A Promise Made to Be Broken
by PlantsAreNeat

Summary

A young John makes an ‘if we’re still single at 40, we’ll get together’ pledge to a woman who ends up all wrong for him. She keeps reminding him of the promise, and won't let go of it. John asks Sherlock to pose as his boyfriend at a family wedding, so as to dash her hopes permanently. Sherlock, who has at last acknowledged his feelings for John, reluctantly agrees despite knowing how painful it will be to ‘have’ John, but not keep him.

Notes

Set after S3, with some S4 trailer references - mostly John's dreamy swooshy hairdo. Written for @SwissMissFicRecs, who unknowingly has been a Sherpa to the Everest of my Johnlock fic obsession for the last few years. I've been too shy to say hi, but when she mentioned on one of her excellent rec lists that she wished for a 'fake boyfriend trope' story from Sherlock's POV, a little voice in my head said "I wonder if I could write that?" and now we all get to find out.

Not beta'd or Brit-picked - I'm American (as is my spelling), so comments and corrections gladly accepted. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson are creations of Arthur Conan Doyle; their updated counterparts belong to Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss and the BBC. I receive only writing practice (and hopefully kudos) for this effort. :)

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Chapter 1

John Watson’s parents died when he was 14. John’s father had been drinking as usual, as had his mum; what was unusual was that they were out of the house, at a company party for his father’s factory job. His father wrapped their battered hatchback around a tree in the early hours of the morning. By the time the car was found by police, both his parents were dead. John comforted himself with the thought that they likely hadn’t suffered long, and ignored the tiny feeling of relief that he wouldn’t feel his father’s drunken fists ever again.

He and Harriet (“Call me Harry, you little twat! I’m not some swooning lady!”) went to live with their Aunt in Brighton. It was simpler for him than for his sister; sixteen years old was not an easy age to lose one’s parents, change schools, or come out. She did all three at the same time. John was more easygoing on the surface; people liked him and generally missed the simmering anger he kept well-hidden – at his parents for dying, at their drinking and how it made them treat their kids, at himself for how little he seemed to miss them.

They lived with their Aunt Brigid, and gradually settled in. Aunt Brigid was kind and strict, but never tried to replace their mother. She was their friend as much as their guardian. Time passed. Harry applied to school for law, and when she was eighteen, moved out to attend. John went out for rugby and discovered the thrill of the scrum and the joy of hard-won victory, which left him grinning, panting and filthy. He had a talent for the game, a head for strategy and a visceral appreciation for a solid tackle; he soon made Captain of the team.

Aunt Brigid’s new beau, Timothy Penton, had moved to town with his family some years ago, and around the time Harry and John had moved to Brighton, his then-wife had ended their marriage in a divorce so acrimonious, everyone had been talking about it. Even the Watson kids knew the whole story, despite their troubles. It was generally agreed that Mr. Penton was the innocent party in all of it and his ex-wife was likely a nutter. His two children, Marjorie and Stephen, were a few years behind John in school, and kept to themselves. He treated Aunt Brigid well, was soft-spoken for the most part, and occasionally arranged outings for Aunt Brigid together with his family, agreeably inviting John along as well. John didn’t mind, as the trips to the beach or for ice cream made a nice break. He liked Marjorie and Stephen well enough, he guessed. Stephen was a typical irritating little brother, and Marjorie was terribly shy in the presence of the older John.

Like now, for instance. Today’s outing was a hike and a picnic, and Stephen had run rings around the older two kids, chattering about everything and nothing while the adults had ambled slowly behind, hand in hand. The unusual mushroom at the side of the trail (“it looks like a marshmallow poo!”), John’s new trainers (“Awesome! With the blue swoosh!”), Stephen’s clear superiority of spelling prowess over his classmates (“Can’t even say ‘infinitesimal,’ let alone spell it, the wankers!”) and Marjorie’s science report (“the volcano tipped over, just before she was supposed to talk!”) received a thorough monologue in a piping voice that occasionally dipped into a pubescent break. Marjorie couldn’t contain her sighs after the first ten minutes, and John had to steer her back to the trail at least twice due to overt eye-rolling at her brother’s antics. Eventually, she hit her limit. “Shut up!” she yelled, “Can’t you for one minute be quiet and just walk along? We’re supposed to be enjoying the nature!”

“I am enjoying it! I was just talking about the mushrooms a minute ago!” Stephen’s indignant retort cracked shrilly.

“And then about every. Single. Bloody. Thing. In the world! I’m tired of your talking and talking. Just stop talking for once in your life!” Marjorie’s words spooked a dozen crows from
nearby trees, and they flew off, cawing. Stephen watched them, rapt.

“Wow,” he breathed, “did you see that? That was a proper murder of crows, that was! That’s what a group of crows are called you know, a murder!”

“Shut! Up!” Marjorie was close to unhinged; John began to be concerned for her, and murmured soothingly to them both. He was ignored, and Stephen’s face darkened.

“You’re just stroppy because Eric dumped you yesterday. You know, if you hadn’t been such a clingy twit, maybe you wouldn’t have scared him off!”

“You don’t know anything about it, Stephen. Piss off!” Marjorie turned her back to John to hide her flaming cheeks.

“His mates were talking in the hall, and they said you called him at least five times a day, you followed him around in school and practically stalked him outside school. I heard him tell you it was creepy, and he’s right! It is creepy!” Stephen was yelling now, too, fists clenched and face screwed into a grimace. John wondered if he would have to break up a fight between the siblings.

“You will shut up right now, Stephen Penton, or you will not like what I will do to you,” Marjorie hissed furiously, just as her father and Aunt Brigid came into view and Stephen’s expression went from angry to uncertain.

“Here, now, what’s all this?” Mr. Penton said. His children glared at each other.

“Erm, just a misunderstanding, sir.” John said. “Nothing to worry about, we’re all settled now.”

“Good, that’s good. Well, another quarter mile and we can have lunch!” Mr. Penton announced jovially. He eyed his daughter speculatively as Stephen brightened and ran on ahead; Aunt Brigid and John started along as well, while the elder Pentons lagged a few paces behind.

“No taking anything out on Stephen, you hear me?” Mr. Penton said quietly to his daughter. “Even if he was out of line, you talk it out with words. Your pranks aren’t funny and could really get him hurt someday.” Marjorie glared sullenly at the ground and stayed silent as Aunt Brigid and John shared a look.

They walked along in the warm summer afternoon. The atmosphere seemed to lighten and the event was soon forgotten in the pleasant picnic and scenery.

~~oOo~~

Sherlock Holmes was counting his blessings. He lay on the sofa in his warm, comfortable flat on Baker Street, Mrs. Hudson had finally chattered her way back downstairs after dropping off his midmorning tea, and despite not finding a single case worth his time this entire week, Sherlock was not yet bored today. With a small half smile, he acknowledged how entirely unlike him that was.

John was home again. Really home, as in moved back in, his bed made with tight hospital corners and his shoes lined up in the hall. It still seemed a little unreal to Sherlock, and certainly counted high among his blessings.

During the time John had been married, the flat had felt empty. It was worse even than when he had been dead (“away!”); at least when he was hiding in some grotty bolt hole, or chained up in a Serbian cell, Sherlock could still imagine coming back home so clearly he could smell the books and feel the steam on his face, rising from his tea. He held to that image like a lifeline – the
The glow of the fire, the rich colors and patterns of the flat, and he and John in their chairs. Home.

So it had come as a bit of a shock to come back to 221B and not be able to find that comfortable feeling anywhere. The flat felt hollow even when he had clients or visitors in. He rattled around like a pinball through the rooms when he was there by himself. He had come to welcome Mrs. Hudson’s little visits simply to fill the silence with a friendly voice. He even had played games with Mycroft to break up the monotony, for God’s sake!

He was dismayed at how long it had taken him to identify that the fundamental difference between his vision and the disappointing reality was John’s absence. John was living with Mary, not at 221B, and therefore 221B did not feel like home. The flat felt warmer when John would visit. It felt just like old times when they played that silly drinking game with the sticky notes on John’s stag night. Then cold and dull again after the wedding; Sherlock had connected the dots that night at the reception, when he realized John and a pregnant Mary would have obligations – an entire new person! – which would take precedence over Sherlock. There was no hope of 221B feeling like home again, and the emptiness of it had sat heavily in his chest.

Sherlock huffed and rolled to face the back of the sofa, tightening his dressing gown over his hips and digging his bare toes into the cushion. His brow furrowed a bit as he contemplated the dark times. (“He’s got on with his life.” “What life? I’ve been away.”) Ironic that Sherlock was the one who seemed to lack life when John was away. Sentiment, again. Always for John Watson. John kept him right, as he had declared to everyone they knew. How could he not have noticed how much his heart was on display in that bloody speech? Had he been so blind all along?

It took a bullet to make him see, finally, what it all meant. When John was back in 221B helping him recover, that ‘home’ feeling was back again, but tenuous, overshadowed by John’s hair-trigger temper as he processed what his wife had done. Yet his care for Sherlock was gentle - changing bandages, monitoring his pain medication, helping him bathe or dress or just move around. Sherlock came to anticipate John’s strong arm behind his shoulders as he groaned his way down to the sofa, or a hand to his flushed forehead to check his temperature, or any number of other little events, in a way that puzzled him at first. As he healed and John’s assistance was less necessary, he found himself missing that closeness. Faced with far too much time laying about, he’d catch himself imagining John stroking fingers through his curls, or sliding a hand down his chest while helping him on with his shirt, or bathing him slowly and intimately. It crystallized for him the way all his best deductions did; one fact leading to the next to the inescapable conclusion. This was … love. It explained everything; all the inexplicable ways he responded to John’s presence, craved John’s attention, considered John’s reactions, even when the man himself wasn’t present.

Understanding was not immediately followed by acceptance. Sherlock prided himself on his resistance to the weaknesses of sentiment. He had buried the feelings as deeply as he could and attempted to look at the situation logically. John had been in danger, that much was obvious. His wife would have become suspicious in time, if John made no move to at least contact her. There was the child to consider, as well. Sherlock spent the long, dreary hours of his convalescence turning the problem over in his mind. Sherlock rubbed the scar on his chest as the final deduction solidified. (Really, should it pain him that much now that it was mostly healed?) It was inevitable: for his own safety, John would have to return to Mary.

Convincing John of this fact turned out to be more difficult than Sherlock expected; John was righteously furious at Sherlock’s injury and Mary’s seeming lack of remorse for causing it. It took considerable and increasingly less subtle manipulation on Sherlock’s part to get his friend to see reason. Sherlock had pointedly ignored the flare of warm satisfaction John’s stubborn loyalty inspired; just a twinge from the healing wound, clearly.
Eventually, however, even Sherlock had to admit what was going on with him, with all these feelings swirling around in his head, making him miss vital, important things. Things like Magnussen’s blackmail information being solely in his mind palace. Like the ticking time bomb of John’s marriage, husband to an assassin with everything to lose. Like his own weaknesses being used against him, with disastrous consequences for John, when everything he had done was to keep his best friend safe. His preoccupation had left him backed into a corner there at Appledore, forced to use the least elegant, most brutal force to protect John.

Sherlock shifted uncomfortably on the sofa for a moment; turning over to face the room but not opening his eyes. He didn’t like to dwell on the period that followed – his slide into despair, locked in a cell as he was informed he would be sent to Serbia on Mycroft’s suicide mission, leaving John unprotected with his wife a still-unknown factor. The drugs were the only way to cope, really. With his confinement, with the scene on the tarmac, with the emotional sendoff that he thought was the last time he would ever see John’s earnest face. He wanted to speak his feelings aloud in that moment, more than almost anything - but couldn’t bring himself to do it when he realized his last memory of John would be uncomfortable hemming and hawing over the unexpected sentimentality. Much better to make him laugh, and cherish the wry lines of the crow’s feet by his friend’s eyes and the strength of their hands, clasped together.

In the madness that followed, initially blurred by drugs, eventually smeared with exhaustion and the rollercoaster pace of events, Sherlock hardly had a second to contemplate his experience of the finer emotions. That didn’t stop his brain from squirreling away moments to be pulled out and examined later. John, arriving at the flat with a new haircut that had Sherlock silent and blinking for a full two minutes, heart beating frantically in his chest. John, awkwardly thrilled to have his baby tucked against him in a carrier, out for a stroll. The fond indulgence on John’s face when a grinning Sherlock looked up from scratching that bloodhound behind the ears. John’s expression when he discovered his wife was gone and his baby daughter with her; raw in a way Sherlock had never seen before, mutely pleading with Sherlock - with the world - to change the truth. He didn’t like how that moment made him feel, but he couldn’t delete it. He never could delete anything about John.

All that was behind them now; the truths that couldn’t be changed. John is no longer (was never) married. John does not have a daughter with him at 221B. John has returned to his life with Sherlock, and slowly, slowly, has mostly come back from the places in his mind that those traumatic events took him. Sherlock has found himself wanting to comfort his friend in ways that would likely make John intensely uncomfortable. Physical gestures. Not in… well… that way, of course. John has made it perfectly clear that he is not gay. But just to… put an arm around him when his eyes go deep and far away. Hold him, and feel him allowing Sherlock to take some of the burden for a bit. Drop a hand on a shoulder as he passes, to remind John he’s there. He absently rubs the scar Mary gave him; it still aches at the oddest times.

These thoughts propel him up from the sofa, suddenly needing to move and stop all this maudlin nonsense. John is back, and their friendship is still strong; it’s more than he should have been able to have. He will be glad for it, by God, and not pine for some unnameable, impossible ‘more’ that John cannot give. He runs long fingers through his tangled curls and realizes he’s not had a shower in too long. Right then: first order of business – shower, dress. Then, find some experiment to occupy his mind and his time until Lestrade brings him something worthwhile. Sherlock stalks over to the window, observing the people on the street. “Somebody kill someone, I’m going mad,” he says under his breath, remembering times when he would shout it through the glass in his frustration and desperation to calm his whirling mental processes. A different time, then. A different him.

Down below, a greying ash blond head came into view. Sherlock notes John has been to the barber this morning, tidying up the very appealing hairstyle he’s adopted over the last year. He
looks trim as usual, though his fashion sense had always left something to be desired. Sherlock occasionally catches himself dressing John in his mind palace, the compact body revolving like a mannequin, dressed from pants outward to Sherlock’s exacting standards in the finest of fabrics and rich, deep colors. When he realizes he’s doing it, he packs the mind-John away in a huge wardrobe.

From downstairs the front door opens, and John’s footsteps pound up the stairs in his usual efficient cadence. In Sherlock’s mind the wardrobe door slams; he spins around, dressing gown flaring, to face his friend. John comes in with a bit of color on his cheeks from the brisk wind outside, and a pleasant smile on his face. “You’re up off the sofa, I’m impressed,” he said, “Did Lestrade text?”

“No,” Sherlock replied, “I was about to shower. D’you need the loo?”

“Need tea,” John said, heading for the kettle. Sherlock can’t help but watch him go; that new jacket of John’s offers an unobstructed view that Sherlock has been keenly interested in lately. From a strictly aesthetic standpoint, of course – Sherlock is interested in anything new about John. John fills the kettle and flicks it on, raising an eyebrow inquiringly and smiling. “Something you needed?”

“Er, no,” Sherlock said, blinking. “I’ll just…” he starts in the direction of the bathroom. The wardrobe door in his mind creaks open again, and the John-mannequin is back, dressed only in his pants, but he has a bit of color in his cheeks now and windswept hair. It’s probably best that Sherlock’s heading for the shower; once he’s dressed John in his mind palace, there are times when it is very difficult to keep from undressing him again. This seems to be one of those times. Not something he’d want John to observe on his face or in his posture, if he wants to maintain the status quo. He hurried down the hall.

When Sherlock emerged from his room - dressed, refreshed and more relaxed than when he went in - John was planted in his chair, tea at his side, poking away at his laptop. After years of relentless mockery from Sherlock, John had learned to touch type but he was not fast, and he hit the keys so hard it sounded like he was using tiny rubber mallets on them.

Sherlock detoured to the kitchen to collect the second cup of tea considerately left there for him, and settled in his own chair. When John glanced up, he nodded in thanks, indicating the drink. John smiled and went back to his hammering. Sherlock sipped delicately. Perfect.

When Sherlock had finished the cup, he pulled his own laptop to him and idly looked at his email, then surfed around to the London news sites to see if there was anything promising on the horizon. When nothing presented itself, he moved on to the gossip sites where he could troll the illiterate mouth-breathers who congregated there to squeal over the latest manufactured popstar crisis. He had really begun to work up some steam castigating some fans (calling themselves ‘cookies’ for God’s sake) cooing over a gawky, intellectual actor with a truly ridiculous name who had, it seemed, successfully procreated and then gotten a trinket from the Queen. Wasn’t there something useful these people could be doing? Be creatively murdered, for instance? He huffed loudly, and prepared to flay them with words when he noticed the quiet. The tiny mallets had gone still. He looked up.

John was staring at his own screen, fingertips of one hand pressing the bridge of his nose as he read. Whatever it was, it seemed long and John’s face had lost the easy relaxation he usually displayed when he was editing a blog post. Article, then, or email with unpleasant news in it. John had tried to hide his distress over the last months when reading about children, or accidents that happened to families, but this expression lacked the pinch of anguish around the eyes those had produced. Instead, John’s lips were thin, pressed tight together, and his eyebrows drew down in
“John?”

“Hmm?” John said, not really looking up, but rather starting to read the item again.

“What’s that you’re reading?” Sherlock asked.

“Mm... Email. From my Aunt.” John said, still clearly preoccupied.

“Your Aunt? You’re usually pleased to hear from her. Has she said something unexpectedly offensive?” Sherlock persisted, wanting to know what put that particular combination of expressions on John’s face.

John finally looked up at Sherlock. “What? No, No. Not offensive, just telling me the family news. All distant relatives, mostly, aside from me and Harry. But she says my... well, not stepsister, but my Aunt’s husband’s daughter from a previous marriage, you know?” he trailed off for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

“Well, her husband’s died recently. Marjorie’s husband, I mean, not my Uncle Tim. Two weeks ago, rather sudden; an illness over a month or so. She’s only a few years younger than me, and he was right around my age. Brilliant bloke, chemistry researcher of some kind. I only met him once, when I got back from Afghanistan. We didn’t really have anything to talk about, but he seemed devoted to Marjorie.” John blew out a breath. “It’s a shame, that; I should probably send a card or something. Poor Marjorie.”

“Poor fellow, I should think.” Sherlock said blandly. “What else?”

John quirked a half smile. “How did you know there was something else?”

“As you read the email for the second time, you skimmed over the first part - about the death I assume since you frowned – but lingered over the later part and tilted your head a bit like the way you do when you look at pictures of dogs on the Internet, and you held in a chuckle; it makes your chin tighten up.”

A chuff of breath accompanied John’s smile and nod. “It’s still brilliant how you do that, even after all this time.”

Sherlock tried not to preen, but a brief smile leaked through. “Well, then, what else?”

“Oh, yeah. Well, my sort-of, not-really stepbrother, Marjorie’s little brother Stephen, is getting married for the third time. If I was chuckling, it’s because after this Harry won’t let me hear the end of how I ‘taught Stephen to charm the ladies, and now look at him!’” John wiped a hand over his face and shrugged his discomfiture. “I might have coached him on asking a girl to dance at a family wedding, once. I had nothing to do with the wives. I don’t think I even met the second one.”

John’s email alert bleeped, and his eyes snapped back to the screen. “Speak of the devil,” he mused. “Marjorie’s sent me an email.” He hesitated a moment, then opened it.

Sherlock leaned back in his chair and observed his best friend. What was that hesitation? Why would he not want to hear from this... whatever-relative-woman? John’s reluctance had been clear, even though he had intended to send his condolences for her husband.

John’s expression sobered as he read the email. “She seems to be coping quite well with her bereavement,” John said dryly. “She wants to know if I’ll be going to Stephen’s wedding. Aunt
Brigid asked me too, so I don’t think I can get out of it,” he blew out a big sigh. “Well, maybe in four months, we’ll be deep in a case and I can beg off. Get on that, will you?” He shot Sherlock a more genuine smile and put the laptop aside, getting up from the chair. “I’m starving, let’s have some lunch!” John headed for the kitchen; finding distraction, as he often did, in the small tasks of the day.

Sherlock steepled his fingers under his chin and wondered how soon he could break into John’s email and look at them for himself. Something seemed a bit off with John and this part of his family Sherlock had never met and rarely heard about. Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim were perfectly ordinary people; he had met them at John’s wedding. There had been no talk of Tim’s children at the time, and they hadn’t been on the guest list. He wouldn’t have deleted it if it had come up; nothing about John stayed deleted.

He ruminated a little more while John tried to interest him in a sandwich and he waved it off. John was just wiping crumbs off his shirt after putting his plate in the sink when Sherlock’s phone pinged. “Text from Lestrade,” he drawled, “what do you know about the effects of uncontrolled decompression on a body?”

“No thing.” John said, eyeing his friend keenly, a smile spreading over his face.

“Nor do I,” Sherlock said, breaking out into a matching grin. “Shall we learn, then? Lestrade says ‘Messy. Bring your Wellies.’ Ha! Excellent!” He bounded from his chair “Come, John!”

The very minor mystery of John’s sort-of, not-really relatives was set aside for the much more interesting case of who would try to dispose of a body by attempting to vacuum-seal it.
Chapter 2

The early spring air was brisk as John sauntered back toward the locker rooms from the pitch. Practice had been vigorous and muddy after the rains this week, and John was filthy from head to toe. The team was in fine form this year and he had high hopes for the weekend’s match. It would be excellent if during his last year as Captain, they took the league cup! At the moment, though, he was looking forward to a shower and change of clothes before heading home to tackle that organic chemistry practical write-up. He’d been distracted in the lab by his lab partner, Chrissy Smythe, who was wearing a tight pink fuzzy jumper that accentuated her chest and had lips shiny with Dr. Pepper-scented lip gloss her cousin in America had sent her. It smelled good. He wondered if her lips tasted like they smelled.

Up ahead, he saw a pair of his teammates, talking to a slight figure in dark clothes and holding a satchel up out of reach. Something in the picture made him frown, and he hastened toward them.

Jones, the boy holding the satchel up, was speaking. “I said, what are you gonna do about it, then, eh? I need your chemistry notes for Friday’s test, and I’m gonna take ‘em!” His companion Fitzhugh snorted and nodded along.

“I need them too, you imbecile, you should have taken your own notes in class,” the figure said, and John realized with surprise it was Marjorie Penton. John and Marjorie crossed paths frequently enough, since her father and his Aunt were a pretty serious item these days. John knew Marjorie was in higher-level chemistry with some of the older students, and she had helped him with his own homework in the subject more than once. He hadn’t realized she shared a class with any of his teammates, and in her goth-inspired outfit, so unlike what she wore at her father’s house, he hadn’t recognized her until she spoke.

“Hello, lads, what’s happening?” John said, observing the tableau. His teammates whirled around to face him, looking innocently nonchalant.

“Nuffin’ much, Cap,” the boy holding the satchel said.

“That bag is mine,” Marjorie said.

“Hmm. You don’t say? Well Jones, Fitzhugh - I’d hate for the rugby team to be falling into any unfortunate jock stereotypes by roughing up other students and taking what isn’t theirs, in order to get away with not doing their very best work in their classes.” John eyed the two sternly while they goggled at him. “I’m sure you were actually just brushing the dirt off the bag after picking it up for her, weren’t you,” he said and cocked an eyebrow, indicating Marjorie. Both boys shut their slack jaws and looked abashed as John spoke.

Jones made a show of brushing the bottom of the bag off before handing it back to Marjorie, who took it with modestly good grace. “S’right, Cap, din’t want it to get all in the mud,” he said, “must’a got a bit enthusiastic afore you came along.”

John smiled easily. “I knew it. Well, that’s great, lads. How about ten extra laps of the track at tomorrow’s practice, then? That’s the best place for enthusiasm like that.” His teammates blinked as the words sank in. “I’ll see you there. Oh, and you know - if you had asked nicely, she might have helped you with your notes. Try that next time, yeah?” He nodded firmly. “Best get off to the lockers to clean up, then. If you feel like me after today’s practice, you’ve got mud in places even your Mum’s never seen.” Jones and Fitzhugh guffawed and turned to go, sniggering about crude places
where one or the other might be hiding mud.

Marjorie regarded John with wide eyes as they turned to walk back toward the school. “Sorry about that,” John said, letting the boys get a bit ahead, then leading her back to the building. “They’re not the brightest, those two.”

“Um, thanks,” she said awkwardly, “you helped me, and you didn’t have to.”

“Course I did,” John said emphatically. “I don’t like it when people take advantage because they think they’re entitled. I mean, you’re a nice girl, and you work hard to get good grades, and those knobs just want to play rugby and goof off in class. They shouldn’t get to be dicks to you and take your notes just because they play a sport.”

Marjorie’s wan smile was brief. “You’re the only one in school who plays, who thinks that.”

“Not for long,” John said, “They’ll be remembering when they run my laps – I plan to make them sprints, and ten laps is two and a half miles!”

Marjorie’s smile took on a slightly feral cast. “Can I come watch?”

John snorted and grinned. “Yeah, all right.”

Jones and Fitzhugh did indeed suffer through their extra laps, and as if the gods wanted to weigh in as well, then went on to contract a debilitating bout of food poisoning just in time to miss the next match. John led the team to a solid win, even so. Marjorie attended every rugby match after that until John graduated.

~~oOo~~

Sherlock didn’t get around to poking in John’s email until a few weeks after the ‘Vacuum-Packed Adventure’ as John insisted calling the case on his blog. There had been little in the way of diverting cases after that case wrapped up, (‘Ha!’ said John’s voice, ‘good one!’) but Sherlock had had a few email puzzles that occupied him and two new experiments on what happens to flesh when abruptly exposed to unusually low pressure. Gruesome, but very informative. He’d had to go to Bart’s morgue for the second experiment; he was right in thinking it would need a space with a drain in the floor. John had asked where he was going, thought for a moment, then calmly wished him luck and suggested he wear the protective suit for once. Good advice, when it came to it. It would have taken ages to get the bits out of his hair after the second trial reacted more vigorously than he had anticipated.

When he got home, no one was there. He pulled out his phone and brought up the calendar. John had linked his calendar to Sherlock’s account, so that he could know when John was at work. Sherlock resolutely didn’t smile; while he didn’t talk (out loud) to John when he wasn’t present anymore, he felt a certain satisfaction at this evidence that John viewed their lives together as a given, something to be facilitated as a matter of course.

John was indeed at work, and wouldn’t be home for some hours. For form’s sake, Sherlock dashed off a text - ‘Home now. Protective gear was a good idea; no repeat of the pig incident.’ - and pictured John’s smirk when he received it. The flat was silent and held a ghost of the emptiness that Sherlock hated. He considered his options. He could write up the results of his experiments for his blog. While that was interesting, he found writing up experiments while explaining them to John to be much more stimulating. Having to go over the parts that were obvious to him but opaque to John meant his results were received more positively by the small following his blog maintained. While he
scoffed that his readers, mostly forensic techs and researchers, should be able to follow his reasoning without any hand-holding, empirical evidence demonstrated that his articles were better understood when he had John to vet the results. The reduction in asinine requests for clarification was worth having to wait a few hours to get to the writing.

He could go up to John’s room and look around. (”Snoop, you mean.” ”Quiet, John.”) He did that sometimes, when holding his inconvenient feelings at bay dragged his mood down toward melancholy. He would go up and go through John’s chest of drawers, prodding at untidily-arranged socks and stroking the softness of folded jumpers, absentmindedly scratching at the scar on his own chest. He’d carefully perch on John’s tightly-made bed, so as not to leave evidence he was there, and lean over to inhale John’s scent from the pillow. It made him uncomfortably aware he was doing something not very good, wallowing in John’s intimate space without his permission, so he didn’t do it often. Only when he really needed to.

But today he didn’t need that relief; he was still occupied enough with his experiment that he was impatient for John to return and just wanted to fill the time. So he doffed his coat and hung it on the peg, and fetched his blue dressing gown while the kettle boiled. His phone pinged - ‘Glad you’re unbloodied. Thinking Indian for dinner.’ - Grabbing the nearest laptop as he settled in his chair with his tea, he realized it was John’s. No matter, he was just going to check email and scan the news sites while he waited. John’s password was predictable as usual, though the insults he had been choosing lately were amusing. Take this example: ‘UseY0ur)wnY0uC0ck’ – so very John in tone, and he suspected the parenthesis was unintentional though it added a level of complexity that stumped him for almost fifteen minutes.

The news sites were full of puff pieces about celebrities’ dogs and political scandal. Nothing interesting presented itself to capture his attention. Dull. Banal. Tedious. His email was overrun with lost jewelry, spouses-with-overly-friendly-secretaries, and one cat. A lost cat! Is this what his international reputation had earned him? He narrowed his eyes at the photo of a disgruntled, squash-faced Persian that a hopeful prospect had sent him and canceled out of his email in disgust.

On John’s desktop, in the area he usually left blog posts or correspondence he was working on but hadn’t published or sent, there was the draft of the ‘Vacuum-Packed Adventure’ (Sherlock shook his head) and an incongruous email icon. John had saved an email? Shrugging, he clicked it.

‘Dear John,

I’m sure you’ve heard by now that my husband Richard has passed away. It was very hard to go through his illness with him, but he was stoic to the end. He was a wonderful man and I will miss him. But don’t worry about me. I will be all right.

How are you? Are you planning to go to Stephen’s wedding? Hopefully this one will stick! I’d love to catch up with you there, if you are. We can talk about how old we’ve gotten. I’ll be forty the month before the wedding, can you believe it? Where does the time go? I’d love to see you again.

Take care of yourself,

Marjorie’

This must be the email John had mentioned weeks ago, from his cousin-relative-woman. While the text certainly didn’t indicate much grief on the part of the widow, Sherlock couldn’t see anything that would explain John’s reluctance to hear from her. And while he had managed to answer his Aunt within a day or two of her email, he clearly had not answered this one yet. Why not? Perhaps John was uncomfortable with how unaffected Marjorie seemed by her widowhood, when John himself had struggled to come to grips with his own bereavement. Of course, there is
quite a difference between losing a spouse to an illness, and the horrendous events John had endured. Perhaps it was difficult for him to be reminded of it like this.

Sherlock closed the email, and then the laptop, taking up his violin to play by the window. He felt unexpectedly solemn, and the sweeping notes he coaxed out of the instrument brought to mind John’s profound, far-away expression that occurred less and less often lately. Sherlock played to that deep stare, and in his mind, his arm supporting the violin was around John’s shoulders, and his bowing stroked through ash-blond, silverying hair.

Hours later when John came home with a bag smelling of Indian takeaway, Sherlock had moved on from his contemplative mood and greeted his friend with enthusiasm and actual appetite. The two worked into the evening on their respective projects, John on his blog post and Sherlock on his write-up of the low-pressure experiments, bouncing ideas back and forth as the thought occurred. Sherlock took himself off to bed when John said goodnight; no sense in writing that he’d just redo when John got a look at it. As he lay under the cool covers, waiting for them to warm up, it occurred to him that the evening had been almost exactly like the vision of home in his head while he was away. The thought followed him to sleep, and his dreams were hazy with firelight and shared companionship.

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The next day was Sunday; Sherlock looked forward to Sundays more than he probably should. It was the day most likely to involve John lounging around in the flat in his pajamas, cajoling Sherlock into eating breakfast with him and having a lazy day together. Or rather, each having their own lazy day, at the same time, in the same flat. Not together. Not... together-together, just being in the same place. Like flatmates who are friends. Sherlock rolled his mental eyes at himself. Truly, this sentiment business was worse for brain work than the smoking bans. Did he have any patches around?

This Sunday morning, Sherlock was particularly distracted by lazy-day details. As Spring rolled along, it was warm enough to forego slippers and thick bathrobes. John’s sleep shirt, a grey Tshirt stretched out and threadbare in places, kept slipping off to one side and exposing unfair amounts of collarbone and trapezius to derail his train of thought. Which had already been following a worn track of trim ankles and bare feet, biceps flexing while eggs scrambled, and that strip of waist that had flashed when something on the top shelf of the cupboard was needed.

“Sher. Lock!” John said loudly, leaning over to more pointedly address his oblivious friend. Sherlock twitched and regarded John, who had clearly been trying to get his attention for some time. The shirt had slid forward, revealing both collarbones with perfect framing by the drooping neckline. Sherlock resolutely did not wonder what they tasted like. “Do. You. Want. Eggs!”

“Of course I want them. Aren’t you making some?” Sherlock replied somewhat acidly, to cover his inattention.

“Already did and they’re waiting for you on the table, that’s what I’ve been saying! Come and eat.” John heaved a sigh and sat himself at his plate, having done his part. He applied jam to toast with gusto. Sherlock pushed the pajama-clad version of the John-mannequin, collarbones and all, into the wardrobe in his mind palace with a quiet click, and joined him.

Later that day John had dressed but skipped socks and sat in his chair with his feet tucked up. He was hammering at his laptop again - writing something, then deleting it, then writing something, and so on. Eventually, John made a ‘sod this’ face (Sherlock had seen – and caused - that one enough to know it well) and clicked with finality. He got up to fill the kettle, then ambled into the loo.
Sherlock had observed all this covertly, watching John over the top of his own laptop screen. What was so frustrating? He took his chance to lean over and look at John’s laptop. His email was open, so Sherlock clicked on the last sent email. That Marjorie-step-woman-relative was the recipient.

‘Marjorie,

I am terribly sorry to hear of your husband’s passing. I know just how hard it can be to lose someone you thought you would spend your life with. It will get easier as time goes by, at least it has for me. Having good friends helps.

Yes, I will likely be going to Stephen’s wedding. I’d be happy to do a little catching up, but I don’t want to monopolize the sister of the groom. I assume you’ll have duties, right?

Take care,

John’

Sherlock was back in his chair with John’s laptop replaced where it had been as the sound of the water turning off in the bathroom sink alerted him to John’s return. So, he had finally replied to the whatever-woman. And a cool reply at that; not exactly a brush off, but in no way as enthusiastic as her initial message. John was less invested in this person than she was in John. Or perhaps actually disliked her? And John had said ‘having good friends helps.’ Was Sherlock included in that category? John had said Sherlock was his best friend. Did John know, at least on some level, how much Sherlock wanted to help, comfort, be there for him? Sherlock felt a little frisson of something when he thought of John appreciating his presence; of him ‘helping.’

He decided to play his violin; John’s favorites to start, then variations of his own on those themes. He occasionally glanced at John for a reaction, and was rewarded every time with a nodding head, relaxed smile, and steady attention until he looked away. Helping, indeed.

~~oOo~~

Over the next few weeks Lestrade kept them quite entertained with a series of escalating street robberies that culminated in a chase on foot, then on ‘borrowed’ bicycles, and lastly over the rooftops of some disreputable row housing. Lestrade had been left panting in their dust as Sherlock and John scrambled up a fire escape after their surprisingly nimble perpetrator, who had been disguised as an old man missing a leg. As it happened, the leg was not missing, merely folded up tight, and the old fellow was a 25-year-old former track star who had gotten himself entangled in a drug scheme. They might not have caught him except he hadn’t had as much experience on rooftops as his pursuers, and didn’t see the missing shingle before he stepped on it and put his leg down into an attic. Sherlock and John skidded to a stop nearby and dissolved into wheezing laughter. Sherlock left their swearing, shouting culprit stuck in a hole, with a text to Lestrade to come get the thief and bring a roof patch while he was at it. John’s shining eyes as he read the text and giggled uncontrollably were fantastic. He put them in the front of John’s display in his mind palace.

During this time, John began to exhibit a new pattern of behavior toward his laptop. Sherlock, who missed little when it came to John, hadn’t put the pieces together until they had finished with Lestrade, though the symptoms had been scattered through those weeks. It started small, just an irritated huff or a tightening of the lips when he would open up the screen, or an unusually firm closing of the cover when finishing up. These little tics intensified as John and Sherlock resumed the routines of their life – John opening the laptop, looking at it for only a moment or two, then clacking it closed again; occasionally looking at it like it might bite him, whether it was on or not; clearly having to make himself get on it and hammer away. He also stopped leaving it
around the common spaces of the flat as often, bringing it up to his room with him or even taking it
to work a few times. It puzzled Sherlock; he observed these little oddities in his usually composed
friend and turned them over in his mind like one might run a worry stone through their fingers. He
found dwelling on John, any facet of John, soothing and absorbing.

John didn’t want to do something on his laptop. Not blogging; Sherlock could tell when
John was writing a blog post, because his face mirrored all the emotions he had felt as he relived
whatever experience he was putting on the page, and he had obviously been writing up the rooftop
chase the previous evening. (Sherlock loved watching John write blog posts, so he criticized them
viciously to keep from gushing like a vapid fan on one of the gossip sites.)

What else does John do on his laptop? Read articles and news, get emails from his sister
and Aunt and some distant friends, spend as little time as possible on social media, look at pictures of
dogs doing supposedly humorous things. None of these had ever produced this reaction before. Of
course, Sherlock could just break into the laptop and look, but that wouldn’t allow him the chance to
figure it out and interesting cases had been thin on the ground since the robberies had wrapped up.
More importantly, John hadn’t left it anywhere long enough for Sherlock to get his hands on it.

Tedious. He’d have to collect more data.
Chapter 3

In the spring of John’s first year at St. Bart’s medical school, Aunt Brigid called to let him know she and Tim were getting married that summer. John was genuinely pleased for them; in his opinion, Mr. Penton was good for Aunt Brigid, and Aunt Brigid was good for Tim and his kids, especially Stephen. Marjorie had outgrown her goth phase and matured into an intelligent, self-possessed young woman who was well on her way to a doctorate in Chemistry and a career in pharmaceutical research. Stephen had struggled to find his way in school, timid and accident-prone in his teens. In recent years, he had come out of his shell somewhat and was looking forward to Uni avidly. John privately thought some time out of his sister’s shadow had done him a world of good.

He promised to be there for the wedding as he rang off, grinning. Just the break he needed from the pressures of school: a huge party on his old stomping grounds. John loved his life as a poor, harried med student, and he loved London with its round-the-clock activity and frenetic energy, but he was looking forward to being coddled a bit by his Aunt and Uncle-to-be.

Late June rolled around, and John took a train back to Brighton a week before the wedding for a proper visit. He’d asked Harry if she wanted to travel together, but she said she’d just come down for the weekend of the wedding itself, and confessed rather endearingly that she was bringing a plus one. John looked forward to meeting the woman who could make his tough sister sound like that. He had some news of his own to give the family: his enlistment in the RAMC after his medical degree was complete. He wondered how they would react – he knew the adventure appealed to him, and the financial assistance toward med school was substantial and necessary. Harry and Aunt Brigid were the only blood kin he had left; of course they would worry about him in the army.

He was right. Aunt Brigid went a bit pale, and clutched her fiancé’s hand tightly, but said “I know it’s what you have to do, and what you want to do, too. I’ll worry about you, of course.” Uncle-to-be Tim solemnly shook his hand and said “We’ll keep you in our prayers, John.” Harry threw a shouting fit, which her plus one, Clara, observed calmly until she took Harry’s hand and drew her into a hug, stopping her mid-rant. “Oh, you’re a keeper, you are,” John told her fervently. “I know,” Clara said placidly. Harry was not the only Watson who loved Clara after that.

At the wedding itself spirits were high, toasts made, the happy couple ordered to kiss by choirs of tapped glasses and applauded when they complied. After the formalities of cake-cutting, first dances, and bouquet-throwing, a seemingly endless parade of distant relatives and friends of the family stopped by John’s table to bring him drinks, make remembrances of his parents, and ask after his schooling. Soon John was more than loose and feeling no pain.

He had his eye on the vicar’s pretty niece, in town for the month from Scotland, and was trying to decide if he was steady enough to ask her to dance when Marjorie sat down straight-backed beside him and blocked his view. She’d brought a bottle of very good whiskey with her, and he found himself mesmerized by the crisp speed of her diction as she told him all about her research, her degree, her prospects for an R&D position with an as-yet-undetermined big pharma company, since several were courting her. More than an hour slipped by as she spoke, diction and posture softening with each glass she poured, and John regaled her in turn with stories of medical training, scientific mishaps and the truly macabre shenanigans medical students could get up to when motivated; his habitual charm making her blush prettily more than once. He found himself enjoying her company as much as he enjoyed her whiskey, and wondered blearily to himself why he had always stayed so aloof with her growing up. She wasn’t his type, sure, but she wasn’t so bad. The drink seemed to make her a bit soppy, though.
A lull in their chat left them watching the couples swaying on the dance floor to a slow jazz tune with a cheesy saxophone line. The Vicar’s niece had been dancing with a friend of Stephen’s for the last half hour, and John acknowledged his chance had passed. He sighed.

“You know, whoever you end up with will be a very lucky woman, John,” Marjorie said slowly, watching the dancers.

John turned to regard her owlishly. “Naw, I’m not that… naw,” he said. “M’just… me.”

“And the you, that you are, is charming, handsome, smart... pretty wonderful, actually. Have you,” she took a deep breath and then said, somewhat rushed, “have you ever thought about the two of us? Together?” Marjorie looked at him from under her lashes, color high on her cheeks. “In all the years we’ve known each other, have you?” She leaned toward him, lips parted.

John leaned away from her intensity, disconcerted by her sudden question. “Er,” he said, stalling for time. “I can’t say I have, Marjorie. I mean, your Dad, my Aunt, they’re together. I always thought of you sort of like my sister. Not like in the way that Harry is, I mean! Though of course it’s all fine if you were, er, that way.” He took a breath. “But anyway, more like that you were my sister. So, no, I never thought about it.” He shook his suddenly woozy head and frowned. “I don’t think that came out right.”

Marjorie’s lip trembled. “But I’m not your sister. We’re not related at all. So it would be all right if you did… think of me like that.” She looked hopefully again at John, and when he didn’t reply, her face crumpled. A tear welled up. John felt his brain moving through molasses and wished he hadn’t drunk quite so much of Marjorie’s very good whiskey.

“I’m sorry, Marjorie, I didn’t know you felt that way.” He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “You’re so confident and intelligent, and - and pretty, you deserve someone who wants you for yourself.” John shook his head. “That’s not me, really it isn’t. When I finish my medical degree, I’ll be heading directly into basic training, and then into the Army. I’ll be deployed for months, maybe a year at a time overseas, and in dangerous situations. I can’t get serious with anyone right now – it’s not fair to ask them to worry and wait for me, with no guarantee I’ll even come back.” John had hoped to keep Marjorie from crying any more, but instead she put her face in her hands and sobbed. John cast around frantically for something to say to stem the flood. “Tell you what,” he blurted, then took a breath and put on his best bedside manner. “Er, how about this - you’re twenty-one? Plenty of time still to find the man who will love you for yourself. But when you turn forty, if you’re alone… and I’m alone too… and you still want to, we can give it a try. Alright? Just please, don’t cry anymore.”

Marjorie gradually quieted behind her hands, then looked up when John offered her the square from his suit pocket. She dabbed at her eyes. “You mean that? Really? You’d try with me if we’re still single when I’m forty?” She offered him a watery smile.

John huffed a smile of his own, relieved that the crisis seemed averted. “Yeah, o’course - but I’m sure by then you’ll have found some brilliant cancer researcher who will sweep you off your feet, and you won’t need to pity date a beat up old soldier.” He wagged his eyebrows at her. “I won’t be such a catch at forty-two, you know.” Her face lightened and she giggled a bit. John breathed an internal sigh of relief.

He breathed an even bigger one when Harry and Clara, obviously very merry themselves, came to his rescue a moment later; dragging him off to another table to pep-talk Stephen into asking a pretty girl to dance before the music ended. Charming the ladies was one thing John did well, at least the first time or two. Longer term, he’d yet to get the hang of. Just look at tonight, for chrissake! John vowed never to get that plastered while talking to a woman again. He couldn’t think straight.
John was surprisingly good at keeping his laptop out of reach, Sherlock decided after two more weeks of watching John have an increasingly love-hate relationship with the object. Surely he should have been able to get a half hour alone with it by now? John was being positively devious about limiting Sherlock’s access to the bloody thing. He took it up to his room every night and to work every day he spent at the surgery. He didn’t leave it unattended when he went to take a shower; instead it was left on the toilet cistern, covered with a flannel to keep it from being splashed. He left it down with Mrs. Hudson more than once, even! And when Sherlock, finally driven to try to sneak a look while John was sleeping, slipped cat-footed into his friend’s room to swipe the infuriating machine, he saw the corner poking out from under John’s pillow. Ridiculous! What could be happening on there that John was so keen to keep from him?

New facets of behavior also began to present themselves when John was actually using his computer when Sherlock was nearby. John stopped allowing his friend to lean in and read over his shoulder; he changed the password every other day; he clamped the lid closed if Sherlock passed too close. And most disturbing of all, a faint blush occasionally stained his cheeks and once or twice an expression of guilt? Furtiveness? What was that? Would cross his features and John would ‘head out for some air’ in order to deflect Sherlock’s scrutiny – though not without leaving the laptop with Mrs. Hudson.

All this strangeness began to prey on Sherlock’s mind. What if John were hiding some sort of girlfriend or love affair on the laptop? Perhaps it was a longer-distance thing. Would John move out to go be with her? Was that why he didn’t want Sherlock to know about it? Sherlock took to pressing on the scar on his chest with his fingers. He knew a healed scar couldn’t spontaneously reopen, but it was aching often now. He hated how much this seemingly minor aberration was taking over his thoughts and pushing aside everything else. Certainly it was none of his business who John wanted to date; (since it would never be Sherlock) they weren’t like that. Nicotine patches didn’t help. The violin didn’t help, other than to wipe away any blushes John might be having when the caterwauling notes began.

It took two more days of this for Sherlock to get entirely fed up. John was sat in his chair, frowning at the laptop on his knees when Sherlock stood up to go into the kitchen, where the low-pressure decomposition experiment would be just about ready for another observation period. John smacked the laptop closed so fast it crunched a bit, then peered up at his friend, who had gone still and cold standing in front of him.

“John.” Sherlock said, “this is ridiculous.” And he looked at his friend. Just looked for a full silent minute, and then sat down in his chair with his fingers steepled against his lips. His gaze never strayed from John’s face, and seemed to become heavier with each passing second.

For his part, John appeared mesmerized, a deer caught in the headlights of that weighty stare. Until suddenly he looked down and to one side and actually squirmed a bit in his seat while his ears reddened. He put the laptop aside, blew out a breath and made to stand up. “Tea?” he asked.

“John.” Sherlock said. He did not move and if possible, his gaze became even heavier. “I don’t want any tea.”

John flopped back into his chair with an almost-silent groan and wiped his hands across his face. “I should have known I wouldn’t be able to hide this from you. Christ, what a mess.”

“Hide what?” Sherlock asked, motionless and unblinking. He held himself tightly in check, when he really wanted to shake his friend and yell “Who is she? Who will take you from me?!”
“It’s…” John huffed. “Well, it’s…” he crossed his arms, then uncrossed them, then wiped his hands across his face again. “You see it’s… well, you remember Marjorie?”

Sherlock’s stomach dropped and his eyes narrowed. “Your step-relative-whatever-woman?” That couldn’t be right. John’s email to her had been cool and implied not the slightest bit of interest.

“Right. Well, she…” John huffed a sort of strangled laugh. “She’s been emailing me for the last month or two. A lot.” He still couldn’t meet his friend’s gimlet stare. “You see, when we were younger…”

“You had a liaison, and now you wish to resume it. I see.” Sherlock interrupted frostily. “Well, I can’t dictate who you choose to associate with, but I don’t think a widow on the rebound with an old flame is likely to result in a happy outcome.” He clamped his mouth shut before more mawkish twaddle could pop out. How soon before he could escape to his room? This was worse than torture. He stilled his hand before it could press his chest.

John gaped at him for an incredibly long thirty seconds, then began to splutter. “No! What? No, Sherlock, I never was with Marjorie! God, no.” He chuckled breathily, shaking his head. “No, but she did have a pretty heavy crush on me, I guess.” He pushed up out of his chair and began to pace a few steps back and forth, gesturing vaguely with his hands. “and then I… uh… I guess I…”

“Oh, for God’s sake, man, spit it out!” Sherlock snapped.

“I sort of promised to marry her!” John yelled back defensively.

“What, just now, in an email? Seems rather cold, don’t you think?” Sherlock lashed out, hand flashing to press hard on the scar on his chest.

“No, you git - when I was twenty-three and right pissed, alright? Besides, I never meant it, she was crying at the time!” John swung round to face him, fists clenched. Anger streaked his features, and something else Sherlock had rarely seen on John, and so it took him a moment to recognize it. Embarrassment. John was mortified by whatever situation he found himself in, and thought Sherlock would scorn him for it.

A fair assumption based on past behavior, Sherlock acknowledged, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it now. His own temper deflated, and he sighed. “I think I could use that tea after all, and then you can tell me about it,” he offered.

John blinked, and his fists relaxed. His lips twitched in a brief smile. “Yeah… yeah. Okay.” He went to fill the kettle. Sherlock jumped to his feet and did a few laps of the room himself while the tea steeped, to settle the frantic thoughts bouncing though his mind. He heard John taking deep, steady breaths in the kitchen, his calming routine the only useful thing that therapist had ever taught him.

Tea made, they each sat back in their chairs, more composed. Sherlock nodded, indicating John should continue speaking. John couldn’t contain the flush that crept up from his neck, and looked intently into his mug. “So, Marjorie. She was twenty-one, I was twenty-three. She had been nursing a crush on me for some time apparently, and at my Aunt’s wedding to her father, we got drunk and she confessed it to me. Asked if there was any way I would consider … being with her.” John looked up from under his brows to see if Sherlock caught his meaning, then scrutinized his mug again.
“You have to understand, I had thought of her like a sister since her Dad and my Aunt were together. And she is beautiful, intelligent, intense, and I was not attracted to her at all. Just not my type, I guess. I told her no, and she started sobbing. I was very young and very drunk, and I just blurted out that if she would stop crying, and if we were both alone when she turned forty, that we could give it a try.” John glanced up again, to see his flat mate merely blinking bemusedly. “What? What is that for?” John said defensively.

“I’m trying to imagine you being flustered by a woman crying. I’m not having much luck, given your track record when you first moved in here.” Sherlock said with brutal honesty.

“Oh, thanks a lot. Like I said, I was young. I wouldn’t be a doctor for another few months, hadn’t been in the Army at all. I learned better.” John’s one-fingered salute lacked conviction, but he made the effort. “Anyhow, it seemed to calm her down, and I didn’t think much of it. I didn’t see her again for at least a year while I trained up, not until Harry’s wedding. She seemed a little fixated on me there, so I asked her to dance to see what was up. She remembered my stupid drunk promise and seemed to just be waiting until she turned forty. I talked her out of it, and she went on her way. We lost touch after I was deployed, I didn’t even try to get leave to go to her wedding when it happened during my second tour. Had hardly heard from her until lately, with Stephen’s wedding coming up and her husband passing. Now she’s emailing a few times a week, asking all about my life, gushing about the blog. Wanting to catch up, and she keeps mentioning her birthday – her fortieth. It seemed a bit odd, that, so…” John trailed off, obviously ill at ease with this part of the story. Silence fell while John’s face flushed a deep red, and he began to speak only to stop, then repeat the whole business again.

“So?” demanded Sherlock.

“All right! I started to think maybe she was remembering that whole thing with the marrying at forty as a way to cope with losing her husband, so I…” He heaved out a breath, dropped his face into his hands and said, muffled by his palms, “Imighthavetoldheryou’remyboyfriend.”

It was Sherlock’s turn to gape and splutter. “Sorry? What was that?”

“I might. Have told her. We. Were together,” John gritted out from behind his hands, clearly expecting to be eviscerated for such stupidity. When the explosion didn’t immediately come, he peeked out between his fingers. “Sherlock?”

For his part, Sherlock was staring into space, blinking rapidly, his mind awhirl with John’s statement. John had told someone (anyone!) that he was together - meaning together-together – with Sherlock. That they were in a relationship. Which implied that they… felt things for each other and… did things together. Physical things. Or perhaps just emotional things – he didn’t expect some relative-step-woman-person to have a nuanced understanding of human sexuality, and for that matter, despite John’s ‘it’s all fine’ acceptance of people as they chose to identify to him, Sherlock didn’t think he would split hairs like that in this instance. So John. John! Had told someone (anyone!) that they were… like that.

Suddenly Sherlock became aware of fingers snapping in front of his nose. “Sherlock, hey, Sherlock? C’mon now, this is more scary than the best friend thing, really. Come back, now. Hey, Sherlock?” He blinked one more time and the mildly concerned and mostly amused face of John Watson swam back into view, much closer than when he had last seen it. John was half knelt in front of Sherlock’s chair, leaning in, hand resting warmly on Sherlock’s knee for balance. It was as if all bodily awareness in Sherlock’s mind narrowed down to that point, John’s hand on his knee.

“There now, back with me?” John said fondly. “Huh, I guess that really flipped your switch for a minute, hmm?”
"Why on Earth would you tell her that we were together?" Sherlock rasped. It came out more roughly than he intended, but he was just so surprised. John had a way of doing that to him; it was one of the things that made him so fascinating.

John flinched back, looking uncertain again. "I didn’t really know what else to do to discourage her," he admitted as he settled back in his chair. Sherlock’s knee felt unexpectedly cold, and his scar ached. “Everything else I tried,” John continued, “she either ignored or implied she could er, do… for me.” He sighed again. “I guess I got a little desperate.” He hung his head.

Silence fell between them for a painfully long minute, John flexing and releasing his hands while Sherlock stared at him.

“Look, I know this is asking a lot, and I’m a right bastard for even considering it… but…” he cleared his throat. “Stephen’s wedding is next week, and we don’t seem to have anything on, so I was wondering if – well, if – you’d… come to the wedding. To show Marjorie that there’s no hope of her being with me.”

Sherlock stared at him, deductions falling into line, to the inevitable conclusion. “You want me to go to this wedding with you, and pretend to be… your boyfriend?” he said incredulously.

“Well, I guess so, yeah.” John confessed sheepishly. “I mean, it’s none of their business who I’m with, is it? And this is Stephen’s wedding, so it’s likely to be a bunch of people I hardly know and may never see again, and you’ll certainly not see them again. So you don’t have to worry about it being awkward some other time.” He cleared his throat again. “It would really be to get Marjorie to give up her silly fixation on a stupid thing I said twenty years ago and get on with her life.” The _and leave me bloody well alone_ was unspoken, but clear on his face. John wanted this Marjorie to stop pestering him enough to move well outside any previous areas of comfortable behavior. He really was disturbed by her attention.

Sherlock took a moment to consider. His initial reaction was to refuse, dramatically rebuke John for even suggesting such a thing, and storm off to his room to sulk for a few days. That was obviously what John was expecting him to do, it was written in his hangdog expression and the slouch in his usually upright posture. On the other hand, there would likely never be another opportunity to know what John would be like if he were… his. Sherlock would have permission, would be encouraged at least in public, to offer the arms around shoulders, the hands holding hands, the kiss on a weathered cheek, that he had been imagining – pining for - since he realized he loved John. This would give him a chance to know what that would feel like. He could construct a special room in his mind palace to hold it and visit there when his feelings rose up in his throat, and know - in a real way - what it was like to have a little bit of John to call his own. He couldn’t pass up this chance.

“All right.” Sherlock said, and John’s eyes snapped to his own, shocked.

“Really?” he said.

“If it’s the only way to protect your virtue, then I have no choice, now do I?”

“Oh, ha very ha. You’re really okay with this? It might be a bit strange for you, after all. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable and then have things get all awkward with us. That’s not worth it to me.”

“Yes, really. Honestly, it’s tedious to repeat myself.” Sherlock huffed, rolling his eyes. “No matter, John. It will be a challenge to see if I can maintain the character for so long, and it’s only for a few days, after all.”
“Next weekend, yeah. Go down on the late train Thursday night, come back Sunday. Wedding and reception is Saturday. You really mean it?” He chuffed a laugh, a grateful sound. “Thanks. It’s… nice… of you, to help me out like this.” He ran a hand through his hair, tousling it appealingly. “It’s a relief, really, Sherlock, you have no idea.” He stood, plainly having reached his quota of emotional talking for the time being and clapped his hands together. “I’m for some air. Dinner’s on me tonight, I’ll pick it up while I’m out; what do you fancy?”

Sherlock watched him put on shoes and jacket, and said “I suppose those green curry noodles from that place across the park, if you’re going that far?”

“Done. I’ll be back in a bit.” And John was down the stairs and out the front door, walking briskly to clear his head.

Sherlock moved from his chair to the sofa and wondered if he might need a brisk walk himself; his thoughts crowded one another, all clamoring for attention, one on top of the next. One thought stood out among the rest: if he had thought it would be difficult to watch as John married another person (and it was, it had been excruciating) how then would it be to have John, at least a little, and then have to return to the ‘just flat mates and best friends, not more’ of their daily lives? He found himself taking slow, deep breaths as he sank into his mind palace to deal with the cacophony. Perhaps John’s calming ritual would work for him this time.
John was Harry’s best man, and his rented tuxedo was too tight in the neck and too loose in the waist. He’s sure he’s yanked his collar, then hiked up his trousers a hundred times; and they haven’t even had the ceremony yet. Of course, he got fitted for the bloody suit before he went for intensive combat training last month - after running for four weeks in full pack, armor, and weapons, he’s certainly put on a fair bit of muscle and is as fit as he’s ever been. He feels great; if only his sodding trousers would stay up! He did his yank-hike routine again and grumbled.

“Relax, little brother,” Clara said, when he visited her in her changing room in the rear of the reception hall where the civil ceremony was to be held, “you’ll break plenty of hearts today. All the girls will swoon over you, and a fair few of the blokes, too – well, except the lesbians, of course, so it will be a challenge to pick the right ones, yeah? I’ll tease you forever if you try to pull one of my exes.” She whacked his arse with the back of her hand. “Here, unbutton your waistcoat; I’ll help shorten your braces. And ow, what is your bum made of? Bricks? That hurt!”

John grinned a sardonic grin at her as she fiddled with the sliders at his back, then smoothed the waistcoat again and gestured for him to do up his buttons. “Maybe. And aren’t you supposed to be the uptight one today? Should I be telling Harry you’re going around patting bums?”

“Naw, I’m the cool cucumber in this pair, and she knows your bum is on my exemption list. Though it makes her gag a bit.” Clara winked while John looked at her aghast before bursting into a high-pitched giggle.

“I am so glad you’re joining the family,” he gasped as he regained his composure and pressed Clara into a hug.

“Me too, love. Me too.”

An hour later, he stood beside a flustered Harry and a beaming Clara in the reception line, shaking hands and accepting congratulations for the happy pair. The wedding guests passed by in a blur, with a few standouts: Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim, grinning and demanding John come sit with them and catch up; Stephen Penton, all grown up, with an attractive young lady on his arm; Clara’s mum, who was as lovely as Clara and had a similar fondness for bums, John discovered. He hadn’t realized he could make that particular sound, and Clara’s mum laughed delightedly. He flushed crimson, and somehow ended up agreeing to save the lady a dance. Harry widened her eyes in eloquent disgust while Clara cackled from her other side.

And there was Marjorie, who earnestly took his hand in both of hers in the reception line, and greeted him with a kiss on the cheek that seemed to linger a touch too long. She followed him with her eyes wherever he went at the reception, whether doing his duty on the dance floor, taking a break at the bar or eating his dinner with Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim. It was a bit intense and he felt unsettled under her stare.

Clara noticed his grimace as he took his new sister-in-law for a dance while Harry made another run at the bar. “That girl’s making you nervous, isn’t she?” Clara said. “She’s been staring at you all night. Even my mother’s noticed, and she’s half pissed by now.”

John huffed a laugh. “I’m surprised your Mum looked up from the bum buffet,” he
quipped, trying to make light of his unease. Clara swatted his shoulder. “Marjorie confessed she had a crush on me the last time I saw her,” he sighed. “And I get the feeling it hasn’t gone away in the years since. I’ll talk to her and hopefully that will be the end of it. I ship out next month, anyway, so there’s not much more to be said, right?”

“I don’t like it,” Clara declared darkly. “That girl isn’t quite right, if you ask me. You take care with that one.” John nodded, and their talk turned to happier subjects.

After returning Clara to his tipsy sister, he went over and asked Marjorie to dance. She accepted with a blush on her cheeks and a slightly giddy smile. He swung her out onto the dance floor with a gentle tug on her hand. “You’ve been staring at me all night,” he said reproachfully.

Marjorie hid a giggle in his shoulder, then looked up at him. “You look so handsome, and I couldn’t help but imagine when I’m forty and it’s you and I getting married.”

John blinked; then remembered the words he had said to convince Marjorie to stop crying the last time they had talked. He chuckled weakly as he said “Ah, you remember that, do you? Well, I’m flattered.”

“No, John, I’m the one who should be flattered. I mean, you’re a doctor, and a soldier, and kind and smart and handsome, and to give me a promise like that is… just amazing.” She sighed happily. “And you’ve only gotten more handsome as time goes by. Really, I’m a lucky girl.”

John’s expressive eyes drew down in concern. “Marjorie, I think you might have gotten the wrong impression. I didn’t say what I did so that you would wait for me.” He huffed for a moment and collected his thoughts. “I want you to turn your attention to someone else, who can appreciate you for yourself. I can’t give that to you. The best outcome is that we both find other people who are perfect for us, and don’t have to settle for each other just because we turned a year older. Do you understand?” John fervently hoped this little speech did the trick; he did not find it easy to speak about his feelings, and even less so when he had to let someone down. Marjorie’s face fell, and after a moment she took a deep breath.

“I think I understand, John. You’re right, and I will look for someone to love who can love me back. He couldn’t be as wonderful as you, of course. But…but if things turn out that we’re both alone when I turn forty… we still have your promise to fall back on, right? You’re not taking it back, are you?” Marjorie’s fingers clamped tight on his hand where they clasped in the dance, and her eyes seemed to bore into his own.

John hedged, “I expect you’ll meet someone more wonderful than me. At least I hope so.” He decided not to address the promise he had made, hoping if he dropped the subject, she would let it go. “I’m being deployed next month,” he said instead, “Afghanistan.”

Marjorie gasped and stiffened in his arms. “Oh, John, no! There’s a war there! You’ll be killed!”

“I’ll be fine,” John said. “It’s what I signed up for, what I’ve trained for. I want to go, actually. I’ll be serving Queen and country, and saving lives, saving my fellow soldiers. I’m a very good doctor, you know.” He continued, his eyes growing distant as he thought of the challenges he would face. “But what surprised me is that I’m a good soldier too; good with the hard work, good with my team, with the fighting, with a gun. Very good. It’s what I was born to do, I think.” He trailed off, considering what he’d learned about himself getting to this point.

Which was why he was startled when Marjorie left him on the dance floor and fled the room. After a moment’s thought, he approached his Uncle and explained that Marjorie seemed upset
by the news of his deployment; would he be willing to check on his daughter? John didn’t think she’d want to see him again so soon. Uncle Tim agreed, and left the room in the direction Marjorie had gone. He returned a while later, saying they had talked, Marjorie was fine but very tired, and she had gone back to her hotel to rest. John thanked him, relieved that he hadn’t made her cry again. He put the question of whether he’d promised to marry in future to the back of his mind, and didn’t think on it, or Marjorie, again for months.

~~oOo~~

The day after John's confession, Sherlock emerged from his mind palace after hours of silence. He had been mulling over the emails he had read between Marjorie and John after breaking into John’s laptop while he was out walking. Marjorie was obviously fixated on John, likely as a way to cope with her loss. John just as clearly was trying to be kind, but in no way encouraged her. John’s idea had merit; appearing to be in a gay relationship would take John about as far off the market as it was possible to be.

“I have two requirements if I am to pose as your partner at this wedding,” he said imperiously.

“Oh,” John said warily. His brows drew down. “What’s that, then?”

“One, I get to pick your wardrobe for the trip. It wouldn’t be believable if I were to choose to be with a dowdy old man, so your usual jumpers and button downs will have to be… upgraded.”

“Oh, think pretty highly of ourselves do w - hang on, what’s wrong with my clothes? I dress just fine!”

“Please, John. Your normal attire is fine for sniffling noses and ingrown toenails at the surgery, but at an event like a wedding when you’re not the groom, you’ll need some help.” He eyed the blocky oatmeal jumper and loose-fit trousers John was wearing with a sneer. “Second, I think for this to go well, we should practice.” Sherlock leaned back to watch John’s reaction. He wasn’t really set on either of these requirements, but he wanted to know how far John was comfortable taking the pretense. Of course, any chance that he could live his fantasy of dressing John the way he deserved was worth taking, and the ‘practice’ would give him a whole week of opportunity to store up memories, not just three days.

John eyed Sherlock apprehensively, diverted from the question of his clothes. “Practice?”

“Yes, practice. Acting like a couple. Becoming comfortable with the closeness we’ll have to portray. In short, not flinching when we touch each other. Problem?”

John blew out a breath. “I guess not.”

“Fine. We have an appointment with my tailor this afternoon. As for the rest, just do what you think is appropriate, and I’ll do the same. Do you have restrictions?”

“What? Restrictions, what is that supposed to mean?” John looked puzzled and a touch nervous.

“Can I kiss you? Anywhere I shouldn’t touch? How do you feel about public displays? For my part, I am willing to allow kissing, any touching you wish to initiate with clothes on, and the more publicly affectionate the better to discourage your step-whatever-person.” Sherlock stated boldly, a touch of hauteur in his tone. His heart was racing at the audacity of his statement; touching John, kissing John!
“Christ, that’s direct,” John stuttered. “Er, no, I guess, I’m good with what you said. Kissing is fine; I wasn’t about to tear your clothes off, for God’s sake! And yeah, the whole point is for Marjorie to get the message, so we can’t be too discreet.” John’s cheeks were flushed, Sherlock was surprised to see. ‘Three Continents Watson,’ able to pull a woman from across the room when he put his mind to it, was blushing at the thought of kissing and touching his very male flat mate. Sherlock found his own face rather warm, too. He cleared his throat.

“That’s… good. Good, then.” Sherlock bounced to his feet and strode to the window, where his violin was waiting. “We’ll be leaving in an hour.”

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The rest of the afternoon was a revelation for Sherlock. He expected to feel inept and unnatural where casual intimacy was concerned, (not really his area) but after a stilted beginning, all he had to do was relax the hold he maintained on his impulses toward John. He ostentatiously helped John on with his coat as they got ready to leave the flat, looking him firmly in the eye as he did so. John nodded and put a hand to the small of Sherlock’s back to usher him out the door, so light as to be barely discernible.

The cab ride to the tailor was short, but with a look to make sure it was all right, John hesitantly dropped a hand to his friend’s knee and settled up closer in the seat than usual. Pressed together from shoulder to thigh, his warmth bled through soon after and Sherlock feverishly recorded the sensation in his mind palace. The new room would have to be expanded, he decided. The tiniest moments and contacts conveyed such impact that they mustn’t be discounted.

He left John to pay the fare as usual, but waited for him at the door of the shop full of ready-to-wear, high-quality suits and assorted men’s clothes. John uncomfortably scanned the interior as he entered; noting the lack of price tags immediately and with trepidation. “Sherlock, how much is this going to cost? I don’t think I can afford a new suit like this.” He indicated a flashy shop figure swathed in rich mahogany fabric with a muted shimmer.

“Now, John, I’d never put you in a suit like that. You’d look jaundiced.” He waved a hand negligently. “Besides, Mycroft pays my account here; says he needs me to look the part.”

And so it went. Sherlock guided John through the shop with a hand on his shoulder or his hip, turning him bodily to face the light or hold a particular item against his compact form. He insisted that John remove his blocky jumper almost as soon as they arrived, to better see how a waistcoat would land or a suit jacket would drape, demanding that the shop assistant bring him a dress shirt or a patterned pocket square as the whim struck. John began to look dazed after the fifth rejected possibility, and resigned after the seventh. When Sherlock sucked in a sharp breath at the ninth example of sartorial elegance, John perked up – perhaps hoping that the ordeal would be over. Instead, he was manhandled into a changing room to put on the potential candidate. John insisted that he go in alone, since Sherlock was taking his role as suit consultant very seriously and looked ready to follow John in to help with the buttons.

When John disappeared into the cubicle to change and had reluctantly accepted two more dress shirts and a stunning deep blue tie which was flung over the door, Sherlock took a moment to regard himself in the three-way mirror in the corner. His eyes were shining, his color was high, his hair a bit tousled in his enthusiasm. His fingertips were tingling. He could not have anticipated how affected he would be by actually getting to bring John here and put him in something that would do his rugged looks justice. John was solidly handsome, not strange and exotic like Sherlock’s own features, and so needed more deliberate presentation to bring out his best. Just choosing from the possibilities had Sherlock wanting to press himself up to John and breathe against his skin. He
wanted… something, he wasn’t sure, but his scar had opinions on the topic and so did his groin. He
distracted himself with a display of smooth, soft cashmere jumpers in jewel tones. Oh yes, one of
those would come home with them, too.

The changing room door opened, and John tentatively stepped out. The light grey fabric of
the suit seemed to shimmer in the bright, indirect lighting of the changing area, and the high cut
neckline of the matching waistcoat framed his square jaw, contrasted by a charcoal dress shirt and
vivid sapphire tie. His eyes glowed endless blue as the lights caught them. John shuffled nervously as
he regarded Sherlock.

“Well then, how’s this?” he asked.

A moment passed while Sherlock collected himself and calmed his racing pulse. “Come to
the mirrors and see,” he said, smiling somewhat manically and pulling John over to the corner. They
both looked into the glass.

“Wow,” John breathed, jaw slack. Sherlock nodded in ardent agreement. “Is that me?
Imagine stumpy old me looking like this.”

“The trousers need hemming, of course, and the suit coat and waistcoat can come in a bit
on the sides, but yes,” Sherlock announced, his voice unaccountably deep as he flicked away
imaginary threads and smoothed John’s lapels. “I think we have a winner.”

The rest of the trip went smoothly after that, though Sherlock had to turn aside and breathe
deeply more than once as John tried on one of the cashmere jumpers or some casual trousers. He had
quite severely underestimated the effects of the opportunity to pay such focused attention to John’s
body. John’s lovely, lean, fit body with its sculpted arms, muscular legs and toned arse, now actually
discernible in decently tailored slacks. Sherlock was rather spoiling the line of his own trousers after
an hour of smoothing seams over John’s strong chest and ogling John in several different, very
flattering outfits. He had never been so grateful for his long coat.

They had John measured and the suit pinned for alteration, with the assurance that it would
be ready for Thursday. Sherlock chose two more sets of shirts, some trousers and a jumper in a rich
Merlot hue. It did wonders for John’s complexion and felt marvelous under Sherlock’s hands. John
drew the line at underpants though; declaring mulishly that his Marks & Spencers were fine, thanks,
and he would be damned if he let Mycroft buy his boxers. Sherlock eyed the clerk significantly,
indicating that the sleek cotton-silk boxer briefs in John’s size which he casually left on the counter
should be delivered with the other things. The clerk nodded his understanding with an understated
wink.

This time Sherlock had pressed up to John’s side as they got into the taxi, and John shot
him a startled smile. They spent the ride in silence, each tired out and wrapped in his own thoughts.

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The next few days passed in a fugue of sensation, elation, and despondency for Sherlock.
Elation that John seemed willing to ‘practice’ as much as Sherlock wished; his initial hesitancy
growing less as they became accustomed to casual touches during their usual routine. A pat on the
hip as they moved around each other, or stroking fingers as tea or a plate of toast was passed one to
the other, or ushering one through a door with a hand to the small of the back. Sherlock fervently
catalogued all the instances in his mind palace, marking a few themes as he went.

For instance, John liked to put his hand on Sherlock’s knee; it was simple and obvious, and
Sherlock could easily follow the thought process on John’s expression as he made the decision to put
it there. Sherlock also noticed that if it remained for more than ten minutes or so, say on a longish cab ride, that John’s mind would wander… and his hand would too, just a little; sliding up Sherlock’s thigh to mid-leg, and unconsciously flexing fingers in a caressing or massaging motion. Whenever this happened, it sent shivers up Sherlock’s spine and whatever he was thinking about was lost in the white noise of his response.

Sherlock was utterly fascinated with the nape of John’s neck; it was illogically ridiculous how much he wanted to taste it, smell it, bite it, rub the tip of his nose and then his lips back and forth across the nobs of John’s cervical vertebrae. He had imagined it a thousand times, but had only summoned up the courage to stroke the innocuous stretch of skin lightly with long fingers as he walked behind John’s chair. The sound of the breath John had sucked in as he did so had its own display cabinet in the new mind palace room, and the flush that migrated from John’s cheeks back to his nape was in pride of place beside it.

As a man who prided himself on his control of his transport, Sherlock was annoyed by all the erections the practice period engendered. Either he was half aroused from anticipating the next time he or John would initiate contact, or he was remembering a previous instance as it came to attention (so to speak), or John was absentmindedly caressing his thigh and he was carefully loosening his coat to hide the resultant tenting. For God’s sake! He hadn’t sprung this many stiffys even when he was a teenager; surely John would notice? That would certainly give the game away. He would have to look for some techniques to discourage the physical response; he would not give up the cab-leg moments for as long as he could have them.

For his part, John seemed bemused by how seriously Sherlock was taking their practice. He amiably received any overtures Sherlock made with evident, or at least well-feigned, enjoyment and no sign of discomfort because Sherlock was a man, or because he was Sherlock. He was remarkably relaxed with the whole situation. When Sherlock was honest with himself, it irked him a bit. Here he was, genius consulting detective with an international reputation, all in a dither over a pretend boyfriend who was not interested in him; while said pretend boyfriend was oblivious and unaffected. And irritatingly calm. And unfairly attractive. Damn him!

Though the days were filled with frantic mental activity for Sherlock, the nights after John went to bed were quiet and empty. Sherlock passed the time in his room: first cataloging the day’s events that needed to be stored in his mind palace, then planning a few new things to try the next day. Often those two processes would result in yet another annoying erection. Before now, he had hardly ever needed to attend to this particular task (just transport) but in his bed in the dark, Sherlock could indulge without fear of discovery. He could not resist spending a longer time each night imagining John as if he were really Sherlock’s lover - all the things he would do and Sherlock would do, hazy with his inexperience of the actual acts - while taking himself in hand. His climax inevitably overwhelmed him and he stifled his groans with a fist in his mouth, lest John hear him through the floor.

Coming down post orgasm, however, Sherlock would remember that he would never have John that way, that even the little intimacies they were practicing this week were only pretend, and would end after the weekend. His replaying of favored moments took on a discouraged, desperate flavor in the wee hours of the morning, and he would slip into sleep with a hand pressed tightly to his scar.

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“John, come here,” he ordered on Wednesday morning, after the two had finished breakfast. “Sit with me on the sofa.”
John seemed nonplussed, but joined him. “More practice, then?” he inquired.

“Obviously. Sit here, at the end. I have some thinking to do about that question the entomology professor emailed yesterday.” Once John was settled, he flopped down on the rest of the sofa, his head in John’s lap. It was surprisingly comfortable.

“Um, hello,” John said with a breathy laugh, peering down at him. “All right, there?”

“Yes, fine. I need to think.” Sherlock closed his eyes and folded his hands on his chest, cataloging the firm muscle beneath his neck and the texture of John’s jeans for his mind palace. He would move on to the professor’s question once that vital information was recorded.

“Er, Sherlock,” John said quietly. “What should I do?”

“I don’t care, John, just don’t get up.” He opened his eyes long enough to roll them at John, then resumed his previous position. John reached for the remote and clicked on the telly, dialing the volume down a bit and settling himself more cozily in the cushions. The weight in his lap grumbled and huffed until John had stilled and was engrossed in the spy movie he had found. They seemed to be playing at all hours of the day.

Sherlock had moved on from his recording to the question of why a professor’s bees were suddenly producing blood-red honey, when an extraordinary sensation washed through him. All the synapses that had been contemplating nectar sources and bacterial contamination snapped to ‘what was that?!’ mode. It came again, sweeping from his forehead across his scalp and down above the ear facing out to the room. Inexplicably, his toes curled, then flexed out wide. His eyes fluttered open.

Above him, John was focused intently on the screen where a villain was threatening a dapper fellow in a bow tie. And more closely, his hand was hovering over Sherlock’s forehead, descending to pet through his hair. Dear God, he had never thought that his head would be an erogenous zone, but the evidence… toes curling, stretching, shivers down the lower spine, ah!... would indicate otherwise. John’s fingers had slipped out of his hair to hover over his forehead again, motion arrested by a dramatic moment, and Sherlock held his breath until the next pass. John’s hand dropped, curls slipping between the sturdy digits, pads gently sliding along the skull underneath. Bliss. Sherlock gave up trying to analyze anything for the time being, and let his eyes close again. He’d need a very special cabinet for this in the mind palace – maybe an entire alcove.

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Neither of them had tried for a kiss, despite stating they each were willing that first day. Sherlock hadn’t because his obvious lack of skill would result in an embarrassing failed attempt, possibly with John coming to his senses and backing out of the arrangement. He could not allow that, now that he had begun down this path; Sherlock needed to wring all the experience he could out of their ruse to sustain him after, when John wasn’t his anymore.

He suspected that John didn’t want to impose, since to John, Sherlock was playing a part only to fool that step-woman-relative. John mostly let Sherlock set the pace of their practice, his natural reticence keeping his hands to himself except when he flagrantly made a move or rarely, forgot himself when distracted. Sherlock began to wonder if John would be able to keep up his side of the pretense; for a couple as new as he and John would be playing, surely they would be rather affectionate? Would Marjorie believe it if they barely held hands and just patted each other’s knees? Sherlock couldn’t imagine that would impress anyone.

Thursday rolled around, and they still hadn’t made the attempt. Hadn’t even hugged fully.
Hadn’t found out if they (if Sherlock) could cope with so much physical contact. They were slated to travel on the eight o’clock train that evening, so he stiffened his resolve and faced up to the problem.

John had gone up to pack his new clothes for the trip after that morning’s delivery, and Sherlock heard a muted “argh!” followed by the stomping of John’s feet on the stairs.

“Did you make them bring these underpants? I didn’t want them!” John said, striding into the room, brandishing a glossy package. He stopped, seeing his friend stood tall and rigid in the center of the room, then advanced more cautiously, sensing a difference of mood but not yet sure if it would be dangerous. John was, after all, a soldier at heart. “Well?” he demanded sternly.

Sherlock didn’t wait. He stepped forward and wrapped John in long arms, underpants and all. John stiffened and made an undignified sound that was stifled by Sherlock’s chest, then he pushed roughly away from the lean figure.

“What the hell, Sherlock?” he snapped, eyes flashing. Sherlock stepped back a pace, fingertips to his scar, unaccountably hurt. He scowled.

“Practice, John. We haven’t practiced embracing or much of anything more than helping each other through the door this week, and we leave in a few hours. Do you want our first hug to be when you introduce me to your step-relative-woman-person? I’m sure that would be very convincing, while we figure out where our arms go and which way to turn our heads.” Sherlock responded acerbically.

John’s stance relaxed, dropping the rigid outrage it had held. “Bloody hell, Sherlock. A little warning next time, yeah?” He ran a hand through his hair and blew out a breath. “Do we have to do this now? Only I was packing.” He waved the package in his hand again, seeming to notice he was still holding it. “And what about-“

“No time like the present, John. Now, come here and hug me.”

John dropped his face into his free hand for a moment, then looked up with a half-smile Sherlock found utterly adorable (though he would never say so out loud.) “You’re mad, you know that?” And, dropping the package of underpants in his chair, he stepped forward to embrace his friend.

They came together tentatively - and yes, had to sort out how their arms would go - and then they were hugging.

John fit him perfectly, Sherlock couldn’t help but think. He was shorter, but that meant Sherlock could rest his chin on top of John’s head. His arms reached most of the way around John’s shoulders, and when he spread his hands on John’s back, he could feel the muscles along John’s spine adjusting to support the new position. He could feel John’s hands doing the same, splaying from under one arm up over his shoulder and the other over his spine. They both were still rather wooden, and there was a bit of space between them, so nothing was pressing into... anything, thank God. But John’s body was firm, and his warmth came through almost immediately, everywhere they were touching. John’s hair smelled like rosemary shampoo.

He wondered what John was noticing about this moment.

After a minute, John shifted a little bit and relaxed into Sherlock’s body, huffing a sigh. “There now, was that so hard?” he said, voice muted by a lean chest.

Sherlock chuckled. “Nooo.” He drawled. Another moment went by with them just
breathing and being there. “John,” he said solemnly.

“Mmm?” said the muffled voice.

“Of course I got you the pants. You can’t wear a suit like that with shabby undergarments. It’s disrespectful.”

A beat for breath passed, and abruptly the man in his arms was shuddering, stifled giggling vibrating against his pectorals. John tipped his head up, eyes crinkled as he laughed out loud. “Fine, you win. I’ll bring the posh bloody pants.” Sherlock made a note to create another alcove dedicated to John laughing while hugging; the sensation was incredibly enjoyable.

They each relaxed their holds and widened the space between them preparatory to breaking apart, when John’s expression gained a sly twist. “This is practice, yeah?” Sherlock nodded. “Well then-“ John rose up on his toes, and pressed a quick, soft kiss to Sherlock’s lips. “Nothing to it, right?” He grinned as Sherlock’s eyebrows tried to crawl into his hairline. “I think we’ll be fine.”

And then he stepped back, nodded smartly, and vanished up the stairs, the package of underpants in one hand.

When Sherlock emerged from his blinking, stunned silence and looked around, he was glad to realize that John had not been there to witness it. How could he explain that a simple gesture - barely a peck on the mouth - had been the most unexpected, possibly world-altering thing that had ever happened to him? He’d had kisses before, of course; for cases mostly, or from relatives, and one or two experiences when he was younger. This was different. This was John. His John. Who had kissed him first. Kissed him with a bit of challenge in those blue eyes, and with lips slightly chapped but pliant and sweet, shaping into a pout from their earlier laughter. Already he wanted it again, ever the addict.

It abruptly dawned on him that agreeing to pretend to be John’s partner might be a colossal mistake. If a single hug and fleeting kiss affected him this profoundly, how can he give it up when the pretense is over? Could he give it up? Or would he drive John away after he could no longer hide how he felt, how he craved more? He sank down into his chair, staring bleakly into a future where his best friend was gone because his inconvenient feelings (Love! Call it what it is!) made it impossible for John to stay.

He would just have to live with it, he decided. He loved John, and he was certain John loved him as much as he could love any man. That would have to be enough. He would make it be enough.

He pushed up and stalked into his room to pack.

Chapter End Notes

John’s suit in this chapter is pretty much lifted straight from Dress Sense by PrettyArbitrary. It’s a lovely PWP that helped form my Pavlovian response to handsome men in gorgeous suits. And their descriptions of the clothes far outstrip my own. Go read it!

Oh, and the thing with the red honey really happened; the bees were going to a nearby maraschino cherry factory and sipping up the spilled syrup. Ain’t life grand?
Afghanistan was exhilarating, amazing, terrifying, perilous. It was trembling with adrenaline after a push, and trying not to piss yourself when the bullets flew close to your ear, and holding the needle steady when you were suturing a torn artery before the newest recruit could bleed out under your hands. John thinks he was made for this place, when he is both rested enough to stay awake and has a quiet moment to consider.

He had a hard time expressing this to his family and friends back home. He got emails from them all; from Harry, from Brigid and Tim, from Clara, from Stephen, from some of the blokes he trained with at Bart’s, and from Marjorie. He did his best to let them know he was fine, he was safe, he was doing what he loved. It was easy to complain about the food and the heat or the cold, or the bloody sand in everything. It was easy to write about the boredom between missions, and how he saved a hand or a knee or an eye with his skills. It was not easy to write about how fiercely his heart pounded, his legs and arms working tirelessly with seemingly no effort; how empty he felt when the mission was finished and the waiting for the next one began. How he could hardly remember what his life was before this experience.

When he first arrived, communications from England came frequently, even daily, but soon he answered not more than once a week. It took that long to come up with enough trivial details to fill a decent email. Harry’s emails trailed off to every month or so almost immediately; Clara keeping him abreast of what they were up to. Some trouble there, he sensed, but nothing was ever said. Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim sent chatty missives every other week. Others emailed when they thought of it, or saw an article in the news that reminded them.

Except for Marjorie – she emailed every night. At least a sentence or two, but often more. John read them guiltily and replied rarely, knowing her preoccupation with him was probably not healthy. By his third month in country, her emails started to seem unreal; unconnected with what he understood as the daily reality of war. He answered even less often, and her messages begged for replies. Eventually, the guilt grew to be too much, and he sent her a message: I will be unable to email for a while. We are going on a series of missions that require us to be incommunicado. Harry will know if I’m all right, but I won’t be able to write. I should have home leave in a year or so, and we can catch up then. Take care, J. He didn’t email her again.

Eventually, her emails trailed off too, ending with Stay safe for me, John.

It was during his second tour that he received the unexpected email. Dear John, I’m sure you’re surprised to hear from me! I wanted to tell you I’m getting married, to a lovely man who I met through work. You don’t need to worry about me anymore. I hope you’ll save the date, and can get leave to come home for my wedding! I’d love to see you. Love, Marjorie.

John was relieved. He had heard from other family members that Marjorie had thrown herself into her work and was a successful research chemist, but not much else. He was glad she had found something to distract her from that stupid promise; he’d never be what she wanted, and he wasn’t inclined to try. He replied - Congratulations! I hope you live long and happy lives together. Leave is hard to come by these days, I’m afraid. Take care, J.

John didn’t hear from Marjorie after that, and didn’t notice the lack. He thrived in the soldier’s life until he had his own problems to cope with: shot in the shoulder, invalided home, with a limp that was all in his head and an illegal firearm in his desk drawer. He didn’t have the energy to spare to think of her then, and once he had met Sherlock Holmes, he was too dazzled to think of much else.
Sherlock overslept on Friday morning. He awoke with a start in an unfamiliar room on an unfamiliar bed surrounded by too many ridiculously squashy pillows and covered with a thick, fluffy comforter. He was roasting, and he was alone.

He sat up and scrabbled for his phone on the bedside table to check the time. It had gone half ten! Bright sunshine shone through the window and illuminated his text notification. It was from John. - ‘You were out cold and clearly needed the rest. I’ve gone to find breakfast and have a look around the hotel. Text when you wake up.’

Sherlock flopped back into the absurdly soft bed, groaning. He had squandered a chance to observe John as he woke up because his transport had failed him. Admittedly, he had probably done that to himself, since his sleep patterns the last week had not been very regular, and the journey to the hotel-and-reception-facility in the countryside near Bath had been taxing, and his resolution to stay up and observe John as he slept (“yeah, that’s kind of creepy,” “Hush, John.”) so as to miss nothing probably had not helped matters.

They had made it to the train station with plenty of time, after stopping for an early dinner at Angelo’s. Never had Sherlock been so hyper-aware of his proximity to John while at a restaurant. They were practically on top of each other! He was not able to decide where to put his hands until the food came and he could be occupied with his utensils. At one point, he extended a leg under the table, and entirely by accident slid his foot along John’s ankle. John fixed him with a perplexed eye and asked if they were still practicing? Sherlock had brazened it out, stating one couldn’t be too prepared, and hidden his blush behind his fringe while attending to his plate.

The train ride itself should have been the easy part; ride along in comfort for not more than an hour and a half, then take a taxi to the facility. The wedding service would be held in a chapel on site, so they didn’t have to go anywhere other than their accommodations. Given their train at eight PM, they’d be there by ten-thirty in the evening at the outside, no problem. Which is why it was so very, very frustrating when they came into the station in bloody Swindon, to be told that the track line had a tree across it that would be cleared ‘in just a little while.’ Two full hours of ‘little whiles’ later, Sherlock was about to climb out of his skin, trapped in a seat in the train with nothing to do. He had deduced all the passengers he could see (quietly, for John’s ears alone after John had vehemently shushed him while the first passenger he picked – bank clerk, at least one white cat, told his girlfriend in the next seat he had enjoyed meeting her mother but actually hated it – glared daggers at them) then looked at his email on his phone, and texted Lestrade to tell him to hold any good cases from the next three days until he came back, and made a production of striding the length of the train to use the loo and surfed the gossip sites and the news sites on his phone. And then he sat fidgeting while John placidly read the novel he had brought with him. It was torment of the worst kind, and he said so, repeatedly, at full volume.

“How about you settle down a bit?”

“Can’t. Too bored.”

John’s sigh could have been heard in the next train carriage. He put his book aside, and thought for a moment. “Well, how about you practice,” he said, widening his eyes, “being more relaxed?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “I don’t need to practice being relaxed; I need something to occupy my mind!”
“And that’s why you should practice your relaxation.” John said with a rather comical waggling of his eyebrows.

“And that’s supposed to help, is it? Just relax and not be bored anymore? Excellent advice, I don’t know why I’ve never considered that.” Sherlock stated waspishly.

“Oh for God’s sake!” John reached over and pulled Sherlock over to him, pressing the curly head down onto his shoulder rather more firmly than perhaps was required, and slipped his hand onto Sherlock’s knee for moment, before flipping his hand over and grasping Sherlock’s own long fingers. “Can you occupy your mind with this practice, please? Before I resort to violence?”

Sherlock spent the next three quarters of an hour minutely examining John’s hand, testing different finger-interlace combinations to find the one he liked best, and memorizing the scars and calluses. He barely noticed when it was announced they were back on their way, and would be in Bath in twenty minutes. With the delay, they’d likely be arriving at the hotel just after midnight.

“Well, that worked better than I expected,” John remarked under his breath somewhere along the journey, and tipped his head back against the seat to shut his eyes for a bit before they had to get out and find a taxi.

In the morning light of the hotel room, Sherlock shook off the remembrance then flung himself out of bed and into the shower. John (and he as pretend boyfriend) didn’t have any family obligations until a late lunch with his Aunt and Uncle, and in the evening there was a drinks mixer for guests who had arrived a day early while the wedding party went to the rehearsal dinner. Sherlock tamed his curls with product and chose his clothes with care; no telling when they might run into their intended target and certainly they needed to set up the ruse with the rest of the guests, too.

He sent a text to John – ‘Awake. Come if convenient.’ – and finished doing up the buttons on his deep teal dress shirt before slipping on a black suit jacket. After taking one last look in the mirror, he unbuttoned one more at his neck, exposing a vee of pale skin. That should do it. The hotel room featured a little sitting area next to the enormous bed, so Sherlock chose a seat with a view of the door to wait for his (pretend) boyfriend, fingers steepled against his lips.

About twenty minutes later, he heard a card in the door and John strode in, smiling and chipper. “This place is huge, Sherlock! I thought the place we hired for my wedding was grand, but this tops it easily. It has a swimming pool indoors, and three hot tubs, a squash court, and the breakfast is a buffet including a grumpy fellow in a chef’s hat making omelets. I had two.” He grinned wider, taking the chair across from his friend. “Are you hungry? I’d like to know what you deduce about the omelet bloke that makes him so gloomy.”

“Not really hungry, no. But I could come with you if you fancy thirds,” Sherlock offered. He desperately wanted a cup of tea, but not enough to eat an omelet to get it.

“Ah, no, two’s my limit, since we’re going to have lunch later. What do you want to do, then? Have you had tea yet? I could use a cup, and there’s a café off the breakfast hall.”

“Right, then.” Sherlock got out of his chair and went to collect his coat, when John cleared his throat.

“Um, hey, Sherlock?”

Sherlock turned with a raised eyebrow, “Mmm?”
John’s face had a concerned wrinkle in the eyebrows. “You know you can still decide not to do this, right? We can just go as friends, and not have to pretend anything if you don’t want to. I mean, I appreciate how you’ve thrown yourself into preparing for ‘the role,’” he made an air quotes gesture, “but if it’s not something you want to do…” John trailed off uncertainly. “Just having you here for support will make a big difference.” He rubbed the back of his neck and looked at the floor. “I guess I just wanted to give you one more chance to back out before we go meet everyone, out there. You’ve said it’s not your area, after all, boyfriends, girlfriends… all that.”

Sherlock had stood stock still while John worked his way through his statement, a frown and his stomach dropping more with each sentence. “Do you want to back out?” he asked sharply. “I do think this ruse is the best way to convince that step-woman-whatever that you’re not ever going to be available to her.”

“No, I don’t want to back out. I agree with you. But Sherlock, you’re my best friend. I don’t want to make you do something that will be uncomfortable for you.” John looked up from under his brows. “It’s not a requirement of best friends that they do whatever they’re asked, you understand? We’d still be the same as ever, if you backed out now.”

Sherlock realized what John was getting at, finally. He was worried he had pressured Sherlock into doing something he would regret and it would damage their friendship. How little he knew that the regret would come when he had to stop! Sherlock huffed impatiently. “John, I’m a grown man, and I know that I don’t have to pretend to be your boyfriend so we can stay friends.” His face softened. “While I… appreciate your care for my sensibilities, I’ll be fine. And we’ll be fine, afterwards.”

John looked him in the eye for a full minute, judging his sincerity; then he smiled that lopsided smile that wrung Sherlock’s heart, and stood up briskly. “All right then. Shall we?” He indicated the door.

Sherlock threw him a devilish smirk. “Let’s go break some hearts,” He said callously.

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They met Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim for lunch at one in the breakfast hall, now reset for table service with white serviettes and multiple forks and spoons. The older couple greeted them both warmly, and eyed Sherlock’s deliberately-casual arm around John’s waist with interest. They busied themselves with the menu and small talk initially, mentioning Harry wouldn’t be attending the wedding despite all Aunt Brigid’s asking, and would they be going to the mixer later? Stephen and his fiancée, Suzanne, would be making an appearance there, with the rest of the wedding party, including the fiancée’s parents and Aunt Brigid and Tim, and a fair gaggle of bridesmaids and groomsmen.

“You’d think, for a third wedding, there wouldn’t need to be so many, but it’s her first, so…” Aunt Brigit shrugged.

Uncle Tim snorted. “At least it’s her parents paying for it, even the ushers’ tuxes, and Marjorie’s and the other girls’ gowns and all. And they can certainly spare it. Stephen’s over the moon with the whole thing, poor sod.” Uncle Tim seemed less impressed, and Sherlock’s estimation of him went up.

John laughed a bit self-consciously. “Well, it’s easy to get caught up in it. I was the last person to want a big wedding and look what…” he trailed off and cleared his throat. “Well, it can get away from you is all.” His head dropped and he fiddled with his silverware.
Before he could stop himself, Sherlock had taken John’s hand and given it a gentle squeeze. He was about to let go, shocked at his audacity and starting to come up with an apology, when John’s fingers tangled with his and squeezed back. John shot him a grateful look, tinged with surprise, and Sherlock realized with startled glee that he was allowed to do all the things he’d been holding in until now. The game was on, and he was allowed. He smiled, and rubbed the back of John’s hand with this thumb.

Aunt Brigid was no fool. She adroitly changed the subject to their cases: “did you really catch a killer who tried to shrink wrap the body parts in plastic, like steaks?” Uncle Tim’s eyes opened wide; he apparently hadn’t read the ‘Vacuum-packed Adventure’ on John’s blog yet. Sherlock took on the question while John collected himself enough to rejoin the conversation, and John was soon charming his relatives with an animated retelling of their caper. He didn’t let go of Sherlock’s hand until some dramatic gestures were required; Sherlock compensated by swinging his arm up along the back of John’s chair. John leaned into him as he finished the tale, and Sherlock dropped his arm from the chair to his friend’s strong shoulder. “And Sherlock, like always, was absolutely brilliant. He was the only one to realize that the maintenance schedule predicted where the murderer would show up to dispose of his victims. He is just extraordinary, I’ve always said so.”

John turned his head to look into Sherlock’s eyes for a moment as they so often did, his own eyes shining. The moment stretched, and tension tightened between them. Sherlock leaned in – allowed, it’s allowed – and softly, gently, pressed his lips to John’s. His eyes fluttered shut. The kiss was short but lingering, and he felt John’s lips spread into a smile under his own. As he pulled back, John’s lopsided smile came into focus, bright and pleased. John was a better actor than Sherlock had given him credit for, if this was him shamming a boyfriend reaction. As it was, he had no idea what expression was on his own face; he was breathless with his own daring and the pounding of his pulse.

And then, John blinked and turned back to the table, clearing his throat. “So, er, I guess there’s a little more news to pass along,” he said sheepishly.

“Oh, now, what could that be?” Aunt Brigid asked archly, but with obvious pleasure. “You’ve finally come to your senses, have you?” She shot a look at Uncle Tim that clearly said ‘I told you so!’ which that fine gentleman acknowledged with an incline of his head. He did not look uncomfortable to see that his step-nephew, who until now had been exclusively heterosexual, had just kissed another man at the lunch table. Sherlock found himself feeling relieved; he wouldn't want their ruse to make trouble for John with the few relatives he had left who were close.

John looked over at Sherlock, still with that crooked grin, and held his gaze as he replied “Well, it’s a little new but, yeah, I think we have, actually.”

The waiter took that moment to deliver their order, and the conversation quieted while they tucked in. All four expressed appreciation for the delicious food and even Sherlock cleaned his plate of pasta with grilled lemon chicken and new peas. John groaned with happiness over his primavera, and then perused the dessert menu with interest. Sherlock observed him indulgently; John had dropped almost half a stone over the troubles of the last year, and he felt a warm throb behind his scar at his friend’s relaxed enjoyment of the meal. (“Is that what boyfriends do? Feed you up?” said a quiet voice from somewhere in his mind palace.)

They lingered over coffee and dessert. John flirtatiously demanded that Sherlock try a bite of the rich crème brûlée, right from his spoon. He closed his eyes as it melted on his tongue to the sound of John’s giggle, and Sherlock took time to fix this moment in his mind palace. He felt…
happy. He slipped his hand onto John’s knee, and added the gasp of indrawn breath to the moment he was recording.

Perhaps that was why Aunt Brigid overcame her hesitance and gave rein to her curiosity. “So, you two are together now. I’m so pleased for you! I remember when he met you, Sherlock, John wasn’t able to talk about anything else, really. And he was so sad when you were, er... gone, you know. I always thought he might have had deeper feelings for you than he let on. So, what about you? Did it come as a surprise?”

John shifted in his seat, the picture of a boy whose Mum has asked his first date an embarrassing question. He opened his mouth to deflect, but Sherlock beat him to it.

“I have always cared very much for John, from the first,” he found himself saying. So it was to be the truth, then – he wondered what was possessing him to say this now? “But I had almost no experience with caring, or with feelings – always thought they were a weakness and tried to stamp them out in myself.” He looked intently into his coffee so as not to see John’s face as he spoke. “I didn’t realize what it was I was feeling until much more recently, and then circumstances got in the way. So, if it is a surprise, it’s that I can be honest with John now, when I couldn’t before or didn’t understand.” He couldn’t resist peeking aside at John to gauge his reaction. Bemused, fond, and intent in a way Sherlock couldn’t interpret.

John took his hand and squeezed it again, but said nothing.

“Well, I think it’s grand,” Uncle Tim broke in unexpectedly. “It’s good to see you looking so happy, John. Even at your own wedding you didn’t look as comfortable and... right, I guess. Solid. As you do today. Long lives together to you both.” He nodded emphatically and raised his coffee cup in a toast.

Aunt Brigid was right behind him, beaming as she sipped. “Sometimes the second try is the one that sticks,” she said pointedly, poking her husband’s arm. John and Sherlock laughed with relief and raised their cooling cups together.

Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim took their leave soon after; they had the rehearsal dinner in a few hours and had declared they would need naps if they were to survive it, old fogies that they were.

John’s Aunt pulled him into a tight hug, and then dropped a kiss on an awkward Sherlock’s cheek, whispering “I’m so happy for you, after all this time.” Sherlock regarded her with wide eyes, surprised by her perception. He nodded, flashing a brief smile.

“Well, that went very well, I’d say,” John remarked as they left the dining room after making their farewells.

“Yes, I’d say so,” Sherlock said absently, ruminating on what Aunt Brigid had implied with her comments. She had assumed John had feelings for him all along, and she knew John as well as anyone, having raised him through a difficult time in his life. And she seemed to think she had seen Sherlock’s own feelings, too – even before Sherlock had known of them. He might do well to have a conversation with her without John around, despite what treacherous hopes might result.

“We’ve got some time to kill,” John went on, oblivious to his friend’s preoccupation. “What do you want to do?”

“What would you do if you had brought a non-pretend date?” Sherlock asked and found himself actually curious as to the answer.
“Walk around the grounds and maybe find a secluded place for a good snog,” John declared. “Or erhm… suggest we go back to our room for the afternoon,” he finished, ears reddening.

Sherlock found himself flushing a bit, too. “A walk then – we want to be visible, don’t we?”

“Right. The door’s this way.”

The walk had turned out to be very enjoyable indeed; the grounds were large and well-kept, with many flowerbeds and trees in glorious late-spring bloom. John and Sherlock ambled aimlessly until they spotted several beehives at the back of the gardens, and a plump lady beekeeper tending to them. Sherlock spent a pleasant hour talking apiary management and the habits of English honeybees with her, and she gave him some avenues to explore for the professor’s red-honey problem.

John, who had little interest in bees, still kept right by them and watched Sherlock with evident pleasure at his enthusiasm. When the beekeeper took her leave, pleading an appointment, Sherlock agreeably walked along with John, hands waving as he expounded on his admiration for a hard-working insect. “They are a marvel of evolution, John. A super-organism comprised of many individuals, each performing different tasks for the hive the way our organs do for our bodies.”

John regarded him with an enigmatic smile. “Maybe when you retire, you can live in the country and keep some of your own,” John took his hand as they made their way back to the hotel building. “And I can eat the honey on my toast.”

Sherlock walked a few steps in silence. “Perhaps I shall,” he said thoughtfully.

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The amber liquid in his highball was almost gone, Sherlock noticed. He rattled the ice gently, debating if he should have a third drink so early in the evening, but he was bored stiff by these dreary wedding guests. The bride was the daughter of a new-money type who liked to flaunt his wealth, so no expense was spared for this little get-together being held for the business contacts, elderly relatives, and more distant kin of the happy couple. Which meant the whiskey was excellent, Sherlock thought. Point in favor for a third.

Point against? John Watson. He stood next to Sherlock in the incredibly flattering merlot jumper and tailored slacks they had bought last week, making light conversation with the third set of married city professionals of the night; at least these ones had read his blog. Sherlock was having trouble keeping his hands from stroking the soft cashmere from neckline to hem as it was; more alcohol would exacerbate the problem. His hand not occupied with his tumbler resided persistently on John’s hip, petting little circles with his fingers. John didn’t seem to mind, sending him coy glances every so often as his conversation ebbed and flowed. Sherlock chimed in rarely, and hardly politely, but the professionals remained interested in them.

Eventually, John wound it down and they moved to the edge of the room, shielded somewhat behind the fronds of a potted palm as tall as Sherlock. The detective blew out a sigh and leaned back against the wall, draining the dregs of his whiskey before setting the glass on a nearby table. John watched him closely. “How are you doing? I know this isn’t your kind of thing, but you were great with those wankers - barely insulted them at all.” He giggled a little as he grasped for Sherlock’s forearm, eyes somewhat bright; Sherlock tried to think if he had seen how many whiskeys John had had over the last two hours.
As Sherlock shrugged his opinion of their erstwhile companions, John stepped close - looking up into Sherlock’s face, quizzical and smiling. He tilted his head and swayed forward, hand on Sherlock’s chest to steady himself. “This feels a little familiar,” he said, “I don’t mind.” He leaned in more fully and slid the hand up to Sherlock’s shoulder.

“I don’t mind, either,” Sherlock said, all his attention riveted on the man resting against him. He put his arms around John’s back (allowed!) and smiled faintly. He had been flashing back to the kiss at lunch all day, revolving it in his mind palace to relive it from every angle; he wondered if he dared steal one now. From what he had observed of other couples, this was the kind of situation where not-pretend lovers would be affectionate. He scanned the room for observers – plenty of them, good - and when his gaze returned to John’s face he raised an eyebrow; question tinged with challenge. John gave the tiniest of nods, never looking away from the face above him, then tilted his head up to meet Sherlock bending down.

They were neither at their most precise after the whiskey, so their aim was off a bit. What Sherlock expected to be a more lingering kiss like they had shared earlier, instead was a series of soft touches that made Sherlock’s mind spin with sensation: the lithe body in his arms, a hand sliding up his shoulder to skim into the curls at his nape and another slipping around to his lower back; John’s lips, mellow but insistent, returning for press after press against his own; John’s breath whispering past his ear, against his skin. He attempted to record it all and could not – there was too much. John’s mouth returned again, slightly wet as his lips opened and latched to Sherlock’s lower lip individually; Sherlock’s lips parted with his gasp. John’s tongue made darting little licks to each of Sherlock’s lips in turn: first top, then bottom, then top again, then dipping in for a brief taste of tongues touching, then a deeper, exploratory tangling. Sherlock realized he was ferociously hard, his erection pressing against his trousers uncomfortably. His hands had been sweeping up and down John’s spine, caressing the red cashmere and the muscles beneath; now they clutched the fabric as he clung to John.

John’s mouth pulled away only to move along his jawline, tasting and latching, then down to the thin skin below his ear, where he settled to sweep gentle lips across the sensitive stretch with the ghost of a moan, barely audible even so close. Sherlock sucked in air, rediscovering the need for oxygen. John’s compact body stepped into him a bit more, insinuating a sturdy thigh between his long legs. Sherlock was overwhelmed with awareness of every point where John’s body touched him, especially the firm pressure on his groin and at his throat. His senses were reaching overload, and started to blur when John laved a wet area by his Adam’s apple and nipped with the faintest hint of teeth; Sherlock’s head tipped back and he whispered “John… please.” He wasn’t sure whether he was asking for respite or ravishment.

The body underneath his hands stilled - John’s agile mouth froze, then withdrew. John heaved a breath, and raised his head to look at Sherlock’s dazed expression, his own face sober and wide-eyed with chagrin. He leaned away from Sherlock hurriedly and took a step back; hands drifting to clasp lean biceps as he panted.

“Oh, my God… Sherlock, I… I got carried away,” he said shamefacedly. “That was…” (extraordinary, brilliant, over too soon, Sherlock’s mind supplied.) He put his face in his hand, rubbing at his brow.

Sherlock was casting about for something to say, while his faculties came back online and he exerted all his control not to yank John to him and resume the kisses; even he could tell John would not welcome such an action at the moment. He was about to suggest they retire for the night to collect themselves.

Which is when the wedding party arrived: including Stephen, his bride (Suzette? Susan?)
Shirley? Unimportant, anyway) Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim… and Marjorie. They couldn’t leave now, with such a perfect opportunity to introduce the ruse to the reason it existed in the first place. A cold voice in his mind, unaffected by the turmoil in his body and thoughts, suggested that he likely looked somewhat rumpled, and John looked deliciously mussed himself. It would not take a genius to guess they had been, er - canoodling; all the better to lend verisimilitude to their story.

“John,” he said, interrupting John’s obvious self-recriminations, “John, they’re here, she’s here, your whatsit-step-person. Now is the time to introduce me and our relationship to her. You can have your crisis later.”

John straightened as if slapped, as Sherlock had intended. He began to protest that he was not having a crisis, thank you very much, when the rest of the actual words penetrated. “She’s – they’re here? Oh, okay,” he looked around the room while running a hand through his hair, tousling it rakishly (probably not what he intended) and tugged the hem of his jumper down. “Right. Well then, we’ll let them get in and then we’ll… make the introductions.” He took Sherlock’s hand and guided him very gently from behind their inadequate screening. “Would you like a drink?” he asked carefully, avoiding Sherlock’s gaze.

“Yes, that will do nicely. It gets us out into the room where we can be spotted,” Sherlock replied, wary of this sudden solicitousness. Was John the one having regrets, now? “John,” he said suddenly, wanting his friend to look him in the eye.

“Yeah, Sherlock?” John was scanning the crowd, looking for step-whatsitname.

“You’re a very good kisser, John. You’ve clearly honed your skills.” Sherlock delivered in his drollest deadpan. (Very, very good, John. Kiss me again. Right now. Sherlock shut down that voice instantly; focus on the task at hand!)

John’s head snapped back around and he stared a moment, then huffed a quiet chuckle. “Thanks,” he said, shaking his head a little. “Never thought I’d need it for a case, but I’m glad it came in useful.” Good humor somewhat restored, John led the way to the bar, pulling Sherlock by the hand.

They were met almost immediately by John’s Aunt and Uncle, smiling widely and clearly at least one sheet to the wind. The rehearsal dinner had been a merry affair, it seemed, and John commented that their descriptions reminded him of formation marching drills from his days in the service, but with more alcohol. They about injured themselves laughing, performing sloppy toe-turns so that Sherlock readied himself to catch one of them if they toppled.

Conversation was flowing easily between the four of them when Marjorie joined their group. She was taller than John but shorter than his own height, with long chestnut hair pulled back in a severe bun. She wore a flattering pastel dress but no makeup and little jewelry – not wearing her wedding ring any longer, Sherlock noted, but the tan line was still minutely visible. He could see she worked in a chemical lab, consistent with her job in pharma research, had no pets, and couldn’t take her eyes off John. Sherlock didn’t like the intense way she looked him over, top to bottom and back again, with a glint of possessiveness in her perusal. He narrowed his eyes at her and regarded her down his nose.

“John! How wonderful to see you! How long has it been?” she gushed, breaking into the anecdote her father was relating to them to pull John into a close hug. John tried to keep his distance and patted her back stiffly, eyeing Sherlock over her shoulder. Her voice had a slightly hard note to it; Sherlock hated it immediately.

“Haha, a long time, years, really,” he replied stepping back quickly; he was nervous,
though no one except Sherlock would probably notice. “Have you met Sherlock?” He took his friend by the elbow and brought him up to his side. “Sherlock, this is Uncle Tim’s daughter, and Stephen’s big sister Marjorie. We’ve known each other since we were teenagers.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said, clearly not at all pleased. “You’re John’s flatmate, the detective, right? The one who was accused of all those crimes a while back and then was dead?”

“Charmed, I’m sure. But I’m not dead, I was undercover,” Sherlock drawled. “And you’re the one whose husband was dead just recently, I believe? I’m sorry for your loss, though you don’t seem too put out by it.” He made a conscious decision to go on the offensive right off, so he shook her hand with a deliberately limp grip and dialed up the posh gay in his tone; it went better with the catty remarks he intended to make.

“Of course I am, I’m shattered, but this is a wedding and one must make an effort,” she said sharply. “And I intend to catch up with John, which makes me glad.” She scowled briefly at him, then schooled her expression and turned back to John and her father.

Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim, who had been watching this exchange avidly, heads turning as at a tennis match, were hailed from across the room; their presence was required and they reluctantly took their leave.

John said, “I suppose they will be calling you over soon enough, Marjorie; it looks like they’ve got the photographer.”

“Can’t trust them, I find. Photographers, I mean.” Sherlock said, leaning back against the bar and nudging John with his hip. “So hard to find one who doesn’t have an ulterior motive.” He smiled a secret smile, just for John; excluding Marjorie from the joke. John and he stared into each other’s eyes for a moment, grinning.

“Good thing you can spot them, then, isn’t it?” John said softly, intimately. The gaze held a beat longer and John stroked two fingers along Sherlock’s forearm where it was braced on the bar.

“So, what have you been up to lately, John?” Marjorie interrupted the moment, looking suspiciously from one to the other of them. “I haven’t had time to read the blog this week with the wedding and all.”

Sherlock answered, “we’ve been practicing a role that we need for a case we’re currently working on; believability is vital to getting the proper result.” He smiled into his glass, which had just been delivered. “As it turns out, John has undiscovered talents in that direction.” He raised an eyebrow at his friend, and stifled the stirring down below; now was not the time to dwell on their little incident.

John held his eye for a beat, a faint flush creeping up his neck. “Yeah, I never thought I had it in me to be an actor. Sherlock must bring out my creative side.” He focused intently on Sherlock, as if Marjorie wasn’t there. His hand stroked Sherlock’s forearm again.

Aunt Brigid returned in a rush, this time to collect Marjorie for more photographs. “Come along dear. Leave these two lovebirds to each other. They have years to make up for!” Aunt Brigid was clearly tipsy now; she actually patted Sherlock lightly on the cheek as she made her declaration.

Marjorie’s mouth dropped open and she blinked for a moment. “What? What’s that? Brigid, you must be mistaken. John, you’re not with … him… are you?” Her face had gone pale, and she fixed John with a pointed look, indicating Sherlock with a dismissive gesture.
“Yes, actually. It’s only a few months along. But yeah, me and Sherlock… are, yeah.” He slid an arm around Sherlock’s waist, cozying up to him where he leaned on the bar. Sherlock put an arm around John’s shoulders and lazily kissed his cheek, then regarded Marjorie’s distress with a superior smirk. *Mine, not yours,* the smirk said. He tightened his arm, drawing John closer into his side.

“But, John – you’re not *gay,*” she said, still not addressing or even looking at Sherlock. She said ‘gay’ like it was a synonym for ‘unclean.’ Sherlock suddenly felt offended on John’s behalf – and his own, for that matter. He drew breath to respond scathingly, but John beat him to it.

“There is such a thing as bisexual, you know,” he said forcefully. “Sherlock makes me happy. What’s wrong with that?” He had stood up straight, bristling with offended annoyance.

“N-nothing, John,” Marjorie backpedaled in the face of John’s outrage, face going pale. “I was just surprised, I guess. I didn’t expect it of you.” She deflated, and Aunt Brigid, who had stood quietly by, reminded her of the photographer waiting for them. “I’ll see you later. We can talk more then.” She withdrew to the other side of the room, still not having acknowledged Sherlock after her first comments, but shooting him a venomous look as she went.

John blew out an irritated breath. “Well, I guess we can call that a result.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “I didn’t expect the homophobia, though. She was always fine with my sister, after all.”

Sherlock said quietly, “or she hid it well.”

“I suppose. Well, I’m not up for any more of that tonight. Can we leave this rubbish party now? Or do we need to hammer things home with Marjorie some more?”

“No, I think we’ve made the point rather nicely. God yes, let’s go.” Sherlock took John’s hand and led him out, heading for the stairs. John was very quiet as they ascended, and after a moment, let go of Sherlock.

“Actually, I think I’d like to get some air before I come up to bed.Alright?” He said, looking at the floor again. It was clear he had remembered their unexpectedly intense interlude from earlier and was not yet ready to face the intimacy of sharing their room. Sherlock felt the awkwardness himself, actually. It surprised him.

Sherlock nodded. A walk would do John good, and it would give him much-needed quiet to finish placing the expanded gallery in his mind palace. And perhaps he’d take a shower to deal with the inevitable ‘issue’ that would arise while revisiting those stunning sensations and actions. He watched John head back downstairs toward the gardens, then turned to unlock the door.
Chapter 6

John was uncharacteristically quiet in the morning, deep in his own thoughts in a way that made Sherlock want to crack open that silvering head and see what was going on inside. (“Bit not good, that,” “Shut up, John.”) He was the one who was supposed to not speak for days, but John had hardly said a word when he returned to the room last night; merely performing his ablutions, wishing him goodnight, and going right to sleep. And now this morning, he had said good morning like he was a long way away, then disappeared into the bathroom to shower and start getting ready for the wedding.

Sherlock was sure that something about what had happened yesterday was bothering John, and that could only mean he was second-guessing their ruse and its ramifications. He pressed his steepled fingers against his bottom lip (which John had bestowed with its own, personal kiss yesterday before moving to his upper – irrelevant to the matter!) He wasn’t worried; far from it – he just had a touch of indigestion. Or was hungry, or something equally ridiculous. Certainly not concerned about John changing his mind.

He covertly observed John in the mirror as his friend emerged, clean-shaven and scrubbed, dressed already in the trousers and shirt from his new suit. The waistcoat, jacket and tie awaited John on the bed, and he stepped over to them with an absent look on his face.

Sherlock finished his own dressing: smoothing his product-tamed curls behind his ears one more time, straightening the collar of his aubergine dress shirt, settling his suit jacket and doing up the one button. Ties were for tuxedoes or other people; he wouldn’t be wearing one that day. He glanced at John in the mirror again, and saw him gazing into space while he fiddled with the lovely sapphire tie that so enhanced his eyes.

“Here, let me,” he said without stopping to think; his voice sounded unnaturally loud in the quiet of the room, and John twitched as if he had forgotten he was not alone. He regarded Sherlock with some surprise. Sherlock stepped up behind his friend and took the tie out of his hands.

“Er, yeah, okay. I’m rubbish with these things, always have been.”

Sherlock put the tie around John’s neck and settled it under his collar, then expertly tied a crisp Windsor knot with the beautiful blue silk, and smoothed it over John’s chest. He drew a breath scented with the bergamot and sandalwood of John’s cologne. “There, all right and proper.”

John’s hand came up and covered Sherlock’s where it lay on his chest. “Thanks,” he said without stopping to think; his voice sounded unnaturally loud in the quiet of the room, and John twitched as if he had forgotten he was not alone. He regarded Sherlock with some surprise. Sherlock stepped up behind his friend and took the tie out of his hands.

“Er, yeah, okay. I’m rubbish with these things, always have been.”

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John’s hand came up and covered Sherlock’s where it lay on his chest. “Thanks,” he said, turning around to face his friend and keeping the long fingers in his grasp. “Thank you for doing all of this. This week has been utterly mad, but…” John started to say something else, and it seemed to catch in his throat. Sherlock waited, horribly afraid to hear what John would say next, certain it would spell the end of all his misguided hopes.

John’s phone beeped, and his brow wrinkled. “What’s that, then?” He reluctantly stepped over to the nightstand to look at it. “Christ, look at the time! Aunt Brigid will kill us if we’re late.”

He stepped back to his suit and put on the waistcoat and jacket, hurrying to do up the buttons, then stepped back into a motionless Sherlock’s personal space to look up into his eyes. “Look, when this stupid wedding is over, we’ll talk about this week and… and what it… we’ll talk.
Okay?"

Sherlock silently nodded, while inside he was shouting in frustration. What – what could John possibly have been going to say? He both needed and dreaded to know.

They moved to the door, and John’s hand on his lower back was warm and firm as he was ushered through.

~~oOo~~

Dear God, weddings were dull. Boring tediousness of the worst sort; endless and horribly, deadly dull. He huffed a loud sigh, his fifth in as many minutes. They had reached the chapel (in plenty of time! They needn’t have jogged the whole way and John could certainly have finished his bloody sentence!) and were sat on the groom’s side near the middle. They took some brief time perusing the hymnal and the leaflet the usher had given them. This wedding had a leaflet to let guests and gawkers know what part of the bloody service was happening when they snapped awake and wiped the drool from their chins after falling asleep because of the Total. and Complete. Boredom!

John, in his wisdom, had offered his hand for inspection and manipulation almost as soon as the service began and that had occupied Sherlock for a bit, since he was sitting on the other side which meant it was the hand he hadn’t had a chance at yet. But that was hours, ages, eternity ago! How long did it take to say “Do you? Yes. Do you? Yes. Sign here.” No, people had to drown in sentiment and flowery language and waste entire years of people’s lives blathering on when said people could be dragging their infuriating flatmate somewhere quiet to demand explanations. And possibly kisses.

He drew breath to huff an even larger sigh, when he froze, his brain entering ‘what was that?!?’ mode unexpectedly. He’d been aware of John’s arm around his shoulders for ten minutes or so, after that hand had been inspected and released, and now… yes, fingers were teasing the curls at the base of his hairline, petting lightly along his scalp at the base of his skull. It felt… divine. It drew delightful chills up his spine and the back of his neck. His toes tried to curl in his bespoke shoes. His breath hissed out quietly on a long exhale, along with much of the tension in his posture, and he breathed deeply and rhythmically as the stroking continued. It seemed like music was playing (was it?); he heard the coughing and rustling of the guests like white noise in the background.

Then the lovely motion stopped; John’s hand returning to his shoulder while he blinked at the people standing up around him, applauding. He stood also, just in time to see the bride and groom grinning like fools and walking back down the aisle, hand in hand. The service was over, and the veritable platoon of groomsmen and bridesmaids were trooping out two by two to the strains of ‘Ode to Joy’ being butchered by the organist in the gallery. Marjorie went by on the arm of a strapping young usher, glaring daggers at Sherlock as she passed. He smiled beatifically at her and put his own arm around John, who looked up at him and smiled. (Holmes one, Step-Whatsit nothing.)

They managed to skip the reception line altogether and made their way over to the hall, where a hearty wedding lunch was planned since it was mid-afternoon. The dancing would likely go on as long as the staff could be convinced to stay, however. Sherlock looked wistfully at the dance floor, remembering his lessons with John in their flat, so long ago. How he had loved those afternoons, thinking it was the chance to dance he had enjoyed. In retrospect, he knew it was dancing with John. He looked over at his friend, just in time to see the silvering head turn away and scan the room, looking for their place cards.

They were seated with Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim, thank goodness; Sherlock hoped he’d get a moment with Brigid before the day was through to ask some questions. Especially since his
not-boyfriend was being so blasted closemouthed. Other guests began to trickle in, and John and Sherlock made a point to head over to the open bar before it was mobbed. Sherlock vowed to go easy on the whiskey today, no matter how excellent it was; he noticed John giving his glass a similar hard look.

They established themselves at their places and waited, saying little. John seemed impervious to the frequent long stares Sherlock pinned him with, only breaking the silence once a stocky fellow with a pained expression lumbered by to set up the roast beef carving station. John indicated the worker with a significant head tilt, and said under his breath “that’s the omelet bloke. So, what’s his story?”

Sherlock turned away from his observation of John to fix his stare on the very gloomy-looking roast beef attendant. Heavy boots under his trousers; uncomfortable shifting from foot to foot; faint red marks under his chin at the jaw; occasionally massaging his wrist as if it ached. It clicked into place and he turned back to John. “I’m surprised you didn’t catch this one, John. He’s got piles, and they’re acting up more than usual. He’s been riding a motorcycle to work, you see; car is probably in the shop this week.” John’s eyebrows rose as Sherlock spoke, and he clapped a hand to his mouth to stifle his giggles before the attendant noticed.

“Ah, brilliant! How could you possibly have seen that?” he said in a strained voice before confining more giggles behind his hand.

“Marks from the helmet strap on his jaw, motorcycle boots under his uniform, wrist hurts from turning the throttle when he’s not used to it, and can’t stand still for more than a minute without adjusting his stance using a truly unfortunate amount of rear wiggling. Really John, you’re a doctor – shouldn’t you be the one telling me this?” John’s giggling was infectious, and Sherlock started to laugh, too. He found he couldn’t look back at the attendant without breaking out into chuckles again, and John couldn’t even see Sherlock look at the bloke without losing it.

When they finally settled down by rigidly staring ahead and breathing deeply, Sherlock found that the irritation he had been holding for John and his inexplicable half-declaration of the morning had dissipated. He was willing to stick out this wedding, and then would have a very serious talk with his friend and hear what he had been going to say, whether John liked it or not.

Most of the guests had filtered into the room by now, and the wedding party milled in the foyer waiting to be announced. The bar was doing brisk business. Sherlock looked around and indicated the situation to John. “Into battle,” he said for John’s ears only. John nodded in understanding and squeezed his hand briefly.

After the ridiculous introductions of the entire wedding party, hyped mercilessly by the DJ in the corner and amplified over a martial piece of music full of brass that did not seem to fit a wedding atmosphere at all, (“Sherlock, it’s the Imperial March! From Star Wars? Darth Vader? Or did you delete that again?”) Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim joined them, breathless and cheerful after the afternoon’s events. Marjorie frowned at them from the head table where she was sat between a bulimic twenty-something bridesmaid and the impassive usher who had escorted her in the wedding service. Neither of her dinner partners spoke to her.

He and John accompanied John’s Aunt and Uncle through the buffet line when their table was called, filling their plates with this and that, though they both skipped the beef station while suppressing their smiles. They resumed their seats and tucked in; the food was again excellent, and again even Sherlock ate with good appetite. He especially enjoyed the pinched look on Marjorie’s face as he dabbed at John’s chin with a napkin, or offered him a canapé from his fingers, or accepted a bite from John’s fork. He made a point to catch her eye when he leaned over to speak quietly in
John’s ear, enjoying the way his friend sucked in a breath at the vibration of his baritone so close to thin skin. (Holmes: many; step-whatsit: still zero, ha!)

There was a lull in the obligatory activities of the reception while the slow eaters finished, the gluttons went for seconds and everyone went for more drinks; which the DJ filled with music for dancing. Nothing too poppy or techno – that would come later in the evening; for now it was couples on the floor swaying to oldies and ballads. Sherlock was pleased to note several same-sex pairs out there, including two male-male couples – he leaned back in his chair and followed their twirls with his eyes, entirely diverted even from John for the moment.

“Come on, then,” a presence loomed at his side, and he looked up, puzzled. John held out a hand to him, and bobbed it insistently while Sherlock stared blankly back. “You are dying to be out there, and I am your partner, and therefore I am asking you to dance.” He bowed a bit from the waist, ever gallant, and waited. He stood as though he would wait forever, lopsided smile never faltering, until his offer was accepted.

Sherlock’s mind was whirling faster than the dancers on the floor. He looked at John; really looked, and was utterly lost. There was his John, hair swept back from his forehead, blue eyes picking up sapphire lights from the tie at his throat, his skin honeyed by contrast to the dark collar of his shirt, his fit body hugged and flattered by the lines of the pale grey suit. His expressive face entreated Sherlock while his sturdy hand beckoned. Sherlock felt like he was floating as he took John’s hand and rose from his chair. They stepped out to the floor, and John said sheepishly, “you’d best lead; it’s been a long while since I danced.”

Sherlock said nothing, but positioned John’s hands appropriately and guided him smoothly into the dancers with an easy waltz, since it was the only one John knew. He couldn’t look away from blue eyes as they stepped and turned, relaxing into this unusual way of moving together with only a few trodden toes on John’s part as he remembered how it went. This moment, here and now – this would be jewel of his mind palace, Sherlock determined. This was the pinnacle of sentiment for him, holding his dearest person in the world and dancing as if there was nothing else but they two.

He felt the body in his arms tense up minutely, and realized John had opened his mouth to speak but immediately closed it, perhaps afraid to spoil the moment. Sherlock tilted his head and raised an eyebrow to encourage his friend. John tried again, color staining his cheeks. “Sherlock,” he started, taking a deep breath, “you know talking about – important things - is not easy for me.” He breathed again, in and out; “but this week has been… along with being completely crazy, it has been one of the best of my life.” He huffed another moment. “And it’s because I’m seeing a side of you I never knew might be possible. I need to know…” he trailed off and turned his gaze away from Sherlock, looking at the other dancers nearby. A moment passed, filled with music and the hum of conversations all around them.

“Know what, John?” Sherlock said quietly, his voice emerging deep and velvety.

John sighed, and dropped his head to Sherlock’s shoulder, hiding his face. “How much of this is an act, for you? Is it like in the train car when you said we were going to die when you had already found the switch? Or when you were shamming with Janine? You are a very good actor, Sherlock, and I’ve seen you give perfect performances. But I need to know,” he heaved another breath. “Because I’m not actually any sort of a good actor, Sherlock. Not at all.” His shoulders sagged as he breathed out, waiting for the worst.

Sherlock’s brow creased as he tried to work out what John was asking. Acting? Of course he was acting, that was the point of being fake boyfriends. It was an act. Where he finally got to do all the things he wished he could do all the time with John. And where he got to experience things
like John’s hand in his hair, and John’s kisses, and a passionate embrace like he had never
encountered in his life and during which he had barely kept control of himself. And he got to observe
John in all sorts of new situations and behaviors and be impressed with his boyfriend-shamming
skills, because he was an unexpectedly good actor - but he said he was not any sort of actor. At…
all. Not acting, then…?

Sherlock flashed to John’s face after the kiss at the lunch table: bright and pleased and
startled. To wistful comments about honey on toast, implying they’d grow old together. To his
stuttering confession after a tipsy kiss grew heated: “I got carried away.” To how carefully he
behaved afterward, as if he had been worried that Sherlock thought he had taken advantage. The
pieces were falling into place, forming a pattern, crystallizing to an astonishing result. Oh. OH!

“Sherlock?” John’s tentative voice penetrated the deluge of thoughts and sensations.
Sherlock looked down at his friend, who watched him apprehensively, miserable with waiting.

“John,” he said wonderingly, “my John. In this case, I’ve been a terrible actor, too.” He
tipped his head down and kissed John’s slowly blooming smile, right there in the middle of the dance
floor.

John’s hands clutched at him as they kissed sweetly and with restraint; it was not the time
or place for passion. Instead, Sherlock felt like muscles he didn’t know he had were relaxing for the
first time, like he was breathing in after being underwater. He felt John lean into him, letting Sherlock
take some of his weight; it felt like a gift. He tightened his arms around his friend (more than friend).

Sherlock drew in an arm to put his fingers on his scar; it seemed like it should be pushing
outward with all the pressure behind it, yet it wasn’t a painful sensation. He flipped his hand over to
feel John’s chest, and discovered a rapid heartbeat beneath his palm.

They pulled back to regard each other. “John,” Sherlock said, nothing hidden in his voice
or on his face; how could he hide? There was so much. He didn’t think he had enough space in the
mind palace to accommodate this entire interlude, but he was certainly going to try.

The song ended, and the DJ announced the next phase of wedding obligations would be
coming up: cake, first dances, and the throwing of the bouquet. Sherlock barely registered it.

“I know this isn’t the time to talk everything out,” John said, ducking his head, “You know,
between us, what this means. But – I want this, with you. However you’ll have me.”

Sherlock nodded soberly. “John - I do, too. I’ve wanted this for ages, I think.”

John smiled. “Well, we just have to get through the rest of this afternoon, then. Think we
can manage?”

Sherlock scoffed. “I’ll hardly let some step-relative-woman with a crush steal you away just
when we’ve got ourselves sorted. Don’t be an idiot.” And keeping John’s hand in his own, he led
the way back to their table to endure cake and coffee.

A half hour later, Sherlock was absorbed in an increasingly interesting conversation about
John’s escapades as rugby captain in secondary school (there were pictures! Of John, in the uniform!
Probably muddy… He must convince Aunt Brigid to send them to him.) and what he was like as a
young man. John never let go of Sherlock’s hand unless it was to stroke his forearm or put his arm
around lean shoulders, like he thought he needed to keep contact or their new understanding would
evaporate. Sherlock didn’t mind; he occasionally found himself shooting John a look that said
“really? This is us now?” and meeting the same look in his (more than) friend’s eyes. Sherlock
couldn’t remember ever feeling so marvelous without chemical help.

The idiotic DJ broke in with a call for first dances, in several combinations. Uncle Tim was tapped to dance with the bride, while the mother of the bride danced with Stephen. John, who had been shifting in his seat, leaned over to Sherlock and said in his ear “just off to the loo, and I’ll stop at the bar. Do you want a whiskey?” Sherlock nodded and turned his head to his (more than) friend. Their kiss was brief but heartfelt, and John’s smile lit up his whole face. As he watched John walk away (really, that suit was fantastic) he realized this left him alone with Aunt Brigid. He turned back to the table to catch her perceptive gaze. She sipped at her cocktail, which had been regularly replaced by her husband all day; her color was high and she had been giggling like a schoolgirl during the reminiscences.

“Something’s different,” she said. “With John, with you.”

Sherlock nodded slowly, “yes.”

“You’ve worked it out, then, really?” Her smile was pointed, but kind.

He blew out a breath. “Yes. We’ve at least made a good start.” His answering smile was brief and sheepish.

“Why have the act, then? If you both really felt for each other?” Sherlock shook his head ruefully; were they really so transparent? “Oh, no, don’t worry. I’ve just known John a very long time, and have seen him in love before.” Sherlock rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously as she went on. “I could tell he was holding something back, but it didn’t make sense since he was so obviously gone on you.”

“Marjorie. She’s been quite fixated on John since her husband passed. We came up with the idea to put her off.” He chuckled. “It was rather more effective at showing us what the other was hiding, it seems.”

“I’m glad,” Aunt Brigid said. She sipped from her glass. “Huh. Seems an odd way to cope, doesn’t it? I mean, she’s always had a crush on John – he was handsome and charming, and always very nice to her. But when he deployed, she stopped talking about him. And then she met Richard and they married. Poor Richard, it was such a shock, him dying like that.” She sighed. “He was a lovely man, and just devoted to Marjorie - thought she hung the moon. And he was a health nut, exercised all the time, yoga, acupuncture, even formulated his own vitamins, being a chemist and all.” She sighed again. “Tch, listen to me, going on all maudlin at a wedding.”

He waved off her concern. Something about that statement niggled at him. “Not to worry. John will tell you I’m the last one to be proper at any gathering. So, what did Richard die of? An illness, I think John said?”

“Yes, he just declined and died, over about six or eight weeks. I don’t know that I ever heard they had a real diagnosis, actually. I remember the last time I saw him healthy; we had Stephen and Suzanne over to celebrate their engagement, and Marjorie and Richard came too, the whole family. We would have invited John, but it was just after... well, you know. All that business with Mary and the baby. We had to break the news at the dinner table, as I recall. So sad.” She sipped at her cocktail and sighed. “I might be a bit potted, I’m afraid. Just shush me if I’m nattering on too long.”

“Not at all.” Sherlock reassured her. He wanted to keep her talking; the clicks of deductions were ticking away in the back of his head the more she spoke. “So, when did he fall ill? Richard, I mean.”
“A few months after that. He had been not quite himself for a while – trouble sleeping, feeling run down, you know. He got rashes, too, on his skin, and then his blood pressure went up, and his heartbeat got irregular, I think Marjorie said. In the end his kidneys failed and he passed in his sleep in the hospital just after he was admitted. Marjorie was right with him through it all. Quite the stiff upper lip, she had. I don’t think I could have held up as well as she did, if it were my Tim to go so fast.” She looked morosely into her glass, then searched for her husband on the dance floor; his turn with the bride had just ended and he was making his way back to the table. She held her hand out to hurry him along.

Sherlock’s mind was working frantically, parts falling into place with metallic clinks in his thoughts. Marjorie had learned John had lost his family, and was again alone. Her husband fell ill soon after. Her husband formulated his own vitamins. Marjorie was also a chemist. Richard’s symptoms… he couldn’t quite place them. Maybe John would know? He needed to talk to John.

He looked around the room, realizing John was nowhere in sight. He had said he was going to the toilet, and then the bar, but that was ages ago; surely he would have returned by now? Sherlock excused himself from the table, and headed toward the gents; the first stirrings of alarm giving length to his strides.

In the bathroom, a bored attendant told him John had come in, done the necessary, and left again. Sherlock left without thanking him, heading back to the hall; perhaps they had just missed each other? He went to the bar, but the bartender hadn’t seen John, or didn’t remember if he did – people had been packed two deep there all day. Sherlock jumped up on a chair then stepped up on a table to better scan the room over the heads of the guests. No silvering head in sight. “John!” he shouted over the din. Several male heads turned inquiringly, but none were his John. He growled and jumped back to the floor while nearby guests tutted and snickered.

Wait a minute; he hopped back up to the table and scanned the crowd again. Marjorie was nowhere in sight, either. His alarm grew. Marjorie had almost certainly killed her husband in order to be ‘free’ for John when she turned forty, and now neither of them could be found. He jumped down again, and crossed the hall to accost the groom.

“Where is your sister?” He demanded, grabbing Stephen by the arm and shaking him. “It’s important that I find her right now. Where did she go?”

“Er, she said she left something in her room, or maybe her car? I don’t know!” Stephen stuttered, while the ushers he was chatting with pushed Sherlock back.

“What room?” he demanded, indignantly shrugging off the ushers.

“Um, 308, I think? We’re all on the same hall.”

Sherlock uttered a sound of purest frustration and headed for the stairwell to the guest rooms, using his long legs to cover the distance as rapidly as possible without running. Not the best idea to be turned out by security before he had found John.

He found the hallway where the wedding party was situated; some rooms had doors open with small, raucous parties going on inside. Judging by the sounds coming through at least one closed door, other rooms were in use as well, though for more private parties. Sherlock knocked on the door to 308, then pounded when that produced no result. Still nothing. He held his head carefully next to the door to listen inside. Silence. Damn it!

He put his head into the next room, where an open-door party was in full swing. “The room, next door – has anyone been in there in the last half hour?” He demanded shortly. Ten or so
heads turned in his direction and regarded him owlishly. No one spoke, though several mouths hung open. Given the aroma in the air, he would need to speak more slowly. “Did. Anyone. Go. Into. The room. Next. Door?”

A fellow by the door, who seemed less affected than the general rabble, stood up and weaved over to him. “Who are you looking for, eh, then?” His eyes were bloodshot.

“Next door! Marjorie Penton, Stephen’s sister! Has she been to her room?”

“I couldn’t tell you, mate, we haven’t been watching the hallway. But naw, that’s my buddy Trevor’s room. She’s that uptight bitch in the room next to his, right? She called security on us last night because we was too loud, she says. It’s a bloody wedding party, o’course it’s loud!” the inebriated informant’s voice raised indignantly.

“Right. Great. Very good.” Sherlock left the bloke droning his outrage to nobody as he stalked down the hall. Not 308; rather, 306. He knocked smartly on the door – and it swung inward slightly, having not latched fully. He pushed his way into the room, flicking on the overhead light as he passed. The room was in disarray, bedclothes mussed, some of the many pillows on the floor, a bedside lamp knocked over. Sherlock spun in place, scanning the entire room for clues; luggage still there, but Marjorie’s wedding heels partially kicked under the bed. Must have changed for more manageable footwear. Marks on the rug indicated dragged feet, but hard to tell if one person or two were involved – there was considerable scuffing all over the place, like many people had been in the room since it was last hoovered. And – Sherlock gasped a breath; a glint of sapphire in the bathroom. John’s lovely tie lay in a sinuous coil on the floor.

He picked it up and ran it through his fingers, smoothing it; John had been here. His tie had been stripped from him, or perhaps he had dropped it so Sherlock could find it. He took a deep breath to calm his racing heart and circling thoughts, then frowned. What was that? He held the length of silk to his nose, inhaling. There was a faint trace of John’s cologne, and a stronger, vaguely chemical smell that made him dizzy for a moment. An aerosol? Some sort of drug, perhaps. That would explain how John had been incapacitated; too nice for his own good, he would have accepted if Marjorie asked to talk to him. And then, when they were unobserved, spray him with a narcotic aerosol and claim he’d drunk too much as he was dragged through the hotel. But where had they gone from here?

Stephen had suggested her car. Sherlock determined to check the car park next, and set off.

Arriving at the large car park in the gathering dusk, Sherlock grabbed the closest valet and asked if he had seen a dark-haired woman helping a short man in a grey suit out to the car? The valet proved to be that rarest of witnesses: giving him what he needed without faffing about, he directed Sherlock to ‘the lady whose date got right pissed. She was ever so angry, and they went off that way.’ Sherlock yelled his thanks as he sprinted away in the direction indicated.

He heard them before he saw them, and slowed to hide between two parked cars before confronting Marjorie. If she had more of the aerosol, he’d need to take precautions that he didn’t get a dose himself. He peeked up over the boot of the sedan he was crouched behind and froze. Marjorie seemed to be directing a tirade at John, who clearly was not cooperating.

“…promised me, John! You said we’d be together when I was forty, and now I am, and now we. Will. Be. Together!” She interspersed her words with heaves of effort, trying to pull John along toward the last line of parked cars in the lot.

John, ungraceful and loopy, was dragging his feet, grabbing at cars - doing his best to hinder her attempt to take him. Sherlock couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride, however poor the
timing; his soldier, never giving up, fighting to the last. John was protesting as he struggled, his words blurring with the drug in his system. “tha’s stupid, Marjorie. We w’juss kids!” he picked at the tight grip on his hip, trying to pry away her hands. “Said ‘f we werr… ‘lone. ‘M’not alone.” They both went over in a tangle of limbs as he flailed. Marjorie emitted a shriek on the way down.

“Don’t say that, John!”

“I’ve Shhhh… Sherl… love of m’ life.” He said from the ground. “Ev’n if ’e nev… wanted more… I’d stay wiff ‘im. Sherlock. ‘S brilliant.” He seemed to be close to passing out, and lay limply, breathing hard. Behind his car, a stunned Sherlock blinked rapidly.

“That. Is not. True!” Marjorie ranted as she disentangled herself, getting up and rooting in a blocky leather shoulder bag. “John, your wife is gone. Your family is gone. You are alone, and I am alone, and now we’re going to be together. Just like we said, years ago. I waited. I did what you asked. I didn’t intrude on your life. I found someone to love me in the meantime, and waited for when you would be mine. Then you got married, and I thought maybe… maybe I was wrong, maybe it wasn’t meant to be!” She held up a little handheld atomizer and shook it, grimacing when it seemed to be empty. She went back to rooting around. “I was glad for Richard, after that.” John groaned on the pavement and flopped over on his front, still trying to get away with his uncoordinated limbs.

“But then I heard they were dead, and you were free! It was like God smiled on me. I knew what I had to do, so I could be ready for you when the time came. Aha!” With a sound of satisfaction, she found a second cartridge for the atomizer, and swapped it with the empty one. “Richard, with his stupid yoga and his bloody vitamins, so smug. Well, I fixed that. A little mercury in the formula, increase the dose over two months, and I was free too.” She nudged the prone form at her feet with a trainer-clad toe; incongruous with her wedding finery. “Roll over, John.”

He made a sound of negation, and she knelt down to roll him over herself. John resisted as best he could, and as soon as he was on his back, put his arms over his face like a sulky child. “No! Bugger off!” he slurred. “Sh’lock… he’ll come. Save me.”

“Don’t talk about that queer, that freak - to me, John,” she said venomously, getting to her feet again and starting to tug at John’s arms. “You don’t love him. You can’t love him!” She grunted with effort, yanking at his arms. “It’s not true. It has to be a test. All those emails, flaunting yourselves to my father and everyone, I know it’s a test. You’re testing me so I’ll prove I’m worthy of you. Well, I am worthy. I love you, John. He doesn’t love you. Look how he’s hurt you! Died in front of you! And he’s a man! You aren’t like that, John. Aren’t… wrong… like him.” She managed to tug an arm free from John’s face, and held tightly to the struggling limb while she tried to bring the atomizer into position to spray him. “He should have stayed dead,” she muttered.

“Love him,” John said. “Sh...lock…”

Sherlock had heard enough, and his anger at Marjorie’s continued attempts to manhandle John so she could dose him with that unknown drug overcame his shocked motionlessness at what he had heard. He stood up casually, strolling out from between the two cars where he had crouched. “John’s right you know; I will always come for him,” he said. John’s bleary smile was like the sun coming out.

Marjorie tried to swing the atomizer around to target Sherlock, but his longer reach served him well. He batted her arm aside, then savagely punched her in the stomach. As she crumpled to the ground, he stripped the atomizer from her hand, looked it over, then oriented it toward her face and pressed the button. A fine mist sprayed out as she wheezed for breath, and after a few gasps, she passed out in a heap.
Sherlock dropped the atomizer in his pocket and knelt down to John, helping him to sit up, leaning him against Sherlock’s wiry strength. He looked groggily at Marjorie on the ground before him. “Sherlock,” he said, brow furrowed with concentration, “Didjoo just punch a girl?”

“No, John,” Sherlock said, dialing the police on his mobile. “I punched a delusional murderer who was trying to drug and kidnap you.”

“Oh,” said John. “Well, I should bloody hope so.” He leaned heavily into Sherlock and rested his head on a bony shoulder. “Thanks,” he whispered. Sherlock tightened his arm around his (more than) friend’s back, and summoned the authorities to come collect John’s step-whatever-relative-murderer. Perhaps weddings weren't so dull, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos to EllieSaxon, who spotted my utterly cunning plot twist way back in Chapter 2! Brainy is the new sexy, you know.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sherlock awoke gradually in an unfamiliar room, on an unfamiliar bed, surrounded by too many ridiculously squashy pillows and covered with a thick, fluffy comforter. He was roasting, and he could not have cared less. When his eyes opened, the first thing he saw peeping out from under the puffy covers was the sleeping face of John Watson. John’s hair swoosh had flopped over in the night, and was coming straight up from his head over the top of his pillow. His mouth was slack and his cheek mashed forward toward his nose a bit. Somehow, Sherlock found it to be entirely entrancing, and not the least bit (hilarious) undignified.

After a while, John rolled onto his back, tipping his chin up and smacking his lips. His legs straightened, stretching, and a mostly bare arm came up to tuck in behind his head as he pulled in a deep breath. His eyes fluttered open, and he turned his head to regard Sherlock with a sleepy smile. “Hullo, there,” he said, voice raspy with disuse.

“Good morning, John.” Sherlock replied, attention captured by the half-lidded eyes, the relaxed smile. John was lovely just then. He wasn’t sure what to do next; what was the protocol when your pretend boyfriend became your real (more than) friend? He settled for touching John’s jaw with gentle fingertips. “How are you feeling?”

“No. This facility lacks decent lab space, and I was rather busy with the police, after all. They’ll send a report once they’ve determined what was in it. Some narcotic, was the best the paramedics could say. Do you remember much from last evening?” Sherlock propped his head up with a hand as John sat up in bed and reached for the water bottle on the bedside table.

John shook his head. “Everything up until Marjorie stopped me outside the gents and asked to talk is fine. Figured we were going to have an argument and that would be the end of it, but she sprayed me with that stuff just as we came up to the lifts. It’s bits and pieces after that. So, what happened?” He opened the bottle and drained most of it, swishing the first mouthful around loudly. Somehow even that wasn’t off-putting to Sherlock. (Lo, how the mighty have fallen, he thought.)

Sherlock recounted the events of last night: the discovery that Marjorie was a murderer, his frantic search for John, finding Marjorie dragging him towards a car, taking her down and calling the police.

“And then the police, once they had woken her up and cuffed her and read her rights, just had to sit back with a pencil while she confessed to the whole thing. Well, more ranted it, but essentially confessed. She was rather doped with that spray, so I don’t know if it will stick in court, but she dropped enough details that even a bunch of ham-fisted imbeciles like the local force should be able to build a decent case.” He sat up himself, punching a superfluous pillow off the side of the bed. “I offered my services should they need help, of course,” he added loftily.

John snickered, then heaved himself out of bed and headed for the bathroom. “Don’t stop talking; back in a tick,” he threw over his shoulder. He didn’t close the door all the way, and Sherlock heard him start to relieve himself. He stuttered a little in his recounting, then coughed to
cover and resumed.

“The paramedics looked you over, and declared you fine, aside from the drug; a little bruised but nothing major. Said you would sleep it off, and helped me get you up here. You rather indignantly insisted on changing for bed, though you needed… er, help.” Sherlock’s cheeks bloomed pink, and he was glad John had moved on to vigorously scrubbing his teeth and couldn’t see. “The paramedics had left by then, so we got you out of your suit, and into your pajamas. Then you hit the bed like a downed tree and have been out cold entirely until this morning.” He sighed ruefully.

“Your suit is rather worse for wear, I’m afraid. You fell down on the pavement and rolled around a bit at one point, and it scuffed the fabric rather badly and tore one of the knees. I’m not positive it can be mended.” Sherlock contemplated the loss of the suit morosely as he swapped places with John, using the loo himself and brushing his teeth perfunctorily. Perhaps John would go shopping for a new one with him? The tie could be cleaned, after all, and John had looked so... The wardrobe in his mind swung open and showed him John in his finery, hand held out, asking Sherlock to dance. Yes, he would insist John get another.

Sturdy fingers took him by the chin and tipped his head down to John, in the doorway of the bathroom. “We will get it mended, or we’ll get another. It’ll be worth it for the look on your face when you see me in it.” Sherlock wrinkled his brow; what look? There’s no look… Is there a look? He regarded John, puzzled.

John smiled like a boy with a secret and stroked his hand down Sherlock’s neck to his chest. “I think you liked me in that suit.”

Sherlock snorted and looked to the side, to cover his sudden flush and raised pulse rate. “Of course I did, usually you dress like a frumpy Grandad. It was a relief to see you look your own age,” he scoffed.

John leaned closer, his other hand coming to rest at Sherlock’s waist. “I liked watching you like me in that suit,” he said quietly. He pulled Sherlock closer, pressing their bodies together from sternum to knees, and Sherlock could feel the warmth of him, the strength of him, and the hardness pressing into his thigh. His body hastened to react, and his hands slipped around to John’s lower back, fingers flexing.

“John,” he said, head lowering despite what he was about to say, “we can’t do this now.” His lips met John’s, latching briefly with the barest swipe of a tongue; he tasted the mint of their toothpaste.

“Why ever,” murmured John, stretching up for a taste of his own, “can’t we, then?” He dipped in again, shifting his hips minutely against Sherlock, a delicious friction for both of them.

Sherlock submersed himself in the sensations of John wanting him, John kissing him, John against him, (all so new, all so addictive) for another full minute before he could tear himself away enough to reply. “Because we have to meet your Aunt for brunch in twenty minutes.” He dropped his head to John’s shoulder, panting lightly.

John’s intriguing nibbling of Sherlock’s collarbone stilled. “I’m sorry, what?” He said breathlessly.

“Your Aunt, John. I promised we would meet her for brunch at ten-thirty and it’s past ten already. Your Uncle Tim was informed of Marjorie’s arrest, of course, so I don’t know if he’ll be joining us. But she wanted to be sure you were all right.” Sherlock furrowed his brow. “She is surprisingly persuasive when she puts her mind to it.”
John dissolved into giggles. Sherlock recorded it for his ‘hugging John while he laughs’ cabinet.

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When they walked into the breakfast hall a little while later, most of the tables had diners, and most of them looked extremely hung over. The wedding party was nowhere in attendance - perhaps they had their own breakfast event; more likely they were still asleep. They found Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim sitting solemnly at a table by the wall, picking at plates of pastry. They looked the worse for wear; it could not have been an easy evening.

They all said hello, and Aunt Brigid insisted ‘the boys’ go fix themselves plates before they had even sat down. Sherlock shrugged, and dutifully headed for the buffet. Once there, he and John exchanged suppressed smiles, then strode over and ordered from the gloomy attendant. Somehow, using doctorly charm that Sherlock didn’t understand and certainly didn’t possess, John was able to quietly take the fellow aside and suggest that he give up the motorcycle. The omelets they received were two inches thick, and absolutely delicious.

“John, how are you feeling?” Aunt Brigid said as they settled their plates and poured their tea.

“Much better this morning, thanks,” John replied, “I slept well, at least.”

“I’m so sorry for what Marjorie did,” Tim said, clutching his wife’s hand. “I just can’t understand it. How could this have happened?” He clearly had had a sleepless night, and seemed painfully bewildered by his daughter’s actions.

John put down his fork and regarded his relatives somberly, considering his words. “Tim, Aunt Brigid, it’s not for you to be sorry. Marjorie is… well, she’s ill; and she did some awful things because of it. She was very good at hiding it, but that’s not your fault. Sherlock and I, we come up against people who are greedy, or malicious or just plain bad all the time in our work, and she wasn’t that.” He cut a bite of omelet and chewed it philosophically while he ruminated. “We’ve had much worse in our time together, him and me,” he took Sherlock’s hand as Sherlock nodded.

“That’s certainly true,” Sherlock agreed. “And on a personal note, John and I would possibly never have made the change in our relationship that we have done, without her. So, there’s a silver lining, if you want one.” John squeezed his hand.

John’s Aunt and Uncle sat in silence while John and Sherlock finished their breakfasts. John declined a second omelet this time around, but had a third cup of tea. Sherlock felt terribly full, but was content to sit at the table with John’s hand on his knee while they sipped. Tim and Brigid had lost the edge of haunted incomprehension that had marked them when he and John arrived. The coming months would not be easy for their family, but they would be alright in the end.

The conversation started back up once everyone had eaten as much as they were going to; John asked what had happened to Stephen – he was sorry this business had overshadowed the wedding. Brigid snorted with a bit of restored vigor; turns out the bride’s family thought the excitement was a great thing and they would be the talk of their circles for years. Stephen and his bride were more aware of the human costs, but had still gone on the elaborate honeymoon the bride’s father had booked them. There was little they could do to help at the moment, and the tickets were bought. They had flown out last night on a later flight than originally planned.

Aunt Brigid and Uncle Tim had rescheduled their train for early afternoon instead of that evening, and took their leave to go up and pack. Aunt Brigid hugged each of them tightly as they
said their goodbyes. When it was Sherlock’s turn, she kissed him soundly on the cheek and whispered in his ear “Take care of him, and welcome to the family.” He couldn’t help but grin. When Aunt Brigid finished with John, he stepped back from her and nodded gravely to whatever she had said to him.

Uncle Tim remained stoic through the handshakes, but accepted a hug from John that might have reddened his eyes a bit. Then they were heading up to their room, and out of sight. John watched them go, then shook his head. “I don’t envy Uncle Tim right now, that’s for certain.”

Sherlock hummed agreement, then turned to John. “Our train back to London isn’t until five, so we’ve got some time to kill. Shall we go look at the bees?”

John’s face broke out into a smile. “Alright. But only for half an hour, if you please. Then I’d like to suggest we go back to our room for the afternoon.” The smile took on a devilish quality.

Sherlock blushed. He, Sherlock Holmes, international reputation and deductive genius, blushed like a schoolgirl! At the thought of spending the afternoon with John. In their room. Together. Together-together, even. And likely with… things happening, and … all that. Kissing, and… suchlike.

They took a brief walk in the garden; the beekeeper was not in evidence today, so they didn’t linger there, but rather took a shady path lined by benches back towards the hotel. As they approached the building, Sherlock grew more apprehensive with each step. What if he disappointed John? Was terrible at this physical business? He had always dismissed it as unnecessary and had almost no experience with another person. John was obviously proficient at this form of interaction, and deserved the best a lover could do for him. Without his conscious decision, his steps began to slow, his face to frown, his brow to wrinkle. What to do? This was not something he could bluff his way through.

Just as he was about to cast around for a reason to do another lap of the garden while he thought furiously, John tugged him over to one of the shady benches and sat down. “You’re thinking awfully hard, Sherlock.” He raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

Sherlock’s mouth opened, and again without direction from his furiously cogitating mind he blurted, “I’m a virgin, John.” Dear God, what had he just said? He was every kind of idiot.

John blinked, clearly not expecting such a statement. “Oookay,” he said. “thanks for telling me.”

Sherlock regarded him frostily. “Aren’t you going to laugh, or ask why, or protest that a man of my age couldn’t possibly be one after all this time?” he tried to stand up, but was prevented by John’s grip on his arm.

“Do you want me to do any of those things, Sherlock?” John said, a note of disbelief in his tone. “Because that would be a pretty shite thing to say to someone I care about.” He huffed out a breath. “Not everyone has sex, Sherlock. Not everyone wants it, or likes it, or finds the right person to do it with.”

Sherlock stared at the ground. “I think you’re the right person,” he muttered, but didn’t flinch when John took his hand.

“So, what’s the problem, then? Because I think you’re absolutely the right person for me, whether we have sex like crazed weasels or never go beyond some excellent snogging like we’ve already done.”
“You said something like that yesterday, while you were… loopy,” Sherlock mused. “That you’d stay with me even if I never wanted more.” He turned to pin John with his gaze. “But I do want more, John! I just have no idea what I want, or how to do any of it. Where does one even begin? I could be rubbish at it, you know, and you’d be saddled with a terrible lover for the rest of our lives.” This time he actually clapped a hand over his mouth before more appallingly inane sniveling could come out. Where on earth had his vaunted control gone?

John’s smile was kind, and his chin was suspiciously tight. “Oh, go ahead, have a bloody chuckle. Your chin is giving it away,” Sherlock snarled, and John burst out laughing. After he composed himself, he turned to face his friend, and pulled at a sulking Sherlock’s knees until his (more than) friend faced him.

“Where one begins, you magnificent git, is with what we’ve already done. You try things, and decide if you like them. If you do, then do them again, maybe something a little different next time, maybe not. Experiment. I’m surprised you don’t already have a series of experiments planned for as soon as we get back to Baker Street, actually. And if you find things you don’t like, you say ‘stop’ in the moment, or you don’t do it again after that.” John tipped Sherlock’s chin up with two fingers, and kissed him softly. “As for being rubbish, I don’t think that’s possible. Just it being you goes a long way, with me.”

Sherlock bowed his head and pondered John’s words for a few minutes, turning them in his mind; while John quietly waited, holding Sherlock’s near hand with fingers interlaced. When he raised his head and stood up, John stood too. “John, would you like to go back to our room for the afternoon?” Sherlock asked archly.

“Oh, God yes.”

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The door shut behind them with a quiet click, and they were alone together in their room. John stepped into the bathroom for a moment, and Sherlock slipped off his shoes and sat on the bed. He was still uncertain about his ability to please John, but he was determined to try. He reviewed the few interludes they had had already, and the kiss from that morning; his responses had been very much instinctual, but John had not seemed disappointed – well, except that they had to stop.

For that matter, Sherlock found having to stop to be rather frustrating, too. His body was certainly interested in the replays; he was thickening in his trousers already. Well, he wouldn’t have to stop anymore, he told himself. John opened the bathroom door at that moment, and Sherlock popped up to catch him in a kiss, open-mouthed and fervent, arms curling tightly around a muscled form. John reeled back a step or two, then gave as good as he’d got; expertly taking control of the kiss and walking Sherlock backward toward the bed until the backs of his knees hit the mattress and he folded to sitting. He looked up at John, vexed, and blew a wayward curl off his forehead.

“Keen, then, are we?” John asked from his place between Sherlock’s spread knees, “there’s no rush – we have all afternoon.” His face was serious but humor lurked in his deep blue eyes.

“John –“ Sherlock growled, embarrassed and aroused all at once. He shut his eyes and dropped his head back, chin to the ceiling. “Just – I don’t know how to do this, John.”

“But you do want to,” John said, making absolutely sure.

Sherlock groaned with exasperation and flopped back on the bed with arms outflung. “Yes, Yes! John, Yes!”
“That’s all I needed, Sherlock. Budge up a bit, then.” John pushed his knee onto the bed between Sherlock’s legs, encouraging him to scooched up toward the headboard until John could crawl up the bed beside him. Something in his demeanor changed as he moved; the gentle humor receding behind an intensity of focus that thrilled Sherlock in ways he couldn’t fully define. His skin felt charged, as if with static electricity, so much that when John stroked a hand across his cheekbone, he twitched as if shocked.

John continued the motion up into Sherlock’s curls on that side; maneuvering his body closer until he was pressed all along Sherlock’s side, with one hand supporting his head and the other… the hair… fingers in… Sherlock breathed out a long ‘hmmmmm’ sound and angled his head to maximize the stroking.

“You really like that,” John said quietly, continuing to pet springy curls, pressing fingers between skull and pillow to cup Sherlock’s head in his strong hand. He turned Sherlock toward him, and leaned in to kiss cupid’s bow lips – once, twice, then lingering to nibble on the sensitive flesh. He brushed the tip of an agile tongue against the seam of Sherlock’s mouth, requesting entrance.

Sherlock opened for him inelegantly, awash in competing sensations of the hand in his hair, the supple friction of kissing, the growing hardness pressed against his hip. John’s tongue slipped in and stroked his tongue lightly, teasingly, encouraging Sherlock to reciprocate. John’s leg drew forward to press the bed between Sherlock’s legs, pressing their bodies more fully together. Sherlock could feel John’s erection against his hip and his own pressing into John’s thigh. His abdominals tensed, pressing him harder against John’s solid muscle, and he breathed out a faint moan. Dear God, that felt… he did it again. Oh…

“You’re so gorgeous,” John breathed as he pulled back a moment, looking at the man beneath him, tousled and panting.

“John,” Sherlock said, “I –” he closed his eyes; too much input, too much fulfillment of too many hopes at once crashing in on him. He turned his head into the crook of John’s smooth neck, trembling slightly. His arms, which until now had been clutching the bedclothes, slid up along John’s sides to grab at his shoulder blades, clinging tightly. He breathed raggedly; he wasn’t sure what was happening. This wasn’t climax, but he was utterly overwhelmed.

John’s hand in his hair stilled, and he tried to peer down at Sherlock, who tightened his grip to keep his face hidden. “Hey now,” John said, “Sherlock?” He slipped the arm from under his own head, underneath Sherlock to curl around him, enclosing him in a cage of his solid body. Sherlock could feel the thump of his heartbeat where their chests pressed together.

Sherlock took several more breaths, grounding himself in the feel of strong arms surrounding him, firm muscle and bone pressed against his front and side from head to knees. John smelled wonderful; clean and spicy, with the faintest hint of sweat. Sherlock was achingly hard, and still very aware of John’s answering arousal at his hip. He raised his head to meet John’s inquiring eyes, his own rolling savagely at his display of nerves.

“All right?” John asked. Sherlock huffed and nodded. “Too much, before?”

“Sort of. I’ve wanted this, John. For so long,” Sherlock huffed another breath. John’s arms squeezed him tighter for a moment.

“So when you get it… it’s overwhelming, yeah?” John said. Sherlock nodded. “I get it, Sherlock. We can stop, if you want?” John checked Sherlock’s face and smiled at the outraged frown the question produced. Sherlock tensed his abdominals again, nudging John with his erection. John chuckled, and nudged back with his own. “That’s a no, then.” He leaned in to kiss the tip of
Sherlock’s nose, then heaved himself up to sitting. He unbuttoned his shirt and took it off, throwing it over the side of the bed, then laid his arms out to the side. “Here’s what we’ll do. I’m all yours – have at me.” And he flopped back on the pile of ridiculous pillows behind him.

Sherlock watched all this, nonplussed. He sat up to better see his mad lover sprawled across the bed. “All… right,” he drawled, “should I take off my shirt, too?”

“If you like,” John replied. “I hope eventually you’ll want to, but that’s up to you.” He shimmied his shoulders luxuriantly against the pillow mound and waited.

Sherlock decided he would take his shirt off, and began with the buttons. He looked up at an unexpected sound from John – a sort of growling hum. He raised an eyebrow in question.

“Like I said – gorgeous,” John said, eyes darkened and avidly following long fingers as they opened the fabric over Sherlock’s chest. The shirt slid away from lean shoulders and was tossed over the side, and John’s hand, seemingly involuntarily, cupped the bulge in his trousers and adjusted his length as he hissed out a breath.

Sherlock, momentarily stilled as he watched John, realized the wisdom of this arrangement – he would take the lead so as not to get overwhelmed, and at the same time could learn all those little details about John’s body that had been merely conjecture until now. Abruptly he couldn’t wait to begin, and leaned over John’s supine form to start with his shoulder scar. He observed it minutely, the starburst pattern of the exit wound faded to silver after all these years. He stroked sensitive fingertips over the uneven flesh, surprisingly smooth-skinned. John exhaled long and slow through his nose, blowing cool air over the back of Sherlock’s neck and causing the lean frame to shiver.

Sherlock leaned in further to taste the skin, and John arched a bit to press into the contact. John likes that, Sherlock thought.

He had a goal, now: to discover all the places John Watson liked to be touched. He took his time, stroking fingers over taut pectorals, brushing lightly over pebbled nipples and savoring the gasp that was produced when he tasted there. John squirmed when he dragged fingers along smooth flanks, and chuckled throatily when he slid up into lightly furred armpits, inhaling John’s musky scent from the source. Biceps and triceps were mapped and lightly massaged, to hums of contentment from John.

Settling back down against the length of John’s body, Sherlock bent in to mouth up and down the strong column of John’s throat: scraping his teeth across the Adam’s apple, tonguing the tendons that strained to present themselves, resting sensitive lips against the pulse point to feel the rapid thumping. John’s hand came up again to rest against the back of his head, guiding him up to meet for a searing kiss, all sloppy tongue and eager lips. Sherlock slipped into a fugue of sensation; the heat of the kiss, John’s strong chest against his own, a hand holding his head steady, another stroking down his spine, raising goosebumps in its wake. In his trousers, his cock throbbed, constrained and uncomfortable.

“John,” he gasped, when they had to come up for air, “I want –“ he slid a hand down John’s sternum and onward, following the thin line of hair that led to a soft belly and further. “Can I –“ long fingers tapped the button of John’s trousers tentatively.

John didn’t speak, just reached down and undid the fastening, and started the zip. Sherlock hastened to assist, not wanting to miss anything about this part of John as it was revealed. He slipped the trousers over John’s hips as he raised them off the bed, and down his legs; stripping off socks at the same time. John had interesting feet, Sherlock decided, with a high arch and unexpectedly smooth skin; he would make a further study another time. For now, his attention traveled up muscular legs, noting scars, especially on the knees – rugby, yes – and an interesting one on John’s
thigh - not a bullet, not a knife; shrapnel? He filed it away to ask later.

The tendons at the back of John’s knees tensed tightly when he curled his hands around them, and John’s sparse leg hair felt interesting against his tongue when he bent to test the firmness of the scarred thigh with his teeth. John let out a vocal sigh and shifted his hips, diverting Sherlock’s attention to the black silky boxer briefs and what they contained. He slipped two fingers under the waistband, preparatory to pulling them down, but first he raised a sardonic eyebrow at John, who grinned.

“What, they’re comfortable,” he said, holding in a laugh. “And I wouldn’t want to be disrespectful.” His chuckles were lost in a gasp as Sherlock waited no longer to take the pants off.

Sherlock paused to take in the sight before him: John, utterly nude, his erection standing proud from its nest of ash blond curls, his skin flushed from cheeks to chest, breathing hard, pulse beating visibly in his neck, staring back at Sherlock with eyes darkened by arousal. He was… beautiful. Scarred, weathered, imprinted with the evidence of a life lived hard, and all the more stunning for it. Sherlock felt a tightness in his throat and sucked in a breath. “John,” he breathed, blinking furiously, “is this… can I really?” He shut his eyes for a moment, swallowing against the rush of sentiment.

Strong arms surrounded him, skin to skin everywhere: grounding him in the warmth and silky smoothness of the body embracing him, the well-known voice soothing. “Sherlock, yes, God yes, for as long as you want me, yes.” Sherlock heaved out a breath that was part-laugh, part snort. As if there would come a time when he wouldn’t want John; impossible, now that he had had this taste.

They paused there for a few moments, just being together and savoring the newness of it all. When Sherlock pulled back a little, John ducked his head to catch his eye. They gazed at each other for a long beat, faint smiles on their faces. John leaned in for a gentle kiss, lingering and sweet. He returned for another, then another, each kiss more heated than the last until they were smearing lips over each other’s faces, sucking at tongues and moaning, fingers clutching at the muscles of each other’s backs. John’s blunt fingers traveled down, tracing Sherlock’s long spine vertebra by vertebra, then scrabbling at the waistband to his trousers. “Sherlock,” John gasped between kisses, sounding desperate, “please, Sherlock, let me see you, let me touch you, please, please.”

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to lay back and unfasten his trousers, then lift his hips to help John slip them off; his pants whisked away in the same motion. He gasped with the release of cramped pressure at his groin. It was John’s turn to stare reverently, jaw slightly slack. Sherlock’s momentary flash of self-consciousness dissolved in his lover’s ardent gaze (lover - John is my lover), in the widening of his eyes, in the licking of his lips as he regarded Sherlock. “May I…” he said, gesturing to Sherlock’s body; Sherlock nodded, beyond ready to experience John’s touch in this way.

“Together?” John said, lying down next to Sherlock, pressed against his side and lightly touching the smooth pale skin over the flat abdomen. Again, Sherlock nodded, and mimicked the action. John’s hand slid downward, fingers slipping into dark hair at the base of Sherlock’s long, slender cock, brushing the tip with the back of his hand and picking up the bead of moisture that clung there. Sherlock’s much larger hand moved to the base of John’s penis tentatively; his cock was thick, and longer than the statistical average for a man of his stature; it suited John, Sherlock decided. The foreskin had mostly retracted, exposing a shiny dark red head, and Sherlock ghosted his palm across the tip, feeling the velvety smoothness there. John bucked forward into his hand, catching his
bottom lip between his teeth.

Sherlock clasped John’s penis in his hand, wrapping his fingers around it and gradually tightening his grip while John hissed and bucked his hips, thrusting through the tight channel. “Oh, shi-” he rasped, “Sherlock, like that, yeah. I could… I could come just like this, oh, from your hand.” Sherlock watched, fascinated, as John undulated his torso to thrust faster, foreskin stripping back then sliding over the shiny head as it pulsed back, glistening with a clear fluid. John’s hands slid up to Sherlock’s shoulders, gripping hard, his head snapping back as he groaned something that sounded vaguely like Sherlock’s name, or possibly swearing. He thrust again: once, and then his body bowed with a savage push into Sherlock’s hand, and his cock shot strings of pearly fluid over Sherlock’s fingers and onto his own straining belly. He pushed a few more times, not producing much fluid but emitting a growling whoosh of breath with each thrust, then relaxed bonelessly into the pillows, panting like he had just run a race.

Sherlock watched his lover, amazed by the intensity of his climax and the beautifully debauched picture John presented now. This was how John should look, always. Sherlock still held John’s softening penis in his hand, and carefully stroked it once before letting go. John gasped with overstimulation, then relaxed again. He started to chuckle. “God, Sherlock, that’s not how I meant this to go.” He put a hand over his face, blushing crimson.

Sherlock said nothing; he was still recording everything he could about John in this moment, and absently brought his fingers to his lips to taste the fluid there. Salty, somewhat bitter. Viscous, almost sticky. It was not unpleasant, though he couldn’t say he liked it, per se. John opened his eyes just then, and widened them at the sight. “That… is incredibly sexy.” He said in a hushed voice. “God, you gorgeous creature – your turn now; lie back, please, let me, let me…” As he spoke, he sat up, ignoring the mess on his stomach to help Sherlock lay down, then pressed his own body against a lanky flank. Strong arm muscles flexed and sturdy fingers tickled his pubic hair as John’s hand swept up the length of his cock, stroking firmly, then again.

Sherlock’s mind was roaring with sensations, suddenly inundated with waves of input from multiple sources. John’s hand, stroking his cock up and down, incredibly sensitive nerve endings sending fireworks up his spine and down to pool in his balls. John’s agile mouth, teasing the thin skin of this throat, then biting and sucking, Sherlock’s head arching back to push into the feeling. He’d have a mark there, he thought, and felt a fierce gladness to be given such a physical reminder of how John wanted him.

John’s hand let go of his cock, and he blinked his eyes open at the loss, looking quizzically at his lover. John rolled to his back, bringing Sherlock over on top of him, long body between John’s legs. “Here now, like this, just here…” John arranged them so that Sherlock was pressed in the cradle of John’s hip, slippery with his ejaculate. Sherlock’s own cock was dripping copiously now, adding to the slick slide, and he found he could not help but rock forward and back, rubbing himself against John’s soft belly. John’s hands moved to cup Sherlock’s buttocks, squeezing them, pulling them apart and forward, fingers dipping toward his crack and oh, that was… Sherlock’s body thrust again, faster, then pushed eagerly back into the hands on his arse.

His body was singing, thrumming like a high, held note on his violin. He was making sounds - gasping, breathy moans; deep rumbling purrs – with no thought to meaning or language. His hips thrust helplessly, instinctively, frotting against John’s body, forehead pressed to the pillow and arms cinched around John’s shoulders. All his awareness was sinking down, following his spine to its base, coming forward into his bollocks where they were pulled up tightly against his body. His hips thrust, then stiffened fingers were brushing his anus, pushing up solidly under his scrotum on his perineum, and all his coiled energy burst out of him: muscles shuddering with the force of his release, mind whiting out entirely, some sort of unidentifiable sound coming from his mouth, stripes of milky
ejaculate spurting onto John’s smooth skin. A second pulse, a third, a faint fourth; and his body slumped, ragged and limp, down onto his lover and the pillows.

An aftershock twitched through his frame as his mind struggled to come back online and take stock. He registered a gentle hand stroking up and down his spine, another still cupping his buttock possessively. John was murmuring somewhere beside his ear. “That was amazing, Sherlock, oh, brilliant. You’re so beautiful when you come. I’ve wanted this for so long, and now… I can’t believe it. So, so gorgeous.” The reverent litany continued, and Sherlock determined that he felt (amazing, bloody brilliant, completely fantastic, fucking wonderful) better than he possibly ever had in his life. Also that he might never move again. Moving was boring, anyway. Much better to lay on John while stoned on endorphins.

He breathed deeply, inhaling the aroma of sweat, semen and John that surrounded them, then raised his head to look at his lover (my lover!) John’s smile spread over his whole face and into his hairline, where his hair was a tousled mess. Sherlock’s face split into a smile, too. He blew out a long breath through his nose, and suddenly they were both laughing. Chests heaving, mouths open, they laughed their joy and relief that this moment existed.

“John,” Sherlock gasped as he regained his composure, “I… I don’t have the words. This… all this… it’s so…” he shook his head, frustrated that he couldn’t express this fundamental change in his experience of the world. “I…” he settled for the basics; the rest would come in time, he figured. “I love you, John. I never let myself hope we would be together like this, but…” he gave John a suddenly watery smile, then hid his face in the pillows by John’s shoulder.

His ears were not at all hidden, though – so he clearly heard John’s whispered, “Love you too, you madman. For the rest of my life.”

~~oOo~~

They spent rest of the afternoon in bed. John dozed off soon after Sherlock had rolled off him and they had cleaned up with flannels from the bathroom. Sherlock couldn’t sleep, though his body felt filled with lassitude; he cataloged the events of the day into his mind palace, and added a naked, debauched John to the mannequins in the wardrobe; that was one worth keeping, for certain.

They boarded their train at five, and once in their seats, John’s hand settled on Sherlock’s knee then slid up to mid-thigh to massage the muscle there. Sherlock had a momentary sensation of unreality as he realized this was his life now; casual affection from John, and for John, whenever he wished. He turned his head to look at John Watson: doctor, soldier, best friend, and the love of his life. It would not be placid perfection, them being together, he knew. They were both strong personalities with difficulty expressing feelings; it was inevitable there would be fights and misunderstandings. But them together felt right; like puzzle pieces slotting into place, like deductions domino-falling to a crystalline conclusion. There wasn’t any other way they could be, now that they had gotten here.

He covered John’s hand with his own, and leaned his head back against the seat, shutting his eyes. They’d make it work, and there would be honey on toast, one day.

~~END~~
Happy New Year 2017, all you Crazy Cats, and Happy Season 4 Day!

Thank you all for your kind support and enthusiasm for my efforts here. I've never written anything like this until now; it's been a trip of the best kind. I hope the Muse bites soon so we can do it again! :)

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