bills?”

“No.”
John sighed and began feeling his way back toward the living room. Truly, he was more to blame than Sherlock for this. He’d known Sherlock wouldn’t have bothered with bills that came when he was gone, even ones that were marked Final Notice. He should have made sure to pay it before he left.

“Lucky for you I planned for this, and lucky for you…” He groped down in the darkness next to the fireplace and grinned as his hand closed on the lid of a cardboard box. “I didn’t leave this in the kitchen because I knew you’d probably mess with it.”

He pulled the lid off the box and took out a dozen or so candles and a box of matches. “Here.” He thrust the candles into Sherlock’s hands. “You light these, I’m going to order our food.”

Even the fact that the electricity had been shut off didn’t dampen John’s good mood. It was an unseasonably warm night for late April and John walked through the flat, opening windows to chase away the burnt odor with the scent of spring air.

They cleared the mound of papers off the desk in the living room and as John was setting out the curry, Sherlock appeared with a shockingly nice bottle of wine in hand.

“Where on earth did you get that?”

Sherlock produced two wine glasses from God knew where (John didn’t even know they had wine glasses) and unscrewed the cork in several deft moves.

“A case I solved while you were away. A man with quite a lot of property in the south of France was very grateful.”

The cork made a satisfying pop as Sherlock tugged it free.

“You sure you want to drink this now?”

“I’m not one for fine wines, John.” Sherlock said, pouring him a very full glass. “It would be wasted on me.”

John insisted Sherlock pour himself a glass too, and Sherlock did, although he hardly touched it.

As they ate, Sherlock regaled him with the details of the wine merchant case and John was pleased to note that Sherlock actually ate two healthy portions of curry even in the midst of his storytelling. That Sherlock could eat and talk so eloquently at the same time never ceased to amaze John.

The wine was delicious and after John had happily eaten his own weight in curry, he settled back in his chair, very full and very content, studying Sherlock in the candlelight. He looked happier than John had seen him in a long time. Probably it was just the fact that he was eating again, but regardless, John was happy to see it. His eyes were lit up as he went on to tell John about another case he had solved in the years before he’d met John.

“Food does you good, you know. You should eat more often.”

Sherlock smirked as he refilled John’s wine glass. “Difficult to remember without the constant nagging from my live-in physician.”

John eyed the very full glass. “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“Maybe. Perhaps I want you compromised so I can have my way with you.”
John chuckled at the joke but Sherlock’s eyes were grave. John felt a shudder go through him.

By the time John had finished his third very full glass of wine, they had moved to the sofa. Sherlock was sitting on the floor at John’s feet, the now mostly empty bottle beside him. The breeze coming in through the open window was pleasantly cool on John’s flushed face and he tipped his head back against the couch and shut his eyes, savoring the fact that he was happy and alive and Sherlock was with him.

“So what happened between you and Sarah?”

In his wine-fogged brain, John was distantly aware that it was a strange question for Sherlock to be asking because Sherlock never asked John about his relationships, but he was relaxed and somewhat drunk and so happy to be out of it that he answered without hesitation.

“What didn’t go wrong is more like it. She’s a nice girl, I just… I don’t know what I was thinking, going on a trip like that with her.”

“Why do you say that?”

“We were hardly in a relationship before we left. Being forced to spend every hour together made it painfully clear how much was missing.”

“What was missing?” Sherlock’s voice was low, meditative, and once again John found himself answering without hesitation.

“Well, she was irritated by how much time I spent with you for one. I think when I agreed to go on this trip she thought it would mean she finally had my undivided attention.” John chuckled bitterly to himself. “Apparently physical distance between us doesn’t change the fact that I talk about you constantly. She got pretty fed up with that.” John took a drink of wine and realized that Sherlock had refilled his glass again. “And then of course there was the sex. Or should I say the lack thereof.”

John didn’t know what had come over him, why he was suddenly revealing to Sherlock all the messy and intimate details of his failed relationship. Part of it was the wine, but part of it was also the fact that Sherlock was asking him about it. Sherlock was facing away from him so John could only see a sliver of his face from where he sat, but there was something in Sherlock’s tone that made John want to keep talking. His interest was sincere and John found himself responding to it against his better judgment.

“What happened?”

John could feel the low rumble of Sherlock’s voice through the couch. His head was just by John’s knee, almost touching. John studied Sherlock’s hair in the candlelight; he had never noticed before the touches of auburn in it, and in the low light from the candles it looked almost gold. John wanted to reach out and run his fingers through it, see if it felt as soft as it looked. He took another sip of wine instead.

“I couldn’t keep it up.” John felt his cheeks burn at the confession and suddenly realized he had crossed a line he hadn’t wanted to. He gulped down the rest of his wine to cover his embarrassment.

“It was humiliating.”

John leaned over to set his wineglass back on the floor in an effort to hide his face from Sherlock. The room reeled around him at the movement.

Sherlock twisted around on the floor to look at him. John couldn’t bring himself to meet Sherlock’s eyes. Sherlock was leaning into his leg and the heat from Sherlock’s body was suddenly too much
for John.

“I think I’ve had too much wine.” He struggled to lift himself off the couch but he felt a hand on his wrist, stopping him.

“John—”

There was something in Sherlock’s voice that made John look down. “There’s no need to be embarrassed.”

His heart was pounding. In one impossibly graceful movement, Sherlock pulled himself up onto the couch beside John. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about.” He was still holding John by the wrist. There was something intense in his expression; John felt pinned by his gaze. His eyes glowed hot and dark in the candlelight, the color of his irises like the center of a flame.

John could feel his pulse hammering in his throat. The way Sherlock was looking at him… it was that same predatory look, and to John’s inebriated brain it felt heated and decidedly sexual. John leaned back into the couch in an effort to put some distance between them, licking his lips.

“I don’t know, I’d say it’s pretty embarrassing to be unable to get it up with the girl you’re supposedly attracted to.”

“You obviously weren’t attracted to her.”

Sherlock’s grip on John’s wrist was hot. John wanted to pull his hand away for fear Sherlock would feel the rapid beat of his pulse.

John shut his eyes to escape the intensity of Sherlock’s gaze. “Your theory was wrong you know.”

“My theory?”

“About me sleeping better next to someone else.” There was a voice in John’s head telling him to stop talking, but the wine in his system made the words pour out unmediated. “I didn’t sleep well at all next to Sarah. I kept her awake half the trip with my nightmares.”

Sherlock leaned over him. “John—”

Sherlock’s phone went off, the shock of the sudden interruption shattering the intimacy of the moment.

John opened his eyes to see Sherlock rising from the couch with the phone already halfway to his ear.

“What is it?”

His physicality had changed in a heartbeat. Moments ago he had poured himself onto the couch beside John with the speed of molten glass. Now he was pacing the floor by the fireplace, his eyes sharp and inquisitive.

John let out a shaky breath and rubbed his sweating palms down his thighs. If he hadn’t been thoroughly drunk, he would have sworn Sherlock was about to crawl into his lap and kiss him. It’s a good thing they’d been interrupted; otherwise John might have tried to kiss Sherlock himself. That had been a very, very close call.

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.” Sherlock was staring at John now without seeing him, his eyes
already visualizing what Lestrade was describing. Sherlock hung up the phone and crossed the room in two strides. “This is it.”

“What?” John looked up at Sherlock, attempting to appear more sober than he felt. He was steeling himself for Sherlock’s request that he accompany him to the crime scene and trying to decide on a scale of one to ten how terrible an idea it would be if he did.

“I’m not sure yet, but it’s going to be something big.”

Sherlock was halfway out the door before John had managed to lift himself off the couch.

“I’m coming with you!”

Sherlock turned back to look at him, an expression of surprise on his face. Then he smiled before disappearing down the stairs.

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John discovered being drunk at a crime scene didn’t turn out to be such a terrible idea. In fact, he debated whether it wasn’t preferable to be mildly intoxicated every time. He had a much higher tolerance for the long boring stretches of Sherlock staring in silence at some minute and seemingly inconsequential detail, and Sherlock’s digs at Anderson were ten times funnier than usual.

He did feel compelled to apologize to Lestrade when they arrived, which turned out to be a good decision as he was overtaken by a fit of hysterical giggling when Sherlock told Anderson he looked like an underfed iguana. Lestrade simply raised an eyebrow and attempted to hide his amusement without much success. When Anderson started shooting him evil looks, he decided to go stand quietly by himself for a while until he managed to calm down.

Meanwhile Sherlock was completely engrossed in the bizarre and inexplicable details of the case. It was a double murder. The two victims had seemingly been about to embark on a tropical vacation. They were dressed for holiday travel but the bodies were discovered in a dumpster behind a fast food restaurant with no trace of their luggage anywhere around. They had been stripped of all identification and all their personal belongings. Anderson was loudly insisting that it was clearly just a case of petty theft.

“Two people on their way to the airport get mugged and killed. The murderer tosses the bodies in a dumpster nearby. I don’t see what you’re going on about. There’s nothing strange about it.”

Sherlock fluttered his hand at Anderson as though he were a particularly irritating insect. “They clearly didn’t know each other but they both had tickets for the same cruise.”

“How on earth could you know that? There’s no tickets on the bodies! And how do you know they were going on a cruise?”

“Look at their clothes! Use your eyes, Anderson. That’s what they’re there for.”

“And how could you possibly claim they don’t know each other? What proof do you have of that?”

Sherlock ignored Anderson and turned to Lestrade. “There’s nothing more I can get here. Call me as soon as you’ve identified the victims.”

Sherlock tucked the samples he’d collected into his breast pocket and John fell into step beside him as he made his way out of the alley.
John gestured toward Sherlock’s coat pocket. “You off to St. Bart’s then?”

Sherlock nodded, distracted.

“I think I’ll head back to the flat. I won’t be much use to you in the state I’m in.”

Sherlock’s eyes flickered to John and he seemed to remember the circumstances under which they’d left 221B. There was a flash of humor in his eyes. “We can share a cab. St Bart’s is on the way.”

John was hitting the sleepy stage of his drunkenness as he crawled into the cab beside Sherlock. Sherlock planted himself in the middle seat and didn’t move over when John got in. Perhaps this would have seemed strange to John under normal circumstances but in his inebriated stupor he was simply grateful to have somebody to lean against.

As soon as the cab started moving, his head drooped down to land on Sherlock’s shoulder, his body melting into Sherlock’s side. Vaguely, he registered Sherlock stiffening beside him at the contact but he was too tired to pull away. He shut his eyes and began to drift as he felt Sherlock gradually relaxing beside him, his hand coming to rest on the top of John’s thigh. John turned his face toward Sherlock’s neck with a sigh and he felt Sherlock lift his chin to accommodate him. Sherlock’s fingers began to move slowly against his leg.

Suddenly John was wide-awake, but he didn’t move his head from Sherlock’s shoulder. He kept his eyes shut and fought to keep his breathing steady as Sherlock’s fingers began tracing lazy circles on the top of his thigh. It was such a simple gesture but John felt his body responding to it like a taper to a lick of flame. There were goose bumps on his arms and heat already pooling low in his stomach. He wanted to sneak a glance up at Sherlock to read the expression on his face. Was the gesture intentional? It certainly felt like it was but John was having trouble hearing his own thoughts over the roar of commotion in his body.

He was very aware of how close his mouth was to Sherlock’s neck. The desire to lean in and press his lips against the soft skin was overwhelming. He heard a buzz against Sherlock’s hip and felt him shift under John to pull out his phone with one hand. Sherlock began typing out a response with his left hand but his right hand didn’t move from John’s thigh.

John let his legs fall open, his knee pushing into Sherlock’s, his breath one long, unsteady exhale against the side of Sherlock’s neck. Sherlock’s hand dipped down into the inside of John’s thigh, fingers brushing the seam of John’s trousers. He was still typing furiously on his phone with his left hand.

It’s just an absent minded gesture, John told himself, his head swimming with the effects of the alcohol and his own anticipation. But when Sherlock’s hand began to creep higher up his thigh, John held his breath.

The cab came to a halt. Sherlock leaned forward to speak with the cabbie before he slid out and the absence of his warm weight at John’s side was a shock to John’s system. He caught the tail end of their address and then Sherlock was gone, walking at a brisk pace up to the steps of St. Bart’s, his coat flapping behind him.

John fell back against the seat as the cab started moving again, his heart pounding so hard he could feel the reverberations in the leather at his back. What the bloody hell had just happened? He was too drunk and too turned on to try and reason it out. His erection was pressing uncomfortably against the front of his trousers and he spent the remainder of the cab ride in agonized arousal, his hand clenched into a fist on his thigh.
Thankfully Sherlock had already paid the cabbie the rest of the fare, so all John had to manage was finding his keys and stumbling his way up the stairs to the flat without alarming Mrs. Hudson. He succeeded in all of these tasks, albeit fumblingly, and it took all of his self-restraint to force himself to wait until he made it up to his own room with the door shut firmly behind him until he yanked his fly open and shoved his hand down his pants.

He fell back against his bedroom door, hard, his cock in his hand. Without even bothering to push his trousers down his thighs he began to stroke himself with long, unsteady strokes. He had promised himself he wouldn’t think of Sherlock, and he’d been true to his word for weeks, but now he abandoned all pretenses of controlling his thoughts and let himself go. He imagined Sherlock’s mouth on his, hot and desperate, as his hands slid down over his ribs to hold him hard by the hips. He imagined taking Sherlock’s cock in his hand, Sherlock’s body arching down over John’s, tugging him closer by the grip on his arse, dragging their cocks together until the sweet friction of their bare flesh against each other, coupled with the drag of Sherlock’s teeth down John’s throat, pushed him over the edge.

He came with a shout, his knees giving way beneath him, his head tipping back against the door as his orgasm ripped through him. Nearly senseless, he slid until he hit the floor, where he sat gasping, still floating somewhere above himself as he rode out the end of his orgasm. *God in heaven.* He hadn’t come that hard in years. He hadn’t even managed to get his trousers off.

It took all his effort to hoist himself off the floor, peel his sticky trousers off and crawl into bed. He waited for the shame to come crowding in but he was still too drunk and now too contented to feel anything but a faint nudging at the corners of his mind and he pushed it away, impatient. He could feel ashamed tomorrow. For the moment, all he wanted was to imagine himself back in that cab with Sherlock’s hand moving up his thigh, up and up until he found John’s erection, those dexterous fingers tugging on the zipper, sliding in under the material to take John in his hand, his lean body swinging around to straddle John by the hips, dragging John up to his mouth by the shoulders, kissing him with slow, serious intention.

John fell asleep with one arm around his pillow, holding it to his face.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter coming very soon! As always, comments are very much appreciated. :)

Chapter Five

John woke himself several hours later with his own shouting. He sat up in the darkness, his heart feeling as though it were trying to break through his ribs. It took him a minute to recognize his own room, to drag his mind back from the world of his nightmare.

There was cold sweat on his forehead, and for a moment, he wondered why Sherlock hadn’t come running at his shouts, but then he remembered. Sherlock was probably still at St. Bart’s.

Moriarty’s hands had been all over him, stroking, pulling, manipulating his body as he whispered in John’s ear the things that Sherlock would do to him, that Moriarty would make Sherlock do to him if John gave him what he wanted.

“All you have to do is say the word, Johnny Boy, tell me what I need to know, and I’ll give him to you. He’ll be all yours.”

Moriarty’s tongue had dragged a wet path down the side of John’s neck and he’d shuddered and tried to twist away.

“There’s no point feigning disgust. I know what you want.” He palmed John’s erection through his trousers, his blank reptile gaze unflinching on John’s face as John fought against the sensation of pleasure. “I can bring him to you, naked, compliant, hands bound. I’ll make him suck you off.” His palm rubbed a slow circle over John’s cock at his words and John let out an involuntary moan.

“Before you fuck him, on his hands and knees, until he begs for mercy, proving that he’s no different from the rest of us, that he can feel just as deeply. You’ll make him see that, John. With my help.”

He remembered the feel of Moriarty’s smile against the side of his neck. “Just say the word, Johnny Boy. Say it and he’s yours.”

John must have said yes, because the next thing he knew Sherlock was being dragged through the door, furious, disheveled, hands cuffed behind his back. His teeth were bared in a grimace and there was a long gash bleeding on his forehead. The collar of his shirt was undone and twisted, showing evidence of a struggle. Seeing him like that, John felt his cock in throb in response, but then Sherlock’s eyes had found his and the look of betrayal went through John like a knife.

But worse than that, worse than the hurt in Sherlock’s eyes was the expression of disgust as he was shoved forward and forced to his knees.

That was the last thing he remembered before he woke up. That look, that look in Sherlock’s eyes made John sick with shame. He pressed his hands against his eyes and struggled to breathe deeply. It was only a dream. It was only a dream.

John curled into a ball under the covers and attempted to untangle the knot of self-hatred that throbbed like a living thing inside his chest. He would never betray Sherlock at Moriarty’s prompting but what filled him with shame was how badly he had wanted Sherlock in that moment, in every moment, and the reality that Sherlock would never feel the same way.

He’d been so good at putting Sherlock out of his mind when he had been away with Sarah. Okay, maybe that was a lie, but he hadn’t consciously fantasized about Sherlock during the whole trip, and that unto itself was an accomplishment.
However, his unconscious mind was another matter entirely. He had definitely dreamed about Sherlock during the trip and there had been a few uncomfortable mornings when John had woken from a particularly vivid dream, hoping desperately that he hadn’t made any kind of compromising sound in his sleep. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more certain he was that he probably had. Sarah had been forced to physically wake him from several nightmares, but there had been mornings when she hadn’t said anything at all, and her pointed silence made John wonder what other spectrum of emotion he had displayed while sleeping.

The point was he had been successful at keeping Sherlock from his waking sexual fantasies for almost three weeks now, so what (other than drinking almost an entire bottle of red wine) had pushed him over the edge?

John thought back over his hazy memories of last night, trying to sort out whether what he had construed as feeling very sexual in the moment had simply been yet another instance of Sherlock’s total disregard for physical boundaries.

John rubbed his eyes. There was no way to be sure. Of course, he had been turned on by Sherlock’s hand on his leg in the taxi but that was probably just the result of the distracted jitteriness Sherlock often displayed when he was deep in thought. After all, he’d been texting Lestrade throughout the entire interaction.

And then there was that moment on the couch—but John had been so turned on at that point already, he was fairly certain his conviction that Sherlock was about to kiss him was really just the red wine talking. Red wine was notorious for making John helplessly aroused.

Well, that was the last time he ever let Sherlock Holmes get him drunk.

As if the shame and horror of his nightmare weren’t bad enough, John woke up with a hideous hangover. It took most of the morning for him to muster enough energy to descend the stairs to make a cup of tea, only to remember when he went to plug in the kettle that the electricity was still shut off. John shut his eyes and counted slowly to ten. Then he counted backwards from ten and even more slowly up to twenty-five. It was a good thing Sherlock was nowhere to be found otherwise he would have been strongly tempted to hurl something at his head.

Fortunately, the gas was still on and he remembered seeing a teakettle lying under a heap of filthy Petri dishes in the bottom of one of the kitchen drawers. He dug it out, muttering to himself about forcing Sherlock to actually clean the kitchen one of these days. He found a box of matches that happily hadn’t yet been swallowed by the mess of Sherlock’s experiments and lit the gas burner on the stove. He was dying for a piece of toast but he had too much pride to go downstairs and confess to Mrs. Hudson that they’d neglected to pay their electric bill again.

After John’s two-week absence from the flat the only things in the refrigerator were moldering bits of unfinished experiments. There was nothing edible in sight (seriously what did Sherlock subsist on when John was away? Mold fumes?), but after several minutes of expletive-laden investigation John managed to find a bag of bread that he had bought before he went away with a few, only-mildly mildewed slices left.

He scraped the mold off and sat at the kitchen table, drinking his tea without milk, chewing mutinously on a piece of cold bread, entertaining dark fantasies about Sherlock walking in through the door in the next five minutes so John could chastise him for intoxicating him and then leaving him in a flat with no food or electricity. All of his feelings of self-hatred and shame were currently being eclipsed by feelings of hang over-induced rage at Sherlock for getting him drunk in the first place.
Lucky for Sherlock, John’s rage had abated by the afternoon and his hangover receded to the point that he was able to venture out of the flat to pay the electric bill and pick up some much-needed groceries. But there was no sign of Sherlock that evening, and no sign of him the next morning either.

In fact, John hardly saw Sherlock at all over the next few days. He didn’t come home until late afternoon of the following day, and that was only to use John’s laptop for a frantic half an hour. John barely had time to make him a cup of tea which Sherlock had responded to with a distracted, “Thank you,” without looking up from the screen, and then he was gone again when John came back downstairs, the tea untouched beside John’s computer.

He had vanished into the case. This was normal for Sherlock, and at first, John was relieved to have time to attempt to deal with his new onslaught of shameful feelings in private. His nightmares got worse—another reason John was thankful Sherlock was absent from Baker Street. John woke himself up screaming two nights in a row. He didn’t know what he would have told Sherlock had he come inquiring. However, after a few days, John found himself wishing Sherlock would come back, if only to distract him from his own dark thoughts.

Thankfully, there was a dearth of workers at the hospital as everyone was on holiday so John picked up some extra shifts. Seeing Sarah was still painfully awkward but John had reached a point at which anything was better than being stuck in the flat with his own guilt.

It had been five days since they’d found the bodies in the dumpster and John hadn’t seen Sherlock in two, so he was surprised to come home from a late night shift at the hospital to find Sherlock sitting in the living room, literally adrift in a sea of papers. Sherlock was so focused he didn’t notice John come in.

He went upstairs to change and came down to make himself a cup of tea, pausing in the doorway to ask if Sherlock wanted one as well.

“What?” He could see the distance Sherlock had to travel back to the present moment. When he looked up at John there was a crease between his brows.

John repeated his question and briefly, Sherlock’s expression cleared. “Yes, thank you. Tea sounds lovely.”

John went to put the kettle on and when he came back he moved a sheaf of papers aside so he could sit next to Sherlock on the sofa and take a closer look at him. He was clearly exhausted. He looked drawn and pale, paler than usual, with dark circles under his eyes.

“Sherlock?”

“Mmm…” He was studying a graph on John’s computer with a complicated pattern of numbers, evidently trying to find something on one of the sheets of paper that matched the graph.

“Have you been sleeping?”

The crease between Sherlock’s brows deepened, as if he was irritated that John would ask him a question he so clearly knew the answer to. “Of course not.”

“When was the last time you had something to eat?”

“Don’t remember. Lestrade gave me some biscuits at the station.” He gestured absently to his coat which was lying beside him. John saw an unopened packet of biscuits sticking out of Sherlock’s coat pocket.
John got up to switch off the kettle and fished around in the cupboards to find the emergency packets of protein powder he kept on hand for when Sherlock got too immersed in a case to remember to eat. He dumped two of them into Sherlock’s tea along with several large spoonfuls of sugar and then filled the mug almost half full of milk. Any calories were good calories at this point.

Sherlock took the mug from John without looking at it, and drank half of it in one swallow before setting it down on the coffee table. At least when the food came in contact with Sherlock’s mouth, his body’s needs overruled his distracted brain.

John took this as a sign of encouragement and went back into the kitchen to see what they had in the fridge that was still edible. He found half a container of curry from a couple of nights ago and heated up a generous portion for Sherlock. He would spoon-feed it to the man if he had to. Sometimes it seemed to John like Sherlock was intent on driving himself to an early grave.

To John’s great relief, when he set the steaming plate at Sherlock’s elbow, he reached for the fork without hesitation and began shoveling curry into his mouth. He still hadn’t removed his eyes from the computer screen.

“Can I help?”

Sherlock’s eyes flickered momentarily to John. “If you’d like.”

“What are we looking for then?”

Sherlock showed John the pattern in the graph that he was trying to identify.

“It’s bound to be on one of these and as soon as we find it that’ll give Lestrade his warrant.”

“So you’ve already identified the killer?”

“Days ago but we can’t get the proper evidence to convict him.”

“Jesus. Do we know where he is?”

Sherlock nodded as he unrolled a furl of new pages.

“Here, give me that. Which ones have you already gone through?”

It took the better part of an hour and half for John to organize the chaos Sherlock had created and establish a methodological system for their search. As much as Sherlock could be tidy in his experiments, when it came to cases his order went out the window. He got too impatient, especially when he was close to getting the results he wanted, which is why it was a good thing John had an especially tidy mind.

They were nearing the bottom of the pile and John was feeling triumphant, not because they were getting any nearer to finding the evidence they needed, but because he had managed to successfully feed Sherlock a second plate of curry and two more mugs of tea. He had just finished flicking through his current stack of papers and was leaning over to place them in their respective pile, when he looked over to find Sherlock sound asleep beside him on the couch.

He was leaning back against the cushions, his head tilting toward his right shoulder, hands still folded around the sheaf of papers in his lap.

There was something vaguely impossible about seeing Sherlock asleep and it occurred to John that although of course he knew that Sherlock slept, he had never been able to imagine it. Whenever he
tried to picture it, he saw Sherlock in a meditative pose with his eyes shut, fingers steepled beneath his chin, or Sherlock sitting in lotus position on his bed, his spine perfectly straight, staring directly ahead. He had never been able to come up with an image of the impossibly energetic man not moving long enough to fall asleep if he wasn’t thinking.

Now, seeing him asleep made something in John’s chest ache. He looked younger, vulnerable—the worried line between his brows was gone, his lips were parted slightly, one tumbled lock of hair slipping down over his eye. John fought the urge to lean forward and smooth it back. He needed a haircut. Sherlock was usually meticulous about his hair regime (although he pretended not to be, John knew otherwise), but ever since the events with Moriarty Sherlock had clearly been too distracted to schedule one.

At the thought of Moriarty the feeling in John’s chest tightened. He and Sherlock had been out of sorts ever since the incident in the pool, and it wasn’t only a result of John’s realization about his sexual feelings. They hadn’t talked about their argument over John’s blog post. John still hadn’t ascertained why Sherlock had been so upset, and he felt a twinge of guilt for not broaching the subject again. Sherlock certainly hadn’t been afraid to ask him what was wrong when he sensed something was amiss.

John shifted uncomfortably as his thoughts flooded with memories of their interaction in the hallway.

That was precisely the problem: Sherlock was too aware for his own good. John had been so relieved the last few days that Sherlock was finally distracted by a case because it meant he didn’t have to constantly be on his guard. But he realized now, sitting next to Sherlock as he slept, how much he missed him when he wasn’t around.

Life was dull without Sherlock.

After weeks of complaining about it, he found he missed Sherlock’s invasive presence. He missed Sherlock standing on the furniture and making strange comments as he thought out loud. He missed Sherlock yelling at the TV, stealing the ends of his toast, and leaning into his arm as he tried to type on his computer. It had taken him two weeks in a country on the other side of the world to realize it, but John had been looking forward to life getting back to normal as soon as he returned to Baker Street. But now Sherlock had thrown himself into a case and John was too frightened by his own feelings to follow him. And that was the real problem.

Ever since his sudden awareness of his feelings, he hadn’t let himself get near Sherlock. He tensed up every time Sherlock got close, simultaneously flooded with terror that Sherlock would deduce his feelings, and shame that the feelings existed in the first place. Having Sherlock temporarily out of the flat because he was immersed in a case was not a solution to John’s problem.

John put his face in his hands.

He didn’t know what he was going to do.

He looked back over at Sherlock and saw that his mouth had fallen open slightly.

He was clearly exhausted; John was hopeful that meant he would sleep for a few hours before his overactive brain jolted him awake. Sherlock hadn’t been this worked up about a case since—well, since the incident with Moriarty.

John leaned over and very gently removed the papers from Sherlock’s hands. He closed the laptop and set it aside then, moving as quietly as possible, he crept into Sherlock’s room and came back with a blanket, which he spread over Sherlock’s lap.
He stood for a moment watching the slow rise and fall of Sherlock’s chest under the blanket.

His head had drooped all the way over and was now propped against the arm of the couch. It couldn’t have been a very comfortable position but John didn’t dare move him for fear of waking him up.

He felt another overwhelming flood of emotion fill his chest as the familiar urge to protect Sherlock at all costs washed over him. This time the feeling was so intense he had to clench his fists at his sides to keep from reaching out.

Instead, John reached over and shut off the lamp beside the couch. Sherlock might be angry with him when he woke for letting him sleep, but he’d thank John in the long run when he discovered how much better his brain worked after a few hours’ rest.

John retreated into the hallway and up the dark staircase to his room.

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John awoke a few hours later to an insistent pounding on his door.

“John! Wake up! I’ve got it. I found the evidence we need! We’ve got our warrant!”

John sat up in the darkness, disoriented, and squinted at his clock.

Dawn was still a few hours away. Sherlock had only managed to stay asleep for less than four hours.

He rubbed his eyes and briefly considered ignoring Sherlock’s eager request.

It had been a long day at the surgery yesterday and he was scheduled for another late shift tonight, but he was pleased that Sherlock had come to wake him at his discovery and he found the familiar feeling of excitement and anticipation rushing through him at the prospect of a chase.

Besides that, Sherlock was running on five days with hardly any food or sleep and if he had ever needed backup, now was the time.

John climbed out of bed and reached blindly for the clothes that were nearest at hand.

He could hear Sherlock on his phone outside his door.

“We’ll meet you there. Yes, yes, I’ll wait until you get there with the warrant.” He heard Sherlock’s impatient footsteps as he paced the landing. “Come on, John!”

“Coming!” He exited his room still dragging a shirt over his head to see the back of Sherlock’s head disappearing down the stairs.

He barely had to time to grab his coat from the front hall before Sherlock was pushing him down the stairs and out onto the street to summon a taxi.

Sherlock’s nervous energy in the taxi was infectious.

John felt the familiar sharpening of his senses, and the strange calm settling over his body at the prospect of danger.

“We are actually going to wait for Lestrade when we get there, correct?”

Sherlock didn’t answer.
“Sherlock?”

The taxi came to a halt and Sherlock thrust a handful notes at the driver before sliding out.

“We’ve waited long enough already. We’ll be lucky if he’s still there. Come on.”

Sherlock grabbed hold of John’s elbow and steered them both into a narrow alcove between two buildings. He crouched down beside a collection of rubbish bins, dragging John in beside him.

They were in a residential neighborhood, the street on both sides lined with posh-looking apartment buildings.

“The suspect lives here?”

Sherlock nodded, putting a finger to his lips to motion for quiet. He pointed at the building directly across from them.

When he spoke his voice was so low John could barely make out what he was saying. He leaned in closer, tilting his ear toward Sherlock’s mouth. He felt the gentle rush of air at Sherlock’s rapid response.

“Timothy Briggs. He’s divorced. Nasty split. His ex runs a private cruise company. All the victims have been passengers intended for the cruise.”

“Why is he murdering the passengers?”

“He’s trying to make bad press. He got all the money in the divorce, but now she’s out-earning him. He can’t stand to be bested. But perhaps more significantly,” Sherlock looked back at John and gave him a dark look. “He never wanted to divorce her in the first place. He was still in love with her.”

John felt a sick feeling in his stomach.

Sherlock turned back around. “As I’ve said before, bitterness is a paralytic. Love is a much more vicious motivator.”

The sick feeling in John’s stomach twisted. He didn’t ask any more questions about the suspect.

They waited in tense silence for several minutes. Dawn was just breaking over the rooftops of the buildings across the street. Sherlock kept glancing at his phone, his impatience making him bounce his leg restlessly beside John.

“Stop jittering,” John whispered.

“Where is he? God, he could be gone ages ago if we’d just—There!”

There was a man dressed in an expensive looking leather jacket making his way down the apartment steps.

“Wait, Sherlock! Sherlock!”

But Sherlock was halfway across the street before the words had left John’s mouth, falling into step behind the man.

“You there! You dropped something!”

The man turned to look at Sherlock and Sherlock rushed forward to grab his wrist, but he saw
Sherlock’s lunge forward and snatched his hand back at the last second, then broke into a run.

“OYE!”

Sherlock tore off after him with John close at his heels, fuming silently that Sherlock would give chase on someone who was potentially armed with no backup in sight. They should have waited for Lestrade.

Unfortunately, the suspect was fast. John was impressed by Sherlock’s ability to keep up after all of four hours of sleep in four days, but he was worried about how long he would last.

After two and a half blocks, the man swerved down an alley between two buildings, Sherlock careening after him, John close behind. They splashed through fetid puddles, dodging dumpsters and piles of trash bags.

Sherlock and his quarry turned a corner and John cursed as they vanished from sight. He was going to have some strong words with Sherlock when they got out of this mess. Never give chase when you have no backup. Wait for your partner before throwing yourself down narrow alleyways with no cover. John put on a burst of speed as visions of Sherlock, doubled over and bleeding from a fatal gunshot wound, flashed before his eyes.

When he turned the corner, he really did swear because neither Sherlock nor his target were anywhere in sight.

He crept forward, eyes scanning the dripping brick walls around him for a clue as to where they might have gone when a hand shot out from a nearby alcove, dragging him into the darkness.

John’s self-defense instincts kicked in. He was prepared to elbow his assailant in the kidneys with deathly force when a hand clamped over his mouth and Sherlock’s voice in his ear hissed, “It’s alright. It’s me. I doubled-back so I could surprise him. He’s coming this way. Don’t make a sound.”

John fought the adrenaline that was now pounding through his system. He could taste it, sharp and medicinal in the back of his throat.

Sherlock’s hand hadn’t moved from his mouth. John twisted his head, trying to break Sherlock’s grip. He made a muffled sound of protest.

“Shh!”

Sherlock’s breath ghosted the back of his ear. He was holding John tight, too tight against the long line of his body. John could feel Sherlock’s heart pounding against his back through the thin material of his shirt.

John exhaled angrily through his nose. He was very seriously considering biting Sherlock’s fingers when Sherlock suddenly spun him around and pushed him up against the brick wall behind him. He kept one hand on John’s mouth, and used his other hand to pin John’s wrist in place at his side. He leaned into John with his body, his eyes on the dim stretch of alley just beyond the alcove.

“Here he comes.” Sherlock’s whisper sent heat rippling over John’s forehead. He was leaning into John with so much force that John wondered fleetingly whether he was trying to crush him. Then he realized Sherlock was trying to cover John’s body with his own, hiding him from view. He was enveloped in the folds of Sherlock’s coat, Sherlock’s head tucked down against his neck. “Wait until he passes.”

Sure enough, John could hear footsteps now, echoing off the alley walls.
Sherlock’s face was so close to John’s neck that his lips brushed the skin under John’s ear when he spoke. “Don’t,” he said, his voice so low John felt the words rather than heard them. “Move.”

John sucked in a silent breath as the erotic force of the situation hit him all at once.

Sherlock’s fingers pressed against his mouth; Sherlock’s breath, quick and hot against John’s neck; his body covering John’s. Sherlock was pressed so tightly against him that he was practically straddling one of John’s thighs with his own. His curls brushed John’s cheek as Sherlock turned to watch the mouth of the alcove. Sherlock’s hand tightened on his wrist as the sound of footsteps grew louder.

John swallowed hard and tipped his head back.

And then the footsteps were passing and Sherlock was shouting, “NOW!” and he tore out of the alcove, grabbing the man around the middle.

There was a brief struggle—Sherlock and his assailant were locked in a swirling mass of black leather jacket and wool coat. Before John could intervene, the man twisted, and Sherlock dropped to his knees with a hard breath, and Briggs was running again, vanishing into the darkness at the mouth of the alley.

John put his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder as Sherlock climbed to his feet.

“I’m fine!” He shouted, pushing John’s hands away, and then Sherlock was off and running.

John tore after him, cursing Sherlock under his breath. He watched their quarry scale a fence at the mouth of the alley that was looped with barbed wire and drop neatly down the other side.

Sherlock got to it before John.

“SHERLOCK!”

He was halfway up the fence when John got to the bottom.

“Sherlock, wait!”

Sherlock didn’t wait.

He threw himself over the top. John saw him slip and his heart was in his mouth, but then Sherlock was slithering down the other side to the ground.

John followed, moments later, carefully, carefully lifting his weight over the rings of barbed wire. It wasn’t until he dropped to the ground and looked up to see that Sherlock wasn’t running that he realized something was wrong.

“Sherlock!”

He was moving strangely, slowly.

John ran the remaining few steps to his side.

“What is it?”

“I caught my leg on the bloody barbed wire. Stupid, clumsy. Never happens to me.” Sherlock was furious. “Now he’ll get away.”

“Sit down.” John took Sherlock by the upper arms and steered him towards a nearby crate. “And shut up about the bloody criminal.”

John was still furious. He railed at Sherlock as he pushed aside the folds of his coat to inspect the wound.

“That’s the last time you give chase on a suspect without any backup. We didn’t even know if he was armed!” He stopped talking when he saw that the fabric of Sherlock’s trousers had been gashed wide open.

His tone softened. “I’ve got to cut the fabric away to look at the wound, alright?”

Sherlock waved his hand at John in a dismissive gesture, as if he could not have cared less that John was about to cut his trousers open to examine what might be a critical wound.

John had already pulled out his pocketknife, and he made short work of cutting away the torn fabric around the wound.

The gash was deep and bleeding heavily.

John hissed at the sight of it. “Christ, Sherlock.”

He felt his doctor’s resolve wavering. He shut his eyes for the briefest of seconds to collect himself, and opened his eyes to see Sherlock peering down at it critically.

“Missed the femoral artery.”

“Sherlock, I need you to lie back.”

His tone had shifted into doctor mode. Sherlock didn’t question him. He lay back, breathing shallowly.

John unzipped his jacket and reaching down, yanked his shirttails out of his trousers to get at his undershirt.

Sherlock, whose eyes were unfocused, smirked up at John. “Using my vulnerability to take advantage of me, Doctor? I never thought you had it in you.”

John tore off a wide section of his undershirt, folding it several times into a neat square before pressing it against the wound to staunch the flow of blood. He continued tearing off sections and wrapping them tightly around Sherlock’s thigh to create a makeshift bandage.

The blood was seeping through the bandages at an alarming rate.

John spared a moment to punch Lestrade’s number into his phone. Mercifully he answered on the first ring.

“Yes. Yes, I’m with him. No, he didn’t wait.” He held his phone up to his ear with his shoulder as he knotted the last bandage. “No, we didn’t. Look, I need you to send paramedics. I’ve got a deep tissue wound, inner thigh, bleeding heavily.”

Sherlock tried to sit up. “No, John! I don’t need—”

John put a hand on Sherlock’s chest. “Christ. I don’t even know where the bloody hell where we
are. Ah…” He shifted the phone against his ear to look for a street sign.

“St. John’s Parkway,” Sherlock said, struggling against John’s hand. “Victoria Square.”

John repeated the address to Lestrade. “Yeah. Yeah, I’ll do my best.”

“John.” Sherlock was sitting all the way up and John moved to push him back down again but at the
tone in his voice, he stopped. “John, you’ve got to go after him.”

Sherlock fisted his hands in John’s shirt. His eyes were blazing. “He hasn’t had time to get far.
You’ve got to get him. He knows we’re after him now. He’ll change locations. We’ll have to start all
over again… Please, John.”

John put his hands over Sherlock’s. His voice was gentle but firm. “Sherlock, if you think I’m going
to leave you to bleed to death in an alley in order to catch some bloody criminal, then you are
officially out of your mind.”

“You already know I’m out of my mind. Besides I’m hardly bleeding to death. I’m perfectly fine.”
There was sweat standing out on Sherlock’s forehead from the effort of sitting up. His hands
tightened in the fabric of John’s shirt. “We’ve got to catch him, John.”

John rubbed his palms over the back of Sherlock’s hands. “Sherlock, I need you to lie back.”

“John, listen to me—”

“Sherlock! Every second you stay sitting up is another milliliter of blood draining out of your body
and away from your brain so if you want to retain the ability to keep nagging me then I suggest you
lie back.”

Sherlock lay back. He looked irritated but it was clear he was getting exhausted. He shut his eyes. “I
hope this isn’t how you treat all your patients. You have a terrible bedside manner.”

“No,” John said, reaching out to take Sherlock’s wrist. “No, you get the special treatment reserved
for particularly difficult patients.”

“What an honor,” Sherlock intoned. He didn’t protest when John started to check his pulse. Not a
good sign. His eyes were still closed and his color was steadily worsening. His pulse was weak and
erratic.

John glanced down the alley. They were at the heart of a network of narrow alleys behind a stretch
of houses and therefore not within view of the street. He wanted to get Sherlock to the mouth of the
alley so the paramedics didn’t have to waste time finding them. However, Sherlock remaining
upright for the length of time it would take him to get to the street was out of the question.

Sherlock was white as a sheet.

John looked down to check his makeshift bandage and saw that Sherlock was rapidly bleeding
through it. He swore loudly and tore off another long strip of his now desecrated undershirt.

Sherlock made a sound.

John looked down at him with concern but he saw that Sherlock was smiling. “Oh, John. You
beast!”

John used the remainder of his undershirt to finish the bandage, then he shrugged out of his jacket
and spread it over Sherlock’s chest. “Right. So I’m going to do something which might be a terrible idea.”

Sherlock opened hazy eyes and looked up at him. “I admit, I’m feeling weaker than I’d like but say the word and I’ll help you. Don’t know if I can stand though.” He frowned and tried once again to sit up.

“No, you daft sot, I’m going to carry you.”

Sherlock scoffed. “John, I’m exactly thirteen centimeters taller than you are, there’s no way—”

“Shut up and put your arms around my neck.” Stooping down, John slid one arm under Sherlock’s shoulders and the other under his knees and lifted him with surprising ease into the air. He caught the wince of pain on Sherlock’s face. “Sorry,” he grunted. “Hold on and I’ll go as fast as I can.”

Sherlock obediently looped his arms around John’s neck. Sherlock’s skin was cold where it touched John’s. John could feel his breathing, quick and shallow against the front of his chest. “I can’t believe you’re carrying me.”

“Luckily you don’t weigh much.” He was halfway to the mouth of the alley when he heard sirens in the distance. “Thank God,” he muttered.

“I’m really fine. I don’t know what you’re so worried about.” Sherlock’s speech was starting to slur.

John turned the corner and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the street. A police car screeched into view just as he reached the mouth of the alley.

“John!” He heard Lestrade’s shout before he saw him. His arms were starting to shake from the effort of holding Sherlock. He heard running footsteps and then Lestrade was at his side. “Jesus Christ, what happened?”

“He gashed his leg open on some barbed wire. Where are the paramedics?”

“They’re just behind us. Here they are.” Lestrade fell into step beside him as John started walking toward the truck. “Thank God you were with him. He’s been out of control the last few days.”

“I can still hear you, you know,” Sherlock said but his eyes were closed. His forehead was drenched in sweat. John could feel his grip around John’s neck weakening.

“Hang on, Sherlock. We’re almost there.”

This time, Sherlock didn’t respond. The back doors of the ambulance were open and someone rushed forward to help lift Sherlock out of John’s arms.

Sherlock made a sound of protest and tightened his hold around John’s neck.

“It’s alright, Sherlock. I’m right here.”

They maneuvered Sherlock onto a gurney and John immediately fell into conference with the paramedics. “Laceration on inner thigh. Possible puncture wound. Hasn’t stopped bleeding since impact. Pulse is weak and erratic. Definite hypovolemic shock. He’s past stage two, well on his way to stage three.”

The paramedics began wheeling the gurney into the truck. Sherlock started to sit up, a look of sheer panic on his face.
“John—”

John moved to climb in after him but one of the paramedics stopped him with an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry, sir. No passengers.”

John opened his mouth to protest, but then shut it and took a step back. He nodded. “Right.”

“John!” Sherlock was still struggling to sit up. One of the paramedics put a hand on his shoulder.

“Sherlock, you’re going to be fine.” But something in John’s chest flipped unpleasantly at the desperation in Sherlock’s voice. “I’ll see you at the hospital. We’ll be right behind.”

“John—!”

Sherlock’s protest was lost as the doors of the ambulance swung shut.

John took a deep breath and turned to Lestrade. “Fancy giving me a ride?”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter coming very soon. Thank you so much to all of you who have left comments, I can't convey how much I appreciate it!!
Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

I apologize in advance for this chapter. It has to get worse before it gets better. And it will get better, I promise. It really, really will. Hang in there, faithful readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John tried to reassure himself the entire long ride to the hospital that Sherlock’s panic was just a result of his shock, not the result of some past traumatic experience at a hospital that Mycroft had exposed him to. For a man who loved cadavers as much as Sherlock it seemed strange for him to voice any kind of aversion toward going to a hospital. John also knew Sherlock had a high tolerance for physical pain so it seemed odd that his panic would be a result of his wound. But he had had no choice in the matter.

Still, John couldn’t suppress the wriggle of guilt in the pit of his stomach at the memory of Sherlock’s face. It felt wrong for them to separate under any circumstances during a case. They always stuck together, no matter what.

To top it all off, he and Lestrade were stuck in morning rush hour traffic.

John shifted impatiently in his seat.

“He’ll be alright.” Lestrade threw John a sideways glance before returning his gaze to the stream of traffic. “He just doesn’t like hospitals.”

John looked at Lestrade inquiringly.

“Or I should say, doesn’t like being a patient at hospitals.”

“Why not?”

Lestrade threw John another significant look but didn’t say anything.

John waited.

Lestrade looked like he was trying to prevent himself from saying something and failing. Finally, he sighed. “It’s from back in the days when Sherlock was… using. There were several… incidents where he had to be forcibly restrained.”

“Jesus.”

“And there were usually paramedics involved.”

John let out a hard breath. “If I had known—”

“If you had known, you wouldn’t have done anything differently. He needed the paramedics, John. It couldn’t be helped. He’ll be alright.”

John rubbed a hand over his mouth and didn’t say anything. In fact, he didn’t say anything the long
By the time they found out where Sherlock was and filled out the necessary paperwork to ensure his release, they had finished with him in surgery. However, John and Lestrade still had to wait another forty-five minutes for Sherlock to emerge.

“You don’t have to stay,” John told Lestrade for the third time. “We can just get a cab home from here.”

“John. I’m just as concerned about Sherlock as you are. I’ll leave you two as soon as I see Sherlock’s alright.”

John nodded his thanks. He would have been grateful even if Lestrade had only been pretending to care but he knew the sentiment was genuine.

A doctor emerged. “You’re here for Sherlock Holmes?”

“That’s right,” said John, coming forward. “How is he?”

“We gave him a transfusion and stitched him up. Twenty-four stitches. He’ll need to come back to get them out in about a week. We gave him a prescription for co-codomal. And he’ll need to take iron supplements for the next month or so.”

The doctor hesitated and John could tell there was something he wasn’t telling them. He felt concern spike his chest.

“What is it?”

“Mr. Holmes proved to be a… difficult patient. We had to give him something to calm him down.”

The doctor frowned. “He might be a little out of it for a few hours.”

“What did you give him?” John heard the note of aggression in his own voice and sensed Lestrade tensing beside him.

“He should be fine by this evening. Just let him sleep it off.”

John could feel his pulse pounding in the tense line of his throat. He fought to keep his voice calm.

“What did you give him?”

“We had to administer a sedative, but I can assure you there’s no need for concern, Mr….?“


“Oh.” The other man’s face cleared. “Well, then Dr. Watson, I’m sure you can understand that when a patient is making care impossible, one is required to do what’s necessary to get the patient under control.”

John took a step forward and Lestrade grabbed hold of his arm. “John—”

John stopped moving but he leaned in, his voice low with fury. “I understand that one’s medical license can be revoked if one administers unauthorized drugs to someone with a history of drug usage.”

The look on the doctor’s face shifted again, this time to one of barely concealed contempt.

“In that case, I’m certain your friend will be just fine. It’s no wonder it took such a strong dosage to
sedate him.”

For a moment, John couldn’t see through his rage. He clenched his fist and felt Lestrade’s fingers tightening on his arm, but just then a nurse emerged through the swinging doors that led back to the surgery pushing someone in a wheelchair, someone with dark hair and a pale, bruised face.

“Sherlock!”

John surged forward and Lestrade let go of his arm.

Sherlock had been wearing a sinister expression but his face cleared when he caught sight of John. He was still wearing his suit jacket, which was wrinkled and torn, but his bloody trousers had been replaced with hospital issue pajamas. There was a fresh cut on his forehead stuck together with medical tape.

“John! Thank God. Help me!” Sherlock started to rise from the wheelchair and the nurse made a disapproving noise but didn’t try and stop him. Lestrade came forward to take Sherlock’s arm.

Sherlock pulled away from him. “No. John!”

“It’s alright, Sherlock. Let him help you. I’ll be right there.” John turned to the doctor, and now made no attempt to hide his fury. “What did you do to him? He didn’t have that bloody great gash on his head before he got into that ambulance.”

“The head wound you’re referring to is the very reason Mr. Holmes had to be restrained. That was self-inflicted in his violent attempts to refuse life-saving care. He was a danger to himself and my staff, Dr. Watson. As a medical professional, you should know that sometimes sedation is the only option.”

Sherlock had managed to get to his feet but he was having trouble standing on his own. He was leaning heavily against Lestrade’s shoulder, glaring at anyone around him wearing a hospital uniform. It was evident that he still had very little muscle control.

“How much did you give him?”

The doctor’s eyes were cold. “As I said before, he was resistant to the first dose. We had no choice but to administer a second.”

“John!” Sherlock was struggling to make his way to John’s side. When he was within arm’s reach, he launched himself from Lestrade’s grip and fell hard into John’s shoulder.

John caught him and slid an arm around his waist. “I’m here, Sherlock.”

“John, John, John.” Sherlock buried his face in John’s shoulder and let out a long breath. “Thank God.”

“You gave him Lorazepam, didn’t you?” John hissed over Sherlock’s head. “He was in hypovolemic shock and your paramedics administered a tranquilizer?”

“Listen, Doctor.” The man smiled condescendingly at John, his eyes traveling pointedly down the front of John’s mud-splattered jumper. “Go home and get some rest. I think you need it as much as your friend. If you’d like to file a formal complaint with the hospital for any reason, feel free to come back tomorrow and one of our secretaries can assist you in filling out the necessary paperwork. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have patients to look after. Good day to you.”
He turned his back on John and vanished through the swinging double doors.

John made a move as if to follow him but Lestrade’s voice stopped him. “John—don’t. It’s not worth it.”

John took several deep breaths and readjusted his grip on Sherlock, who was hanging like a dead weight at his side.

“Let me help you.”

Lestrade came around and took Sherlock’s other arm. This time he didn’t protest. Between the two of them, they managed to get Sherlock out to the curb. Several hospital attendants passed them on their way with inquisitive looks but John’s expression stopped all of them from offering any kind of assistance.

Once outside, John hailed a cab and Lestrade began disentangling himself from Sherlock’s side.

“I’ve got to get back to the station. Are you sure you can manage?”


“Don’t mention it. Text me later, to let me know he’s… back to normal.” Lestrade dropped his voice, his gaze lingering on Sherlock’s matted curls. His head was rolling on John’s shoulder. “I’d keep an eye on him. He seems really out of it.”

John nodded again, adjusting his grip around Sherlock’s waist, in order to start maneuvering him toward the taxi. “I’ll talk to you later.”

He pushed Sherlock into the cab first, and then slid in after him.

“221 Baker Street, please.”

Sherlock crawled over the leather seat until he was pressed hard against John’s side. He laid his head on John’s shoulder, one arm curling possessively over the front of John’s stomach. His hand fisted in the material of John’s jumper.

“Thank god,” he breathed, turning once more to bury his face in John’s neck. “Thank god you’re here.”

John slid an arm around Sherlock’s shoulders and squeezed. “That’s right, I’m here. Everything’s fine now.”

“John, John, John,” he chanted happily against John’s neck. “I knew you would come back for me.”

The anger burning in the pit of John’s stomach was turning slowly to a sick feeling of guilt. “Of course, I came back. I told you I would, didn’t I?”

Sherlock buried his face into the crease of John’s shoulder. John put his hand up to hold the back of Sherlock’s head. The knuckles on the fist clenching John’s jumper were white. “John the Baptist. John D. Rockefeller. John Napier. John Paul II. John Lennon. John Dalton. So many Johns but none of them you. None of them as brave as John Watson.”

“God, what did they give you?”

“Lorazepam is a high-potency, intermediate-duration, three-hydroxy benzodiazepine drug frequently used as a sedative. It has all six intrinsic benzodiazepine effects: anxiolysis, anterograde amnesia,
sedation/hypnosis, anti-convulsion, antiemesis and muscle relaxation,” Sherlock recited, his lip sticking to John’s neck as he spoke.

The sleeve of Sherlock’s suit jacket had bunched up as he tightened his arm around John’s waist. John saw a smudge of purple and instinctively grabbed for Sherlock’s hand. Very gently, he pushed the sleeve of his jacket up to his elbow.

“Jesus Christ, Sherlock.”

There was a mottled trail of dark bruises coiling up Sherlock’s forearm and wrist.

His hand lay unresisting in John’s grip, turned up, elegant fingers curling in toward his palm. At the sight of the livid marks on Sherlock’s skin, John felt his anger return in a rush so powerful it stole his breath. *How dare they…*

Sherlock carried on, undeterred, his mouth hot against the skin of John’s neck. “Its uniqueness is largely explained by its pharmacokinetic properties—poor water and lipid solubility, high protein binding and anoxidative metabolism to a pharmacologically inactive glucuronide form—and by its high relative potency.”

“Sherlock, listen to me. How did they give it you? Was it an injection?”

“Lorazepam injectable solution may be administered either by deep intramuscular injection or by intravenous injection. The injectable solution comes in one-milliliter ampoules containing two or four milligrams. The solvents used are polyethylene glycol four hundred and propylene glycol.”

“Sherlock—”

“In my case, the dose was administered intramuscularly into the deltoid muscle of my arm. The first dose had no effect. They had to hold me down to give me the second.”

John’s hand tightened convulsively on Sherlock’s shoulders and Sherlock pulled his hand from John’s grip to pat him soothingly on the hip.

“It’s alright, John. You saved me.”

John tucked his chin against the top of Sherlock’s head, and felt Sherlock’s curls tickling his throat. His breath was coming hard. He was struggling to calm down and failing.

“I never should have left you.”

“No. No, John.” Sherlock’s hand was tightening again in John’s jumper. His voice was fierce. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

John let his lips brush the part in Sherlock’s hair and smelled the bitter antiseptic smell of hospital.

“I hate them.” Sherlock whispered, his tone suddenly hostile.

“Who?”

“All of them.”

John felt the hard, tight feeling in his stomach unclench slightly as Sherlock burrowed deeper into his side. He sighed and John felt his eyelashes flutter against his throat as Sherlock shut his eyes.

“All of them but you.”
Sherlock fell asleep before the cab reached Baker Street, coiled against John’s side like a tentacular plant, his breath warm and muggy in the hollow of John’s neck.

John hated to wake him but he knew that he couldn’t manage to carry Sherlock up two flights of stairs.

He guided him as gently as possible from the cab, and over the threshold of the front door. The stairs were a challenge. Sherlock was goggier than before and he seemed unable to do much more than lean heavily against John’s side as John struggled to get each of his long legs up and over the individual steps.

It was still early in the afternoon but Mrs. Hudson was clearly out. John knew she would have come inquiring at the sound of their awkward, shuffling tread on the stairs.

John had to pause to catch his breath on the landing and Sherlock seemed to revive slightly in the interval. He lifted his head off of John’s shoulder and pressed his forehead against John’s jaw. He exhaled slowly through his nose and John felt the long plume of air stream down the side of his neck.

“John.”

His tone was different. It had lost its edge of desperation and now sounded… curious, inquisitive.

“Come on, Sherlock. I need your help on these last few steps. Up we go.”

He readjusted his arm on Sherlock’s waist and moved him toward the stairs, but Sherlock wasn’t helping. He had pulled his face in against the side of John’s and his lips were currently moving over John’s ear.

“Mmm... John.” His tone had definitely shifted. He said John’s name like it was an exotic treat, only to be savored on very special occasions. The heat of his breath was making the hair stand up on the back of John’s neck.

“Sherlock, please. A little help.”

Sherlock made a sound like a purr against John’s ear and parted his lips. John instinctively jerked his head away. “Sherlock! Come on. You can do it. It’s just one more flight.”

Sherlock’s laugh was a huff of hot air on John’s throat but he straightened up slightly and stepped when John told him to step, his dark head bowed as he concentrated on his feet.

They made it up the stairs and through the living room, but in the doorway of Sherlock’s room, he started dragging again. Sherlock’s knees were buckling, his long legs folding beneath him. John had to pull him in toward his chest, sliding his hands under Sherlock’s shoulder blades to keep him upright.

“Woah, woah. Easy now. Look, we’re almost there.”

Sherlock looped his arms around John’s neck and John had to lock his knees to keep from being pulled to the ground. Suddenly, Sherlock’s mouth was at John’s throat, his breath one long exhalation of John’s name. “John, John, John.”

His mouth grazed the tendon in John’s neck that stood out as he tried to pull away.
“All right, Sherlock, that’s enough.”

Sherlock pressed the length of his body against John’s.

John struggled to maintain distance between them as he dragged Sherlock closer to the bed. Sherlock opened his mouth and his lips traveled, soft and hot, along the underside of John’s jaw. John gritted his teeth against the sensation.

“My John.” Sherlock’s voice was low and breathless, deeper than it had any right to be; the feel of it against John’s skin went straight to his groin. “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

“Shut up, Sherlock.” John pushed Sherlock back against the mattress. “Now get into bed.”

“I mean it.” Sherlock’s arms were still fastened around John’s neck. He used his hold on John to pull John down against him. His mouth was still pressed to the skin of John’s throat, open, warm and wet.

“Sherlock, stop it. I’m serious.” John was struggling to untangle Sherlock’s arms. “Let go.”

Sherlock licked the skin under John’s ear and slid a hand down between them, long fingers brushing the curve of John’s erection through his trousers.

John jerked at the contact.

“All right, that’s enough now,” he gasped. “This isn’t fair.”

“What’s not fair?” Sherlock asked, opening his palm and dragging it over the bulge.

John shuddered and almost lost his balance.

Sherlock’s eyes were low-lidded, his irises a darker blue than John had ever seen. His expression was suddenly deadly serious. ”What's the matter?” There was a slight hitch in his voice as his hand ground a slow circle against the hard flesh of John’s erection. “You don't like it?”

"You're drunk—drugged.” He said, nearly stammering in his desperation. He straightened his arms again, struggling to lift himself off of Sherlock’s chest. “You’re not yourself. You don’t really want this.”

With surprising force, Sherlock pulled John down against him and licked the shell of his ear. His body under John’s was warm and pliant, his thighs parting to pull John closer against him. He opened his mouth against the side of John’s neck and bit down softly.

John let out a moan.

Sherlock’s clever fingers were pulling at the button on his jeans, tugging on the zip. His voice in John’s ear was breathless. “But you do…”

“Sherlock, stop…” John’s voice was ragged. “Don’t.”

Sherlock pushed the fabric apart, his fingers snaking in through the gap.

“Sherlock!” John reached down and grabbed hold of Sherlock’s wrist, stilling the movement.

Sherlock made a sound of protest and reached down with his other hand, but the drugs had made him weak, and John grabbed hold of that one too and easily pushed both of Sherlock’s wrists up above his head.
“No.” John leaned forward over Sherlock’s torso, breathing hard, his body making a cage over Sherlock’s. He rose up on his knees, lifting his hips away from the heat of Sherlock’s. He felt his erection throb in protest. “We are not doing this.”

Sherlock tipped his head back, exposing the long pale expanse of his neck. His lips were parted, his expression far away as he gazed up at John through lowered lashes. John licked his lips, struggling to tear his gaze from the shadowed groove at the base of Sherlock’s throat, which he was dying to lick.

Sherlock took advantage of his distraction to twist under him, sliding his knee up between John’s legs to stroke him through his jeans.

John hissed in response and jerked away, momentarily losing his hold on Sherlock’s wrists. Sherlock slid his arms around John’s neck and used his grip to pull John’s mouth down against his.

“No, Sherl—”

His protest was lost as Sherlock arched up against him and captured his mouth with his own. Something snapped inside John at the contact. He stopped struggling. Sherlock partied his lips and John sank down against him, his body melting into Sherlock’s, hips meeting Sherlock’s in a spark of heat.

The kiss was soft and sliding, Sherlock’s mouth opening to coax John’s tongue into his own. Against all his better judgment, he parted his lips and John heard himself make a sound like he’d been punched as Sherlock’s tongue pushed in past his teeth. Suddenly everything in his world narrowed to that point of contact between them, Sherlock’s tongue sweeping slow and sweet over his own, his mouth opening impossibly wider to take John deeper and the taste of him, oh god, the taste of him.

John made a desperate sound low in his throat, his arms shaking from the intensity of the sensation, and then there was a physical pain in his chest as he remembered that Sherlock wasn’t in his right mind and he shouldn’t be doing this.

It took all of his willpower to break away from the sweet hot force of Sherlock’s mouth. He pulled back, breathing hard, struggling to disentangle himself from Sherlock’s limbs.

He managed to free himself from Sherlock’s arms and he crawled backwards off the bed as fast as he could.

“John!”

Sherlock sat up and reached out for him, but John pushed him back against the pillows with a hand on his shoulder, careful to keep his distance.

“No, Sherlock. No. You’ve got to sleep now.”

Sherlock’s mouth was swollen and there was a flush creeping up his throat. He was staring at John’s mouth, his dark eyes unfocused. “John—”

“No, Sherlock, you’re not—this isn’t…” John couldn’t catch his breath. He shut his eyes. He had to clench his fists at his sides to stop them shaking. “Just go to sleep, Sherlock.”

Sherlock slumped back against the pillows in defeat, his expression stormy.

John made his way around the bed to the door and put one hand on the handle. “Just close your eyes and get some rest. You’ll feel fine again as soon as you get some sleep.”

Sherlock lay down on his side, with his back to the door.
John pulled the door open. “I’ll be next door if you need me.”

Sherlock didn’t answer. John pulled the door shut behind him.

“You’ll be back to yourself in the morning.”

***

He didn’t even make it to the living room before his legs gave out beneath him. He fell back against the door of Sherlock’s room and let himself slide down to the floor, his entire body shaking. He put his head in his hands and struggled to breathe deeply, all too aware of the erection still pressing painfully against the front of his trousers.

Get a grip, Watson. Get a fucking grip.

John shut his eyes.

What had just happened? What the bloody hell had just happened?

It was the drugs. It had to be. Sherlock was as high as a kite. He was out of his mind. But why would he feel inclined to kiss John? Even in his severely drugged state? He was just toying with you, John told himself fiercely. That’s what Sherlock does. He figures out what people want and then he—

The realization stopped John cold.

Oh my god. He knows.

In some part of his brilliant mind, he must have deduced that John was attracted to him. He had figured it out and now he was testing John to see whether he was right. No, to prove that he was right—Sherlock never got it wrong. With sudden horrible clarity John remembered Sherlock’s response to his protest that Sherlock hadn’t wanted it, the curl of amusement in his voice: “But you do.”

John dug his fingers into the sides of his skull, as if he could crush the memory from his head.

Sherlock had read John’s desire for him as easily as if he were reading a book, and whether he’d come onto John because he’d figured out that’s what John wanted, or because he wanted to prove that he was right, one thing remained clear and that was that Sherlock himself hadn’t wanted it.

John felt sick at the realization. It was as bad as his nightmares: Sherlock offering himself up to John against his own will, whether by compulsion or simply because he felt he owed it to John for some reason or another—both possibilities made John feel equally queasy with guilt.

He ground the palms of his hands into his eyes, willing himself to calm down.

There was a chance Sherlock would remember none of this the next morning. Tranquilizers often caused short-term memory loss if administered in strong enough doses, and Sherlock had certainly been given a strong dose. There was also a chance that Sherlock’s behavior was a direct result of the drug—hypersexuality being a common side effect as well as disinhibition.

He felt rage overwhelm him again at the thought of what they’d done to Sherlock—the gash above his eye and the deep bruising on his wrists. He’d obviously put up a fierce struggle; Sherlock’s panic must have been visceral for him to react so violently. Once again, John cursed himself for leaving Sherlock alone.
Never again, he thought fiercely to himself. *Never again.*

He let his head fall back against the door and listened hard for a moment for any sounds of movement on the other side. All was quiet. He hoped to god that Sherlock had fallen asleep and that would be the end of it. He would go in and check on him in a couple of hours but for the moment, John didn’t want to risk it.

Instead, he levered himself up off the floor and made his way to the bathroom. He was still filthy from their chase through the alleyway; his hands covered in dried traces of Sherlock’s blood. He would take a shower and he would wash away the memories of the whole encounter—Sherlock’s blood welling up between his hands, Sherlock’s arms around his neck, Sherlock’s mouth sweet and warm beneath his.

John stumbled as the memory gashed hot and painful through his mind. He fell against the doorframe, his forehead pressed against his arm. His cock was still throbbing, furious and neglected between his legs. *No.* John gritted his teeth. *No,* he wasn’t going to give himself the satisfaction. He couldn’t afford to keep this up any longer. He had to quench his feelings once and for all. He pushed himself upright and made his way into the bathroom, determined to ignore the insistent pounding of the blood along his cock.

But as he stripped off his filthy clothes and stepped under the icy spray of the water (which he’d kept deliberately cold), he couldn’t stop himself remembering the feel of Sherlock’s lips on his throat, his fingers, those long beautiful fingers stroking the length of John’s cock through his trousers, the sound he’d made when John had melted down against him. For one brief moment, he let himself imagine that it had all been real, that Sherlock had wanted it as badly as he had, that the sound of longing Sherlock had made as he pulled John against him was genuine—the eager press of his tongue into John’s mouth because he needed to know that John felt the same way he did.

*This will be the last time,* he told himself. *This is it. Just one last time…*

He’d taken his cock in his hand without even realizing it and suddenly he was coming, arching up into his fist as the freezing water pounded his back, sobbing with the intensity of his release.

He fell hard against the wall of the shower, shuddering, wiping the tears from his eyes with the heel of his hand. He told himself the tears were simply the result of the stress of the last twenty-four hours, and the fact that he hadn’t masturbated since the night he’d arrived back from New Zealand. *Just the release of physical stress,* he told himself, as he reached for the soap. *Nothing more.*

He turned the temperature of the water back to hot, taking several focused moments to regulate his breathing. No more pining like a lovesick school girl. He squared his shoulders as he stepped back under the water. This was the end. He took his longing, his despair, his memories of Sherlock’s body under his—all of it, and shut it away, deep within himself. He took the bar of soap and began to scrub hard at his skin. He would wash it all away—every trace of the experience—and emerge in possession of himself once again, all his bitter thoughts of what was and what might have been resolutely forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again for all the wonderful comments, I appreciate them so much! I will get the next chapter posted as soon as humanly possible!!!
Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

So this next section of the story is a little case-fic heavy, but I promise you that all your patience will pay off in the end. The sexual tension is going to be resolved MULTIPLE TIMES OVER. Really.

That being said, I hope you enjoy. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John checked on Sherlock periodically throughout the afternoon and was relieved to find him sound asleep each time. He called in to cancel his shift at the hospital, explaining to Sarah that yes everything was fine, but that Sherlock had had rather a bad accident and needed looking after. He’d responded to a concerned text from Lestrade, assuring him that Sherlock was sleeping.

He stayed awake long into the night, reading in the darkened living room, with one ear trained on the door. He was confident that Sherlock would awake the next morning and be back to himself, but with such a high dose of drugs being administered after such an extreme shock to Sherlock’s body, there was always a chance something could go wrong.

He went to check on Sherlock one last time before going up to bed. He was still curled over on his side in the same position—his sleep so heavy and deep he hadn’t moved since John left the room hours ago. John bent down to listen to his breathing. One arm was thrown up over his head, his sleeve still rolled up to his elbow to reveal the dark bruising on his wrist. John swallowed down the rage that blistered in him at the sight of those marks and reached out gently to take Sherlock’s pulse.

Sherlock shifted at his touch, blinking sleep out of his eyes to look up at John.

John let go of Sherlock’s wrist and made to take a step back but Sherlock’s hand shot out and grabbed him, his grip surprisingly strong.

“John.” His voice was thick with sleep.

“It’s alright. It’s just me. Go back to sleep.”

“John.” Sherlock shut his eyes again and sighed contentedly but didn’t let go of John’s hand.

“Sherlock, I need my hand back.”

Sherlock made a muffled noise into the pillow.

“Sherlock…”

Sherlock’s eyes opened and settled on John’s face. His gaze was unnervingly calm. “Stay with me,” he whispered. “Please.”

The plaintive note in Sherlock’s voice made something in John’s chest ache. He thought of Sherlock’s face as the doors of the ambulance slammed shut.
“Alright,” he said, his voice rough. “Alright, I’ll stay but let go of my hand so I can get a chair.”

Sherlock acquiesced and John pulled a chair up beside Sherlock’s bed. Sherlock settled back into the pillows.

“Well go to sleep. I’ll be right here.”

Sherlock shut his eyes. The last thing John remembered before slipping off himself was the small smile on Sherlock’s face.

***

John awoke the next morning with a sharp pain in his neck, slumped over in the chair beside Sherlock’s bed. He rubbed at his shoulder. That had clearly been a mistake.

Sherlock’s bed was empty.

Swallowing down his rising panic, John made his way to the living room to find Sherlock wide awake and looking very alert, if slightly pale, sitting at the dining room table, typing furiously on his laptop. Some of the fear drained out of John’s body. He had been half-afraid Sherlock would have left the flat as soon as he was conscious again.

“How are you feeling?” John circled around to the other side of the table to get a better look at Sherlock. There were dark circles under his eyes but the crease of concentration between his brows was all the evidence John needed to prove that Sherlock had fully returned to his right mind.

“Yes, all things considered.” John didn’t realize how tightly he was holding onto the back of the chair until Sherlock’s eyes slid over his hands. He let go.

Sherlock’s gaze lingered briefly on his face before returning to the computer screen. “Whatever it is I may have said or done yesterday, I’d prefer not to hear about it.”

“You didn’t—” John hesitated and then let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “You don’t remember anything?”

“I remember what happened in the ambulance.” John didn’t miss the dark look that flashed across Sherlock’s face before it passed. He felt a stab of guilt. “They determined I was dangerous enough to require two doses.” His mouth twisted, fingers tensing briefly on the keys. He looked back up at John, his expression cold. “I don’t remember anything after that.”

“I’m sorry.” John looked down at his hands to see that they were once again clenched on the back of the chair. He forced them to relax. He fought to keep his voice even. “I’m sorry I left you.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Sherlock wasn’t looking at him. He’d started typing again, his fingers flying over the keys. “You saved my life.”

John returned his gaze to his knuckles, counting his breathing to slow his heart. He took a deep breath. “Lestrade told me about… well, he told me why you aren’t so keen on paramedics. Sherlock, if I had known—”

“Well, you didn’t,” he snapped. “Besides, you were right. I’d already lost more than a significant
amount of blood by the time they arrived. If you hadn’t phoned Lestrade, I would have bled out in that alley. As for my history with hospital personnel,” Sherlock’s voice was practically a sneer. “I’d rather not talk about it. Ask Mycroft for details if you’re interested. I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to fill you in.”

John didn’t say anything.

There were several seconds of silence filled only with the sounds of Sherlock’s typing.

“You didn’t have to sit up with me all night,” Sherlock said, his voice softening a fraction of a degree. He glanced up at John. “That must have been hell on your shoulder.”

“It’s fine.”

The corner of Sherlock’s mouth quirked. “So that’s two of us then denying we’re in pain.”

John’s own mouth twitched in response but he didn’t let go of the chair. “There’s co-codomal when you need it. If your leg’s bothering you.”

Sherlock’s mouth twisted again. He didn’t look up from the screen. “My, my, what a risk they took prescribing such strong painkillers to a former addict.”

John frowned. “I can always get you something stronger if you need it.”

Sherlock’s eyes flickered up to him and this time his smile reached his eyes. “Good old Dr. Watson.”

John found himself smiling back, but there was still a cold feeling tugging at the pit of his stomach. “You really don’t remember anything else from yesterday?”

The smile faded from Sherlock’s face and he returned his gaze to the computer screen. “No.”

Something about Sherlock’s tone of voice made it clear that that was the last he would say on the subject. Even if he was lying, John was grateful for the excuse not to press the matter. Any reason to forget it happened was a good reason. He breathed a small internal sigh of relief. Good. Things could go back to normal.

John straightened up from the chair. “Unfortunately the strongest thing I have to offer you at the moment is tea. Interested?”

Sherlock’s face as he looked back up at John was filled with gratitude. “I’d love some.”

***

The next few days passed in a haze of deceptive normalcy. Surprisingly, Sherlock didn’t complain about being confined to the house. He grumbled a fair amount about having to hobble from room to room (he really wasn’t supposed to put weight on his leg until the stitches came out) but for once he seemed to understand that his body would be of more use to him if he gave it the time it needed to recover.

John wanted to believe that Sherlock had learned his lesson—that he’d finally realized that the reason he’d been so badly injured in the first place, thus allowing their target to get away, was because he’d neglected his body’s needs for so many days. John privately hoped this was true but he didn’t push his luck by saying anything about it to Sherlock. He was too grateful for Sherlock’s relative state of calm surrounding the injury to jeopardize it with a lecture.
Instead, he waited on Sherlock as much as he could—reminding him at every chance he got that this was temporary, and as soon as the stitches came out, things would go back to normal.

John returned to work at the clinic the day after Sherlock had woken up fully restored to his normal cold and calculating self. Mrs. Hudson had returned from visiting her sister up north so John felt confident that if something were to go wrong, at least Mrs. Hudson would be in shouting distance. Of course, the reality was that Sherlock shouted for Mrs. Hudson at every available opportunity, whether to bring him tea, to pass him something on the other side of the room, or simply because his pillows needed fluffing.

John didn’t feel too guilty about it because he knew how Mrs. Hudson doted on Sherlock. As often as she insisted she wasn’t their housekeeper, the delight she took in making a fuss over Sherlock was undeniable.

“I’m always telling you boys to be more careful! It’s a miracle one of you hasn’t ended up dead, the awful things you get up to. Twenty-four stitches? It’s dreadful, just dreadful.”

John was happy to see the steady stream of freshly baked goods that Mrs. Hudson supplied Sherlock with. Even if he only ate a tenth of what she brought him, it would do him good. He needed fattening up.

Lestrade had texted them the day after their botched attempt to arrest Timothy Briggs to let them know that the suspect had vanished, just as Sherlock had predicted. To John’s great surprise, Sherlock didn’t seem terribly bothered by the news. After practically begging John to chase the man down that morning lest he get away, it seemed odd that Sherlock wouldn’t express more frustration over their failure. But perhaps he’d made his peace with the issue. After all, it wasn’t like Sherlock to dwell on failures for very long.

Sherlock managed to keep himself occupied thanks to a steady stream of communication between him and Lestrade. John wasn’t sure whether he was feeding Sherlock details about potential cases, or if Sherlock was simply nagging him, but whatever it was it kept Sherlock busy.

Sherlock had established himself as a semi-permanent resident on the living room sofa. Every time John walked into the room, Sherlock was typing away furiously on his computer, or his phone—most often both. Whatever it was Lestrade was doing, John felt eternally grateful. He made a mental note to thank him next time he saw him in person.

Meanwhile, John was away most days working at the clinic. He threw himself into work in order to get himself out of the flat. He spent most of the day keeping his mind carefully blank or focusing with all his attention on whatever task was at hand. For the most part he was successful at not thinking about any of it.

It was more difficult in the evenings, when he came home to order take out and watch crap telly with Sherlock, but Sherlock was quieter than usual himself so the long periods of silence didn’t feel as burdensome. With anyone else, John’s reticence might provoke commentary, but Sherlock was so focused on whatever was going on inside his own head that he didn’t seem to notice.

There was something occupying his mind—something big. It was now the norm for Sherlock to sit with his fingers steepled in front of his mouth for hours at a time without moving, seemingly unaware of what was going on around him. It was a relief for John, not only because it meant he could watch whatever he wanted on the telly without Sherlock objecting, but mostly because it meant his own strange mood went unnoticed.

On the day before Sherlock’s stitches were due to come out, John came home to find Sherlock
digging frantically through the bin of papers that they had used to get the warrant to arrest Briggs. John had taken the neatly organized piles and stowed them in a box beside the sofa. Now, in Sherlock’s frenzy, they were forming a small maelstrom around his head.

“What are you doing?”

Sherlock was on his hands and knees beside the living room sofa. All John could see was Sherlock’s blue-robed bottom as he dug behind the couch. When Sherlock re-emerged there was lint in his hair. His eyes were shining with excitement.

“It wasn’t the husband after all!”

“Sorry, what are you on about? Whose husband?”

“Timothy Briggs, John! It wasn’t him. Or rather it was, but it wasn’t only him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the two of them were in it together. Husband and wife, John. Timothy and Tilly Briggs.”

“How d’you reckon?”

“Tim Briggs evaded arrest. He’s not in custody. We’ve had no sign of him for a week but the murders have stopped.”

“So, he’s probably lying low now that he knows we’re after him, right?”

“Wrong. Two victims a week for the past three weeks, John. After so methodical a system why would he stop now?”

“His… murderous impulses are all used up?”

“They’ve done all the murdering they need to get what they want.”

“Which is…?”

“The insurance money if the company folds,” Sherlock brandished a piece of paper triumphantly. “Tilly Briggs has declared bankruptcy. Tim is going to buy her out. If all goes according to plan they’re going to rendezvous somewhere on the opposite side of the globe, start all over again with new names and the very cruise ship that Briggs sold to her husband.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Lestrade’s been doing some reconnaissance for me. Surprisingly well, I might add.”

Ah. So that explained the constant stream of communication. It wasn’t a new case after all. John felt a funny little twist in his stomach at the knowledge that Sherlock had entrusted Lestrade to get what he needed, and not him.

“So now what?”

“We can’t arrest her until we get one final piece of evidence. Tilly Briggs is throwing a party next week. To celebrate the end of the murders, she claims. A gala on board the ship. She’s advertising it as a sort of farewell to the business, ‘going out with a bang,’ but it’s really a celebration for a job well done. I have reason to believe that Timothy Briggs will be somewhere on board. If we can’t get the evidence we need, we still have the warrant for Brigg’s arrest.”
“Have we been invited to this ah… gala event?”

“Hardly.”

“Won’t our presence seem strange?”

“Not at all. Tilly Briggs obviously loves dramatics, which will work perfectly in our favor on this occasion. Time to make a trip to the tuxedo shop, John. It’s a masked ball.”

***

John fiddled with his bow tie in front of the mirror. He’d never been very good at tying bow ties. No matter how many times he tried, it came out looking lopsided. He sighed and decided to give it up.

“John!”

“Coming!” He went down the stairs, nervously flattening his hair as he went. He’d never felt comfortable in formal wear and the rented tux was probably the fanciest thing he’d ever worn. But Sherlock had insisted that they look the part, and as he’d said, Tilly Briggs was a fan of ostentation. In order to not be conspicuous it was imperative that they blend in.

John rounded the corner into the living room and stopped dead in his tracks when he caught sight of Sherlock. He had to shut his mouth to stop himself from gasping. Hardly surprising that Sherlock in a three-piece tailored suit transformed him into sex on legs, but the sight of it still literally took John’s breath away.

The suit was his own, (of course, with Mycroft for a brother, you’d have to own a three-piece suit), and as a result it fit him like a dream. The lines of the suit showed off his long legs and slim waist, and the flash of white at his wrists and throat made his normally pale skin look golden. His dark hair was combed straight back from his forehead, highlighting the sharp planes of his angular face. His eyes, as they flickered over John approvingly, were ice blue.

Sherlock frowned when he saw John’s mangled bow tie. “What happened there?”

“I’ve always been rubbish at tying these. Never got the hang of it.”

“Let me.” In two long strides, Sherlock had closed the distance between them and his agile fingers were at John’s throat, pulling apart the silk.

John held himself very still, ignoring the intimate feeling of Sherlock’s breath on his temple as his fingers delicately manipulated the fabric around John’s neck. He smelled of aftershave and some sharp, clean scent that John recognized as uniquely Sherlock. He fought the instinct to shut his eyes and lean in closer.

John lifted his chin to give Sherlock more room to work, looking pointedly over Sherlock’s shoulder to a spot on the opposite wall. “I feel like a right prat.”

“Well, you don’t look it.” John’s eyes darted up to Sherlock’s but he was concentrating on the bow tie, one elegant line between his brows. Sherlock’s movements were deft and efficient. He stepped back after just a few seconds and smiled appraisingly at his own handiwork. “There. Much better.”

John turned to glance at himself in the mirror above the mantel and nodded his approval. “Thanks.”

“And now for the finishing touch…” Sherlock leaned over the desk and produced two black masks.
“Speaking of feeling like a prat,” John muttered.

Sherlock tsked at him. “Nonsense. It really couldn’t be more in our favor that the Briggs woman is so fond of showy displays. You don’t have to put it on until we get in the cab. Now, ready?”

“Yes.” John noted the significant lift of Sherlock’s eyebrow. “Oh, right.” He patted the inner pocket of his jacket where his gun was tucked snugly against his hip. “All ready.”

“Good.” Sherlock knotted his scarf around his throat. “Shall we?”

***

The ship was small for a cruise ship, but big enough to make quite a statement, docked at the edge of the dark water with all its decks lit up like a birthday cake.

John whistled as the cab pulled to a halt outside an elaborate entryway leading to the upper decks. Two smartly dressed attendants were greeting guests and directing them up a ramp that was wreathed with tiny lights.

“She does like to make a show, doesn’t she?”

Sherlock paid the cabbie and John slid out after him. They’d tied on their masks in the cab and if John had felt silly before, he felt absolutely ridiculous now—making his way up to a party on board a ship in a tux and a black mask; he felt like a character out of the pulp novels he’d read as a boy.

“I’m guessing this kind of event is invitation only. How are we going to get past the goons?”

Sherlock slid his hand inside his coat and pulled out two envelopes.

“Ah, brilliant. Where’d you get ahold of those?”

“Another helpful favor from our devoted Detective Inspector.” Sherlock leaned into John’s shoulder as they approached the front entrance, keeping his voice low. “Now remember what we discussed. First sign you see of Briggs, text me. Get him in a compromising position and keep him there. The Yard is on standby to make the arrest and I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

They’d discussed their plan on the cab ride over. Sherlock was headed for Tilly Brigg’s office to get copies of the insurance claims. John was to keep a lookout for Tim Briggs. Sherlock had obsessively grilled John on his stature and eye color, as he would also be masked—that is, if he was bold enough to appear at the party. There was a chance he might be skulking somewhere out of sight. Whichever of them obtained their goal first was to contact the other.

“I imagine the Briggs are feeling pretty pleased with themselves. Hopefully, their overconfidence will lead them to slip up. These types usually do.”

Sherlock straightened up as they reached the shimmering entryway, his body language subtly coalescing into that of someone with incredibly high status. Granted, Sherlock tended to hold himself pretty confidently most of the time, but this was something else entirely. John had to marvel at Sherlock’s ability to transform himself so completely in a matter of seconds. At times it was almost disturbing to witness.

He glided toward the attendant, proffering the invitations with a disinterested flick of the wrist.

The man’s eyes lowered deferentially to scan the invitation. “Thank you, sir. Right this way.”
John followed Sherlock up the ramp way, making one last fruitless attempt to flatten his hair.

“Stop doing that,” Sherlock told him out of the corner of his mouth. “It makes you look like a primary schooler on portrait day.”

“Well, that’s what I feel like,” John hissed. “I’m not used to all this posh stuff. It makes me nervous.”

Sherlock slowed his gait so that he fell into step beside John. He put his hand on the small of John’s back. John knew the gesture was supposed to be calming but he couldn’t stop himself from tensing at the contact.

Sherlock leaned down to John’s ear, their shoulders bumping as they walked. “Just imagine you’re in one of those Bond movies you love so much.”

John rolled his eyes. “Right. Very helpful.”

They had made their way up the ramp and were now being directed into a grand ballroom at the end of a long hallway. There were liveried footmen standing at intervals along the hall.

John could hear the sound of a live orchestra up ahead.

“Jesus.”

“The party’s meant to replicate a turn of the century ball.”

There were two more masked attendants to greet them at the doors to the ballroom. Sherlock’s hand was still at the small of John’s back, gently guiding him forward, which was fortunate as John almost came to a halt in his astonishment at the sight that greeted them.

The room was vast and high ceilinged but was crowded near to bursting with people in expensive clothing wearing masks of all shapes and sizes. The ceiling was hung with gilded chandeliers and real candles burned in sconces on the walls. At one end of the room, a masked orchestra was playing a waltz.

“ Seems a bit of a fire hazard,” John muttered at Sherlock’s elbow.

Sherlock steered them forward into the thick of the crowd, and they were assaulted on all sides by the sounds of high-pitched laughter, the glint of diamonds at women’s wrists and throats, men in white tie and tails and the scent of expensive perfume.

“These Briggs, are they friends of Mycroft’s? You can practically smell the money coming off these people.”

Sherlock didn’t answer. His eyes were narrowed, flickering intently over the faces in the crowd, his nostrils slightly flared. If the crowded room was overwhelming for John, he couldn’t imagine what Sherlock was experiencing.

As they plunged deeper into the heart of the crowd, John realized that the room wasn’t as big as he’d initially thought. The illusion of space was created by mirrors lining the walls around the entire perimeter of the room. They created a bizarre doubling effect, multiplying the glitter of the chandeliers, the light from the candelabras, the dizzying colors of the crowd.

Sherlock had steered them to a corner of the room, in order to better survey the group of elegantly dressed people. A waiter in a gold mask appeared at John’s elbow, making him jump.
“Champagne, sir?”

“No, thanks. I’m alright.”

“And for you?”

Sherlock waved the man away, his eyes still scanning, hawk-like over the glittering crowd.

John let his own eyes wander over the well-dressed guests, trying to identify the man they’d chased, but it was difficult to glean anything behind so many masks, and there were multiple men in expensive suits who had a similar stature to Briggs.

John leaned in to Sherlock, to speak in an undertone. “I hope you’re getting something out of this because I’ve got nothing.”

Sherlock bent his mouth down to John, gesturing with a flick of his eyes. His voice was low and smooth in John’s ear. “That’s Tilly Briggs, there. Green dress. Diamond tiara.”

John followed Sherlock’s eyes to a short, curvaceous blond woman in an acid green dress. She was in her mid-fifties with a plump, forgettable face. She was laughing in a frantic, breathless way in response to something the man beside her had said, her hand on his arm. She had diamonds the size of golf balls glinting at her ears and throat.

“She does like her diamonds.”

“Keep an eye on Tilly, but more important, find Briggs. He’s here. I’m certain of it. If anything goes wrong, text Lestrade. With any luck, we’ll be out of here within the hour.”

Sherlock was studying one of the candles beside John’s head. John turned to follow his gaze. The sconce was rattling ever so slightly on its hinges.

“Is that—?”

“The engine. We’ve left the port.”

“Was this advertised as a gala cruise? People do rent out those party boats, go up and down the Thames…”

“No. No, John.” Sherlock’s eyes were sparkling but there was a grim set to his mouth. “Things just got a lot more interesting. Stick to the plan. Text me what you find.”

“Sherlock, wait—”

“Find Briggs. I’ll see you shortly.”

“Sherlock!”

But he’d already vanished into the press of the crowd.

John swore under his breath. This was definitely, definitely not good. Criminals were a lot harder to apprehend on boats in the middle of large bodies of water. How was Lestrade supposed to get to them now? Or perhaps, more vitally, how were they going to get off?

John took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. Of course, Sherlock was right. They still needed to get what they came for, and even if they wanted to get off, the ship was moving now, so they had little choice in the matter.
John didn’t like the fact that they had to split up. Sherlock had only had his stitches out a few days before, and was still weak on his leg. He couldn’t move as quickly as he normally did—he really wasn’t meant to be moving around much at all, but John knew arguing the matter would be like yelling at a brick wall. It only made sense that they split up, it would ensure that they found what they were looking for quicker, but John still didn’t like it.

He crept slowly around the circumference of the room, studying every man that matched Briggs’ physical description. No one in the room seemed to notice that the ship was moving, or if they did, they didn’t seem to mind. People were dancing on the far end of the room by the orchestra, the rest of the crowd happily drinking and talking.

The press of bodies and the heat from the candles were starting to make John sweat in his suit. He fought the urge to tug at his collar; he wasn’t used to having so much starched fabric at his throat. He still felt painfully out of place in the elegantly dressed crowd—this was the world Sherlock and Mycroft had grown up in, not him.

He was so focused on studying the crowd that he didn’t notice the man who came up beside him until he spoke. “Some party, huh?”

John turned to look at him. The other guest was only a little taller than himself, slender, and dressed in an expensive black tux. His dark hair was slicked back from his face, the entirety of which was obscured by a metallic silver mask, its surface covered in dark scrollwork.

John made a noncommittal sound and nodded, returning his eyes to the crowd.

“This your first time at a Briggs’ shindig?”

The man had a strong American accent. There was an almost humorous lilt to his voice, as if he was on the verge of mocking John but only just holding himself back.

John nodded, eyes still fixed on the crowd.

“This is nothing. You should have seen the bash she threw on New Year’s Eve. When I heard she was going under I knew we’d be in for a treat. Tilly knows how to pull out all the stops.”

John was on the verge of excusing himself when a waiter appeared in front of them.

“Champagne, sir?”

“Don’t mind if I do. You look like you could use a drink. Here.”

John was about to refuse but the American was already lifting two crystal flutes from the tray, and pressing one into John’s hand.

“A toast. To the sins of the rich!”

John turned to the other man to raise his glass. The eyes in his mask were slanted in a sorrowful expression. They made a strange contrast with the mechanical detailing on the rest of the face—the cold, blank surface of the mask disturbed by the violent emotion of the eyes.

The eyes behind the holes in mask were pitch black.

John downed his champagne in one long swallow.

“I knew you were in need of that drink. I imagine it’s stressful work, apprehending criminals.”
John stared at the masked face. “What did you say?”

The lights in the chandeliers overhead went dark.

A woman screamed. The orchestra grated abruptly to a halt. The only light in the room now came from the candles flickering on the walls. There was a brief spell of anxious silence but then the orchestra resumed playing, and several people laughed nervously as the general buzz of conversation started up again.

“Tilly does love her theatrics.”

John’s heart was pounding in his throat. There was something familiar about that voice, something terribly, terribly familiar.

John licked dry lips. “What did you say to me just a moment ago?”

The man oozed forward, his movements abrupt and serpentine. Suddenly, the masked face was far too close to John’s. The breath that misted out through the hole for his mouth stank of spearmint.

“I said, did you miss me, Doctor Watson?”

Horror poured like icy water into John’s chest and seemed to freeze him where he stood. He felt paralyzed, paralyzed just as he had been that day in the locker room, with those cold hands roaming over his chest.

The lights and the noise of the orchestra faded around him, his world shrinking to the space he and Moriarty occupied. They were standing in a corner of the room. If Moriarty came any closer, John’s back would be up against the wall.

The masked head tilted as it studied him and John cursed himself for not recognizing the flat black eyes, the reptilian incline to the head. In the low light from the candles, the shadows on the mask’s metallic surface made it look alive.

He swallowed hard, his own voice sounding rough in his ears. “I should have known you were behind this.”

“This? Two petty criminals making fools of themselves? No, this has nothing to do with me. It’s so easy to predict where the two of you will be—playing heroes on the party boat. I’m just here for the show.”

“What are you talking about?” John growled.

“Can’t say more than that I’m afraid. You’ll have to wait and see. How are things progressing between you two?” The voice purred, now stripped of its American accent. “Have you achieved that sweet state of domestic bliss you longed for?”

John’s fingers twitched at his hip. He could shoot Moriarty right now. He could do it. It would be over in a manner of seconds. It might even be worth the lifetime in prison they would sentence him to as a result.

“Let me guess, Sherlock’s been a little slow on the uptake?” The mask leered closer. “Not picking up on your hints?”

John’s voice was low but deadly. “Take one more step towards me and I will shoot you through the heart.”
John could hear the grin in Moriarty’s voice, even if he couldn’t see it. “You’re a feisty one, aren’t you? I bet you’re bossy in bed. Tell me, would you pull rank on our cold-blooded scientist? Order him into submission until you have him writhing beneath you?”

“One more step and you’ll be dead before you hit the ground.”

“Ooh, I’m quaking in my boots. You are a good guard dog. I’ll give you that. But I have a feeling your bark is worse than your bite.” He slithered closer and John had to clench his fists to keep from falling back a step. “I have a suggestion for you, Johnny Boy. Be a little more *forceful*.”

The room was too hot. The oblivious party guests seemed to swarm around them, as if the drinking, laughing, dancing crowd were closing in, pinning him between Moriarty and the wall. Trapped. He was trapped.

He held himself completely still.

“Otherwise, you know better than anyone that it’s a lost cause. Flesh doesn’t hold his interest… and that’s all you are, isn’t it?” Moriarty’s mouth had drifted in against his neck, the cold surface of the mask hovering just above his ear. John held himself as still as though he were carved from ice. “What is it they call the pair of you?” John’s nostrils were filled with the sickly sweet scent of spearmint. He felt like he was suffocating in it. “The head and the heart?”

The room was definitely getting hotter; sweat was pouring down John’s neck, the lights of the candles blurring into star-shaped points before his eyes.

“Do you think Sherlock would be jealous if I touched you?” The hiss of his breath through the hole of his mask felt like fingers on John’s neck. “He is awfully possessive about his things. Because I plan to, John Watson.” Moriarty curled closer until his hips were pressed up against John’s gun, digging it into his hip. His voice was a theatrical whisper. “I plan to make you stop beating.”

John jerked backwards and came up hard against the wall. Moriarty followed him, his body sticking to John’s like a shadow. John’s hand closed on the butt of his gun and Moriarty’s fingers closed around his wrist.

“That’s the problem with flesh, it’s so fragile,” Moriarty breathed, his voice still a poisonous whisper. “So *flammable*.”

His grip was strong but John felt rage wake in him at his touch. He twisted his hand free with a snarl and Moriarty stepped back, laughing.

“I’d keep my eye on those candles, Doctor Watson. Fire can be so dangerous in a closed space.” He started walking backwards and now John’s gun was in his hand, hot and reassuringly heavy as he pulled it free. “Give Sherlock my regards. Tell him I’ll be seeing him again very soon. Ta ta. For now.”

John’s finger tensed on the trigger but Moriarty was gone, vanishing as suddenly as he had emerged, into the press of the crowd.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you once again to all of you who have left comments! I can’t tell you how much I
appreciate them and continue to appreciate them!!
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Shit gets real.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For several precious seconds, John was frozen where he stood. Then all at once, the noise from the orchestra exploded in his ears. It was as if someone had suddenly turned the volume back on.

Keeping his gun in his hand, he pushed off from the wall into the crowd in the direction Moriarty had gone, elbowing people as he went. Several people exclaimed in anger but John kept pushing his way through, his eyes scanning the crowd for a glimpse of the metallic mask and the well-tailored suit.

There was no sign of him.

Swearing violently, he dug into his pocket with his free hand for his phone. If Moriarty was here, that meant he’d known they were coming. He could have people stationed all over the ship.

He punched in Sherlock’s number and held the phone to his ear as he shoved his way past a woman in a turquoise gown, knocking her drink clean out of her hand.

“Sorry!” he yelled over his shoulder at her outraged shout.

He skirted his way around the edge of the dance floor, listening with mounting panic as Sherlock’s phone rang several times before going to voicemail. He punched in the number again.

“Godammit, Sherlock, answer your phone!”

But the phone rang on with no answer.

He was just opposite the double doors where he and Sherlock had come in, and he had to stop and shove his gun in his pocket in order to send Sherlock a text. He noted absently that the doors to the ballroom were closed.

M onboard. Where are you?

He was sliding his phone back into his pocket when he smelled it. John’s head snapped up, eyes searching for the source of that acrid, all-too familiar scent.

There was a murmur sweeping through the crowd but the orchestra was still playing. One by one, the couples on the dance floor were swaying to a halt. Then, someone screamed and John saw the blaze of light in the corner of the room.

“FIRE!”

Panic descended. Screams pierced the air as people began to race toward the doors, shoving each
other as they went.

John pushed on the door nearest him and it didn’t budge. He tried the other door. It didn’t move.

A man came up and threw himself against it.

A woman standing behind him began yelling in a shrill voice. “What’s the matter with you? Open the door!”

“I can’t! It must be locked!”

Several people pushed forward to try the door and John had to twist sideways to avoid being crushed.

John raised his voice to be heard over the furor. “Everybody calm down! There’s got to be another way out, and panicking won’t help us find it.” A few people stopped pushing and turned to look at him. “Get down low so you don’t breathe in the smoke. And for God’s sake stop pushing and shoving!”

John pulled off his jacket and, bunching it up to cover his mouth, made his way in the direction of the flames, moving along the wall at a crouch.

A whole row of candles had been knocked from their sconces and the carpet on the far side of the room was steadily being eaten up by fire. Underneath the mirrors that ringed the room, the walls were wood, and the flames were climbing the space between the mirrors, licking their way up toward the ceiling.

One man was trying to beat down the flames on the carpet with his jacket, stamping at them with his feet, but it was having no effect.

John scanned the perimeter of the room desperately for a trace of a fire extinguisher but there were none. There also appeared to be no other way to enter or exit the room save the double doors that were now shut.

At this point, everyone in the room had dropped to their elegantly dressed knees, so John had a clear view across the room to where the orchestra was set up. The players had abandoned their instruments and were crawling along beside the other party guests, desperate to find a way out.

One of the doors had now opened but a man was blocking the entrance with a gun in his hands, yelling for quiet.

John dropped to his hands and knees and began crawling rapidly forward.

“Listen up! Everybody has the chance to make it out of here alive, but you need to act quickly and do exactly as I say. You will not leave this room until you have surrendered all the valuables on your person up to me. I repeat: all valuables must be handed over if you want to leave this room. That includes watches, wallets, credit cards, cufflinks, and all jewelry. If you do as you’re told, I will let you out. That is when and only when I determine you’ve given me everything. Is that understood?”

A man towards the front of the room spoke up in anger. “This is preposterous! Step aside or we’ll knock you down, the lot of us.”

The man in the doorway cocked the pistol in his hand. “Try and knock me down and you’ll get a mouth full of lead. I have no qualms about picking the money off your corpses.”
The same man called out, but now his voice was wavering with panic. “It’ll take ages for all of us to give you our things before we fit through the door! The fire’s moving too quickly.”

“Well then you’d better move quicker, hadn’t you?”

The guest was right. The flames had now engulfed the entire far wall and were licking merrily along the expensive carpet. John was halfway to the door and he could feel the heat on his back. A woman beside him was sobbing as she pulled off her earrings.

John wasted a valuable second pulling out his phone to text Lestrade.

*Boat has left port. Moriarty onboard. Fire onboard. Send backup ASAP.*

The man in the doorway wasn’t Briggs—of that much John was certain, but whether this operation was the work of the Briggs, or Moriarty, John had no idea.

The sounds of coughing and weeping filled the room. Thick smoke had obscured the chandeliers on the ceiling, making it difficult to see. John crawled past men and women who had stopped to assemble their valuables before they crowded toward the door.

Several couples had already thrust their belongings into the gunman’s hands and had been granted access to the hallway outside. Whoever had planned this seemed to have the impression that the fire would be contained within the ballroom; but if John knew anything about fire, it was that it was rarely contained.

He pushed past a trembling woman in a sapphire mask to gain access to the front of the queue and climbed unsteadily to his feet.

“Here,” he said, shoving his hands in his pockets as if to pull out his wallet, his fingers closing around the handle of his gun. “Here, take all of it, just let me out of here. For God’s sake, let me out!”

He stumbled intentionally into the man guarding the door, who threw his hands out to stop John from falling into him, and thrust the barrel of his gun into the man’s sternum.

John straightened up and was rewarded with a look of pure surprise on the other man’s face. He cocked the gun.

“Walk backwards for me now, nice and easy, so we can let all these people get by. That’s right.”

The man grimaced at John but did what he was told, walking backwards from the force of John’s gun until they had cleared the doorway.

Never taking his eyes from the other man’s, John yelled in the direction of the flaming ballroom. “Oi! Coast is clear. Get out of there! Calmly and quickly—don’t push!”

People began to pour out of the open door, shoving as they went.

Reaching out with his free hand, John pulled the pistol from the other man’s hand, and pointed both guns at his chest, pressing him to the wall behind him while the screaming guests streamed past.

John saw the other man’s eyes register somebody behind him and had just enough time to duck before whirling around to face his attacker, slamming the butt of his gun into his assailant’s jaw.

The second man went down but the first threw himself on John’s back, one arm around John’s
throat, knocking him to his knees.

He threw his elbow backward into the other man’s ribs and felt his grip loosen momentarily, then yanked hard on the arm around his neck, ducking his head and throwing him over his shoulders and onto the ground with a sickening crack.

He shoved one gun in his pocket and kept the other one in hand as he climbed to his feet.

The guests were still pouring out of the smoking ballroom, staggering down the hallway and up the stairs at the other end. There were most likely more armed men waiting to deal with the guests above deck but he didn’t have time to worry about them now. He had to get to Sherlock.

Where were the offices located on a ship this size?

John could only guess. He headed off at a run down the hallway in the opposite direction the guests had gone.

Thankfully, he encountered no one. He turned two corners and came to a stairwell where he had the option to go up or down. He hesitated.

John’s phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out, expecting a response from Lestrade. It was from Sherlock.

*Quarter deck C. Portside. I’ve got the files.*

A bubble of relief welled in his chest. If Sherlock was texting him it meant he had yet to be apprehended by Moriarty or either of the Briggs.

He’d also missed a text from Lestrade.

*On our way.*

John shoved the phone back in his pocket and took the stairs going up two at a time. Fortunately he had been heading in the right direction so it took him only another two minutes to reach the part of the ship where the offices were located. He slowed down when he reached the appropriate corridor, gun cocked and ready in his hand.

The corridor was empty. There was a door open halfway down the hall with light streaming out. Not a good sign. Sherlock would never have been that indiscreet.

John crept forward, one shoulder pressed to the wall as he approached, listening hard.

He heard Sherlock’s voice, cool and vaguely condescending. “Still in love after all, then? How heartwarming. Or is it simply that the two of you figured out that if you worked together you could be a lot more effective? Not the cleverest scheme I’ve come across, but not half bad, I admit.”

“Clever enough to fool you.”

The other man’s voice was cold and clipped. He spoke with a middle-class accent. Briggs.

John crept another step closer, his body flat against the wall.

“Yes, bit out of your league, isn’t it? Let me guess, you had help.”

John heard the sound of a gun being cocked. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”
“Yes, I would actually. But I can see by the way you’re waving that gun in my face that you’re not planning on telling me anytime soon. Fortunately, I already know the answer.”

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?”

“I don’t think I’m clever. I am clever.”

John glanced through the gap in the door. He could see the back of Brigg’s broad shoulders and beyond him, one of Sherlock’s elbows from where his hands were clasped behind his head.

“I’m sick of listening to you gloat. On your knees, Holmes. You’re not so clever that you don’t get caught red-handed sneaking around my ship. Looks to me like you made a pretty basic mistake.”

“And what’s that?”

“This ship is headed out to sea. By this time, all the guests will have been divested of their personal belongings and loaded into lifeboats to make their way back to shore. By the time they go crying to the police we will be well on our way, and you’ll be dead.”

“Very neat. However, I fail to see how any of that can be attributed to a mistake on my part.”

“Your mistake is that you had the arrogance to think you could get the best of us.” John watched through the crack in the door as the man leveled his gun at Sherlock’s forehead. “That, and the fact that you left your little sidekick behind in the ballroom. I suppose there are worse ways to die, but being burned alive; well I’d say that’s pretty bad. You can count yourself lucky that I’m giving you a bullet through the brain. Any last words, Mr. Holmes?”

“Yes. Your wife was cheating on you with her aerobics instructor, I’m sorry to say. But you knew that really, didn’t you? Deep down.”

John watched Briggs go utterly still.

“What did you say to me?”

“I said—”

John fired.

Briggs crumpled to the ground with a shout of rage. Sherlock climbed to his feet and kicked him in the side of the head. Briggs went still.

Sherlock straightened up, dusting off the front of his jacket. “Brilliant timing, as ever.”

“You really like to push their buttons, don’t you?”

Sherlock stepped neatly over Briggs and then bent down to check his pulse. “I knew you were there.”

“Still, taunting a man with a loaded gun pointed at your head? Not on, Sherlock.”

Sherlock studied the hole the bullet had made in Brigg’s thigh. “No permanent damage if he gets himself to a surgery in the next few hours. Very nicely done.”

“I texted Lestrade. The Yard’s on their way. Although how they’re going to get on this bloody ship when it’s in the middle of the Thames is beyond me.”
“They have helicopters.” Sherlock glanced up at John and seemed to really see him for the first time. “Are you alright?”

John wiped sweat off his brow with the hand that was holding his gun. He must look a right mess. He’d lost his jacket somewhere along the way and his ridiculous mask. His eyes were still stinging from the smoke but his hands had never been steadier.

“I’m fine.”

Sherlock climbed to his feet and stepped closer to John. “No, you’re not.”

“Sherlock—”

“You’ve got soot on your face,” Sherlock said, reaching up to wipe at John’s cheek with surprising gentleness. “I wasn’t worried about you, you know. But how did you escape being burned to death?”

“You know me.” John cracked a smile. “I’m slippery like that.”

Sherlock’s eyes were dark with worry. “What happened, John?”

John clenched his jaw and swallowed down the sick feeling climbing up his throat. “He was in the ballroom. I didn’t recognize him at first because of the mask. He said none of this had anything to do with him. He was just here to watch. But he alluded to the fire, I think… I think the fire was his idea.”

“The candles?”

John nodded.

“And they wouldn’t let the guests on the lifeboats till they’d handed over their valuables?”

“Wouldn’t let them out of the ballroom. I didn’t make it up to see if there were lifeboats. And there’s been no sign of Tilly since we spotted her earlier. She wasn’t in the ballroom when the fire started. I checked.”

Sherlock’s face was grim. “This whole thing stinks of Moriarty. And if I know anything about dear Jim it’s that he’s not keen on survivors.”

He picked up the gun that had fallen from Brigg’s outstretched hand. “Come on. We’d better get up top.”

***

They made their way through silent corridors to the upper decks. There was no evidence that the fire had spread beyond the ballroom but John could still smell the thick stench of smoke hanging in the air.

When they emerged through the doorway to the outside, the cold air that rushed them felt wonderful on John’s flushed face. He drank in several deep breaths to cool his burning lungs.

“Come on. This way.”

Sherlock led them at a crouch around the walls of the control room towards the front of the ship. It was easy to locate the crowd of guests due to the panicked sounds of sobbing and shouting emanating from the main deck.
They turned a corner and hunched in the shadows just out of sight. Men with guns stood at intervals along the deck, barring passengers from entering the lifeboats until they’d handed over their valuables. One lifeboat already full of shivering partygoers was being lowered into the water.

Tilly Briggs was standing in the center of the crowd wrapped in an expensive-looking fur coat, gleefully directing traffic.

“At least he hasn’t stopped them getting in the lifeboats,” John muttered in Sherlock’s ear.

“Best not to jump to conclusions.” Sherlock’s eyes were scouring every inch of the deck. “That boat hasn’t made it to the water yet.”

As if on cue, there was a loud snapping sound of cables giving way and John saw the lifeboat that was suspended in midair lurch hard to one side.

Screams rent the air as people fought to stay inside the boat, clinging to the walls and the seats in front of them.

“Oh no, he doesn’t.”

John ran, shoving through the crowd of people, across the decks towards the man who was operating the winch to lower the boat into the water. Sherlock called after him but John ignored his shout.

John slid to a halt in front of the man operating the winch and drove the butt of his gun into the other man’s jaw. He went down hard. John reached forward to grab the crank, turning it the rest of the way to even the boat’s progress to the water.

The guests in the boat screamed again, but this time in relief.

John turned the crank another full rotation and the boat dropped another few feet. He continued turning it till the boat dropped somewhat roughly to the water below.

Fifty feet to John’s left, a second boat was being lowered to the water and was almost halfway down when the same lurching motion overtook it, turning the boat violently on its side.

“Goddammit!”

John raced down the deck towards the second winch, his gun trained on the man turning the crank.

“Don’t move or I’ll shoot!”

He was a few steps away and the man was leaning forward to knock the second cable out of alignment when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, a burst of yellow flame explode from the port side door of the main control room.

“John!”

He heard Sherlock’s strangled shout in the same instant, and he had to crush something down inside himself to ignore the sound for the two crucial seconds it took to knock the second winch-operator to the ground.

Stepping over his body, he righted the crank, and turned it until the boat hit the water. Miraculously, no one had fallen out.

That was two boats down but there was still one more on deck, only half full. At the sight of the flames, the panicked guests swarmed the armed guard controlling the flow of traffic, fighting to get
There was the sound of a gunshot and John swore, dropping to his knees on the deck, before crawling in the direction of Sherlock’s shout.

The entire control room tower was alight with flames and thick black smoke was billowing out both doors leading down to the lower decks. There was no way the fire from the ballroom had spread that quickly; somebody had started it from inside the control room.

John had to shield his eyes in the light from the fire, but he could make out two struggling figures silhouetted against the flames. He watched the larger figure dragging a much thinner, taller figure around the corner of the burning control room and out of sight.

John staggered to his feet and raced after them, his path taking him perilously close to the shimmering wall of heat that had become the ship’s main tower. He felt the hair on the side of his head curling in the heat from the flames, but he kept running until he saw the larger man push his quarry ahead of him through a door at the end of the deck.

John burst through the door after them, a gun in each hand, and saw that the man who was wrestling Sherlock to the ground was Timothy Briggs, bleeding heavily from the wound in his thigh, murder in every line of his face.

John would later blame over-exposure to smoke as the cause of his utter lack of quick thinking as he blundered in the door, not stopping until he was almost on top of Briggs, not reacting fast enough to dodge Briggs’ blow to the side of his head—a blow so powerful it knocked both the guns from his hands.

Briggs followed his first punch with a brutal jab to John’s ribs that sent him spinning to the ground.

He lay gasping, the air knocked out of his lungs, and turned his head to see Sherlock struggling to free himself from Briggs’ grasp.

Sherlock made a lunge for one of the fallen guns but he was slow on his bad leg, and Briggs caught him around the waist, bringing his knee up in a gesture that was clearly intended to break Sherlock’s arm. Sherlock dodged the blow, but only just, and Briggs seized hold of his arms, twisting them behind his back until Sherlock fell hard to his knees.

“So you were going leave me below decks to burn to death, is that right?” Briggs’ voice was a rasp of fury. There was blood on his temple from where Sherlock had kicked him earlier. The expression on his face was utterly deranged.

“Burn to death or bleed to death. Didn’t really have a preference.”

Briggs yanked on Sherlock’s arms and John saw Sherlock’s face contort with pain.

“ Turns out your little companion isn’t a very good shot.” Briggs shifted his grip so that he was holding both of Sherlock’s wrists in one hand. “How fortunate for me as it gives me the chance to kill you properly.”

John saw a flash and realized Briggs was holding a knife. Not just any knife. It was military issue, short but viciously sharp. The blade was jagged and ugly. A blade like that could tear someone’s throat out with one twist.

John’s eyes raked the carpet for the other gun and saw that it was just a few feet from his outstretched hand. Keeping his eyes trained on Briggs whose gaze was fixed on Sherlock, John
pulled himself along the carpet towards the gun.

“Unlike your friend I don’t plan on missing, Mr. Holmes.”

Briggs set the edge of his blade against Sherlock’s exposed throat. Sherlock stiffened.

“I’m going to bleed you like a stuck pig.”

John’s hand closed on the muzzle of the gun. He spun it around till the handle was nestled snugly in his palm and trained it on Briggs.

The knife flashed again and this time John didn’t hesitate.

He fired, twice, aiming for Briggs’ right shoulder.

Both shots were true. The force of the double blow knocked Briggs backward off his feet, the knife tumbling from his fingers to the carpet with a dull thud.

Sherlock let out a gasp of relief and John saw that the knife had nicked Sherlock when the gun had gone off. There was a trickle of blood running in a thin stream down his throat.

Briggs lay on his back, motionless, eyes wide open.

John climbed to his knees, his head still ringing from the blow that had knocked the guns from his hands. “I’m sorry,” he croaked, his voice hoarse from the smoke. “I fouled that up.”

Sherlock was crouching down over Briggs, the only other evidence of his struggle the lock of dark hair that had fallen forward into his eyes. “He’s dead.” He looked up and his eyes as they met John’s were hard.

“I’m sorry.” John couldn’t shake the image of the vulnerable line of Sherlock’s neck beneath the blade of Briggs’ knife. He’d seen what knives like that had done to men in the desert. When he blinked, he could see the pale flesh torn open, the exposed mechanism of Sherlock’s shredded throat. He ran a hand through his hair and found that his hands weren’t steady anymore. “Christ. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I should’ve—”

Sherlock straightened up. “Stop saying you’re sorry.”

John found he couldn’t read the look in Sherlock’s eyes. His head was spinning, his throat as dry as paper. “We’d better get back outside. The last lifeboat…”

The room had gotten hotter even in the last few seconds, and the sounds coming from just beyond the door indicated that the fire had spread to the rear of the ship.

Now that John wasn’t fighting desperately to save Sherlock’s life he could see that the room they were in was nothing more than a carpeted hallway with another door at the far end leading down to the lower decks.

Sherlock stepped over Briggs and crossed the room in two long strides, stopping when he was directly in front of John.

“Jesus. I—”

John didn’t know what was wrong with him. His hands were shaking so hard he could barely hold his gun.
Sherlock reached down and took the gun from John’s hand, his fingers closing momentarily over John’s before sliding away. He held John’s gaze throughout, his eyes so blue they seemed to burn like the center of a flame. “That’s the second time tonight you’ve saved my life. Don’t ever apologize for that.”

John was breathing too hard; he couldn’t catch his breath. It was the smoke from the flames beyond the door. He could see it trailing in along the ceiling, thick and insidious. It was affecting Sherlock too. John could see his chest expanding and contracting far too rapidly beneath his starched shirtfront. His bow tie was somehow miraculously, still perfectly intact.

John stared at it helplessly. “Sherlock…”

“Don’t.”

The way Sherlock was looking at him… it was opening up a chasm inside John’s chest and he was afraid, terrified that if he made one wrong move he was about to tumble in and be lost forever.

His heart was beating too fast. It was the heat of the room; he could feel it making the sweat stand out on his brow. He clenched his empty hand into a fist at his side to stop it trembling.

“Just... don’t.”

John could see sweat on Sherlock’s temples too, his forelock of dark hair was tangled with it, and a fine line of sweat beaded his upper lip. John wanted to kiss it off.

Sherlock’s eyes trailed down his face. He was seeing too much—John was too tired to hide it, so Sherlock must be seeing the sheer, naked desire on his face; the ache of wanting Sherlock that somehow impossibly had been dragged out into the light here, in the midst of all this madness.

He felt a drop of sweat slide down his temple. It was too hot. John couldn’t stand it. He shut his eyes.

“I knew you weren’t alright.”

John’s fist tightened at his side and he opened his eyes to look back at Sherlock. Sherlock’s eyes when they found his were full of fire.

John licked his parched lips. “I’m perfectly fine, I’m—”

Sherlock leaned down and kissed him, swallowing John’s protest in one soft sweep of his lips over John’s.

John went numb.

He froze under Sherlock’s mouth, unable to believe what was happening, his body stiff as a poker. Then he felt Sherlock’s hand reach out to take his coiled fist, tangling their fingers together, and the shock of Sherlock’s warm palm against his own made him gasp in surprise.

Sherlock took advantage of his open mouth to deepen the kiss, leaning down into John to push his tongue in past John’s lips.

No No No.

This couldn’t be happening. Why was this happening? There was something deeply rooted inside of John that told him this couldn’t be happening for any of the right reasons. It couldn’t be. It couldn’t be that Sherlock wanted him too, after all this time.
John’s brain may have been telling him it was all a lie, but to his body, it didn’t matter one way or the other.

Waking from his state of shock, he heard himself make a guttural sound, and he started kissing Sherlock back, opening his mouth wider to let Sherlock in, his own tongue pushing back against Sherlock’s, his free hand pulling Sherlock in by the back of his neck, down closer against him.

He could taste smoke in Sherlock’s mouth but underneath that was the taste that John remembered from the night Sherlock had been drugged, when he had pulled John’s mouth against him, and it was even better than he remembered. He heard himself making the same desperate sound, his fingers slipping on Sherlock’s neck, sliding down to bunch in the fabric of his expensive jacket.

The movements of Sherlock’s mouth on his changed in a heartbeat from sweet and somewhat tentative to hungry and as desperate as John’s own. His teeth clacked against John’s as he pushed deeper into John’s mouth, the hand that was pressed to John’s sliding over his palm, causing sparks of pure feeling to shoot up his wrist.

John gasped again, his hand fisting in the material of Sherlock’s jacket, and felt Sherlock’s teeth sink into his bottom lip, tugging lightly, before pulling back, his breath hot and unsteady against John’s jaw.

He surged forward against John and John felt himself pushed backward until he hit the wall with his shoulder blades, Sherlock’s mouth never leaving him, traveling hot and hungry over the edge of his jaw and down his neck.

He pressed a kiss to the pulse throbbing in John’s throat and then bit down briefly, teeth scraping the sensitive skin, before sucking the place he had just bruised. John gasped brokenly at the sensation, his mouth falling open.

Sherlock was still holding the gun in one hand, John realized, as he brought it between them to reach for the buttons on John’s shirt. He pulled hard at the knot in John’s tie, tugging it apart, before tearing the buttons open with frantic fingers, diving forward with his mouth as soon as he’d parted the fabric to devour the exposed skin at the groove of John’s throat.

John felt the barrel of the gun brush cold against his collarbone as Sherlock pushed the material aside. His mouth was hot and wet as it slid the length of John’s collarbone, breath pluming out from his nostrils against the over-sensitized skin.

John let his head fall back against the wall, the hand that was still wrapped around Sherlock’s, squeezing desperately. He didn’t know what to do with himself. He was everywhere all at once, coming apart under Sherlock’s mouth. He was thankful for the wall at his back because his legs were as soft as butter beneath him, trembling and weak.

Over the top of Sherlock’s head he could see flames writhing against the circular window outside.

Sherlock pushed their tangled fingers up above John’s head, pressing his hand against the wall as he leaned down into John with his body, his leg insinuating itself between John’s thighs.

John shuddered at the contact, his half-hard cock leaping to full attention at the firm pressure from Sherlock’s narrow, muscular thigh.

Sherlock’s tongue had worked its way back up John’s neck, his teeth skimming the pounding pulse under John’s jaw, his thigh now rubbing shamelessly against John’s rigid cock.

John fought for some semblance of control, even as he felt himself slipping, sliding down so easily.
into the darkness of his own pleasure.

They shouldn’t be doing this. Not here. Not like this. John heard Moriarty’s words in his head and they tore through his enjoyment like shards of broken glass.

“He’d do it for you because you’re his favorite pet. He’d do whatever you wanted if you only asked. He’d do anything at all to keep you, which is why I intend to stop you, John Watson, stop you beating.”

He pulled his fingers out of Sherlock’s grasp, his hand reaching out to push Sherlock away, but faltering as soon as his fingers closed around Sherlock’s bicep because Sherlock had tossed the gun aside and his free hand was now sliding down between them, his long, dexterous fingers spreading out over the bulge in John’s trousers and Sherlock was grinning against John’s neck, he could feel it.

“No! Sherlock—”

Sherlock kissed him again; his lovely full lips so soft against John’s, and John felt a sob of despair catch in his throat. His other hand came up to grasp Sherlock’s upper arm and for a moment, he could do nothing but surrender to the feeling of Sherlock pressed against him, kissing him with an openness and an abandon that John didn’t understand.

*This can’t be right. He’s only doing this because of the adrenaline, because he thinks it’s what I want… The heat, the smoke, it’s gone to his head.*

In spite of his confusion, John felt himself melting under Sherlock’s mouth and Sherlock took advantage of his pliancy to drag his hand back up the length of John’s cock and reach for his zipper. He pulled it down in one sinuous movement and before John could stop him, his hand was reaching in between the folds of John’s trousers, taking the hot hard length of John in his hand.

Sherlock moaned into his mouth as his fingers closed over John. He was already embarrassingly hard, the head of his cock slick with moisture.

John broke away from Sherlock’s mouth, panting, as Sherlock’s fingers slid down the length of him—the feeling of Sherlock’s exquisitely shaped fingers pressing into the sensitive skin of his cock almost too much for him to take. He felt lightheaded, and he dropped his head back against the wall once more and shut his eyes as the room spun around him.

Sherlock stroked him with obsessive attention. John could feel the reverence in his touch—the pads of his fingers savoring each ripple of John’s flesh—and suspected he must be imagining it. Sherlock’s forehead was pressed sticky against John’s cheek, his breath hot and unsteady as it stuttered out of him with each worshipful stroke.

His own breath was coming in short, sharp bursts. John opened his eyes and watched the smoke curling above them on the ceiling, his thoughts slowing down to the speed of a dream. He was certain that he was imagining all of this; that he would wake to discover that it had all been nothing more than the dark, wishful turnings of his tortured mind.

Meanwhile, his body was coming apart in Sherlock’s hands. He felt like he was breaking open—like there was light streaming up through the cracks in himself, so bright and jagged that it hurt as it threatened to shatter him to pieces.

John heard himself make a choking sound. His knees were buckling, the only thing holding him up, his grip on Sherlock’s arms. Sherlock felt him falling and slid a hand around to grasp John’s waist, his other hand still working the length of John’s cock.
“John…” Sherlock’s voice was urgent. John felt it before he heard it, Sherlock’s breath hot on his neck. “John, look at me. Look at me, John.”

John dragged his heavy eyes from the smoke on the ceiling, searching for the brilliant blue of Sherlock’s irises and when he found them, he saw they were filled with concern. He felt Sherlock’s hand on his cock still.

John made a keening sound at the loss of sensation and then felt a spike of shame steal over his cheeks at the realization that the desperate sound had come from his throat. He turned his face into his own shoulder, struggling to hide his face from Sherlock’s gaze. He wasn’t himself anymore. He was in pieces; he had been devoured by flame.

“It’s alright.” Sherlock’s mouth was pressed against his ear, his cheek sticking to John’s, his hand on the small of John’s back, pulling him in close against the curves of his body, and to John’s immense relief, his hand resumed its stroking on John’s cock. “It’s alright.”

John’s hands tightened around Sherlock’s upper arms, his dry lips catching on Sherlock’s jaw.

His breath was coming shorter and shorter, and all he could see was the light from the flames outside that were climbing the glass of the window, licking the frame of the door.

“I can’t—” he grated out, in an attempt to warn Sherlock he was on the verge of coming, if that’s what you could call the feeling that was threatening to rip John apart. His knees were shaking so hard he felt one leg shuddering convulsively into Sherlock’s; he couldn’t stop it.

There was a feeling in his chest like a fist tightening around his heart, and he tore his head away from the press of Sherlock’s mouth as soon as he felt the first contractions overtake him. He wanted to hide his face but he didn’t have the strength to lift his hands. Instead, his fingers clenched in Sherlock’s arms with bruising force as the pleasure broke through him like a riptide.

He ground his teeth together in a futile effort to deny the sensation through sheer force of will and when he realized that he couldn’t stop it, he came, sobbing, into Sherlock’s hand.

Sherlock held John against him through each intense convulsion of his orgasm. When his legs gave out completely, Sherlock slid both arms around his back and held him as John continued to shake, his body trembling, the sound of his own ragged gasping harsh in his ears.

“You’re alright.” Sherlock’s voice was like muffled velvet, his lips against John’s hair. “You’re alright now.”

John wanted to shut his eyes and let himself be swallowed up by it, to let the voice blot out all memories of himself so that he could live inside it, dark and warm and unknowing; but the bitter smell of burning plastic was suddenly stinging the inside of his nose.

John’s eyes flew open, his fingers tightening once more on Sherlock’s arms, this time in warning.

The muscles in his throat worked; he couldn’t get his voice to do what he needed it to.

Sherlock looked down at him in alarm and John saw that his cheeks and the bloody column of his throat were smeared with soot.

*From my face.*

The thought made something hot flare in John’s chest and then immediately go cold.
Sherlock turned in the direction of the door they had come through.

There was smoke pouring into the room from the deck outside, the shimmer of raw heat across the threshold a clear indication that they could no longer exit the way they had come in.

Sherlock turned back to John. “Can you walk?”

John nodded, his head still swimming, suddenly furious with himself for being so frail, but the threat of fire made his throat close up with fear. It was as though Moriarty was with them in the room, living in the flames.

“Looks like we’ll have to go down to get out.”

Sherlock repositioned himself to pull one of John’s arms over his shoulder, sliding his own arm firmly around John’s waist.

John leaned into him, fingers bunched white-knuckled in the material of Sherlock’s jacket.

His legs, he found, did move when he told them to, albeit slowly and awkwardly. He stumbled once before they’d even reached the door and Sherlock shifted his grip, tugging John closer against him.

The lights in the stairwell were flickering but the air coming up from below felt cooler. John was counting on the map in Sherlock’s brain to navigate them successfully through the lower decks before heading back up again.

However, Sherlock’s internal map had no way of knowing which direction the fire had spread.

Their progress down the stairs was slow but as they got going, some of John’s coordination came back to him, as did his resolve as the air began to clear of smoke.

He pulled away from Sherlock’s side as soon as they reached the bottom of the stairs and Sherlock gave him a questioning look but didn’t push him when John simply shook his head.

Whatever madness had overtaken them back in that burning room was now being folded up into the long string of traumatic events that had comprised the evening. John’s mind felt tacky and resistant to thought like day-old gum, but he didn’t need to think in order to keep moving along the hallway behind Sherlock. He only needed to put one foot in front of the other, occasionally wiping sweat out of his stinging eyes with the heel of his hand.

They were halfway down the corridor when they smelled smoke.

Sherlock smelled it first. He stopped walking so abruptly John stumbled into his back.

Sherlock turned to him and grasped him by the arms. “Stay here. I’m going to look around the corner. Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

John opened his mouth to protest but he shut it again when he saw the look on Sherlock’s face.

“I’ll be right back.”

He nodded and Sherlock let go of his arms and hurried away down the hallway, before turning the corner and vanishing from sight.

John could smell it now too. He walked several steps further down the corridor in the direction Sherlock had gone and felt the temperature in the air increasing by degrees.
He glanced back up the staircase they had just come down and saw smoke beginning to stream out along the ceiling. Fear settled like a cold weight in the pit of his stomach.

Sherlock re-emerged moments later and when John saw his expression, he felt the cold feeling in his stomach turn to ice.

Sherlock was afraid.

“No good.”

John fell back against the wall, all of his resolve draining out of him. The reality of their situation was suddenly like a weight on his body, dragging him down. He let out a long breath. “So I guess… we wait.”

“No.” Sherlock had a hard look in his eyes.

“It’s no good going back the way we came. Look at the top of the stairs.”

“Doesn’t matter. Come on.”

Sherlock took hold of his arm and began pulling him in the direction they had come.

“Sherlock, we can’t—”

“No! It’s not going to end like this!” Sherlock’s voice was suddenly a snarl. “I won’t give him the satisfaction.”

There was no need for John to ask whom Sherlock meant.

He was too tired to protest. He let Sherlock drag him back up the stairs through the smoke that was now thick enough to make both of them cough. John held his arm over his mouth and breathed shallowly into the filthy sleeve of his shirt.

Sherlock pulled him across the room to stop in front of the door leading to the outer deck. Flames roared at the circular window beside the door and the heat from the fire just outside was so intense, John stopped instinctively on the threshold, releasing his hold on Sherlock’s hand.

John felt panic welling up in him. “No, Sherlock! We can’t. It’s too hot. We can’t do it.”

Sherlock’s face was blazing in the light of the flames. “There’s a ladder just beyond this door leading to the observation deck. Once we get to there we can climb above the fire. We need to be higher, John.”

“Sherlock—”

“Take my hand.”

John hesitated, the heat from the flames leaping over his face. His basic survival instincts were screaming out in protest, but the smoke was growing thicker by the second, the color of the night sky beyond the door illuminated in a shower of sparks.

“Trust me, John. I promise you, I’ll get us through.”

John’s eyes connected with Sherlock’s. He felt a thrill of sheer madness spiral through him, making him feel oddly giddy. He took Sherlock’s hand.
“Just so you know,” John yelled over the roar of the flames. “This is by far the maddest thing we’ve ever done.”

Sherlock looked back at him and grinned. Then before John had time to change his mind, Sherlock tore forward into the flames.

John remembered just in time to bury his face in the crook of his elbow and hold his breath, as the world around them erupted into searing heat and the hiss and crackle of living flame. He shut his eyes against the glare, holding like a drowning man to Sherlock’s hand, thankful that Sherlock was leading the way, propelling them through the blaze.

John stumbled into Sherlock and then he felt Sherlock’s hand on his shoulders, pushing him forward, guiding his hands to the rungs of a ladder; instructing him wordlessly to climb.

The metal was almost too hot to touch; he felt it burning the flesh on his palms but John’s hands closed gratefully around the first rung and started to climb.

With each step upward, he felt the air cooling around him. He kept climbing until his knees hit the deck and he crawled forward onto the slippery metal surface, turning back to see Sherlock’s head and shoulders emerging between the bars, his face streaked dark with soot.

Sherlock’s knowledge of the ship had proved true; they were on the roof of the observation deck.

John dragged himself to a standing position and peered out over the railing. Far out on the dark water, he could make out the shapes of the three lifeboats well on their way to the shore.

“Thank God,” he whispered, his voice thick and strange sounding to his own ears.

However, as he glanced down at the decks below them, he felt his heart skip a beat; the ship beneath them was an inferno of orange flame.

John suddenly felt that standing was a bit ambitious. He lowered himself to the metal deck, resisting the urge to press his blistered palms to the cool surface, holding them instead, lightly, in his lap.

Some distant part of his brain registered that Sherlock was on his phone beside him, speaking rapidly, his voice brittle with anger. “Well, you certainly took your time. No, we didn’t. We’re still on the bloody ship. No, we’re having a lovely time. Yes, telling stories, roasting marshmallows and just enjoying the view really.”

John stared hard at the lights in the water, reflecting that it really was quite beautiful.

“Looks like a Van Gogh,” he tried to tell Sherlock but his voice came out slurred.

The sound of Sherlock’s voice receded beside him. He felt light-headed again and this time, he didn’t fight it, just watched with a vacant sort of pleasure as the night sky and the dark water of the Thames swirled together before his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all you lovely people for commenting and showing your support. As always, I can't tell you how much it means to hear from you. <3 So pleased to hear you liked the case fic elements of the last chapter! But then again, who doesn't love a
masked ball on a burning cruise ship, amiright?

ETA: If you'd like to see a gorgeous rendition of John and Sherlock getting it on in the middle of the fire, please, please check out the incredible artwork I commissioned for this chapter from the amazingly talented sweetlittlekitty. Her artwork is everything. It is EVERYTHING.
John didn’t remember much of what happened after Sherlock phoned Lestrade.

He remembered that there were helicopters and police boats and a rope ladder that he somehow made it up or down (he couldn’t remember which), and he remembered sitting in the back of an ambulance, a woman with a gentle face shining a flashlight in his eyes, checking his nose and throat for permanent damage, giving him oxygen. They tried to make Sherlock undergo the same run of tests but he wouldn’t sit still long enough for them to perform any of them; he was too busy shouting at Lestrade.

There was a great deal of Sherlock shouting at Lestrade.

It wove through each fragmented piece of the morning that John blearily remembered, somehow pulling them all together to make one long exhausted chain of events that culminated in him and Sherlock riding silently in a cab back to Baker Street, gazing out the rain-streaked windows at the spring morning beyond.

Tilly Briggs was in custody.

She’d smuggled herself onto one of the lifeboats and tried to sneak away as soon as they had reached the shore, but was easily apprehended by one of the Met. She’d pulled a gun on the police officer who grabbed her, and then had dissolved into messy tears as soon as they’d wrenched the gun out of her hands. She said the fire onboard had not been her or her husband’s idea, insisting that even when they’d agreed to the plan, “he” had assured them the fire would be contained. She was apparently devastated over her husband’s death, but Sherlock told John later that the real cause of her grief was clearly the loss of her beloved cruise ship.

Sherlock had been present at the questioning. They’d wanted to take John in for blood tests, which he’d tried to refuse but Sherlock had become so furious and belligerent at the suggestion that John not submit to the full range of care, that he had quietly agreed, with the caveat that he would only go if Sherlock attended Tilly Briggs’ briefing.

White-lipped, Sherlock had tried to argue with him, but even exhausted and huddled in a hospital-issue blanket in the back of an ambulance, John Watson was fiercer than any of the adversaries Sherlock had tangled with.

“Go, Sherlock. You’ve got to go and find out the extent of his involvement.”

The mention of Moriarty was the clincher. Sherlock’s eyes were narrowed but he stopped arguing.
with John.

“You’ll likely be done long before me anyway. You can swing round and pick me up at the hospital on your way back. Go on, then. I’ll be fine.”

Sherlock had gone, white-faced and unhappy, but he had gone.

Poor Lestrade had looked relieved. There was a mess of paperwork to sort out regarding Tim Briggs’ death. Sherlock and John would both have to provide statements affirming that John had shot him in self-defense. It was just another nasty complication that would require long and tedious follow-up.

The one bright spot in the horrifying series of events was that, other than Tim Briggs, there had been no casualties. There were a few minor injuries here and there as a result of the fire, but on the whole, both the staff and guests on board the ship had made it to the lifeboats relatively unscathed.

John remembered Sherlock loudly accosting several of the tear-stained passengers as they climbed shakily from the lifeboats, pointing at John where he sat in the back of the ambulance, demanding that they provide a testimony that John had saved all their lives.

“Several times over in point of fact!” Sherlock had insisted, in a carrying tone, as paramedics had ushered the distraught passengers out of the line of Sherlock’s wrathful stare.

“You deserve more credit,” Sherlock had raged at John’s side, while they waited for Lestrade to finish directing Met officers and hysterical passengers. “I’m tired of no one knowing what you do for me, for them, all of the time!”

“Leave it, Sherlock.”

“People need to know,” Sherlock shouted again, springing to his feet. “JOHN WATSON SAVED ALL YOUR LIVES!”

“Keep that up and they’ll make you come in for blood tests too. They’ll think the smoke has addled your brain.”

Sherlock had turned to John with a fierce expression on his face, but thankfully, Lestrade had appeared at that moment to bring Sherlock with him to Scotland Yard, to attend the Briggs briefing. They were confident they would get a full confession from her, but it didn’t hurt matters that Sherlock had managed to hang on to the evidence he had pulled from the computer, all those hours before.

It was hard to believe that only a few hours had passed since they’d boarded the ship; the beginning of the evening felt like a lifetime ago, and it felt even more distant in John’s foggy brain after he’d sat through several hours of hospital tests.

It was full morning when Sherlock showed up to collect him. John had been right; Sherlock had finished at the Yard before the hospital was through with John. He’d even gotten Sherlock to submit to the rest of the standard fire-exposure tests while he waited for John to finish up. He was grumbling and sullen throughout but John was relieved to have the confirmation that Sherlock was officially free from harm. After all, Sherlock had suffered almost as much exposure to the smoke as John had.

He and Sherlock had both been lucky; neither of them had suffered any serious ill effects from their exposure to the fire. This was very lucky indeed; as a doctor, John knew better than anyone that the majority of fire-related deaths were a result of the noxious smoke that people inhaled rather than burns.
In the cab on the way home, John fought the urge to press his forehead to the cool glass of the window and simply fall asleep. However, his exhaustion was so intense he doubted his ability to revive when they reached Baker Street and he didn’t want Sherlock to have to manhandle him out of the cab.

A cold and impenetrable silence had settled between them, but for John’s part he was only registering it with one faraway piece of his mind; the rest of him felt shut away in a box somewhere—an iron-clad, heavily padlocked box, lying in a chest at the bottom of the sea. For the moment, all he could think about was climbing the stairs to his bedroom and crawling in between the sheets to sleep for what he hoped would be the next three days.

The fact that John had managed to stay awake the whole cab ride home didn’t stop Sherlock from hovering anxiously around him as he climbed out of the cab, or casting furtive, side-long looks in his direction as they made their way up the stairs to the flat.

“Do you need anything?” Sherlock had asked him as soon as they’d reached the landing, potentially prepared to each go their separate ways. Had John been in his right mind, he would have registered the absolute impossibility of Sherlock asking him this question, because Sherlock never took stock of his own needs, much less the needs of those around him, nor did he offer to help meet said needs of other people; but John was exhausted, and his brain felt like a badly-frayed jumper that had been pulled to bits. All he wanted was to be alone and in darkness and to sleep.

“I’m fine,” he told Sherlock, waving away his attempt to help John the rest of the way up the stairs. This gesture should have been another tip-off that something was amiss, but John was too intent on getting to the bathroom to notice. “I’m just going to go clean up.”

As much as his bed was calling to him, John didn’t like the thought of falling asleep with the smoke and the grime of the fire still on his skin. He knew he would feel better when he woke if the physical traces of the experience had been wiped away. A shower would be quicker but he honestly didn’t know if he could remain standing under the spray of hot water, even for the brief length of time it would take to get clean.

He went into the bathroom and shut the door, distantly registering the fact that Sherlock had moved silently between the living room and the kitchen half a dozen times in the time it had taken John to walk from the landing to the linen closet, fluttering like a disoriented moth, too skittish to alight in any one place.

He filled the tub with hot water and peeled off the smoke-stained remains of his ruined tuxedo. It looked as though he was going to owe the rental shop for that disaster. He sighed and did his best to ignore the grisly state of his soot-smeared torso once he’d pulled off his shirt. He resolutely did not look at his own reflection in the mirror but couldn’t fail to notice that a patch of hair on one side of his head had been singed away.

He lowered himself into the bath, conscious of the blisters on the palms of his hands. The burns hadn’t been bad enough to require bandages but they’d put ointment on them and advised him to keep them as dry as possible. Right, a doctor keeping his hands dry. Good luck with that.

The hot water felt good on his sweat- and smoke-stained skin. He settled down in the tub and leaned back, shutting his eyes so he wouldn’t have to look at the dark film on the water as the grime soaked off of him.

He hadn’t intended to fall asleep but he was so tired and the water was so warm that before he knew it, his head had tipped back against the tiles, and he found himself drifting off.
He awoke with a start when the door of the bathroom was flung open and slammed into the wall with a resounding crash.

He sat up and saw Sherlock towering over him, the expression on his face one of pure terror.

“Sherlock! Jesus Christ!”

John’s heart was hammering in his chest. In his panic, he’d grasped the sides of the tub with his burned hands, and was now wincing at the result. The pain made him irritable and he didn’t bother to conceal the irritation in his voice.

“What is it? What’s the matter?”

Sherlock looked utterly shell-shocked for a moment, and then John watched the emotion on his face recede bit by bit, as if he were reeling it back inside himself with a fishing line, to be replaced by a calm and impassive expression.

His expression had settled in a matter of seconds but John had seen the panic stark on Sherlock’s face, and his heart gave a painful lurch in his chest in response to how uncharacteristically lost he had looked.

Sherlock cleared his throat and looked away. It was the closest thing to embarrassment John had ever witnessed in him.

“Forgive me. I thought—you weren’t making any noise. You hadn’t made a sound in almost an hour and I thought…” He glanced briefly back at John but dropped his gaze as soon as their eyes connected. “Forgive me. I was mistaken.”

“Sherlock…” John’s tone was gentler, but a part of him was still irritated that Sherlock was treating him like a wounded baby bird. “You didn’t seriously think I’d drowned in the bath?”

John instantly regretted his words at the flash of hurt on Sherlock’s face. His expression hardened. “As I said, my mistake. I apologize for interrupting.”

Then without another word, he turned on his heel and exited the bathroom, closing the door behind him with a soft snick.

John let out a long breath and sank below the surface of the water until his head was submerged. He stayed under as long as he could, listening to the sound of his pounding heartbeat in his ears, watching the bubbles from his nose and mouth stream to the surface.

Sherlock had been listening through the door the whole time he’d been in the bath, listening to make sure he was all right. John’s stomach flip-flopped at the realization and then turned cold at the memory of his own cruelty.

He couldn’t deal with any more emotional upheavals today. There was already too much new information in his brain that his exhausted body didn’t have the energy to process. He hadn’t allowed himself to think about what had happened between him and Sherlock on the ship—he couldn’t yet, it was too big, too incomprehensible—his mind shying away from the memory the same way he kept flinching at his burned hands. He would deal with it later, after he slept.

He climbed out of the tub, conscious of every ache and pain that was now making itself known after the night’s exertions. There was a dark bruise already forming under his ribs from where Briggs had knocked him to the ground. His entire body felt stiff and sore. He watched the filthy water run down the drain as he toweled himself off. Then he wrapped himself in a dressing gown and made his way...
upstairs to his bedroom.

He didn’t see Sherlock on his journey from the bathroom to his bedroom and he felt another twinge of guilt for the way he’d handled Sherlock’s panicked intrusion.

The terrified expression on Sherlock’s face hovered at the forefront of his thoughts as he crawled under the covers, and he wasn’t sure he’d be able to fall sleep with his own angry words burning in his ears, but his worries were fleeting. Almost as soon as he shut his eyes, he fell into a deep sleep.

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John dreamed of the fire.

He and Sherlock were back on the ship, on the observation deck just above the line of the flames, but this time, no helicopters came to their rescue. There were no police boats waiting down in the water, no Met officers with life jackets and fire blankets at the ready, it was just John and Sherlock staring at each other through the flames.

“Well, I guess this is it.”

Sherlock’s eyes were like mirrors for the orange glare all around them; they looked otherworldly, each iris in possession of its own tiny pinprick of flame.

Sherlock cocked his head and the light in his eyes shifted. “This is how I always hoped to go, with you at my side.”

John recognized absently that he was in the realm of dreams; Sherlock’s speech was too poetic. He’d never say anything like that in real life.

Sherlock offered John his hands and John took them in each of his own and kissed the palms. They were milk white.

“This is better than what I feared would happen. That he would separate us somehow, drive a knife between us because that’s his goal, John. He knows now. After what happened at the pool he’s seen how much you mean to me and he can’t stand it. It makes him furious that someone so ordinary could hold my interest. He wants my full attention and he knows that he can never have it, because I’ve got you. So he’ll do whatever it takes to drive the two of us apart—to make you doubt me, to make you doubt yourself—because don’t you see, John? My love for you is what makes me different than him. It’s what will keep me from ever becoming truly like him, because I hold you in a position as important as I hold myself, and that’s something Moriarty can never understand.”

Fat, salty tears started streaming down John’s cheeks somewhere in the middle of this speech and they were so hot, they were burning the skin on his face, but he couldn’t stop them. He could only look at Sherlock, with his hands still in his own, and weep with gratitude, because at the end of it all, he realized with a sudden burning clarity, it didn’t matter whether Sherlock wanted a physical relationship with him or not, what mattered was that Sherlock wanted John in his life, unconditionally, and at the look in Sherlock’s eyes, John finally was certain of it. The realization left him breathless.

The fire was climbing around them, sending a tower of sparks into the sky, and the heat should have been unbearable but with his hands in Sherlock’s, John couldn’t feel it. Even the stinging passage of the tears on his cheeks was forgotten as he looked into Sherlock’s eyes. Sherlock bent close to him and kissed the place where the tears had been.

The fire was twisting around their legs, gobbling up their torsos, but John couldn’t feel any of it. Just
as the flames reached his heart, Sherlock leaned forward and kissed him, and then the fire was gone —the world around them transformed into someplace cool and green, the soft touch of Sherlock’s mouth against his like the blue of the ocean, and he and Sherlock were adrift in a wide sea.

Then John had another dream, and this one wasn’t good.

He was following Sherlock through the corridors of the ship, trying to keep up as Sherlock ran ahead of him. The fire was all around them—the air so thick and hot it was difficult to breathe.

John tried to call out to Sherlock and tell him to slow down, but he couldn’t get the words out. When he opened his mouth, smoke streamed out.

He came to a door with a circular glass window. Sherlock had already vanished through it; he could see the back of Sherlock’s dark head on the other side disappearing down the hallway, but when he pulled on the handle, it wouldn’t open.

He tried pounding on the door, shouting Sherlock’s name, but the fire in the room was rising, and in this dream he could feel the heat of the flames, could feel his lungs filling up with smoke, seared by hot air, filling his mouth with the taste of metal.

Sherlock’s worried face appeared in the circle of glass between them, but the door was growing hotter by the second, the metal on the handle singeing John’s palms. He watched Sherlock throw his shoulder against the door, again and again, in an attempt to break it open. It was as if John was transfixed where he stood. He couldn’t let go of the door handle, even when he felt the skin on his hands begin to burn.

Sherlock hesitated and stood with his shoulders heaving, his expression livid. Then all of a sudden, his face crumpled in agony, and he clutched at his heart.

John watched Sherlock fall to his knees, his hands tearing at the fabric of his shirt, mouth twisted open in pain. His teeth were bared in a grimace as he pulled the fabric apart and there, John saw, with a corresponding shock of pain that reverberated through his entire body, was a hole where Sherlock’s heart had been, black and charred at the edges, pouring ash.

John let go of the door handle.

He was on the ground and the room was full of fire. He had never known pain like he was experiencing now, but worse than the feeling of his flesh sloughing off his bones was the deranged sound of Sherlock throwing himself against the other side of the door.

Through the smoke, John saw Moriarty’s face above him, smiling in a droopy-eyed, chillingly vacant way.

“I told you to watch out for fire, didn’t I, Doctor Watson?” His voice was an amused drawl. “But your sort never listen, do they?”

“I would have preferred to eat you raw,” he said, eyes trailing down John’s flaming torso, “But I suppose char-broiled will have to do.”

His grin was manic—his eyes utterly absent of emotion—and the last thing John knew before he woke was the smell of his own burning flesh as Moriarty held him to the ground.

He woke with a gasp, the raw terror of what he had just experienced so real, it took him several moments to believe that the room around him was in fact his own, that this was his reality, not the horrifying world of the dream.
He was drenched in sweat, the sheets around him so wet they were clinging to his legs.

His skin was burning up. He felt like he could still feel the heat of the flames, and he wondered wildly for a moment if he had a fever, but as he forced himself to lie still and take deep breaths, he realized the heat was all in his head.

The burned skin on his blistered palms was smarting and looking down, he saw his hands were clenched into fists. He uncoiled them, forcing himself to breathe deeply, and gradually, he felt himself begin to cool down.

He sat up, kicking his legs free of the twisted sheets, and glanced at the clock; it was late afternoon. The sun was slanting in a lazy, honey-colored arch over the floor under the window and across the foot of his bed, making the room warmer than usual. He pulled his foot away from it.

At least he’d managed to get several hours of sleep. His throat was so dry it felt like sandpaper. He rubbed his hands over his face, mindful of his injured palms.

God he was so sick of nightmares. What was it like, nightmare-free sleep? He honestly couldn’t remember.

He still felt strange; his head woozy, his skin oddly thin, as though the world around him was waiting to press in through his flimsy defenses, but he was desperate for a drink of water, and desperate to escape the heat of his room. He couldn’t bring himself to go back to sleep just yet. There were too many hot and poisonous things lurking just out of sight on the edges of his mind, and he wasn’t ready to succumb to them again so soon.

He pulled on a pair of trousers and a clean t-shirt and made his way downstairs, grateful for the cool feeling of the worn wood beneath his feet.

He went into the kitchen for a glass of water, listening as he went for sounds of Sherlock, but the flat was quiet. Maybe he had gone out. At the thought of Sherlock, John felt his pulse pick up, and he experienced a stab of irrational anger, both at himself for his body’s reaction and at the possibility that Sherlock had left the flat. If Sherlock was gone, he should be grateful. After all, he’d made it very clear to Sherlock that he didn’t want looking after.

Still, the possibility made something in his chest ache.

John stood next to the sink and drank down two glasses of tap water. He felt immeasurably better. He couldn’t remember the last time water had tasted so good.

He filled his glass a third time and set it beside him. Placing his palms on the counter, ignoring the pain in his hands as he leaned his weight down into them, he thought about what he was going to say to Sherlock.

It was clear that he couldn’t ignore what had happened between them. This time neither of them had been drunk, or drugged, so the incident couldn’t be explained away for those reasons, or conveniently forgotten in the light of day due to memory loss. Granted, the circumstances surrounding the event had been extreme (only Sherlock Holmes would initiate sex in the middle of a burning ship full of criminals), and John was half-convinced the whole thing was the result of adrenaline and smoke-induced madness, but the point was, neither of them could ignore it now.

As far as John was concerned, it was something ugly and potentially disastrous, now barring their way forward, and it was going to take some very delicate handling on his part to make sure the obstacle was removed without damaging either of them, or their relationship. He had absolutely no
idea how Sherlock would react if he brought it up but he couldn’t face the prospect of not saying anything because he was too afraid that Sherlock himself would never acknowledge it, and the possibility that Sherlock might pretend it never happened would surely drive him mad.

He straightened up and took his glass of water in hand. He was desperate for a cup of tea but the thought of a hot beverage had no appeal to him. He crossed over the threshold of the kitchen into the living room, heading for his armchair. When he was halfway there he looked up, and stopped dead in his tracks.

Sherlock was lying on the couch in his dressing gown, looking at nothing.

John took a deep breath, willing his pounding heart to slow down. There was no point putting it off. Thinking about it wasn’t going to help him feel any less terrified, and if he was honest with himself, he knew that thinking about it also wasn’t going to help him come up with what to say. In the end, it didn’t matter what he said. He just had to say something. What mattered was getting Sherlock to talk about it, to explain himself; as little as John might want to hear the answer.

He squared his shoulders. He could do this.

John swallowed down his terror. It had a bitter taste.

“Hi.”

Sherlock turned to look at him, his head rolling on the pillows, the slide of his eyes as languid as his posture on the couch. His expression was utterly blank.

John set his glass of water down on the desk between the windows. Best not to be holding breakable objects when entering into this conversation.

“Right. So.” He felt suddenly at a loss for what do with his hands now that they were empty, so he crossed his arms over his chest, unconsciously shielding himself. “We don’t have to talk about this at great length but I need to know—”

He took another deep breath. Sherlock was watching him without moving at all. The intensity of his stillness was alarming.

“I need to know what happened last night. After I shot Briggs. When we were…” He stopped himself. He took another breath and forced himself to meet Sherlock’s eyes. “Why did you… why did you kiss me?”

John regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. He heard the rushed and desperate quality in his voice when he said the word ‘kiss’ and hated himself for how stupid he sounded; like an infatuated teenager stumbling around his first crush, stammering and blushing.

He hated that Sherlock could so easily hear every nuance of desire in the lift of his voice, that he could see the rising shame on John’s face; that even now, Sherlock could probably guess what he was thinking, could see the conflict raging in him, just below the surface.

He bit his lips together while he waited for Sherlock’s reply, struggling to keep his emotions in check.

Sherlock slid off the couch and came towards him slowly, carefully, his movements underscored with studied grace. John didn’t like it. Least of all because it made Sherlock look like a panther, elegant, leonine, unaffected—the blue silk of his dressing gown fluttering behind him like a cool wave; or like some god that had casually descended to earth to interact with the babbling mortals that
fell to pieces in his wake. His features could have been carved from marble they were so impassive. He had clearly showered not long before as his hair was still wet. Even the disarray of his dark curls against his pale forehead looked studied to John, and all the poise and arrogance in his demeanor made John want him more than ever, even as the realization filled him with rage.

But most infuriating of all was the suggestion that Sherlock was treating him cautiously, as though he were afraid John might have a violent episode, or worse, dissolve into hysterical tears. John hated being treated like he was fragile. It made him want to break something.

Sherlock stopped his approach when he was directly in front of John. His eyes were pale blue, like sheets of ice under a summer sky, like how John imagined glaciers looked when the sun beat down on them and shone transparent through the ice.

Sherlock’s voice was as cool as his gaze. “Because you wanted me to.”

“Sorry?”

Sherlock repeated himself very carefully, eyes never straying from John’s. “I kissed you because you wanted me to.”

“I didn’t—” John blustered. “I never—”

Mercifully, Sherlock cut him off. “You’ve been wanting me to kiss you for weeks now.”

“How? How can you—?”

John should have known better. He shouldn’t have asked. He knew exactly where that question would lead and he already knew he wasn’t going to like the answer.

“I can see it in the way your body responds to me. When I get close to you your breathing accelerates, your pupils dilate, your eyes drift continually to my mouth. You hold yourself differently, tensely, like you’re trying to keep yourself from reacting, like you’re trying to stop yourself from moving closer to me.”

Bugger it all to hell. It was exactly what he’d been afraid of. Sherlock could read his sad pathetic desperation like a book—had been for weeks.

“You smell different as well. It’s the pheromones—your sex drive is working overtime.”

John had never felt angry about Sherlock’s ability to read him before—it was always astounding to him, dazzling, something to be praised. In fact, he found it almost comforting, the idea that Sherlock knew him better than anyone, sometimes better than he knew himself. But for the first time, he felt too vulnerable, overly exposed as if he had been stripped of his skin, and Sherlock was standing before him, fully clothed, gazing with a clinical eye at all the messy inner-workings of his heart and blood and organs.

It wasn’t fair. John felt like he was fighting at a disadvantage and that made him want to fight dirty. He made a valiant effort to swallow down his rage.

“I see,” he said, his voice full of barely-disguised fury. “So you worked all that out. Good for you. One more question for you though. Why then? Why yesterday if you noticed it weeks ago? Why choose that moment?”

“You needed it then.”
"I… needed it?"

"Yes, you were frightened. You were hurt. You needed… comfort."

John shut his eyes. Oh, this was so much worse than he’d imagined.

“What’s wrong?”

John heard the sharp spike of concern in Sherlock’s voice and it made him feel small and stupid and weak. He didn’t want to be the broken little man that trailed after Sherlock Holmes, falling apart every now and then until Sherlock patched him back together with a kiss and a grope. The fact that Sherlock had noticed not only his desire but also his pain… it was humiliating.

He couldn’t bring himself to communicate that to Sherlock, though; he already felt like he had been carved open, like some insect that had been dissected and pinned, his insides on display for Sherlock to scrutinize. He grasped desperately for something to say to Sherlock that would begin to convey why everything was wrong with what happened between them on the ship. Funnily enough he ended up choosing the detail that probably bothered him the least.

“I had just killed a man, Sherlock. His corpse was lying feet away from us! The ship was in flames, the place was literally falling down around us and you chose that moment to…to…”

“Make you come?”

John’s ears burned. “Yes.”

“Problem?”

“Yes, Sherlock! You can’t just go around kissing people and sticking your hand down their trousers when you think they’re upset! Especially not in the middle of a fire!”

Something in Sherlock’s expression hardened. “I don’t see what you’re complaining about. You obviously enjoyed it.”

John watched the world around him go red.

It took him a moment to find his voice; his throat was so tense with anger he could barely get the words out.

“That’s not the point. You can’t do that, Sherlock.”

“Do what?”

“Go around… assessing people’s desires and then just taking what you want!”

"Why not?"

John let out a hard breath, struggling to control his fury, to try and help Sherlock understand. "Because that's not how people work. You need to give them time to decide things for themselves.”

“You’re really angry with me.” Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

John ignored the question. "People aren't just puzzles for you to solve. You can't just stick in your money when you’ve figured it out and get what you want, like a gum ball machine.”

Sherlock's eyes flashed. He drew a step closer to John, lowering his face down to invade John's.
"You want me. You've wanted me for weeks now and you've never said anything about it, never done anything. Why shouldn't I act on what I can see written in every line of your body? What you're proposing is illogical, John!"

“This has nothing to do with logic!” John shouted. He took a deep breath, grasping at the frayed threads of his control. "Sometimes you have to give people time, Sherlock. People need to work things out in their own time."

Sherlock’s voice was a snarl. "So you’re suggesting I sit back and wait and watch you suffering because you need time to work up to turning me down?"

John nodded. "Yes." Then he realized what Sherlock had said. “Hang on, I never said—”

"Well, I decline.” Sherlock growled, crowding his body closer to John's. “That's a stupid reason not to do something, John. I don't accept it."

John bristled. "You've got to respect other people's decisions Sherlock, even when you don't agree with them!"

"How can I respect your decision when it's not even what you want yourself?"

John realized like a slap in the face that Sherlock was right; he was arguing for the exact opposite of what he really wanted. Sherlock knew what he wanted and was trying to give it to him. But he didn’t want to be with Sherlock if Sherlock didn’t want him—if Sherlock was only acting on behalf of some twisted sense of obligation.

Sherlock was entirely too close to John for comfort, but John refused to fall back a step. He could smell the familiar scent of Sherlock’s expensive shampoo, could feel the heat from Sherlock’s torso as Sherlock leaned down to put his lips against John’s ear. The smell of Sherlock this close—it was like a match being dragged to life—his whole body was suddenly aflame.

“Perhaps you could enlighten me, John,” Sherlock said, his voice low and rough in his ear. "Tell me why I should ignore what your body is screaming at me every time I get close to you."

John held himself absolutely still as he fought to ignore the sensation of Sherlock's mouth against his ear. The touch of Sherlock’s lips, the timbre of his voice tugged at something deep within him. John’s voice was desperate. "Because that's not how this works..."

Sherlock reached out to take hold of John’s wrist, long fingers sliding down to rest against John’s hammering pulse. His response was a plume of hot air against John’s neck. "How does it work then?"

John was so sick of this; sick of being unable to control his body's responses while Sherlock read him like a book, laying him bare one piece at a time. It wasn't fair; he was tired of always being the vulnerable one, tired of being manipulated.

He wanted Sherlock to want it too, and maybe he was asking too much, hell, maybe he was asking the impossible, but he'd rather they went back to the way they were than have Sherlock performing sexual favors for him like some kind of live-in concubine.

He heard Moriarty’s voice in his head and felt shame twisting in the pit of his stomach. *Flesh doesn’t hold his interest... and that's all you are, isn’t it?*
John tried to pull his hand free of Sherlock’s grasp but Sherlock’s fingers closed around his wrist. "Stop it. Stop doing that! I don't want it!"

"But you do want it—"

"Sherlock!"

He wrenched his arm out of Sherlock’s grasp with such a violent motion that he sent Sherlock staggering backwards into the coffee table.

Sherlock only lost his balance for a moment, but in that moment, John saw the look of hurt on his face before it transformed into anger. He righted himself and looked up at John, pale blue eyes blazing.

“Oh, I see.” Sherlock’s voice was glacially cold. “So it’s alright for you to spend weeks nursing an attraction which you say nothing about to me, and do nothing about, but when I attempt to give you what you so clearly want, then that’s wrong? This is exactly why I don’t waste my time on this! It doesn’t make sense!”

“Right. Right.” John let out a long slow breath, which did nothing to help abate his anger. “Since it’s such a waste of time, I’ll make things easier for you, shall I?”

He turned for the door.

“John, wait!” Sherlock reached out and seized John’s wrist.

John’s voice was deadly quiet. “Sherlock. Let go.”

Sherlock dropped his wrist but he held John’s eyes with his own, his expression wild. “How can you be angry with me when this is what you’ve wanted all along? I know you want this, John. I didn’t say anything when I figured it out because you weren’t saying anything about it. I couldn’t understand why you wouldn’t just make the first move. So I thought I’d help you—by making the first move for you.”

John shut his eyes against the desperation on Sherlock’s face. He didn’t want to hear this. He didn’t want to be the pity fuck that Sherlock forced himself to endure in order to get John to stay. It was just like his nightmares. Just like Moriarty said. “All you have to do is ask, and he’d bend himself over backwards for you. You could have him eating out of your hand, so what are you waiting for?”

“You can’t just…” He was shaking so hard he could barely get the words out. “You can’t just go jumping people when you don’t even know…”

“But I do know, John. I do.” John could feel the intensity of Sherlock’s gaze on his face even with his eyes closed. “I waited for you. I tried to give you the chance to make the first move but you wouldn’t do it! For some reason you’ve been afraid. Why?”

John opened his eyes.

“What is it? Why were you so afraid to tell me?”

“I don’t…” He clenched his hands into fists, digging at the burned flesh of his palms.

I don’t want you if you don’t want me.
But he couldn’t bring himself to say it, couldn’t bring himself to read the confirmation of his fears in Sherlock’s eyes.

“There’s something else, isn’t there? What did you think would happen?”

John’s voice was a wail of despair, and he hated himself for it. “This!”

“What? Finally getting what you want? Me knowing? What? What is it? Tell me, John! Tell me, otherwise, how do you expect me to understand?” He could hear the edge of sheer frustration in Sherlock’s voice. “You seemed to like the sex, so I really don’t see what the problem is!”

“No, you wouldn’t, would you?”

He couldn’t do this. John started for the door.

“John—”

Sherlock started to follow him, but John turned around so quickly Sherlock fell back a step in surprise.

“I’m not just an amalgamation of my body’s responses, Sherlock!” he said, his voice shaking with rage. “I’m not just… flesh!”

“I never said you were.” Sherlock’s eyes were soft, the blue of his irises deepening with an emotion that looked a lot to John like pity.

He couldn’t bear it.

He turned, thrust his feet into his shoes, and made his way down the stairs of the flat, out through the front door and onto the street.

He didn’t know where he was going. He hadn’t even taken his jacket. He was so upset he couldn’t think. He felt like the world was coming apart before his eyes.

The afternoon sun was cutting dramatic swathes of golden light across the sidewalk. John walked blindly through it, barely registering the chill of the late-spring afternoon that persisted in spite of the sun. The cherry trees at the end of the street had bloomed early due to the warm spell they’d had last week. He walked beneath them, the sky overhead obscured by a riot of pale pink.

“JOHN!”

He heard the desperate shout before he heard the sound of footsteps, and turned to see Sherlock running towards him, his coat on askew over his dressing gown.

John waited on the sidewalk, motionless, for Sherlock to come to a halt in front of him. He couldn’t imagine what Sherlock would have to say, but he waited all the same.

Sherlock stopped in front of him, an arm’s length away. His damp hair was tumbling the wrong way across his forehead; his eyes were flashing. The expression on his face could only be described as unadulterated rage.

“Did it ever occur to you that you’re not the only one who gets a say in this? I want you and I know you want me so I don’t see—”

“Say that again.”
“I said I don’t see what the problem—”

“No, before that. Before the part about me wanting you.”

John held his breath.

“I want you.”

The wind blew down a storm of petals.

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. John shut his eyes. “Say it again,” he whispered.

“I want you, you daft twit.”

John felt a laugh climbing up his throat. He felt mad. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“I want you, John Watson. I want your hot little army doctor arse. I want your nightmares, and your rage, and your stubbornness, and your utter inability to see what’s directly in front of you. I want it all. Does that make it clear enough for you?”

“No. This isn’t happening.”

John was shaking his head. This wasn’t real. Couldn’t be real.

“John.” Sherlock’s expression sobered. He looked miserable. He looked like he was in pain. “I’m no good at this but it just so happens that I care about you. A lot. Too much. I didn’t realize—” He paused, looking uncomfortable. “It took you staring at me like a child in front of a twenty-four hour sweet shop for me to realize that you… that I…”

This was unbelievable. Sherlock Holmes at a loss for what to say. John marveled.


John’s throat was closing up. He still felt like he couldn’t trust what his ears were telling him. Sherlock looked terrified. John had never seen him look so utterly lost. He looked… vulnerable. Like he’d just laid his heart at John’s feet for him to peruse. Well, that was a change. It would be cruel to keep Sherlock waiting much longer but he had to be sure. He had to be absolutely sure.

His voice, when he found it, was smaller than he would have liked, but that was all right. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

The look in Sherlock’s eyes was heartbreakingly clear. “You never asked me.”

John drew a breath. He shut his eyes.

“John, I—”

“No.” He shook his head, eyes still closed.

He opened his eyes, blinking back tears. Sherlock was staring at him, concern written clear across his face.

John reached out and took hold of the edges of Sherlock’s coat, then, dragging Sherlock’s mouth down to his, he kissed him.
They had kissed before now on several occasions but as far as John was concerned, all of those kisses were wrong. It was as if they had never happened. None of them mattered. All of those kisses were wiped out in the wake of what was happening between the two of them in this moment.

This kiss was something completely new. For the first time, they were meeting each other with all their vulnerabilities exposed—each of their frantically beating hearts warm and messy in one another’s hands—and the intensity of the shared emotion between them almost knocked John off his feet.

Sherlock’s mouth was soft under his, shocked and delighted all at once. He felt Sherlock opening for him, yielding to him in a way that went far deeper than the parting of his lips.

John wanted to swallow him whole, wanted to explore every inch of Sherlock’s mouth, to pull him inside out, but he kept his movements gentle—it was already too much—Sherlock’s hands coming up to cup his face, as if in disbelief, the sigh he could feel in the back of Sherlock’s throat, the sweet simplicity of Sherlock’s lips against his own.

He clutched the edges of Sherlock’s coat as if they were a lifeline and he a drowning man. He was drowning in a sense, drowning in the blissful impossibility that Sherlock wanted him, John Watson, as badly as he wanted Sherlock. Or so he said. John wasn’t convinced of that yet, but he was happy to give Sherlock the chance to prove it to him.

For just this moment, Sherlock was the only sure thing in the world to John, the only thing that made sense, and he didn’t want to pull away for fear that this was all he got, that Sherlock might change his mind in the space it took him to catch his breath.

But he needed to breathe, just one deep breath to steady himself, so he pulled away, just slightly, still clinging to the edges of Sherlock’s coat, and looked up at Sherlock through his eyelashes.

Sherlock’s breathing was as unsteady as his own, the look in his eyes equally blown apart, except darker, hungrier, the blue of his irises devoured by his pupils. His hands were still cupping John’s face, his thumbs resting by the hinge of John’s jaw. He was like a living contradiction—the way he was holding John’s face so gently between his hands, like he was trying to protect him, combined with the starved, desperate look in his eyes—it took John’s breath away.

John understood. He felt very much the same way himself.

The wind was blowing Sherlock’s hair across his forehead. It made goose bumps stand up on John’s bare arms. He suddenly remembered that they were standing on a street corner and he didn’t have a coat. He should have been cold, but he wasn’t. Or if he was, he didn’t care. He was shivering lightly but that wasn’t from the cold.

Sherlock seemed to notice it in the same instant as John. He let go of John’s face to pull John in against his chest. John let go of Sherlock’s coat. He lifted his chin to Sherlock, wetting his lips. Sherlock leaned down and kissed him, tugging the edges of his coat around John’s back.

The wind blew down another shower of cherry blossoms. Sherlock pulled John closer against him, his lips sliding over John’s.

John was in a warm little world of Sherlock’s chest against his own, Sherlock’s hands on his shoulder blades, his leg tangling with Sherlock’s, and Sherlock’s mouth on his—warm and wet and open.

He wanted to keep his eyes open, to see Sherlock’s face as he was kissing him, but it was so difficult
—there was too much—it took enough effort at this point just to remain standing. He tried for a moment and was rewarded with the curve of Sherlock’s cheekbone and beyond that, the surreal sight of the cherry blossoms raining down from the tree above as the wind rose, the air around them transformed into a fluttering pink and white sea.

John felt Sherlock’s tongue push against his own and John tilted his head to take Sherlock deeper into his mouth. The sound Sherlock made in the back of his throat in response was enough to make John’s knees give out. He clung to Sherlock’s back, his leg pressing in between Sherlock’s thighs. Sherlock dragged his teeth over John’s bottom lip. Oh god. They couldn’t keep doing this on the street—they needed a bed, yes—a bed would be good.

Sherlock’s hips were tucked against John’s waist and with a gasp, John felt the hard length of Sherlock pressed up against him—the evidence of Sherlock’s desire suddenly made shockingly clear. This was the first time John was made aware of Sherlock’s erection—he may have had one before, but John hadn’t felt it. Not like this. His bones felt like they had turned to water.

With a tremendous effort, he pulled back from Sherlock’s mouth.

He saw the storm in Sherlock’s eyes as he pulled away, the protest half-formed on his lips.

John lifted himself up on his toes to reach Sherlock’s ear; he could hear the urgency in his own voice. “Let’s go back to Baker Street where we can do this properly.”

Sherlock smiled. There were cherry blossoms in his hair.

John took Sherlock by the hand and tugged him in the direction of 221B.

“Come on.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, this story's not over yet! Next chapter? Pure porn. :)

Thanks to those of you who've left comments! I love hearing from you so please keep 'em coming!

ETA: Please, please, please do yourself a favor and go look at the GORGEOUS ILLUSTRATION that sweetlittlekitty did for this scene. It is seriously one of the greatest pieces of fanart ever created (in my humble opinion). :)
They managed to make it down the street, up the steps, and through the front door of 221B without stopping, but as soon as the door closed behind them in the front hall, Sherlock pulled John against him and kissed him as though his life depended on it.

His hand was still in John’s, and John felt Sherlock’s fingers tighten around his hand as their mouths came together. At the touch of Sherlock’s lips—he could feel the dramatic dip of Sherlock’s upper lip where it brushed against his own, the soft intake of breath as he opened his mouth—John felt his knees go weak once again with the knowledge that this was Sherlock, *Sherlock* kissing him, because he wanted *John*. He didn’t know if he was ever going to get used to that information.

There was a warm feeling somewhere in the region of his lower abdomen that was spreading all through his body, filling him up, until he felt like he was suffused with light; as though if he were to look down at his arms and legs he would actually be glowing. With each new moment of Sherlock’s mouth on his, with every eager press of Sherlock’s hips against his own, he suspected he was growing brighter.

The kiss was ravenous—it felt like Sherlock was trying to swallow him whole, like he was afraid someone was going to pull John away from him before he got what he wanted.

Sherlock had walked John backwards until he was up against the door, his mouth hot and insistent against John’s. John was beginning to detect a pattern here, a pattern that involved Sherlock positioning John between himself and a hard surface, pinning the smaller man beneath him as he took him apart bit by bit. John was not adverse to this development, not in the least. On the contrary, the realization made a burst of desire erupt in the center of his chest.

However, as much as John was aroused by the idea of Sherlock having him right up against the front door, there was still the issue of Mrs. Hudson, and although he suspected that she had had designs on them getting together from the beginning, he didn’t want to offer her proof of this new aspect of their relationship in quite so visceral a manner.

John pulled back gently.
“Sherlock—”

Sherlock kissed the corner of his mouth.

“Let’s…”

Sherlock began kissing his way over the edge of John’s jaw and down his throat, undeterred.

John abruptly lost the thread of what he was saying as Sherlock’s mouth did something unbelievable and exquisite to the side of his neck.

“Oh god!” He gasped and fought to keep his eyes open. “That is… I think we should…”

Sherlock was sucking and biting and licking somehow all at once, and it felt… it was like nothing John had ever experienced. John found he was temporarily beyond speech.

Sherlock stopped performing sorcery with his mouth and pulled back a little. John felt the unsteady exhalation of Sherlock’s breath against his skin as he dragged his mouth back up the side of John’s neck, not touching, but so close that John still felt the heat of him.

His right hand was still clasped in John’s left, his left hand tracing patterns on the inside of John’s wrist—the movement so delicate, it seemed to bring into sharp focus every nerve ending on the underside of John’s arm.

Sherlock looked down at him and the intensity of the desire in his eyes made a wave of heat pass through John and leave him shivering in its wake. Once again he had the impression of being pinned by Sherlock’s gaze, but this time he welcomed it. It made him want to peel himself apart to give Sherlock more layers of himself to devour.

Sherlock’s breath when he spoke was hot on John’s cheek. “I’ve never wanted anything as much as I’ve wanted you.”

John felt another shudder move through him at Sherlock’s words.

Sherlock put his mouth on John’s temple and held it there, his lips parted. “I want you, John Watson.” John could feel Sherlock’s heart against his shoulder. It was beating impossibly fast. Each word on his skin was a burst of heat. “I want every piece of you.”

John forgot about why it was important to get out of the front hall. He forgot about Mrs. Hudson and neighborly courtesy and public indecency. He forgot about everything except his need to have Sherlock’s mouth against his right away, immediately, now.

Reaching a hand up to the back of Sherlock’s neck, he dragged Sherlock’s mouth down against his and kissed him with an ache in his chest that was only made better when Sherlock’s lips parted and his tongue came out to meet John’s, warm and slick and deliciously wet.

John’s hand slid up into Sherlock’s curls, his other arm looping around Sherlock’s neck to bring Sherlock closer against him, and before he knew what was happening, Sherlock was lifting him—lifting him—off the ground, his hands supporting John’s buttocks. John didn’t question it. He lifted his legs and wrapped them around Sherlock’s waist to give him better purchase. This new turn of events meant he was closer to Sherlock than ever, his groin pressed into the heat of Sherlock’s stomach, Sherlock’s hands warm and firm on the crease of his buttock and thigh.

He was still kissing Sherlock. His teeth pulled gently on Sherlock’s bottom lip and Sherlock made a sound in response that John would likely never forget. He felt Sherlock’s fingers tighten on his legs.
He did it again. Sherlock almost dropped him.

“John—”

Now it was Sherlock’s turn to break away, his breathing shaky. He pressed his forehead against John’s.

“Wait a moment. Let me—”

John licked Sherlock’s upper lip.

Sherlock made a sound that was half-snarl, half-moan.

“Right.” He tightened his hold on John’s legs, pulling John in against his chest. “Hold on.”

Tucking his mouth in against John’s ear, Sherlock charged toward the staircase. John locked his arms around Sherlock’s neck and held on.

Sherlock carried him up all seventeen steps, never pausing once to catch his breath.

It occurred to John midway up the stairs that perhaps he should be insulted that Sherlock was carrying him like he weighed nothing at all, like he was a swooning maiden, and Sherlock was his conqueror, sweeping him off to some secluded bower; but John found the scenario produced exactly the opposite effect.

He’d never had such an intense erection in his life.

They’d left the door of the flat wide open. Sherlock carried John through it and around the corner into his room, not stopping until his knees came up against the edge of the mattress.

He lowered John down onto the bed, somehow managing to do so without moving his mouth from John’s neck. Sometime in the space between reaching the top of the stairs and arriving in Sherlock’s bedroom, Sherlock’s mouth had returned to the underside of John’s throat and resumed performing the magical combination of licking and sucking that made John forget that there was anything more to him than just miles and miles of undiscovered skin.

John’s arms were still around Sherlock’s neck, one hand still buried in Sherlock’s luscious curls. God, he’d imagined the sensation so many times but his imagination paled in comparison to the actual feeling of the thick, slippery hair beneath his fingers—the fragrance of it when he bunched it in his hands.

John was lying flat on his back, Sherlock kneeling between his legs, bending over him, making a tent around John with his coat.

“Sherlock…” John was so breathless he could barely get the words out. “Coat…”

He gasped as Sherlock bit down with his teeth and pulled on the sensitive skin under his jaw.

“Take off your coat!”

Sherlock gave the patch of skin one last leisurely lick before sitting up and shrugging his shoulders out of the coat and tossing it beside the bed.

“Dressing gown, too.”

Sherlock did as John said, holding John’s eyes all the while. His eyelids were heavy; the skin around
his mouth was red where John had kissed him. The sight of him looking so debauched, his gaze intently on John, sent a bolt of desire straight to John’s cock. He moaned, letting his legs fall open a little wider.

He watched the look that passed over Sherlock’s face in response to the sound that he made and lifted his mouth to Sherlock’s as Sherlock dove forward to kiss him.

The kiss was demanding—all teeth and tongue. John rose up into it, his hands moving from Sherlock’s hair down the length of his narrow back. He could feel Sherlock’s ribs under his thin t-shirt and John was suddenly seized with the desire to kiss each one.

He found the edge of the material and slid his hands underneath, running his palms up over Sherlock’s bare flesh. He was rewarded with a gasp from Sherlock and he kissed the corner of Sherlock’s open mouth and then the lovely bow of his upper lip, which he would never tire of kissing.

Sherlock’s breathing was ragged against him.

It occurred to John in that moment how blind he really had been. The way Sherlock was looking at him now—he’d had the same look in his eyes last night on the ship. It was desire John had seen, and it had been real. He’d been so afraid to believe that Sherlock could feel anything for him that he’d denied the evidence of his own eyes, the evidence that in retrospect couldn’t have been clearer.

Sherlock had been holding himself slightly above John but as John’s hands continued their passage up and down Sherlock’s back, his hips began to sink toward the mattress, and gradually he lowered himself into the space between John’s parted thighs.

John’s fingers froze on Sherlock’s back as the heat of Sherlock’s groin came to settle between his legs. He could feel the hard line of Sherlock’s erection through his trousers, now just inches from his own, and for a moment, he couldn’t breathe.

The sensation was overwhelming. John shut his eyes, and forced himself to breathe.

It occurred to him that their current position was a mirror image of the night Sherlock had been drugged, with their positions reversed. There was something bittersweet in the realization that made the bright feeling in John’s chest glow hotter.

He could feel Sherlock shuddering against him and he realized in the same instant that Sherlock was as overcome as he was.

He resumed his stroking up and down Sherlock’s back and he pressed his mouth to Sherlock’s temple.

“Hey…” he said, reaching up to push Sherlock’s hair out of his eyes. “It’s all right.”

Sherlock looked down at him, and the expression on his face took John’s breath away. “I don’t think you know what you do to me.”

John pulled Sherlock’s shaking torso down against him. “Come here.”

He stroked Sherlock’s hair, pulled him in tight against his chest, clenching Sherlock’s lower body to him with his thighs. He needed Sherlock against him at every possible point of contact.

“It nearly ruined me.” Sherlock drew a shallow breath, his head on John’s chest. “Keeping myself from you.”
John’s hand stilled.

“I couldn’t let you know how badly I wanted you. Not after it became clear you weren’t going to act on your own desires. When I finally kissed you on the boat… that was purely selfish. I wanted you in that moment. So I took you.”

John felt the shudder than ran through Sherlock at the admission. His hand resumed its journey up Sherlock’s back.

“You can’t do that, you know.” John said, his voice quiet. “You can’t just take what you want from people.”

“I know,” Sherlock ground out. “I knew that then, but I couldn’t wait anymore. I couldn’t bear it.”

John let his lips brush Sherlock’s hair, struggling to breathe evenly despite the feeling that Sherlock had pulled his heart up through his throat. His voice was tight with suppressed emotion. “Well, you don’t have to wait anymore.”

Sherlock lifted himself up on his elbows and looked down at John, his dark eyes full of fire.

John tipped his chin up. “You can take me now.”

Sherlock’s mouth descended on the corner of John’s mouth and stayed there, shaking. John parted his lips and turned his face toward Sherlock, his nose grazing Sherlock’s cheek, his mouth finding Sherlock’s.

“I’m yours,” he said, opening his mouth against Sherlock’s.

He felt Sherlock’s soft inhalation of pleasure rather than heard it.

Sherlock kissed John like the world was ending, like they were back on the burning boat and the fire had closed them in at last. It made John feel desperate and dangerous and more aroused than ever.

Sherlock began kissing his way down John’s neck, hands bunching in the material of John’s t-shirt.

“Sit up,” he breathed, lifting his mouth back to John’s to issue the command.

John obliged, even if it meant putting temporary distance between them.

Sherlock pulled John’s shirt up over his head.

“I need to see you,” he said, mouth returning immediately to the skin of John’s throat. “I need to see all of you.”

Sherlock kissed the length of each collarbone before dragging his tongue down John’s sternum. He paused briefly to close his mouth over one of John’s nipples, scraping lightly with his teeth.

John gasped at the sensation, arching his torso up closer to Sherlock’s mouth, but Sherlock’s mouth kept traveling down, his hair tickling the skin of John’s belly as he licked his way down John’s ribs, pausing to suck a love bite in the soft skin above John’s hip.

John’s hands flew to Sherlock’s head, fingers clenching in the soft curls as Sherlock sucked. He felt like he had on the boat, like Sherlock was taking him apart piece by piece, but this time he wanted it—he wanted Sherlock to see him come completely undone.

It was so different from how John had expected sex with Sherlock would be. He’d always imagined
he would be the one in control—that he would be doing the touching, directing what happened, most likely because he wanted to touch Sherlock so badly. He wanted to touch the hollow planes of his ribs, the dip of his narrow waist, his long thin legs—he wanted to taste every inch of his lovely pale skin.

But this, this was something John never imagined he would want—giving up control to someone else entirely—and John found that he liked it. Not only did he like it, he got off on just the idea of it. He could feel that the fabric that was stretched taut against the head of his cock was already soaking wet.

Sherlock’s mouth was still hot against John’s lower stomach when he felt Sherlock’s fingers working their way under the elastic of his trousers and pants, tugging them down his hips, and out of the way of his mouth. He pulled the material down John’s thighs and tossed both trousers and pants beside the bed, leaving John completely bare beneath him.

Sherlock took his mouth away from John’s body and sat back to look at him. The heat of his gaze over every inch of him made John feel so aroused he thought he might come right there just from the intensity of Sherlock’s gaze.

That, combined with the fact that Sherlock was still fully clothed above him in t-shirt and trousers, made the state of his utter nakedness all the more apparent. He felt Sherlock’s eyes travel down his torso and belly and settle on the arousal that was so evident between his legs. The look in Sherlock’s eyes made him groan aloud.

“God, Sherlock. Please… touch me.”

Leaning forward, Sherlock laid his hands on John’s hips and then, spreading his palms, he dragged his hands down John’s legs, taking John’s foot in his hand and pressing a kiss to the inside of his arch.

He kissed John’s ankle—just the softest brush of his lips—before sliding his mouth up to John’s calf. The touch of his mouth was so light John could feel himself shaking beneath it; every nerve in his body felt like it was on fire and Sherlock hadn’t even touched his cock yet. He fisted his hands in the sheets to keep from crying out.

Sherlock’s mouth traveled up the inside of John’s knee, pressing soft kisses against the curve there, pausing when he reached John’s inner thigh. Then, opening his mouth, Sherlock sucked hard at the sensitive skin.

This time, John couldn’t hold back his cry.

He clutched helplessly at the sheets, quivering like a pinned butterfly, the metaphor that before had been so disturbing to him now making him feel like putty in Sherlock’s hands. He’d never felt so helpless, so utterly vulnerable.

The warm heat of Sherlock’s mouth slid up his thigh, drifting close to the base of his cock but not touching, moving up to graze the crease of his pelvis, alternating the press of his tongue with the pull of his teeth. The way Sherlock’s mouth was moving against him made it clear that he was tasting John.

The realization made another groan issue from John’s throat.

“Sher—Sherlock…”
John licked dry lips, unable to catch his breath.

He groaned again as Sherlock dragged his nose through the thatch of pubic hair above his cock, hips jerking at the feel of Sherlock’s breath hitting its base.

“Fuck, Sherlock—I can’t—”

He couldn’t take it anymore. He reached for his own cock but Sherlock’s hand was on his wrist before he could touch himself, stilling the movement.

“No, John.”

Sherlock’s admonishment sounded more like a plea.

He climbed up John’s body, taking John’s other wrist in hand and pressing both wrists against the mattress above John’s head. He lowered his long body down against John’s so that John was trapped, naked and shivering beneath him.

“I can see you really like pinning me,” John said breathlessly. “Making me completely vulnerable…”

“Problem?”

“None whatsoever,” John gasped.

Sherlock dropped his mouth to John’s ear, lips caressing the shell of it as he spoke. “I want you to come in my mouth. I want to know what you taste like when I’ve driven you over the edge.”

John rutted his hips up against Sherlock’s at his words, the overly sensitized skin of his cock coming into contact with the rough material of Sherlock’s trousers. He gasped at the sensation and Sherlock turned his head and pushed his tongue into John’s mouth, grinding down against John with his hips as his tongue stroked the length of John’s.

John whimpered into the kiss, his hands fisting in Sherlock’s grasp, feeling like he might break apart if Sherlock didn’t touch his cock soon.

He thrust desperately up against Sherlock’s groin but this time, Sherlock lifted his hips away. He caught John’s bottom lip between his teeth, releasing his hold on John’s wrists to slide his hands down John’s sides and push his hips down against the mattress.

“No, not like that.”

There was a tremor in Sherlock’s voice that betrayed his arousal—that and the flush creeping over his cheeks. John had never seen Sherlock look so undone. He pressed his hips up into Sherlock’s hands, desperate.

Sherlock knelt between John’s spread legs, keeping his hands firmly on John’s hips while he leaned over to press an open-mouthed kiss to the juncture between John’s hip and thigh. Then, burying his nose and mouth against the base of John’s cock, he inhaled deeply.

John made an incoherent noise, his head falling back against the mattress.

“John.” Sherlock’s voice was deep and impelling. John could feel the vibration of it against his thigh.

“John, look at me.”

With effort, John raised his head and looked down his body to where Sherlock’s mouth was now just above the tip of his cock. Sherlock’s eyes locked onto his.
John felt a shudder go through him.

“Jesus Christ.”

Sherlock’s pupils were so heavily dilated that his eyes looked black.

“Look at me, John.”

Sherlock’s hands were still on John’s hips, holding them down, his mouth now so close John could feel the heat of his words on his cock. His knee twitched violently. The sound of his panting breath seemed to fill the room, but he kept his eyes on Sherlock’s.

Sherlock parted his lips and then—John couldn’t help it, he looked away from Sherlock’s eyes to take in the sight of his gorgeous mouth opening around the head of John’s cock and sliding down.

John’s own mouth fell open at the sensation of the slick, wet heat of Sherlock enveloping him. His eyes flickered back up to Sherlock’s to find Sherlock still holding his gaze, and at the look in Sherlock’s eyes John made a guttural sound, his hips jerking under Sherlock’s hands.

Sherlock’s eyes were lowered to half-mast—clearly so overcome that it was an effort for him to keep them open but resolutely holding John’s gaze, looking up at John through his eyelashes as his tongue stroked the head of his cock.

“Fuck, Sherlock!”

Once again, John’s fists were clenching in the bed sheets, desperate for something to grab hold of, his heels digging into the mattress.

Sherlock dropped his mouth another inch, creating suction with his cheeks as his tongue worked the slit of John’s cock.

John let out a groan.

“God, Sherlock…”

He pulled off, sucking hard as he did, and then ran his tongue down the vein on the underside, flattening his tongue on the way back up—then back down again, this time all the way down until he reached John’s balls, pulling them both into the wet heat of his mouth.

John cried out, his hips bucking violently.

Without moving his mouth, Sherlock slid his hands from John’s hips down to the underside of each knee. He lifted until John’s legs were fastened around his back.

John let out another groan.

Sherlock released John’s balls with a reluctant huff of air through his nostrils and then rubbed his cheek against the side of John’s cock, mouthing his way back up to take the head of John’s cock between his lips.

John’s breath was a hiss as Sherlock’s mouth closed around him again, his thighs tightening around Sherlock’s waist.

“I can’t… God, Sherlock, your mouth—”

John’s head fell back against the mattress, his breathing ragged. He was so close to coming. He
didn’t want it to be over yet but he wasn’t going to last much longer with Sherlock swallowing more of him every second.

He reached down blindly, wanting to take hold of some part of Sherlock, to communicate to him what he was feeling. He settled for burying his hands in Sherlock’s hair, not pulling, but massaging, carding the thick curls through his fingers, one hand teasing the sensitive skin along his neck.

Sherlock made a low noise of satisfaction in his throat and John felt the vibration in every inch of his cock.

Sherlock took him deeper, tongue massaging the underside of his shaft even as his mouth was full of him.

John dug his heels into Sherlock’s back; his head tipping back against the mattress.

His whole body was trembling with the approach of his orgasm—his hands fisting desperately in Sherlock’s hair to stave off the inevitable.

It was so different from what he’d imagined, not only because it was full of details John had never been able to fully conjure—the velvety feel of Sherlock’s mouth around him, the flush staining Sherlock’s cheeks and throat, the weight of his hands on John’s hips—but because it was undeniable that Sherlock wanted him. Somehow, John had never been able to accurately imagine what that would look like, and seeing it now, the look in Sherlock’s eyes, like he was drowning in John and still wanted more of him, was enough to make John feel like he had on the boat, like he was about to be splintered to pieces, but for a completely different reason. He felt as though he would break open from joy.

Suddenly, none of it was enough. Even with his hands in Sherlock’s hair, his legs gripping Sherlock’s waist and his cock buried in Sherlock’s throat. He needed more of Sherlock, all of him; he wanted Sherlock’s cock in his hand, the length of his body pressed against John’s. He wanted to feel the whole of Sherlock’s arousal, wanted to be a part of it. As much as he loved being on the receiving end of Sherlock’s attentions, this time, this first time knowing that Sherlock wanted him, he wanted to be aware of Sherlock’s arousal as he came.

It took a tremendous amount of effort for John to direct his attention away from the heavenly feeling of Sherlock’s mouth on his cock, but he managed it, moving his hands down from Sherlock’s hair to lightly grip either side of his face.

“Sherlock…” His voice was hoarse. “Wait.”

Sherlock pulled off and looked up at John, his eyes questioning.

“I want…” He was panting so hard he could barely get the words out. “I want you. Please.” He swallowed. “I want to feel you.”

Something shifted in Sherlock’s eyes at John’s request, and when John felt Sherlock shudder against him, he recognized the look as one of pure longing.

Sherlock crawled up John’s body, John’s hands now on either side of his neck, guiding Sherlock’s mouth to his as Sherlock lowered the length of himself down against John.

He kissed Sherlock with a renewed urgency, desperate to feel as much of Sherlock against him as he could. Sherlock’s mouth was warm and slick and John could taste himself on Sherlock’s tongue. The realization made him moan into the kiss, his hand slipping down between them to find Sherlock’s erection.
He could feel the warm weight of Sherlock’s arousal against his hip and he coiled his fingers against it, opening his palm to stroke the length of it through Sherlock’s trousers.

He felt Sherlock’s sharp intake of breath against his mouth at the movement, felt Sherlock’s hips stiffen against him, and John had to hold his hand still for a moment to hold his own arousal at bay, so overcome was he by Sherlock’s response.

Sherlock pressed his forehead against John’s, his breathing rapid and uneven against John’s cheek.

He was close; John could tell. The front of his trousers was damp where the head of his cock was pressed. John wanted to feel Sherlock in his hand without any layers of fabric between them, but he knew he had to be quick: neither of them were going to last much longer.

His fingers shook as he reached his other hand down to undo the fastening on Sherlock’s trousers. Sherlock lifted his hips to give John room to push the material down his thighs, gasping when John’s thumbs grazed his bare flesh. His face was tucked in against John’s ear and John could feel how hot Sherlock’s cheek was against his own, the delicate flicker of Sherlock’s eyelashes against his temple.

When his fingers closed around the hard heat of Sherlock’s cock, he heard Sherlock’s breathing hitch, and his hips jerked up into Sherlock’s at the sound—it was a small, soft sound but it contained such depth of feeling that John felt it from the base of his stomach to the tips of his toes, and he had to dig his teeth into his bottom lip to keep from coming.

John dragged his knees up until his feet were flat on the mattress on either side of Sherlock and he was holding Sherlock between his parted thighs. He could hear Sherlock fighting to get his breathing under control. His cheek was still pressed against the side of John’s face, his arms on either side of John’s torso trembling as he struggled to hold himself up.

He let his thumb slide through the moisture at the tip of Sherlock’s cock and he heard Sherlock make a sound like a whimper, his arms finally giving way, forcing him to drop to his elbows. He moved his lips over Sherlock’s ear, trying to make a soothing sound. He meant to keep his hand still, to give Sherlock a moment to adapt to the sensation but he couldn’t stop his greedy fingers from slipping down his shaft, and Sherlock made the same whimpering sound, his hips thrusting into John’s hand.

The movement brought Sherlock that much closer to him, and when John stroked his hand back up the length of him, his knuckles brushed his own cock, sending a shudder coursing through him. He could scarcely form thoughts anymore; he was nothing but sensation, and the need to feel Sherlock’s cock against his own drove every other desire from his mind.

Moving his hands to Sherlock’s hips, he dragged Sherlock further up his body until Sherlock’s cock was lined up with his own. Then, slipping his hands around to grip Sherlock by his buttocks, he thrust up into him, the feel of Sherlock sliding slick and hot against him making his mouth drop open with pleasure.

He felt the shudder that went through Sherlock’s body at the contact and his mouth broke away from the side of John’s face with a gasp.

John clenched Sherlock tighter between his thighs, digging his fingers into the flesh of his buttocks and rutting up against him.

Sherlock’s forehead was back against his own, his breath hot and desperate against John’s face. John pulled Sherlock still tighter against him, arching off the bed to push his hips into Sherlock’s with more force, increasing the friction that made him feel as though his body was a tangle of electrical currents gathering charge.
He was aware that he was making a steady stream now of pleading sounds, increasing in intensity with every roll of his hips against Sherlock’s. He could feel his own pleasure rising in him; any moment now it was going to brim over and he would be carried away.

Sherlock tipped his face down to press an unsteady kiss to John’s temple, then another to his brow bone, to the tip of his nose, the curve of his cheek, murmuring in between each one, “John… John…” his voice beseeching, as if he were asking him something, needed something that John wasn’t giving him.

John tried to ask him what it was, but his throat was so full of emotion he couldn’t speak. He tilted his mouth up against Sherlock’s in answer, pressing a breathless kiss to Sherlock’s jaw, his hands moving up to grip Sherlock by the shoulders.

Sherlock’s lips slid over John’s, panting into his mouth as he pushed a hand between them to wrap both of their cocks in his fist. John cried out at the feeling and Sherlock ground his hips down into him, tightening his fist as he did so, biting at John’s lips.

It was too much.

John’s thighs clenched around Sherlock as he arched up against him, fingers digging into Sherlock’s shoulder blades, his head tipping back against the mattress, the room lost around him in an explosion of light.

Pleasure burst through him, filling him up, moving over him like water, until he felt as though he were breaking apart, dissolving like foam on a wave.

Sherlock’s lips moved on his and he couldn’t hear what Sherlock was saying but he felt the urgent press of Sherlock’s mouth skid down his throat, hot and wet and studded with teeth, one of his hands sliding up to cradle the back of John’s head, as the other gave their cocks one last desperate stroke. Then Sherlock was stiffening against him, bearing down into John with all his weight, and shuddering hard between John’s thighs as he came.

John pulled Sherlock down against him as he felt the warm rush of Sherlock’s release spill out over Sherlock’s fist onto the skin of his belly, hips hitching up instinctively to bring them closer together, the smear of liquid on the sensitive skin of his cock drawing one last, long shudder from his body.

Sherlock’s face was tucked in against the side of John’s neck, his breath hot and unsteady in the crease of John’s shoulder. John could feel his body shivering minutely against him, still wracked with the after-effects of his orgasm.

He dropped his mouth to Sherlock’s hair and pressed a kiss to the damp curls. His body felt loose and pliant, pulled apart by pleasure. All he wanted was to curl himself around Sherlock like a vine and fall asleep. He let his hands smooth down Sherlock’s back and noticed that Sherlock was still shaking against him.

Sherlock’s breathing against the side of his neck sounded wrong: irregular and thin. He could feel Sherlock’s fingers, where they were still holding the back of his head, now squeezing with vise-like intensity, and he slid his arms around Sherlock’s waist, suddenly concerned.

“Hey, Sherlock…”

He slid a hand up the back of Sherlock’s head, threading his fingers gently through the curls. He heard Sherlock’s breathing change at the movement, catching for a moment before evening out. He felt the fingers that were holding his head relax several degrees.
“Hey…” he said softly, rubbing soothing circles with his other hand over Sherlock’s lower back. He ducked his head to the part in Sherlock’s hair and held his mouth there, warm and steady. “You alright?”

He heard Sherlock try to draw a deep breath, turning his face against John’s neck as he let it out.

“It’s all right,” he murmured into Sherlock’s hair. “You’re all right.”

Shifting his weight, Sherlock pulled his hand free from where it was still tucked between them, and curled himself closer against John. His face where it was pressed against John’s neck was damp.

John stroked his fingers over Sherlock’s scalp and felt another long exhalation of Sherlock’s breath in the crease of his shoulder, this one slower, slightly easier.

He kept his fingers moving in slow circles through Sherlock’s hair, his lips soft against Sherlock’s part, murmuring meaningless soothing things, aware that the gesture was calming him as much as it was Sherlock. He felt fragile, tremulous, like a sheet of gold leaf that had been beaten too thin.

Gradually he felt Sherlock relax against him, the stiffness leaving his limbs, his body softening under John’s arms.

“You’re all right,” he breathed. “I’m right here.” He pressed another kiss to Sherlock’s hairline, where the curls were pushed back from his forehead. “I’m right here.”

Sherlock shifted against him, lifting himself onto his elbows to look down at John.

His eyes were shining; his lips flushed pink. John saw his mouth trembling. He took John’s face in his hands and kissed him, and John felt his heart constrict in his chest.

Sherlock’s mouth against his was as soft as the sound he had made when John had taken him in his hand. Nothing Sherlock ever did was soft—and this softness, this new tenderness, was all for John.

John felt as though his heart was breaking, but that couldn’t be right. He’d never known what people meant when they said they thought they’d die of happiness, but now he did. Somehow his joy and sorrow were all mixed up together. He couldn’t contain all the feeling in his chest. It seemed to be streaming out of his eyes.

His fingers shook in Sherlock’s hair. He made a sobbing sound under Sherlock’s mouth, and Sherlock pulled away.

John’s cheeks were running with tears.

“I’m sorry.” John scrubbed at his eyes with a fist, feeling suddenly self-conscious. “Jesus. I’m not—I don’t usually…I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Sherlock said, still holding John’s face between his hands.

John felt the muscles in his throat work. He tried to look away, to look anywhere but at Sherlock’s face, but Sherlock held his head still.

“John,” Sherlock said, and John raised his eyes to Sherlock’s to find Sherlock’s eyes alight with the same blazing look they’d held on the boat before Sherlock had pulled them both through flame. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

The look in Sherlock’s eyes broke him. He pushed his fist up to his mouth, stifling another sob.
“It’s all right,” Sherlock said, kissing his wet cheeks, his movements slightly halting, unsure, but his hands still so gentle where they cupped John’s face. “You’re all right.”

John pulled Sherlock’s hand to his mouth and kissed his fingers, kissed his open palm. His heart was pure gold, hammered thin.

Sherlock made a low, desperate sound, and tugged John against him until they were lying face-to-face, Sherlock’s calf hooked over the backs of John’s knees.

“You’re all right,” Sherlock gasped, his mouth still trembling when he pressed it to John’s ear.

John buried his face in the space between Sherlock’s chin and shoulder. He shut his eyes, furiously taking note of every sweat-slick point of skin at which he and Sherlock were connected. Sherlock’s chin was a reassuring sharp presence against the top of John’s head, the dull thud of Sherlock’s heartbeat pounding against his own steadying him.

He exhaled, long and wet, into the skin of Sherlock’s throat.

Sherlock slid his free hand up the back of John’s neck and pulled John’s mouth to his once more, his hips cradling John against him as he pressed his swollen lips to John’s.

His lips stuck against John’s when he spoke.

He tasted of salt; he tasted like the sea.

“I’m right here.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again for all your fantastic comments. Seriously, I cannot thank you enough. Hearing from you guys makes this experience a million times more awesome.

And, just in case you’re worried, I feel like I should mention that this is NOT the end of the story. Not at all.
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

John has erotic botanical dreams. Oh yeah, and rain sex.

Chapter Notes

Yet another special thank you to A Study In Purple for her ONE DAY TURN AROUND beta-ing this chapter! Once again in the midst of stressful job applications and grading. She is THE BEST.

Soooo, remember when I said that the unresolved sexual tension would be resolved multiple times over? Yeah. This is literally nothing but smut. I promise there is more plot coming, but for now, just enjoy the sex. :D

John woke some time in the night with an ache in his shoulder, from a strange, soft dream that had been full of vines and growing things, pale blossoms dappled with shadows in a green world suffused with golden light. Sherlock had been there with him, sliding his hand into John’s as they walked along, bending his mouth to John’s ear to murmur the names of the various plants.

“Jasminum polyanthum,” he said, pointing to the white, star-shaped flowers as his mouth traced the shell of John’s ear. “Responsible for the perfume in the air. And that,” he said, moving his body behind John’s to kiss the nape of his neck, “Heliconia latispatha—a favorite of hummingbirds.”

Sherlock’s hands were warm on his torso, his lips now lost in John’s hair. John tipped his head back and saw a canopy of brilliant green.

“Identified by the flowers forming on the long, erect or drooping panicles—see there? and the brightly colored waxy bracts that hide the smaller flowers within. It’s a distant cousin to the banana plant.”

John hummed his assent but his eyes were closed, the feeling of Sherlock’s hands moving over his hips lulling him into a trance-like state of pleasure.

“And of course, the infamous Dionaea muscipula, recognizable for its trapping mechanism, rapid movement, and the sensitive hairs on the leaf lobes that look so much like teeth.”

At the word teeth, Sherlock’s mouth had fastened onto the side of John’s neck, suckling like a vampire bat. John made a hissing noise, turning in Sherlock’s arms to find his mouth, body arching toward Sherlock’s torso.

Moving his hands to John’s hips, Sherlock had lowered them both to the ground, his tongue now firmly in John’s mouth, sucking on it as though John’s mouth was the hollow of a flower and his tongue full of nectar.
He twisted under Sherlock, trying to find purchase on the slippery ground to press his body closer, and felt pain flare in his shoulder, real pain that sent him stumbling back to consciousness.

He kept his eyes closed for several heartbeats as the lovely embrace of the dream faded around him, trying to hang onto the details, to stay for a moment longer in that warm green world where Sherlock’s body moved hungrily against his. How many more dreams like this would he be forced to suffer through, to wake from, aching with want?

He blinked in the darkness, moved to roll over, and felt the brush of Sherlock’s hair under his mouth.

John froze, immediately registering the long warm body pressed against the front of his—the ache in his shoulder, the result of his arm looped possessively over Sherlock’s waist—and gasped as the stream of his memories from the last twenty-four hours unspooled before him.

Sherlock confessing he knew all about John’s desire, Sherlock’s bewilderment, his desperation; Sherlock, begging him to explain—his own anger and then relief when Sherlock finally revealed how he felt about John, their kiss at the end of Baker Street, the blur of the cherry blossoms, Sherlock’s mouth hot on his—and everything that followed after.

The fire that had been building in him during his dream, that had sunk to embers upon waking, now flared back to life at the memory of all that had passed between them the night before. He sifted through the memories of last night, his body tingling as he turned each one over in his mind, the warmth that had started in his belly slowly filling the whole of him. He pressed his mouth to Sherlock’s shoulder, overcome.

He didn’t want to move but the ache in his shoulder was steadily worsening, so with great reluctance, John disentangled himself from Sherlock’s torso to roll onto his back and stretch his stiff shoulder.

Sherlock, who had been sleeping soundly as evidenced by the gentle rise and fall of his back against John’s chest, made a small, barely distinguishable sound of displeasure when John rolled away.

John sat up to fully flex both his shoulders, then gazed down at Sherlock in the shuttered light.

He was still asleep, curled over on his side, dark hair fanning out in disarray against the pillow.

John’s heart clenched at the sight of him in such a rare moment of peace, and he was sharply reminded of the last time he had witnessed Sherlock sleeping, how the ache of wanting him had nearly broken him open. He was even lovelier now than he had been then. His long limbs were quiet, lips slightly parted, his eyelashes a smudge of shadow against his cheek—so utterly lovely and finally, finally within John’s reach.

He leaned over and pressed a kiss to Sherlock’s shoulder, watching with amused affection as Sherlock made a sighing sound and turned over onto his back, moving closer to the source of the kiss.

John smoothed his hair back from his forehead, placed another kiss on his temple, and then stretched out beside him to fall asleep.

Before he’d even settled on the mattress, Sherlock had wrapped himself around John, one arm sliding over his stomach to clutch at his hip, his face burrowing into John’s shoulder, sighing in contentment as he settled against him.

John slid his arm over Sherlock’s shoulders, the feel of Sherlock’s hair soft against his cheek, the sound of rain striking Sherlock’s bedroom window the last thing he registered before drifting back to
The drizzle that had started in the middle of the night had given over to a steady current of rain by the morning, and when John woke later the room was awash in the type of grey gloom that made the world outside look as though it were underwater.

The tendrils of another strange, erotic dream still gripped him as he lay, half-waking, gazing at the mottled light on the ceiling, gradually becoming aware that he had turned in his sleep and that Sherlock was tucked in firmly against his back, the long lines of his body cupping John’s, his face pressed into the curve of John’s spine.

This dream had been even stranger, more erotic—he had been lying on a bed of moss, his bare torso brushed by the fronds of low-hanging trees, Sherlock curled around him at so many places that at times it seemed his arms were vines, Sherlock’s mouth on his body as delicate, as succulent as the suckers of some exotic plant.

John arched his back at the memory and felt Sherlock stir against him. He rubbed his face against the notch at the top of John’s spine, purring like a cat.

“Mmm… good morning.”

Sherlock’s arm was nestled snugly against his own, lying across the curve of his stomach, their fingers intertwined. He felt Sherlock shifting minutely against him as he stretched.

He was still caught in the sensory tangle of his dream, his body loose and pliant, the feel of Sherlock all along his back filling him with a warm buzz of contentment.

Sherlock’s mouth had opened against his back and the soft rhythm of his breathing made the low buzz in John’s belly start to spark and spread. He wiggled his hips, pushing his arse closer to the heat of Sherlock’s groin, and smiled as he made contact with the stiff head of Sherlock’s cock.

He heard Sherlock’s breathing change against him.

John wriggled closer, tightening his grip on Sherlock’s hand, his own palm hot against the skin of his belly. He tilted his chin back to look at Sherlock but all he could see was the light from the rainy windows reflected on the ceiling. “I dreamed you were telling me about plants.”

Sherlock’s open mouth pressed closer to the skin between John’s shoulder blades. John felt his tongue come out and trace a small circle. His breath, when he spoke, struck the sensitized skin and sent chills skipping down John’s back. “Sounds dull.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was very…” John wriggled closer still, and then gasped as Sherlock’s tongue licked a wet stripe up the side of his neck. “Illuminating.”

Sherlock made a humming sound of disbelief, his mouth caressing the back of John’s ear. He licked the inner whorl lingeringly. “Really…” His breath was a warm tide against the side of John’s throat. “How so?”

“You were…” John struggled to maintain the thread of what he was saying as Sherlock’s warm, ripe mouth began traveling down the skin of his throat, pausing to suck at the curve of his shoulder. “You were telling me which ones smelled the best and which ones…” John’s fingers clenched on Sherlock’s. “Which ones…”
John’s breathing hitched as Sherlock’s lips moved over the scar on his shoulder. He gasped, his body rising against Sherlock’s mouth.

“You don’t have to—” He began, but then all thought left him as Sherlock sucked hard on the pitted flesh, his tongue stroking the place where the bullet had torn through his shoulder.

John made a helpless sound, unconsciously pushing their joined hands down toward his now fully erect cock, never imagining that contact with that particular place on his body could be so erotic.

Sherlock lapped at the sensitive skin for several long delicious moments, disentangling his fingers from John’s to move both his hands and trace the curve of John’s hips as he did so.

John shut his eyes and lost himself in the sensation.

Sherlock pressed a light kiss to the place and then pulled back. “You were telling me about your dream,” he prompted, now moving to kiss John’s other shoulder.

John fought to regain control of his breathing, all of his concentration fixated on the soft progress of Sherlock’s mouth as it moved between his shoulder blades.

“Yeah.” John licked his lips. “My dream…”

“Apparently I was instructing you on the various uses of flowers.” Sherlock’s voice was lower than usual, rough from sleep. “And you found it… erotic?”

“Yeah,” John bit out, his voice catching as Sherlock licked a trail down the length of his spine. “Yeah, it was…” John licked his lips again. “You made it all very…” Now Sherlock was mouthing at the hollow at the base of his hips. John arched his back at the sensation with a little moan. “Very…”

“Very what, John?”

Sherlock’s long fingers skimmed up John’s sides, sliding over his chest to his nipples. He dragged the tips of his fingers over the sensitive skin and John gasped again as he felt them tightening under Sherlock’s hands.

“I’m sorry, John. I can’t say I understand the appeal of this botanical dream of yours.” John could feel the heat from Sherlock’s mouth as he spoke, traveling over the curve of his arse, not touching, but following the crease to the juncture of his thighs. “Perhaps you could be a bit more specific?”

Sherlock’s voice seemed to be deepening with every word; melting into a richer, more resonant sound the closer his mouth came to the heat between John’s legs. It now had the timber of wood smoke from an open fire. If he could taste it, John thought deliriously, he suspected it would taste like a whiskey he had drunk once in the north of Scotland—dusky and amber colored, tasting of the earth.

John wanted him to keep talking, to say anything in that voice, he didn’t care what. At this point, he was fairly certain he could come from the low murmur of Sherlock’s voice alone.

Sherlock pressed a kiss to the curve of his waist, his voice coaxing. “Tell me about it, John.”

His fingers were still rubbing delicate circles over his nipples and John made a frustrated sound, pushing his chest closer to Sherlock’s hands. The touch was too teasing, too light. He needed more friction, but Sherlock’s hands slid back down to grip his hips, stilling him.
“No,” he said, and there was an edge of steel now beneath the velvet. John groaned; whether from frustration or arousal, he couldn’t be sure.

“No,” Sherlock said again, pushing on John’s hips and rolling him onto his front. “No, I have something else in mind.”

Sherlock crawled down the bed, nudging John’s thighs apart so he could kneel between them.

“Good,” he said, pressing another kiss to John’s hip as John obediently spread his thighs. “Just like that.”

John was so desperate to have Sherlock’s mouth back where it had been, ghosting along the crease between his arse cheeks, that he hitched one knee up on the mattress, opening himself further.

He heard Sherlock’s soft intake of breath at the sight.

“Very good, John,” he said, and this time, John got what he wanted, as Sherlock bent forward and licked the length of his crack. “Very, very good.”

John moaned—it was a deep, guttural sound, and he dragged a pillow underneath his face, clutching it beneath him to muffle the noise.

“No, John,” Sherlock said, and the edge of steel was back in his voice. He pulled the pillow out from under John’s mouth. “No, I want to hear you. Lift your hips.”

John did so, obediently, and Sherlock pushed the pillow underneath his groin.

“Much better,” Sherlock said, rubbing his cheek against the skin of John’s arse like a satisfied cat. He stroked his hands up John’s thighs until he reached his arse, massaging the muscular tissue. “Now tell me about your dream.”

John pulled his arms out from under his body, resisting the urge to provide some much-needed friction on his cock by thrusting into the pillow. He had a feeling Sherlock would be opposed to that.

“I had another dream,” he breathed, “It was even better than the first one. You had vines instead of arms. You were a… oh, god!” He cried out as Sherlock’s tongue pushed between the flesh of his buttocks. He was panting now, shameless. “You were a flower and you were feeding off me… just—just like this.”

“Feeding off you?” Sherlock asked, the rough bur of his voice resonating through John’s balls all the way up to the head of his cock. He pushed his mouth deeper, the stubble on his jaw scraping the cheeks of John’s arse. John could hear the arousal in Sherlock’s voice, purring up from the base of his throat. He lingered over every vowel, savoring the sounds, drawing them out to make each syllable drip with sex. “Was I sucking the nectar from you?”

“YES!” John cried out, rutting his hips in desperation against the pillow. “God, yes. You were—”

Sherlock licked the entrance to John’s body. “Like this, John? Did it feel like this?”

“Yes,” John panted. “Yeah, just like that. Oh, Jesus, just like that…”

Sherlock let his tongue trace the circle of puckered flesh, spiraling outwards several times, before pushing in and beginning to fuck John’s arsehole with his tongue.

“Fuck, Sherlock. Jesus fuck!”
John’s hands fisted in the sheets. The sounds he was making—he’d never heard himself like this. He couldn’t stop his hips pumping in time with Sherlock’s mouth, fucking the pillow beneath him.

Sherlock pulled back, his panting breath stroking the sides of John’s spread arse cheeks. “How does that feel, John? Is it as good as it was in the dream?”

John nodded, breathless; he could feel his cock leaking against his hip, making a mess of Sherlock’s pillow.

“But tell me, is it better than it felt in the dream? Because it needs to be better.”

“Yes,” John gasped, flexing the fingers of his clenched hands. “Yes, it’s much better.”

Sherlock stroked a hand meditatively over the curve of John’s arse. “I’m not convinced, John. You don’t sound certain. I need you to be certain.”

“I—”

“Roll over.” Suddenly the heat of Sherlock’s mouth withdrew. “I have an idea. Roll over, John.”

Sherlock’s hands returned to John’s hips, turning him so that he was once again lying on his back. John let himself be maneuvered without protest, the act of Sherlock bodily flipping him sending a bolt of arousal straight to his cock.

Sherlock crawled up his body, his hands on John’s splayed thighs, his voice a low rumble of desire. “I wanted you to come in my mouth yesterday and that never happened. I want that now.” His eyes were dark as they mapped John’s body, settling on the curve of his swollen cock. “God, John, I need to taste you.”

John moaned at the raw need in Sherlock’s voice, his hips canting up towards Sherlock’s mouth. “Whatever you need—just take it. I’m yours, remember?”

He reached up to pull Sherlock’s mouth down to his for a breathless kiss, his fingers threading through Sherlock’s curls, his tongue pushing warm and insistent into Sherlock’s mouth.

Sherlock growled, thrusting John back down against the bed with a hand in the middle of his chest, his mouth following to fasten onto John’s nipple.

He sucked hard at the sensitive flesh, his tongue flicking the area as he did so, until John was whimpering and clutching at the back of Sherlock’s head with both hands. He slid his mouth across John’s chest to concentrate on the other one, smiling as John’s fingers tightened in his hair.

“Sher… Sherlock—”

As good as it felt, the movements of Sherlock’s mouth on his nipple clearly anticipated what he was planning to do to John’s cock, which so far had had almost no direct stimulation. The need for something, anything, against his cock was driving him a bit out of his mind.

“Sherlock!” John’s voice was desperate. “I need—”

Sherlock let his mouth slip down John’s belly, pausing to dip his tongue into John’s belly button.

“What do you need, John?” The tones of his voice pulsed through John’s groin. “Tell me.”

“I need…” John bent his knees, pushing his hips up off the bed. “I need you to suck me. Just like in my dream.” He heard the whine in his own voice, not caring how desperate he sounded. “Please,
Sherlock, I need your mouth around me. I need—*Fuck!*

His head fell back against the mattress as Sherlock’s mouth closed over the head of his cock, cheeks hollowing as he swallowed half of John’s length in one slow slide.

“God, you’re so good at this—I can’t—” His words disintegrated into a breathy moan as Sherlock sucked off to lap at the tip, the fingers of one hand wrapped around the base, squeezing lightly.

John could hear the unsteady tempo of Sherlock’s breathing, alerting him to the fact that Sherlock was as impossibly aroused as he was. He rubbed his cheek in the moisture at the head of John’s cock in the same cat-like gesture, his eyes fluttering shut with pleasure, and John groaned at the sight of him looking so utterly lewd.

“I love the way you taste, John,” he said, mouthing the head of John’s cock as he looked up into John’s eyes, his irises lost to darkness. “The feel of you between my lips, the pulse of you against my tongue, sliding down my throat…” He took the first inch of John back into his mouth and groaned. The vibration made John groan in turn, his own eyes flickering shut, his breath a hiss of pleasure.

“Jesus, Sherlock…”

Sherlock licked the slit of John’s cock, his hand stroking up to join his mouth before pumping back down, his mouth mimicking the movement directly after, this time taking John even deeper, creating the same luscious suction as he enveloped John in warm, wet heat.

He fought to keep his hips from rocking up into Sherlock’s mouth, not wanting to overwhelm him, the fingers of his left hand clenching in desperation, pushing in against his temple.

John had never considered himself loud in bed; the truth was he usually wasn’t. Other than some cursory panting and grunting he was usually fairly quiet. But with Sherlock, everything was different. Sherlock was able to pull sounds out of John he wasn’t even aware he was capable of making because of the sensations he created in John’s body.

As Sherlock began to pump John’s cock in and out of his mouth, John found himself responding in a breathless canto of needy, high-pitched sounds. Embarrassed, he pushed his fist into his mouth to stifle them.

Sherlock pulled off with an urgent noise, reaching up to grasp the wrist of John’s left hand and push it back against the mattress.

“No…” Sherlock’s face was beseeching. “John, no. Don’t stop making noise.” His voice shook with need. “Tell me how it feels.” His breath over the moist head of John’s cock made John gasp with pleasure. “Tell me.”

John’s fingers tightened in Sherlock’s grasp.

“God, it’s…” His own voice was lost in a groan as Sherlock’s mouth returned to the head of his cock and then paused, teasingly.

“Yes?” Sherlock prompted.

“It feels like…*fuck*, like heaven,” he panted as Sherlock swallowed him down and reestablished the rhythm that had compelled John to make such desperate sounds. “Like…*Jesus*, it’s—”

He was trying for Sherlock. He was making a valiant effort to describe what he was experiencing but words were beyond him at this point, slipping away in his mind like water through cupped palms. He
could scarcely remember that he had a brain that was capable of forming words.

And then his breathing quickened as he felt a finger at the entrance to his body.

Sherlock pulled off to look up at him, his expression suddenly grave. “John.” His voice was husky. “Is it alright…?”

“God, yes,” John said, tipping his hips forward in his eagerness, feeling hungry, suddenly conscious of an ache somewhere inside him that only Sherlock could satisfy. He wanted to be filled. “God, please, Sherlock. Please.”

Sherlock stroked the puckered circle of flesh, his mouth returning to John’s cock and swallowing him down as his finger pushed in.

John sucked his breath in as Sherlock’s finger worked in past the tight ring of muscle, feeling himself grip Sherlock’s finger, his body stiffening in surprise at the sensation.

He’d never done this before, never had anything actually **inside** his arse, and was shocked to find how much he enjoyed the feeling, how much he wanted more of it. The thought of Sherlock pushing into him, penetrating him was so profoundly erotic that John heard himself whimper sharply with need.

Sherlock let go of his cock, glancing up at John with a flash of fear in his eyes. “Are you alright?”

John couldn’t find his voice so he answered wordlessly, pushing forward with his hips to take Sherlock’s finger deeper, making a breathless sound of pleasure as Sherlock’s finger sank in up to the second knuckle.

He saw the changed look that came over Sherlock’s features at the noise he made and pushed forward again to take Sherlock deeper.

“How does that feel?” John heard the tremor in Sherlock’s voice that betrayed his own profound arousal at the sight of John fucking himself onto Sherlock’s finger.

“It feels good.” His own voice sounded deeper to his ears, not his own. “Yeah, it’s… god. I need more, Sherlock. Give me more.”

Sherlock groaned helplessly at the command. John pushed forward again with his hips.

“Please, Sherlock.”

He could hear Sherlock’s breathing, fast and unsteady, and he wondered how Sherlock was resisting the urge to touch himself, had resisted the urge all this time. He glanced down between Sherlock’s legs and saw the head of his cock swollen and straining against his stomach.

He wanted to touch Sherlock too, give something back to him for this, but for the moment all he could think about was having more of Sherlock inside him. He felt half-mad with need.

John lifted himself onto his elbows to give him more momentum, and they groaned together as the movement pushed Sherlock’s finger deeper into him.

“More, Sherlock,” he rasped, beyond caring that he was literally begging for it. “Please.”

Sherlock pushed his finger deeper, curling it as he did so, and John froze as Sherlock’s finger brushed his prostate.
He could feel Sherlock’s hand trembling against his hip. “How does that feel?” His voice was thick.

“I—fuck, Sherlock. Can you do that again? Whatever it was.” He licked his lips, tried to catch his breath. “Whatever it was, you just—”

Sherlock stroked his finger over the spot again, his eyes intent on John’s face.

John made a keening sound, arching his back in an attempt to prolong the sensation.

“Fuck! Oh, fucking hell—”

Sherlock was panting above him, his arousal making his movements more abrupt, less seamless, as he rubbed his finger over the bundle of nerves, diving down to swallow the length of John’s cock as he did so.

John cried out, arching up into Sherlock’s mouth.

The combined sensation of Sherlock sucking on his cock and breaching him with his long, slender finger was almost more than John could handle.

But he still wanted more. It wasn’t enough.

“Sherlock,” he gasped. “More. Give me more.”

Sherlock moaned around his cock and John’s hips stuttered upward at the sensation, reaching down to bury his fingers in Sherlock’s hair.

He wasn’t going to last much longer. He could feel his orgasm building in the center of his body, gaining momentum like a wave, and an irrational throb of sadness moved through him with the knowledge that it would be over so soon.

Even though he knew they weren’t going to manage it this time, he knew what he wanted. He wanted Sherlock inside him—to feel the length of Sherlock’s cock piercing to the center of him. The thought made him desperate.

“Sherlock…” His voice was pleading, his fingers tightening in Sherlock’s hair. He sounded on the verge of tears. “Sherlock, god, please!”

Sherlock had lost the even rhythm of his thrusts on John’s cock but he obligingly pushed a second finger in beside the first, wriggling it bit by bit until it was fully sheathed up to the knuckle.

John gave a low moan at the feeling of being stretched further open, hitching himself higher up on his elbows, spreading his thighs to take Sherlock deeper.

He was making the same stream of plaintive, incoherent sounds, his breath tangling with the words, Sherlock’s name emerging in fragments between the desperate noises.

“Sher… Sherlock… Jesus…”

Sherlock grasped John’s waist with his free hand and dragged him up into a sitting position, pulling John’s hips to his face, burying his fingers deeper in him as John rocked forward, fucking himself down onto Sherlock’s fingers.

John held onto the back of Sherlock’s head with desperation, his body curled into a bow around
Sherlock, pinned between the luscious heat of Sherlock’s mouth on his cock and the sweet pressure of Sherlock’s fingers inside him.

They found a rhythm together, John’s hips thrusting frantically in time with Sherlock’s mouth, somehow maintaining the pace even as his body began to shake with the impending presence of his orgasm.

“Sherl…Sherlock…”

He tried to give some kind of warning but his own breath kept escaping him so he clenched his fingers into Sherlock’s hair and in response felt Sherlock changing the angle of his head to swallow John’s cock all the way to its base.

John lost the rhythm of his thrusts, his hips jerking helplessly forward, the slick heat of the muscles of Sherlock’s throat around his cock sending him crashing over the edge into oblivion.

He was distantly aware of trying to rise higher and higher off the bed as his orgasm burst through him, Sherlock’s fingers and mouth the only things in the world holding him together, anchoring him in a world of pure sensation. He felt his internal muscles clench around Sherlock’s fingers with each pulse of his orgasm; the feeling of Sherlock swallowing down his release seeming to draw more and more shuddering waves of pleasure from his body.

Sherlock sucked down every drop before lifting his head, and simultaneously pulling his fingers out of John, his breath unsteady against John’s hip as he straightened up.

John pulled Sherlock up to his mouth, feeling utterly boneless, barely conscious, his body humming with the aftermath of his orgasm, gasping softly as Sherlock’s tongue met his, overwhelmed for a moment at the taste of himself on Sherlock’s lips.

“What do you need?” He kept his mouth on Sherlock’s as he asked the question, feeling Sherlock’s hand trembling where it still held his hip. “Anything. I’ll do anything you want.”

He moved his mouth over the curve of Sherlock’s cheekbone, heard Sherlock’s sharp intake of breath as he reached down between them to take Sherlock’s erection in hand.

“I don’t—” Sherlock’s voice was strained. His eyelids fluttered shut. Oh god, he was too close. Had been for so long. John felt a stab of guilt—he would make it up to him.

John sat up straighter, pulling Sherlock into his lap, arranging his long limbs so they were wrapped around John’s back.

“What do you know what you did to me just now?”

He slid his mouth down Sherlock’s throat, letting his tongue leave a wet trail; one hand slipping down to grasp Sherlock by his narrow waist, to pull him close against John’s chest, the other wrapping around the base of his cock.

He sucked hard on Sherlock’s neck as his hand began to move, wanting to leave a mark there, letting his teeth bruise the skin as his thumb slid over the moisture on the tip.

“God, you’re so wet. We wouldn’t have even needed lube…”

He stroked his hand up Sherlock’s length; felt his hips twitch closer at the movement, hearing the little moan caught in Sherlock’s throat.
“You know what I wanted,” he breathed into Sherlock’s neck, speeding up the movement of his hand on Sherlock’s cock, knowing that Sherlock needed it hard right now, needed it quick, however badly he wanted to slow it down and savor every moment of Sherlock trembling in his hand, completely exposed and at his mercy.

“I wanted you to fuck me,” he said, tightening his first around Sherlock’s cock, registering the change in Sherlock’s breathing, feeling Sherlock’s thighs tighten around his back. He sucked another love bite onto Sherlock’s collarbone, before dragging his teeth up the underside of Sherlock’s jaw. “I wanted you to fuck me into the mattress so hard I wouldn’t be able to walk afterward.”

“God, John—”

Sherlock’s hands were grasping John’s shoulders, desperate.

John quickened his strokes, tightening his fist further around Sherlock’s cock. He put his mouth to Sherlock’s ear. “Imagine you’re fucking me now, Sherlock. Do you feel how tight that is?”

Sherlock moaned against him, now rocking his hips in time with John’s thrusts, fingers biting into John’s shoulders.

“All that tight, wet heat.”

He could hear the thready staccato of Sherlock’s breathing, knew more than anything that that was an indication of how close Sherlock was.

He arched his back to push his chest closer to Sherlock’s, lifting his crossed knees to cradle Sherlock in his lap. He let his lips move over Sherlock’s ear. “Fuck me, Sherlock. Harder. I want to feel you come inside me.”

John stuck his tongue in Sherlock’s ear and Sherlock cried out, fucking up into John’s fist as he came, shuddering in his arms.

John slowed the movement of his fist, but didn’t stop pumping until every last emission was wrung from Sherlock’s cock. Sherlock collapsed against him, breathless and shaking.

He held on, smoothing the flat of his palm up and down Sherlock’s back as gradually his breathing calmed, his body melting in the circle of John’s arms.

His face was pressed into John’s shoulder and John waited before moving his hands up to Sherlock’s arms and starting to ease him off his chest.

“You okay?”

Sherlock didn’t move for several long seconds, his arms still locked around John’s waist. Then John felt the long exhalation of his breath against the side of his neck and John tensed, worried that the experience had been too much for him, that on top of the overwhelming events of the previous evening, this was more than Sherlock could handle.

Hell, it had almost been more than he could handle.

Sherlock’s voice was muffled in the skin of John’s shoulder. “Is it always like this?”

“What?” John asked, feeling anxiety spike in his chest.

“Sex with you.” Sherlock loosened his hold on John’s waist and pulled back to look at him. The
expression on his face was one of mock horror. “Is it always this intense?”

John laughed, startled. “Not usually, no. Rarely. Actually never. It’s never this intense.”

“Good. I’m not sure I can keep this up, otherwise.”

John laughed again but it didn’t touch the fear that was lodged in his throat at the potential that there was some truth to Sherlock’s words. The expression of overwhelmed horror on Sherlock’s face suddenly looked much too real.

Sherlock’s gaze sharpened. “What is it?”

“Well, I mean sex with other people hasn’t… it’s not.” John cleared his throat. “I think the common denominator is you.”

Sherlock looked suspicious. He narrowed his eyes at John, calculating. It was incredible to see such a familiar expression on Sherlock’s face when he looked so thoroughly fucked. His hair was a mess. The bruises on his neck were dark against his pale skin. John wanted to kiss the frown from his mouth.

“What’s funny?” Sherlock snapped, suddenly imperious despite the fact that he was still sprawled, naked, in John’s lap.

“Nothing.” John swallowed down his laugh. He felt giddy in spite of his fear. The combination left him feeling decidedly manic. “It’s nothing, but I’ve got news for you. I don’t think the sex is getting any less intense.”

Sherlock still looked skeptical.

John leaned forward and put his mouth to Sherlock’s ear.

“Just imagine,” he murmured, intending his tone to be playful but surprising himself by the note of genuine longing in his voice. “How much worse it will be when I let you fuck me.”

Sherlock groaned as if in frustration but John felt Sherlock shudder against him. He pressed his forehead to John’s shoulder, scooting closer, tightening his arms around John’s waist.

John set his chin on top of Sherlock’s head, for the first time really believing that there might be a next time, and grinned.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all of your AMAZING comments! I love them SO MUCH. I cannot tell you. Please continue to leave them. You fill my little heart with glee.

Apologies for the longish delay between chapters this time around. I didn't realize quite how challenging it would be to post regularly once the school year started up again! However, the next chapter is largely written so it shouldn’t be so long until the next update. Like I said, plot will return next time around. Mostly. Ish.

:)
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

Sherlock seduces John with breakfast foods.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to A Study In Purple for her continued loveliness and excellent beta-ing skills. And for watching seven episodes of Doctor Who with me in one night so we could watch the 50th Anniversary live. You are a woman of many talents. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John leaned back a little in the circle of Sherlock’s arms.

He was gradually becoming aware of his body’s other needs that had been on hold for the last forty-five minutes or so. Unfortunately, Sherlock seemed content to stay exactly where he was for another forty-five minutes.

John attempted to loosen the grip of Sherlock’s arms around his waist. “Sherlock…”

Sherlock rubbed his nose in John’s hair.

“Sherlock, let me up. I’ve got to piss.”

Sherlock made an uncompromising sound and tightened his arms.

“Also, I’m hungry,” John said, now trying unsuccessfully to wriggle backwards out of Sherlock’s grip. “Some of us need sustenance after prolonged physical activity.”

“Some of us have had sustenance,” Sherlock murmured, mouthing the shell of John’s ear.

“Yes, well, you may be able to subsist on a diet of dust particles and seminal fluid but some of us require actual food.” John pushed at Sherlock’s arms. “Come to think of it, I can’t remember the last time I ate… Look, at this point, I’m so hungry if I don’t go find some food I’ll have to eat you.”

“Mmm…” Sherlock made a pleased sound, pushing John back onto the bed. “That can be arranged.”

“Sherlock!” John pushed Sherlock off his chest, scooting backwards out of his reach. “I’m serious!”

“Fine.” Sherlock collapsed back on the bed with one arm thrown over his eyes, this time groaning for real. “Breakfast,” he moaned. “How tedious. Now we’ll never have sex again!”

John rolled his eyes and made his way to the bathroom.

He opted not to take a shower—now that he was aware of his hunger he felt positively ravenous. He pulled on his discarded t-shirt and trousers and made his way into the kitchen to put the kettle on and
start pulling things out of the fridge.

Sherlock emerged not long after, wearing an emerald green dressing gown, and emitting an insufferably gorgeous post-coital glow that made John want to throw him down on the breakfast table and have him right there all over again.

With a truly admirable display of self-possession, John ignored the beautiful man stalking through the living room and focused on the task at hand.

He pulled down two mugs, stuck two pieces of bread in the toaster, and got out two plates.

Sherlock threw himself down on the living room sofa and started flipping through a magazine at break-neck speed, not even bothering to look down at the pages.

“I’m making eggs for you, too,” John announced, dropping butter into the heated pan. “And you’re going to eat them.”

Sherlock dropped the magazine onto the coffee table and in a few incalculably rapid, sinuous moves had crossed the living room and come up behind John where he stood at the stove.

“Am I?” he purred into John’s ear, tucking his body in neatly behind John’s.

John refused to be distracted.

“You are,” he replied, cracking the first egg and listening to it sizzle as it hit the pan. The smell of frying butter made his stomach growl.

“What if I have no interest in eggs… what if there’s something else I’d like to devour?”

Sherlock bit softly at the nape of John’s neck. John’s fingers tightened on the spatula but he ignored the sensation.

“I know what you’re trying to do.”

“Do you?”

“You’re trying to distract me,” John said archly, cracking two more eggs into the pan.

“Nonsense.”

Sherlock’s hands slid up under the edge of John’s t-shirt, warm on the bare flesh of his stomach, and this time, John did react. He let out a hiss at the feel of Sherlock’s warm palms pressed low on his belly, tilting back into Sherlock’s embrace.

Sherlock kissed the side of his neck.

John shut his eyes for just a moment, the steaming pan in front of him forgotten, and turned to find Sherlock’s mouth. He kept his mouth open and soft, felt Sherlock open his mouth against his own, and he pushed his tongue into the delicious heat to stroke Sherlock’s tongue once, lingeringly, before pulling away.

“Now go make yourself useful.” He shoved at Sherlock with his hip. “Set the table.”

Sherlock was still looking at his mouth, his expression hazy. John felt his heart give a little jolt, still shocked at the knowledge that he could affect this gorgeous, impossible man so deeply with something as simple as a kiss.
It took a second for Sherlock’s expression to clear, and then, narrowing his eyes at John, he stalked over to the silverware drawer and dug out forks and knives.

John was shocked that Sherlock had actually taken his order seriously. He smiled to himself in astonishment before turning back to the eggs.

The food was ready not long after, and John set one steaming mug and plate in front of Sherlock who reached gratefully for the tea, his eyes on John as he brought the mug to his lips.

It was absurd, Sherlock was just looking at him, just looking, that was all, but it took real effort for John to drag his eyes away from the sight of Sherlock’s lip meeting the edge of the mug, slender fingers curled on the handle, the graceful movement of his throat as he swallowed.

John turned away, flustered, and headed back to the kitchen for his own plate.

As soon as the food was in front of him, however, John momentarily forgot all thoughts of Sherlock in his hunger.

He concentrated on his food with ravenous intent. Perhaps it indicated something about his particular state of mind that everything had an undertone of sensuality that he rarely experienced while eating. The bright taste of the butter, the faint bitterness of his tea, the way the yolk burst slow and golden when he pierced it with his fork—it was as if his senses were more sharply tuned than usual, picking up details at a higher frequency. Everything tasted better as a result. He didn’t look up from his plate until he’d soaked up the very last traces of yolk with the end of his toast.

When he finally looked up he found Sherlock watching him.

“What?” he asked, reaching for his water, and downing half the glass in one swallow.

“You,” Sherlock said, and there was something hungry in his eyes that John knew had nothing to do with the food in front of him.

“You should eat something.”

Sherlock didn’t even look at his plate. “I’m fine.”

John shook his head. “Nope. If you’re interested in more sex today, then you will eat that plate of eggs.”

Sherlock held his gaze. “Only if there’s jam for the toast.”

“What?”

“I said I want jam.”

“Fine.”

John went into the kitchen and stood in front of the open refrigerator for a long minute considering which of the three varieties would be most palatable to the pickiest eater he’d ever met. He opted for simply bringing all of them.

When he came back into the living room, Sherlock was staring at his phone.

John set down all three jars. “Take your pick.”

Sherlock didn’t even look at them. “I changed my mind. I want honey.”
John glared at Sherlock. “Not until you eat your eggs.”

Sherlock took a large bite of egg and looked up at John. The innocent expression on his face looked unsettlingly genuine.

“You have to eat all of it.”

Sherlock petulantly shoveled the entirety of the remaining egg into his mouth, chewed, swallowed and then looked at John with the same demanding expression. “Honey.”

Luckily, as was so often the case with Sherlock, the two bites of food he had taken caused his body to remember his hunger. When John returned with the honey, Sherlock had indeed cleared his plate, save for half a piece of toast.

John set the honey down in front of Sherlock with what was perhaps too much force.

Sherlock smiled prettily up at him and reached for the jar. He unscrewed the top, and then dipped his knife into the golden liquid with exaggerated slowness, holding the knife suspended above the jar while the honey drizzled off the blade.

John found himself studying Sherlock’s hands, the narrow dips between his knuckles, the graceful curve of his pointer finger where it rested on the handle, and the long line of his middle finger where it bent around the blade.

He watched Sherlock tilt the knife to catch the last drop and his eyes traveled up Sherlock’s pale forearm, lingering on the bone that stood out in his wrist, hypnotized by the neat lines of his elbow as he began spreading the honey on the toast in smooth, assured strokes.

His eyes returned to Sherlock’s fingers—so long and so beautifully shaped—and found himself overcome with memories of what it felt like to have those fingers inside him.

“Anything the matter, John?”

Sherlock took a bite of toast, his expression impassive.

John dropped his eyes from Sherlock’s hands and shifted in his seat, amazed at how quickly his body could respond to Sherlock’s presence.

“You look a bit… hot.” Sherlock screwed the lid back on the jar of honey, and then glanced down at his finger. “Oops, clumsy me. I’ve got honey everywhere.”

John stared at the gleam of honey on Sherlock’s knuckle, and then watched as Sherlock licked the area in question, closing his eyes as he did so, before sucking the whole of two long fingers into his mouth.

John made a sound like Sherlock had kicked him under the table.

Sherlock looked pointedly at John as he pulled the fingers slowly out of his mouth and then ran his tongue up the inside of each one, his eyelashes lowering to half-mast as he did so.

John made another half-strangled sound.

Sherlock studied the expanse of his hand with concern. “God, I really made a mess.”

Sherlock brushed the tip of his fingers against his mouth, the pale pink arrow of his tongue darting out to caress each one. He licked the palm of his hand, slowly, deliberately, lips moving down to
close against the inside of his wrist, and then, he moaned—the sound low and dark—into the flesh of his palm.

John’s hands were fisted in the material on his thighs, his breathing quick and shallow.

Sherlock gave one last lingering lick to the base of his wrist before lifting his eyes to John. They were full of feigned distress.

“You sure you’re all right?”

John rose from his chair so quickly he almost knocked it over, the legs grating against the floor with a violent sound as he came around to the side of the table where Sherlock was sitting.

Sherlock’s expression was as calm as still water, but his lips were swollen. Honey glistened at the corner of his mouth.

Fisting his hands in the front of Sherlock’s robe, John dragged him out of his chair and up to his mouth, tasting immediately the plump flesh of his lower lip as he sucked it in between his teeth, savoring the sharp sound of Sherlock’s indrawn breath of surprise.

He concentrated on that lower lip for a dreamy indeterminate interval before opening his mouth against Sherlock’s to take more of him, his tongue plunging into the warm cavern of Sherlock’s mouth, tasting tea and milk and Sherlock’s joy at playing the ingénue, his deviant delight—and underneath it all, the sweet sting of honey.

He kept the kiss languorous and slow, the speed of the honey running off the knife, dipping his tongue into the hollows of Sherlock’s mouth again and again, undulating like water, until he felt Sherlock’s arms begin to shake with the effort of holding himself crouched halfway out of the chair.

John pulled back, taking in the dazed expression on Sherlock’s face, using his purchase in Sherlock’s robe to drag him the rest of the way to his feet, and then, unable to help himself, he leaned in to lick the last smear of honey off the corner of Sherlock’s lips.

Sherlock’s hands came up to grip his arms.

John looked at Sherlock through his lashes, his voice much less steady than he’d anticipated. “Happy now?”

Sherlock pushed back against him and John felt the scrape of Sherlock’s stubble on his cheek. His fingers clenched on John’s arms, demanding. “No.”

John moved his lips over the underside of Sherlock’s jaw. “You greedy bastard.”

Sherlock hummed with satisfaction as John’s mouth found the bruise he had left earlier that morning.

Sherlock’s phone buzzed against the table and he leaned around John to reach for it, but John let out a low growl of protest and pulled Sherlock’s mouth back to his as Sherlock’s hand closed around the phone.

“Oh no, you don’t.” John let his teeth catch on Sherlock’s jaw and he bit down, hard, his voice rough. “Your attention is mine.”

Sliding one arm up around the back of Sherlock’s neck to pull Sherlock’s mouth down to his, John sucked Sherlock’s bottom lip in between his teeth and began walking him backwards away from the table towards the center of the room.
Sherlock gasped into the kiss, the hand still holding the phone coming up between John’s shoulder blades to pull him closer. He let John march him backwards until they stood in the space between the table and the couch, the light from the rain-streaked window catching on the soft waves in Sherlock’s hair.

John sucked his way down Sherlock’s neck, his hands bunching in the silk of Sherlock’s robe. He felt light-headed from the intensity of his arousal, his heightened senses aching for contact with every dip and curve of Sherlock’s body, torn between the twin desires of tasting and looking. He hadn’t had a chance to really look at Sherlock last night—he’d been far too occupied with holding himself together as Sherlock took him apart. Even earlier this morning, John had been so swept up in the current of Sherlock’s attention that he hadn’t had time to focus on the gorgeous man between his thighs.

He still felt a faint flutter of guilt at the lack of attention he’d given Sherlock that morning. He intended to make up for it now.

He slid his open mouth over the tendons in Sherlock’s neck, tasting the pulse at the base of his throat, savoring the erratic thump of it as it beat beneath his tongue.

Sherlock tilted his chin up to give John more room, his breath a soft sigh of pleasure as John licked the length of his collarbone.

Sherlock swallowed, and John watched the cord of muscle flickering in Sherlock’s pale throat, unable to stop himself from pressing another open-mouthed kiss to the same place.

“You may have my attention, John,” Sherlock said, somehow managing to sound magnanimous even as John reached behind him to pull the phone out of Sherlock’s hand, briefly breaking contact with his mouth to lean around Sherlock and set it on the coffee table behind them.

“You got the raw end of the deal this morning,” John said, lips returning to the hollow of Sherlock’s throat, then skimming down until they caught on the edge of Sherlock’s robe. “I plan to make it up to you.”

“You came in my mouth with my fingers buried inside you.” Sherlock’s hands slid up the back of his neck into his hair, one thumb absently massaging the soft skin behind his ear.

John shuddered at the memory, tasting wet silk as his mouth opened against one of Sherlock’s nipples.

Sherlock made a soft, yearning sound at the contact, fingers tightening in John’s hair. His voice was breathless. “If you think that’s a raw deal then I have a lot to teach you.”

John chuckled against him and then pushed at Sherlock’s nipple with his tongue, feeling it harden immediately under the pressure. He heard Sherlock gasp and was simultaneously shocked and delighted to discover that Sherlock clearly had an intense response to being touched there.

Grinning, he closed his mouth around Sherlock’s nipple and sucked.

Sherlock let out a cry, the blunt ends of his fingernails digging into John’s scalp.

Keeping his mouth where it was, he alternated the intensity of the suction, lessening the pressure of his mouth in response to Sherlock’s body. He brushed his thumb across Sherlock’s other nipple while his mouth was occupied and heard Sherlock’s breathing grow ragged above him.

“I should—I should probably warn you,” Sherlock gasped as John’s mouth concentrated on the
opposite nipple. “I could come from this… which would be, god, exquisite but… in case you had other plans.”

John looked up at Sherlock to see the skin of his throat flushed dark, and knew he meant it.

He let his palms stroke down Sherlock’s torso to his hips, feeling the curve of each rib under his fingertips as his hands slid down. He pressed a kiss to the flushed skin of Sherlock’s neck, keeping his lips there as he spoke. “I do have other plans.”

Sherlock had nothing on under the dressing gown—the only barrier between his hands and Sherlock’s skin the thinnest layer of silk. God, how many times had John imagined a scene just like this? Putting his mouth all over Sherlock’s body against the silk of that dressing gown, driving Sherlock mad with need before slipping the ridiculous robe off his shoulders to kiss the bare flesh underneath.

He didn’t know if he had the stamina to enact the fantasy quite so precisely but hell if he wasn’t going to try.

He could feel the hot curve of Sherlock’s erection against the inside of his arm as he stepped closer to pull loose the sash on Sherlock’s dressing gown, and he had to ignore the impulse to rub against it as he let the sash drop and heard the soft slither of silk falling to the floor.

Sherlock was holding himself absolutely still, the only movement the shallow rise and fall of his chest as he waited, his dark eyes fixed on John.

As their eyes connected, the intimacy of the situation hit John with full force. It was like being punched in the chest. The enormity of Sherlock’s trust in that moment as he offered himself to John, something soft in the contours of his face rendering him infinitely more vulnerable—it took John’s breath away.

Beyond the window, the rain was still falling in a steady rhythm, casting the room in a strange grey twilight, making it difficult to ascertain the time of day. It made John feel as though they were moving through a dream, as if none of this was real, as if he and Sherlock could only have this interaction outside of time, and for a moment, an irrational panic filled him.

But no, he thought fiercely as his eyes took in the sight of Sherlock in the muted light from the window, the longing in his face, the language of his body so open to John, this was real.

His hands shook slightly as they moved to part the panels of the robe. Sherlock held his gaze and John noted with amazement that his irises were yet another color he had never seen—in the soft grey light from the window they shone a brilliant bluish-green.

He thought perhaps he was making too much of the moment as his fingers moved with slow deliberation to push the silk off Sherlock’s shoulders, thumbs lingering on the arches of Sherlock’s collarbones, his touch teasingly light, but then he saw Sherlock’s eyelids flutter shut as the robe slipped off his body, leaving him utterly, wonderfully bare, clothed in nothing but the light coming in through the rain-blurred windows, and John knew when he heard Sherlock’s soft intake of breath at the sensation that Sherlock was as affected as he was.

He slid his hands down Sherlock’s biceps, kissing the sharp ridge of muscle in his shoulder, mouth following in the wake of his hands, down one long, pale, impossibly slender arm, his tongue coming out to taste the hollow of Sherlock’s elbow, tracing the vein that ended in Sherlock’s bony wrist.

He held Sherlock’s hand in his, turning it over so he could kiss his palm and lick his way up
Sherlock’s middle finger to suck the whole of it into his mouth, tongue curving around the joints of his knuckles, tasting honey and moaning at the memory of the look on Sherlock’s face as he pushed his own fingers into his swollen mouth.

“John—”

He felt Sherlock’s other hand catch at the back of his neck and tense there above his spine as he swallowed down two more of Sherlock’s fingers and sucked.

He heard Sherlock make a stifled noise above him and he slid Sherlock’s fingers out of his mouth with reluctance, consoling himself with a final brush of his lips over Sherlock’s knuckles before moving his attention to Sherlock’s torso.

“God…” He pressed his hot mouth to Sherlock’s sternum, exhaling a long, unsteady breath, on the verge of releasing a burst of completely inappropriate laughter. He shook his head, and rested his cheek against Sherlock’s ribs for a moment. “I don’t know what I ever did to deserve this, but god, I’m glad it’s real.”

Sherlock’s fingers slid up the base of John’s scalp, and stayed there, holding him.

Turning his face, John opened his mouth and slid it down Sherlock’s torso, lingering over every beautiful bone, finally, finally tasting his ribs, the swell of his hip, inhaling the musk at the juncture of his thigh and pelvis.

He dropped to his knees, pulling Sherlock’s hips to his mouth, looking up as he did so to take in the sight of Sherlock in surrender, his wild hair, his open mouth, the bruises on his neck.

The light was hitting the sharp planes of Sherlock’s chest, deepening the hollows of his cheeks, the dark fan of his eyelashes, turning his throat to sculpted marble, the lovely shape of his bitten lips a trembling invitation for John to kiss again and again.

The sight of him like this, abandoning himself to pleasure, to John’s mouth, John’s touch—it was almost more than he could bear.

He pressed his heated cheek to Sherlock’s hip, gasping, overwhelmed.

“God, Sherlock, I can’t….”

Sherlock’s hands, still cradling his head, reached for him, trying to pull him back to his feet.

Sherlock’s voice was tense. “John—”

“No.” John resisted, sliding his hands around to the backs of Sherlock’s thighs, feeling the trembling in Sherlock’s tensed hamstrings. “No, I didn’t mean—God. No. It’s just… you. How? How can you be so…?”

He slid his hands down Sherlock’s legs, feeling every muscle flexed in anticipation. He pressed his mouth to the sharp groove of Sherlock’s hip.

He couldn’t find the words so he decided to let his hands and mouth speak for him.

He ran his hands up Sherlock’s calves, up the backs of his knees until he was gripping him by his thighs. He buried his face in the curve of Sherlock’s hip, dragging his nose into the dark hair between his legs, mouthing at the base of his cock.
He felt Sherlock stiffen against him at the contact. Moving one hand from Sherlock’s thighs to wrap around the base, he took the head of Sherlock’s cock into his mouth, slowly, tenderly, savoring the moment when he felt the first living throb of Sherlock against his tongue.

He’d never done this, never had his lips around another man’s cock, and he was amazed by how intense the experience was, the rush of sensations that greeted him as he pressed his tongue against the grooved underside of the shaft.

The heat and the texture of the sensitive skin of Sherlock’s glans, the slippery salt taste of him, the moisture already gathered at the tip—all of the sensory details combined to drive home to John the intimacy of the act he was performing, and he moaned low and needy in the back of his throat as he closed his mouth fully around his length.

He couldn’t manage to take as much of it into his mouth as he would have liked but he compensated with the hand that he’d wrapped around the base, starting up a slow but measured stroking, breathing carefully through his nostrils so he could hollow his cheeks and suck without pausing for breath.

Sherlock was worryingly silent above him and John broke his concentration for a moment to glance up at Sherlock.

John’s fear that he might be doing everything wrong vanished as soon as he caught sight of Sherlock’s face.

He was gazing down at John through lowered lashes, swollen lips parted in a silent exclamation of pleasure. The flush on his throat had spread to his cheeks and chest. If John didn’t know better he would have interpreted the shattered look on Sherlock’s face to be one of intense pain.

He shifted his fingers against Sherlock’s thigh, slipping them up until they found the curve of Sherlock’s arse. He rubbed the muscled flesh and pulled his mouth slowly off Sherlock’s cock, resuming his stroking with his other hand, considering briefly before licking his way from base to tip.

Sherlock made a sound that went straight to John’s cock, and he repeated the gesture, this time licking more slowly, pausing to suckle at the head, letting the lightest hint of his teeth scrape the sensitive flesh.

He felt Sherlock’s fingers tightening against his scalp and suddenly registered the tremors that were shaking Sherlock’s legs intensifying—a warning sign that his legs weren’t going to be able to hold him up much longer.

John pulled back and changed his grip, seizing Sherlock by the arse with both hands and maneuvering him backward toward the couch.

He pushed Sherlock back against the pillows, crawling in close between his knees to take Sherlock back into his mouth, shaking slightly with the intensity of his own arousal at the sight of Sherlock sprawled, flushed and desperate, his body all angles and shadows in the sensuous light of the rain.

He took Sherlock deeper this time, a hand on each of his spread thighs, relishing the feel of the muscles tensing beneath his fingers as his mouth sank lower, listening to the sound of Sherlock’s ragged breathing speeding up.

He loved hearing the sounds of Sherlock losing control, the gasping, desperate quality to his breathing. It was such a small thing, but to John, who knew Sherlock better than anyone, who knew how difficult it was for him to let go, the significance of those delicate shifts in the air coming in and out of his lungs, catching on its way out of his throat, made him moan in reciprocal arousal, his hips
jerking instinctively forward to find friction for his cock.

He tightened his fingers on Sherlock’s thighs and quickened his movements, making a conscious effort to relax the muscles of his throat to take Sherlock deeper and was rewarded with a hoarse shout from Sherlock, his hips rising to meet John’s mouth.

The sudden fullness in his mouth and the increased pressure on the back of his throat made John gag around Sherlock’s cock but he didn’t pull off.

He could feel Sherlock struggling to lower his hips back to the couch, to give John some air, probably mortified that he’d lost control of himself so profoundly.

“John…” Sherlock’s voice was strained, tense with embarrassment and arousal.

But John refused to let go. Breathing deeply through his nose so he wouldn’t gag again, he slid his hands around to grip Sherlock by the arse and began to move his mouth up and down Sherlock’s cock, holding him up off the couch as he did so.

Sherlock made a grating, desperate sound—clearly struggling with his desire and his fear that he was overwhelming John, his fingers sliding helplessly over the material of the couch, looking for something to grab onto, to keep himself from thrusting into John’s mouth.

John let his eyes travel up Sherlock’s torso and saw that his body was one long line of tension, his teeth bared as if in pain, the muscles in his neck standing out as he fought to keep himself from losing control.

John decided he would help him along.

He sped up the movements of his mouth, using his purchase on Sherlock’s arse to lift him closer, clenching his fingers in the trembling muscles and sucking, harder than he had dared.

It worked.

Sherlock yelled, hips bucking up into John’s mouth, one hand grabbing roughly at the back of John’s head and pulling at the fine hair.

John forced his throat to relax so he could take Sherlock deeper, his nails biting marks into the flesh of Sherlock’s arse as he guided his thrusts.

Sherlock was fucking his mouth.

This realization, coupled with Sherlock’s sudden roughness, his abandon, made John moan with arousal, his own hips rocking against the side of the couch, seeking stimulation.

He could feel every muscle in Sherlock’s body tightening toward orgasm, long fingers clutching at the back of John’s head, his breath dissolving into a chorus of low moans.

He glanced up at Sherlock, needing to see him at the moment of his surrender, and found Sherlock’s dark eyes on his, the expression on his face one blown apart by pleasure.

Sherlock’s hips gave two uneven jerks in quick succession and then he was coming, pulsing down John’s throat, his eyes fixed on John’s until they fluttered closed as another wave hit him and pulled him under.

John swallowed desperately and managed not to choke but he had to pull back for air before the
second burst of come and it hit him on the side of his cheek, the filthiness of the gesture making his neglected cock twitch in response.

John let go of Sherlock’s arse and reached down, gasping, to take hold of his own cock, and heard the sound of Sherlock’s phone vibrating, loud and insistent, against the coffee table.

Sherlock, who had drifted slowly back down against the couch, eyes still shut tight, breathing ragged, seemed utterly unaware of the intrusive noise, which sounded to John as though it were getting louder with every unacknowledged vibration. John marveled at how fast the tension had gone out of Sherlock’s body, leaving him sprawled, naked and pliant against the couch cushions.

John watched the rapid rise and fall of Sherlock’s chest, and noticed for the first time so many of the details that he hadn’t seen in the first frenzy of lust—the gleam of sweat on Sherlock’s temples and his upper lip, the sweat darkening his hairline that told clearly of his exertion—the marks from his own mouth blooming on Sherlock’s neck and collarbones.

The sight of Sherlock’s long body so loose and yielding, stretched out under John’s gaze, made him forget the sound of Sherlock’s phone entirely, which was going off a second time, moving with every vibration closer to the edge of the coffee table.

John put one hand on Sherlock’s spread thigh and with his other began to stroke himself, trying to keep the movement slow and failing, as his eyes traveled over Sherlock’s pleasure-sated body. His fingers slipped in the liberal amount of liquid already coating the tip of his cock and he groaned at the contact on his overly sensitized flesh.

Sherlock’s eyes fluttered open at the sound, his pupils grown so dark John could see only a hint of the blue-green iris at the rim. John quickened his strokes, the hand on Sherlock’s thigh clenching at the sensation.

Somewhere very far away he heard the sound of Sherlock’s phone vibrating itself off the coffee table and onto the floor.

Sherlock reached for John, seizing hold of the hand clenched on his thigh and dragging John up off his knees and onto the couch. Sherlock slid sideways so he was lying lengthwise, pulling John in to lie between his thighs, pushing John’s trousers down his thighs to bare more of his flesh.

The feeling of Sherlock’s long naked body under his, even through the inconvenient layer of John’s t-shirt and trousers (why hadn’t he taken a moment to fully undress?), was almost enough to make him come right there.

Sherlock shoved John’s trousers down as far as he could reach and then pulled John’s t-shirt up his back so that their bare chests were pressed together, wrapping one long arm around John’s waist as John’s hand resumed its stroking.

John moaned long and loud into the crease of Sherlock’s neck at the feel of Sherlock against him, the hard line of Sherlock’s spread thighs, his softening cock pressed against John’s hips, John’s knuckles brushing Sherlock’s stomach with each frantic movement of his hand.

John was moaning continuously now, savoring the sound of Sherlock’s gasps as he bucked against him, fucking his fist against Sherlock’s stomach, the fingers of his left hand holding Sherlock’s shoulder hard enough to bruise.

Sherlock’s arm tightened on his waist in an effort to pull John closer, one lean muscular leg twining around John’s arse and the backs of John’s thighs.
Sherlock’s lips ghosted John’s temple, tracing over the shell of his ear. His voice was lower than John had ever heard it, torn apart by sex. “Come for me now, John. Come for me.”

The command alone was enough to push John over the edge—John felt his body stiffen in Sherlock’s arms as his orgasm moved to overtake him—but then Sherlock was licking the come off the side of his face and that was just… he couldn’t… he was done. He cried out, grinding down against Sherlock’s stomach as heat spilled between them.

He kept stroking as his body shuddered in Sherlock’s arms, feeling Sherlock’s leg tighten around him, his mouth pressed hot against John’s cheek, holding John so tightly it was as if he was afraid he’d slip away.

John shut his eyes, pressing his sticky cheek to Sherlock’s shoulder, forcing himself to breathe.

John felt Sherlock’s hand come up and begin to stroke his hair.

John wasn’t sure how long he lay there nearly senseless, enjoying the feeling of Sherlock’s fingers rubbing so softly, so meditatively in his hair, but gradually he felt the rumble of Sherlock’s voice under his cheek.

“You were right.”

John slid his hand up into the moist heat of Sherlock’s armpit, struggling to hang on to sense. His voice came out slurred. “About what?”

“The sex is only getting more intense.”

John laughed, and this time the laugh was genuine. He felt strangely free of his earlier anxieties about Sherlock’s doubts. It was probably just the orgasm talking (or maybe the fact that that was his second orgasm in as many hours) but the happiness currently radiating through him felt as though nothing could diminish it.

He raised himself up on his elbows and looked down at Sherlock, grinning. “And how are we feeling about that?”

Sherlock’s face assumed a bored expression. His hand had slid down John’s body and was now lazily tracing circles on his lower back.

Sherlock shrugged. “It’s fine. I’m just not certain whether you’ll be able to keep up.”

“Oh, I’m the one who’s going to have trouble keeping up?”

Something quick and bright flashed in Sherlock’s eyes. His hands tensed on John’s lower back. “You had to take an hour long break to eat breakfast, John. You’re slowing us down. At this rate, we’ll be having half as much sex as we could be having if you didn’t have to indulge your every bodily function.”

John laughed again at the look of genuine irritation on Sherlock’s face. He laughed harder as Sherlock scowled at him. “You really mean it!”

He collapsed onto Sherlock’s chest, arms weak, stomach shaking with laughter.

Sherlock growled and pulled John’s mouth up to his. “You’re laughing now, John Watson. Just wait until next time. You won’t be laughing then.”
He bit softly at John’s lips in warning and John felt a ripple of arousal move through him in response. The thought of Sherlock making good on his threat made John moan in anticipation. God, his sex drive hadn’t been this high since he was a teenager. He kissed Sherlock back, opening his mouth to push his tongue into Sherlock’s, sighing as he did so.

Sherlock slid a hand back up to the base of his skull, fingers soft in John’s hair as John explored his mouth.

He pulled back, pressing an absent kiss to Sherlock’s chin. “I do have to give you credit though.”

“What?”

Sherlock’s fingers were still stroking his hair. He leaned into the touch.

“Your attempt to seduce me. It worked.”

Sherlock grinned, lazy as a cat, and tugged John back down against his chest. “I’ve told you, your desires are utterly transparent to me. This is why I am your perfect lover.”

John snorted.

“Your love of sweet sticky breakfast foods coupled with your obvious fascination for my fingers—it couldn’t have been more obvious if you’d explicitly told me what you wanted.”

“I do not love ‘sweet sticky breakfast foods’.”

“I have one word for you John Watson: jam.”

John opened his mouth to protest but then remembered how many types of jam were currently in their fridge. “Well, if I like jam so much, why didn’t you rub that all over yourself?”

“Honey is typically considered more erotic than jam. However, due to your proclivity for that condiment in particular I obviously plan on gathering more data in order to ascertain the level of your sexual response to it. That was the first of what will inevitably be many more experiments about what appeals to you sexually both in and outside of the bedroom.”

John swallowed. Leave it up to Sherlock Holmes to make the scientific nature of his sexual response to breakfast foods erotic. He found all of his arguments suddenly completely irrelevant.

He settled back down against Sherlock’s chest, wedged snugly in between the back of the couch and Sherlock’s naked body. He was content to stay exactly where he was until some basic instinct drove him from the spot. Such as the desire to have more sex. Oh, and more food at some point.

Yep, that sounded about right. Food and sex and maybe some more sleep. John wriggled closer against Sherlock and shut his eyes.

Sherlock pressed a kiss to the top of John’s head and then leaned down to pluck his phone off the floor.

John made a sound of protest as Sherlock twisted sideways, upsetting the perfection of his natural pillow.

He glanced up at Sherlock, a petulant complaint half-formed on his lips, but all memory of what he was intending to say left him as he caught sight of Sherlock’s expression.

“What is it?”
Sherlock’s eyes were fixed on the screen of his phone—all the softness gone from his face.

He didn’t say anything for a moment as he texted back a response.

“There’s been another one,” he said, maneuvering his long limbs out from under John’s body with surprising grace and disappearing into his bedroom before John could ask what he meant.

John sat up, feeling worry beating hot and swift in his temples. The sudden shift in Sherlock’s demeanor at the mention of a case was typical; the gravity in his expression was not. He pulled his trousers back up his thighs, now regretting his decision not to shower earlier.

Sherlock reemerged in the doorway a moment later dressed in a pair of clean trousers with a shirt in his hand. He was texting again.

John’s question went unspoken.

Sherlock’s eyes when he looked back up at John were dark. “Another vivisection. Just like the butcher shop.”

It took John a minute to find his voice. “But he’s in prison. The butcher shop murderer’s in prison. You caught him. It took you less than twelve hours…”

Sherlock had shrugged his arms into his shirt and was halfway through buttoning it, somehow managing to text and button at the same time. “Apparently someone else has picked up where he left off.”

John felt cold. “Christ.”

“They found two more bodies in a house in Chelsea. Same exact scarring patterns of the butcher shop murderer, but with several… additional organs missing. Obviously the locale is drastically different. They’re not sure whether they were murdered in the house, or if the bodies were simply brought there after the fact. Lestrade’s on his way now.”

“Right.” John rose to his feet. “Right, let me just put an another shirt and get my gun—”

“John.”

He was halfway to the stairs but something in Sherlock’s voice stopped him.

Sherlock was looking at him and John couldn’t place the emotion in his eyes.

“Last time…” Sherlock pursed his lips together. “That is, if it’s too much—”

John cut him off, impatient. “This isn’t going to be like last time. My reaction was completely unrelated to what happened. I’ll be fine.”

“No, John. There’s something else. These particular bodies… it seems… specific. Tailored specifically for us. Lestrade is worried it’s a set up.”

John’s heart was pounding in his throat. “Tailored specifically for us how?”

“He wouldn’t say on the phone but the evidence suggests that it’s…”

John shut his eyes. He knew before Sherlock had finished speaking what he was going to say.

“Moriarty.”
John opened his eyes to find Sherlock looking at him the same way he’d looked at him yesterday. Like John was something fragile that needed careful handling. It made him furious.

“If you think for one second I’m going to let you walk onto that crime scene by yourself…” John shook his head.

He looked Sherlock straight in the eyes, keeping his voice very even. “I’m going upstairs to get my gun and then we are leaving together. End of story.”

Sherlock looked back at him, lips still pressed into a tight line. He finally nodded, but the worried look didn’t leave his eyes.

John pounded up the stairs in a rage. So, Sherlock thought he was going to have a meltdown over two vivisected bodies? That’s fine. That was just fine because when they got there he would see how badly he’d underestimated John. He would see.

He pulled on a fresh shirt and a jumper, found socks and shoes, stuck his gun in his jacket and banged his way back downstairs to find Sherlock already standing in coat and scarf in the front hall.

Sherlock looked at John. He nodded.

Sherlock turned and John followed him down both flights of stairs and out onto the street.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for leaving comments and giving kudos! I know I sound like a broken record at this point, but really, I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. YOU FILL MY LIFE WITH JOY.

I'll try to get the next chapter up soon- I'd really like to finish this story before Season 3 comes out (CAN WE TALK ABOUT THE PAIN OF THAT MOUSTACHE IN THE MOST RECENT TRAILER?OMFG) but that may be overly ambitious with finals looming in the next few weeks. Then again, it may be overly ambitious to expect the BBC will EVER announce the UK air date, sooo... perhaps it's silly to try and plan around that.

In any case, there will be more of this very soon!
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

Warnings this chapter for a crime scene of an extremely graphic and disturbing nature, including implications of past-torture/mutilation. There is also brief mention of sexual assault/rape.

Thanks once again to A Study in Purple for her exceptionally speedy turn around beta-ing! What other editor is so dedicated that she edits your story while in line for the midnight release of The Hobbit? I ask you.

It seemed only appropriate that I post this incredibly creepy part of the story on Friday the 13th, 2013. Also, it just so happened to be Chapter 13, which was not intentional in anyway on my part... *cue eerie music*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rain had overtaken the day. It beat against the windows of the cab as they rode toward Chelsea, steady and relentless, the colorless sky overhead offering no hope of a break.

John stared out at the grey city beyond, careful not to look at Sherlock, who sat beside him, fiddling with his phone, his whole body thrumming with nervous energy.

They were sitting with a respectful distance between them, a distance that John was grateful for as it gave him the chance to sit in silence and attempt to get a handle on his rage.

He was furious at the suggestion that he wouldn’t be able to cope with whatever awaited them at the house in Chelsea, at the idea that Sherlock thought him too fragile to be exposed to any more encounters with the twisted criminal mastermind.

That was part of the reason for his fury but of course the bigger problem, the real source of his anger, was the fact that he was terrified.

A cold feeling had settled over John, seemed to move deep into his bones—a still and penetrating terror that threatened to eclipse all rational thought.

He should have known. Should have known that the utter bliss of the last few hours—waking up next to Sherlock, the fantastic sex, lying around together, taking a break from fucking only long enough to eat breakfast before going back to it again—was too good to last. It had felt impossible, too good to be true, and of course, it was. All his worries, all the terrors of the outside world had temporarily vanished in the cozy interior of 221B, but they hadn’t really vanished.

God, he’d been so naïve.

It had barely been twenty-four hours since the incident on the ship and already Moriarty was back in their lives. But of course he was back. He hadn’t really done anything on the ship, other than try to terrify them. He was just toying with them. If he’d really wanted to do either of them harm, he would have done so. What was so infuriating about Moriarty, John was gradually realizing, was the knowledge that he was playing with them like trapped birds in a cage, like field mice in a shoebox.
that he kept pulling out to dangle in front of the cat.

If they were lucky, the incident they were heading toward now was just another attempt to frighten them without doing any real harm. Because that was always the essential piece of Moriarty’s game—it was the psychological aspect of terrorism that thrilled him, breaking people from the inside out. He wouldn’t simply cause physical harm, oh no, it was so much more satisfying to him if he could destroy people’s bonds with one another, break down their perceptions of the world, unravel everything they held dear.

So if they were lucky, this next incident would just be one more stroke designed to weaken them, without yet attempting to finish the job. If he was still teasing them, that gave them time, gave Sherlock time to attempt to anticipate his next move, but what frightened John more than he was prepared to admit was the fact that Moriarty was as ruthlessly clever as Sherlock, if not more so. For the first time in his life, Sherlock really was out of his depth.

John sat, looking out at the rain, terrified that if he lost hold of his rage, his fear would overwhelm him.

He hated how helpless it made him feel, how senseless, like some small quivering quarry caught in the crosshairs of a hunter’s rifle, stripped of all ability to do anything but panic, frozen, reduced to the condition of shrinking blood vessels and a rapidly beating heart, trapped in a body of tiny, breakable bones.

What made matters worse was how visibly worried Sherlock was. It made John both more furious and terrified at once—furious with Moriarty for being able to affect them both so profoundly, and terrified at the implications of a Sherlock who was anxious to the point of mania.

It was unsettling to see him so ill at ease. He kept turning his phone over and over in his hand, restless, agitated, his worry as palpable as the gloom hanging over the affluent Chelsea streets, where the street lamps had been switched on despite the fact it was the middle of the day.

The cab pulled to a halt outside an elaborate wrought-iron gate set into a walled courtyard whose crumbling red brickwork spoke of centuries of hereditary wealth. John had no doubt that the property behind the austere outer gates would be immense.

John slid out first and glanced down the street, crowded close on either side with old, gnarled-looking trees. There was a string of police cars parked up and down the block, but no MET officers in sight.

Sherlock paid the driver and joined John on the sidewalk. They both stood for a moment, insensible to the driving rain, silent before the scrolled-iron gate, as if acknowledging that this was their last chance to turn back.

John felt Sherlock’s eyes on his face. He couldn’t bring himself to meet Sherlock’s gaze, to see the concern written deep in his eyes.

“John—”

John shook his head. “Don’t.”

The vulnerable part of him, the part that was connected to Sherlock now, that had glowed like a white light beneath his breastbone during the events of the last twenty-four hours, had gone dark. He had to shut it off, shut it down, in order to go through with this. He couldn’t acknowledge that what they were about to do could signal the end of everything that had only just begun between them.
There was no point. If they ignored this trap, Moriarty would simply create another more impelling, more insidious scenario to ensnare them. They had to do this. He had to face this.

John set his jaw. He strode forward and pushed open the heavy gate, Sherlock falling into step immediately behind him, the only evidence of his frustration a faint exhalation of breath that turned white in the cold, damp air.

The house was immense just as John had predicted. However, it was even bigger than he’d imagined, shockingly immense for a house in the center of the city—one of those rare monstrosities that some wealthy family had managed to hang onto for years, defying city planning and German bombs and a hundred other factors that should have razed it to the ground long ago.

Whoever owned it had clearly fallen on difficult financial times and could no longer afford the upkeep. The red brickwork of the façade was overgrown with ivy and the garden in front of the house, which had clearly once been magnificent, was now reduced to a tangle of weeds.

There was still no sign of any MET officers on the property inside the gate and the absence of any visible police force struck John as odd.

He glanced back at Sherlock as they mounted the front steps and saw Sherlock’s brow creased in concentration, his eyes raking over every visible detail in the vicinity, no doubt already assembling the information into some sort of legible narrative, piecing together the history of the house and the last five generations of families to occupy it.

They found Lestrade just inside the front hall with a team of other officers. John released a quiet breath of relief he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Even the sight of Andersen, standing with his head bowed next to Sergeant Donovan, was a reassuring sight. It meant they weren’t alone in this.

However, when Lestrade looked up and saw them, something in his expression made the cold feeling in John’s chest harden and turn to ice.

Sherlock stepped around John, all business. “Where are they?”

Lestrade didn’t answer. He was staring at John.

Sherlock gestured impatiently toward the room off the front hall behind Andersen and Donovan. “Never mind, it’s obviously this way.”

Lestrade dragged his eyes from John back to Sherlock. John didn’t like the expression on his face one bit. “Listen, Sherlock when I texted you, when I said it was personal… I hadn’t seen… I didn’t realize…”

“What is it?” Sherlock snapped. “Something has clearly incapacitated your already questionable ability to formulate a sentence. Out with it.”

“Look, I shouldn’t have texted you. I didn’t realize quite what…quite what we had on our hands. We can sort this one on our own. I think it’s best if the two of you aren’t involved…”

“Lestrade, you’re being tedious. I’m going in.”

Sherlock stalked past Donovan and Andersen, toward the doorway through which the forensics team was exiting.

“Sherlock—”
“What’s the point? You can’t stop him. If he’s going to be so pigheaded about it, he might as well see.” Andersen’s drawl was full of the usual hostility but his eyes, John saw with a sinking feeling, were grim.

Donovan’s face looked drawn, and her eyes when she looked at John were full of pity.

It suddenly occurred to John that word had probably gotten around the MET that he’d been dragged unconscious from a burning cruise ship only yesterday. He knew exactly what Sally Donovan was thinking. Poor John Watson, following like a dog at Sherlock’s heels, too stupid to realize he’ll follow Sherlock to his own death. John felt his rage leap back to life. The look in Donovan’s eyes made up his mind.

He moved to follow Sherlock but Lestrade put a hand on his arm. “John, trust me on this. I really wouldn’t.”

John removed Lestrade’s hand forcefully but politely. “I appreciate it, Greg, but I’m with Sherlock on this.”

He saw the disgust on Andersen’s face as he walked past and felt a flicker of childish satisfaction. Anything warranting Andersen’s disapproval had to be a good decision on some level.

The room just off the front hall was large with high ceilings, tall Georgian windows, and a black and white tiled floor. There was an enormous fireplace at one end and it was empty of furniture save for several pieces covered in dust cloths set around the edges of the room. Judging from the dust on the chandelier overhead and the general aura of disrepair, no one was currently using the home as a residence.

Sherlock was standing in the center of the room where the forensics team had set up lights around the bodies—they’d all cleared off at Sherlock’s approach. He was standing with his back to John.

John stopped beside him, steeling himself a moment before looking down. He glanced at Sherlock first to get an idea of what to prepare himself for.

Sherlock’s face was white.

John knew then, knew from the creeping sensation crawling over his flesh that he didn’t want to look down. It would be a mistake to look down.

He looked down.

The bodies were lying side by side. Two white males, mid-30s, one thin with dark hair, the other shorter, blonde. Cut into the forehead of the dark-haired corpse were words in a language John couldn’t understand.

They were naked, each body sliced neatly down the center from sternum to groin, the skin peeled back from the ribs to reveal the full extent of the mutilation. What had been taken from the blonde corpse was immediately apparent.

The genitals had been sliced clean off.

It took John another moment to realize what had been taken from the dark-haired corpse, but it too was obvious, would have been obvious to anyone without medical knowledge of the human body. The dark-haired corpse was missing its heart.

John concentrated on breathing deeply through his nostrils, aware that his physiological response to
the scene before him was likely to be extreme. Curiously, however, he did not feel as he felt the day they’d found the first vivisected corpse. The emotional center of his brain had shut down. Time felt as though it had slowed, and as a result his senses were sharpened, hyper-tuned to every sound, every smell, every color in the vicinity. All that mattered was his experiential awareness of the world around him.

John recognized this response. It was often what happened when he and Sherlock found themselves in situations of extreme danger. His body had converted entirely to combat-mode. His heart was beating very fast.

There was very little blood around either corpse, which suggested that the removal of the organs at least had been made after death. Either that, or the incisions had killed them before the vital organs had been removed. The amount of time a human body could survive a procedure like that was… limited.

Lestrade had come up to stand behind them. John could sense the unease in his posture without turning back to look at him. “This is how we found them. We haven’t moved them at all. No sign yet of the… missing parts.”

“How long?” Sherlock’s voice came out only slightly wrong sounding. He was pulling on a pair of disposable gloves, his movements brisk, business-like. John was impressed in spite of himself.

“Time of death estimated to be sometime early this morning. It’s not clear whether they were… whether it happened here or elsewhere.”

“Have they been identified?”

Sherlock squatted down beside the dark-haired corpse, running his eyes over the exposed chest cavity.

“Yeah, inmates from Thameside reported missing a few weeks back. Murder and uh… sexual assault, I believe.”

“Oh, Jim, how charitable…” Sherlock’s voice was cold, his face twisted in an expression of humorless mirth. “Using the defective citizens as your messengers. What’s next? A children’s hospital?”

“What is that… the writing?” Lestrade pointed to the forehead of the dark-haired corpse. “It’s German, I know. But what does it mean?”

Sherlock was silent for a moment as he inspected the hole where the heart had been.

“Der zerstückelnde Verstand. Literally ‘Reason that cuts to pieces.’ Kant’s critique of the Enlightenment.” Sherlock rubbed a gloved finger over the incisions. “Made with a pen-knife…”

He straightened up, and moved around to examine the blonde-haired corpse. John thought he saw something in Sherlock’s face flicker for a moment as he crouched down, but it was gone as quickly as it had come, his expression as calm and impassive as ever, if slightly paler than usual.

The man looked nothing like him really, but John found he couldn’t watch as Sherlock moved his gloved hands over the mutilated body. He studied the wall behind Sherlock with resolute focus, his posture impeccable, his body returning out of habit to relaxed parade rest.
John heard the front door opening and listened to the sounds of the forensics team packing up, the low murmur of Sergeant Donovan’s voice in the doorway indicating that she and Andersen were watching the scene unfold from a distance.

Sherlock straightened up after another minute or so, peeling the gloves from his hands.

“They weren’t killed here. That much is obvious from the lack of blood and the pattern of dust on the floor. They were brought here, dragged clearly—at least into this room. Have you checked the other rooms in the house? Has anyone been upstairs?”

“No, but Sherlock, listen—”

“Good, that’s less evidence that hasn’t been utterly ruined. God knows what else we’ve missed thanks to Captain Incompetence and the interference of his minions.”

“Sherlock, there’s something—”

“The vivisections were performed elsewhere and the bodies were brought here. But why here?” Sherlock was circling the perimeter of the room, his eyes moving over the dust on the curtains, the years of grime smudged on the windowpanes. He sank to his knees, and peered under a shrouded ottoman. “Who owns the house?”

“Uh… Family with a French name.” Lestrade looked at a clipboard in his hands. “But it hasn’t been lived in for the past decade. It’s been on the market for years.”

“And nobody’s buying…” Sherlock murmured, stepping back and looking up as he did so, up to the tops of the very tall windows where a haze of grey light was filtering through. “Who found them?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. That’s what made the whole thing so weird. It was a tip-off from an anonymous caller. Just the address and then some bloody poem… something about murder and a mad king.”

“What?” Sherlock spun around, his voice sharp.

“It was a tip-off from an anonymous caller.”

“No, no, no, the message! What did the message say exactly? I need to know, what were the exact words?”

“Calm down, Freak.” Donovan strode into the room. “Don’t get your knickers in a twist, I’ve got it here.” She read out from a paper in her hand. “‘One is Murder, Rape’s the other’s name./ Beware the mad king with his ring of keys:/ O curiosity, thou mortal bane!/ Spite of thy charms, thou causest often pain/ And sore regret, of which we daily find:/ For thou —O may it not displease the fair—/ A fleeting pleasure art, but lasting care./ And always proves, alas! too dear the prize,/ Which, in the moment of possession, dies.’ And then there was the address at the end.”

“Oh.” Sherlock’s breath left him in a rush.

Everyone looked at Sherlock, waiting for the inevitable explanation.

“Stupid, stupid. Of course! A wealthy Frenchman’s house, the mutilated bodies…” Sherlock spun in a desperate circle, his hands clenching briefly into fists before he dropped them at his sides. He rounded on Lestrade, his eyes bright, almost feverish. “Lestrade, get them out. All of them. Especially the witless ones.”
“Sherlock, what are you on about?”

Sherlock snapped at Lestrade, his tone vicious. “The murderer is still here. In this house. Isn’t it obvious? It’s a trap. It’s a trap for me and John.”

Lestrade looked bewildered but there was fear in his eyes at Sherlock’s intensity. “Alright, Andersen, get forensics out of here.”

“We’ve got to search the house. We should split up to cover more ground.”

Lestrade was indignant. “If this is a trap what kind of bloody stupid idea is that, splitting up to search the house?”

“I’ll start on the ground floor.” John pulled out his torch and headed for the main hallway.

Sherlock hesitated for a fraction of a second but then he nodded, the movement strangely stiff. “I’ll take the second floor. Lestrade, you head to the top of the house.”

“Sherlock! You’re telling me there’s a maniac with a carving knife somewhere in this house and you want to creep off by yourself to find him?”

“Yes! Look, he’s not going to carve us up. It’s not as simple as that. This is Moriarty. It’ll likely be something much more psychologically disturbing.”

Lestrade threw his hands up in exasperation. “Oh, well in that case—”

“Listen to me.” Sherlock’s face was very close to Lestrade’s. He was enunciating every syllable in the irritating way he did when he was being pedantic. “He’s intending to frighten us. That is his strategy. We can’t let it get to us. There will be valuable information in whatever form that message takes. It’s imperative that no one touches anything that they find before I see it. Get the incompetent ones out of here.”

Lestrade opened his mouth to protest but John didn’t hear his reply. He was already out the door and halfway down the hall leading into the heart of the house. The ensuing negotiations with Lestrade would take several minutes more. Meanwhile there was a maniac on the loose. John planned to find him.

The hallway that stretched back beneath the central staircase was long and dark, poorly lit by old bulbs mounted in sconces on the walls. John shone his torch on the ground, looking for the tracks in the dust that Sherlock had pointed out. Sure enough, there were marks showing evidence of recent foot traffic. John followed them down the long hallway that ran the length of the house and through a doorway at the end that lead into the kitchen.

The room was enormous, its size lending credence to its status as a house built back when kitchens were the heart and soul of a household and were designed to accommodate a large domestic staff. It was almost as dark here as in the hallway, the grey daylight obscured by a thick layer of grime on the windows.

Objects leapt out at John through the darkness as he shone his torch around—a strange mixture of old and new kitchen appliances. Brass taps above a sink large enough to bathe in, a broken down Kitchen Aid mixer, copper pots gleaming dully on the tiled wall behind the stove.

Everything seemed to be in its place. There was no sign of a disturbance.

John squatted down by the table in the center of the kitchen, looking again at the dust on the floor,
trying to make out whether the marks he had noticed were significant, whether they were really marks at all or just the disorder of an old, abandoned house.

The kitchen extended beyond the back of the house without a second storey above it, so the sound of the rain was louder here—drumming heavy and relentless on the roof overhead.

Perhaps that was why John didn’t hear it until he crouched down between the table and a door leading outside, the sound of another person breathing in the corner of the room.

He stayed where he was, forcing himself to keep his posture relaxed, pretending to continue examining the dust on the floor, gauging the intruder’s location as best as he could by listening.

He was standing directly behind John, in the corner between the door and the wall.

John drew a breath, his muscles tensing, and then straightened up like a spring uncoiling, lashing out with his foot into the corner of the room.

He caught the man in the chest with his foot, heard his breath go out with a satisfying whoosh, but he fell forward onto John, seizing hold of his arms, and knocking into him with the full force of his weight.

He was a big man, his body thick with muscle, but John held his ground, and pushed back against him, driving the other man hard into the plate-glass door that lead outside. He saw a crack form where his head struck the glass.

In the half-light, he could just make out a dark jacket, cropped hair, and then a flash of teeth as the man lunged at John again, throwing his head against John’s with such force that he felt the impact of the other man’s skull all down his spine. His vision blurred. He momentarily lost his grip and this time it was easy for the larger man to overpower him, reversing their positions, slamming John so hard into the door that he shattered the entire pane of glass and fell through it to the world outside.

John landed hard on his backside, bruised and winded, looking up to see the hulking figure of his assailant stepping through the hole he had made.

John crawled backwards as fast as he could, still too disoriented to stand, and experienced his first flash of panic as his shoulders came up hard against something. There was a wall at his back. John glanced to the left and right—the door had opened to an alley on the side of the house.

He was trapped.

The man bent down over him and John saw his features more closely—a flat stump of a nose, clearly broken several times and badly healed, shrewd, black eyes, and a broad scar that ran the from the corner of his left eye to the hinge of his jaw.

By the time he’d closed his fists in the front of John’s jacket, John had his gun in his hand, the muzzle buried in the other man’s solar plexus.

The larger man looked down and grinned, expelling a stream of rancid breath. His grin was deranged. “En’t you a slippery one? Well, you’re free to shoot me, but first I’m to give you this.”

He jerked suddenly, reaching for John’s hand.

John’s finger tensed on the trigger but he didn’t fire.

Too late.
The curve of a blade was hugging the tendon in John’s neck. He lifted his chin against the pressure and lowered his gun.

“That’s right. Easy does it.”

He pulled the gun from John’s fingers and tucked it away somewhere John couldn’t see. The pressure at his throat didn’t ease so he kept his head up, eyes trained warily on the man’s lowered head.

“I’m not supposed to hurt you. Just supposed to give you this.” John’s entire body tensed as he felt his fingers pulled apart. He tried to yank his hand away but the man’s grip was too strong. “Not supposed to hurt you. Not just yet.” He was pressing something into John’s hand, something cold and metal, heavy, dense. John watched him shake his head. “What a shame. What a shame. Such lovely flesh for cutting…”

The man’s hand withdrew, his eyes now fixed on the length of John’s throat. “You’ll know the place, he says. Such lovely, lovely flesh. The room at the top of the house. You’ll go willingly, he says… if you want to see your Sherlock Holmes again.” His breathing thickened. John saw him lick his lips. “I’m sure he won’t mind if I make the smallest slice.”

John’s fingers tightened on the object in his hand, the word for what it was crystallizing suddenly in his terror-fogged brain. Key. It was a key.

“I’ll just take something small, something you won’t miss…”

John felt the blade of the knife sink in slightly against the skin of his throat. He watched the man’s eyes focus on the bead of blood welling along the cut, felt it run down his neck.

“Such lovely, lovely flesh.”

He eased the pressure off momentarily, his eyes glazing over with something sickeningly like lust, and John seized the opportunity to twist sideways, driving his knee up with as much force as he could manage. His knee hit something soft and the knife slipped briefly, before slashing into the flesh of his upper arm.

He kicked out blindly, as hard as he could, and was rewarded with a shout.

There was rain in his eyes and something sticky too, which made it difficult to see. He had fallen over on his side and he kicked out again, in the direction of the shape still looming over him.

Again, his foot made contact, this time with a satisfying crunch, and he saw the figure stagger up and away, out of his line of vision.

John clenched his fingers around the object in his hand, breathing hard, unable to believe he’d frightened his assailant away so easily, and then he heard his name, followed by the sound of running footsteps.

He struggled to sit up.

“John! JOHN!”

Blinking rain out of his eyes, he saw Sherlock falling to his knees in front of him, his coat pooling around him as he leaned forward, his eyes wide and terrified.

“John.” Sherlock loomed over him, as if overwhelmed with the desire to touch him but too
frightened to do so. “John…”

John tried to answer. He couldn’t bear to hear Sherlock repeating his name like a broken record, Sherlock who couldn’t stand to repeat himself. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m alright.”

“John…” Sherlock was staring at the cut on his neck.

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” He managed to sit all the way up and saw Lestrade stepping through the shattered kitchen door behind Sherlock, surveying the damage with a look of awed horror on his face. “My gun though. He took my gun.”

Sherlock looked at him as if he couldn’t understand what John was saying.

“Where is he?” Lestrade jogged forward with his gun in his hand, his eyes scanning the length of the alley. Sherlock’s eyes hadn’t moved from John’s neck.

“He—” John couldn’t catch his breath. He nodded mutely in the direction of the mouth of the alley.

“He must have taken off when he heard you coming. I couldn’t—I didn’t see which way he went…”

“Jesus Christ.” Lestrade dropped into a crouch beside Sherlock. “What the hell happened?”

“He was in the kitchen. I tried to catch him off guard… got a couple of blows in but… he was… big. Knocked me through the kitchen door.”

Lestrade’s eyes were now also trained on John’s neck. “Jesus, did he…?” He seemed to realize the answer to his own question before he’d finished forming it. He shook his head. “Jesus, if we hadn’t heard the glass… If we’d already been upstairs…” Lestrade blew out a long breath. “This is exactly what I was talking about, Sherlock. That was a damn sight too close for my taste!”

John watched Sherlock’s expression momentarily break, before hardening into a mask of stone. If he hadn’t been watching Sherlock’s face he would have missed it.

Sherlock rounded on Lestrade, his voice a snarl. “So what are you waiting for? Why are we all still standing here when there’s a serial killer currently making his escape? Send your dogs after him, Lestrade!” Sherlock pointed down the alley. “That’s what they’re here for, isn’t it?”

Lestrade looked momentarily stricken. Then he nodded, reaching for the radio at his hip. “Right. You’re right.” He held it to his mouth. “Donovan…”

“It’s alright. He wasn’t going to—” John stopped himself, the lie catching in his throat like a spine of barbed wire. He swallowed hard. “It’s fine. He wasn’t supposed to hurt me.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed, the masklike quality of his face replaced with a calculating expression. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing.” John tightened his fingers around the key in his hand, felt its cold metal edges biting cruelly into his palm. “Just—” The rain was sending the blood stinging into John’s eye. “Can we do this inside?”

He started to push himself to his feet and Sherlock reached for his arm to help him up. Sherlock’s fingers closed inadvertently around the wound on John’s bicep.

John hissed at the contact and flinched away.

Sherlock dropped his hand as if he’d burned John, his face flooding with renewed fear. “What is it?
What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing.” John clenched his teeth as he stood, using the wall behind him to pull himself to his feet. “My shoulder. He must have—”

Sherlock seized John by his other arm and pushed his jacket off his shoulder to reveal the torn and blood stained sleeve of his jumper beneath.

“Oh my god.”

“It’s fine, Sherlock. It looks much worse than it is.”

Sherlock’s fingers clenched violently where he still held John’s other arm, his breathing suddenly ragged. His eyes were unfocused.

“Sherlock—”

His voice was like a wound torn open, raw and aching. “I’m going to kill him.”

“Sherlock, wait—”

He dropped John’s arm and turned sharply to Lestrade. “Give me your gun.”

“It’s fine, Sherlock. It looks much worse than it is.”

Lestrade hesitated.

“I’ll be right behind.” John gestured to his shoulder. “I’m just going to wrap this up.”

Lestrade looked uneasy, but he nodded. He set off after Sherlock, yelling into his radio as he went. “Donovan! Sherlock’s coming around the back. Little bastard took my gun...”

John watched Lestrade turn the corner out of sight.

He rotated his shoulder cautiously and then flexed his arm, trying to ascertain the depth of the cut. It was bleeding freely now, soaking the sleeve of his shirt, but that was more than likely a result of the rain.

He picked his way gingerly over the shards of glass on the ground and climbed back through the hole in the kitchen door, pausing in the gloom just inside to look down at the object in his hand.

The key was old-fashioned, ornate, its handle comprised of an intricate pattern of scrolls and twisting vines. In the center of the filigreed portion at the key’s base there was a coat of arms showing a cross bisecting four winged creatures. John rubbed his thumb over the worn iron. They looked like eagles without beaks or feet.
The room at the top of the house, he’d said. John slid the key into his pocket. He’d been holding it so tightly in his hand that the pattern at the key’s base left a mark in the center of his palm. He stared at it a moment longer, then flexed his fingers.

John supposed he was lucky Sherlock had run off again. Otherwise, he hadn’t any idea how he would have made it to the room at the top of the house without Sherlock following him, and he had to be alone.

He knew this like he knew the cold sick feeling at the center of his bones that told him Moriarty had orchestrated all of this for him. He’d known something like this was coming. Without even consciously realizing it, he had been waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Moriarty to capitalize on the seed of doubt he’d planted in John’s mind by the pool all those weeks ago; the final act in the elaborate pantomime that was designed to pull John to pieces.

Still standing in the pool of grayish light by the shattered kitchen door, he shrugged his ruined jacket off his shoulders and tore off a strip of his cotton t-shirt to wind around the bleeding portion of his upper arm. The cut didn’t feel especially deep but the blood was making a mess of his jumper and the doctor in him could only ignore a wound for so long without giving it some kind of attention.

He knotted the makeshift bandage as tightly as he could, pulled his soaking jacket back onto his shoulders, and made his way through the darkness to the center of the house.

There were no sounds from the front room where the forensics team had been and by the time he reached the central staircase where he and Sherlock had come in, he saw that the MET officers had packed up and cleared off per Lestrade’s instructions.

The house was quiet save for the distant sound of the rain drumming on the roof overhead.

He didn’t bother pulling out his torch; by the time he reached the staircase, his eyes had adjusted to the gloom. He mounted the stairs with measured footsteps, climbing up into the darkness with a detached, mechanical exactness, feeling like a clockwork toy that had been wound up and then set into motion, as if he’d been designed to complete this task and this task alone.

The darkness was thicker on the next floor and when he reached the landing he saw that all the doors along the hallway were shut. He walked past them without a second glance and continued onward to the next flight of stairs.

The sound of the rain grew louder as he approached the final landing, the darkness swelling around him with every step, pressing in against his eyes. He dug the key out of his pocket halfway up the stairs and squeezed it in his fist, wondering if he’d be able to tell which door was the one he was meant to open.

By the time he reached the second storey, the darkness was so intense he had to pull his torch out in order to see his own feet. He shone the light through the shadows and saw another row of closed doors lining the corridor, identical to the hallway below. There seemed nothing remarkable about any of the doors on either side of the staircase. John pointed his light directly opposite him and saw at the very end of the hallway, a smaller door, the elaborate ironwork of its lock glinting in the light from his torch.

He approached the funny-looking little door, his heartbeat pounding in his throat. Other than his elevated heart rate and the sweat prickling his palms like so many little needles, he felt eerily calm, hollow, wiped clean of emotions.

There was no part of him that considered turning back.
He flicked his torch off and stuck it back in his pocket, leaving him in complete darkness. Reaching out with one hand, he felt for the lock, and then guided the key into it by touch. It slid in relatively smoothly and when he turned it, he heard the satisfying sound of tumblers giving way, releasing the mechanism of the door.

Leaving the key in the lock, he turned the handle, and pushed the door wide.

Chapter End Notes

The section of Moriarty’s message that is in italics is a quotation from Robert Samber and J. E. Mansion’s 1922 translation of Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou Contes du Temps passé*. For the sake of suspense, I will not reveal WHICH fairy tale until the end of the story. © However, if you feel so inclined, by all means, go look it up.

I sincerely apologize for the cliff-hanger. I am ambitiously aiming to post the next chapter in a week, which is much more likely now that I have completed all my own final work, and just have to survive a few more days of grading.

Thank you again for all your comments and support! I love hearing from all of you so much. Fandom community FTW!
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

Warnings this chapter for psychological torture and abuse, and violent sexual language.

This was a difficult chapter to write for multiple reasons, and my inability to stop working on it has led me to manically post it before receiving feedback from my beloved beta, A Study in Purple. I will update with her edits as soon as possible. But in the meantime, I had to get this out into the world, for fear that I would never stop tinkering with it.

Special thanks this chapter to my dear friend, Sev313, who helped me untangle various complicated moments, and once again spoke at length with me about John Watson and all the abuse he puts up with.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At first, John could see nothing but the grey outlines of shuttered windows in the room within, the darkness too penetrating to provide him with any hint of what the room contained, but as he took a step forward into the dim interior, his senses were assaulted in a different fashion altogether by a rank familiar smell.

The stench was so strong, John gasped, drawing the sleeve of his coat up to cover his nose and mouth.

It was familiar to John because it was the smell of so many field hospitals he had worked in; it was the desperate stench of the operating table in war, in the crowded confines of the army tent when hours could pass before anyone had a chance to look up and pause for breath, much less wash away the accumulated gore.

He groped for his torch but before he could flick it to life, something struck him hard in the back of the knees, making him stumble, knocking the torch from his hand.

He heard it fall to the floor with a wet sound and roll away out of reach.

He managed to stay upright, wheeling around in the darkness to find his assailant, but his eyes still hadn’t adjusted and the smell of old blood all around him was so overpowering, it made his eyes stream with tears.

Stumbling, disoriented, he failed to anticipate the blow aimed at his head. It caught him on the brow bone and this time, it knocked him off his feet.

He fell forward on his hands and knees, his palms slipping in something slick, the smell of blood suddenly much stronger. It took a second for the two pieces of information to click together in John’s brain.

Panic took the breath from his lungs. He tried to scramble to his feet but he found no purchase on the slippery floor and before he could rise, someone seized hold of his arms and pushed them up over his head.
He began to struggle but a voice came out of the darkness, freezing him as effectively as if he’d been struck with a bolt of electricity.

“Don’t be tedious, Doctor. You’re doing beautifully so far. What on earth could you hope to achieve by resisting now?”

John went limp. He felt his wrists pulled together and lashed tightly with a thin strip of synthetic material.

“Much better. Goodness, you are obedient. I’d forgotten. So good at following orders. Must be all that time in the army.”

Hands fastened in the back of his jacket and hauled him to his knees. His bound arms were lifted over his head and then attached to a device above him that pulled his arms taut.

John felt the torn flesh on his arm stretch with the movement and gritted his teeth.

He heard the sound of a mechanism turning and felt his body pulled upward until he was hanging, suspended by the wrists, with just the tips of his toes scraping the floor.

His eyes had adjusted somewhat to the darkness and he could make out strange shapes in the shuttered light from the windows that looked like the silhouettes of medieval torture devices. He blinked, mistrusting what his eyes were telling him.

“Let’s have a little more light. After all, the whole reason I invited you here was to show you around.”

A bulb on the ceiling flickered to life and the stark shapes that John had been guessing at leapt suddenly to life around him.

He had not been wrong.

His eyes absorbed the information at first in fragmented flashes—as though his brain knew that taken as a whole, the scene would be too much to take in. He saw only pieces: a rack hung with chains, a meat saw, a metal basin, several stained plastic buckets, some still half-full of blood, others knocked over.

He blinked slowly, opened his eyes again.

The ceiling was crisscrossed with low beams hung with an assortment of metal chains and hooks, like the one currently holding him up. Along with a rack and an iron maiden there were several spiked and cruel-looking machines that John didn’t recognize but whose purpose was all too clear. He didn’t need to know how they worked to ascertain that they were instruments designed solely with the intention of inflicting the maximum amount of pain.

They were arranged in a ragged semi-circle around an object situated in the very center of the room, illuminated harshly by the uncovered bulb hanging directly above it. It was a butcher block, human sized, outfitted with an assortment of straps, its mottled wood surface stained dark.

There was a trough running the length of it to drain the blood and beside it stood a low table covered in a variety of different sized knives, many of which had long, curved blades, others that were short and squat, some of which were clearly intended for skinning and filleting, others for breaking bone.

The butcher block was identical to the one from his nightmares all those weeks ago, the night after they’d found the first vivisected corpse.
Sitting in the center of it, wearing a dove grey suit, his mad dark eyes roving happily around the room, was James Moriarty. He was swinging his feet with undisguised glee, legs crossed neatly at the ankles.

“What do you think of my collection? It’s all very gothic, I admit. Not exactly to my taste, but it’s been so useful in dealing with my latest consultant. He goes mad for this sort of thing. It’s been handy having him in my service because of course, as you know, I don’t do any of the hands on work myself. Presumably the two of you have met by now. What did you think of him? Isn’t he a joy? Looks like he had a hard time keeping his hands off you.”

Moriarty cocked his head, eyes glittering in the dim light.

“I have the two of you to thank for finding him. Sherlock does seem drawn to the particularly nasty cases, doesn’t he? It was only the work of a few well-placed pieces of evidence to mislead our dear detective, giving me the opportunity to court the real psychopath.”

Moriarty slipped nimbly from the table and landed on his feet with a squelching sound.

“I know, it’s all a bit dramatic, but I wanted something really breathtaking for this little meeting of ours.”

Moriarty slid his hands in his pockets as he strolled toward John, his posture loose, casual.

“I wanted to bring you here to have a little chat. It’s so hard to get you alone and we never really got a chance to talk. It seems we’re always being interrupted.”

Moriarty strode closer, his expensive shoes making a trail through the blood. He stopped when he was an arm’s length away.

“I want to offer you my congratulations.”

John could feel his pulse reverberating in the fresh wound on his forehead, making the room swim around him. His arms ached from the weight of his hanging body. He blinked furiously, struggling to keep both eyes open.

It was so like a scene from one of his nightmares, John wondered for a moment whether he was dreaming, but the pain in his head was real, as was the bile rising in the back of his throat; the bite of the plastic into the skin of his wrists a brutal reminder that this was no dream.

“I’m so pleased you took my advice.” Moriarty studied John, his black eyes crawling over John’s face. “I’ll be the first to admit, I didn’t think it could be done.”

Moriarty began to walk in a circle around him, hands still in his pockets, his voice soft, intimate, like the brush of an unwanted embrace.

“Our cold-blooded, rational scientist moved to indulge in sins of the flesh. What could have possibly compelled him? With plain, old John Watson, no less. Britain’s everyman. As reliable as fish on Fridays. As bland as white toast. As comforting as afternoon tea.”

He stretched his mouth wide in an exaggerated grimace around the final word as he came back around to face John, his tone full of unmistakable disdain. He leaned in close to John’s face, eyes narrowing.

“So tell me, John. How did you convince him? What did you have to do? I’m dying to know.”
John held the cold black gaze, feeling distinctly sick at the intimate form of address.

“Come on, Johnny Boy, you can tell me. I won’t tell a soul, I promise. How did you do it? Did you take my advice? Did you flash a little extra skin one morning on your way to the shower? Rub up against him in a tight corner? Or was it your damsel in distress act on the cruise ship? Was he so moved by your plight that he felt compelled to soothe you?”

John felt his rage, which had been lying cold and dormant like a banked fire, leap suddenly to life.

“It’s none of your fucking business.”

“Oooh, no need to get nasty. My, my. Did I strike a nerve?” Moriarty’s eyes seemed to bore deeper into his as he leaned closer. “I did, didn’t I?”

John held his gaze, despite the fact it felt as though Moriarty had crawled in through his eyes and was now slithering around inside his soul, picking things up that were sacred to John, holding them in his white hands, his fingers like pale worms.

“Oh, I see,” he breathed after several moments, a note of awed wonder in his voice. “You didn’t do anything, did you? He was the one who initiated it. Incredible.”

Moriarty slid in another tight circle around him. John could feel his eyes on him through the back of his head.

“Oh, this changes things, yes, it does. It means Sherlock is more susceptible than I thought to your particular charms.” His voice was soft with pleased excitement. “How fascinating.”

Blood was oozing steadily from the cut on John’s brow bone into his eye. He closed it with reluctance, feeling all the more vulnerable by limiting his range of vision. Even with one eye closed, he could feel the weight of Moriarty’s gaze slithering over his shoulders and back, down his arse and legs as he crept around him. It made him feel filthy. He wanted to scrape it off and then scrub himself raw to remove the memory of it.

“What is it about you? What is it you have? It isn’t as though you actually help him solve his little puzzles. You can’t possibly challenge him intellectually. You’re as dim as the rest of them.” He slid back into John’s line of sight. The curiosity on his face was mingled with disgust. “What is it he gets from you? What could you possibly offer Sherlock Holmes?”

John couldn’t help himself. He lifted his chin.

Moriarty noticed the gesture. His mouth twisted.

“I suppose there must be pleasure in owning something so completely… And he does, doesn’t he?” Moriarty reached out and circled John’s throat with one cold hand. “You’d do anything for him. Anything he said. You wouldn’t question it.”

Moriarty tilted his head as his fingers tightened.

“You’re the perfect pet because you’re so willing. How many times have you let him fuck you?” His hand slid higher up John’s neck. “Did he take you on the floor, panting, on your hands and knees? Or did he fuck you face-up so he could watch your face crumple at the feeling of being split in two? I imagine the latter. Dear Sherlock is so sentimental.”

The pressure on John’s throat was making it difficult to breathe. He concentrated on the white gash of Moriarty’s bared teeth in his grey face, struggling to inhale through his nostrils.
“Does he send you away after he fucks you? Or does he make you sleep at the foot of his bed? I’m surprised he hasn’t put a collar on you yet.” He squeezed the hinge of John’s jaw, stretching it open. “How many ways has he marked you? How many of your filthy little orifices has he *fucked*?”

He leaned closer, peering into the hollow of John’s open mouth, like a butcher inspecting a cut of meat.

“Perhaps I’ll mark you for him. He’d like that, wouldn’t he? Property of *SH*. I’ll cut it into your cheek.” He used his grip to twist John’s head to the side. “How much do you think you’d be worth to him if I cut you up? If I mar this lovely flesh of yours? Would he have any use for a damaged pet?”

Moriarty’s grip beneath John’s jaw was making fresh blood run from the cut on his neck. He watched out of one eye as Moriarty studied the wound. “I imagine Sherlock wasn’t pleased at all when he saw this.” He dragged his thumb over the incision. “He so *hates* when people tamper with his things.”

John hissed as Moriarty dug his thumb into the seam of the cut, pain blooming hot and jagged under the pressure. He clenched his jaw against the sensation, breath now coming fast between his teeth.

“I don’t like *bodies*, John. They bleed and they sweat and they stink, and make a mess of things, which is why I generally prefer not to get involved. But in this instance, for you, *dear* John, I’m willing to make an exception.”

Moriarty pressed his face in close to John’s as he continued digging with the nail of his thumb, hatred naked on his face.

“You think you’re special, don’t you? Well if you are, in fact, Sherlock’s favorite plaything…” He leaned in close until his mouth was against John’s ear, his lips cold and leathery. “I intend to *break* you.”

John tried to jerk away but the strain on his arms left him no freedom of movement. He could do nothing but hang limply, unable to protect himself.

“I would love nothing more than to hurt you in every way imaginable. And believe me, I can be quite imaginative. I could put you in the iron maiden and bleed you dry. Strap you to the rack and stretch you till your joints popped. But you’re not afraid of pain, are you?” He dug his thumb in harder, his enraged face inches from John’s. John felt a muscle in his jaw twitch. “I could give you any injury and you’d bite off your own tongue before you made a sound. No, I’ll have to destroy you a different way. There’s something that affects you much more, isn’t there?” Moriarty relinquished the pressure on the wound and dragged his bloody thumb up John’s cheek and over his bottom lip, lowering his face to John’s as he pushed his thumb in against John’s teeth, lip curling as he did so. “*Shame.*”

John kept his jaw clenched tight but that didn’t stop him tasting the bitter copper of his own blood as Moriarty rubbed his thumb against his teeth.

“What will it take to *really* humiliate you? We’re going to find out together because now we have all the time in the world. Because this time, Sherlock won’t be coming back to rescue you. Not when I gave him such a pretty puzzle to solve. He won’t be back for *hours* yet.”

Leaning back, Moriarty plucked one of the knives from the low table beside the butcher block without moving his thumb from John’s mouth. Light flashed on the long, narrow blade as he turned it over in his hand.
“I never asked you if you liked my riddle. Or didn’t you get the reference? Think hard. I’m sure Sherlock gave you plenty of hints.”

Moriarty pulled his thumb out of John’s mouth, smearing blood obscenely over his bottom lip.

“I love old fairy tales. They’re so wonderfully brutal. Bluebeard’s always been my favorite. Shall I tell you about it?” He pulled his hand away, wiped the blood from his fingers on the front of John’s trousers. “The virginal bride, dumb as a box of rocks, pure as the driven snow, marries the local brute. After the wedding, he gives her the keys to his castle. ‘Go in any room you like, my sweet meat, except the one at the end of the hall, opened by this little key.’ Of course she can’t resist a prohibition like that, so she opens the door, and in the room at the end of the hall she finds the corpses of her husband’s mutilated wives. But she drops the key in the blood and no matter how hard she scrubs, she can’t wash the bloodstain out. So when her husband comes back and asks her for the key.” Moriarty grinned, showing his canines. He spun the knife in his hand. “Well.”

The sound of the rain on the roof overhead suddenly grew louder. The noise was oppressive. John was stricken with the sensation that the room was shrinking like a noose around them, pushing the instruments of torture closer, until he was certain he could feel the tip of every blade at his back.

“You see you’re the final bride. The next one for the chopping block. I thought it was appropriate given the carnal nature of your sins. I imagine you were something of a virgin in this context, and as you know, virgins lose their worth once they’ve been had. Once the maid has been deflowered, she’s dog meat. Worthless.” Moriarty pressed the flat of the blade against the underside of John’s throat, forcing him to lift his chin. “That’s the trick with virginity. Only valuable until it’s been taken.” He tilted the knife until the edge of the blade bit a clean line into the skin of John’s throat, making a mark identical to the one on the other side of his neck. “And it’s clear your card has been punched.”

Moriarty put pressure on the blade and John felt blood run down his neck.

“In order not to disappoint Sherlock, it looks as though I may have to cut you up after all. You know how he gets. He’ll be so disappointed if it doesn’t play out the way it’s meant to. That’s one reason I treasure him. No one ever appreciated a complex crime more than Sherlock Holmes. You know that better than anyone, don’t you, John? You’ve seen his glee over a crime carried out just right. The casualties don’t matter. They’re just details. Insignificant. Like you.” Moriarty eased the pressure off the blade and John felt blood trickle down into the collar of his shirt. “You may tell yourself you’re special, but deep down, you know the truth.”

Moriarty reached out and tugged down the zip on John’s jacket.

“You think he really cares about you? You think that’s possible for him? Oh, I don’t doubt he has uses for you, but you know as well as I do that emotions don’t interest him. So he’s fucking you. Big whoop. Just means he’s using you in a new way. You aren’t worth more than the skin you’re standing in.” Moriarty dragged the blade of the knife down the front of John’s jumper, his face vicious, feral. “You’re just meat to him. So John Watson, I plan on reducing you to what you really are—by cutting you to pieces.”

He trailed the knife meditatively over John’s exposed collarbones, tugging the collar of his shirt down with the point of the blade.

“I think I’ll strip you down first—bare as a lamb chop. It makes the cutting so much easier.” He took hold of the bottom of John’s jumper, hooking the blade into the soft fabric. “Let’s have a look, shall we? I’m dying to discover what Sherlock finds so appealing.”

In one swift upward stroke he slit the garment in two, along with the t-shirt underneath. The blade
just missed the underside of John’s throat.

“Whoopsie! Silly me. Wouldn’t want to end the fun so soon by slitting your throat! Much as I’d love to watch the blood drain from your body. No, you’d die far too quickly. And I have so much suffering in store for you. The real question is what to do with you once I’ve cut you up? The possibilities are endless.”

Up close, the familiar scent of spearmint and expensive cologne made John’s stomach roll. He bit down hard on his tongue, tasting blood.

“I could sell you to the dog food factory. Or make you into pies and have Sherlock come and eat them.” He peered critically at John’s stomach. “Or perhaps I’ll have you stuffed. Then I can make use of you long after you would have rotted. That does sound appealing. That would give me a chance to pull your organs out while you’re still alive.” He laid the tip of the knife against the soft skin of John’s belly, his voice an intimate hiss. “I saw you eyeing the butcher block. I think perhaps you have an affinity for it.”

John no longer tried to hold Moriarty’s gaze. He could scarcely see and there was nothing to be gained from looking into the blank reptile eyes. The numbness in his arms seemed to have spread through the rest of his body. He couldn’t feel the scrape of Moriarty’s knife on his abdomen.

“Maybe I’ll skin you and send Sherlock the pelt. After all, it’s going to be hours before someone finds you. By the time they get here, you’ll be nothing but a chunk of meat.”

Moriarty used the blade of the knife to push the torn fabric aside, exposing John’s chest.

“Then again you have just the right amount of fat for a tenderloin. Do you know much about butchering, John?” Tucking the knife out of sight, Moriarty reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick black marker. He snapped off the cap with a click. “Let me walk you through it. First, I’ll split you down the backbone, dividing you into bilateral halves.”

He pressed the point of the marker to the skin under John’s throat and drew a thick black line down between his ribs.

“Then I’ll break your carcass down into the primal cuts: Shoulder.” He pushed back the corner of John’s shirt and made a large X. “Ham. Loin.” He dug the point of the marker into the flesh of John’s stomach and wrote something in large black letters above John’s right hip. “And belly.”

He stepped back and attached the cap of the marker. He lifted an item from the table and held it up between them.

“Do you know what this is, John?”

It looked like a bell with a long metal handle.

“It’s called a bell scraper. It’s what I’ll use to scrape the hair from your flesh after I’ve scalded it off your bones. Would you like to feel the blade?”

He laid the edge of it against John’s cheek. John held himself still, felt the tremor in his body as the metal edge sank deeper.

“You know I don’t think anyone’s ever used it on a living animal before. Should we try it out and see what happens?”

Moriarty laughed abruptly and set the item back on the table.
“We’ve got everything we need right here.” He gestured to the meat hooks dangling from the ceiling, the stained white buckets, the glittering array of knives. “So what it’ll be?”

He was smiling at John, a soft, deranged smile that made his flat black eyes look moist.

“Perhaps I should just take a piece of you and then send you back to Sherlock. See how he reacts. What if I take something vital… something he’ll really miss? That’s a sure way to learn your utility.”

Moriarty’s knife was back in his hand, his fingers tensing on the handle.

“What’ll it be?” Moriarty lifted the blade to John’s bloodied mouth, squeezing it open again by applying pressure to the hinge of John’s jaw. “Your tongue?”

He grinned a private lascivious grin—eager, deranged.

“But you’re not particularly linguistically gifted, are you? Not so skilled in that area.” He let the knife drop. “No. Something else then… Something more valuable.”

His eyes crawled down John’s bare torso to the waistline of his jeans.

“Are you especially well endowed, Johnny Boy? Or does Sherlock simply enjoy a warm, obedient place to stick his cock?”

Using the blade of the knife, he peeled the shredded wings of John’s shirt further apart.

“What piece do I have to take to render you completely useless?”

His grin widened suddenly, dead eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Oh, but it’s obvious, isn’t it? It’s been obvious all along.” John felt the exhalation of his delighted breath against his cheek. “Of course.”

Setting the knife aside, Moriarty reached out and hovered both hands over John’s hips, his face a mixture of revulsion and exhilaration.

“Because you only have one purpose, don’t you?”

He slid his fingers into John’s belt loops and dragged his hips closer.

John felt the first few fingers of real panic flicker through his numbness, like flames licking at a block of ice.

Moriarty’s fingers skimmed the skin above his hips. John could feel the repugnance in the gesture, as though in touching John he feared he might contract some disease, contaminate himself.

Over Moriarty’s shoulder, John could see that the door was still wide open. He stared at it, hopelessly, out of his good eye.

The hallway beyond gaped dark and empty.

The fingers closed on the fastening of his trousers and began pulling the buttons apart.

Moriarty leaned in closer, until his lips brushed John’s cheek.

“What do you think, Johnny Boy? You think Sherlock will have any use for you after I take your cock?”
John couldn’t look at the empty hallway any longer. He shut his eyes.

“Ah…” Moriarty’s breath was sour against John’s cheek. “There it is. Good. Good.”

Cold hands were now yanking the material of John’s trousers and pants down his thighs. He made a sound in the back of his throat—involutary, protesting.

Moriarty laughed, low and breathless. “That’s right. How does it feel, John? Tell me how it feels to be reduced to what you’re really worth.”

His arms and shoulders were completely numb; he had no purchase on the ground, but still he made an effort to twist away.

He swung helplessly, succeeding in nothing but furthering his own humiliation. Moriarty laughed harder and shoved John’s trousers down to his knees.

John made another unwilling sound of protest. Moriarty had accessed some animal part of him, determined to protect itself at all costs. He realized he was shaking his head—a pointless, violent gesture.

“No,” he heard himself say. He didn’t recognize his own voice.

The knife was back in Moriarty’s hand. John felt the cold press of the blade against the skin of his inner thigh. Just like his nightmare.

John thrashed, wild, desperate, a guttural moan pulled from his throat. The abrupt movement caused the edge of the blade to sink in.

Moriarty adjusted his grip and pushed the blade deeper, his breath now coming fast against John’s face.

“Now you show your true colors. You’re an animal. Lamb for the slaughter.”

John’s teeth were bared in pain. He was gasping, senseless. There was moisture on his face. He couldn’t tell if it was sweat or blood.

“Now you show yourself for what you really are, John Watson. Flesh. You’re nothing but flesh.”

The blade of the knife jumped, met the juncture of his hip and thigh.

“I can see what Sherlock sees in you when you’re like this… a hot, squirming body to pull reactions from. It’s almost delicious.” Moriarty grimaced against John’s cheek in his delight. John felt the press of his canine; his breath, moist and rapid against the corner of his mouth. “How does it feel, John? Tell me how it feels.”

The knife was tucked in against his femoral artery. John stopped moving abruptly.

Over the sound of Moriarty’s shallow breathing, John thought he heard the sound of footsteps in the distance. Foot falls coming up a staircase.

“Remember this, John. As long as you stick with Sherlock, I’ll be with you. Every time he touches you, I’ll be there. He’ll never be safe as long as you’re around and neither will you.”

No. No, it was just the sound of the rain on the roof.

The blade wasn’t moving. Moriarty’s hand had stilled. John could feel his pulse beating under the
cruel curve of the metal.

Moriarty’s breath continued, sickeningly intimate against his cheek, the corner of his mouth. The brutality of his humiliation was almost worse than the pressure of the knife. John found himself longing for the blade to move, to cut short his agony. If he severed the femoral artery he would bleed out in minutes.

Better than the iron maiden, the rack, the butcher block.

Blood crawled down John’s neck. Time seemed to grind to a stop.

Sherlock wasn’t coming.

Moriarty was right.

He moved to swing his hips forward into the knife, when he heard a voice from the doorway.

“If you value your life, I suggest you step away from John Watson. Now.”

Over Moriarty’s shoulder, John saw Sherlock in the doorway, gun in both hands, the black wings of his coat still settling around him. John blinked and the image of Sherlock smeared, began to run like water through ink.

"Otherwise, I'm happy to oblige you by putting a bullet through your head."

John felt the pressure of the knife recede.

"Oh come now," Moriarty drawled, sounding bored. "If you had that kind of precision you would have shot me already." He looked back at Sherlock. “A gun, really? How brutish. I’m disappointed. You’re letting the soldier rub off on you in more ways than one.”

Moriarty reached up, and almost lazily, slashed the rope connecting John’s wrists to the ceiling. John fell hard to his knees.

“"It looks like your knight in shining armor came to rescue you after all. You must be so pleased. Well, I’ll leave you to your happy reunion. Wouldn’t want to be around while that’s happening. Could get awkward.”

Moriarty looked down at John. “Such a pity we have to cut this short. I had so many treats in store for you. Oh well.” He reached down and took hold of John’s jaw, fingers tracing the cut on John’s cheek. “I think I made my point.”

“Don’t touch him!” Sherlock’s voice was a snarl.

“A bit too late for that.” Moriarty laughed. He let go of John’s face and turned towards the wall that was lined with windows.

“If you take another step—”

Moriarty ignored him, and strolled to the nearest window. Reaching it, he unfastened the shutters as casually as if Sherlock had just requested a bit more sunlight during afternoon tea.

John watched him, hunched over on his knees in the blood, bound hands hanging uselessly in his lap.

“You won’t shoot me, Sherlock.” Moriarty flung the shutters wide, before turning back around.
“You’d miss me too much.” He stuck his tongue in the side of his cheek and grinned lewdly. “And then who would you flirt with when I was gone?”

He threw one leg over the sill of the window. Sherlock hadn’t moved from the doorway save for turning to follow Moriarty with the gun. John watched the muzzle shake from the tremor in Sherlock’s hands.

“I do so wish I could stay and keep chatting but I’m afraid more pressing business calls; never a moment’s rest for the consulting criminal. But don’t worry. I’ll be seeing you again before you know it.”

He moved to push himself off the window ledge but then turned back around. “Oh, one more thing. Sorry I broke your toy, Sherlock.” He grimaced in mock apology. “He wasn’t much fun anyway. Not sure what good he was to you before but he really won’t have any use for you now. Damaged goods.”

Sherlock fired but the shot went wide.

“Don’t forget what I told you, Johnny Boy.”

Moriarty winked at John and then hoisted himself off the window ledge and out of sight.

Sherlock fired again and missed by feet.

The impossibility of Moriarty dropping out of sight beyond the window was lost on John as Sherlock came sliding into the room.

He almost slipped twice on the slick surface of the floor, but he managed to catch himself without falling, dropping to his knees in front of John, seemingly heedless of the blood soaking through the knees of his trousers, staining the hem of his beloved coat.

The gun slipped from his fingers and fell beside him with a clatter. The safety was still off.

“Jesus, Sherlock.” John’s admonishment came out slurred, meaningless. His tongue felt swollen in his mouth.

John couldn’t look Sherlock in the eye. He let his head drop, but that didn’t stop him from hearing the horror in Sherlock’s voice.

“Oh my god.”

Sherlock was utterly still for a count of five of John’s rapid heartbeats and then he was a swirl of movement again, scrambling to his feet and seizing one of the knives from the nearby table, reaching for John’s wrists.

John flinched violently at his touch, an involuntary response.

John heard Sherlock draw a breath, fight to keep his voice steady. He spoke slowly and clearly. “John, I’m going to cut the tie that’s binding your wrists. I need you to keep still. Just for a moment.”

John felt a slow burn of humiliation. He wanted to snap back at Sherlock. Of course he knew that’s what Sherlock was doing. It was his body reacting, not his brain.

“John?”

John nodded, and made an effort to hold himself still as Sherlock reached forward and sliced through
the ties on his wrists.

It was easy for Sherlock to separate the cable connecting his hands but another matter entirely to remove the strips of plastic from around each wrist.

“Keep holding still.”

Sherlock held John by the forearm and very deftly fit the flat of the blade in between John’s skin and the plastic cord, before twisting delicately upward and severing the plastic.

He heard Sherlock breathe a sigh of relief.

“Just one more.”

John stared hard at his own clenched fists as Sherlock repeated the motion on his right wrist. This time, the edge of the blade nicked John slightly.

Sherlock let out a hiss of alarm at the sight of fresh blood welling up on the skin of John’s wrist but John barely felt it. He clenched and unclenched his hands, trying to work the blood back into his numb fingers.

“John. John, look at me.”

If not for the fear in Sherlock’s voice, John wouldn’t have been able to bring himself to look up.

One eye was still swollen shut but he lifted his head and looked at Sherlock out of his good eye. He immediately wished he hadn’t.

Sherlock was drenched. His hair was soaked through from the rain, water still dripping off the tendrils of curled hair around his neck. His scarf hung sodden and bedraggled down his chest. None of that caused John any distress. Neither did the fine spray of blood on the right side of Sherlock’s face, alarming as it was. What made John instantly regret his decision was the look of abject terror on Sherlock’s face.

He looked broken open.

John felt a wave of sick despair roll over him that he had contributed to Sherlock looking like that. He wanted Sherlock to stop looking at him. What he must look like…Cut-up, bleeding, half-naked, his severed shirt still hanging around him, trousers around his knees... Shame and guilt knifed through him. He wished suddenly that he were invisible, alone, far away from all of this.

“John…”

He couldn’t bear to have Sherlock looking at him anymore. He needed to get out of this room, away from the stink of the blood, from the remnants of his own humiliation. He reached for his trousers bunched between his thighs, struggling to rise to his knees, hands shaking so violently he couldn’t complete the motion.

Sherlock reached out to help him and John fought the instinct to knock his hand away. He needed help. He swayed stupidly as he tried to lift himself, had to grab hold of Sherlock’s arm to stop himself from falling.

“Here.” Sherlock reached out to pull John’s trousers back up while John hung on to Sherlock’s arms. “Let me.”
The gentleness in Sherlock’s voice felt like acid in his wounds. John couldn’t bear it. He gritted his teeth.

Sherlock’s fingers faltered only briefly when he caught sight of the bloody mark on John’s inner thigh. He felt the tremor in Sherlock’s hands before they started moving again, but thankfully he said nothing.

Otherwise, his movements were brisk and efficient, tugging John’s pants and trousers back into place, fastening the buttons so quickly John didn’t have time to feel additional shame from the presence of Sherlock’s fingers at his crotch.

John stayed clinging to Sherlock’s forearms a moment longer than necessary, struggling to regain his balance. He wanted to let go but the room had begun to tilt alarmingly around him.

He could feel Sherlock’s eyes on him even with his head bowed, could feel the concern radiating from him, pulsing hot and insistent like an infected wound.

“Do you think you can stand?”

The question made him furious but he realized he couldn’t actually stand right now, not without help. He nodded anyway, and felt Sherlock shift his grip so that he was holding John just under the elbows.

Sherlock rose to his feet in one fluid, graceful motion, pulling John up with him as he went. John’s legs were like water and for a moment he was afraid they wouldn’t take his weight but Sherlock held tight to his arms until the moment passed.

The air was less rank now that he was further from the floor and John felt a draft of cool air from the open window wash over his face, bringing with it the smell of rain. He breathed it in, trying to steady his spinning head, and felt his teeth begin to chatter.

Sherlock released his hold on John’s arms to shrug out of his coat and before John could ask what he was doing, Sherlock had placed it around his shoulders.

The gesture made something twist in the pit of John’s stomach and for a moment he was afraid he was going to be sick. He bit down hard on his bloody lip, shoving the feeling away, concentrating instead on the sharp flare of physical pain.

No, he couldn’t think about that. Not just yet.

Sherlock shifted his grip so that he was standing alongside John, one arm supporting his shoulders. Sherlock started to push him gently forward but John didn’t move.

“What is it?”

He nodded toward the open window.

“No point. He’ll be long gone by now.”

Another strong wind blew past them, banging one of the shutters closed.

“How…” John’s teeth were chattering too hard to get the words out. He registered dimly that his body was in shock.

“There’s scaffolding under the window. It goes all along the northeast corner of the house. I saw it
when I came out the other side of the alley.” Sherlock tried once more to push him toward the door and this time John let himself be led. “Come on, John.”

Their progress down the stairs was slow and labored. John’s legs were still not cooperating so they had to coordinate their movements, Sherlock’s arm secured tightly around John’s waist. Normally, such a rare display of patience from Sherlock would have made John warm with gratitude but now John felt only humiliation and that same sick feeling. He found himself wishing Sherlock would just leave him on the stairs, force him to crawl the rest of the way on his hands and knees.

His own shame swelled around him, reverberating in his ears with every difficult step.

As soon as they reached the landing on the ground floor, John bit the inside of his cheek hard, to clear his head and then stepped away from Sherlock.

“John—”

John put up a hand between them, shook his head.

At that moment, the door burst open and Lestrade came barreling in, sending a shower of rain over the tiled floor of the front hall. He was out of breath, still holding his radio in one hand.

“Sherlock!” He paused to catch his breath, his shocked gaze traveling from Sherlock to John, who was standing now with one hand against the wall. “What—”

“We’re leaving. He’s gone, Lestrade. There’s no point going after him.”

Lestrade stared at Sherlock in disbelief. “No point? Then what the hell was all this about? Why the bloody hell did the two of you come out here in the first place if not to catch Moriar—”

Sherlock took one furious step toward Lestrade, the movement so sudden he looked like a snake striking. Lestrade fell back a step reflexively.

“I caught you a serial killer, Inspector. I should think that’s plenty for one day.”

Sherlock put a proprietary hand on John’s elbow, pulling him away from the wall. He made to move toward the front door but Lestrade was still blocking his way. He was looking at Sherlock with a curious expression, half disapproval, half frustrated sympathy.

“Sherlock…” Lestrade’s eyes darted momentarily to John before sliding back to Sherlock. “What you did to that serial killer…I can’t…”

Sherlock’s face stilled and then rearranged itself into a cold, ruthless expression. “Tell them it was self-defense.”

“Sherlock, you shot him in cold blood. At point-blank range!”

John’s heart seemed to skip a beat. He glanced at the spray of dried blood on Sherlock’s face. Oh God.

Sherlock’s voice was brutal. “He deserved it.”

“How many times did you shoot him? He doesn’t even have a face anymore! When forensics sees this—”

“He deserved much worse. He’s lucky I killed him quickly.”
Lestrade put a hand over his eyes, drew a deep breath.

“Look, tell forensics whatever they need to hear. Tell them I had a knife at my throat. I don’t care. But I need to leave now.”

Sherlock’s eyes flickered for the briefest moment to John, before returning to hold Lestrade’s gaze.

Lestrade’s eyes searched Sherlock’s for several moments longer and then he let out a sigh, shoulders slumping. “Fine. Fine. But I may have to bring you in for questioning.”

“Whatever.” Sherlock stepped around Lestrade, pulling John with him by the elbow. “If you want to give forensics something to do, send them up to the third floor of this house. That should keep them busy for a while.”

Just as they reached the door Donovan came running up the front steps, equally out of breath, her dark curls misted with rain.

She stopped in the doorway, her expression darkening when she caught sight of Sherlock. “Where do you think you’re going, Freak?”

Ignoring her completely, Sherlock moved to step around her. Donovan put her hands up on either side of the doorframe.

John felt Sherlock’s fingers twitch on his arm. “I really wouldn’t if I were you.”

“Let him by, Donovan.”

Donovan looked over Sherlock’s shoulder to Lestrade, incredulity visible in every line of her face. “You’re not actually letting him go?”

Lestrade opened his mouth helplessly but Sherlock bent his face to Donovan’s before he could reply.

“Yes, Sally, he is letting me go. Let me guess, you think I’m a murderer now as well as a psychopath? Be my guest. Then maybe you’ll believe me when I tell you that if you try to prevent me from getting John Watson through that door within the next thirty seconds, meaning if you don’t get out of my way as soon as I finish speaking, I cannot be held responsible for what I will do to you.”

John felt Sally Donovan’s gaze move from Sherlock to where John stood beside him. He reached to pull the edges of Sherlock’s coat tighter together but he was too late. He watched horror dawning on her face as she took in his bloodied neck, his swollen face, the pieces of his severed jumper clearly visible under Sherlock’s coat. His own shallow breathing sounded eerily loud in his ears.

Donovan dropped her arms.

Sherlock moved past her without a word, pulling John with him out onto the front steps.

Sherlock drew his phone out of his pocket and John saw that his hand, as he went to punch in the number for a taxi, was shaking with rage.

The sick feeling in the pit of John’s stomach had been worsening steadily, and at the look of horror on Donovan’s face, he suddenly felt violently ill.

Twisting out of Sherlock’s grasp, he doubled over and vomited over the side of the front steps.

Alarmed, Sherlock reached for him.
“John—”

This time, John couldn’t hide his rage.

“Don’t touch me, Sherlock!”

Sherlock froze; arm still extended between them.

John staggered backwards out of Sherlock’s reach, down the front steps and out into the rain. He clutched the torn edges of his jumper together, breathing hard, willing himself not to be sick again.

The rain had become a deluge, the drops hitting with such force they stung where they struck John’s skin. He was grateful for the sensation. It helped to numb him.

He made it all the way down the walk and through the front gate before he had to lean hard against the ivy-covered wall as a wave of dizziness overtook him.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sherlock come through the gate, and stop several feet away. He said nothing and John didn’t look at him. He concentrated on holding Sherlock’s coat closed around him, felt the rain begin to wash the blood from his face.

Neither of them spoke until the cab turned into view at the end of the street.

“I’m not going to the hospital.”

For a moment, John wasn’t sure if Sherlock had heard him but when he glanced over Sherlock nodded his assent.

He didn’t help John into the cab but he held the door open for him while he climbed in, and waited until John had settled himself in the seat before going around to the other side.

Shutting his eyes, he pressed his forehead to the cool glass of the window, not caring if he got blood on the glass.

“221 Baker Street,” John heard Sherlock say as the cab pulled away from the curb, and then he heard nothing else for the remainder of the trip, save for the rhythmic thump of the windshield wipers, and the hiss of the rain under the wheels outside, letting the lull of the moving car pull him deeper into numbness.

Chapter End Notes

I sincerely apologize for how long it took to get this chapter up. Not only was this an especially challenging chapter to write, the last month was a whirlwind of holidays and travel and school starting up again and then of course SEASON THREE which basically broke my mind.

So thank you for your patience. And thank you if you are still reading. I appreciate you more than you know. <3
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Most of the warnings for this chapter are just for EXTREME angst, but there is a bit of disturbing content once again in the form of John’s nightmares, so approach those parts with caution if you’re not a fan of gore.

This chapter was originally going to be a lot longer (a lot more was going to happen in the space of this chapter) but it got too long so rather than make you wait EVEN longer for me to finish it, I decided to split it in two. The good news is that means I have the bulk of the next chapter written, so it should not be so long this time between updates!

Thanks once again to the lovely Study in Purple for her beta-ing skills! Her responses to my manic desires to suddenly send chapters out into the world deserve endless praise. Also, her commentary to John and Sherlock in the margins of the story are a delight to witness. :)

Oh, also! I happen to love making obsessively detailed playlists while I'm writing that follow the trajectory of the story, so if you're into that kind of thing, I just made one for the second half of this story. It can be found here. Enjoy!

By the time the cab pulled up outside 221B the rain had stopped, but a bank of dark clouds hung low and threatening on the horizon, heavy with the promise of more rain. Baker Street was obscured by long stretches of water, the gutters transformed into tiny rushing streams.

As Sherlock paid the driver, John watched the sun break through the clouds without warning, throwing the dramatic landscape of the overcast sky into sharp relief, making the rain on the sidewalk glitter briefly before the light vanished as quickly as it had come.

John registered all this as though he were watching it from a great distance, his brain feeding him information without offering him any insight as to how to process it. He had no reaction to what he was seeing. He felt blank, like a canvas that had been stripped clean.

Sherlock exited the cab first. He held the door open for John but made no move to help him out, for which John was grateful.

He had to grip the top of the door to pull himself to his feet but he managed it, stepping over the rush of water to follow Sherlock wordlessly up the front steps.

Sherlock hesitated for just a moment inside the front hall, clearly uncertain whether John could manage both flights of stairs on his own.

In answer, John charged resolutely forward, silently ordering his legs not to give out beneath him, gripping the banister so hard his knuckles turned white.

He had to pause for a moment on the landing before mounting the second flight of stairs and was assaulted with the memory of helping a drugged Sherlock navigate the same corner, how Sherlock
had clung to him, heavy and languid, his mouth warm on John’s neck. But then, unbidden, immediately following it, came another memory, much more recent—the bite of Moriarty’s blade in the same place Sherlock’s mouth had been, the sticky fog of Moriarty’s breath against his ear.

John’s hand slipped on the banister. He fell hard to one knee, letting out a shout of rage, hands coming up on either side of his head to push the memory away.

It was already starting.

He pressed harder at his temples as if he could squeeze the association from his mind.

He felt a rush of movement at his back and then Sherlock was placing his hands on John’s waist, clearly disturbed, his voice filled with concern.

“John! John, what is it?”

John shook his head, furious, struggling to slow his breathing.

“John?”

Grabbing hold of the banister, he pulled himself back to his feet, away from Sherlock’s hands. He climbed the next flight of stairs with his teeth bared in a grimace of determination.

As soon as he reached the top of the stairs, he shrugged himself out of Sherlock’s coat and hung it on the hook behind the door. He headed straight for the bathroom, stripping off his jacket and his ruined shirt and jumper as he went.

Sherlock followed him dark and silent as a shadow.

The desire to be alone, to be in darkness, was overwhelming, but the cut on his arm was deeper than he cared to admit and likely needed stitching. He couldn’t ignore it any longer.

He sat himself down on the closed lid of the toilet and began unwrapping the makeshift bandage he had applied earlier. The white cotton of his torn t-shirt was soaked through with blood.

Sherlock hovered in the doorway, restless.

“What can I do?”

“Bring me the first aid kit from the kitchen.” Sherlock hesitated, clearly uncertain as to its whereabouts, never having sought it out himself. “Under the sink.”

Sherlock disappeared and returned moments later with the extensive medical kit John kept on hand for emergencies. It hadn’t take him long to learn that living with Sherlock meant medical emergencies were practically a daily occurrence, so the kit was well supplied.

John hunched over the sink with the faucet running and cleaned the wound as best he could, all the while careful not to look up and catch sight of his own image in the mirror before him. He could feel Sherlock’s eyes on his torso when he turned to dry his hands, could feel his gaze lingering on the black line down the center of his chest, the black letters on his stomach and shoulder.

“John—”

“Hand me the hydrogen peroxide.”

Sherlock did so, wordlessly, and something in John’s demeanor must have communicated his need
for silence because Sherlock said nothing else for the remainder of the procedure. He stood in the doorway and watched John sew the wound shut, his eyes following the progress of the needle with unswerving focus.

It was difficult at first. Difficult to keep his shaking hands steady, to work through the pain in his forehead, but John had stitched men back together under worse conditions, and remembering that helped strengthen his resolve.

By the time he had finished, his head was throbbing from the intensity of his concentration, the wound over his swollen eye beating a hot tattoo of pain. He covered the stitches with a fresh bandage, and then stood up slowly, stripping the gloves from his hands.

The blood had dried along his brow bone and begun to itch. He would have to clean it off too eventually, clean the cuts on his neck, his thigh—but not now. Exhaustion was stealing over him, slowing his movements, making it feel as though the world were underwater, or as though he were moving through a dream.

He reached for a robe on the back of the bathroom door. Sherlock took two nervous steps toward him, his entire posture lit with uncertainty and fear.

“What do you need?”

John didn’t answer. He pulled the robe over his shoulders and moved past Sherlock into the hallway, heading for the stairs, but Sherlock followed him, concern rising in his voice.

“John, tell me. What can I do?”

Sherlock reached for his arm but when John flinched away, he let his hand drop. Instead, he planted himself in front of John, trying to look into his eyes.

“John.” Sherlock’s voice was emphatic, pleading. “John, talk to me.”

John shook his head.

Something was happening to Sherlock’s face—something about John’s reaction was upsetting him. He looked disturbed.

“Nothing.” John said, attempting to put some emotion in his voice, to signal to Sherlock that everything was fine, would be fine as soon as he could be by himself. “There’s nothing I need.”

He tried to step around Sherlock but Sherlock moved with him, keeping himself between John and the stairs.

John felt his pulse begin to thump insistently in the base of his throat.

His voice was quiet. “Let me by.”

“John—”

“Let me by, Sherlock.”

Even in the shadows of the hallway, John could see the sorrow written clearly on Sherlock’s face. He’d never seen him like this: his face, an open book to his emotional state. Usually everything was kept out of sight, any vulnerable part of him tucked safely away, but now it was like some channel had been opened up that Sherlock couldn’t or didn’t want to switch off, a channel in which he fed
his emotions directly to John. John couldn’t bear it. You, you are the cause of this. It was like holding a fire iron pulled straight from the coals between his bare hands.

“John, you need to tell me what happened.” Sherlock’s voice was low, insistent. “What did he say to you?”

John said nothing. He could feel the panic rising up the back of his throat as Moriarty’s words leapt and slithered to the forefront of his brain. No, he didn’t want to remember. Not yet.

“John, whatever he said to you was said in an effort to manipulate you. None of it is true. You have to remember that.”

John tried to step around Sherlock once more and Sherlock blocked him again.

“Get out of my way.”

“John, please—”

“Sherlock, I can’t do this. Not now.”

“John, listen to me—”

“NO!”

John threw himself against Sherlock’s shoulder, forcing his way by. As he moved past, Sherlock reached instinctively for his hand. With a snarl of rage, John caught him by the wrist, spun him around, and slammed him against the wall.

He looked into Sherlock’s stunned face, breathing hard, his fury momentarily blinding him. His voice was raw. “Don’t push me, Sherlock.”

He heard the shallow quality of Sherlock’s breath and noticed suddenly the vicious angle at which he was restraining Sherlock’s wrist, and realized he was hurting him. He let go immediately and stepped back.

“Just—” He put a hand up to his forehead, feeling lightheaded as his rage left him as quickly as it had come. “Just leave it. Leave me alone, please. I just need to be alone.”

Sherlock didn’t move from where he stood against the wall.

John was careful not to look at his face as he moved past; he couldn’t bear to see the hurt he knew would be there, the gutted look that made it feel as though he’d taken something from Sherlock that should have been his in denying him the opportunity to help John in this moment. Sherlock’s help was the last thing he needed. Telling Sherlock the details of what happened, being forced to relive the pain and humiliation—it would break him.

This last staircase was the hardest to climb.

It felt as though an eternity stood between him and the dark solace of his room, but he couldn’t falter now, not with Sherlock standing at the foot of the stairs, watching him with his heart in his eyes, waiting for him to stumble so he could rush to his aid.

He gritted his teeth and forced his shaking legs to cooperate, not allowing himself to pause until he made it to the top of the stairs and turned the corner out of sight. As soon as he was out of view, he couldn’t stop himself from falling into the wall. He let himself lean there for a moment, breathing
hard, gathering his strength to walk the last three feet into his bedroom.

If Sherlock heard him fall, he didn’t react. All was quiet at the bottom of the stairs.

Pushing himself off the wall with the last ounce of his will, John staggered the last two steps into his room and closed the door behind him.

He leaned against it and shut his eyes, feeling the tide of horror he’d been struggling to keep at bay break over him.

Ever since he’d left that blood-soaked room, it had taken all his effort to keep his thoughts safely blank, free from the memories of Moriarty’s eyes on him, evaluating, hateful; free from Moriarty’s voice worming its way through his thoughts, infecting everything it touched like a blight, turning all that John had held sacred into ash.

He fought against it still, his breath coming fast at the memory, panicked; felt sweat break out along his brow.

He wasn’t ready to face it, to come to terms with the horrifying truths Moriarty had revealed to him, as though he had reached inside John and plucked out the rotten pieces of himself that he hadn’t known were there, turning them in his hands to show John how the insides had begun to decay.

He reached out blindly for the door handle, searching for something to hold onto as he pushed back against the wave of panic in his mind. His thoughts were a churning pool, threatening to drag him under, a hideous mixture of self-hatred and horror and shame.

Shame that he had let it happen, that he had gone so willingly to his fate, like a trained animal, like a lamb to the slaughter. As if Moriarty had snapped his fingers and John had jumped to attention. He might as well have lain himself down on the butcher block as soon as he entered the room.

Shame that he hadn’t gotten away, that he hadn’t even attempted to escape, that Sherlock had to rescue him again, Sherlock’s very own damsel in distress. It was pathetic.

But what was more painful than any of that, what cut him more deeply than the admission of his own shame, was the realization that he wasn’t good enough for Sherlock. He’d been deluding himself thinking he could have a relationship with Sherlock Holmes.

He’d known it was too good to be true and Moriarty, Moriarty had shown him the heart of his own fears—he had revealed to John what he had known was true all along, that he couldn’t possibly be clever enough or interesting enough to keep Sherlock’s attention. It was never going to last. Like Moriarty said, he was ordinary. He was just a pet that Sherlock kept around to distract him occasionally, perhaps to remind him that there were others who moved through life at a much lower mental capacity—the dull background whose sole purpose was to act as a foil for Sherlock’s brightness.

Even if Sherlock hadn’t realized it yet, it was only a matter of time before Sherlock tired of him, before he remembered that John was just a body as far as Sherlock was concerned, just a set of stimuli, a cluster of nerve endings to pull reactions from. He represented all that was base, while Sherlock moved in a higher sphere, in the unadulterated world of pure reason. John could never meet Sherlock there. He would always be down in the mire, gazing in admiration at Sherlock up among the stars.

He couldn’t stay, not now. Not when all he was to Sherlock was a potential risk, just another body to be kidnapped, tortured, a body that he’d have to rescue again when the time came, another detail
distracting him from the work.

Besides he was broken anyway, like Moriarty said. He’d always been broken. Even when he met Sherlock it was already too late, and now he was beyond help. He felt tarnished, filthy, as if in addition to the words bled in dark ink into his flesh and the gashes from the knife, Moriarty’s fingers themselves had left marks, signaling his corruption, his status as an item that was soiled beyond repair.

The memory of the horror on Sherlock’s face at the sight of him, hunched over on his knees in the blood, came back to John and he heard himself make a low, involuntary sound of pain.

If the only thing he could offer Sherlock was his body, then he had nothing left to offer him now.

He wanted to go back in time, make it so that Sherlock had never come into the room, never seen him like that, bleeding and broken, like an animal that had been caught after a ruthless struggle, its eyes wild, its sides heaving and coated with sweat. He had never wanted Sherlock to see him like that, incapacitated by pain and humiliation, reduced to the sum of his parts.

Maybe if Sherlock hadn’t been the one to find him, if Sherlock had never seen him like that, maybe he could try and get past it. If he’d had time to cover up his wounds, to bury the humiliation that Moriarty had dragged out of him before going to Sherlock, maybe then it would have been all right. But there was no going back now, no covering over what Sherlock had seen. He had seen the truth about John that Moriarty had pulled out of him and thrust forward into the light, like a cancer he’d exposed by carving John open.

Moriarty had achieved what he’d set out to do. He’d reduced John to nothing more than his body’s reactions, proved that he was nothing more than flesh.

John heard his own teeth chattering again, the sound violent in the stillness of the room, disturbing, reminding John once more that he no longer had control over his body.

He would leave in the morning; let Sherlock get back to the life he’d had before he’d met John.

He should have left immediately but he didn’t have the strength. His body needed a chance to recover, and if he was honest with himself, he had to admit that he wanted one more night in Baker Street, one night to say goodbye to this chapter of his life that had been so good it felt like a dream.

He didn’t have much in the way of belongings—all he owned would fit into his army duffle. He would contact the rental agency in the morning; it was likely that the block of flats that housed his previous bedsit had vacancies. He could keep his work at the clinic; avoid those places where he might run into Sherlock. In time, his mental scars would heal. It would be fine, he reasoned. He could survive this. And the farther he was from Sherlock Holmes, the safer they both would be.

But at the thought of returning to the beige cell that had been his room, that had held the sad fragments of a life that held little worth before he met Sherlock, he felt misery engulf him—bleak and unending—and somehow the pain of that life awaiting him was worse than any of the pain he’d suffered at Moriarty’s hands.

He clung to the door handle, gasping, terrified. Once more, he fought to push the torrent of his thoughts back below the surface, reaching for the numbness that he’d found solace in earlier. Don’t think about it, he commanded himself. You can deal with all that when you get to it. He knew then that if he let himself think about it, he would never leave. Numbness was the only answer.

He opened his eyes and focused on the details of the room around him, letting the familiar shapes
and shadows ground him in the present. Although it was the middle of the afternoon, the murk of the
overcast day outside made it impossible to determine what time it was. It was as if the gloom that
hung over the city, the gloom at the center of that decaying house, had followed him home and was
pressing in at the windows, rubbing its shoulders against the glass, trying to reach him.

He crossed the room and pulled the curtains shut, turning back around to face his bed.

He hadn’t slept in it since the morning after the fire. It was still made up neatly the way he’d left it,
before he’d headed downstairs for a glass of water, before the conversation with Sherlock that had
turned his life upside down and back again, before—John swallowed hard, suppressing the memory,
but he was too late.

An image of Sherlock’s desecrated bed flashed in his mind, the way he’d last seen it this morning.
The pillows all thrown off, sheets tangled, the curves of Sherlock’s body showing through the
blankets, soft in the light of the rain. Pain went through him like a blade in his belly and once again
he thought he was going to be sick.

He bent forward with one hand on the bed.

The feeling passed.

He straightened up, breathing thinly and considered the door.

He knew that Sherlock would try to get in. He couldn’t lock it so he took the chair that stood by the
wardrobe and pushed it under the handle.

This method had always been effective in keeping Harry out of his room, growing up in a house
without locks on the doors.

The thought of Harry made him pause and for a moment he seemed to forget where he was, the
contours of the room blurring around him. He came back to himself, standing motionless in the
center of the room, and realized that it had not been the memory of Harry that had made him freeze
but the sound of Sherlock, coming up the stairs.

John held himself absolutely still.

“John?”

Sherlock was standing right outside the door.

John didn’t answer.

“John, please.”

Sherlock’s voice was desperate. It filled him like an ache.

“John.”

The word tore through John, threatened to pull him from his moorings. He covered his mouth with
his hands so Sherlock couldn’t hear the ragged tempo of his breathing. He couldn’t listen, couldn’t
afford to picture Sherlock standing with his head inclined toward the door, standing so close that his
forehead touched the wood, listening for some sign from him, any sign that he was alright.

He crossed over to the bed and lay down on his side on top of the covers, facing away from the door.

His hands were shaking badly. He pressed them together between his legs.
Sherlock was still standing outside the door. John could hear the sound of his breathing, the slight give in the floorboards when he shifted his weight but he didn’t try to open the door.

John was grateful for that at least.

He shut his eyes, concentrated on the sound of the blood pounding in his temples as it reverberated strangely against the surface of his pillow, ordering his mind to go blank. He tried to use the meditation technique they had taught him when he’d first left the army, in an effort to control his uncontrollable fits of rage, but he’d always been rubbish at it. He’d never once succeeded at clearing his mind.

He found himself wishing for Sherlock’s ability to focus, to drown out all other stimuli, but John had never had that kind of mental fortitude. No, he was far too aware of his own body—the sweating, clamoring, distracting racket of his throbbing pulse, the furious tremor of his shaking hands.

He couldn’t be sure how long he lay there, shaking hands clenched between his thighs, swallowing down wave after wave of misery. Every time he thought he’d succeeded in wiping his mind clean, another surge of panic would break over him, until he was left gasping, shivering, clutching at the blankets beneath him like a drowning man.

However, his fatigue was so acute, that eventually his troubled mind succumbed to his exhausted body and was pulled down into a world of nightmares.

He found himself back in that bloody chamber; arms bound above his head as Moriarty circled him like a hungry wolf.

The room was the same as John remembered with one major difference: all around the instruments of torture were stacked the corpses of Moriarty’s victims. They lay in messy piles, naked, limbs disfigured, pale eyes staring at nothing, their bare and ruined bodies overlapping obscenely. Many of them were unfamiliar to John, but one or two, he recognized—the couple they’d found in the dumpster, the man from the butcher shop, the woman dressed in pink from the very first case he and Sherlock had solved together.

Moriarty noticed him staring and he leered closer, caressing John’s cheek.

“Don’t look so horrified, Doctor Watson. I know how much you and Sherlock enjoyed all these little adventures I set up for you. I should have seen it all along. It’s not just Sherlock who gets off on murder; it’s both of you. Think of them as anniversary gifts from me—each corpse marks another milestone in the history of your sordid love affair. It’s really thanks to me the two of you got together at all, so don’t be surprised if I expect a little gratitude.”

Moriarty made a sudden movement between them and looking down, John saw that Moriarty had slashed the length of his stomach open. Blood poured from the wound like water from an open tap.

“Take this.”

Moriarty had freed John’s hands and was pressing a bowl into them.

“Use it to catch the blood. Don’t spill. Or I’ll be very angry. You wouldn’t want to make me angry, would you, Johnny Boy?”

John held the bowl against the skin of his lower belly, watched the red liquid stream over the metal rim. He could feel the warmth of it against his hands through the thin enamel.

The room was cold enough to see his breath.
“I told you I was going to gut you like a pig, didn’t I? You’re going to help me through the butchering process, oh yes, you are. You’re going to be such a big help. And then when Sherlock comes to see what I’ve done with you I can tell him what a big help you were.”

Moriarty nuzzled his nose against John’s cheek, reaching a hand down between his legs.

“I think I’ll wait to take this bit last. I know how you cherish it, how worthless you would be without it.”

The cold hand probed the length of John, disdainful, invasive.

John dropped the bowl.

Moriarty leaned back and sighed. “Oh dear. I told you not to spill. Now you’re going to be sorry.”

In one violent motion he thrust his hand into the hole in John’s belly, grasping, pulling, his face contorted into a terrible grimace.

“Is this what it feels like when Sherlock is inside of you? How will it feel when I pull your heart out through your stomach? Will it feel as sweet?”

The pain was unendurable.

He screamed, and the sound was like an animal dying, and then John realized that of course, that’s exactly what he was. He was dying like an animal, his insides ripped from his body.

He screamed again, longer, louder, the pain like nothing he had ever experienced, and as he screamed, the noise felt like it was being torn from his throat.

It was the sound of his own screaming that dragged him from the nightmare, or at least, that’s what he thought when he awoke and found himself on the floor of his bedroom on his hands and knees, his torso drenched in icy sweat.

His limbs were shaking, his throat raw from screaming, and it took several seconds for John to realize that what had woken him was the sound of Sherlock yelling his name, pounding on the door to his bedroom.

He fell forward on his arms, panting; delirious, fighting off the horrifying remnants of the dream that clung to him like the sticky cobwebs of a burial shroud.

“JOHN!” The handle rattled as Sherlock pulled on it. “John, let me in!”

John lay with his cheek pressed against the floor, gasping, the sweat cooling on his cheeks. He could still feel the thrust of Moriarty’s hand in his lower abdomen, could still smell the ripe scent of his own blood as it ran down his legs.

John squeezed his eyes shut, felt them burn.

It wasn’t real. It wasn’t real. It wasn’t real.

“JOHN! John, can you hear me?”

The hammering on the door intensified until it sounded as though Sherlock was throwing the whole of his weight against it.

Then all at once the pounding stopped and Sherlock’s voice broke through the silence, clawing its
way into the center of John’s chest.

“John… Open the door.” He’d never heard Sherlock beg like this. He sounded wrecked. “John, please.”

He could picture him so clearly—one hand on the doorknob, the other curled into a fist above his head, his hair a mess, the long line of his back broken in supplication.

John stayed where he was, cold, motionless, the whole of his body aching.

It was better this way, would make it easier for both of them in the end. Sherlock would thank him eventually.

John listened to the sound of Sherlock’s body falling against the door, the final thump of a fist as he slid down the surface to the floor.

It was several minutes before John had the energy to climb back onto the bed.

He curled over on his side on top of the covers, trying as best as he could to ignore the silence of Sherlock pressed up against the other side of his door, the silence that was somehow louder than any of the shouting and pounding had been.

John lay in the gathering darkness and watched the shadows climb his bedroom wall, desperate for anything that would drown out the silence on the other side of the door. He concentrated on the throb of his pulse in his mouth, suddenly grateful for the distraction of his body, counting the relentless progression of his broken heartbeats until he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your lovely comments and kudos, and for your unending patience for my inability to post chapters in a timely fashion. I DO NOT DESERVE YOU! BUT I AM SO GLAD YOU ARE HERE!
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Notes

Special thanks as always to my steadfast beta, A Study in Purple, who once again responded with deftness and grace to my desperate pleas to get this story up, in the midst of finals week no less! I've said it before, but I'll say it again, she is a woman of many talents.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John moved through nightmares like a ship through dark waves, each terrifying landscape transitioning seamlessly into the next so that there was no respite from the horror. It was like being suffocated under a heavy quilt. Every time he searched for a break in the fabric he found only more material weighing him down until he was certain he would never wake up, that this was his new reality, his own special circle of hell.

Moriarty wasn’t always there to begin with but no matter the situation, no matter the place, he would always appear, gliding out of the corners with his mouth twisted in a smirk, coming to rest his cold hands on John, to murmur things that filled John once again with shame. Sometimes he would try to fight back but any time he went to lift his fist he would find that his hands were bound, his ankles shackled, strung up like a puppet on strings. The angrier he got the harder Moriarty would laugh.

The store of weapons kept by the Moriarty in his dreams was inexhaustible. If there was an instrument for causing pain, Moriarty had it. John dreamed he was in the iron maiden, that he felt the moment the spikes pierced his skin. He dreamed that Moriarty stretched him out upon the rack, turning and turning it until his arms were pulled from their sockets. He dreamed that Moriarty took a meat tenderizer to his jaw. John felt the bones in his face shatter.

Worse than the scenes of physical pain though were the moments when Moriarty appeared to influence his interactions with Sherlock. He dreamed he was back in Baker Street, and he and Sherlock were talking in the kitchen, Sherlock’s worried face hovering in the steam from the mugs of tea between them, leaning forward to take John’s hand in his. John pulled his hand away but Sherlock reached for it. As soon as Sherlock’s fingers curled against his, Moriarty was at his shoulder, bending low over John’s neck to issue a warning.

“Every time he touches you, I touch you, Johnny Boy. Think of it as eye-for-an-eye.” John felt a cold hand reach between his legs. “Is it really worth it? What do you think?”

And then John was tearing his hand away, Sherlock’s face, alarmed, uncomprehending, watching John stand up so fast he knocked his chair over, calling after him as he ran from the room.

The scenes kept coming; the brutal images streaming endlessly on and on like scenes from a projector spinning out of control. And no matter the scenario, no matter how intimate, Moriarty would always be there to ruin it, drawing the darkness out of John like poison from a wound.

He dreamed he was in darkness, wandering, lost, calling Sherlock’s name, but every time he thought he found him in the mist, when he turned him around, John found that it wasn’t Sherlock, but Moriarty.
John thought perhaps he’d found a brief respite from the pain at last when he found himself in Sherlock’s bed; Sherlock crouched between his thighs, his mouth hot against his neck, his hands grasping John’s hips. John was lifting himself up toward Sherlock’s mouth, arching his back, his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders, pulling him closer. Sherlock was kissing a trail of warm, open-mouthed kisses down his chest, his fingers sliding down the crease of his pelvic bone to his inner thighs, gently pushing them apart. “John…” His voice as he spoke between kisses was thick with desire. “I want…” One hand slid closer to the heat between John’s legs. “Will you let me…?”

John nodded, sliding his arms up around Sherlock’s neck to pull him in for a kiss, but as he did so he found that it wasn’t Sherlock at all, it was Moriarty crouched over him, pressing a blade to the skin of his throat, his face stretched in a leering grin.

John tried to push him off but Moriarty pressed the knife in, hissing.

“Not so fast, Soldier Boy. There’s something of yours I need. I can’t let Sherlock have it, so I’m going to take it for safekeeping.”

The blade of the knife moved down his throat, down the black line still marking the center of his chest, down over his belly and hips until it vanished between his legs.

“You think I was going to let Sherlock have the honor of deflowering you? Oh no, no, no, John. That privilege is all mine.”

John felt the point of the blade at the entrance to his body and he froze in utter terror, cold sweat streaming down his cheeks.

Moriarty bent close, grinning; his breath moist against John’s ear.

“Look at you, so obedient. Not even going to struggle. Good. It will be better that way, for both of us, I think. Although I do like it when you struggle. It makes the game so much more satisfying.”

He put pressure on the blade, ever so slightly, and John felt the first spike of pain lance through him.

“You know what they say, Johnny Boy? If you can’t run to save yourself, then you deserve to be had. And you’re not even trying to get away, are you? Go on, try and get free, I dare you.”

John felt the tip of the knife recede. He held himself still, felt a bead of sweat creep down his jaw.

“But you won’t will you? No, because you like it.” He heard the smirk in Moriarty’s voice. “John Watson likes it with a knife between his legs. Don’t tell Sherlock. My, my, what would he think?”

Moriarty slid the knife back into place.

“I’m going to ruin you for him. Every time he touches you, all you’ll feel is pain, pain, pain. Can you feel it yet, John? Oh, it’s going to be delicious. I’m going to slash you to ribbons, until there’s nothing but a gory mess between your legs. Sherlock won’t want to fuck you then. Goodness, no.”

Moriarty put his face down close to John’s until their foreheads were touching. John tried to twist away but Moriarty pressed in closer, his expression exultant.

“A symphony of pain just for you, Johnny Boy. I’m going to make you scream if it’s the last thing I do—I want to taste it as it’s ripped from your throat. Then I’ll give you back to Sherlock. Then he can do what he wants with you. Shall we begin?”

John felt the pressure on his torso increase as Moriarty leaned down into him and fear overtook him.
like madness. Before the blade had the chance to pierce him, he pushed as hard as he could against
the weight on his chest, twisting his body as he did so in an effort to heave Moriarty off.

But Moriarty was not so easily dislodged. He hung on, digging his weight into John’s hips, the
sudden force of it so real the sensation took John’s breath away.

He struggled up toward consciousness, willing himself to wake, like a swimmer fighting through
dark water and weeds, kicking his way to the surface. He opened his eyes, realizing in the same
instant he recognized his bedroom ceiling that the weight pressing in against his hips was actually
there.

Someone was leaning over him on the bed, holding him down.

Terror wiped his mind clean. John thrashed, senseless, kicking his legs as hard as he could to throw
the body off.

He felt hands tightening on his shoulders and then, a familiar voice pleading with him, filled with
fear.

“John, wake up! John! Wake up. Wake up!”

The hands were shaking him.

His eyes flew open but all he could make out was the shadow of a figure bending over him, and the
adrenaline coursing through his system was instructing him to incapacitate his opponent immediately.

He jerked his entire body once more, trying to buck his opponent off.

“John!”

_Sherlock. It’s Sherlock_, his brain told him frantically, but it was another few seconds before his body
got the message to stop fighting.

He ordered himself to lie still, even as his heart threatened to pound out of his chest, panic lapping at
the edges of his mind.

In the grey light of the dying afternoon, he saw Sherlock leaning over him, terror cutting dark lines
into the contours of his face. His hands were clenched tight on John’s shoulders, his eyes searching
John’s, haggard, desperate.

“John?”

Sherlock was leaning over the bed, one bent knee pressed in against John’s thigh, the other foot still
anchored to the floor.

John lay on his back, chest heaving, and as he looked up at Sherlock, he felt his visceral terror
transform suddenly to rage.

“Let go of me.”

Sherlock must have heard it in his voice, or read it in his posture, because he let go of John’s
shoulders immediately and sat back, his expression watchful, full of fear.

John dragged himself with effort into a sitting position and propped himself against the headboard.

“How did you get in here?”
As he asked the question John felt a draft of cold air move over his face. He turned toward it and saw that the lower pane of his bedroom window had been completely shattered. There was a fringe of broken glass on the floor beneath the window, several large jagged pieces still jutting out from the frame. The curtains that had been thrust aside twisted in a sudden gust of air.

John looked back at Sherlock in horror, his eyes scanning Sherlock’s hands and face for signs of injury, and sure enough, there was a score of raw-looking cuts crisscrossing the backs of Sherlock’s hands, and one deeper looking gash on his forearm that was still bleeding freely. His face, thank god, appeared to be unscathed.

“Jesus, Sherlock.”

John shut his eyes, struggling to manage the warring sensations of anger and relief, overcome by the implications of the fact that Sherlock had broken a sheet of glass and crawled through a shattered window to get to him. “How did you…?”

He opened his eyes to find Sherlock’s gaze locked on his face. “I came up the fire escape.”

“Jesus.” John shook his head, all the ways the situation could have played out differently now running through his mind. He could still feel adrenaline thrumming through him. He tightened his hands into fists and then forced them to relax. “You shouldn’t have done that. I thought you were—” He bit off the rest of his sentence. Sherlock must have known what he thought. He didn’t have to say it.

“You were screaming.” Sherlock’s tone was matter of fact, but the lines in his face seemed to darken with the words.

John swallowed and it was like the shards from the broken window were lining the insides of his throat. “I could have killed you.”

“You were screaming my name.”

John put a shaking hand up to cover his eyes. He couldn’t watch the minute shifts of pain in Sherlock’s face anymore, like insects disturbing the surface of still water.

“Well… I’m fine now. Can you please…?” John’s throat constricted, as if in an attempt to prevent him from saying the words. He kept his hand over his eyes. “Please leave.”

John didn’t have to see him to feel the entirety of Sherlock’s body stiffen.

There was a moment of silence and John felt the cold air from the window bring with it a spray of rain. He had started to shake again, minutely.

And then into the silence came Sherlock’s voice, hard as steel.

“No.”

“Sherlock…”

He felt the bed shift as Sherlock leaned forward. “I’m not leaving until you talk to me. You need to tell me what happened, John. What he did. What he said. All of it. It’s the only way you’re ever going to be able to move on. You have to tell me.”

John was shaking his head. He’d dropped the hand from his eyes but he didn’t lift his eyes to Sherlock’s. “No.”
“John…” Sherlock rose up on his knees, his voice emphatic. “John, look at me. You need this. It’s the only way. You know what he’s doing, don’t you? He’s trying to poison you. He’s trying to destroy you from the inside out. He wants you to think you’re responsible when really it’s him, John. It’s him! John, look at me!” Sherlock seized John by the shoulders, forcing his gaze up to his own. “Can’t you see what’s going on? He’s trying to break you!”

John was shaking so hard now his teeth had started to chatter. “L-let go of me.”

“No. I’m not leaving until you tell me what happened. It started long before today didn’t it? It started that night at the pool.” Sherlock’s eyes looked dark in the strange grey light. They followed John’s gaze, relentless, penetrating, missing nothing. “You never told me what happened that night. Something’s been wrong since then and it has to do with Moriarty. It always has. Tell me what he said to you, John. Tell me.”

John was shaking his head so emphatically he couldn’t follow Sherlock’s gaze.

He fought a childish instinct to cover his ears with his hands. He wanted Sherlock to stop talking. Didn’t Sherlock understand? He couldn’t reexamine what happened. It wouldn’t help him. If he told Sherlock the things Moriarty had said it would only make them more real. Speaking them aloud would make them true.

He was shaking so hard he was making the headboard rattle behind him. He felt like he was going to shake apart.

He needed to get away from Sherlock’s penetrating gaze, his sorrow, his concern. He could feel it, drawing all of the suffering out of him, up to the surface. He couldn’t let Sherlock see how badly he needed him; if he did, he would never let John leave. Panic rose in him—hot and invasive as a fever. He would have to leave now. He couldn’t wait till morning anymore. He needed to get as far away from Sherlock as possible.

He reached up to pull Sherlock’s hands off his shoulders, his voice shaking as hard as his hands. “Get out.”

“John—”

“Didn’t you hear me? I said, get out.”

“John, listen to me—”

“NO!” John shoved at Sherlock’s shoulders. “Are you deaf? I said, GET OUT! I don’t want you here!”

Sherlock stayed where he was, motionless, knees curled under him where he sat on the bed.

John felt hysteria building in him. He didn’t dare risk a look at Sherlock’s face, couldn’t bear to see the hurt laid bare there. He shoved at Sherlock again, hard, and this time Sherlock seized him by the wrists.

“Let go of me.” John’s voice shook with rage.

“No.”

“I said, LET GO OF ME!”

“I’m not leaving until you tell me what happened.”
John kicked out at Sherlock hard, but Sherlock dodged the blow, throwing his weight forward to push John down on his back against the bed, pinning him by his wrists. Before John had a chance to react, Sherlock had climbed astride his hips, straddling him, pushing down with his knees to keep John’s legs still. He leaned down over him, one dark spiral of rain-swept hair spilling into his eyes.

John looked up at Sherlock, all his sorrow momentarily forgotten in the sweeping force of his rage. “Get off me.”

“No.” Sherlock’s face could have been carved from stone. “Not until you talk to me.”

John tried again to buck Sherlock off but he dug in hard with his hips, his grip tightening around John’s wrists the harder John thrashed.

It was pathetic. John should be able to unseat Sherlock easily—Sherlock was nothing but skin and bones. He was much stronger than the slender detective but exhaustion had made him weak.

He tried once more to no avail. John let out a yell of rage.

“It’s no good trying to get free. I could do this all night. You might as well talk to me.”

John’s chest was heaving with exertion. He looked up, panting, wild-eyed, at the unyielding expression on Sherlock’s face, and saw that Sherlock was right. At this point, John would wear himself out long before Sherlock. The realization made him desperate.

John let his head drop to the mattress, studying Sherlock’s determined face long enough to give the impression that he had given up. Then, throwing this head forward with all his might, he smashed his forehead into Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock let out a startled cry of pain, a stream of blood spurting from his nose, but his grip on John’s wrists didn’t falter. If anything he held on tighter.

John made one last effort to throw him off, twisting his hips futilely, nearly sobbing in his desperation.

“GET OFF ME!”

“No.”

“Please! Please, I can’t—”

His rage was quickly turning back to fear and he fought against it now as much as he struggled to free himself from Sherlock’s grasp. He had to get away before it swallowed him whole. He could feel it overtaking him. He couldn’t see; he couldn’t breathe. He needed to get away, he needed—

“John. John, look at me. I need you to look at me. John!”

John felt something warm and wet hit his face. He looked up and saw that it was blood dripping from Sherlock’s nose, blood that was still streaming freely down the lower half of his face. He didn’t seem to notice it at all. His hands were still tight around John’s wrists, his eyes fixed on John’s.

John stopped struggling long enough to hold Sherlock’s gaze. At the look in Sherlock’s eyes, fierce and blazing, yet filled with compassion, he felt a sob rip through him.

Sorrow broke over him like a tide of floodwater overtaking a broken dam.

Sobs wracked his torso—loud, heaving, shuddering sobs. He’d never lost control like this. How
fitting that it would happen now when he was trying to tell Sherlock why he wasn’t worth his time. Good. Hopefully it would help him make his point.

He had to make Sherlock understand why they couldn’t do this, why he wasn’t worth it. If he couldn’t fight Sherlock off, then he would have to try and put it into words.

“You don’t understand! You can’t—you can’t want me. Moriarty was right. I’m… I’m an animal. God look at me! I can’t—I’m not like you. I can’t keep my body under control. It doesn’t… I’m not…”

John choked on a sob, horrified by the magnitude of his emotions, how messily all of it was spilling out. But now that he’d started he couldn’t seem to stop. The shame of what had happened combined with the shame of his hysterical reaction cut through him now like a double-edged sword. John welcomed the pain. He deserved it.

“He was right about everything. I’ve always been w-weak and… and… broken. I’m not good enough for you. I never was but I knew that. I knew that, and I couldn’t understand why you’d want me anyway. I still don’t understand. But now… you can’t want me now. I’m ruined. I never worked right to begin with but now—”

His words were interrupted by another wracking sob, but he forced himself to keep talking through it. It was imperative that Sherlock understand why John had to push him away, why Sherlock would be better served if he left.

“You can’t still want me! I’m nothing, nothing, to someone like you!”

“Is that what he told you?” Sherlock’s voice was quiet but it pierced like a knife through the sound of John’s ragged sobbing.

“He didn’t have to tell me!” John gasped, furious. “Everything he said—I already knew. He just proved it to me.”

“What else did he say to you?”

John let out a wail of frustration. It wasn’t working. Sherlock wasn’t giving up. “It doesn’t matter. He only told me what I already knew.”

“Then tell me.” Sherlock’s face was anguished; his eyes a brilliant turquoise above the bloody red mask of the lower half of his face. “Tell me what it is you already knew.”

“That I’m an animal. That I’m your pet.” John spat the words like seeds from a piece of poisoned fruit, each one stinging bitter and astringent on his tongue. “You keep me around because I’ll do anything you say. Because I’m so obedient.” John felt a hollow kind of satisfaction in voicing each twisted thought aloud, watching the resounding horror surface on Sherlock’s face. Sherlock wanted to know what had happened? Fine, he would tell him. “He said he was going to cut me up, cut me to pieces because that’s all I am, nothing but meat… that I’d be of just as much use to you dead as I would alive.”

He felt Sherlock’s eyes move to his torso, where the dark writing on his chest still gleamed, harsh and vindictive.

John rolled his head to one side on the pillow, suddenly overcome with revulsion for the things he’d just confessed. He couldn’t face the haunted look in Sherlock’s eyes. He could feel his self-hatred congealing into a hard, dark knot in the center of his chest, making it difficult to breathe.
He had yet to confess the most shameful detail of all. John felt his throat constrict around the words.

“And I let it happen. I didn’t try and stop him.” He flexed his fingers into fists above his head. He swallowed hard, forced himself to keep speaking. “I didn’t fight it because I knew he was right.”

Sherlock sat back on his hips, suddenly releasing his hold on John’s hands.

John felt all the fight go out of him. He lay limp, head still turned to the side, too sickened with his own shame to risk a look up at Sherlock’s face.

Now came the worst part.

This was the part John had been dreading.

The part where Sherlock climbed off the bed with a muttered apology and acknowledged that it was better if they ended things here and now. It would be better for both of them.

John felt his breath coming faster in anticipation, and he squeezed his eyes shut, steeling himself for the blow that was sure to come, hating Sherlock for breaking in here only to leave him anyway, making him go through all that just to tear himself from John’s side.

Absurdly, he felt himself already missing the presence of Sherlock’s long fingers locked around his wrists, and he allowed himself a final moment to appreciate the warm weight of Sherlock on his legs, the last contact he was ever going to have with him.

John felt tears burn the corners of his eyes and his self-hatred was complete.

He waited for the creak of bedsprings as Sherlock moved off the bed, waited to feel the shift of the mattress as Sherlock drew back in revulsion, but there was only silence and stillness.

Agonized, furious, John risked a look up at Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock was sitting absolutely still, his face immobilized by horror, hands motionless in his lap.

He caught John’s gaze as John looked up at him and for the first time, seemed to notice the blood on his own face. He wiped at it, distracted, with the sleeve of his shirt.

“God, John. God. I didn’t…” Sherlock shook his head, both hands suddenly coming up to cover his mouth in an anguished gesture. “No wonder you didn’t want to see me. What he did to you… I—”

He raised his hands helplessly and then let them drop at his sides, shifting his weight off of John’s legs, his face stricken. He looked down at John, and John realized that the expression on his face was not horror but fear. “Can you ever forgive me?”

“What?”

John didn’t understand what was happening. His brain felt sluggish, slow. He struggled into a sitting position in an attempt to make his brain respond.

“I should have known something like this would happen, that he would try to use you against me. We never should have gone to that house. Stupid, so stupid!”

John blinked, his brain whirring like a rusty clock. Sherlock didn’t want to leave him. Sherlock felt responsible for what had happened?

Sherlock’s hands were moving nervously, purposelessly through the air again, his eyes roving unseeing over the surface of the bed. “I knew it was a trap but I didn’t realize it would be targeted to
catch you… I didn’t think he’d come after you specifically again. I didn’t think he knew…” His hands came up to clench in his hair in frustration. “How did he know?”

John’s heart was pounding in the hollow of his throat. He thought he could hear the words that Sherlock wasn’t saying, was almost certain he knew what lingered unsaid at the end of that sentence but he couldn’t be sure, he couldn’t count on it.

“John.” Sherlock looked up at him again, his eyes eerily bright in the darkening room. “I understand if you don’t think you can forgive me. You have more than enough cause to be justified in never wanting to speak to me again, however I…” Sherlock’s voice broke and John’s heart gave a corresponding jolt in his chest. He wanted to reach out and grab hold of Sherlock, offer him comfort and reassurance, but that wouldn’t be fair. He fisted his hands at his sides. “If you’ll let me try and make it up to you…” Sherlock bowed his head. “I’d like to try and make it up to you if I can.”

John swallowed down the hard, dry feeling in his throat, ignored the voice in his head telling him to keep his mouth shut. Clearly, Sherlock felt responsible for what had happened. John could just forgive him right now, let Sherlock take full responsibility, never tell him the missing pieces, but that wouldn’t be right. John could never live with himself if he didn’t tell Sherlock the whole truth.

John shook his head. “I can’t forgive you because it wasn’t your fault. It—” He felt his voice catch, and he swallowed down his fear. “I had a feeling he was going to come after me again. Ever since the pool. I never told you—”

John drew his knees up against his chest, gritting his teeth to force himself to continue speaking. Here was the part he had never wanted to confess to Sherlock, the part that showed him for what he really was, that revealed that his attraction for Sherlock had just been another result of Moriarty’s manipulations. But he had to do it now so that Sherlock knew the whole truth. Otherwise, Sherlock would continue to mistakenly think he was responsible for all of it.

Sherlock was holding himself absolutely still. “What didn’t you tell me?”

“It—that’s what started all of this. Moriarty figured it out.” John felt a shudder move through him at the confession. “He figured out how I felt about you even before I did. That night at the pool…” John paused, his breathing ragged. He couldn’t bring himself to say the words.

“What did he do to you?” Sherlock’s voice was low, full of fear.

Clearly, Sherlock thought that he’d assaulted John sexually. Perhaps that would justify the depth of John’s horror. But it was nothing like that. It was only John’s own sordid thoughts that Moriarty had made apparent to him. And that’s what made it so much worse.

“Nothing! He didn’t do anything.” John pulled on his own elbows to stop his body shaking. It didn’t help. “He’s the one who told me—” John felt shame creeping like a physical presence through his belly. “He told me how I felt about you. I didn’t even realize it. I was too stupid to realize it on my own but it was obvious to him. God, how obvious it must have been. And then I couldn’t unhear what he had said. I started having dreams… about you, but… but he would always show up, he would always be there telling me what to do, how to manipulate you, manipulating us both…”

John hunched over his arms, shaking his head.

“It’s like he’s been controlling me all this time. He wanted me to pursue you. He probably knew how easy it would be. That’s probably why he identified me for this job in the first place, because he knew I was a slave to my body’s impulses. Knew I was weak. That once I’d started wanting you it was only a matter of time before I gave in. He kept… checking up on my progress. On the ship,
when he found me, he asked me how things were developing…” John hunched harder against his arms, back teeth chattering. “He knew I couldn’t hold out much longer.”

“John!” Sherlock lunged forward, grabbing hold of John’s shoulders, urging John to look up at him again. “Listen to me! You’re giving him too much credit! Those feelings are yours. They always have been. Moriarty just noticed they were there and worked to use them against you. That’s what he does—he finds out what’s most valuable to people so he can use it against them, use it to control them.”

Sherlock let go of John’s shoulders as suddenly as he had taken hold of them, and sat back, his hands reaching up to clutch again at his hair. His eyes were wild.

“How can you possibly feel responsible for any of this? God, John. Moriarty wouldn’t even know you existed if it weren’t for me! That night—that night at the pool…” Sherlock let go of his hair to wipe at his bloody mouth in a distracted gesture, his eyes far away. “I didn’t know what to do, I couldn’t think. I never suspected… I never thought Moriarty would put you in danger, never thought you’d be at risk because I didn’t realize… God, John, don’t you see? Moriarty figured it out about me before he even got to you. It took Moriarty to show me how much you meant to me.”

Sherlock’s eyes found John’s and they were shining turquoise, bright with sorrow. John’s eyes raked Sherlock’s, his mind struggling to follow the logic of Sherlock’s words. He felt like he was in shock. Sherlock went on talking, his eyes breaking away from John’s, almost stumbling over the words in his hurry to get them out.

“And then like an idiot, I let it happen again. I should have learned my lesson the first time… should have realized how transparent my feelings were for you.” Sherlock’s hands went back to his hair and tugged in the same anguished gesture. The regret in his voice was palpable. “I never should have let us go to that house. John, don’t you see?” His eyes flicked back up to John’s, luminous with pain. “The whole reason you’ve been made to suffer is because of me.”

John shook his head, still not convinced he could trust what Sherlock was telling him.

“I don’t—I don’t understand.”

“Moriarty wants to ruin me and he knows the most effective way of doing it is by hurting you. That’s why he’s targeted you. The reason he’s trying to destroy you is because he knows that’s what would break me. Moriarty saw it before either of us. It’s you, John Watson. It’s always been you.”

John let out a sob, his hand coming up too late to cover his mouth. He held his hand there a moment, swallowing down the gravity of what Sherlock had just said.

He shook his head again, struggling to pull air into his starved lungs so he could explain to Sherlock why he couldn’t accept what he was saying.

“But it doesn’t make sense. There’s no r-reason why you’d want me around. It’s not logical!”

The blazing light in Sherlock’s eyes seemed to intensify, seemed to throw the grooves of sorrow on his face into sharper relief. “Why does it have to be logical?”

“Because that’s how you operate! You only do things if they make logical sense. You’re rational, that’s how you are! You wouldn’t keep something around if it wasn’t useful to you.”

“John, listen to what you’re saying! You just described yourself as a thing.” Sherlock bent forward, his expression insistent. “Can’t you see what he’s doing? What he’s been trying to do all along? He’s
trying to drive us apart in the only way he knows how. But he doesn’t understand it. He’s underestimated us, John. He’s underestimated us both.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Remember the corpses, John! What was missing from each body?”

John licked at his parched lips. He couldn’t think.

“He thinks we’re each only capable of one faculty. That I can only reason, while you can only feel. He thinks we’re split neatly down the center—you are the body and I am the mind. But he’s wrong, John! He’s wrong about both of us. We’re not so easily carved up. You’re not just a body he can cut to pieces. No more than I am simply a mind that can be reasoned with. And that’s what you’ve showed me, John. Without you, I never would have realized I was more than just a brain.”

John looked at Sherlock, on his knees before him, his expression begging John to consider what he was saying.

“That’s what he never understood… not only are we more complicated than that, but we complement each other, John. I’m better for the parts of you that I don’t have. You bring out all that is missing in me. Don’t you see? We’re stronger when we’re together. That’s what Moriarty can never understand. You make me better.”

John put his hand over his mouth again, this time unable to deny the enormity of what Sherlock was telling him.

“I understand if you don’t think you can be with me. I know I don’t often—I can’t always feel the things I’m meant to, or at least—not in the same way. But that doesn’t mean I don’t feel them. And I’m not… I know I’m not…”

The uncertainty in Sherlock’s voice, the sudden halting quality to his speech was so at odds with how he usually spoke that John felt his entire body ache with corresponding sympathy like the deep vibration from the tone of a bell.

Sherlock seemed to steel himself. “I know what I am, and I understand if it isn’t worth it to you to be with someone like me. Especially with the risks involved.” Sherlock drew a sudden breath and John heard the fear in the sound, the frustration. “But please…”

Sherlock reached out and took one of John’s hands between his own. His eyes, as he looked up at John, were raw.

“Please, if you want me, stay. Don’t leave because of what Moriarty said. Leave if you want to, but not because of him. Please, John.”

Sherlock’s voice was ragged.

"I don’t know how to do this sort of thing. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say, other than to tell you that I need you. I need you, and know that if you left, it would be the end of me."

John pressed his hand harder against his mouth. It felt as though the earth had cracked beneath him, the impact of Sherlock’s words breaking over him like a flood. He couldn’t speak, didn’t dare move for fear he would be swept away.

He wanted to shut his eyes, to take a minute to adjust to the magnitude of what Sherlock was telling him, but he couldn’t look away, couldn’t tear his eyes from Sherlock’s for fear that if he did, he
would open them again to find that this was just another dream.

Sherlock bent his dark head over John’s hand in supplication, and John felt the tremor that moved through Sherlock in the touch of his forehead against John’s wrist.

“I need you, John Watson. I need you.” His grip on John’s hand tightened, his voice catching. “I don’t think you understand…” His breathing was growing increasingly uneven; John felt pressure on the hand that Sherlock was gripping, felt Sherlock shake his head against John’s arm, mirroring his own hopeless, panicked gesture from before. “I still don’t think you know…what you do to me…. what it would do to me if you left.”

John looked down at the dark tangle of Sherlock’s wild hair, the broken curve of his body as he bent low over John’s arm, and as he felt Sherlock’s breath skipping in hot, unsteady bursts over the skin of his wrist, it struck him that even as he felt he didn’t deserve Sherlock, it just might be possible that Sherlock felt he didn’t deserve John.

The thought seemed absurd but John forced himself to ignore the doubting voices in his head and focus instead on what his body was telling him, on what Sherlock’s body was telling him.

He’d never seen Sherlock affected like this. In fact, he had, but only—

The realization struck him like a blow. He had seen Sherlock this affected before.

Because of him.

In the last forty-eight hours he’d seen Sherlock come undone more times than he could count. It felt like weeks ago now, but the events on the ship, the fire, their conversation the next morning—that had happened yesterday. He’d seen Sherlock at his most vulnerable—no, correction: Sherlock had let him see him at his most vulnerable. Not only had Sherlock allowed himself to become affected, he’d allowed John to see it. He’d willingly let John in. And he, John Watson, had been the cause of it.

If he thought back even further, it occurred to him that the first time he’d ever seen a trace of Sherlock’s vulnerability was the night when this had all started—the night at the pool.

He’d never seen Sherlock upset the way he had been that night.

He remembered his shock when Sherlock had run forward as soon as Moriarty left, the urgency with which he’d ripped the vest from John’s shoulders and thrown it away, how unhinged he’d seemed, rubbing his head with the hand still holding the loaded gun—how fragile.

He’d been in shock himself that night so he hadn’t thought much about it—except of course in the dreams he’d had afterwards—but it occurred to him now what a sea change that night really had been for them both, and that it hadn’t just changed the way he felt about Sherlock; it had changed the way Sherlock felt about him.

He remembered, all of a sudden, a detail he’d forgotten from that night.

In the cab ride on the way home, Sherlock had sat right next to him, with his shoulder pressed hard against John’s own. In the moment, John had thought it strange but it had been comforting, had grounded him in the shaky aftermath of his fading adrenaline, and he remembered shutting his eyes, pressing back against Sherlock’s shoulder with responding pressure.

Sherlock must have thought he was asleep because he remembered distinctly once he’d shut his eyes, Sherlock slipping two fingers in against the inside of his wrist and leaving them there for the
remainder of the ride, warm against the thin skin, and John had been grateful for that small, intimate point of contact between them, too tired to question it, until the cab pulled up outside Baker Street and Sherlock pulled his hand away.

All this made John realize that Sherlock was right. In a way, they had Moriarty to thank for forcing them both to begin to understand how they felt about one another.

The revelation was staggering.

He needed to say something, needed to tell Sherlock that he wasn’t going to leave, couldn’t possibly leave now after realizing how well and truly they’d become tangled up together. John might have his flaws, but Sherlock had them too, in spades, and it occurred to him in that moment that that was precisely what Sherlock had been trying to tell him.

He needed to say something, but he was so overcome that he couldn’t seem to pull enough air into his lungs to speak. His whole chest felt like it was tightening with the revelation. His ribs ached. It was as if his whole body was suddenly too small to contain the immensity of the emotion he was feeling.

The sight of Sherlock’s bedraggled curls pressing in against his forearm, wordlessly pleading with him, like an animal asking to be put out of its misery, was suddenly too much for John.

He reached down, closing his hands over Sherlock’s arms just above his narrow elbows and pulled, until Sherlock was eye-level with him again and he was looking directly into Sherlock’s bleeding, devastated face.

Still, he couldn’t speak, so he tightened his grip on Sherlock’s arms, letting go with one hand to reach up and brush his fingers over Sherlock’s bloody cheek, over the sharp ridge of his cheekbone down the hollowed groove beneath it to the soft curve at the side of his mouth.

He allowed himself a moment, just a moment, to sit with the fact that this man—this beautiful, impossible man—might actually want him in his life. John let that realization sink in for a moment—his fingers shaking now against the down-turned set of Sherlock’s mouth—and he didn’t know whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

Instead, he leaned forward and kissed Sherlock’s down-turned mouth.

It was a trembling, helpless kiss, without finesse, but with all the feeling that was lodged like a dagger in John’s chest—the sharp, heartbreaking feeling that he couldn’t seem to breathe around. He heard Sherlock’s sudden intake of breath as their noses brushed and John’s fingers tightened around Sherlock’s arm, the shock of feeling as his lips touched Sherlock’s causing him to feel once again as though he were drowning in a wide, blue sea.

For a single heartbeat, Sherlock didn’t react.

John felt Sherlock’s body stiffen under his hands and he held himself still in turn, heard his own breath catch as he waited for Sherlock to respond, fingers still holding tight to Sherlock’s arm as though it was the only thing tethering him in place in a world too vast to comprehend.

John kept his eyes open and saw the blurred blue of Sherlock’s irises up close, flickering in rapid succession as though trying desperately to assess what was going on.

John’s other hand was still on Sherlock’s face, cupping the curve of his cheek, his thumb just brushing the corner of Sherlock’s mouth where it touched his own. He stroked his thumb almost absent-mindedly over the indent there, and heard Sherlock make a sound like a sob.
All at once, the stiff lines of Sherlock’s body softened, and he was melting down against John, his own hands coming up to grasp John’s face, his open mouth slipping over John’s in his desperation, as though he were afraid if he didn’t reciprocate fast enough, John would pull away.

John kissed him back with feeling, trying to pour all of his reassurance into the kiss, to apologize for doubting what he’d felt for Sherlock, for thinking that what was between them—that this—might not be real.

He could still scarcely believe it was real. Despite the fact that he could taste the blood on Sherlock’s mouth, could feel the rough quality of his chapped lips, the flutter of Sherlock’s eyelashes against his cheek as he tilted closer—in spite of all the evidence, John still couldn’t believe he was kissing Sherlock Holmes, and he knew in that moment he would never lose that first shocked swoop of delight whenever their mouths made contact.

Sherlock pulled away all of a sudden, hands gripping John hard by the shoulders, his eyes full of fear. “Does this mean you’re staying?”

At the look in Sherlock’s eyes—so open, so vulnerable, and yet so completely uncertain as to what John was trying to tell him without words—John knew it was only fair to Sherlock that he communicate it to him in a way he couldn’t possibly misinterpret.

John leaned back so he could look Sherlock directly in the eyes. “I’m not going to leave. You’re right, it’s all… it’s him. I let him get to me. He’s gotten inside my head, and I”—John drew a shuddering breath, watched the pinprick of light in Sherlock’s eyes growing brighter with every word. John shook his head, his voice gruff, suddenly self-conscious. “I was being an idiot. Of course, I won’t leave. I’m not going anywhere.”

Sherlock reached out once again and grabbed hold of John’s hand. But this time, he turned it over and kissed the palm.

John felt a burst of emotion at the gesture—white-hot and searing—so intense it was like a lick of pure flame.

Sherlock pulled back just far enough that John could hear his murmured words, before moving his mouth up kiss to the inside of John’s wrist. “God, John, I can’t… I couldn’t—John, promise me. Promise me you won’t ever leave.”

“I promise,” John said, pulling Sherlock up against him, forcing the words out around the knot of emotion in his throat. “I’m not going to leave.”

John moved to pull Sherlock against his chest, but Sherlock held him at arm’s length, his hands tight on John’s shoulders, his expression intent.

“If you let me stay, John—if you’ll let me, I will make sure this never happens again. You have my word. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe. Do you understand me?” Sherlock tightened his hold on John’s shoulders. “I’ll kill anyone who tries to get near you.” The look in his eyes was frightening. “I’ll kill them all. Do you hear me, John? I will not disappoint you.”

His hands clutched at John’s shoulders, desperate.

“I believe you. I believe you! Sherlock!”

John put his hands over Sherlock’s where he was clutching his shoulders, alarmed, and at his touch, felt Sherlock sag against him.
John tugged Sherlock’s limp form close against his chest, pulling him almost into his lap, and he clung to John as though he still didn’t believe that John was staying, didn’t trust that John was really there.

John put his arms around Sherlock, let his chin rest on the top of Sherlock’s matted hair, and Sherlock burrowed closer, his breath shuddering into the skin of John’s neck—too quick.

“I’m not leaving. I’m right here. You’ve got me, all right? I’m right here.”

He tightened his arms around Sherlock’s shoulders, suddenly aware of how desperately breakable was the body in his arms; he could feel Sherlock’s ribs under his hands, each notch of vertebrae in his bending spine, and was overwhelmed by a hot, fierce, swell of rage that someone would dare try and make this man suffer.

Sherlock was wrong about Moriarty. He hadn’t underestimated them. He understood the situation precisely. He’d known from the very beginning that they were stronger together. And it was for that reason that he’d worked so hard to drive them apart.

John’s mind was made up.

God, how foolish he had been to let Moriarty make him think that he should leave.

John shifted on the bed, keeping Sherlock in his arms but maneuvering them so they could lie down together.

Sherlock didn’t loosen his grip, he stayed curled around John like a weed, his breath starting to even out against John’s neck, and at the feel of Sherlock’s heartbeat solid and real against his chest, John felt relief move through him, as cool and sweet as water to a man dying of thirst.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you for all your continued kudos, comments, and support—they keep me going! So please keep leaving them! I’d love to know what you all thought of this chapter in particular :)

Also, I feel like I should tell you once again, this is not quite the end of the story. I’m planning on two more chapters, so look for those in the near future!

If you’d like to know what I was listening to while thinking about/working on this story, please check out the two mixes I made for it, which can be found here, and here.

And if you’re on tumblr, and would like to know more about my effusive love of all things Johnlock, you can find me: here!

ETA: I commissioned a piece of artwork from this chapter from the impossibly talented sweetlittlekitty.

Here is the gorgeous, gorgeous piece she did for me from this scene.
This chapter is so goddamn long. Probably too long. I was going to try and make some effort to cut it back, and then I thought, if anyone out there was ever going to appreciate 10K of gratuitous comfort and wound-healing, it would be you guys. So please, enjoy it, in all its completely unadulterated glory.

Thanks as always to my delightful beta, A Study in Purple. :)

They lay like that in John's cold room, wrapped around each other, until John's limbs grew stiff and he realized that he was starting to tremble not from exhaustion but from the cold air still seeping in through his shattered window.

"Sherlock." His voice came out in a hoarse rasp. He shifted slightly, encouraging Sherlock to move with him. "We should get up. It's too cold in here and it's only going to get worse."

Sherlock's only answer was a long exhalation of air against John's chest. He fidgeted but made no effort to sit up.

"Sherlock," John nudged him again gently. "I think I'm going to go have a bath. Clean up all this filth."

He felt Sherlock stiffen at his words, his arms tightening around John as if in fear that he would leave Sherlock's arms. He added quickly, "You can come if you like."

Sherlock relaxed against him then, and sat up.

"On second thought, we should clean up your face first."

Sherlock reached gingerly for the clotted blood under his nose and around his lips and winced.

"Come on." John took him by the hand, sheepishly aware of the fact that he was just as reluctant to let go of Sherlock, as Sherlock was to let go of him.

Sherlock followed John down to the bathroom, letting himself be pulled along with his hand in John's, as silent and obedient as a child. He seemed to have shrunk in the last half hour—he looked smaller somehow, frailer, as if his long spine was bowing under an actual weight. His silence had an undercurrent of profound exhaustion, as if, only now that the struggle was finally over, did he feel the impact of all that he had undergone.

Well, of course, he was exhausted. He would be.

John thought about Sherlock pressed up against his bedroom door, wakeful, agonized, listening with every sinew in his body poised for action, trembling, straining to hear any sound of John on the other side as John forced himself to lie still and silent.

And then, how it must have affected him when John had finally fallen into restless sleep—the sounds
he knew he must have made, that he had woken up making—how it must have driven Sherlock mad to be unable to get to him.

John remembered the sounds of Sherlock throwing himself against the door, the wild, animal force behind it, and he almost stopped halfway down the stairs and sat down, so overcome was he by sheer, raw sympathy.

Instead, he looked back at Sherlock, at the light silhouetted against his disheveled curls, the slant of his face lost in shadow, and for what felt like the hundredth time that day, John was stricken once again by how different this Sherlock was from the regular sharp-edged Sherlock of daily life—how reticent he was, how willing to be led by John, and the realization that he was allowing John to see him like this, to help him, pulsed through John like a physical ache.

John’s fingers may have tightened around Sherlock’s for a moment, squeezing just a bit too hard, but if he noticed, Sherlock didn’t say anything, he simply followed in John’s footsteps without looking up, placing each of his feet just where John’s had been a moment before, like a child avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk, simultaneously trusting and superstitious.

As they reached the first floor landing, John saw that the sun was setting beyond the windows of the living room. Everything outside was grey and dripping, tinged at the corners with the pink of the setting sun, which had emerged from the clouds just long enough to throw its dying rays over the soggy London streets.

There was a patch of pink light on the floor by the foot of the stairs, shimmering strangely, clearly reflecting a pool of water at the base of the window, but seeing it there, bright and inexplicable in the dim shadows of the stairwell, where it would have been impossible just an hour before, made joy swell sharp and sudden in John’s chest.

All of a sudden, John felt like laughing.

Sherlock paused behind him, his hand still in John’s.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” John said, smiling stupidly, hugely, and using the grip on their joined hands, he turned Sherlock toward him to pull Sherlock’s mouth down to his.

He felt Sherlock’s quick, indrawn breath of surprise before their lips met, his free hand fluttering for a moment in the air before coming to rest on John’s hip.

It was a soft kiss, gentle, but full of suppressed joy, and John only pulled away because he couldn’t stop himself grinning in the middle of it, so irrepressible was the giddy feeling in his chest.

He didn’t know what had come over him.

Then again, he knew exactly what had come over him—it was relief.

Sherlock pulled back just far enough to look down at John’s grinning face—he kept his forehead pressed against John’s, his eyes scanning John’s face up close, rapid; curious.

“What?” he asked, breathlessly.

John was grinning so broadly his face actually hurt. “Look at us. We’re ridiculous.”

Sherlock didn’t move his forehead from where it was pressed against John’s. John could hear his
breathing quickening. “Are we?”

John couldn’t stop his thumb from traveling meditatively over the back of Sherlock’s hand, and he felt a little spike of sorrow lance through his joy at the welts he found there. His smile faded.

“We’re like the walking wounded.”

He felt Sherlock’s free hand settle in the dip at the base of his spine and pull him one step closer, bringing their bodies fully into alignment. John felt his heart stutter in his chest.

The sudden possessive gesture coupled with the feel of Sherlock—long and lean and hard against him—made all the blood drop from John’s head immediately to his groin.

Sherlock’s fingers tightened around his, his voice almost a growl but fraught, pitched low with concern.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” John said, and now it was his turn to sound breathless, as Sherlock had tilted his face and was rubbing his cheek against John’s temple in another acutely possessive gesture, the soft feel of Sherlock’s lips in stark contrast to the rough texture of his jaw. “I just meant—” And he gasped as Sherlock pressed a kiss against his forehead. It was a perfectly innocent kiss and yet John felt his body responding to it in a decidedly sexual way, fire leaping up his spine from where Sherlock’s hand was pressed into the groove of his back. “We deserve each other,” John said, lifting his mouth up to Sherlock’s in a silent plea to be kissed. “We’re both completely mad.”

Sherlock tilted his head down until his mouth was centimeters from John’s, but then he held himself there, his shallow breath hot and uneven against John’s lips, his voice a low murmur. “I thought you were going to clean me up.”

“I am,” John murmured back, before lifting himself up on the balls of his feet to push his mouth properly against Sherlock’s, drinking in Sherlock’s sigh as he did so, keeping his mouth wet and open—the opposite of a chaste kiss—and was rewarded with Sherlock’s fingers clenching in the small of his back, dragging him one step closer until his left thigh was caught firmly between Sherlock’s legs.

Sherlock pulled his fingers out of John’s abruptly to slide his hand around the base of John’s neck and cradle his head as he deepened the kiss, pinning John against him at two different points with his hands.

John opened his mouth wider, his own hand coming up to bunch in Sherlock’s tangled curls—and at the feel of Sherlock’s wild hair under his fingers, his mind presented him with the memory of Sherlock’s torn-open expression when he’d found John on his back in the alleyway, the rain streaming from the matted dark fringe above his eyes and down over his mouth like tears.

John must have reacted in some visceral way to the memory because all of a sudden Sherlock broke the kiss, and stepped back, one hand coming up to cover his mouth, as though ashamed. “I’m sorry,” he said, breathless, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t—”

Sherlock looked mortified.

John instantly stepped forward and took hold of the hand Sherlock was using to cover his mouth. “Shh. It’s alright. There’s no need to be sorry.” He couldn’t bear for Sherlock to experience one more moment of self-doubt. He squeezed the fingers between his own, mindful of the cuts on the back of Sherlock’s hand. “I started it!”
John attempted a laugh, but it came out all wrong. God, what was the matter with him? He couldn’t seem to sustain one emotion for more than fifteen seconds. He was a complete mess.

The only thing that seemed to be consistent was his body’s intense need to be all over Sherlock’s.

Maybe it was inappropriate for John to feel this aroused in the direct aftermath of such a staggering physical and emotional crisis, especially one that related so directly to his sexuality, but there was no denying the insistent throb of his arousal. His body seemed to crave physical contact with Sherlock almost of its own accord—he could feel his desire in every fiber of his body—like a low whine deep in his bones that was only quiet when he was pressed hip to hip with Sherlock, Sherlock’s mouth against his own.

His body currently felt as fragile and bruised as his psyche but perhaps it was because his defenses were so utterly shattered that he felt more drawn to Sherlock than he ever had before.

Besides, nothing about the way he related to Sherlock had ever made sense, and it certainly had never been conventional, so why question it now?

Still, Sherlock’s face was a mess, and needed tending to, and John had no idea whether Sherlock was emotionally prepared for anything sexual under the current circumstances, much less physically prepared, given his current state of exhaustion, so he tugged on Sherlock’s hand again, pulling Sherlock after him into the bathroom.

“Come on, let’s get your face cleaned up. I want to check that cut on your arm too.”

Sherlock let himself be led by John once again, following him obediently into the bathroom—his sudden intensity replaced once more with a deep reticence.

The strange pink light of the dying day was still just visible over the tops of the trees outside—one wavering patch of it pale and shimmering against the bathtub tiles—and John was hesitant to turn on the light and chase away the strange lovely impression it made. He paused just a moment before letting go of Sherlock’s hand to switch it on.

The first-aid kit was still beside the sink where they had left it, and John wondered fleetingly with another inappropriate burst of humor that he managed to suppress just how many times they had stitched themselves back together with this kit, and then wondered, just as suddenly, with a flip-flopping sensation in his stomach, how many more times they would use it in future.

He directed Sherlock to sit down on the edge of the bath, while he took a clean flannel and ran it under warm water, wringing it out before coming to stand before Sherlock and taking his jaw gently in hand, instructing him wordlessly to tilt his chin up so John could examine his nose in the fading light from the window.

He was fairly certain he hadn’t broken it, but he had made no attempt to soften the blow when he’d thrown his head forward, so he wanted to be absolutely sure.

There was no bruising yet and the bleeding had long since stopped. He watched Sherlock’s face intently for any flickers of pain as he felt along the bone and was satisfied when he saw none.

He began wiping at the dried blood under Sherlock’s nose, very gently, conscious of the fact that Sherlock wasn’t looking at him—his eyes were fixed on a point somewhere over John’s left shoulder.

As was usually the case when Sherlock’s body began betraying him, he appeared all the more conscious of keeping it strictly under his control. He sat with his spine ramrod straight, his head held
perfectly in place, his hands still in his lap.

John had a sudden insight into what young Sherlock might have looked like just after he had done something atrocious—like burning down half the garage in an experiment gone wrong—and was focusing all of his intense willpower on being contrite.

John felt a wave of tenderness move through him at the thought.

“I’m sorry I almost broke your nose,” he said softly, tipping Sherlock’s chin up a bit more so he could wipe away the blood on his lips.

Sherlock snorted, and then winced. His own amusement seemed to break him out of his trance-like stillness.

John stepped away to re-wet the flannel, and when he turned back to Sherlock he saw there was a smirk on the corner of his mouth.

“If we’re trading apologies, then I suppose I should tell you I’m sorry I pinned you to your bed.”

He was silent as John cleaned the rest of the blood from his bottom lip.

“But I’d be lying if I did.”

John paused with the flannel still pressed to Sherlock’s mouth, and looked at Sherlock. Sherlock met his eyes and John found the same hard, blazing look that Sherlock had worn earlier. John recognized the set to Sherlock’s jaw—it was the way he held himself when he knew he was right and refused to back down.

Normally, seeing that expression on Sherlock’s face filled John with a mixture of exasperation and rage, but seeing it now, there on his behalf, made warmth flood his chest. He had to purse his lips to keep from smiling.

He worked to school his face into a disapproving expression.

“You’re an arrogant prat, you know that?”

John tilted Sherlock’s face to get at a bit of blood that had smeared along the plane of his cheek.

“With absolutely no concept of personal boundaries.”

Sherlock hummed in appreciation at the gentle touch of John’s fingers. He had shut his eyes, and seemed to be warming to John’s touch, pressing his face into John’s hand like a skittish cat suddenly turned affectionate.

Sherlock’s small appreciative noise made John even more aware of what felt like the live current of longing for Sherlock running through his body. He could feel it even in the smallest point of contact between them—where the tips of his fingers rested under Sherlock’s jaw, in the drag of his fingers over Sherlock’s cheek—burning with an almost palpable heat.

There was something about Sherlock tipping his face up to John’s attention that was quietly, stunningly erotic.

By now, Sherlock’s face was completely free of blood but John let his hand linger for a moment longer than necessary, savoring the feeling of the elegant line of Sherlock’s jaw beneath his fingers.

Sherlock’s eyes fluttered open and found his.
His eyes had changed color again. John would never cease to be amazed by the chameleon quality of Sherlock’s eyes. In the warm light of the bathroom, they shone a deep liquid green.

They were studying John intently, a question forming in them, and John let his fingers drop from Sherlock’s jaw, suddenly overcome.

“God, you—”

He shook his head, unable to speak around the tightness in his throat.

He straightened up, and turned toward the medical kit, felt Sherlock’s eyes follow his movements. The way Sherlock was looking at him. It was all too much.

He reached for the bottle of antiseptic and nodded at Sherlock’s bleeding forearm. “Let me have a look at that cut.”

Sherlock’s eyes were still trained on him. “It’s nothing.”

“I’m worried it’s deeper than it looks.”

John dropped into a crouch between Sherlock’s parted legs, and reached for the arm in question.

Sherlock let him take it, extending his elbow so that the wounded flesh was turned toward John. His eyes still hadn’t left John, and John could hear his breathing, shallow and slightly quick, in the stillness between them.

The cut was indeed deeper than it looked, but not so bad as John had feared. It didn’t need stitches, which was a relief.

He wiped away the blood as gently as he could, holding Sherlock on either side of his bony wrist, and tried not to think about those jagged edges of glass tearing through the fragile blue veins snaking just under the surface of Sherlock’s pale forearm. If it had caught him just a few inches to the left…

John blew out a quiet breath.

“I’m not angry at you for holding me to the bed you know.” His voice was tight with disapproval. “…But I am still angry about this.”

Sherlock was quiet as John reached for the bottle of antiseptic. He could feel Sherlock’s eyes on him still, but he didn’t look up at Sherlock’s face.

“That was a bloody stupid thing to do, Sherlock. Stupid and reckless. If one of those pieces of glass had caught you at a slightly different angle—”

John shook his head as he poured antiseptic onto a swab of clean cotton.

“This is going to sting.”

It must have hurt—the cut was long, and deep enough for Sherlock to feel the burn all the way through it. John saw Sherlock’s fingers tense in response, heard the slight change in his breathing. Even so, it didn’t stop Sherlock from reaching out with his injured arm, and seizing John by the forearm.

“John—”

At the desperate note in Sherlock’s voice, John finally looked up. The color in his eyes had changed
yet again, the green deepening to a jade sea. John felt his own fingers tightening on Sherlock’s arm at the pain he saw there.

“I was going to take the door off its hinges, but it would have taken too long. John, you don’t know —”

He saw the muscles in Sherlock’s throat constrict, watched his eyes take on a wild expression, as though he had suddenly been transported back to the other side of John’s door.

“You don’t understand—I couldn’t just let you—”

Sherlock was holding his arm so hard John was worried he was going to make his cut start bleeding again.

John felt his anger evaporate in the presence of Sherlock’s visceral panic. He felt suddenly guilty for bringing it up.

“Shh, never mind.” He put a hand over Sherlock’s to loosen his grip. “It’s all right. I’m sorry I brought it up. I just—” He reached up to smooth the tangled hair back from Sherlock’s forehead, knowing the gesture had soothed him in the past, and felt Sherlock noticeably calm under his fingers.

He repeated the gesture; keeping his movements slow and measured, until he saw Sherlock shut his eyes and the tension fall from the rigid line of his shoulders.

He dropped his hand from Sherlock’s forehead, and reached for a clean bandage. He held Sherlock just below the elbow as he covered the area.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was much softer. “I just wish you’d think sometimes before you did things.”

Sherlock looked up at him when he had finished, and although the raw panic had left his eyes, there was still a glimmer of something like unease in the center of each pupil.

His tone was somber. “I was as careful as I could be under the circumstances.”

John sighed, and let go of Sherlock’s arm.

He straightened up and felt his body protest as he did so, all the muscles that had taken a beating over the last twenty-four hours announcing their discomfort at once. The sudden need to be immersed in hot water momentarily drowned out all his other concerns.

He reached behind Sherlock to turn on the taps, checking to make sure the water was as hot as it could possibly get before leaning back and adding a generous squirt of the fragrant bath product that made such lavish bubbles. It was the sole luxury bath product that John allowed himself.

He strode over to the door with the intention of shutting it to keep the steam in, but as his hand closed on the handle, it occurred to him that he should probably say something before he did.

He cleared his throat. “I’m going to clean up but… you don’t have to…” Sherlock’s head shot up to look at him. “That is, you’re welcome to…” John licked his lips, suddenly self-conscious. “That is… I’d really like it… if you stayed.”

He saw Sherlock visibly relax, and then lift his eyebrows at John with a look that was clearly intended to communicate the sentiment, ‘If you think I’m leaving your side for one minute, then you are far stupider than I’ve ever given you credit for.’
John shut the door.

As the bathtub was filling up, John leaned over the sink and finally gave the cut above his eye the attention it deserved. It took him a while to clean away the clotted blood, but once he did, he discovered the cut was not as bad as he had previously thought.

Sherlock sat behind him on the edge of the tub, watching him in the mirror with rapt focus, his reflection gradually lost in the fog of growing condensation.

When the tub was nearly full, John turned off the taps and stepped out of his bloody trousers as quickly as possible, body turned slightly away from Sherlock as he did so, before, just as quickly, stepping into the steaming water.

He meant to drop down quickly as well, but the delicious shock of the heated water against his skin was so intense and so exquisite that he couldn’t help but slow his movements as he lowered himself down.

He let himself sink slowly, oh so slowly, into the delicious warmth, until the water came up to his chest, lowering himself down until he was leaning against the back of the tub. He let his eyes fall shut and he kept them closed as he rejoiced in the prickly, hot sensation tingling over every inch of his skin.

There was something about baths—John loved them, he always had.

Showers were part of his daily routine, and he treated them with the kind of perfunctory attention you’d expect from a man who’d spent time in the military, but baths were another thing altogether. Baths, for John Watson, were absolute bliss.

He forgot to feel self-conscious about the fact that a beautiful man was perched on the edge of the tub, watching him sink down into the bubbles. He spread his arms out on either side of the tub—careful to keep his bandaged shoulder from getting wet—and simply let himself relax for the first time in what felt like days.

All was silent in the steamy bathroom except for the occasional drip from the tap, and the corresponding plink as the drop hit the surface of the water beneath.

John kept his eyes shut and let himself drift, floating happily along on pure sensation, his thoughts on nothing, the warm air billowing gently against his face.

John was almost asleep when Sherlock broke the silence with a quiet voice. "You know I used to fantasize about you in the bath."

John opened his eyes and looked up at Sherlock, startled.

Sherlock was still sitting on the edge of the tub, his body turned toward John, the fingers of one hand immersed in the warm water.

He went on without encouragement, his voice a murmur, almost as though he were speaking to himself. “It’s something you do that I’ve always found erotic. After cases, you’d take those long baths, lock yourself in here in the heat and the steam and sit for hours.”

John watched him, trailing his fingers through the pearly water, his eyes following the movement of his own hand meditatively.

“I used to stand outside the door and wish, wish that I could see through it, to see you in the hot
water with your eyes closed, enjoying the heat of it on your skin. Do you know what you look like, John, when you're really enjoying something?"

He looked up at John suddenly, and John saw that his eyes were dark, filled with longing.

“Of course you don't, how could you? You close your eyes, and it’s as if the entire world disappears around you. It's the same expression you had on your face yesterday morning when you were eating that plate of eggs—the way you experience things, John, you savor them. I can tell how much just by watching your face. I love to watch you savoring things, but this—this, I knew would be the most erotic of all."

John stared up at Sherlock in utter shock.

He was aware that his mouth had fallen open at Sherlock’s words but he was too stunned and overwhelmed to close it. All he could do was stare up at Sherlock, his breath coming too quickly between his parted lips.

The stunned look on his face must have been quite extraordinary because Sherlock suddenly seemed to grow self-conscious. He pulled his hand out of the water, and dropped his eyes, apologetic.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “That was—” He cleared his throat nervously, and turned away. “Completely inappropriate to voice at a time like this.”

John shook his head, as if to clear it. He knew he should reassure Sherlock but he couldn’t move past Sherlock’s confession.

“You—you used to fantasize about me in the bath?”

Sherlock’s eyes reconnected with his, tentative, searching. His head was still bowed, as though in shame, but after a moment, Sherlock nodded.

John licked his lips, the heat of this revelation unspooling in his chest and spreading to every inch of his body, warming him as effectively as the steaming water he was immersed in.

He lifted himself up from where he had been leaning against the back of the tub.

“You, Sherlock Holmes, used to fantasize about me in the bath?”

Sherlock nodded again, his expression now growing amused.

“You used to stand outside the door and think about me, in here, naked and wet and soaking in hot water—and wish that you could see me?”

Sherlock nodded, his expression shifting again, this time back to one of longing. His body seemed to lean down closer to where John sat.

John sat up straighter, unconsciously lifting his body closer to Sherlock’s. He could hear how breathless his own voice sounded when he asked Sherlock his next question. “And is it?”

Sherlock’s own lips were parted, his eyes focusing on John’s mouth. He looked up in confusion at John’s question. “What?”

John scooted half an inch closer to Sherlock along the bottom of the tub. John’s voice was thick with arousal. “Is it as erotic as you thought it would be?”

John arched his back, blatantly lifting his mouth up to Sherlock’s, no longer bothering to hide the fact
that he wanted Sherlock to lean down and kiss him.

Sherlock closed the last two inches between them and John could feel the sighing exhalation of his response against his mouth. “Yes. God, yes.”

John licked his lips again, his whole body crackling with the need to feel Sherlock’s lips against his. “Then why aren’t you kissing me? ”

“I don’t know, I thought—”

John didn’t bother letting him finish. He reached up one soapy arm and pulled Sherlock’s mouth down to his, opening his mouth under Sherlock’s, inviting his tongue into the warm, wet heat of his own mouth.

He heard Sherlock make a whimpering sound in the back of his throat before opening his mouth against John’s and answering his request, pushing his tongue into John’s mouth to stroke the length of John’s.

The feel of Sherlock’s open mouth against his—warm and wet, his tongue slipping over John’s—made John growl low in response, and tug Sherlock harder down against him by the grip on his neck, throwing Sherlock off balance, causing him to reach out for the nearest thing at hand to keep himself from falling forward into the water, which happened to be the dripping faucet.

John was done with pretending he didn’t want this. He didn’t care if it was inappropriately timed. He wanted Sherlock, possibly more than he’d ever wanted him, and he knew Sherlock wanted him just as badly. Maybe it was unconventional to crave sex immediately after a near fatal run-in with a criminal mastermind, but John didn’t care.

Sherlock pulled his mouth away from John’s, his eyes low-lidded but filled with concern. “John—wait. I didn’t mean to be, I don’t want—that is, I wasn’t trying—”

“I know,” John said, reaching for the buttons on Sherlock’s disheveled shirt. “I want this. I need this right now, Sherlock. Please. I know it’s—I know I shouldn’t be thinking about sex after… after everything, but I want you.” He started undoing the buttons on Sherlock’s shirt, more rapidly than he would have thought possible. He heard his own voice shake with longing. “God, how I want you. So please, just—”

Sherlock leaned forward and kissed the plea from his lips. His hands closed over John’s and gently moved them from the front of his shirt so he could pick up where John had left off.

John broke away, panting, his wet hands reaching to help push Sherlock’s shirt off his shoulders, his voice shaking, breathless, pressing a grateful kiss to Sherlock’s jaw. “Thank god, thank god.”

Sherlock slipped the shirt off his arms and let it drop to the floor behind him, but then he leaned back down over John, taking his face between his hands.

Sherlock pressed his forehead against John’s, looking down with solemn focus into John’s eyes, his irises almost completely overwhelmed by pupil, but questioning, still uncertain. “Are you sure?” He was equally breathless. “You’re sure it’s not too soon?”

John shook his head against Sherlock’s. His whole body ached with wanting.

“No. It’s not, Sherlock. I am here to tell you it definitely is not. Besides,” he said, rising up on his knees to loop his arms around Sherlock’s neck. He was dripping soap all down Sherlock’s back. He didn’t care. “I would love something to take my mind off of all that. And right now, having you…”
John let go of Sherlock’s neck to reach down between them and fasten his fingers on the button of Sherlock’s trousers. “In here with me…” He opened his mouth against Sherlock’s jaw, and bit down softly, while his fingers pulled down on the zip. “Is everything…” He pushed the material down Sherlock’s hips, and was rewarded with Sherlock’s soft intake of breath. “…I want.”

That seemed to make up Sherlock’s mind. He stood up abruptly, pulling his trousers the rest of the way down his legs and banishing them to a corner of the bathroom with one swift kick.

He divested himself of shoes and socks just as quickly, until he was standing before John in nothing but his black Y-fronts. John could see the swollen bulge of his erection where it was pressing against the material, and the sight of it made his mouth go dry.

He watched Sherlock hook his thumbs into the waistband and push them down without ceremony. John couldn’t keep back his moan at the sight of the full length of Sherlock springing free. The evidence of Sherlock’s very profound arousal after only the few kisses that they’d shared was enough to make John yearn to reach for himself under the water and start to stroke, but he stopped himself. Instead, he watched with a hungry expression as Sherlock stepped forward and climbed into the tub, his beautiful long naked body pale in the yellow light of the bathroom. John felt a dizzying rush of arousal at the sight of that lean, supple body folding itself in half to join him in the steaming water.

He heard Sherlock’s low exhalation of pleasure as he sank into the heat, and watched his eyes flutter closed at the sensation.

The corresponding realization that he was naked, in a bathtub, with Sherlock Holmes, and all the intimacy that went along with that realization made John feel suddenly, completely overwhelmed. This was beyond his greatest fantasies. And what’s more—it apparently was a fantasy of Sherlock’s. Suddenly, it was all almost too much for John.

Sherlock must have seen it on his face. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Ahh,” John put up his hands to cover his eyes, and rubbed at them, as though to affirm that the sight before his eyes was actually there. “Nothing. I just—” He grinned into his own palms and then dropped his hands. “God. You. This. I’m still not quite—”

“Shh.” Sherlock slid forward, until he was occupying the space between John’s parted thighs, and then to John’s surprise, reached for the sponge by John’s elbow. “You said you wanted to get cleaned up, didn’t you? Let me help you.”

John let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding, and nodded his head in relief. “That’s—yes. That’s a good idea. Let’s do that first.”

It had been the original purpose of John’s bath, after all. Besides, maybe it would help take the edge off his arousal. Then again, at this point, he was so turned on, he was fairly certain if Sherlock so much as touched his shoulder in a platonic manner he might come.

He reached for his bottle of discount shampoo but Sherlock made a disapproving noise and swatted his hand away. “Let me.”

Sherlock tapped gently at his shoulder, instructing him to turn around in the water so that his back was to Sherlock. John did so, glad for a directive, and for an opportunity to hide the fact that his hands were shaking with the intensity of his desire.

Sherlock settled himself behind John, keeping just enough distance between them that he could
easily reach John’s hair, but not so close that he was actually touching. John was grateful for the chance to try and get his body under control.

He heard the snap of a bottle opening and smelled the subtle fragrance of Sherlock’s own expensive shampoo. John said nothing, but he was silently, desperately pleased that Sherlock found his own head worthy of what Sherlock massaged into his own pampered locks on a daily basis.

He was quiet as Sherlock’s hands settled in his hair and began gently rubbing the exquisite smelling product into his scalp. It smelled like Sherlock, and instead of being erotic in that moment John found it deeply comforting. It smelled like home.

He also found Sherlock’s touch deeply comforting, soothing; the rhythmic motion of Sherlock’s fingers rubbing circles into his scalp made all the nervous tension seem to melt from his body. John shut his eyes.

After several minutes of the utter bliss of Sherlock’s massaging fingers, John heard Sherlock’s soft voice telling him to tip his head back. John did, and felt Sherlock use the cup he kept on hand for shaving to pour warm water over his hair, rinsing out the shampoo.

He sighed softly in contentment, and heard the click of another bottle opening.

“What’s that?” he asked Sherlock sleepily, not really caring either way, but eager to hear the low sound of Sherlock’s voice in the quiet, tiled space of the bathtub.

“Just some conditioner.”

John hummed his assent. Sherlock’s voice sounded just as lovely and echoey as he had hoped. The conditioner smelled as expensive and fragrant as its shampoo counterpart, and felt just as nice being massaged into his hair by Sherlock’s talented fingers. John didn’t know much about it either way—he never bothered with conditioner.

John sighed happily under the attention of Sherlock’s fingers, and felt himself leaning back into Sherlock’s touch.

Contrary to his fears, the soothing touch of Sherlock’s hands had slightly taken the edge off his arousal. His desire was still there, thrumming all through him, but it was as though someone had turned the volume down, and he no longer felt afraid that he might shatter into oblivion from the first touch to his cock. The gentle contact on his scalp was satisfying in an altogether different way, and helped put a check on the ravenous part of his desire.

John let his thoughts drift back to Sherlock’s confession. The thought of Sherlock standing on the other side of the bathroom door, and imagining him in the water, made the pitch of his arousal begin to climb back toward something he could not suppress.

Now that the initial shock had worn off, John found a whole litany of questions erupting in the wake of Sherlock’s confession. Up until just a few days ago, the only information he’d had about the role sex played in Sherlock’s life was that it took a backseat to pretty much everything else. He had no conception whatsoever of what Sherlock’s fantasy life might be like—or whether he had any sort of routine for pleasuring himself.

John felt his cheeks fill suddenly with heat as a host of potential images flooded his mind—of what Sherlock might look like doing just that, at the thought of a nude and fantasizing Sherlock, one hand wrapped around himself as he visualized John in the bath. He was struck suddenly with an image of Sherlock, curled over his own lap, bowed over the slender curve of his own flexed arm as he stroked
himself, thinking of John.

“So when you say you used to fantasize about me in the bath, does that mean…?” John let the question hang in the dripping air between them, unfinished.

He felt Sherlock’s fingers gently tilt his head back, and the cascade of water move over his scalp as Sherlock rinsed the conditioner out of his hair.

“Yes,” said Sherlock thickly after he had set the empty cup back on the edge of the bath.

John felt the fluttering sensation low in his belly dip lower. He tightened his own hands on his thighs under the water, fighting to keep his breathing even.

“So when you…” John licked his lips. “When you were alone later, you’d…” John saw Sherlock reach for his bottle of expensive body wash and heard him squeezing some of it onto the sponge in his hands. He couldn’t disguise the hitch in his voice. “You’d think of me?”

John arched his back slightly when he felt the sponge press in between his shoulder blades, pushing back into the touch.

Sherlock was quiet for several minutes before he answered, pushing the sponge in lovely, firm circles over the expanse of John’s back.

“Yes,” he finally said, and John heard that his voice had dropped about four octaves in the space of as many minutes.

John’s breath left him in a long rush.

He had about a hundred follow-up questions to that confession but he had no idea where to start.

As he struggled to think of what to say, Sherlock spoke into the silence, his voice rich, resonant, dark with something like regret. “You’re not the only one who’s been longing in silence.”

The implications of this were almost too much for John to deal with. How long? How long had Sherlock felt the same way? His mind flickered back over the events of the past month—all those times he had been certain Sherlock was standing closer to him than usual, when his movements had seemed filled with intent, when John had convinced himself Sherlock was about to kiss him—how many of those times had he been right?

“Hang on a minute—that day you attacked me getting out of the shower, was that—were you—?”

“No,” Sherlock said firmly, and John heard the edge of steel in his voice.

John felt Sherlock pour water over his back, rinsing off the soap.

“Did you know then? How I felt about you?”

Sherlock rubbed the sponge over John’s left shoulder, and down over his left arm, careful not to get water on the bandage over John’s bicep.

John lifted his arm out of the water to give Sherlock better access.

“No. I knew something was wrong. I knew ever since the first encounter with Moriarty that something was wrong, but I wasn’t sure what. That was…” Sherlock paused, smoothing soap down John’s arm. “That was when I knew.”
John let the implications of this wash over him.

That day, standing in the hallway clutching a towel around his hips as he dripped with water, Sherlock’s eyes all over him—of course he’d figured it out then. John had suspected as much.

He couldn’t tell if the realization filled him more with embarrassment or arousal. He still felt a throb of desire at the memory of Sherlock’s eyes on the towel as it started to slip, but he also remembered so viscerally his need to flee, to escape the penetrating sweep of Sherlock’s gaze—how Sherlock had stepped back as soon as he registered his desperation.

“What about the night I got back from New Zealand, when you made me drink that whole bottle of wine?”

Sherlock laughed—an unsuspecting, joyful sound. He seemed to startle himself. He began working the sponge over John’s right shoulder, humor still in his voice. “Made you?”

John refused to be distracted by the infectious sound of Sherlock’s laughter. “Yeah. You made a joke about seducing me—I remember. I may not remember everything from that night,” he conceded. “But I remember that.”

Sherlock moved the sponge down John’s right arm, and John lifted his arm out of the water again, obligingly.

He waited in silence as Sherlock scrubbed the sponge in meditative circles down the length of his arm, noticing with a flip-flopping sensation in his belly the care with which Sherlock cleaned the back of his hand, and in and around each finger.

Sherlock lowered John’s arm gently back into the water.

It was strange—the experience of being bathed. No one had given John a bath since he was a child, and there was something both intensely intimate and erotic about the way Sherlock was touching him now, but also startlingly tender. John found himself shocked once again by the delicacy of Sherlock’s movements. That he would choose to touch John so gently was a revelation to John all over again.

“At that point I had only a hypothesis.” Sherlock’s voice was quiet, and John thought he heard the tiniest hint of shame creep in around the words. Sherlock poured water down the right side of John’s back to rinse the soap from his shoulder. “I had to test it to see if I was right.”

John remembered with sudden vivid clarity the feel of Sherlock’s fingers creeping up the inside of his thigh, his blazing erection on the cab ride home, his confusion. “That was deliberate, wasn’t it? That ride back in the cab, with your hand on my leg.”

It wasn’t a question. John knew he was right. “You were testing me to see how I would respond to you.”

Sherlock said nothing.

John felt a welter of dark feelings rise within him. Foremost, rage that Sherlock would push him like that just to glean information, experiment on John just to prove that he was right. It made him feel foolish, to learn that his desire was so utterly transparent—similarly foolish to the way Moriarty had made him feel when he revealed to John his desire in the first place. Had it really always been so obvious?

If it was, why couldn’t Sherlock have just asked him how he felt?
However as soon as this question surfaced in John’s mind it struck him how very unfair he was being. Sherlock could very well demand the exact same thing of him. He had been just as reticent about his feelings. He’d never once given Sherlock any insight as to his true feelings. And even if the reason for that was because he’d convinced himself that Sherlock would never feel the same way, it didn’t make his behavior any less duplicitous.

If it hadn’t been for Sherlock pushing him against the wall on that burning cruise ship, he probably never would have said anything at all.

He thought back to all the intense fantasies he’d entertained about Sherlock over the past month, and considering Sherlock’s admission about him and the bath, wondered once again how long Sherlock had felt the same.

“Did you—” John’s voice was halting. “That night, were you also—I mean, was it—besides being just a test, at that point did you also—?”

“Yes.” Sherlock interrupted him, the edge in his voice full of everything he wasn’t saying.

John noticed that Sherlock had paused in his careful attention to John’s skin with the sponge.

John could feel his heartbeat pounding along the length of his cock. He shut his eyes, silently willing Sherlock to put his hands back on John’s skin, all platonic thoughts swept away in the wake of the restrained desire in Sherlock’s voice.

John thought back to that night, of his own hand on his cock with his back against the door, how hard he had been—god, if he had known that there was even a possibility that Sherlock felt the same…

John was suddenly, blazingly grateful that Sherlock hadn’t waited any longer than he had to make the first move.

John could hear Sherlock behind him, struggling to keep his breathing under control, and decided once again that enough was enough. He was as clean as he cared to be at this point.

“How hard I came later that night because of that?”

Sherlock made an abortive gesture—John saw the corresponding ripples strike the walls of the tub.

“God, I hadn’t come that hard in years. I almost blacked out. That cab ride home nearly killed me—I could barely wait till the door was shut behind me.”

John listened to the sound of Sherlock’s breathing speeding up behind him.

“I didn’t even get my trousers off, Sherlock. You made me come in my trousers and you weren’t even there.”

“John—” Sherlock’s voice was strained. John heard the question at the end of it, and he turned in Sherlock’s arms, causing Sherlock to drop the sponge.

“God, Sherlock, yes. Please.”

Sherlock closed the distance between them in one move, his hands coming up to hold John’s face as he kissed him, tongue licking into John’s open mouth, swallowing down the long moan the gesture pulled from John’s throat.
John drew his knees up to his chest to give Sherlock room to move closer, and felt Sherlock’s parted thighs slide in on either side of him, cradling John between them.

He was so hard he was shaking.

Based on the rate at which Sherlock was devouring his mouth, Sherlock was just as badly off. He only pulled his mouth away so that he could press a kiss to John’s jaw, then to the skin below his ear. The unsteady staccato of Sherlock’s breath was hot against the side of his neck where he pressed another kiss.

“John, *god*, John…”

John felt the tremor in Sherlock’s hands as they slid down to grasp his shoulders and heard Sherlock sigh against him, as though overwhelmed.

Sherlock’s lips stuck against his jaw as he drew in another sharp breath to speak. "You're sure this is alright?"

"Like I said," John settled himself more firmly between Sherlock’s parted thighs, leaning his head back to meet Sherlock’s apprehensive gaze. He kissed the corner of Sherlock’s worried mouth. "I need some new memories to replace the bad ones."

"You never told me what he did." Sherlock’s voice was soft, impossibly intimate in the quiet dripping echo of the bathtub.

John shut his eyes, overcome with the instinct to push the memories away, bury them inside himself, never let them surface in his waking mind, especially not here, not now with Sherlock—in this quiet space. But there was a deeper part of himself that knew otherwise, a stronger conviction that burying the memories would only make them worse. And there was no safer space to pull them out into the light than here, held tightly between Sherlock’s thighs.

John kept his eyes shut, heard his own breathing grow ragged as he began to speak.

“It wasn’t much. He didn’t—he didn’t do much of anything. What he said was far worse. And the feel of his eyes on me.” John swallowed, remembering. He pushed the sick feeling away. “His eyes were almost worse than his hands. He put his knife to my throat,” John said, his voice tight with rage as he remembered Moriarty’s cold hands on him. “Made a cut to match the one I already had.”

John lifted his chin at the memory, as though he were back in that room and determined to show that it didn’t bother him. He opened his eyes to find Sherlock watching him, his eyes full of fury and heartbeat.

“He said a lot worse than he did. It wasn’t—” John clenched his trembling hands under the water. “It really wasn’t anything.”

He watched Sherlock’s eyes—they had changed color again and were now slate grey, the color of a storm at sea—trace over the marks on his neck, first one, then the other. John felt Sherlock’s thumb smooth over the ridge of his collarbone, and then, John watched him bend forward, and kiss the raw red mark on the left side of his throat, so softly, John scarcely felt the touch of his lips.

The gentleness in the gesture went through John like a blade.

He made a little choked sound and Sherlock stilled and immediately pulled back. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” John shook his head. To his supreme embarrassment, he felt his eyes fill with tears. He
blinked hard, felt the tangle of feelings in his chest seem to tighten suddenly around his heart, like someone pulling a knot into a length of rope. He wanted Sherlock to touch him like that all over—at the same time he felt like he didn’t deserve it. “No, it’s just—”

Sherlock leaned in again and kissed the mark on the opposite side of John’s neck, his lips just brushing the wound—causing a storm of sensations to light up on that small area of skin.

John made a sound like a sob, his hands reaching out to grasp Sherlock just above his elbows.

It was both incredibly intimate and intensely erotic. The area around the cut felt charged. The sudden need to feel Sherlock’s mouth against him, over every inch of him, was so intense and overpowering he felt lightheaded.

John tipped his chin up, licking his lips. “Please,” he said, looking up at Sherlock through damp lashes, his voice a needy whisper. “Don’t stop.”

God—he could see the desire blossom fully on Sherlock’s face; he watched his pupils dilate to twice their size, saw Sherlock’s own lashes grow heavy at his request.

Sherlock shifted slightly to reach for the sponge he had dropped. He poured fresh soap onto it with shaking fingers and John leaned back slightly to watch him, his breathing fast and shallow.

Sherlock rubbed the sponge over the dark writing on John’s left shoulder. “The thought of him…” His voice was a low rumble of rage. “Touching you…” He scrubbed hard at the letters, before pouring water over the place from his cupped palms, and then bending low against it, his mouth hovering hot and not touching. “Makes me want to break his bones with my bare hands.”

John felt the tremor of Sherlock’s words against his skin, felt his skin prickling in anticipation of the press of Sherlock’s mouth. It was as if his skin had extra awareness of Sherlock’s—it seemed to light up like a switchboard when Sherlock drew near.

When Sherlock finally pressed the shaking heat of his mouth to the skin over John’s shoulder, he let out a cry, his hands tightening on Sherlock’s arms. It didn’t make sense—the effect Sherlock had over him. John didn’t care.

Sherlock kissed the cold black letters, softly at first, gently, one by one, before opening his mouth against the expanse of the word, letting his teeth drag against the over-sensitized flesh until John was shuddering under his mouth, his body wracked with tremors.

Sherlock dragged the sponge over the writing on the other side of John’s chest and repeated the process, bending his dark head to John’s torso, his mouth chaste at first and then hot and intent, sucking at the skin as though he meant to draw the ink out of John’s body.

Sherlock dropped the sponge and slid his hands down to hold John by the hips under the water, his mouth traveling over the surface of John’s chest, moving to the X drawn there, no longer bothering to try and wash the marks away, just kissing them, his mouth furious and sweet all at once, his breathing fast and unsteady.

“Everywhere he touched you—I want you to replace the memory with one of me—of my mouth on you.”

Sherlock was biting at the mark above John’s ribs, his fingers insistent, tightening on John’s hips.

“Do you understand?” he asked, breathless, his voice filled with conviction. “Because you’re mine, John Watson. You’re mine.”
Sherlock’s mouth was forced to pause where the water met John’s chest, but John was too far gone to care. He pulled Sherlock’s mouth back up to his and kissed the sweet fury of it, Sherlock’s tongue dipping into John’s with something that went deeper than need.

Sherlock broke away to look into John’s eyes. “Do you hear me, John?”

“Yes, god, Sherlock, yes. But please—” John said, using his grip on Sherlock’s arm to guide Sherlock’s hand down between his legs. “Just touch me, please—touch me.”

Sherlock took John in his hand under the water, diving back down to recapture John’s mouth with a growl.

John heard himself make a sound like a whimper as Sherlock’s fingers closed around him, and then he groaned—long and low in the back of his throat as Sherlock began to move his hand up and down the length of him, afraid that he was already coming, the touch felt so good.

Sherlock stroked him in long, even strokes, his tongue in John’s mouth moving in time with his hand, his thighs tightening around John’s body as he shifted closer, his long legs coming to wrap around John’s back.

It was like being in a Sherlock cocoon—Sherlock’s tongue in his mouth, Sherlock’s hand on his cock, Sherlock’s body surrounding him at every point, cradling him, holding him together.

His body felt like an instrument that he had never learned how to play properly, and Sherlock was a virtuoso, the one who held the key to all the symphonies that lay at the heart of John—whose fingers seemed to draw music out of him as easily as the rain striking the side of a house. He felt electrified, as though he could hear his own body singing with sensation—each touch from Sherlock’s hand, his mouth, like a star point of pure pleasure all along his nerve endings.

John’s hands clutched at Sherlock’s arms—if he hadn’t been so anchored by Sherlock at every point, he might have been afraid he was going to drift away, so intense was the mounting tide of his pleasure.

He pulled his mouth away from Sherlock’s, his lips stumbling over his name, suddenly desperate to try and communicate what this meant to him. “Sher—Sherlock…”

But then all words left him, and he was coming, harder than he ever had, his body shuddering in Sherlock’s arms, shaking in the water between them, Sherlock pulling him close, drawing John tighter to him with his legs around his back.

Time lost all meaning. John did not know how long he shuddered in the circle of Sherlock’s arms, his immediate surroundings fading around him in the wake of the fireworks display going off in his own body.

By the time he’d drifted back down to inhabit himself again, his consciousness slowly regaining awareness of his vicinity detail by detail, he could feel the hot, hard curve of Sherlock’s erection against the back of his thigh, and the fine tremors moving through the body pressed close against him.

John tipped his head forward, placing his forehead against the long line of Sherlock’s neck. He felt sleepy, his movements slowed by the drowsy contentment stealing over his exhausted body. All of his concerns seemed to have receded into the distance, over the edge of the horizon, beyond his view. It was a delicious feeling. If he shut his eyes right now, John felt as though he could sleep for a hundred years.
But John didn’t want to sleep—not yet.

He lifted his head off Sherlock’s neck, wriggling slightly backward to break the circle of Sherlock’s arms so he could reach down between them and take Sherlock in his hand.

He heard the sharp intake of Sherlock’s breath as his fingers closed around the length of him, and he leaned back further so he could watch the expression on Sherlock’s face as his hand began to move.

His eyes were shut, the dark smudge of his eyelashes like twin shadows against his pale cheeks, the lines of his expressive eyebrows drawn together in an expression close to one of pain.

John scooted in closer, bending down so he could kiss the gleaming curve of Sherlock’s shoulder as he reached out to grasp the side of the tub with one desperate hand. John slid his mouth along Sherlock’s collarbone, pausing to kiss the groove at the base of his throat. He could taste the salt of Sherlock’s perspiration as well as the astringent tang of the bubble bath. The movements of his hand sped up.

Part of John was filled with regret that he couldn’t drag Sherlock out of the water and up against the side of the tub and take him into his mouth. He wanted to do so many things but his energy was limited and he knew Sherlock was far, far too close, so he contented himself with leaning in closer, the hand that wasn’t around Sherlock’s cock slipping around to hold him by the back of the neck.

He pressed a kiss to the side of Sherlock’s throat, biting down softly, before licking his way up to the underside of Sherlock’s jaw. He felt Sherlock push forward against his mouth, extending his throat as his hips rocked closer against John’s hand, breathless, the fingers of his left hand tightening against the side of the tub.

John kissed the hinge of Sherlock’s jaw, his knuckles brushing Sherlock’s abdomen as he stroked.

John pushed his hand up into Sherlock’s curls, and heard Sherlock gasp in appreciation.

“What did I do… to deserve you?”

He kissed his way along the curve of Sherlock’s jaw, felt his chest flood with emotion as Sherlock lifted his free hand to settle in John’s damp hair.

“How did I get so lucky?”

Sherlock’s mouth was open, the plush skin of his lower lip swollen from where he’d bitten it. John kissed it, savoring the rapid heat of Sherlock’s breath against his own mouth as he did so. He wanted to drink him in, to cover him completely, for Sherlock to feel nothing but John against him at every point. He sucked Sherlock’s bottom lip in between his teeth and heard Sherlock whimper sharply in response, felt Sherlock rise even closer against him, his fingers tightening in John’s hair, and John felt a corresponding stab of affection in response to the gesture.

He slid his hand down Sherlock’s back, tracing the curve of his arse before settling his hand on Sherlock’s hip and tugging him closer, his body pressed so close to Sherlock’s he could feel the frantic thump of his heartbeat against his own chest.

He pulled his mouth away from Sherlock’s—he was breathing so hard John was worried if he didn’t free up his mouth he wouldn’t get enough air—and pressed his forehead in against Sherlock’s cheek, his own breath growing increasingly ragged.

“God—” He shut his eyes, breathing in the scent of wet, gasping Sherlock. “God, you… you.”
The hand in John’s hair tightened, and John heard Sherlock make a soft, little choking sound, and then he was arching up into John’s hand, tipping his head back, extending the length of his throat as he came, spurting into the water between them, his cock pulsing under John’s fingers.

John kissed him then, fully, his mouth soft against Sherlock’s parted lips, drinking in each shaking breath that Sherlock expelled as his body bowed forward into John’s, his eyes still closed, one slender crease between his eyebrows that John wanted to kiss away.

“Sherlock,” he said, and kissed the sharp curve of his cheek. “Sherlock...” His hands skimming up over his ribs to hold him under his shoulder blades, his open mouth pressing in against Sherlock’s temple, kissing each fluttering eyelid, tasting salt, the damp fringe of his eyelashes, sighing as both of Sherlock’s hands came up to clutch him by the shoulders, and pull John down against him in the water.

Tucking his face in against Sherlock’s neck, he pressed his mouth to the pulse in Sherlock’s throat, and felt the same sweet ache fill him, as though he were lost in a wide sea, as though he were drowning, lips shaking as they formed the words, his voice breaking.

“Sherlock.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, thank you for your continued support and all your comments, bookmarks, and kudos. I appreciate them more than I can say. So please don’t stop leaving them!

I'm posting links once again to the playlists I made while working on this story, so if you'd like a soundtrack for the angst you can listen to Part One here, and Part Two here.

Also, if you're on tumblr, you can find me here! :)  

Oh, and one last thing! I am 99.9% sure at this point that the next chapter will be THE LAST! So prepare yourselves friends. I myself am struggling to come to terms with this fact, but I figure hey, if I get more ideas, I can always write a sequel, right?
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

Alllllll the fucking fluff. All of it. Fluff to make up for all the pain you went through with them and then some, enough fluff to keep you happy until the end of time. With a generous helping of angst thrown in too, of course. But beware of the fluff. It might actually kill you. I myself almost destroyed half the furniture in my house while writing it, I was so unable to handle it. You have been warned.

Get out the tissues, folks. It’s going to be a longggg ride.

Chapter Notes

I want to dedicate this story to three very important people who helped me along the way. My dear friend, sev313, who introduced me to ao3, and who has been my best friend and nerd soulmate since the very beginning, since we became tiny nerd friends on the first day of kindergarten, and up until we were 13 years old reading Hermione’s World and posting our terrible first attempts at fanfic on the internet; my friend, AnnaKnitsSpock, who introduced me to this GODDAMN show and the beauty that is this fandom, and who offered me very insightful advice and inspirations along the way, and last but not least, to my incredible beta, A Study in Purple, who weathered the final years of her PhD program while editing piles and piles of angsty smut for me, always offering heartfelt encouragement to John and Sherlock in the margins.

I could not have done it without you three. You know what a milestone this is for me. Thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time John rose dripping to climb out of the tub, the windows of the bathroom were smudged white with steam, the sky outside now fully dark.

Sherlock stepped neatly out of the tub before John and crossed over to the opposite side of the bathroom to pull two towels off the shelf. His lean, muscular back was slick and shining, water running down his calves to leave a damp trail all across the bathroom floor.

John stayed where he was standing in the tub, and admired the view.

His body was still tingling, rejuvenated by the gentle heat of the water and the careful attentions of Sherlock’s hands, but the warm water had made him feel drowsy. He yawned hugely, felt his jaw crack, and drew his arms around himself in the cooling air.

He shivered once, lightly, and then Sherlock was there before him, bundling him into a towel, enveloping John in the soft warmth of the cotton that smelled like their detergent—that smelled like home—guiding him out of the bathtub one foot at a time.
They stood on the bathmat together, dripping, while Sherlock knotted his towel around his hips.

John pulled his own towel tighter around his shoulders and then leaned into Sherlock’s naked, gleaming chest, pushing his face in against Sherlock’s shoulder, and sighing softly, allowing himself one more moment of appreciation for this wet, half-naked Sherlock within arms reach.

Sherlock was shocked momentarily into stillness, but then his arms came up around John, and he put his mouth to John’s hair, inhaling.

“You smell good.”

John snorted a laugh into Sherlock’s shoulder. “I smell like you.”

He heard the smile in Sherlock’s voice. “Exactly.”

“Arrogant prat.”

He felt Sherlock’s mouth drag softly over his hairline, reaching down to press a kiss to his temple before pulling back.

He looked down at John and his eyes were soft, the color muted, the blue of water reflected in a cloudless sky. “What do you need?”

“Who, me?” John let his hands glide down the dramatic curve of Sherlock’s lower back to rest just above the swell of his arse. His fingers found the dimple at the base of Sherlock’s spine. “Absolutely nothing.” He let his hands slip lower, heard Sherlock catch his breath. “You’ve given me everything I could possibly want.”

He fitted Sherlock to him by the grip on his arse, enjoying the sound of Sherlock’s breathing speeding up. He leaned a little closer and pressed his mouth to the hollow between Sherlock’s collarbones, fully aware that he was hours away from being able to get it up again, but far from caring when there was so much naked, wet detective pressed against him.

He let his mouth drop lower, felt Sherlock’s hands clench on his shoulders, and then was interrupted by a loud growl from the region of his stomach.

Sherlock pulled back, his mouth quirked in a smile. “Really, Doctor? There’s nothing else you want right now?”

John pulled away, grumbling.

Sherlock’s smile widened, before assuming a mock-anguished expression. “Didn’t I tell you your body’s needs would be the end of our sex life?”

John leaned back in against Sherlock’s chest and then tipped his head up, his mouth turning up in a self-satisfied smirk. “On the contrary, I would argue my body’s needs are the root cause of our sex life.”

“Well, then that just goes to show…” Sherlock ducked his head to John’s ear, his own hands sliding around under John’s towel to grasp him by the buttocks and drag him a step closer. John gave a little yelp of surprise. Sherlock’s lips were warm against his ear. “How little you know about the history of my desire for you.”

John felt a flutter of heat stir in his belly at Sherlock’s words, at the same time he felt a surge of curiosity at the implications. How long had Sherlock felt desire for him? John leaned back slightly, a
half-formed question on his lips but when he looked up at Sherlock he saw that his playful expression had sobered.

His expression was filled with tender attentiveness and John felt his breath catch at the sight of all of that emotion there for him.

“What would you like? I’ll order us something.”

John was momentarily stricken speechless by the revelation that Sherlock was offering to obtain food for them. Food. This was a first.

John let his chin rest on Sherlock’s shoulder as he pondered the options. “Mmm…”

“Indian?” Sherlock kissed John’s ear gently. “Thai?”

“Ooh.” John suddenly realized what he wanted. “Green curry,” he said longingly, and may have drooled a little in his eagerness.

Sherlock pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “Green curry it is.”

Sherlock stepped back, sliding one hand around to thread his fingers through John’s, reaching with his other hand to pull open the bathroom door.

John let Sherlock pull him by the hand through the chilly hallway into the dark interior of Sherlock’s bedroom, feeling slightly foolish that he was letting Sherlock tow him along like a small child, his towel bunched around his shoulders with his free hand, but altogether too grateful for the opportunity to not have to think for several minutes more.

Sherlock led John to his bed and pushed him gently into a sitting position, before leaning over to switch on the light.

The chill of the rest of the flat in contrast with the steamy bathroom was striking and John drew his legs up against his chest, his teeth chattering lightly.

Sherlock reached down and pulled his duvet up over John’s shoulders. “You stay here. I’ll go get you some clothes.”

John tried to protest but his response was interrupted by a massive yawn.

Sherlock leaned down and kissed his temple. “I’ll be right back.”

“Mmm…” John hummed his assent. He was probably dripping all over Sherlock’s sheets but he was too cold and sleepy to care.

John lay down on his side, keeping his knees tucked in against his chest to try and maximize his body heat. He told himself he was just going to shut his eyes for a moment while he waited for Sherlock to come back, but Sherlock’s sheets were so soft under his cheek, the weight of the duvet pressing in around him like a cocoon, warming him up much quicker than he would have thought possible.

By the time he heard the creak of Sherlock’s bedroom door opening and the sound of soft footsteps by the side of the bed, he had no idea how long he’d been asleep.

The light on the bedside table had been switched off.

John lifted his head in the darkness, felt the crease the pillow had left in his cheek. His voice was
thick with sleep. “Sherlock?”

He felt the mattress shift as Sherlock climbed onto the bed behind him, and then there were soft lips against his hair, sliding, warm, down to the back of his neck.

“Mmm.” He pressed himself happily back against the touch. “How long was I asleep?”

John felt a hand lift the duvet and then a long warm body was pressing in against his back, curling in around him. Sherlock was wearing a worn t-shirt and a pair of pajama bottoms. John felt the soft cotton press in against his back and shivered appreciatively at the added warmth.

A long arm threaded itself around his waist.

“Not long. Just about an hour.” Sherlock kept his lips against John’s neck. “The food should be here any minute, but if you want to keep sleeping…”

John shook his head, wrapped his own arm in against Sherlock’s, snuggling back in against the warmth of Sherlock’s long body. “No, but this is nice.”

The towel was still draped around John’s shoulders but the lower half of his body was completely bare beneath the duvet.

Sherlock hummed against him in agreement, his pajama-clad hips tucking in closer against John’s bare behind. “I brought you your clothes.” John wriggled his bum back in against Sherlock’s hips. “Although…”

The hand around John’s middle brushed lightly down his stomach, tracing his abdominal muscles. John felt his toes curl at the corresponding shudder of delight that went through him. The fingers of Sherlock’s hand circled his belly button, tangling in the hair beneath.

Sherlock bit softly at the back of his neck and John arched back into him with a sigh.

“I like having you like this.” Sherlock’s voice was a low rumble against John’s back. “Just you…” John felt Sherlock’s teeth scrape the sensitive skin, making the hair stand up on the back of his neck. “Against me.”

Sherlock reached between them to tug the towel off John’s shoulders. He tossed it to the end of the bed and then pulled John in against him, mouthing at the vertebrae at the top of John’s spine, spreading his palm over the expanse of John’s belly. His hand was so large his fingertips could span the distance between John’s hips. John pushed forward into the heat of Sherlock’s palm, felt his desire rising.

Sherlock pulled John tighter against him with a growl, pressed his hips in against John’s arse, and John’s breath was one long hiss as he felt the bulge of Sherlock’s growing erection slide along the crease of his arse.

Suddenly, he was wide-awake.

He almost couldn’t believe his own body’s ability to become aroused again so soon—but even more shocking was Sherlock’s capacity to do the same. Sherlock, whose needs were so regimented, whose body was always so carefully under his control, was now seemingly overrun with his desire for John.

John, in turn, had never felt so affected by another person. In all his past relationships, even in the giddy, early days of uncontrollable lust—it had never been like this. What he felt for Sherlock—what he’d always felt, and what it had grown into now, was nothing like John had ever experienced.
The realization was staggering. It made the desire in John’s belly unfurl in a long, shuddering sweep of heat.

He reached down to thread his fingers through Sherlock’s and push their joined hands down towards his cock, but Sherlock stilled the movement.

John felt Sherlock press his forehead in against the back of John’s neck, felt the long exhalation of Sherlock’s sigh.

“Now isn’t—I’m sorry… I should let you get dressed.” Sherlock squeezed John’s fingers where they were clenched under his own before disentangling their hands and rolling away. “You should eat something.”

John let out an equally shaky sigh, struggling to slow his pounding heart. Part of him wanted to argue but then another, wiser part of him realized that the weakness in his body wasn’t just from desire. He blew out a long breath. “You’re right.”

He was still struggling to process the revelation that Sherlock could make him go from sleepy contentment to the razor edge of arousal in under ten seconds.

John threw an arm up over his eyes. “God, what’s wrong with us?”

He meant it as a joke but it came out sounding strangely harsh.

Sherlock didn’t respond.

Something about Sherlock’s silence felt tense—uneasy.

John peered at him from under his arm. He could see the silhouette of Sherlock’s face in the darkness. His mouth had a grim set to it.

“Sherlock…”

“I boarded up the window in your room. Cleaned up the mess. I’ll have Mrs. Hudson call tomorrow and order a new pane of glass. You’re…” Sherlock paused. When he began speaking again, his voice was halting. “You’re welcome to sleep in here until… well, I mean I’m happy to sleep on the couch until the window goes in, but I just wanted you to know—”

“Sherlock.” John reached out and seized Sherlock’s hand.

Sherlock stopped speaking.

John spoke slowly and deliberately. “I’d like to sleep in here with you. Even if my window wasn’t shattered, I would still like that.” He squeezed Sherlock’s fingers gently, his thumb brushing over his knuckles. “If you’ll have me.”

He felt Sherlock noticeably relax beside him.

“Good… I… that’s good.” John saw the muscles in Sherlock’s throat tense as he swallowed. “I want that, too.”

John flipped over onto his belly and dragged himself across the bed until he was right next to Sherlock. He put his weight on his elbows and leaned down over him. “Sherlock…”

Sherlock’s eyes were fixed on his face with rapt attention. His irises were pale grey in the darkness.
“Do you know...?” John had to concentrate very hard to keep from staring at Sherlock’s utterly lovely mouth, which was turned slightly down at the corners in an almost-pout. “Do you know how much I want you? I don’t just mean right now.” John shook his head, eyes never leaving Sherlock’s. “All the time. Every minute. Every day. Not just now. Ever since—” John drew a breath. “Not just since all that business at the pool, but long before that. Before I even realized it. I think I’ve wanted you since the moment I met you. Since you deduced my military history in that bloody lab at St. Bart’s. I had no idea what had happened to me but I remember thinking—I’ve never met anyone as interesting as this. Dear God, I hope I get to see him again.”

Sherlock’s eyes, which had been flickering rapidly back and forth over John’s face, had gone utterly still.

He stared up at John in the darkness, not blinking, eyes impossibly wide.

“So if you ever feel... well, conflicted as to how I feel about you, don’t. That doesn’t mean I don’t get bloody irritated with you a good deal of the time, that you’re not a hugely arrogant prat, that you don’t drive me round the bloody twist, but... what I’m trying to say is.” John swallowed hard, realized this was coming out all wrong. “I’m here to stay. If you want me.”

John ducked his head, breaking Sherlock’s gaze, feeling suddenly self-conscious. God, between the two of them, they’d never succeed at communicating an emotion without falling apart.

“John—”

John glanced up at the desperate note in Sherlock’s voice. He felt Sherlock’s hands grip his elbows. John watched the line of Sherlock’s mouth twist sharply.

“I do.” Sherlock’s voice shook, but his grip on John’s elbows was like iron. “I do want you. Please, John—”

John didn’t let him finish. He couldn’t help himself. He pressed his mouth to the trembling line of Sherlock’s and tried to convey all of his yearning, all of his tenderness, in the touch of his lips.

He heard Sherlock make a sound like a sob beneath him, and rise up on his elbows to push himself closer to John. He let go of John’s arms and reached up to cup John’s face between his hands, kissing him back with equal tenderness and fervor.

It did things to John when Sherlock held his face like that—as though it were something immeasurably precious and breakable, something he was desperate to possess and protect all at once.

John put his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders and opened his mouth against Sherlock’s, his thumbs rubbing over the bones that stood out under his thin t-shirt, his tongue slipping into the heat of Sherlock’s mouth as Sherlock parted his lips.

Each time he kissed Sherlock felt like the first time all over again—like he was discovering something new about him with every brush, every press of their mouths together.

Sherlock raised himself to a sitting position. John crouched on his knees beside him, felt the duvet slipping off his shoulders. The touch of the chill air on his naked skin made a shiver run through him, but it wasn’t enough to pull his mouth from Sherlock’s.

They stayed like that for minutes, drinking each other in, lost in the sensation of one another, only breaking apart when from a long way off they heard the sound of the doorbell downstairs and Mrs. Hudson’s distant shout a few moments after.
Sherlock pulled back, his breathing shallow, his eyelids heavy, a dreamy expression on his face, but John was reluctant to let him go. He chased Sherlock’s mouth with his own, pulling Sherlock’s lip in between his teeth and sucking on it lightly.

“This lip,” John growled from between his teeth. “This lip will be the death of me.”

He let it go but he couldn’t stop himself pressing another kiss to it—just the bottom lip.

He felt Sherlock’s mouth curl into a smile under his. “Oh really? You’d choose the bottom over the top?”

John leaned back a little to consider, his breathing unsteady. “You’re right. Jesus.” He pressed back in with a groan, letting his tongue trace over the dramatic dip in Sherlock’s upper lip. “How could I have said that? Forgive me,” he whispered, pressing the smallest of kisses to the top lip.

He felt Sherlock’s chuckle low in his chest.

“John.” His hands slid down to grasp John’s bare shoulders. John was still murmuring to Sherlock’s top lip. “Curry, John. Remember?”

“Mmm… I do want that curry.”

John reluctantly sat back. “Are we ok though, do you—?”

Sherlock nodded, his dark eyes sparking in the dim light. “I heard you.”

“Boys!”

The sound of Mrs. Hudson’s voice echoed from the front hall. John had been so lost in Sherlock’s mouth he hadn’t even heard her footsteps coming up the stairs.

“Shit!”

John reached around to snatch the duvet back over his shoulders and then let out a snort of undignified laughter at the frantic expression on Sherlock’s face as he scrambled to get out of the bed.

“Coming!” Sherlock yelled, almost tripping as he came around the bed to the door.

“Are you both decent?”

“NO!” Sherlock hollered, skidding around the corner so fast to get out of the room he had to hang onto the doorframe.

John lost it at that. He threw himself face forward into the comforter and laughed and laughed.

Sherlock returned a few minutes later, breathless, his hair sticking up in the back from the way he’d been lying on the pillow, grinning triumphantly.

John was still sitting in the center of the bed with the comforter thrown over his shoulders, chuckling weakly.

Sherlock came over to the bed, his grin transforming in a few footsteps into a sly smile.

“What’s funny?” he asked, climbing onto the bed to kiss John’s laughing mouth.
“You,” John said, reaching up to smooth a stray piece of hair back into place.

Sherlock’s smile became a mock-pout. “Do you really find me so comical, John?”

John kissed him again, unable to keep the smile off his face. “I really do. And I love you all the more for it.”

Sherlock stilled against John’s mouth.

John felt his heartbeat speed up. “Sherlock?”

Sherlock leaned back, his eyes on John’s face, and at the look in Sherlock’s eyes John felt his heart turn over in his chest.

“What did you say?” Sherlock whispered, all traces of humor gone from his face—his expression utterly vulnerable; laid bare.

“I said I love you.”

John hadn’t even intended to say it. It was something he always felt—it was so much a part of his knowledge of himself that he hadn’t even had to think it through. So it had just come out. John hadn’t thought much of it but based on the intensity of Sherlock’s reaction of course it occurred to John that Sherlock maybe didn’t intuitively know that this was true. John was now fiercely glad he had said it.

John wanted to kiss Sherlock again, so badly, but he didn’t want to lose sight of the firestorm of different emotions rapidly flickering over Sherlock’s face—shock, delight, wonder, disbelief, and something deeper, something more profound than any one emotion John could name, rendering the sharp planes of Sherlock’s face into something infinitely softer. John had never seen him look so young, so vulnerable.

He reached up a hand to cup Sherlock’s cheek, his own voice dropping to a whisper. “Of course, I love you. God, Sherlock—”

John watched Sherlock shut his eyes, a single groove appearing between his eyebrows as he did so. John recognized the expression on Sherlock’s face. It was the face John had only seen a few precious times before now. It was the expression he usually made just before he came, when he looked as though his inner world was shattering, as though he was in excruciating pain.

“What is it, love?” John stroked the groove in Sherlock’s cheek, worried. “What is it, love?”

The expression on Sherlock’s face intensified at John’s form of address. He gave a little gasp, his mouth falling open, but still he kept his eyes shut.

John felt his heart do a series of somersaults in response to this and promised himself he would call Sherlock ‘love’ every chance he got, every day for the rest of their lives together.

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock leaned into his touch with a soft sound like a sigh.

“You love me,” he breathed, his voice cupping the words the way you would hold something utterly fragile, utterly breakable in your palms.

“I do,” John repeated, and this time, he couldn’t stop himself from kissing Sherlock. He leaned in
and brushed his lips against Sherlock’s parted ones, so softly he could feel that Sherlock’s lips were shaking.

“I don’t know why I haven’t said it until now,” he murmured against Sherlock’s mouth. “But I’ll say it every day from now on so that you remember.”

John felt Sherlock’s breathing hitch against him and he pressed back in with his mouth, with more pressure this time so that Sherlock’s lips parted beneath his own.

He could taste Sherlock’s shocked delight, could feel his wonder in the way his tongue moved against John’s, could hear it in the heartbroken little sound he made in the base of his throat when John moved against him.

John pulled back, breathing hard, and pressed his forehead against Sherlock’s.

Sherlock’s eyes were still closed.

“You love me,” he whispered again, the reverence in his voice causing John’s heart to twist sharply in his chest.

Sherlock opened his eyes, and looking into them, John felt like he was falling through the sky and into cool, clear water—the kind of water that only exists in hot, sunny places in the Mediterranean, where you can see all the way down to the bottom without a ripple—where sea and sky become indistinguishable.

“I was saving that moment,” Sherlock said softly, “Putting it someplace I would never forget.”

“Oh yeah?” John said, resisting the urge to pull Sherlock into his lap and kiss him again. “Where’s that?”

Sherlock’s face lit up in a smile. He pressed his forehead harder into John’s. “A very special place.”

John couldn’t help kissing him again. This time the kiss was slow, lingering, hinting at things that were to come. John pulled back, breathless. “I hope you’ll tell me about it someday. But for now… I think that curry might be getting cold.”

Sherlock straightened up, and then crawled over to the end of the bed.

“I brought your clothes,” he said, bringing them to John and laying them beside him. “You should get dressed so you don’t catch cold.”

John didn’t think his heart could take any more displays of tenderness from Sherlock. Apparently he had been wrong. He wondered if it was possible for someone’s heart to actually melt.

John scooted forward until he was sitting on the edge of the bed, so he could have more room to maneuver.

“Heart.” Sheriff took John’s pants and knelt between his knees. “Let me.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of John’s thigh and guided first one foot, then the other into the material before pulling them up John’s thighs. John lifted his hips and Sherlock tugged them gently into place, ducking his head to kiss the waistband where it was stretched over John’s hips.

John’s throat went tight with emotion.

Sherlock took John’s t-shirt and pulled it down over his head. John let Sherlock guide his arms
through the sleeves, easing the material with care over the bandage on John’s upper arm.

He didn’t know why he was letting Sherlock dress him. He was perfectly capable of dressing himself, but something about Sherlock’s movements, the sincerity of his gestures—it was as if he was trying to communicate something that maybe he couldn’t say.

With every passing minute, John felt himself more and more affected by this display of tenderness.

When Sherlock bent down to kiss the arch of his foot before pulling on his sock, John had to put a hand up to cover his mouth, he was so overcome.

Sherlock didn’t notice, his dark head was bent over John’s other foot, pulling the sock into place.

John swallowed and lifted his chin, blinking hard, glad that Sherlock didn’t see. He didn’t think he had the words to explain how this was affecting him.

Sherlock had brought one of his favorite jumpers—the cream-colored cable knit one, and it was the last article of clothing that Sherlock lovingly settled into place. He leaned in and placed one final kiss on John’s mouth, his hands warm on John’s knees, and then taking John’s hands, he helped pull him to his feet.

“Ready?”

Sherlock’s face was doing a strange dance between serious and delighted. It appeared as though he was trying to hide his excitement and failing badly.

“Why have you suddenly gone on all twinkly-eyed?”

Sherlock didn’t answer, he just tugged on John’s hands. “Come on, John. There is cold curry at stake!”

Smiling stupidly, John let Sherlock drag him out the door and into the living room.

John stopped dead in his tracks at the sight that greeted him.

The interior of 221B was neater than he’d ever seen it.

The piles of papers and random objects that usually threatened to spill over the surface of the desk in the middle of the room had been tidied up and set off to one side.

The clutter on the coffee table and the odd assortment of objects that lived under the windows had mysteriously vanished.

The floor looked—John squinted and stared harder—had it actually been swept?

The mantle had been cleared of all but the skull and the customary clock and bust of Goethe. A fire crackled cheerily in the grate.

The cleared-off desk had been set with two place settings, with two empty wine glasses glinting in the low light from what must have been two dozen candles, flickering softly, lining every available surface.

John stood and gaped.

Sherlock fluttered nervously beside him, a note of anxiety in his voice. “Do you like it?”
John turned to him and stared. “When did you have time to do all this?”

Sherlock ducked his head, a small, pleased smile beginning to pull at his lips. “When you were sleeping.”

“How did you—?”

“Mrs. Hudson helped. A little. Just with the cleaning. But the candles were my idea.”

Sherlock was practically vibrating with excitement. John had never seen him look so gleeful over something un-crime related.

“Sherlock, this is…” John couldn’t seem to finish a sentence. He shook his head. Once again, he couldn’t speak past the tightness in his throat.

Sherlock hovered closer, his expression still flickering rapidly between ecstatically pleased and nervous. “Yes, John?”

“Come here.”

John pulled Sherlock to him by the grip on his hand, reaching up to slide one hand around the back of his neck and pull his mouth down to John’s.

He kissed Sherlock, softly, slowly, pouring his gratitude into the lingering slide of his lips.

He pulled back, breathless. “It’s absolutely lovely. Thank you.”

John moved to kiss him again, but Sherlock stopped him with one hand on his chest, his eyes sparking with barely concealed pleasure. “Curry, John, remember?”

“Mmm, yes. Curry.” John could smell its heavenly fragrance filling the flat and felt his stomach give a corresponding growl of hunger.

He started toward the kitchen where the fragrant smell was emanating from but Sherlock stopped him, turned him around, and pushed him back towards the table. “No, no, no. You go sit down. I’ll get the food.”

John put a hand up over his mouth to hide his smile. Sherlock’s nervous attentiveness was so heartfelt, so genuine, it was almost too much to take.

He half-expected Sherlock to race around and pull his chair out for him but Sherlock had already retreated to the kitchen.

John sat and stared around him again in dumbfounded disbelief. He never would have suspected. Sherlock Holmes, a romantic.

There was an unopened bottle of wine beside the two place settings, and looking at it, John realized he recognized the label. It was from the same vineyard as the wine Sherlock had served them the night he had come back from New Zealand. The grateful wine merchant must have given Sherlock several bottles.

At the memory of that night, John felt a stream of different emotions fill his chest. God, he had been so uncertain then, so filled with agonized longing. If only he could go back and reassure himself as to what Sherlock really felt for him—well, he never would have believed it though would he? Which was the problem all along, John reflected. His own profound doubt that Sherlock could possibly feel
the same way about him was what kept him from even asking the question for so long.

John reached for the unopened bottle.

“Shall I open this?” he called into the kitchen.

“Yes!” Sherlock hollered back, and John reflected, now with a distinctly pleasant sensation in his chest, how strange it was to be the one sitting in the living room yelling at Sherlock in the kitchen, instead of the other way around.

He uncorked the wine and filled both their glasses.

Sherlock returned with two bulging bags of steaming containers. He began to pull them out, one by one, and unveil them ceremoniously in front of John. In addition to green curry, Sherlock had ordered all of John’s favorite things, and then half the items on the menu besides.

There was far too much food.

John piled his plate. He began to eat while Sherlock was still pulling the lids off various containers.

John almost shut his eyes in bliss. He couldn’t remember the last time food had tasted so good.

To John’s quiet delight, Sherlock also filled his plate and began to eat with steady vigor.

They ate for a while in silence and John was glad for the chance to not have to concentrate on anything but the food in front of him. It felt like days since he’d eaten, which he realized after a moment of reflection, it almost had been.

John was halfway through his second plate, and more able to spare his attention now that his immediate hunger had been satisfied.

He glanced up at Sherlock as a thought occurred to him.

“Does Mrs. Hudson know that we…?” He coughed awkwardly. “That the ah… nature of our relationship has changed?”

John saw Sherlock purse his lips as if to try and keep himself from grinning, but when his eyes connected with John’s they were full of amusement. “These flats have never been very sound proof. What do you think?”

John felt his cheeks fill slowly with color. “Bloody hell,” he muttered, reaching for his water glass to take a long drink.

“She’s thrilled, obviously.” Sherlock said, with just a hint of smugness in his voice. “Said she knew all along, that it was only a matter of time.”

John shook his head, unable to meet Sherlock’s eyes. He was slightly surprised by his own embarrassment, but when he thought back over all the sex they’d had in the last two days, how loud he’d been…

“What do you know about sound-proofing floors?” John asked, this time reaching for his wine glass.

Sherlock threw his head back and laughed.

John looked up at him then, and realized how long it had been since he’d heard Sherlock really laugh. He felt warmth flood his chest at the sound. God, he kept thinking it wasn’t possible for him
to love this man any more than he already did, but every new experience he had seemed to prove him wrong.

They continued eating, and John saw, again to his quiet delight, that Sherlock was actually drinking his wine.

The question came out of John’s mouth before he could really think about it. “What you said before… that night… about not appreciating fine wines? Was that true?”

Sherlock looked up, startled, his face chasing through a number of different expressions before settling on one that was filled with regret.

“In part. I know a lot about wine—it’s useful, has been useful for a number of cases, but I don’t drink it often. It’s rare that I let myself… indulge in something like that. Doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate it though, under the right circumstances. I actually enjoy it quite a bit.”

John watched Sherlock’s long fingers moving meditatively up and down the stem of his wine glass.

He knew it wasn’t fair—he knew he had been just as reticent about his feelings, just as guarded with Sherlock as Sherlock had been with him—more so, in fact. But it still filled him with a throb of wounded rage to think back to that night, and the way Sherlock had seemed to draw him out, how much it seemed Sherlock was coming onto him, only to leave him so suddenly, feeling more conflicted and confused than ever.

It struck him that Sherlock’s wording—*under the right circumstances*—meant that that night had not been one of those times. Presumably, Sherlock had wanted to stay perfectly alert in order to adequately gauge the results of his experiment.

That was the part that really rankled him, John realized, the feeling that Sherlock had been testing him, like a specimen, seeing how far he could push John until he cracked under the pressure, until he gave way to his own desires.

Sherlock must have sensed John’s disquiet. John heard Sherlock shift in his chair, lean forward across the table. He started speaking, his voiced filled with hesitation.

“Actually that’s… part of the reason for…” Sherlock cleared his throat. John looked up at him, saw Sherlock gesture with a nervous hand to the surrounding room. “All this. I thought it might be nice to um… I mean, I was hoping that maybe we could… well. Try that night again.”

John looked up at Sherlock and their eyes connected.

“Preferably with different results.”

John felt a bolt of desire run through him at the look in Sherlock’s eyes. He saw Sherlock swallow heavily, saw the muscles in his throat shift as he did so.

In the low light of the surrounding candles, Sherlock looked lovelier than John had ever seen him.

He was certain Sherlock would disagree with him. He was wearing one of his most threadbare t-shirts, had probably pulled it on without thinking in his haste to get everything ready while John slept. His hair had dried in softer curls than usual, and was still in slight disarray from when he’d been lying beside John earlier. His eyes were full of a mixture of emotions—apprehension, contrition, desire.

But more than any of that, what struck John was that the expression on his face was still full of that
soft, open look; that look that John realized—with a sudden pang of feeling—was only for him.

In his worn t-shirt, slight bruising still evident on his face from where John had hit him, with his disheveled curls, John had never felt more desire for Sherlock than he did now.

He reached for his glass of wine, saw his own hand trembling slightly, and took a long sip.

“I have to ask you something.” John set his glass back down, licked his lips.

Sherlock leaned in across the table. “Anything.”

“Were you…” John stared at the stem of his own wine glass, unable to meet Sherlock’s eyes.

“Would you have kissed me that night? If we hadn’t been interrupted? If Lestrade hadn’t called about the case?”

Sherlock leaned back in his chair.

John looked up at him; saw a furrow emerging between his brows.

Sherlock was quiet for a long while.

John waited.

“I don’t know,” he said at last, softly. He looked up at John, and John saw his expression was full of conflicted remorse. “I hadn’t planned on it. The point was to ascertain how you really felt, to confirm that you were indeed… physically attracted to me, but I’m afraid…” Sherlock dropped his eyes to his lap. “I might have done. If Lestrade hadn’t phoned.” Sherlock’s eyes flickered upward once again and John saw this time that they were dark with longing. “I wanted to.”

John felt a wave of corresponding desire and remorse at Sherlock’s words, and was thankful all over again for Sherlock’s recklessness on the ship. He felt the last of his anger melt away. He really only had himself to thank for the weeks of silent suffering. If only he had had the courage to talk to Sherlock about his feelings… things might have been different.

“You said…” John swallowed hard, struggling to concentrate in the wake of the burst of desire that Sherlock’s words, Sherlock’s eyes had incited in him. “Earlier, you said I wasn’t the only one who’s been longing in silence. How long? How long have you felt this way about me? When did you realize?”

Sherlock dropped his eyes and John lost himself momentarily in the lovely shapes Sherlock’s downcast eyelashes made against his cheeks, the spiky shadows they cast in the low golden light.

“In some ways, I think it started the first time I laid eyes on you in St. Bart’s. I didn’t realize it then, of course, not consciously, but I knew—I knew there was something about you.”

Sherlock fell quiet for a moment, turning his wine glass on the table in a slow circle.

“I didn’t realize my physical attraction for you until after the pool, until that day I stopped you on your way out of the shower. The way you were looking at me… suddenly I could see it all, all your desire for me simmering under the surface, so much of it that I couldn’t understand how you were holding it in. It… affected me, seeing you like that. When you left for New Zealand I was… distraught. I didn’t know what to make of it. I haven’t…”

John watched Sherlock’s fingers tighten suddenly on the stem of the wine glass. His eyebrows were knitted together with some intense emotion.
“As you are probably well-aware I’m not used to… things like this; feelings of this magnitude. It… it was unsettling. I didn’t… handle it well.”

John felt a stab of sympathy, thinking of Sherlock alone in the flat for two weeks, realizing in a sudden blaze of feeling how he really felt about John, utterly uncertain what to do about it. It occurred to him that Sherlock was probably even more unsettled by the revelation than he had been—at least John had experience with these kinds of things, feeling sexual desire, falling in love. As far as he knew, Sherlock had kept himself very far from anything like this for the majority of his life.

Based on Sherlock’s experience in bed John surmised that Sherlock must have had past sexual partners, but they had probably been few and far between, and they certainly did not have any kind of emotional bearing on Sherlock’s life—of that much John was certain. It was the emotional side of their sex that seemed the most overwhelming to Sherlock. John guessed that this was probably because Sherlock wasn’t used to experiencing the two things in tandem.

“I couldn’t… I couldn’t stop thinking about it, but I still wasn’t certain of the way you felt, or so I told myself. I needed to be certain before I could even begin to sort out my own feelings—certain that you felt the same way.”

The furrow between Sherlock’s brows deepened. His eyes were still focused on the glass between his fingers.

“And then… well, I wasn’t sure what to do with the information once I had it. It was… more overwhelming than I’d anticipated, knowing that I… that you…” Sherlock drew a sharp breath, and now John wished he would look up and see the sympathy in John’s own gaze. “It was all too much. So I threw myself into the case instead of dealing with any of it.”

Looking back, it all made so much sense.

Of course, it was typical for Sherlock to throw himself headfirst into a case as interesting as the Briggs murders but John remembered Sherlock’s distance in those days immediately following his return from New Zealand, how he’d only returned to the flat for a few hours during the day when John wasn’t there. Based on what he knew now, it made perfect sense that Sherlock was avoiding his feelings; avoiding the new information he had about John.

Sherlock had been more manic than John had seen him in months—he remembered coming home that night to find Sherlock half-deranged with exhaustion and lack of food, poring over the data to try and find the information to arrest Briggs.

And then of course, Sherlock had almost killed himself in his sleep-deprived mania, tearing his leg open on that barbed wire fence.

At the memory of it, John felt his throat tense up with panic, his fingers tightening to fists. They had been very lucky that the paramedics had been so quick to respond. If they had come any later…

John pushed the dark thought away.

The cluster of candles on the table beside them was throwing its gentle light over their plates, making little star-shaped patterns on the woodwork. John followed the light to where it fell over Sherlock’s hands, which he saw had fallen quiet.

He had one more question for Sherlock but he didn’t want to push him too hard. He knew none of this was easy for him.

“There’s one more thing…”
Sherlock’s eyes lifted to his and John tried to fill his gaze with gentleness.

“The night you came back from the hospital, the night you were drugged… do you remember it?”

Sherlock dropped his eyes.

“Yes, I remember.”

“Was that…?” John fought the well of frustration that rose in him, the memories at that night that still felt so painful, so fresh—his agony over that moment. He clenched his fists on his thighs. “Was that another test?”

“No.” Sherlock’s voice was sharp with some emotion John couldn’t place. He looked back up at John and John felt his own anguish evaporate in the wake of the pain he saw in Sherlock’s eyes. “That was—that was me, wanting you. The drug, it—that wasn’t a test.”

John reached for his wine glass, and took a long drink.

He set it back on the table and looked up to see Sherlock’s eyes on his face, his expression still full of grief.

John reached out and took hold of Sherlock’s hand where it lay motionless beside his wine glass. He squeezed Sherlock’s fingers between his own, saw the crease between Sherlock’s eyebrows deepen in confusion.

“Look, I know I’m not…” John pressed his lips together, tried again. “I’m not always very good at… talking about things, and I know… I know this stuff is hard for you. Harder for you than it is for me. And I’m sure sometimes it feels like I’m pushing you but when I do that, it’s just because I don’t always know what’s going through that bloody great brain of yours, so sometimes—” His voice was getting thick. “Sometimes you have to tell me, alright?”

Sherlock nodded, his fingers limp in John’s. John squeezed them again.

“And I know I could profit from a dose of my own advice. I do. If we’re gonna make this work—” John gestured between them with the hand that wasn’t holding Sherlock’s. “Then we’re going to have to… do this, sometimes,” he finished awkwardly.

“I know,” Sherlock said, and he looked so broken open with remorse John couldn’t stand it.

“Hey,” he said, letting go of Sherlock’s hand so he could push back his chair and stand up. “Hey, come here.”

John came around the side of the table, and pulled Sherlock to his feet. Sherlock let him, his eyes huge and slightly stunned.

John pulled Sherlock by his hands until they were both standing in front of Sherlock’s chair. John sat and then pulled Sherlock with him into his lap.

He wasn’t sure what led him to Sherlock’s chair, and he hoped for one wild, uncertain moment that Sherlock wouldn’t feel demeaned by the gesture, but then Sherlock was twisting in against him, pushing his face into John’s neck.

John’s arms came up around him instinctively.

“Hey.” John pressed a kiss to the top of Sherlock’s drying curls. He could feel Sherlock’s breath,
warm and rapid against the skin of his throat. “Hey, it’s all right. We’re both idiots, but we’ve made it this far, haven’t we?”

Sherlock tightened his arms around John’s shoulders, hiding his face.

“Hey? Haven’t we?”

Sherlock let out a shaking breath.

John reached up and began stroking the hair back from Sherlock’s forehead. He felt Sherlock melt a little against him.

John thought he might break apart with tenderness.

Sherlock pulled his face away from John’s neck, leaning back in his arms until John could see his face. His eyes were luminous with pain.

John kept his arms around him, studied the dramatic shadows on Sherlock’s face, the grooves under his cheeks, around his mouth, thrown into sharp relief from the light of the fire.

“When I came back from the hospital that night… my inhibitions were lowered. I wasn’t… in control of myself. And to be perfectly honest, I don’t remember all of it.”

John watched Sherlock’s jaw tense, his eyes focused somewhere over John’s shoulder, gaze sharpening as he re-examined the memories.

“But I remember kissing you.” Sherlock’s eyes returned to John’s and it was like being struck in the chest, there was such intensity in Sherlock’s gaze. “I remember pulling you down against me. I remember you stopped resisting then, and I thought, ‘He wants it, he wants this,’ and the way your mouth felt, the way you fit against me—it confirmed everything I felt. There was only one thought in my mind—my noisy, chaotic, over-stimulated mind—and it was as clear as a bell: this is the way things are meant to be.”

John sucked in his breath, overcome.

“But it wasn’t a conscious decision I was making—coming onto you like that. It was just… what I wanted.” Sherlock’s eyes fell away again, staring into the fire. “I’d like to tell you I never would never have done that had I been in my right mind but… then I’d be lying, wouldn’t I?” Sherlock’s eyes flickered back to John’s, this time, full of shame. “That’s exactly what I did to you the night of the fire.”

“Sherlock…”

“No, John, listen. I know it doesn’t excuse my behavior but you should know that… I was conflicted. I knew you wanted me, but I couldn’t understand why you weren’t acting on your desires. It didn’t… it didn’t make sense. But I knew you were uncomfortable with it—I knew you wanted to pretend like it wasn’t… like it wasn’t happening. You wanted to ignore it. So I endeavored to ignore it, too.”

John felt guilt burst hot and painful in his chest—like a wound opening that he thought had closed over.

“But I couldn’t… I couldn’t do it. I wanted you too much.”

John felt Sherlock’s hands clench compulsively in the material of his jumper. His eyes were haunted,
once again fixed on some distant place over John’s shoulder.

“Hey,” John rubbed his hand over Sherlock’s back, in an effort to soothe him. “Hey, look at me.” Sherlock’s eyes shifted back to John’s and John had to fight the desire to kiss the sorrow off of Sherlock’s mouth. He needed to say something first. “You don’t have to keep apologizing for that. God—if there’s anyone who should be apologizing it’s me. I should’ve… I should’ve trusted you. I should’ve had faith that you wouldn’t reject me; that you might feel the same way. But… somehow it was all tangled up with Moriarty.”

John felt Sherlock tense at the name, and he dropped his hand lower, smoothing small circles into Sherlock’s lower back. Sherlock let his head rest against John’s shoulder.

“I felt…” John paused and shook his head, as if he could shake away the memories. “He got inside my head—just like you said. He made me doubt that you could ever want me. But it started with my own self-doubt. He must have seen it in me, and known he could exploit it to destroy me from the inside out.”

John fell quiet, his hand still circling Sherlock’s back. He stared into the fire, felt all the dark thoughts of the past two months licking at the edge of his consciousness like the flames climbing the logs. He shut his eyes—tried to let it all go.

John felt Sherlock shift against him, curling closer. John felt the heat of his breath when he spoke, his voice low, full of intent. “What I said earlier, I meant it.”

John pressed a kiss to Sherlock’s forehead. “What, love?”

He felt Sherlock’s small intake of breath at the word and renewed his resolution to say it to Sherlock as often as he could—more often than that, if possible.

“Everywhere he touched you... I want to erase every bad memory with a good one. With the memory of my mouth on you.”

John pushed the hair off of his forehead, felt Sherlock cling tighter to him like an angry kitten. “You have, love. You did.”

“No,” Sherlock growled, pushing his face into John’s shoulder. “No, it wasn’t enough. I need to touch all of you... I want to undo all the pain that he caused you. I need to make it better.”

John could feel Sherlock’s breathing, rapid and unsteady against his neck.

“Shh... you will. It’s all right.”

“No, it isn’t!” Sherlock pushed himself off of John’s chest to look down at him, eyes blazing. “John—”

“Yes, love?”

John saw the look in Sherlock’s eyes shift at the word. “I need you to know how I want you.”

John felt the low warmth in his belly crackle back to life at Sherlock’s words. He shifted his hands on Sherlock’s back until they were resting on his hips. “Then, tell me.”

“I spent so long thinking about you.”

John suddenly found he couldn’t quite catch his breath. “Did you?”
“You asked me yesterday, or I should say, the implications of your words led me to believe that you were asking me whether I touched myself… thinking of you.”

John nodded, his lips parted, his eyes fastened to Sherlock’s, unwavering.

“Those two weeks when you were away, I… let myself examine how deep it went—my desire for you—as an experiment, just to see. It was…” Sherlock shut his eyes and John watched the slender line reappear between his eyebrows. “Intolerable.”

John licked dry lips. “How do you mean?”

Sherlock opened his eyes again and the blue surrounding his pupils was the color of liquid sapphire.

“My desire for you…” Sherlock’s voice was hoarse. “John, I spent three days imagining everything I could do to you. I didn’t come out of my room.”

John could feel his heart hammering against his breastbone. He shifted Sherlock on his lap, hoping the bulge of his erection wasn’t becoming invasive.

“That’s…” John swallowed. “What did you…?”

“Everything,” Sherlock said, and his eyes conveyed the truth behind this statement. “Everything.”

John felt a shudder run through him at Sherlock’s words.

“Do you know why…?” Sherlock’s eyes dropped from John’s eyes to settle on his mouth. The move was so deliberate, so erotic, John felt a corresponding jolt run down his cock. “Why I always ask you to look at me when we’re having sex?”

Sherlock’s voice had lowered about three thousand octaves in the space of a minute.

John shifted in the chair, the warm weight of Sherlock against his groin so lovely and heavy—he wanted to press up into it, soothe the ache of his trapped erection. John licked his lips. “No, I don’t, actually.”

“It’s the one thing I could never quite picture. How your eyes would look when I touched you. Your face shows so much—I can never predict how it will look in those moments. That’s my favorite part always. Seeing the look on your face as I pull you apart.”

“Jesus fucking—”

John seized Sherlock’s face in his hands, interrupting his own exclamation to lick his way into Sherlock’s mouth, his tongue pushing into the warm heat, desperate to taste him, to feel Sherlock against him.

Without breaking the kiss, Sherlock shifted in his lap, turning and lifting himself until he was fully straddling John’s lap, his thighs on either side of John’s, pushing John back against the chair with the force of his mouth.

He kissed John like they’d simultaneously never kissed before and this was the last time they would ever kiss again, as if the destruction of the world was at their back, and he and John were going to go up in a column of pure flame.

The sweet press of his mouth, the scrape of his teeth, John lost himself to all of it—he never wanted to forget this moment with Sherlock warm and heavy in his lap, pushing his erection into the heat of
John’s belly, his hands cradling John’s neck.

John heard himself moan into the kiss and he pushed his hips up closer into the weight of Sherlock, desperate for some friction against his cock.

Sherlock broke away from John’s mouth and began kissing his way down John’s throat, wet, hungry, sliding kisses.

He licked at the hollow at the base of John’s throat, tugging at the collar of John’s jumper, pulling it down so he could lick the length of his collarbones.

John hissed, pressing his body up into the pressure of Sherlock’s mouth, his hands sliding back around to cup Sherlock’s arse.

He felt slightly overcome by how aroused he was—it was as though all his nerve-endings had been turned inside out—every brush of Sherlock’s lips, every wet press of his mouth resonated all through his body, so he could feel each touch everywhere at once, vibrating down to the center of himself, filling him up with warmth.

Sherlock’s hands were pushing his t-shirt and jumper up off his hips, baring the skin of his belly. John slid down a little in the chair to give Sherlock better access, pushing his hips up into Sherlock’s broad palms.

Sherlock bent low over him, his hands sliding around to hold John by the hips, his mouth descending to lick a burning trail down the curve of John’s belly to the groove where the waistband of his pants was stretched taut across his iliac crest.

Sherlock lapped at the hollowed skin, tugging the waistband of John’s pants aside to trace the bone where it curved down between his legs. John pushed his hands into Sherlock’s hair, his breath one long sigh at the feel of the soft curls beneath his fingers.

Sherlock was halfway to the floor already but at the feel of John’s fingers in his hair, the progress of his mouth halted and he gave a little gasp of surprised pleasure, sliding the rest of the way off John’s lap.

John parted his thighs and Sherlock moved between them, dropping fully to his knees, his hands digging in under the waistband of John’s trousers with renewed force.

John combed his fingers gently against Sherlock’s scalp and felt the rhythm of Sherlock’s breathing change against him, the rapid heat of his breath warm against the skin over John’s hip bones. He loved having his hair touched. John filed this information away for future use.

Sherlock looked up at John, his face flushed in the light of the fire, desperate with want.

There was a question in his eyes, and a longing so deep, John heard himself groan at the sight of it.

“John, can I—?”

John thrust up with his hips. “Yes, by all means. God, please.”

Even before John had finished speaking, Sherlock’s fingers were pulling apart the button on his trousers and tugging down the zip.

He felt Sherlock pull the material down his hips and then his broad palms were sliding up over the tensed muscles standing out in John’s thighs, his dark head bent in reverent contemplation over the
cock-shaped bulge in John’s pants.

John felt the heat of Sherlock’s breath traveling over the skin of his inner thigh as his mouth drew closer. John slid his fingers deeper into Sherlock’s hair, lifting his hips, but he felt Sherlock freeze against him abruptly, his fingers halting in their progress up John’s thighs.

John looked down to see what had made Sherlock pause and saw that Sherlock was staring at the wound on John’s inner thigh from Moriarty’s knife. The cut had not been deep but the mark was long and jagged and still very fresh. It stretched across the expanse of John’s inner thigh—raw and ugly looking.

John felt Sherlock’s breathing change against him.

He smoothed his fingers through the hair on Sherlock’s brow but the gesture did not have its usual calming effect. Sherlock’s fingers tensed on John’s thighs, his eyes unmoving from where they were fixed on the inside of John’s leg.

“Sherlock?”

John pushed his fingers through the hair on Sherlock’s forehead again, slower this time, and felt Sherlock shudder in response. His eyes slid up to John’s—dark with horror.

“You didn’t tell me everything, did you?”

“Sherlock—”

“What else? What else did he do?” Sherlock’s fingers were now gripping John’s thighs as though for dear life, his eyes full of savage rage. “Where else did he hurt you?”

John, embarrassed, felt his throat close up. He shook his head, uncertain why Sherlock’s reaction was suddenly dragging all his suffering up to the surface. The words ‘It was nothing’ seemed to catch in his throat and die.

“What did he say to you, John? When he gave you this? What was he planning to do to you? What would he have done if I hadn’t gotten there in time?”

John felt a shock of sorrow burst open in him at Sherlock’s words. There was no reason to be upset—the cut was negligible, John had suffered far worse injuries on more occasions than he could count. But Sherlock’s attention to that mark in particular trigged a wave of shame and terror in him so sudden it was like flipping a switch. John was flooded suddenly with the same visceral panic he had felt when Moriarty had tugged down his trousers.

The shame prompted by that gesture and the sexual implications of Moriarty’s threat had taken on horrific new resonance in that moment.

He reached down to drag the material back up his legs and over his hips.

John remembered so vividly the bite of the blade against the juncture of his hip and thigh—how tempted he had been to end it all rather than suffer the humiliation of it any longer, rather than risk the horror of what Moriarty had threatened to do. In that moment, he had tasted the bitter nearness of his own death in each hot, furious heartbeat.

It was then that he had lost all hope that Sherlock would come for him.

The reality of that fear was suddenly crowding in around him again—despite the fact that Sherlock
was here with him, kneeling at his feet, hands warm on John’s thighs, his eyes full of equal parts fury and tenderness.

All of a sudden he couldn’t catch his breath—the room felt too hot, his lungs deprived of air. He felt compelled to push Sherlock’s hands off his legs, to rise from the chair and run, away from the feeling that seemed to surround him on all sides, suffocating him.

“John?” Sherlock’s voice—filled with sudden fear—was followed by the slide of Sherlock’s palms up his thighs, until he was grasping John by his hands.

Sherlock leaned in and then gently, with surprising strength, he guided John from the chair down to the floor beside him.

John let himself be led, his body stiff, his mind a whirl of panic. He felt Sherlock put a hand against his back, as if to steady him.

John struggled to breathe deeply—in through his nose and out through his mouth. He’d had panic attacks before; he’d been trained to deal with this in his time as a doctor, as a soldier, in the aftermath of his injury.

But it was difficult; difficult to tell his body that the panic he was feeling wasn’t necessary, that the danger was behind him.

He clenched his hands into fists, tried to focus on his breathing.

“It’s all right.” Sherlock’s voice was low and soothing. John was grateful for it. He reached out for it in his panic like a lifeline in the dark. “You’re safe now. It’s all right.”

John concentrated on his breathing. Sherlock’s hand between his shoulder blades pressed in with gentle force, reminding John of his presence. He focused on that feeling, let it ground him. He shut his eyes, and felt his panic begin to recede.

Gradually, Sherlock’s voice broke the silence.

“I’m sorry.” The regret in Sherlock’s voice made John open his eyes. “I didn’t think. I shouldn’t have—” He took a breath, the low rumble of his voice halting, suddenly awkward, losing its confidence. “You don’t—You don’t have to tell me.”

John felt the hand between his shoulder blades tense, felt the stiff self-consciousness of Sherlock’s body where it was pressed against his—the pain in Sherlock’s voice at what he’d prompted, as sharp as the edge of a blade. John reached out and took Sherlock’s free hand in his.

“It’s all right,” he said, his own voice rough with emotion. He stared down at Sherlock’s hand in his, those long, pale, lovely fingers. “I’m pretty sure I would have had that reaction either way. It was bound to happen at some point.” John drew a ragged breath and blew it out, slowly. “Especially over that mark in particular.”

“John…” Sherlock turned against him with sudden urgency, his other hand slipping down to clutch at the one in John’s. His voice was full of desperation. “What did he do?”

John knew then, if he didn’t tell Sherlock exactly what happened Sherlock would drive himself mad imagining the possibilities, and what he imagined would be far worse than what actually took place.

John stared into the grate where the fire was still burning. He studied the pattern in the flames as they leapt and shivered over the iron. John lifted his chin.
“He spent a lot of time telling me what he was going to do to me. Like I said, he didn’t actually do all that much. It was just him talking. Telling me he couldn’t understand how I’d captured your interest. Telling me I was just meat, just flesh.” John paused, registering with a distant awareness the careful, neutral quality of his own voice. “He said he was going to stuff me, to skin me, to chop me to bits. But then he decided he’d rather damage me and send me back to you with one piece missing. The most important piece, he said.”

With another distant part of his brain, John registered that Sherlock’s stiffness beside him had grown worse. He was like a statue—his hands cold, unmoving under John’s.

John narrowed his eyes at the flames, pushed his chin higher.

“He said he was going to take the part of me that was most useful to you.” John swallowed hard around the lump of pain in his throat, forcing the words out. “I suppose it’s obvious what he meant.”

Sherlock’s fingers clenched compulsively against his. Otherwise, he remained motionless.

“That’s… that’s as far as he got. “That’s what…” John shut his eyes. He couldn’t keep the tremor from his voice. “That’s what he was doing when you showed up.”

John kept his eyes shut for several long minutes, focusing with all his concentration on the breath going in and out of his lungs. It was all behind him now. Sherlock had come. It was over, in the past. It had all turned out just fine.

It was several moments before John opened his eyes again, before he noticed that Sherlock still had not moved beside him.

John turned to look at him, worried.

Sherlock’s eyes were fixed on nothing—the same dark line evident between his brows. His face was full of a darkness John had never seen before. His breathing wasn’t right.

“How can you forgive me?”

“Sherlock—”

“How can you choose to stay with me when I put you in a situation like that? When it’s my fault you fall prey to the caprices of a madman who chained you up, who threatened you, mutilated you—”

Sherlock’s breathing was growing increasingly unsteady. “Who treated you like meat on a chopping block—*How* John?”

“Sherlock, listen to me—”

“I’m responsible for your suffering, John. *Me.* No one else. That whole elaborate set up—all those mutilated bodies—that house, the Perrault reference, the bloody chamber—it was all designed for me, to catch my interest. He tried to break you just to get to me. Imagine what he would have done if
I hadn’t figured it out—if I hadn’t come in time… That serial killer was meant to keep me racing all over the city.” Sherlock’s voice lurched in sudden understanding. “There was another set of clues he had for me—I was meant to take the bait, to keep following the trail, keep playing the game—but I was so enraged over what he’d done to you, I killed him instead. I broke the pattern, but John—”

Now Sherlock was finally seeing him again. He pulled at John’s hands, his face wrecked.

“If I’d done what I always do, if I’d picked up the trail where I was meant to, if I’d tried to solve the case instead of coming back to find you…”

Sherlock’s eyes fell away from John’s, the unfinished horror of the rest of his sentence unspooling before them both in one long dark coil.

John sucked in a quiet breath.

Sherlock was shaking now as though the room was ice cold, as though he were going into shock, which, John realized with a sudden jolt, he was.

“Sherlock…” John ran his hands up Sherlock’s arms, attempting to drag him back to the present moment. “Sherlock, love, look at me.”

Sherlock was staring, unseeing, into the shadows on the other side of the room.

“You would be dead, John. Or worse. All because of me—because of my need to solve the puzzle—to get to the end of the game. All because Moriarty knows me, knows what I’m really like… knows how easy it is for me to treat people like they’re disposable, like so many meaningless parts in a larger mechanism.”

John was frightened by the self-hatred evident in Sherlock’s voice. He could hear it throbbing under his words, as thick, as dark as poison, and he knew in that moment what was happening. Moriarty was there between them again, just as he had been present upstairs in John’s bedroom earlier when John had tried to send Sherlock away.

John saw his cold, reptile gaze materialize before his eyes as clearly as if Moriarty was standing over him. He remembered, with sudden vividness, one of the last things Moriarty had said to him. The flat hiss of his voice seemed to fill John’s mind. As long as you stick with Sherlock, I’ll be with you. Every time he touches you, I’ll be there.

John felt his chest swell with an impossible rage—he wouldn’t let Moriarty win, not after all this.

“Sherlock!” John lunged forward, grabbing Sherlock by the shoulders, forcing his eyes up to meet his own. “Listen to me, please. Just listen.”

Sherlock stared back at John, searching, desperate.

“Moriarty thought you would play the game to the finish but you didn’t, did you? You came back. You came back for me, because you’re not like that. You’re not like him. He doesn’t know you, Sherlock. He thinks the two of you are the same, but you’re not. You’re different.” Angry tears were burning in the corner of John’s eyes. He blinked them away, felt his rage catch fire, and he clung harder to Sherlock’s shoulders, insistent. “Remember what you said to me? He underestimated us. He thinks we’re each only capable of thinking or feeling, but he’s wrong. He doesn’t know anything about your capacity to love because he doesn’t have the ability himself. He can’t see it because he doesn’t know what it looks like.”

Sherlock was finally really looking at John again, his eyes wide; the expression in them starved for
something John couldn’t name.

John shook his head, felt angry tears drip off his chin. “I’ve never met anyone with the capacity to love that you have. No one—no one has ever loved me like you do. Sherlock, please, don’t prove him right; don’t let him get to you too.”

John saw the storm break in Sherlock’s eyes. In the depth of each pupil, John thought he could see a glimmer of light.

“You… you know?” Sherlock’s voice was trembling, breathless, his eyes moving over John’s face with a newfound fascination. “You know I love you?”

“Yes.” John let go of Sherlock’s shoulders to sit back in helpless exasperation. “Yes, of course I do.”

“John, I still can’t—what he did to you—”

“Sherlock, remember what you told me earlier. We’re stronger when we’re together. We make each other better—that’s what Moriarty will never understand.” John heard his own voice catch. “We need each other.”

Sherlock pressed his fingers to his mouth. John saw his shoulders start to shake.

“Oh, Sherlock.”

John lunged forward again, this time to pull Sherlock into his arms.

“Come here.”

To John’s utter relief, as soon as his arms closed around him, he felt the stiffness leaching out of Sherlock. His arms came up around John’s shoulders, and John pulled Sherlock closer still until he was almost in his lap. Sherlock curled around him, pushing his face into John’s shoulder, and John heard him sob once—low and broken, as though the sound had been torn from his chest.

“It’s all right. I’m fine now. We’re both fine. It’s all right.”

John reached up to stroke the hair back from Sherlock’s forehead. He pressed a kiss to his temple. Sherlock was shaking against him.

In all the time John had known him, in all the madness of the last month, John had never seen Sherlock lose control like this.

John thought back to the ordeal yesterday—Sherlock murdering the serial killer in cold blood, his rage, and his subsequent terror over what had happened to John—his sleepless hours outside John’s door, torn apart by worry. He hadn’t had a moment’s rest since all this began.

No wonder, no wonder he had finally reached his breaking point.

John stroked his hair, pressed his lips again to Sherlock’s forehead. He curled his body around Sherlock’s as though to offer him a physical shield against his sorrow.

He had been holding too much inside himself—so much, too much—as he always did, but this was more than anyone could bear.

John began to rock him gently, hoping that the movement would prompt Sherlock to finally let himself experience all of what he had been feeling over the past two days, the past week—the past year.
He felt Sherlock’s fingers tighten against him.

John smoothed a hand down his back, and heard Sherlock make another low, broken sound.

John pressed another kiss to Sherlock’s hair. “It’s all right. I’ve got you. You can let it out now.”

John felt Sherlock’s shaking intensify, felt the hot hurricane of Sherlock’s breath lose its rhythm against his neck—another sound, more like a gasp, seemed to rip from his torso.

John held him tighter, kept on rocking, his hand rubbing up and down Sherlock’s back.

“Let it out, love. Let it all go.”

At John’s gentle prompting, finally, finally, the shudders turned to sobs.

Sherlock clung to John and howled into his neck until the tears streamed unchecked down his face.

“That’s right. I’ve got you. I’ve got you. You’re all right now.”

John continued to rock him, stroking Sherlock’s hair, pushing it back from his eyes, over and over, kissing his forehead, his cheek. His hand kept up an even rhythm over Sherlock’s back, slow and measured.

John had never seen Sherlock weep.

It cut him up inside.

John had a good deal of practice offering physical comfort to people who were suffering. It had happened once or twice in Afghanistan—young soldiers shaken awake by the terror of their own memory-riddled nightmares, and John had held them in the dark, much like this, his voice low and soothing, as he’d talked them back from the edge.

As a doctor too, he knew about the healing power of touch, and it was clear to him in this moment how badly Sherlock needed it—needed to be grounded once again in the reality of his own body. As far as he could tell Sherlock was starved for it. John had never realized. God, he’d been so blind.

John pressed his mouth against Sherlock’s hair, and wondered how many times he would continue to admonish himself for his own short sightedness when it came to Sherlock Holmes.

John held him until Sherlock’s sobbing turned to quiet weeping, his tears leaking down John’s neck and into the collar of his jumper, soaking the front of his shirt.

It wasn’t until the trickle of Sherlock’s tears stopped all together that John leaned back, pressing one final kiss to the part in Sherlock’s hair. “Feel better?”

Sherlock pulled back from John with a shuddery breath and nodded. His face was streaked and swollen from crying. John had to fight the instinct to pull Sherlock back into his arms; Sherlock looked younger than John had ever seen him.

John climbed to his feet. “You stay here. I’ll be right back.”

In answer to Sherlock’s questioning look, John called over his shoulder. “I’m getting us a drink.”

They had almost finished the wine—which had been lovely—but this level of emotional upheaval called for something else entirely. John pulled down the bottle of good whiskey that he kept on hand for special occasions and filled two tumblers with a generous portion.
When he came back to sit beside Sherlock, Sherlock was leaning against the armchair at his back, eyes closed. He opened them as John reached to hand him a glass.

“Here. This will help.”

Sherlock took it from him quietly and John felt a lurch in his chest as the firelight caught the flicker of Sherlock’s eyelashes when he moved; they were still damp.

Sherlock kept his head bowed, raised the glass to his lips and took a long drink.

John sat opposite him, his back against his own chair, and sipped his whiskey in silence. He felt the warmth of it burn low and lovely in his chest before spreading slowly all through him.

He stared into the fire, trying to let his mind go quiet, to give them both a chance to recover.

John finished his drink and then got up to stir the fire.

When he came to sit back down, he sat right next to Sherlock, pressed his shoulder in against him.

Sherlock took another long drink and then stared down at the glass in his hand, turning it this way and that, studying the way the light caught the amber liquid. He started speaking, eyes downcast.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice low with gratitude. John could feel the gentle vibration of it in the chair at his back. “I can’t—”

Sherlock shook his head, his eyes still on the glass in his hand. “It’s difficult for me—that. I never—” He drew a sharp breath. The sound of it hurt John’s lungs. “I never let myself. But I… I needed it. I needed that.”

His eyes at last slid up to John’s—the blue of his irises were filled with heat.

“Thank you.”

John held Sherlock’s gaze and nodded. His chest felt too full of emotion to speak.

Sherlock drank the last of his whiskey then set the empty glass beside him on the ground. He reached down between them where their hands were almost touching and took John’s hand in his, lacing his fingers through John’s.

Sherlock stared down at their interconnected fingers.

“I’m not good with words, John. I can’t—can’t tell you what you mean to me. But I can try and show you—” John squeezed Sherlock’s fingers between his own as Sherlock’s eyes darted up to his, anxious, filled with longing. “Will you let me show you?”

John’s entire body felt like one long flame of wanting. He was so overcome he couldn’t answer. He licked his lips, raised his eyes to Sherlock’s.

Sherlock leaned over until his mouth was centimeters from John’s, until John could feel the heat of Sherlock’s breath against his lips. Sherlock’s eyes stayed on his, low-lidded, dark, questioning.

“John, will you let me try again?”

Sherlock’s question was one long plume of heat against John’s mouth.

John opened his mouth to answer. “God, yes—”
And then Sherlock was kissing him; the curves of his lips pressed sweet and desperate against John’s, one of his hands coming up to cup John’s jaw as he parted his lips against John’s, breathing him in.

John leaned closer, opening his mouth and heard Sherlock make a sighing sound as he pushed his tongue in between John’s lips.

Sherlock tasted like whiskey and desperation and heartbreak. John opened his mouth wider, drawing him in.

Sherlock lifted both hands to hold John’s face, the slide of his mouth warm and wet over John’s, the only sound in the quiet room other than their mouths the low crinkle of the fire beside them.

John felt heat fill his belly, felt his erection from earlier return in full force as he bit down softly on Sherlock’s lower lip and heard him whimper in response.

Sherlock had shifted up to his knees and he was leaning down against John hungrily, still holding his face in his hands as though he were frightened if he let go John would slip away and the moment would be lost.

With great reluctance, John broke the kiss, his hands grasping at Sherlock’s shoulders.

“Sherlock,” he breathed, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth even as he started speaking, unable to help himself. “Mmm… Sherlock, I want—”

Sherlock kissed him back, open-mouthed, licking the inside of John’s mouth for several long seconds before John broke away to keep speaking.

“Sher—Sherlock, wait…”

John was so aroused his hands were shaking. He clenched them tighter against Sherlock’s shoulders.

It was as though his desire for Sherlock was an inferno that kept building—growing larger and larger with every new sexual encounter. Each time, he thought it couldn’t possibly get more intense. Each time, he was proven wrong.

John leaned in and pressed his forehead against Sherlock’s. He licked his lips, saw Sherlock’s eyes follow the movement and felt another shudder of lust move through him.

John shut his eyes briefly and then opened them again to find Sherlock looking at him, his eyes like two dark flames.

John fought to keep his breathing steady, kept his eyes on Sherlock’s. “I want you to fuck me.”

He actually saw Sherlock’s pupils grow darker in response to his request.

Sherlock pressed his forehead harder against John’s, his eyes full of hunger.

John leaned forward until his lips brushed Sherlock’s ear. He’d never heard his own voice so husky. “I want you to fuck me right here in front of the fireplace. I want you to strip me first, slowly, and then I want to feel your mouth on every inch of my body until I’m trembling and gasping for it, begging you to put your cock in me.”

Sherlock gave a low moan in response to this and John smiled against his ear. “Will you do that for me?”
Sherlock turned his face in against John’s mouth, and John kissed his ear and then his cheek as Sherlock’s mouth slid back toward his.

Sherlock’s answer was a sigh of pleasure against his jaw. “Yes.” He kissed John’s chin so softly; then the corner of his mouth. “Yes, John. Oh yes.”

John lifted his mouth to Sherlock’s and Sherlock recaptured his lips with his own, pushing his tongue into the heat of John’s mouth, his hands sliding down to John’s shoulders and down his arms until he found the hem of John’s jumper. He tugged it off and over John’s head, stripping him down to his t-shirt underneath.

Sherlock dove back in with a growl, his mouth licking a hot trail down the side of John’s neck, pausing to suck a love-bite into the tender skin of John’s throat.

John raised his chin to give Sherlock better access, his eyes fluttering closed. The whiskey in his system, the smell of freshly showered Sherlock leaning over him, his mouth velvety soft and wet sliding down John’s neck was making John half mad with desire.

He let his head fall back, felt Sherlock press a greedy kiss into the groove between his collarbones, his hands skimming up over the thin material covering John’s ribs, thumbs dragging over John’s nipples until they hardened into peaks.

John pressed his chest closer against Sherlock’s hands with a gasp.

“God, yes…”

John leaned his weight back on his hands so he could concentrate on the feeling of Sherlock’s lovely fingers tracing over the muscles in his chest and then his gasp turned into a strangled cry of pleasure as Sherlock’s mouth descended warm and wet to suck his nipple through the thin material of his t-shirt.

Sherlock lapped at it and then sucked again, pushing hard against the sensitive flesh.

John reached up to thread his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, his mouth falling open as Sherlock scraped the area lightly with his teeth.

“Jesus!”

John’s hips gave a jerk, as if of their own accord. He felt his erection pulse against the confines of his trousers in response and he let his legs fall open in an effort to give himself more room.

Sherlock turned his attention to John’s other nipple and John’s breath was one long hiss of pleasure as Sherlock sucked, his long fingers skimming the hem of John’s t-shirt, dragging it up to expose his belly to the warmth of the firelight.

He tugged lightly on Sherlock’s scalp and felt Sherlock’s corresponding gasp of pleasure against the soaked material of his shirt. The combination of hot breath against wet shirt sent a ripple of sensation down John’s spine.

“Jesus, Sherlock—”

John’s fingers tightened again in the soft, dark curls, and Sherlock gave a whimper, and then he was reaching down to pull John’s t-shirt off, throwing it away into the darkness beyond the fire.

Sherlock paused for a moment and John opened heavy-lidded eyes to look up at him.
Sherlock’s gaze was intent, considering. He leaned in to press a kiss to John’s jaw before rising gracefully to his feet.

“I have an idea,” he said, and vanished briefly into the shadows on the other side of the room.

John watched his sinewy retreat, his weight back on his hands, his eyes on the lithe movement of Sherlock’s narrow hips until he disappeared into the darkness of the hallway, feeling slightly stunned.

Several of the candles around the room had burned down and melted into smoldering heaps of wax, so the room was darker than it had been before—lit almost entirely by the light of the fire.

Everything was soft and golden—touched with shadow; even his own torso. John glanced down to see the dark letters from Moriarty’s pen still gleaming but less harshly now, stripped of their horror by the intimacy of the light.

Sherlock reappeared soundlessly, sliding into the glow cast from the fire like a golden apparition. John looked up to see Sherlock crouching down beside him, his arms full of blankets.

“Come this way.”

Sherlock steered John gently by the shoulder until he was out of the way, and then laid the blankets down on the floor in front of the hearth, folding them so that there was something of a makeshift bed softening the hardness of the floor.

“There,” Sherlock said, and looked up proudly, eyes gleaming. “Now you can come back.”

He led John until he was sitting in the middle of the blankets, and then sat back a moment to take in his handiwork, his expression soft and pleased.

John thought he would drown in the wake of his affection.

Then Sherlock’s eyes were sliding over him and John feared he would burn up in the heat of his own lust.

Sherlock crawled forward on his hands and knees, eyes hungry, his hands hot on John’s bare shoulders as he pushed him back to lie flat on the folded blankets.

“Lie back,” he said, and the note of dark command in his voice was like a spike through the heart of John’s longing—the final nail in the coffin of his ability to handle just how turned on he was by everything about Sherlock.

He could feel his body trembling under the sweep of Sherlock’s gaze. He didn’t even have his trousers off, but the way Sherlock’s eyes were raking over his exposed body was almost more than he could take. John thrust his hips up desperately, silently begging Sherlock to rid him of the last of his clothing.

Sherlock fell forward over him with a sound like a growl, his mouth hot and wet on the exposed skin of John’s ribs—his tongue coming out to trace each groove, each dip of flesh—his hands following in the wake of his mouth, long fingers pulling John’s body closer against him with undisguised eagerness.

John threw his arms back over his head, and pushed his hips up against Sherlock’s mouth, which was now licking a path along the crease of his pelvic bone.
John felt a ghost of worry as Sherlock’s fingers pulled down the zip and tugged his trousers down his thighs, pausing to ease them off his ankles before tossing them away into the darkness.

He felt Sherlock’s fingers slide under the elastic of his pants and his chest tightened briefly in fear—but then Sherlock’s mouth was there, pressing in hot and sweet against the place where Moriarty’s knife had been, against the juncture where his thigh and hip came together, and John pushed his hand against his mouth to stop the sound of gratitude he made—the small cry of shocked delight as Sherlock kissed his way down to the mark left by Moriarty’s knife.

He kissed the whole length of the raw and ragged cut—so softly that John had to put a hand up to cover his eyes—the heat of Sherlock’s careful, shuddering breath like a balm to his wounds.

“I’m so sorry,” he heard Sherlock breathe against the crease of his thigh, his thumbs rubbing soothing small circles into the crests of John’s hips. “I am so sorry for what you were made to endure—”

John heard Sherlock’s voice hitch and he reached down to push his fingers into Sherlock’s hair, offering comfort.

Sherlock bowed his head, went on speaking low and dark into the crease of John’s thigh; his voice a needle of regret that pierced to the heart of John.

“He made you feel worthless,” Sherlock said, shaking his head, even as his thumbs continued to trace circles over John’s hips. “That’s unacceptable. I need you to know, John.”

Sherlock lifted his head then, and slid back up John’s body until his mouth was hovering over John’s, his eyes glittering in the firelight, brimming with urgency. “I need you to know what you’re worth.”

John reared up and captured Sherlock’s mouth with his own, his thighs falling open as he did so. He knew the moment was full of significance, of sweetness—it was like Sherlock’s apology and he wanted to convey his forgiveness, his appreciation—but he couldn’t stop his hips thrusting up against Sherlock with wanton need, desperately seeking friction for the leaking length of his cock trapped against the material of his pants.

“Thank you,” he gasped, breaking the kiss, eyes tracing Sherlock’s shining, swollen lips as he attempted to regain control of himself and failed. “But I need you to touch my cock right now.”

He ground against Sherlock with another slow slide of hips and watched Sherlock’s eyelids flutter shut in response.

When Sherlock’s eyes reopened there was a hunger in them that made John groan long and low, and thrust his hips into Sherlock again with renewed urgency.

He saw Sherlock’s mouth fall open and John would have grinned if he hadn’t been so filled with need.

“Please, Sherlock.”

Sherlock bent down and bit hard on the skin of John’s throat, even as his fingers hooked under the waistband of John’s pants and pulled them down.

John cried out, pushing his neck up into Sherlock’s mouth and lifting his hips simultaneously.

Sherlock licked softly at the skin he had just bruised, easing John’s pants down his thighs, and then
pulling them off each ankle, one foot at a time, tossing them away into the darkness to join the other cast-off articles of clothing.

John parted his thighs as wide as they would go, felt the heavy heat of his cock fall against his hip, his balls tight beneath it.

He was fully nude now, the length of his body laid out for Sherlock’s gaze—the curves of his pelvic bones, the ridge of muscle in the top of his abdomen, the muscles in his thighs—all made soft and sensuous in the flickering light of the flames.

He lay still, watched Sherlock’s gaze trail over him, his eyes like a physical presence on John’s skin.

He had never felt like this in the presence of a lover’s gaze.

Every inch of his skin felt trembly alive and awake—he felt hot all over, shivering, electric, his body turned inside out for Sherlock’s gaze. John stretched his thighs wider, lifting his hips in invitation.

Sherlock, who had seemed to be in a trance watching him, fell forward with a desperate sound at the movement, his hands sliding under the muscles in John’s arse to pull John’s hips up to him.

He licked the full circle of his swollen lips once before lowering his mouth to the head of John’s cock and enveloping the first few inches in slick, wet heat.

John cried out, his hips thrusting up into Sherlock’s mouth, his hands reaching once again to slide into Sherlock’s luscious curls. He was careful not to pull too hard, but just the gentle scrape of his nails over Sherlock’s scalp was enough to make Sherlock moan around him.

John felt the vibration all the way through the length of his cock and into his balls. He let out a yell, his legs coming up to lock around Sherlock’s back.

Sherlock swallowed down another inch of him—so slow, so wet—providing just the right amount of suction and John quivered under his mouth, felt the low curl of arousal in his belly building force.

The soft silk of Sherlock’s curls under his hands, the low sounds coming from Sherlock’s mouth and the feel of him surrounding John—it was too much.

John was far, far too close.

He pulled gently at Sherlock’s hair with a frustrated sound.

“Sher—Sherlock, stop. It’s—” He struggled to catch his breath. “Stop! It’s too much! I can’t—”

John shook his head and met Sherlock’s questioning stare as he pulled off, his mouth raw and red.

John’s head fell back with a strangled curse.

He pushed a hand up over his own eyes, concentrated on breathing deeply for a moment, determined to take the edge off the growing tide of his arousal.

“God help me, it’s too much.”

John felt Sherlock lean back and he kept his forearm over his eyes another moment more, until he’d caught his breath.

Sherlock knelt beside him on the blanket, his eyes wide, his own arousal evident in the prominent bulge pushing up through the material of his pajama bottoms.
John sat up slightly and leaned forward.

“Also…” He said, his hands pulling at the hem of Sherlock’s faded t-shirt. “I want—more of you against me.”

Sherlock gasped as John’s hands brushed his bare flesh.

John leaned forward to kiss him as his hands worked the t-shirt up over Sherlock’s chest, guiding his arms out of the sleeves.

Sherlock melted into him, his eyes falling closed.

John smiled against him. Sherlock was unbelievably sensitive to his touch.

He licked the expanse of Sherlock’s bottom lip before leaning back to pull the t-shirt over Sherlock’s head.

“I want to see you.”

Sherlock scrambled to his knees then and pushed his pajama bottoms down his own hips. He wasn’t wearing any pants underneath.

John felt the low burn of want in his belly surge into a ripple of pure flame at the sight of Sherlock’s cock springing free, curving long and deeply flushed against his stomach.

John could see the slit of it shining with moisture even from where he sat.

His mouth watered. He wanted to lick it off.

Before he had even decided to do so he was crawling forward against Sherlock, until he was kneeling before him, his eyes greedy as they mapped the length of Sherlock’s bare torso, so beautiful in the light of the fire—all curves and shadows.

“Will you—” John pressed a kiss to the pale column of Sherlock’s throat. “I know what I want—and that hasn’t changed—” His voice was breathless, his hands falling to rest on Sherlock’s naked hips, sliding up to the narrow curve of his waist. “But I just need, just a moment to touch you…” His mouth dipped into the hollow of Sherlock’s shoulder, his tongue coming out to trace the shape. “To taste you…”

Sherlock let his head fall back with a moan, his voice equally breathless, but lower, darker, the sound of pure sex, distilled just for John’s enjoyment. “Be my guest.”

John shifted his legs so that they were on either side of Sherlock, his position mirroring Sherlock’s from the bathtub earlier. He bent his knees slightly and clenched his thighs in against Sherlock’s hips so that Sherlock was surrounded by him on all sides.

John leaned in and licked his way into Sherlock’s mouth, reaching down to wrap his hand around the heated length of Sherlock, his thumb sliding over the moisture on the tip.

Sherlock dropped his head back at the touch and opened his mouth.

John licked his way down Sherlock’s neck, sucking and biting his bared throat, his thumb beginning to rub slow circles over the slick head of Sherlock’s cock.

John bent his mouth to Sherlock’s ear, his voice low and rough. “I can’t wait to feel you inside me.” He bit down on the skin below Sherlock’s ear, heard Sherlock whimper in response. “All this…” He
slid his hand—slow and leisurely all the way down to the base of Sherlock’s cock. He heard his own voice go breathless. “All this hard, velvet heat pushing into me… filling me up.”

John felt Sherlock’s hands clench on his shoulders at John’s words and then Sherlock was lunging forward to capture John’s mouth with a growl, his hands on John’s shoulders pushing John back against the blankets as his tongue pushed into the heat of John’s mouth.

Sherlock’s hands slid down John’s arms to grasp him by the wrists, pinning his hands at his sides, his tongue pushing deep into John’s mouth to stroke his tongue with palpable force, establishing a rhythm that pulled noises out of the depths of John’s throat he hadn’t even known he was possible of making.

John could feel the warm, heavy weight of Sherlock’s cock fall against his inner thigh and he surged upward with his hips to try and rub against it—but Sherlock’s hands flew from his wrists to grasp him by the hips, holding him in place.

John heard himself give a low whine of frustration.

“Easy, easy now,” Sherlock breathed against his lips, his mouth curving upward in a wicked grin, his swollen mouth pressing a kiss to the line of John’s jaw as his hands stroked John’s hips. “All in good time.”

John reached up, sliding his fingers in around the nape of Sherlock’s neck, to pull Sherlock down against him.

“I want you… to prepare me,” John said, pressing his mouth in against Sherlock’s chin where he could reach. “I want to feel your fingers…” Another kiss—John let Sherlock feel the scrape of his teeth against his jaw. “Those lovely, lovely fingers…” John could feel Sherlock’s fingers trembling now where they held his hip. “…inside me.”

Sherlock groaned in response and leaned over on one elbow to reach for something in the darkness at the foot of the chair.

“But we need—”

Sherlock slid back into view, his curls falling into his eyes, grinning triumphantly.

“Lube,” John breathed in relief when he caught sight of the bottle in Sherlock’s hand, reaching up to loop his hands around Sherlock’s neck and pull him down for another kiss.

Sherlock leaned back and John let his arms fall from Sherlock’s neck so Sherlock could sit up. Sherlock sat back on his knees, breathing hard, and flicked open the cap on the bottle.

John shifted his hips, spreading his legs wider to give Sherlock better access. He sat up on his elbows to watch.

He could scarcely believe the sight before his eyes—Sherlock crouched naked between his thighs, dark head bent in concentration over his fingers, half his lean torso drenched in firelight, the other half cloaked in shadow. He looked like a study in ebony and gold—the light pouring over the bones in his lovely frame like warm honey, rendering everything about him slow and sensual, soft and hard all at once.

John let his eyes linger on Sherlock’s pouting mouth, the corners of which were turned down slightly as he concentrated, then down Sherlock’s neck where a faint purple mark was blooming to life on the pale skin, left there by his own mouth, down, down slender muscles in his arms and chest
standing out in golden lines, to finally rest on the flushed curve of Sherlock’s erection where it lay against his hip.

John looked and looked at it, felt his mouth water at the sight of it, felt an ache somewhere deep within himself crying out to be filled.

“Sherlock,” he purred with reverence, feeling certain that although most of what he was feeling was sheer, unbridled lust, some of his poetic thoughts may have been a result of the whiskey finally going to his head.

Sherlock looked up at the sound of his name and their eyes connected.

John watched the expression in his eyes grow impossibly darker at what he saw on John’s face.

Sherlock stooped once more to kiss John’s open mouth, reaching down to circle the entrance to his body with one slick finger. John’s hand came up to clutch the back of Sherlock’s neck, fingers tightening, urging him to push it in.

“I’m ready, Sherlock. Give me everything.”

Sherlock bit down softly on John’s lips as he pushed in. John heard him growl low in the base of his throat in response. John wriggled his hips, urging him deeper.

“How’s that?” Sherlock asked, breathless, his forehead pressed against John’s.

“Lovely,” John gasped, savoring the feeling of Sherlock breaching him, tucked into the center of him. He could feel how tight he was around Sherlock’s finger—his body was unused to doing this, but the tightness made him all the more aware of the intimacy of the act, of his body squeezing itself around Sherlock, pulling him in, and this realization made his arousal sharpen to an almost unbearable pitch. He licked his lips. “Give me more.”

Sherlock kissed the corner of his mouth, smiling against him. “Greedy.”


Sherlock kissed him again, pushed another finger in, and John gave a low cry at the sensation, lifting his hips. The burn was worse now but the slight pain only served to heighten his arousal.

“How’s… how’s that?” Sherlock’s question was a stream of heat against John’s open mouth.

“Good. Really, really—” Sherlock stroked the two fingers inside him and John felt the movement brush his prostate. His hips jerked in response, his mouth falling open. “Christ.”

Sherlock dropped his head to lick a wet stripe down the side of John’s neck as his fingers began to thrust gently, rubbing against John’s prostate again.

The movement made the burning sensation worse at first but Sherlock’s long fingers were easily able to reach his prostate and the feel of them, rubbing against it, made low ripples of pleasure course through the pain, chasing it away.

John let his weight drop from his elbows and he fell back to lie fully on his back, his eyes falling shut with helpless pleasure.

“Alright?”
John felt Sherlock kiss his neck, his fingers still moving in a slow slide, in and out.

John pressed his hands in over his eyes. “Your f-fucking hands…”

Sherlock reached up with his free hand to lift one of John’s hands away. He pressed a kiss to the center of his palm. “Ready for more?” His voice was like storm clouds, like the center of a tempest, like the darkness at the heart of the sea.

John could only nod.

Sherlock must have seen because he felt a third long finger pushing in to join the first two and the pain was sharper and sweeter all at once. He whimpered in response to the feeling and Sherlock’s hand stilled.

“Alright?” Sherlock asked, the tremor in his voice a dead give away for how much this was affecting him.

“God, yes. Don’t—” John reached down to wrap his fingers around Sherlock’s wrist, urging him to keep moving. “Don’t stop.”

Sherlock worked his fingers slowly, in and out of John, stretching them slightly every now and then, giving his body time to adjust. He placed his other hand on John’s spread thigh, fingers massaging lightly, sending little ripples of sensation up and down his limbs.

The pleasure building in the center of him as a result was like a light inside himself—John could feel it growing brighter with every flex of Sherlock’s hand, until he was making little keening cries, his spread thighs quivering under Sherlock’s hand.

John’s fingers tightened around Sherlock’s wrist, this time to stop him.

“I can’t—it’s too—too much. I need you now. I need you, Sherlock.”

He opened his eyes to see Sherlock looking down at him, his eyelids heavy with lust.

Sherlock drew his fingers out and reached for the bottle of lube again to coat the straining length of his erection.

John sat up on his elbows again to watch him, feeling half-drunk with pleasure.

Everything about this moment felt slow and heavy—the warmth of the fire on John’s body, Sherlock’s head thrown back, his long neck coated in golden light, the slide of Sherlock’s fingers as they stroked down over himself the loveliest sight John had ever seen.

He looked like the god of sex—on his knees before the flames, hair tousled, lips bitten and swollen, eyes half-shut as he allowed himself one leisurely stroke before crawling forward, the hunger in his eyes like twin pinpricks of fire, bending his body down over John’s, lining the tip of his cock up with the entrance to John’s body.

He looked down at John and John felt a shudder of pure longing course through him.

“Ready?” he asked, and John nodded, legs spread wide, cock straining up against his belly, throbbing with need.

Sherlock placed a hand on John’s hip and used the other to guide himself as he pushed forward with his hips and in.
John gasped at the sensation, his mouth dropping open. Sherlock kept pushing. John knew that the first push was the most painful part and was grateful that Sherlock kept going until the head of his cock was well past his entrance. Still, it hurt. John clenched his teeth, couldn’t help squeezing his eyes shut, his body going stiff.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock said, his voice shaking as he held himself still. “Is it…?”

John shook his head to reassure him, eyes still shut tight. “It’s… it’s a lot. Just… give me a minute.”

John took a deep breath, blew it out slowly, waiting for the burning sensation to abate.

Sherlock bent to press a kiss to John’s temple, then his cheek. His lips slid, warm and soft down the curve of John’s jaw. John could feel his mouth trembling where it pressed against him.

“Tell me…” John licked his lips, reached a hand down to rest on Sherlock’s slender hip. “Tell me how it feels.”

Sherlock’s answer was a moan. “Oh, god, John…”

Sherlock reached down, wrapping the long fingers of his free hand around John’s erection. John gasped in response. Sherlock’s fingers, still slick with lube, felt lovely and cool against his aching flesh. They began to stroke and John felt the small light of his pleasure begin to grow brighter again.

He was so sensitive he felt his hips jerk at the touch, pushing Sherlock deeper inside himself. The resulting combination of pain and pleasure was like a match exploding into flame.

“You…” Sherlock’s voice was breathless, shaking, lower than John had ever heard it. His lips dragged hot on John’s skin as his fingers continued to stroke. “You’re everything. John, it’s… I can’t.”

John could hear how much of an effort it was for Sherlock to speak. John felt Sherlock’s fingers clutch his hip in frustration.

“Shh…” John opened his eyes and saw Sherlock’s wrecked face looking down at him. The burning sensation was almost completely gone, washed away in the wake of the pleasure of Sherlock’s fingers stroking him. “You don’t have to tell me. Show me instead. I’m ready for you to move.”

Sherlock’s gaze was still questioning but John lifted his legs and wrapped his thighs around Sherlock’s waist, pulling him deeper, until he was finally buried up to the hilt.

John groaned at the sensation—felt the burning give way to a need for movement, for friction—the feel of Sherlock fully immersed in him so erotic he had to shut his eyes again.

“Jesus, Sherlock… Christ. I’m ready. Please.”

Sherlock didn’t need to be asked again. He let go of John’s cock to place both his arms on either side of John, leaning his weight into his hands and rolling his hips. He let out a sound John had never heard him make before. John felt his cock throb in response.

Sherlock looked down at him in shock. “Oh my god, John—”

This time John rolled his own hips to repeat the movement and Sherlock made the sound again.

“J—John…”

John tightened his legs around Sherlock’s waist. He looked up at Sherlock, his desire blazing on his
“Fuck me, Sherlock.”

“Jesus—”

Sherlock dropped his head, and finally—oh finally—began to thrust.

It was like nothing John had ever felt—his thighs clenched around Sherlock’s waist, Sherlock so deep in him he seemed to be stroking the very center of John, his body bowing over him, the flicker of his muscles in the firelight as he moved too erotic for John to take—he had to shut his eyes.

The feel of it, the angle of Sherlock’s hips, the hot, tight slide of Sherlock’s cock in and out of him, made the low burn of John’s pleasure began to build in a slow crescendo within him. He knew his orgasm wasn’t far, but he wanted to feel Sherlock come in him first, wanted to help pull the pleasure from Sherlock before he came himself.

He reached up to slide his arms around the back of Sherlock’s neck, his voice shaking. “Harder, Sherlock. I want—” He lifted his hips, pushing one hand up into Sherlock’s hair. “I want to feel you come inside me. I need it. Sh—”

John threw his head back with a shout as he felt Sherlock’s cock brush his prostate.

John felt Sherlock reach down with one hand to cup John’s arse and pull him closer, holding John’s body against him.

“Tell me…” Sherlock’s voice was torn apart by lust. “Tell me if it’s alright, or if it’s too—”

John arched his back, pushing his hips up to take Sherlock deeper, gasping at the sensation.

“No! No, it’s good. It’s good, it’s good… Oh my god…”

John was distantly aware that he was stammering but he didn’t care. He felt like he was coming apart at the seams. He needed Sherlock to move again. His fingers were still grasping at the back of Sherlock’s neck; they were slick with sweat.

“Now just—thrust again. Can you—?”

Sherlock did. John let out a strangled shout, his fingers slipping off Sherlock’s neck as his head fell back, heels digging into Sherlock’s back.

John felt Sherlock curling over him as he sped up his movements. “Like that?”

“Yeah—Yes, that’s—”

John let out another shout as Sherlock’s cock drove hard against his prostate. The mounting pleasure in his body felt like it was everywhere at once—resonating out from the center of him where Sherlock’s cock was pushing in, again and again. The rhythm of it was perfect.

“Don’t stop—don’t stop… Fuck.”

John could feel Sherlock’s fingers curling in hard against the muscles in his arse; he felt a drop of sweat fall from Sherlock’s body onto his chest.

“Oh my god—Sher—Sherlock… Your… your other hand you should…” John couldn’t finish the sentence.

Somehow, Sherlock understood.
He reached down to take hold of the other side of John’s arse so he was gripping him with both hands, guiding John’s body onto his cock as he fucked into him.

John let out a strangled yell of pleasure.

He threw his hands back over his head, hands fisting in the blankets, his eyes shut—his body was dissolving, dissolving into pure feeling, into nothing but heat. He tried to push back up against Sherlock but Sherlock’s strong hands on his arse didn’t need the help. He wanted Sherlock to come—needed to feel it inside him.

He opened his mouth to tell Sherlock but a long moan came out instead as Sherlock adjusted the angle, bending low over him again.

John felt Sherlock’s mouth on his throat.

“John...”

John reached up to fasten his hands around Sherlock’s neck once again. John opened his eyes, unsure if he could speak but at the flushed and devastated look on Sherlock’s face, he found his voice. He needed to talk Sherlock through it.

“Don’t—don’t stop,” John gasped. “Give me—give me everything you’ve got.”

Sherlock’s hips piston ed harder into him than ever and John could tell Sherlock was close as he began to lose the rhythm of his thrusts.

“God, yes, perfect—don’t—don’t stop.”

John looked up at Sherlock; his dark curls were sticking to his temples with sweat, his bitten lips parted in an exclamation of pure pleasure. As their eyes met, Sherlock dove down to capture John’s lips with his, his mouth slipping over John’s with need.

John felt Sherlock’s hand drop from his left hip and return to his cock. The feel of it made John cry out.

Sherlock’s thrusting was now completely erratic but the combination of Sherlock fucking him as hard as he could, with his fingers stroking up and down his cock, was so good it didn’t matter.

“Harder,” he gasped, and then Sherlock was reaching down to drag his leg up over Sherlock’s shoulder, changing the angle again, fucking him deeper than John would have thought possible.

He threw his head back with a scream and then he was coming, his body shuddering and clenching around Sherlock’s cock, wave after wave of pleasure moving through him as his cock throbbed between them, spurting pulse after pulse of hot liquid onto his belly, onto Sherlock’s chest. The pleasure kept coming, and John felt distantly that Sherlock had stopped thrusting. With the last ounce of his energy he lifted his head.

“Come for me, love. Now. I need it.”

One word was all it took.

Sherlock pumped into John with one last thrust and then John felt the lovely pulse of heat deep within himself as Sherlock came and kept coming, his fingers digging into John’s arse, crying out louder than John had ever heard him, his body shaking against John.
He was still shivering in the grips of his own orgasm as Sherlock came apart around him, above him, within him, and the feel of it somehow impossibly pulled more pleasure from his own body. He pulled Sherlock fully down against him as they shuddered through the final shocks, pressing his sticky hips to Sherlock’s stomach, feeling the sweat between their bodies, the hot smear of his come.

They lay for a long while without speaking, breathing hard against one another, John’s arms looped around Sherlock’s neck, Sherlock’s cheek pressed into John’s shoulder.

Despite the fact that he was too hot now in the heat of the fire, his body flushed and sated, he was so content he decided he was never going to move again.

John shut his eyes, savoring the feel of Sherlock’s heartbeat pounding steady and sure against his own ribs, his calf twined around John’s thigh, Sherlock’s fingers loosely holding his wrist.

John’s voice was a murmur of sex-wrecked sleepiness. “How do you feel about never moving again?”

Sherlock hummed his assent, dragging his mouth over John’s collarbone.

John slid a hand up to stroke Sherlock’s sweat-soaked hair off his forehead. He pressed his lips to Sherlock’s temple, his voice softening. “How are you feeling, my love?”

John felt Sherlock shift his hips against him as he lifted his head.

“John.” Sherlock’s eyes were grave. “I don’t—” He ducked his head, suddenly self-conscious again. “I know I’ve told you before, and I will continue to keep telling you—I’m no good with words. But do you know…?” His eyes flickered back up to John’s and John saw with a shocked breath that they were full of tears. “Do you know now what you mean to me, John Watson?”

John couldn’t speak; his throat was closed tight with emotion.

Sherlock pressed his forehead in against John’s. “Do you know how I love you?”

John watched two tears break loose and slide down Sherlock’s cheeks.

He kissed each one, his lips shaking, before kissing Sherlock’s mouth.

When he pulled back after a minute, and saw the corners of Sherlock’s lips turning upward in a smile, he knew that Sherlock knew his answer, even without him saying it.

He said it anyway.

“I do.”

Fin

Chapter End Notes

I cannot thank all of you enough for reading this story, and staying with it all the way through to the end. Your support and insights and encouragement have meant the world
to me. I have never finished a story this long, so finishing this is kind of a big deal. Knowing all of you were out there eagerly waiting for new chapters definitely helped keep me writing through some very busy times when I otherwise might not have found the energy to focus on this story.

So thank you, thank you for all your comments and kudos and bookmarks, and just for reading. I am so, so lucky to have a readership like you.

If you haven't seen it yet, be sure to check out the gorgeous artwork I had commissioned for chapter 16, by the brilliantly talented, sweetlittlekitty.

And as always, if you'd like to come stalk me on tumblr, please do.

Works inspired by this one:

[Cover Art] for bittergreen's "Thirst" by livloveel

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